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NARRATIVE PREACHING — YET ANOTHER PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The theme of narrative preaching has been widely discussed for more than a decade. However, only recently did the interest in this form of communication of the gospel of Jesus Christ become apparent within the congregational context. Ministers increasingly find it necessary to adopt a new approach in preaching. This interest was particularly enhanced by the postmodern emphasis on a hermeneutic approach and the importance of narratives and metaphors. This article endeavours to stimulate further interest on an academic level by researching certain problems necessitating a warning against indulgence of narrative preaching without understanding its nature and challenges. The wrong approach may cause an abuse of narratives and a resistance against any attempt to communicate the gospel in this manner.

1. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

Despite the vast amount of literature written on the subject, narrative preaching still requires further consideration. This may sound presumptuous, for it might seem to suggest that this research paper has all the answers, the final word as it were. Certainly, this is not the intention. However, there are many aspects of the discussion on narrative preaching that are unclear or inadequate. This is an attempt to further the discussion on a very important and contextual issue.

What is it that we do not know about narrative preaching? What aspects of this issue need clarification? How should we go about structuring a narrative sermon? What makes a narrative sermon striking? It is interesting to note that, despite the popularity of narrative preaching, few preachers know how to preach a narrative sermon. Personally, I have as yet not heard one narrative sermon that was both strikingly effective and true to what is described as the character of narrative preaching (including my own efforts!).

This does not mean that there has never been a good narrative sermon. Neither does this suggest that there are no good narrative preachers. How-

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ever, the good narrative sermons and the capable preachers are certainly scarce while the "not-so-good" narrative attempts really stand out. One feels disappointed when evaluating Ellingsen's example of a narrative sermon (1990:97-101). If this is an example of a "good" narrative sermon, then the standard and requirements are not very high. An analysis of this sermon would highlight the many defaults, causing the effort not to "rise to the occasion". The trouble is that a well-structured expository sermon could be more powerful than this example.

The same could be said of other examples by well-known homiletic specialists.[2] Charles Rice's narrative sermon for Pentacost Day has very little to do with the Biblical hermeneutics of Pentacost. Eugene Lowry's rendition of Mark 14:1-10 is nothing special. Even the renowned Fred Craddock's sermon on the conversion of Paul came to me as a disappointment, as it does not deal with the real issue of conversion, but rather dwells on the significance of special revelations. E.A. Steimle's sermon "The eye of the storm", mentioned by Pieterse (1987:171-173), illustrates just how difficult the narration of the text can be. *Reading* these and other examples may be fine, to some even impressive, but to expect all preachers to deliver narrative sermons with such complex structures and interesting byways is optimistic, to say the least. This merely emphasises the fact that it is not that easy to give a narrative sermon. Neither is it automatically better than an expository sermon.

What is the reason for this? Is there a more important link between "the story" and the storyteller? Does the know-how or the natural talent of and for storytelling influence the effectiveness of a narrative sermon, more than some seem to think?

2. HYPOTHESIS

Considering the many unresolved issues of narrative preaching, the following hypotheses may guide this research:

- Narrative preaching affords a wonderful opportunity to communicate the gospel in exciting new and unexpected ways, enhancing the effectiveness of the communication. There are obvious advantages in using a narrative form of preaching. (See Miller 1992:104-106.) One of the main advantages is that people of all ages love stories. When a story is initiated, says Marquart (1985:137), "the ear perks and begins to listen". The listener spontaneously leans forward as he or she is drawn

2 The following examples could all be found in Eslinger (1987).

into the plot. Miller (1992: 104) is of the opinion that television dramas, novels, movies and plays have played an important part in preparing congregations for narrative preaching. This stresses the need for inductive preaching, because it attempts to transform the congregation from observers into participants (Lewis & Lewis 1986:80). Craddock (1981: 60) states: "Everyone lives inductively; not deductively".[3] In this regard the inductive approach represents a totally different process of constructing a sermon than Perry's deductive suggestions (Perry 1973:37-39).

- Narrative preaching is more difficult than is generally accepted.
- Narrative preaching should be considered a possible preaching genre.
- There is the rarely discussed possibility of the abuse of narrative in preaching.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is based mainly on an analysis of literature on narrative preaching. Literature is evaluated in terms of the statement of the problem and the research hypotheses. A qualitative sample of congregational responses to a narrative sermon is included. This was taken from a few sermons by the author in the congregation where he is a part-time minister.

