

## **The Sermon in Three Acts: The Rhetoric of Cinema and the Art of Narrative Exposition**

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### **Abstract**

How to teach narrative communication to emerging preachers? If “story” is the prime vehicle for persuasion in the post-modern context, the master rhetoricians are screenwriters. This paper applies the principles of movie scriptwriting to the structure, flow and persuasive logic of sermons, as a possible model for equipping young preachers to communicate the biblical message effectively to their generation.

### **Introduction**

Middle-aged homiletics professors and typewriter repairmen have a lot in common in the first decade of the Twenty-First Century. No matter how competent we are at our trade, we are probably in need of some new skills.

When I arrived as a student at seminary in the early 1980’s, the professor who had taught my father to preach, twenty-five years before, was still on the campus. Though I never took his class, my preaching professors (contemporaries of my dad) were using the same textbook this fine gentleman and his erudite colleagues had developed a generation before. Their approach was an update of a tradition of over a hundred years in our denomination, which, in turn, stood squarely in the mainstream of the protestant preaching tradition for the past five centuries. It is a heritage for which I am still grateful, and which I endeavor to pass on to my students.

Recent literature however, attests to a dramatic shift in western culture, creating a pedagogical challenge for teachers of preaching. In our tradition, effective proclamation to modern hearers meant accurately extracting the biblical message, crafting it into pithy propositions and inserting it into a straightforward, clear, and persuasive package, following a well-defined set of rhetorical rules. But our audience has changed. Increasingly, we face hearers predisposed against precept. The sword of our traditional rhetoric clinks harmlessly against shields of a steely post-modernism. Perhaps more accurately, we artfully flay the air, while our hearers simply walk away. Most of us have concluded that we must return to story as a basic form for the sermon. Trade the rules of rhetoric for the rules of poetics. We are a generation of preaching professors who must teach our students to practice our craft very differently from the way we learned it.

As a teacher in Western Europe over the past decade, I have grappled with this challenge. Many of the fine works in our field over the past twenty years have been invaluable. David Buttrick

identified “naming” and “story” as the two kinds of language that shape our understanding, and gave us a phenomenological approach to homiletics that joined the spatial and the linear to shape the preaching event. (Buttrick, 1987) Eugene Lowry introduced us to the concept of “doing time” in the pulpit and shaping the “homiletical plot” (Lowry, 1985, 2001), giving us helpful handles for talking about narrative sermon structure. Richard Jensen, pointing to the post-literate culture in which we live, challenged us to “think in story,” and to “stitch stories together” as a way of inviting hearers into the world of the Gospel. (Jensen, 1993) Thomas Long (Long, 1989), Mike Graves (Graves, 1997) and others have called us to sensitivity to the literary forms of the Scriptures, including narrative, and to shape sermons in such a way that they not only say what the text says, but also “do what the text does.” These and many others have erected reliable signposts for those who are seeking paths to effective narrative preaching. Questions, however, remain. Is it even possible to teach a preacher to “think in story”? Can good storytellers be made, or must they be born? Can narrative sermons be intentionally rhetorical, having persuasive objectives, leading hearers to significant change in belief, attitude or living? Redefining our homiletic demands a rethinking of our entire conceptual approach to teaching the next generation to preach.

This paper outlines one teacher’s approach to these practical challenges, looking to the cinema for clues to teaching story. For the past two years, I have spent a Saturday each spring with my second-semester preaching students, teaching principles of screenwriting, and illustrating them with a scene-by-scene analysis of a film. The concepts and vocabulary learned then provide the framework for discussing narrative sermon structure, and for writing, preaching and evaluating narrative sermons in class. Based on some positive experiences, as well as much trial and error, I offer it as a humble contribution to the ongoing conversation about teaching narrative preaching.

**Advantages.** Screenwriters are master storytellers. Their success depends on their ability to shape a story in a way that captures an audience in the first scene, and holds its attention to the “End”. So, they have studied the dynamics of story, developing their craft to an artful science. Long before we preaching professors began to stretch our atrophied story muscles, they were teaching their next generations to spin an ever more interesting yarn. Using the cinema as a structural analogy for the sermon helps meet three needs for the teaching of narrative preaching.

