



Sanctuary as Cinema? Ignore Learning Styles at Your Own Risk

AMBER MARTEN BERGESON

Peanuts, popcorn, programs... preaching? What is this? A church or something? Many churches in America and around the world have entered into a style of worship that can leave people wondering if they have mistakenly driven to a cinema instead of a sanctuary. It is no longer uncommon to see your favorite Hollywood film serving as an introduction to a sermon or worship service. But movies in church are not simply entertainment. When used well, they can sling-shot worshipers into a deeper understanding of God's love, often in very surprising ways.

Have you ever noticed how people can tell you in great detail the entire plot of a movie they've seen? But ask them to do the same for a Bible story you just read, and characters' names get forgotten, locations get foggy, and plot goes to pot. We are told that 65 percent of people learn visually,* which means that using just your mouth in preaching, reading Scripture, and leading worship will reach only a minority.

In my internship congregation, a few years ago, we regularly used at least one video clip during worship: either as a call to worship, a sermon opener or closer, or a testimonial or faith story. I would not have been able to do this on my own, but with the help of a movie buff (or two) in the congregation, we often ended up with more ideas than we knew what to do with. When planning worship, we called upon the help of people in our congregation. Several months in advance, preachers wrote sermon synopses to give historical background and note the direction they sensed God was taking them with the text (it should be noted we preached series-sermon rather than using the lectionary). Once the synopses were written, they were sent out as an electronic file to members of the Creative Art Team (CAT). The CAT, comprised of volunteer, self-identified artsy/creative folks, would read through the file, jotting down ideas that came to mind for each text—ideas on how the congregation could touch, taste, see, hear, and smell each week in worship through songs, images, movie clips, poems, or foods.

*Aultman College, "Understanding Your Learning Styles," at <http://www.aultmancollege.edu/Files/Understanding-Learning-Styles.pdf> (accessed April 11, 2012).

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Sanctuary as Cinema? Screens Should Not Block the Story

KEVIN D. BERGESON

Couples sharing the popcorn bowl on the couch together in the evening often have to negotiate which movie or media they will watch. The same thoughtful negotiation is true for church leaders: how or whether to use film clips to accompany Scripture or sermon requires serious pastoral and theological consideration. Viewer discretion advised.

Worship leaders now have access to an enormous collection of media, from local public libraries (seriously awesome) to the Internet. But the very impact of that material might become the problem. Using a clip of leaping whales may be a powerful way to illustrate a creation story (see BBC's *Earth*), but what happens when people leave worship remembering only the whales and not the God who created the whales? Before simply firing up the DVD player in church, press "Pause" and consider.

Let the text speak

We can easily treat Scripture as an afterthought in preaching. We know the Bible is important, but we often put whatever comes across our desk this past week into the sermon, and soon we don't hear Scripture's voice anymore. We can't simply use a clip as clutter to disguise lazy text work. I know; I've done it.

We have found that sometimes using movie clips can limit people's own imaginations. Ask anyone who voraciously read all *The Hunger Games* trilogy and who then saw the first movie how the book and movie compared. Did it work seamlessly for them? Similarly, what if someone had an image in their mind of the Sea of Galilee and how Jesus calmed the waves and wind and then was presented with a video of the Galilee that was taken only a few weeks ago? Is this a biblical scene or not? After seeing this new image, peoples' imaginations are no longer shaped by the story itself and how it has worked in their own lives of faith but by the reality of the present contours of this lake. How do we balance the power of imagination and the power of movies? Don't let the clip smother the work of the Holy Spirit firing the imaginations of the listeners. Let the text speak!

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The CAT would then come together to share and bounce ideas off each other, and the ideas flew. This is where the movie buffs had a heyday! They'd be quoting lines from movies, summarizing plots, and pulling scenes from deep within their memory banks. After the meeting, the preaching staff, music director, and worship director collaborated to decide which ideas best fit the theme. With all this happening weeks ahead of time, the worship director had time to trim or create films so the transitions in and out of the clips were smooth.

