

Toward a Story Homiletic: History and Prospects

John C. Holbert

Perkins School of Theology, Dallas, Texas

Definitions

Since the rise of so-called narrative preaching, usually seen as tied directly to the “new homiletic” of the 1970’s, there has been much confusion about the definition of this kind of proclamation. And I readily admit that my 1991 book, *Preaching Old Testament*, did little to clarify the confusion. I tended there to use interchangeably the terms “narrative” and “story.” Of course, in common English usage, this is quite natural; nearly every English dictionary I have consulted defines the one term by the other.¹ For example in my very small, desk-size Webster’s New World Dictionary, “narrative” is defined, first, as “story; account” (p.286). And “story” is defined, again first, as “the telling of an event or series of events; account; narration”² (p.423). However, this common interchangeability has led to confusion and imprecision that needs addressing.

Eugene Lowry in his 1997 introduction to preaching helps the move toward clarity. “Technically, the term narrative means a ‘story’ and a ‘teller.’”³ He borrows this basic definition from the classic 1966 text of Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*.⁴ It was that definition that led me to use story and narrative synonymously in my earlier book. However, Lowry, the leading theorist and advocate of what he calls narrative preaching, defines narrative as a series of events related to one another in such a way as to evidence a plot. In effect, for Lowry, narrative is synonymous with plot. Plot, according to Scholes/Kellogg is “the dynamic, sequential element in narrative literature. Insofar as character, or any other element in narrative, becomes dynamic, it is part of the plot.”⁵ The content of any sermon can be plotted, and Lowry suggests how that is so in his famous Lowry loop, the five elements of a plotted sermon he first described in his 1980 book, *The Homiletical Plot*.⁶ Though in the new edition of this seminal and accessible work, Lowry rethinks his original five-element sermon plot design, sometimes reducing the elements from five to four and redefining the original terms, the basic claim remains the same. Sermons need to be “processes in time rather than constructions in space.”⁷ The metaphor employed is crucial; constructions are things built from pieces, nailed or tied together. Processes, or movements, in time have forward motion rather than vertical dimension.

Story sermons are subspecies of plotted sermons; all narrative sermons are not story sermons, but all story sermons are narrative sermons. If plotted sermons involve the telling of a story, the sermon should be called a story sermon. Hence, story and narrative in homiletical practice are not synonyms, but the former is an illustration of the latter. This is so, because stories by their very nature have plots, the Aristotelian beginning, middle, and ending. But narrative sermons, in this more precise sense, may or may not use stories in their plots. It is conceivable, although perhaps not too likely, that a narrative sermon may be completely devoid of stories. A plotted story sermon, on the other hand, uses a story or stories as the central content of the sermon. In the subsequent discussion of the history of story sermons, more clarity will appear concerning the importance of these more precise definitions.

Story Sermons: A Brief History

1. The Bible

Story sermons are as old as preaching itself and have their origins in the pages of the Bible. After King David pursued his adulterous affair with Bathsheba, had her soldier husband murdered in battle, and then married the publicly grieving widow in a crude attempt to cover over his misdeeds, the prophet Nathan marches into the throne room of the king and delivers to him a story sermon. He speaks of a poor man and his one tiny ewe and of a rich man who entertained a traveler by stealing the poor man's lamb for the main course instead of taking a lamb from his own substantial flock. Thus ends the sermon. But not quite! David is enraged and shouts that the rich man deserves death, and before his execution should restore the tiny lamb fourfold. The story sermon here has done its work of personal engagement. Now it is quite true that Nathan goes on to clarify the point of the story, skewering his king on the story's point. "You are the man," he thunders, and it is indeed clear that David is that arrogant rich man (see II Samuel 12:1-15).

Further Hebrew Bible examples may be noted. The eighth-century prophet, Isaiah, tells the tale of the establishment of a vineyard by his "beloved," a vineyard expected to produce sweet grapes. Instead Isaiah laments that the vineyard produced "wild grapes," or perhaps better, "noxious weeds" (Is.5:4). Vs. 7 offers the point of the story:

Surely, the vineyard of YHWH of the armies is the house of Israel,
the Judeans are God's delightful plants.
God expected *mishpat* (justice) but alas, *mispach* (bloodshed),
tsedakah (righteousness), but alas, *ts'akah* (an outcry).

One might call this use of story allegory, where each element of the tale corresponds to an element of the targeted concern, in this case an evil and recalcitrant Israel. However, extended metaphor is perhaps a better description, since not every part of the story (the dirt, the stones, the tower, etc.) has an apparent correspondent in the case against Israel. Still, it is a sermon, using story as the major element in the proclamation.