4. NARRATIVE DEFINED

It is obvious from the literature on narrative preaching that the semantic interpretation of the concept of narrative is not universal. Whereas a narrative sermon is understood to be the re-telling of a biblical story (more often than not in the first person), narrative preaching also includes a story about life that explains biblical truths. Illustrations, often used to confirm an expository sermon, as well as poetic language (such as metaphors and fantasy), the life story of the individual, authentic experiences (Pieterse 1987: 166) are all considered by some to be narrative.

Lowry (1993:25-27) defines narrative preaching in such broad terms that he views each sermon "that moves from opening disequilibrium through escalation of conflict to surprising reversal to closing denouement" as a narrative sermon, whether it contains a story or not. In fact, according to Vos (1996:181-186), any approach that causes the sermon to be more

3 For a discussion of inductive versus deductive approaches, see Janse van Rensburg (2001).

pleasing could be called *narrative*. Some writers include the traditional style of preaching in a definition of narrative (Hamilton 1992:104).

This all-inclusive understanding of the term "narrative" is unfortunate, as it does not help us to better understand the narrative art form. On the contrary, it confuses more than it enlightens. Eslinger (1987:30) also complains about this lack of clarity when he explains the nature of narrative preaching and the methodology used in developing a narrative. According to Ellingsen (1990:15), the "confusion of this family of literary or story approaches" motivated him to try and clarify the debate. We may well ask: "Could an expository sermon with an illustrative story be called a narrative sermon, or is it an expository sermon with a (narrative) story as illustration? Would it be a narrative sermon if a structured sermon were wrapped in poetic clothing? Is it a narrative sermon merely because the biblical story is retold in the first person?" In all these cases it would be difficult to give a specific definition of narrative preaching.

We have to speak the same language in order to understand one another. If we are to take what Lowry describes as the typical anatomy of a narrative sermon seriously, we could simply not accept the open-ended definition of a narrative. Or does Lowry merely represent one of many possible approaches, just as Ellingsen (1990:70-96) represents one explanation of the different steps in a narrative approach? Indeed, Rice, Mitchell, Craddock and Buttrick have different methodologies for developing a sermon (Eslinger 1987; see also Kellerman 1990:13-16).

From the outset it is important to comprehend the need for a clear distinction between story and narrative (Hamilton 1992:104). According to Long (1989:71), a story can be defined as a series of events that have a beginning, a middle and an end. These elements of time are linked by *logical* relationships, by a *causal* relationship (Pieterse 1987:166) or by the dynamics between narrative, images and *arguments* (Schlafer 1992:63; 68-70). However, Buttrick (1987: 10) correctly points out that the report of chronological events could not be considered a narrative. Schlafer (1992:82) correctly warns that stories will not automatically produce a good sermon. It is the plot of the story that adds that special charm and seductive power to entice the listener to become involved.

Whereas stories *give* identity or proves a point or shares ideas (Robinson 1990:34), preaching in narrative form *transforms* identity, because it places the story within the greater context of God's story. Preaching tells a story with transcendent dimension. Although we cannot predict how people will react and whether their lives will be changed by the sermon, the power of

narrative is that it invites people to identify with the characters or a particular character in the narrative. Schlafer (1992:79) explains:

> If a point of identification can be established with characters who are engaged in realistic interaction, there is a possibility that such an identification can have the effect of reshaping the life-stories of those who hear the story in the sermon.

It is thus easier to facilitate involvement with the eventual message of the narrative. Well-told narratives cause the listener to identify with the people in the story. Some characters are loved and idealised while others are hated with a passion. In identifying with the trials and tribulations, the joy and love of the characters, the listener experiences a solidarity with them that enables him/her to say: "I'm like that" or "I wish I could be like that" or "I do not wish to be like that" (Long 1989:75) or "What must we do?" (Miller 1992:110). In this way the narrative captures the listener's full attention.

However, it may take time, for radical change in someone's life (conversion) is seldom instantaneous. Schlafer (1992:88) argues that spiritual growth never depends on the success of a single sermon. Pieterse (1987: 169) refers to this quality of the narrative as "open-ended", because it permits the listeners to make their own choices and decisions. Preaching offers possibilities and alternatives that have the ability to transform and change identity. The single life-changing factor in Christian narratives is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Therefore all preaching should be Christ-centered (1987:11-17).

In evaluating the various possibilities, it seems that there are many approaches to constructing a narrative sermon but only limited possibilities to define a narrative. It must be concluded that a sermon can be called a narrative only if it answers certain basic requirements. A narrative sermon can be briefly defined as follows:

> A narrative sermon is the artistic arrangement and telling of the events in such a way that the story could have its ultimate effect, getting people involved and placing their narratives within the context of God's narrative in Jesus Christ.