Meaningful video is an art, and it can be done well. Here are a few ideas on how to use video effectively:

- Think about the emotive arc of the service. Throwing in a hilarious clip during a reflective time can leave people feeling emotionally jarred.
- Edit the video well. Relying on playing and pausing a DVD can be a recipe for disaster. If your sound tech doesn't know when to stop the video, the congregation may end up with their jaws on the ground if the scene quickly switches to something violent or sexual.
- Avoid clips that are too short. If you pull out a projector to show just a tiny clip, chances are you could have told a detailed story and made it more effective. Thirty seconds to two minutes is about right. Showing a lengthy clip may get the listeners so overly interested they might not want you to finish your sermon.
- Get permission. Most movies have strict copyrights. Be sure to get permission or use a free website (for example, www.wingclips.com) where the videos are copyright released and already edited for you.
- Make your own videos. Sometimes the most entertaining and real video clips feature people from within your congregation. Have them share their faith story, show them doing a service project, or interview them in their home.
- Focus on the text. Good use of video helps people see a biblical story in a modern context, making it easier for them to share the story with others. Two-part clips can show a film character moving from one behavior to another. Comparing them to a biblical character who experiences a similar change can be a powerful parallel.

If video projection is not an option and you want to get visual in your preaching, worship leading, or teaching, consider using photos, objects, or skits. Common household items are often the best visuals because people use them throughout their week and become reminded of the text. Blessings as you seek to give sight to the greatest story ever! ⊕

AMBER MARTEN BERGESON is a 2010 graduate of Luther Seminary, Saint Paul, Minnesota, and the recipient of the 2010–2011 Graduate Preaching Fellowship. She and her husband Kevin currently live in Round Lake, Minnesota.

Beware of spending more time exegeting the movie than the text

A practical matter for the preacher to remember: peoples' minds wander. We come in and out of a sermon. Sometimes those in the pews on Sunday morning are challenged by having either nothing to listen for or no compelling reason to listen. This has nothing to do with the text and everything to do with the preacher and the contact made with the listener. We preach with our whole bodies, and we listen with our whole bodies.

The most humbling experience in my first call came from a man whose chin would be resting on his chest within the first three minutes of my sermon. For him, it was the Sabbath. I knew I had just this three-minute window to get his attention or I would see him sleep through the rest of the sermon. Most of the time, I lost that battle. If we spend too much time trying to provide the context for a movie clip, we risk losing the listener. On the other hand, if we don't give enough context, the clip will be difficult to understand. We need context for a clip as much as we need context for the biblical text we are preaching on. The balance of text and context requires as much work for our clips as it does for our sermons. Making that determination requires careful thought.

What if your technical resources exceed your human resources?

You don't have to serve a megachurch to use media. According to one survey, the average Sunday size of a Christian mainline congregation is about ninety people.* Obviously, having a staff member devoted to the technical side of worship is not the norm. I turned on the microphones and the lights when I got to church on Sunday mornings, but we did have a projector. But how would I use it? Nothing is more distracting than trying to play a clip and having the technical side of the presentation flop. Either do the legwork of trying the clip before worship or delegate the task to a smart teenager!

If you are nervous to try this in worship, experiment on the small screen. Start a blog for your church and embed a movie clip there. Write a short devotion and send it to your council or youth group and ask for feedback. How would you tap your already stretched worship team to bring in new media to worship? Using media in worship is an evolving conversation, so join in. But first, think about what the visuals are meant to do. True, many people learn with their eyes, but using movie clips should serve only as appetizer for feasting together on the word. ☩

KEVIN D. BERGESON of Round Lake, Minnesota, is ordained in the ELCA. He is fascinated by missional theology and shares the popcorn bowl with visual artist and pastor Amber Marten Bergeson.

*"Small but mighty," at *U.S. Congregations*, <http://www.uscongregations.org/10strengths-smallbutmighty.htm> (accessed April 11, 2012).