First, the movies provide an intuitive point of reference for students who are being exposed to narrative preaching for the first time. When a young preacher from a traditional evangelical background is taught to define the “big idea” of the sermon, to develop point statements, to write introductions and conclusions and to explain, illustrate and apply the text, a lifetime of Sunday mornings provides an immediate cognitive background for every concept. As the student grasps the principles of good deductive preaching, a thousand previously heard sermons come to mind. Some are examples of the principles applied well. Others are examples of the principles applied poorly. But the connection is made and the student has an intuitive basis upon which to build.

When the same student, who has not heard many narrative sermons, encounters the concept of narrative preaching, there is no such point of reference. The professor may try to make them interesting and vivid, but if the concepts remain in the abstract, the student has greater difficulty imagining and shaping a different form of sermon. Using the cinema as a point of reference helps reduce the problem. Most preaching students today have experienced thousands of stories

in the movies and on television. They know some stories work better than others, but they may not know why. When the professor teaches principles of narrative in the context of analyzing the structure and dynamics of a film, the lights come on in students' minds. Every film becomes an example of how a story works, or how an attempt to tell a story has failed. First, students become more critical viewers of films, which is not a bad by-product. Then, as they begin to shape narrative sermons, they have an intuitive reference point from which to begin.

Studying and teaching the basics of the screenwriters' craft also meets the need for a clear set of guidelines for the shaping of a story. Some students are naturally great storytellers. They are poets, musicians and artists. Their right-brain I.Q. is off the charts. For them, the introduction of narrative preaching in homiletics class means liberation. Freed from the bonds of point statements and analytical structure, they soar to heights they never thought possible in the pulpit. With a little coaching and refining, they become excellent narrative preachers.

Other students are filled with angst at the thought of telling a story. They are engineers, mathematicians and scientists. They wake up every morning on the left-brain side of the bed. The classical model of introduction-points-conclusion, and sound analytical logic, is the world in which they most comfortably live. To ask them to "think in story" is to invite them into a place that is strange, insecure and painful. They may admire their creative colleagues, and enjoy secret fantasies in which they are themselves master storytellers, but their sweaty palms, quivering voices and awkward attempts betray them. Without manageable handles for mastering narrative structure, they flee to their deductive comfort zones every time. Are these students (and their future congregations) condemned to nothing but deductive sermons for the rest of their lives? Not necessarily. If their analytical instincts are applied to a set of clear guidelines and steps for story, such as those used by screenwriters, they may yet become good narrative preachers.

Finally, a cinematic approach to teaching story can help secure a rhetorical focus in narrative preaching. I once heard a denominational leader express a perception common to conservative evangelicals: "The problem in the church today is too much narrative preaching from the pulpits, and not enough exposition of God's Word!" We might take issue with the apparent assumptions behind the statement. It is a mistake to assume that biblical exposition cannot take on a narrative shape, that deductive structure guarantees biblical content, or that the absence of points means necessarily that the sermon is pointless. However, there could be a valid warning in the comment. We must take care that, in our enthusiasm for narrative, we do not lose the objective nature of our task or fail to deliver a clear, biblical and compelling message to our hearers.

Screenwriting at its best (or worst, depending on the point being made) proves that it is possible to tell a story and persuade at the same time. Consider the influence of Hollywood on American moral attitudes, cultural trends and worldview. This influence has come about through the ever more effective telling of stories. Screenwriting teacher Robert McKee speaks of "narrative rhetoric" in fascinating terms: "Storytelling is the creative demonstration of truth. A story is the living proof of an idea, the conversion of idea to action. A story's event structure is the means by which you first express, then prove your idea...without explanation." (McKee, 1997, p. 113) Films that receive the most awards are often those that make the strongest and most persuasive statements. Serious filmmakers approach their task with "something to say." They carefully

craft and edit their product to communicate their message persuasively. If our narrative sermons lack rhetorical focus, we might learn some lessons from today's master narrative rhetoricians.