5. A DIFFICULT ART FORM

As good narrative sermons are scarce, the first hypothesis of this research is that narrative preaching is more difficult than is generally accepted. One of the reasons for the lack of effective narrative sermons is that narrative means

different things to different people (see the discussion on the definition of narrative). Furthermore, it is often unconditionally idealised as the only method of preaching. Ford (1994:9-15) builds his model for evangelisation on "the oldest, most natural way to reach people." This causes preachers to enthusiastically use narrative preaching without understanding and mastering the true nature of this homiletic genre (see Lischer 1984:29).

One case in point is the handy book by Eugene Lowry (1980). He makes a few sweeping statements about narrative preaching that could cause his readers to believe that this genre of preaching is the easiest and most natural method of communicating the gospel (Lowry 1980:88). Lowry goes on to criticise the standard form of preaching as he advocates narrative preaching as the only natural and true form of preaching (1980:10-14).

The appraisal of the narrative sermon usually stems from a dissatisfaction with standard methods of constructing a sermon. People do not seem to be tired of preaching, but rather of the standard and stereotype preaching (Macleod 1987:11). Runia (1983:10-11) is of the opinion that criticism of preaching is not at all unfounded. He refers to studies that prove that very little of the sermon content is remembered.

Standard methods of constructing a sermon are often described as forced and unnatural (see Buttrick 1994:82; Eslinger 1987:17-19; 23). It is understandable that there is dissatisfaction mainly with topical preaching, in America, in particular (Eslinger 1987:28), as topical preaching was the most popular form in the preaching history of America (Daane 1980:52-53). However, a sermon generally consists of three points (Craddock 1981: 56[4]), so typical of a deductive approach, and is perceived to be ineffective and outdated (Lowry 1990:68).

Ellingsen (1990:7-8) argues along the same lines. He explains that the dissatisfaction with standard forms of preaching (e.g. expository and didactic) has raised the interest in narrative preaching, whereas the American culture seems to prefer this approach to preaching. There is a need for the imaginative preaching by means of the narrative approach, writes Ellingsen, and one should address the need rather than ignore it. McClure (1991: 137) identifies a number of cultural codes of preaching, many of which could be described as narrative instruments: analogies, metaphors, proverbs, etc.

In true dialectical fashion Lowry works with the concept that narrative preaching "is much easier than you think", even though he admits that

4 Craddock (1981: 100) calls this practice "paralyzing".

non-narrative passages of Scripture should be translated (reformed) into narrative form first (1980:88) and that it is not easy to provide dramatic, jolting or funny reversals Sunday after Sunday.[5] The suggestion that narrative preaching might be more difficult than it was perceived to be in the past, apparently came less than a decade later for Lowry when, in the introduction to his practical guide to narrative preaching, he wrote:

> Perhaps it used to be easier to preach on the parables; at least the task was clear in my mind when I graduated from seminary thirty years ago (Lowry 1993:19; first print 1989).

In his book *The sermon* (1997) he writes about "the lazy preacher" who has "up-front needs", suggesting that the creative process of narrative preaching requires more effort than the lazy preacher would be willing to pursue.

Lowry (1980:9-16) also stresses the point that preaching (and narrative) is an art form and that preachers are artists. True! But any artist will tell you that "producing" an artwork is a laborious and difficult task, with many failures and few successes. This is adequate proof that it is not that easy to prepare and preach a good narrative sermon! According to Lowry (1980: 14) a narrative sermon is all about "the plot". Finding that plot in non-narrative passages of Scripture is the kind of challenge that makes it more difficult than we think (Hamilton 1992:110). Besides, many a plot in a (secular) story falls flat on its face! There is no guarantee that this would not happen in a narrative sermon. Furthermore, the plot is imbedded in the movements and structures of the sermon (Buttrick 1987). Venter (2002:9) rightfully asks whether every sermon could indeed be analysed and explained in terms of movements and structures.

Clearly, narrative preaching does not come naturally, at least to most of us. In this regard there is a distinctive difference with Lowry's understanding. He argues that, although many preachers may doubt their narrative skills, they will be surprised at their narrative skills in non-preaching activities. This proves that they have a natural and latent ability to preach in the narrative art form. It comes more naturally than preachers seem to think and it is not such a rare ability, according to Lowry (1990:74-77).

However, one should heed Jones' (1966:114-115) warning that narrative preaching should be left to preachers who have considerable dramatic ability, imagination and skills in the technique of storytelling, if it is to avoid being insipid and trite. This does not necessarily mean that the preacher should also be an actor, dramatising the narrative in such a manner that the

5 Eslinger (1987:86-87) also highlights other discrepancies in Lowrey's approach.

pulpit becomes a stage and the message is reduced to a mere play (see Daane 1980:75).