**Parameters .** I should pause at this point to define the boundaries of this approach. First, “narrative preaching” does not necessarily mean using stories as illustrations, preaching on biblical narratives or building sermons around true or fictional contemporary stories. All of these might well be included in narrative preaching, but we use the term in Eugene Lowry's sense of preaching with a “plot form,” beginning with a discrepancy or conflict, moving through complication to reversal and, finally, resolution. (Lowry, 1997, p. 23)

Second, while we may discuss ways in which a film could be analogous in structure to a narrative sermon, there are many ways in which a film is not like a sermon at all. A film is an intense, multi-media experience. A sermon, media-enhanced possibilities notwithstanding, is still one person standing before a group of people to speak. There is something sacred about the spoken word, and the relational nature of face-to-face communication that we regard as essential to the nature of preaching. A film is illusion and effect. A sermon is reality—past, present and future. A film aims to entertain. A sermon aims to transform. A film's goal is reached when the word “end” appears on the screen (or perhaps before the movie starts, when the patrons pay for their tickets). The sermon's objective begins when the sermon ends. A film might communicate a truth. A sermon *must* communicate *the* truth. A film lasts about two hours. A sermon, we hope, lasts much less. The development of story in a film may be analogous to the structure of a narrative sermon, but, as with any analogy, there are limits as to how far to take the comparison.

Finally, I would offer three “non-negotiables” for “narrative biblical exposition.” First, the message must be biblical, and be demonstrated as such. This means that the sermon should make clear for the hearers that the truth the preacher proclaims is, indeed, based on sound interpretation of the Scriptures. Our narrative sermons should reflect Haddon Robinson's definition of expository preaching, which demands that the concept of the sermon come from a governing text, and that the preacher present enough exegetical information that the hearers could check the interpretation for themselves. (Robinson, 2001, p. 21-30) Second, the sermon must have an objective. There should be a conscious intent on the part of the preacher to call the hearers to a change in understanding, belief, attitude or behavior, or to meet a clear need. We believe with Miller, that “the sermon is there to facilitate God's work of change in the lives of people.” (Miller, 2006, p. 246) More than education or information, the sermon aims for transformation, which demands intentionality from those who stand in the pulpit. Third, character counts more than technique. While, as homileticians, we may always search for more relevant and effective forms in which to couch our message, the spiritual, biblical, moral and relational integrity of the preacher is more important than any shape the sermon might take.

### **Narrative Dynamics: The Essential Elements of Story**

**Protagonist.** Every story needs a hero. Film writers look for several key qualities in the central character. The protagonist is the one with the problem to solve. He or she must have a conscious object of desire, as well as the will and credible capacity to achieve it. Perhaps there is also an unconscious object of desire, which grows in importance as the film progresses. Most

importantly, the protagonist is a character with whom the audience identifies. In fact, according to one screenwriter, “at some level the audience is the protagonist.” (Whitcomb, 2002, p. 103)

The first question to answer in the process of applying cinematic principles to the sermon is, “Who is the protagonist?” There are several possibilities. It could be a character from a story in the biblical text, or a character from a key illustration. In a confessional mode, the protagonist could be the preacher. Ultimately, however, the protagonist of a narrative sermon is the entire community of preacher and hearers. We explore an issue that represents a need or a desire for all of us. We are willful persons, with the capacity to pursue, if we choose to do so, the object of desire. Like the protagonist in a story of any kind, we are confronted with choices and challenges that test our willingness to continue our quest to the final outcome, and our ability to accept an outcome that is different from what we originally envisioned.

**Controlling Idea.** Filmmakers define a single controlling idea that guides the creative process. McKee tells his students to put this idea into a “complete sentence describing how and why life undergoes change from one condition of existence in the beginning to another at the end.” (McKee, 1997, p. 115) The exercise seems strikingly similar to requiring preaching students to define the thesis statement, or the “big idea,” of the sermon! The difference is that, in the narrative framework, the controlling idea is the explanation of life change in the course of the story. This does not mean that it springs from the story. On the contrary, the idea is *a priori*, “the wellspring from which the writer draws all characters, dialogue, subtext, description, action, locations and transitions.” (Walker, 2002, p. 23) While the controlling idea is present in every scene, it is never explicitly stated. Guided by the theme, the writer chooses and crafts each narrative event so as to raise, early on, a single dramatic question in the mind of the audience and maintain the tension of this question throughout the actions of the film. (Tierno, 2002, p. 15-17) Finally, in the climax and resolution, the question is answered, and the audience intuitively, inevitably and powerfully grasps the message, without the need to state it explicitly. The controlling idea is the rhetorical focal point of any film, and of any narrative sermon.

**Conflict.** If a story were a dance, conflict would be the music. Without conflict, there is no story. The management and development of conflict within a story is one of the areas in which screenwriters have the most to offer to those of us who are trying to master the narrative art.