Evaluating the various models for narrative preaching, it becomes abundantly clear that suggestions regarding form and movement are complex and numerous. Browsing through the informative writing of Vos (1996: 180-203) one is struck by the enormous variety of possibilities and requirements that have to be taken into account in order to make narrative sermons effective. This is true of Lowry's suggestions in his two books, in which he proposes different approaches (1980; 1993).

The difficult challenge of narrative preaching is not only underlined by the need for a talent, ability or the willingness to attain such qualities by means of study and exercise, but also by the nature and structure of the narrative form itself. Even the various movements, complex in themselves, have subdivisions. In order to include all these aspects, one should approach narrative preaching well-prepared and armed with inspirational and creative ideas in order to make it an attractive and successful preaching experience. This challenges the general impression of narrative preaching as being easy "because you just have to tell a story". Preachers, who think that the effort of an exegetical process in expository preaching could be avoided by preaching a narrative sermon, are therefore misinformed and in for a surprise.

The above indicates that narrative preaching should be taken out of its idealised context. We need to view the opportunities and challenges of this genre of preaching in an optimistic, yet realistic manner, if we are to develop it into an effective instrument to communicate the story of God's involvement with the many stories of people's needs. Ellingsen (1990:94) justifiably warns: "It takes practice. We must put aside our inhibitions, become actors in relating these accounts, learn how to weave a story." Says Lowry: "[T]he artistic skill required for choosing metaphors will certainly make new demands on the preacher" (Lowry 1993:63; see also Buttrick 1987:25).

6. NARRATIVE: ONE OF MANY POSSIBILITIES

Lowry (1980:16) unconditionally advocates a substitution of expository preaching with the narrative approach. This implies that all sermons should be narratives. However, the second premise of this research is that narrative preaching is but one of the homiletic genres used to communicate the gospel.

Many obvious arguments are used to boost the use of narrative preaching: the power of storytelling, the natural inclination of people to get involved in a story, the inductive nature of narrative preaching, etc. Runia (1983:30) identifies the biblical character of preaching as an *event* that is not only the communication of facts, but also a *cognitive* communication of facts that makes people respond. The cognitive aspects of preaching necessitate a life response.

Venter (2002:7-8) agrees that narrative preaching opens up wonderful and exciting new possibilities (see also Kellerman 1990:4) but stresses the point that this is but one of many possible approaches. Venter warns that the neglect of this diversity or the over-emphasis of the narrative could lead to an undesirable under-exposure of the revelationary and kerugmatic character of preaching (i.e. all kinds of preaching!).

Preachers should refrain from preaching narrative sermons at all times. There are in fact so many variables that will determine the use of a narrative sermon instead of any other genre. To mention but a few:

- The nature of the text, determined by the literary genre, historical, poetic, apocalyptic or otherwise.
- The natural inclination of the preacher, left-brain dominant or right-brain dominant. One of the strongest arguments in favour of narrative preaching is that traditional preaching methods tend to be almost entirely (except for a few stories, illustrations or metaphors tossed in from the side) left-brain structured, while many people are more right-brain inclined or even predominantly right-brain orientated. Narrative preaching offers the opportunity to communicate with members of the congregation who do not think logically. Hamilton (1992:105-106) tends to disagree with this argument, calling it a division between reason and faith. However, this is not the intention, neither could the reality of predominance of left- or right-brain orientation be denied or ignored (see Janse van Rensburg 1998:65-8). A preacher who has the talent to deliver a good expository sermon may use a narrative approach for variation, but should not change his preaching style all together for a narrative approach. Black (1978:23) has some good advice: "Stick to what you know best!"
- The cultural context will play a decisive role in choosing a narrative approach. In the African context stories of liberation, poverty, gender and race come naturally (Healey & Sybertz 1996:21). Mitchell (1987:39-63) discusses the narrative form in the Afro-American tradition and illustrates how effectively this preaching form suits the black tradition.

- The demographic composition of the congregation might be a deciding factor. Is it possible that a congregation of predominantly older people would perhaps not adapt so easily to another preaching style than that which they have grown accustomed to, whereas a younger congregation including students and adolescents would thrive on a narrative approach? Or is it a proven fact that all people respond positively to a narrative approach because of man's natural inclination to be caught up in a good story? Would it not depend on the effective manner of story-telling?
- And what about individual preferences? The response to my own narrative efforts proved that people have mixed feelings about it. In response to the question: "Which preaching form (expository or narrative) do you prefer?", most felt that the narrative sermons "were just as satisfying" as the expository sermons. Some preferred the expository sermons, but none said that the narrative approach was better. When Vos (1996: 181) concludes that narrative sermons rather than structured sermons can capture people's attention, it must be noted that this is not always the case. We have to conclude with Eslinger (1987:29) "[T]hat story is not the only appropriate homiletical medium for biblical preaching."