Conflict is the struggle through which changes take place in the life of the protagonist. These may be changes in fortune, character and/or thinking, but they should represent alternating positive and negative changes in value. Imagine the story of an aspiring young lawyer in a “good, to better, to even better” plot. He wins a challenging case, causing him to receive fame and recognition. He makes partner in his firm, leading to wealth beyond his wildest dreams. His wife and children love him all the more for his success. His kids make the most of their privileged life becoming successful people in their own right. Grateful for all he has received, he dedicates himself to virtuous and generous living, and dies a happy, prosperous and beloved man. This would be a great life for anyone, but it isn’t a very interesting story. By the same token, if he loses his case, loses his job, loses his family and his home and ends up an embittered and corrupt street bum, the “bad, to worse, to even worse” scenario doesn’t work much better. Interesting stories move through conflict, with alternating positive and negative changes.

Screenwriters use the concept of a “gap” to guide the flow of conflict in a story. The protagonist faces an obstacle keeping her from the object of desire. Naturally, she chooses the path of least resistance to overcome it. This path, however, instead of removing the obstacle, leads to an even greater obstacle, creating a “gap” between the expected and the actual result. She takes another course of action, which leads to yet another gap, which leads to yet another action. This pattern continues, increasing in intensity, until the climax of the story. The steady flow of attempted resolution with unexpected and antagonistic results keeps the audience on the edge of their seats.

A key measure of a good story is the relative complexity of the conflict. Conflict may be external, internal or relational. A story with only external conflict is an action picture, where the hero withstands wave after wave of attacks from the forces of evil, finally defeating the villain with a magnificent combination of superhuman strength, cunning and fair play. A story made up of only relational conflict is a soap opera, where a never-ending stream of love affairs, betrayed friendships and family feuds keep the characters in a constant state of emotional crisis. A story with only internal conflict is a slow-moving psychological art film that draws small and somewhat disturbed audiences. Each of these would be an example of “simple conflict.”

The best stories have a complex blend of all three types of conflict. A young lawyer faces the external conflict of a lost document, which is indispensable to keep his career, and even to keep him out of jail. He has the relational conflict of a boss pressuring him to falsify the document, in order to make the problem go away. He suffers the internal conflict of a man who wants to be a good person, but who must be corrupt to fulfill his career goals. The interplay of various levels of conflict makes for an interesting story, as resolving a gap on one level opens a gap on another.

Narrative preaching, like film and other forms of story, moves or stalls on the basis of conflict, or narrative tension. The conflict of a sermon might be dissonance created by a paradox of the Faith (“How can Jesus be human *and* divine?”), a question raised by the struggle to reconcile faith and reality (“Why do bad things happen to good people?”), a biblical or exegetical issue to resolve (“What does this parable really mean?”), or any number of other struggles. The nature of our task narrows the possibilities in two important ways. First, if the preaching community is the final protagonist of the narrative sermon, the conflict must concern an issue that matters to us. Second, the question raised by the conflict must be answered by the biblical text.

Sustained tension through delayed answers is what sets narrative or inductive preaching apart from deductive forms. Screenwriters’ approach to managing conflict in the story suggests some practical handles for maintaining this narrative tension. Consider, for example, the problem, “Why does prayer go unanswered?” Like the protagonist of a movie, preacher and congregation first explore the course of least resistance for solving the problem. Prayers are unanswered, of course, because of un-confessed sin. Then we consider the example of a righteous saint who slowly died of cancer at a young age, in spite of her prayers for healing. A “gap” opens when we realize the first answer falls short. We turn to a series of typical explanations (a lack of faith, broken relationships, not praying according to “God’s will”). Each offers some help, but is insufficient, leaving us with a new gap. We build our search around a key gospel passage on prayer (Luke 11:1-13), where we find the parable of the persistent friend at midnight and the example of fathers who never give stones to sons who ask for bread, all in the context of the promise, “ask and it shall be given unto you.” We search in this passage for keys to successful

prayer, but all of the obvious answers (persistence, claiming your birthright, believing “really hard,” etc.) seem to fall short, as each possible solution (positive charge) is followed by a gap (negative charge). Through this process, the congregation’s interest is piqued and tension grows: What will the final answer be? The complexity of the problem gradually reveals the complexity of the conflict and of our own issues when it comes to prayer. Do we see prayer as simply a way to get what we want from God (external)? Is it a way to draw near to God, to know Him better (relational)? Or is prayer a process through which we ourselves are changed in a fundamental way (internal)? We could approach prayer on any one of these levels, but treating them together, in narrative fashion, helps preacher and congregation to gain a more holistic vision.

This approach has benefits beyond simply holding audience interest. It forces preacher and congregation to look beyond the obvious, the simplistic, the easy answer. It demands honesty to explore real struggles of the life of faith. In course of the narrative, the preacher lays logical foundations in the hearers’ minds and plants seeds of anticipation in their hearts, preparing both minds and hearts to discover and receive the truth. We could well reveal the end at the beginning, but the power of the sermon is in the journey taken, as much as in the destination.

### **Narrative Movement: Five Essential Events of the Story**

“Plot” is the sequence of events through which a story moves. Aristotle saw two fundamental movements common to all plots: the complication and the *dénouement*. (*Poetics*, XVIII) Contemporary fiction writers expand the list to five events. It is no coincidence that these correspond almost precisely to the five movements described by Lowry as the “homiletical plot.” (Lowry, 2001, p. 27-87) They are time-honored and universal—prominent in all narrative genres and venues, from simple storytelling, to literature, to the silver screen. I revisit them here for the purpose of relating the principles of their use in film to the practice of narrative preaching.

**Inciting Incident.** Determining the “point of attack” for the story is not easy for the writer. Character and setting must be established, but wandering in the back-story too long can kill the story before it begins. A critical complication must occur to set the action in motion. (Lee, 2001, p.75) Within the first few minutes of a film, something happens to upset the balance of forces in the protagonist’s life. The event is of such consequence that the he or she immediately reacts to restore equilibrium. (McKee, 1997, p. 189-194) The inciting incident raises in the minds of the audience the question, “How will this end?” From this point, an “obligatory scene” is projected in their minds, of the climax and resolution that must take place before the end of the movie.

The “point of attack” in a narrative sermon is no less momentous. Unless the preacher shows in the opening moments that something of value to the is at stake, the hearers have no reason to go on the journey. If, however, a problem is raised, an issue exposed or a situation described that affects our lives profoundly, then we will accompany the preacher on the quest for resolution. There is no time to waste. Minimize pleasantries and introductions. Get to the inciting incident, “upset the hearers’ equilibrium” (Lowry, 2001, p. 28) and set the sermon in motion.

**Quest.** The narrative event screenwriters sometimes refer to as the “quest” corresponds to Lowry’s “Analyzing the Discrepancy,” or “Ugh!” (Lowry, 2001, p. 39) The latter description is

particularly appropriate, as this is the longest and most difficult movement for the writer as well as for the audience. It amounts to a series of events in which the conflict is developed and explored through multiple attempted resolutions and gaps. The audience begins to see glimpses of the possibility that the objective may be achieved, but each attempt is frustrated. The level of risk and complication rises with each solution. The quest ends in a climax that represents the strongest possibility yet, but it turns out to be only a glimpse of the possible solution, or, most commonly, the mirror opposite of what the final solution will be. Often, through the course of the quest, the objective of the protagonist changes drastically, as the object of desire gives way to an unconscious desire, or a new and more important goal is discovered. (Gulino, 2004, p. 15-17)

In the “quest” of a narrative sermon, the preacher may explore and expose the shortcomings of the easier answers for the problem at hand. This is also the time to provide, perhaps in piecemeal fashion, the exegetical information necessary for discovering the ultimate solution. The skilled narrative preacher will drop the necessary hints along the way for resolution, and even lead to what could be perceived as a final climax, without actually revealing what the answer will be. A well-crafted quest will also lead the hearers to begin adjusting their viewpoints and values related to the object of desire. As frequently happens with fictional protagonists, they may discover that the goal they sought in the beginning is inadequate, and must be exchanged for a new one.

**Crisis.** The final three events are closely linked, and usually come in quick succession. In Lajos Egri’s words, “In birth pains, there is crisis, and the birth itself, which is the climax. The outcome, whether it is death or life, will be the resolution.” (Egri, 1942, 230) The quest finally culminates in the crisis, which is “obligatory scene” anticipated since the inciting incident. Here, the protagonist faces a dilemma. Confronting the most antagonistic forces of life, he must make one more choice in a final effort to achieve the object of desire. At this point, the choice may mean abandoning the original object of desire in favor of a new one discovered along the way.