7. ABUSE OF THE NARRATIVE

Miller (1992:107-109) identifies the following extremely important dangers and drawbacks inherent in narrative preaching:

- There is no guarantee that the narrative will cause people to identify in the correct way with the characters and events of the story.
- Narrative preaching may eventually cause the loss of teaching (*didache*) within the church.
- Narrative preaching may amaze, fascinate and entertain more than it effects change in people's lives.
- The effectiveness of narrative sermons is bound by the creative capabilities of the listeners, and is limited by the creative capabilities of the preacher.

Furthermore, the need to make the narrative sermon more dramatic and effective might lead to all kinds of dubious methods to achieve this goal. Kellerman (1990:12) stresses the danger of moralising in narrative preaching, whereas the real threat is that the narrator/preacher would allow himself all kinds of literary freedom to make the story more effective.

For Lowry (1980:41) this does not pose a problem. On the contrary, he views it as inevitable that the preacher should use artistic freedom when he, for instance, seeks motives for people's actions in Biblical stories. He concludes:

> [T]he preacher who does not dirty his homiletical hands with the fact of the deeper and quite fluid complexity of the motive world will not be trusted in the sermon, in a counseling chamber, or in the church board meeting.

Long (1989:67) apparently supports the concept of the narrator's artistic freedom. He points out that aesthetic writing (and preaching) is not concerned with history or dogma, but with the creative and artistically playful use of language (1989:68).

The exclusive use of the narrative approach may place extra demands on the artistic creativity of the narrator. This might cause non-narrative passages of Scripture to be forced into narrative form, thus creating the danger of distorting biblical facts in order to accommodate artistic creativity. Phillips (1986:3) concludes that non-narrative passages of Scripture require one method of exposition whereas the narrative portions of Scripture require another. Eslinger (1987:29) warns:

> Not all Scripture is of a narrative literary form even though it may be possible to speak of the stories which constitute the Story.

Therefore, Eslinger (1987:87) is opposed to the enforcement of a narrative approach on non-narrative material.

One case in point is the way in which Ellingsen (1990:10-12) incorporates allegory in a narrative approach. He makes some disturbingly positive remarks about allegory as an instrument of narrative preaching. He warns against the abuse of allegory by some preachers, who use this form of biblical explanation to avoid the toils of expository preaching, yet he pronounces positive uses for what he terms as "this hermeneutical model".

Although he is aware of a theological opposition to allegory, he is convinced that this reaction is overridden by the need for a new preaching model. The "die-hard" theologians (those against allegory)

> fail to recognize both the declining impact of their theological orientation in their own churches or the problems otherwise sympathetic colleagues have identified with their orientation — there is no returning to the neoorthodox model (Ellingsen 1990:12).

There are adequate indications (Ellingsen 1990:41-42) that this approach follows the same lines as those of language-philosophy, seeking hid-

den meanings and deeper interpretations of the text than those provided by exegetical and historical-critical analysis. Even though Ellingsen (1990:70) states that narrative preaching does not preclude using historical-critical tools, he also explains in dialectical fashion that there are four historical-critical procedures that are *not relevant* in narrative preaching (Ellingsen 1990: 62), namely:

- Determining the text's "situation-in-life".
- Using the genesis of the text or speculations about its author's intention as a foundation for exegesis. Ellingsen (1990:41) denies that taking the autonomy of the biblical text as point of departure and bypassing the biblical author's intentions is to divorce Scripture from historical reality. This approach clearly corresponds with the postmodern concepts of "the death of the author" and "there is nothing outside of the text" (Janse van Rensburg 2000:6).
- Projecting dogmatic, confessional, denominational or personal faith material on a biblical text.
- Regarding the text in a historically referential manner, concerned only with the political, social, or economic factors of its day.

Ellingsen (1990:50-51) explains that factual questions are of secondary importance, and not directly relevant to proclamation. No wonder Loubser (1994:169) speaks of the demise of the historical-critical paradigm caused by post-modernity! Craddock (1981:98) describes the inherent danger of an inductive approach (such as narrative) as follows:

> The fact of the matter is that inductive preaching, because it has in it the possibility of easy detours and is so susceptible to prostitution, actually requires more discipline of thought and study.

8. CONCLUSION

The enthusiasm with which narrative preaching is greeted, is both understandable and essential. However, greater caution and better understanding of the nature of narrative preaching are indispensable if we are to promote its effective use as communicative act in the service of God's Word.

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