The concept of crisis has profound rhetorical significance for the narrative sermon. This is the moment when the preacher culminates all the information, false solutions and fleeting glimpses of the truth that have been explored along the way, in a single moment of clarity for the hearers. The final crucial pieces of the exegetical puzzle are revealed, and the community (protagonist) is confronted with the ultimate choice demanded by the “Word of the Lord.” We must choose life or death. More accurately, we must decide which life, and which death, we will choose.

**Climax.** Crisis leads immediately to the climax, where the final choice brings about a complete reversal. The protagonist makes a choice from which there is no return, and which effects a change so complete and profound that life is irreversibly altered. It is a point of catharsis for the audience, releasing emotions built up through the course of the film. (Tierno, 2002, p. 97-98)

The importance of catharsis in both film and sermon is a reminder of how closely linked the climax is to all that came before. If we have wandered in an episodic wilderness of the unrelated, uninteresting and/or unimportant, the only emotion hearers will feel in the climax is relief that the sermon is almost over. If, however, we have piqued their interest with an issue that matters to them, stirred their emotions through attempts to resolve an important question and challenged their wills at the point of a clear choice demanded by God’s Word, then they are likely to be prepared to move forward, as joint protagonists in the drama of faith, down the path

that God's Word has marked. When this is done well, we simultaneously engage mind, will and emotions in a moment of profound catharsis, with astounding and authentic persuasive power.

**Resolution.** No film can end on the climax. The audience needs a moment to regain its composure before the lights come up and it is time to leave the theater. The resolution provides this opportunity by briefly demonstrating the consequences of the change effected in the climax. In the narrative sermon, this is the moment for direct application. If we have done our work well, if God has spoken and if our hearers have chosen life, they are ready to see a clear picture of the next steps to take. The application need not be long, and requires no rational defense or justification. Simply paint the picture of a newly discovered reality and invite them to enter in.

### **The Sermon in Three Acts: The Structure of Story**

Filmmakers work with several units of narrative movement, of varying dimensions. Beats, scenes, sequences and acts all represent bits of action, culminating in proportionate climaxes, resulting in changes, moving the film towards its conclusion. Given the shorter time frame of the sermon, the most helpful unit for our purposes is the act. Most films have three acts.

In a typical two-hour film, the first act might last as long as thirty minutes. It presents the key characters and the setting in which the action will take place. Somewhere in the first few minutes of the first act, the inciting incident occurs. The rest of the act deals with first reactions to the conflict created by this incident, and reveals the full implications of what has happened. With the first-act climax, the quest is launched, and we are prepared for the long haul.

The second, and longest, act could last around seventy minutes. It consists primarily of the quest, and includes several sequences in which the protagonist attempts to achieve the object of desire, facing many gaps along the way. Tension builds throughout the act until it ends in a climax so powerful that it could almost be the end of the movie. This ending, however, would stop short of the irreversible change that is essential for any good story to be complete.

The third act is the shortest and most intense. It contains the crisis, the climax and the resolution, often in quick succession. Through dilemma, choice and the portrayal of a new reality, the conflict of the movie is resolved, the controlling idea is made clear and the message is complete.

The three-act structure is not only helpful for narrative sermon structure, it is also the shape of almost any great story, including the biblical story. The gospels, for example, present the birth of Jesus and/or the beginning of his ministry in the first act, continue in the second act with his teaching of the kingdom, miracles and confrontations with the establishment, leading to a climax at the crucifixion. The story almost seems to end there, but the resurrection represents a dramatic turn, creating a crisis of belief and climax for his disciples and leading to resolution through various appearances, teachings and the great commission. Each of the gospel writers fills in the frame differently, in keeping with his objectives, but the structure is essentially the same.

Broadening the scope, the entire Bible could be seen as an epic story in three acts. The first includes the inciting incident, the Fall, and its initial implications through the flood and the tower

of Babel. The second act recounts the quest of God for redemption, beginning with Abraham, through a chosen people, with all the gaps involved in slavery, deliverance, conquest, kingdoms, exile, return, prophecies and the life and ministry of Jesus. The third act takes the story to its final resolution, the ultimate reversal of the fall, in the apocalyptic images of Revelation.

One way to think of the three acts of a narrative sermon is to identify them with the broad strokes of the biblical story. The first act of the sermon, which presents the question, the problem or the discrepancy, corresponds to the Fall and portrays that our reality, life and/or understanding is less than what God intends. The second act explores our quest for God in imperfect ways, even as He acts to meet us, guide us and reveal Himself to us. The third act begins with crisis as some aspect of our lives, nature or desires must die in order for resurrection to take place, and develops the implications of this rebirth, ending in a new and hope-filled vision of life and faith.

The three-act model of Fall-Quest-Redemption provides a framework for narrative preaching that is theologically sound and rhetorically effective. Might a strict adherence to this structure seem as cliché as “three-points-and-a-poem” over time? This is possible, but not likely. The fact that people still pay money every week to view films that are variations of the same three-act structure testifies to the endless creative possibilities within a set narrative framework.

### **Narrative Technique: The Style of Story**

**Dramatized Exposition.** When it comes to revealing facts about characters or histories, back-stories or settings, the screenwriter’s axiom is, “show don’t tell.” (McKee, 1997, p. 334). Exposition in film is a matter of providing the information the audience needs, in order to understand the characters and their actions. At its best, exposition happens naturally, even imperceptibly. At its worst, awkward dialogue is inserted in which the characters discuss matters that they normally wouldn’t, unless they wanted to pass information on to someone they knew was eavesdropping on the conversation. “Show don’t tell” means that, if we want to communicate that a key character is a recovering alcoholic who is trying desperately to put his life and family back together, we do not put him on a bus sharing his life story with a total stranger. Rather, we show him at an AA meeting, and at a bank applying for a house loan, and in his car rehearsing a speech to give the judge, as he makes his way to a custody hearing. Dramatized exposition contributes to the flow of the story, instead of interrupting the action to convey information. This skill could also serve a preacher well, who desires to keep the narrative moving, while simultaneously giving the necessary exegetical information the hearers need to connect the message with the biblical text.

**Economy of Word and Deed.** Aristotle taught that, “of all plots and actions, episodic are the worst.” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, XI, p. 18). An episodic action is one that is unnecessary to the plot, but which is inserted for decoration, or to please an actor who wants a moment to shine upon the stage. Successful filmmakers resist the temptation to include scenes that do not propel the story forward. Extraneous material that is not necessary to the movement, no matter how well performed or beautifully-photographed, ends up on the editing-room floor. Unlike history, drama is not concerned with telling the whole story, but selects instead a significant part of the story. By focusing on the particular, the writer speaks to the universal. In addition to being

selective, screenwriters tighten their stories by insisting that each action or scene emerge necessarily from the one before. There are no leaps, no shortcuts, no *Deus ex Machina* solutions. The best screenplays are those in which even the surprise turn seems, in retrospect, to follow a natural cause and effect sequence. Such economy, achieved through selectivity and sequential action, will also make the difference between effective narrative preaching and homiletical wilderness wandering.

**The Element of Surprise.** The technique upon which any story literally turns is the reversal. A film will have any number of moments when a surprise turn moves the charge of emotional value from positive to negative or vice versa. The final climax will be the most intense, not necessarily because it is the loudest or most violent, but because it contains the core of meaning implicit in the controlling idea. McKee insists that “meaning produces emotion.” (McKee, 1997, p. 309) The best screenwriters pack the moment of final reversal with the meaning of the film. In some cases, they discover the meaning in the final turn of the plot and rewrite the script from back to front to accommodate. For the narrative preacher, whose meaning was discovered from the start in the Scriptures, the process is the opposite. Either way, the crafting of reversal is the single most significant stylistic task of the storyteller.

### **The Cinematic Sermon: A Path to Narrative Preaching**

Equipped with a selective taste of the narrative know-how of the cinema, the preaching student may approach sermon preparation with a fresh set of tools for shaping the final product. Still, a well-defined path is helpful for the beginning narrative preacher. The following suggestions are the fruit of several years of experiments in the classroom as well as in the study and the pulpit.

**Begin With the Text.** Since narrative *biblical* exposition is the goal, the starting point in preparation is no different from that of a more deductive style. While the sermon may respond to a specific need or question, the answer is sought first and finally in the Scriptures, and ultimately in a single key passage. The student still must do the exegetical work of historical, lexical, grammatical, literary and theological study. However, the intended shape of the sermon will, to a degree, influence the questions asked of the text.

In stead of looking only for answers or precepts to proclaim, the narrative preacher will tend to focus more on the questions raised by the text, and the tensions provoked by its meaning. Like the deductive preacher, the storyteller will search for the big idea, but will immediately look beyond the concept to imagine the conflict and change it implies. How does this truth challenge us? How might the passage upset the equilibrium of our comfortable complacency, our traditional assumptions, our safe interpretations, our tame renderings of God’s will? What would be different in our lives if this truth were radically applied? This thought process not only gives the preacher a head start on application, but it also helps to begin identifying the conflict points which will be crucial to the narrative sermon.

The process of biblical study should yield the controlling idea, and the major sources of narrative tension contained in, or provoked by, the passage. It should also result in a clear understanding

of the exegetical material that must be included in the sermon for the controlling idea to be understood as flowing from the text.

**Imagine the Three-Act Structure.** Upon this foundation, the preacher imagines the general structure of the sermon. The first act (“Fall”) portrays a world in which the power of the controlling idea is both absent and unknown, and plants the seed of the controlling idea in the minds of the hearers in the form of a narrative question. The second act (“Quest”) explores imperfect and human efforts to answer the question or resolve the conflict. The third act (“Redemption”) brings the quest to a close in a moment of crisis, in which a final choice must be made, opening the way for climax and resolution as the work of God is experienced in the realization of the controlling idea.

With this structure in mind, the preacher gathers material for the sermon. Stories, statistics, experiences, metaphors and images of any kind are added to the collection of biblical expositional information determined to be essential. The sequence of action, conflict and discovery begins to take shape.

**Compose the Narrative Events.** Next, the preacher crafts the essential events of the narrative sermon. Since the rhetorical force and focus of the sermon depends on the relationship between the inciting incident and the crisis-climax sequence, it is best to begin here. What will be the sermon’s “point of attack?” What image, event, experience or exegetical problem will launch the action of the story and plant the narrative question in the brains of the hearers? What will be the pivotal point on which the sermon turns and the tension is resolved? What ultimate choice will form the crisis, opening up the path to this reversal?

Once there is a draft of the inciting incident, the crisis and the climax, the preacher turns to the quest. The key here will be to get from “point A” to “point B” through a series of attempts to resolve the issue at hand, resulting in “gaps” of increasing intensity and leading to a second-act climax which could end the sermon, but only in a partial and imperfect way. Throughout this process, the necessary exegetical pieces are put in place through “dramatic exposition,” preparing for the ultimate reversal of the climax. Finally, the resolution is developed, through illustration, exhortation or direct application, painting a new picture of life beyond the discovery and application of the controlling idea.

## **Conclusion**

This treatment of basic structural issues is but a superficial glance at the contributions we might glean from the insights of screenwriters, for the teaching of narrative preaching. Multiple types of plots and genres, for example, provide entirely different sets of frameworks for narrative creativity. Insights into the creative process itself may also have applications for equipping narrative preachers. I have found exploring the world of filmmakers to be a stimulating exercise as a preacher and as a teacher. The greatest payoff, however is to see students, who have struggled with narrative, grasp the concepts of story and begin to communicate the Gospel with artful expression and flow, as well as persuasive effectiveness.

## Appendix

### Questions for Review and Evaluation of a “Cinematic Sermon”

Having carefully developed each of the parts of the narrative sermon, the preacher examines the whole to determine whether the final edition actually works. A series of questions might help to spot holes in the structure and flow if the narrative sermon:

- Does the inciting incident raise a question that matters to my hearers and to which I am prepared to give a biblical answer?
- Does the climax answer the question raised in the inciting incident?
- Does movement happen through sustained tension and conflict, alternating positive and negative charges?
- Does each movement or action within the sermon flow naturally from the one before?
- Is each movement within the quest more intense than the one before?
- Is exposition dramatized or explicit?
- Does the first act climax launch the quest in a clear and decisive way, emphasizing our fallen human needs and longings?
- Does the second-act climax bring the quest to an intense conclusion, as close as humanly possible to the ultimate resolution, without actually getting there?
- Does the crisis raise a dilemma so profound that it amounts to the choice of death, in order to experience resurrection?
- Does the final climax contain a resurrection—a change so profound and God-powered that it can only be the final change, beyond which there is no other?
- Does the resolution paint a vivid picture of life in the new reality, beyond the death and resurrection of the crisis/climax, in which the truth of the controlling idea is radically applied?

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