The most obvious example of a story sermon in the Hebrew Bible is the tale of Jonah. In my earlier book, I suggested that Jonah itself represents the type of story sermon I called "pure narrative."⁸ I would also argue that the book of Ruth is a story sermon, albeit a rather more complex and subtle one than Jonah.⁹

There is also the so-called parable of the trees in Judges 9:8-15. The story is spoken by Jotham as an attack against Abimelech, the would-be king of Shechem, and against those elders of the city who murdered Jotham's brothers in order to clear the way for Abimelech's enthronement. In the story, various trees are asked to rule over the forest. In turn, the olive, fig, and grape vines are offered the rule of the forest, and each in turn rejects the offer, claiming that the work they are already doing is more important than any work as ruler could be. When the bramble bush is offered rule, it nastily says:

If you are really anointing me king over you,
then come, hide in my shade!
But if not, let fire burst out of the bramble
and devour the cedars of Lebanon!

In this story sermon, Abimelech is obviously likened to the coarse bramble whose quality of shade is minimal, if not absurd, and whose only practical use is for poor firewood. Also, a fire created by brambles is good only for poor heat, and certainly is not blazing hot enough to engulf the world's mightiest trees, the fabled cedars of Lebanon. In short, the story sermon announces the serious shortcomings of the ridiculous but murderous Abimelech and warns of his dangerous kingship. In three short years, the very elders of Shechem, who made Abimelech king, turn against him. Soon after, Abimelech burns 1,000 Shechemites, both men and women, to death in one of their own city's towers (Jud. 9: 46-49). Following that atrocity, Abimelech himself is killed by his own armor-bearer after a woman of Thebez crushes his skull with a well-aimed millstone (Jud. 9: 50-54). It turns out that Jotham's fable, his story sermon, proved ironically prescient; the bramble Abimelech did produce a devouring fire, burning to death 1000 of his own compatriots, but finally was himself "devoured" by the power of a woman. These examples are merely a few of the many story, or story-like, sermons to be found within the pages of the Hebrew Bible.

But of course the Bible's most famous storyteller is Jesus of Nazareth. His many parables have been analyzed, retold, and embellished on countless occasions in sermons over the two millennia since their first utterance in the hills and valleys of first century Palestine. They have served as well-nigh endless sources of scholarly and pastoral comment, and any attempt fruitfully to summarize such comment is ultimately impossible. Yet, especially the narrative parables are surely story sermons, often offered without explanatory comment. A brief look at one of these will make the point.

Matthew's wonderful "Laborers in the Vineyard" story is the first example (Mt. 20:1-15 [16]). It addresses the question "What is the reign (kingdom) of God like?" If you want to understand something of God's rule, says Matthew, how God might reign over the world and over the lives of those who live in that world, listen to this story. The owner of a vineyard needs to hire workers to pick his crop, so goes out to the place of hiring, the market square of the town, very early in the morning. He there hires workers who all agree that they will receive a denarius for their work. He then returns some hours later that morning and hires more workers, promising them not a specific wage, but "whatever is right." Three hours later, and again three hours after that, he hires more workers, but no comments are made in the story about wages for these workers. Late in the afternoon, he returns to the market square and finds other workers "standing around." He accuses them of being "idle all day," but they reply that "no one has hired them." He responds, "You go to the vineyard, too," and again says nothing about pay.

After the sun sets, the workers gather to receive payment for their work. The owner tells his paymaster to distribute the pay, beginning with those who were hired last. Surprisingly, these workers receive a denarius, the payment promised to the all-day workers. The story then says that those workers hired early in the morning, who worked far longer than these last-hired ones, clearly expected to "receive more." But to their surprise and real anger, they, too, received only one denarius. Not surprisingly to the readers and hearers of the tale, they began to grumble to the owner that he has made the last-hired workers who had worked only one hour "equal to us who bore the long day and the raging heat." The owner calmly replies that he had done these all-day workers no wrong, because he had paid them precisely what they had agreed to when

they were hired, no more, no less. He then adds, rather bluntly, “Take what belongs to you, and go; I choose to give to them what I give to you.” Then two pointed questions: “Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what I own?” Finally, “Or are you envious because I am generous” (NRSV)? The more literal Greek rendering is: “Is your eye evil, because I am good?”

Many scholars suggest that the parable itself ends there in vs.15. Vs.16 is then an editorial addition, either from Matthew or a somewhat later commentator attempting to explain the meaning of the parable. More than a few readers, however, have found vs.16’s interpretation less than illuminating, if not more than a little lame. If the story does end in vs.15, the fact of last hired, first paid does seem at best a rather minor fact of the story. The more potent fact appears to be the astonishing equality of payment, despite the enormous disparity in laboring hours. And, in addition, the three amazing claims of the owner: his absolute freedom to do whatever he wants with his own money, his rejection of the all-day workers’ questions about that free choice, and his accusation that their question is a result of their own evil in the face of his own good. Somehow, says the story, observing this vineyard owner closely, both his words and his actions, will reveal to us something of the nature of the rule of God. Now there is a pure story sermon! We, the hearers/readers, are left pondering just exactly what might be the insights we are to gain concerning God’s reign and rule.

Those insights are hardly obvious and are less than simple to extract. Does God, like the owner, offer God’s gifts equally to all, regardless of the length or quality of their work? Does God include all of God’s creatures into God’s rule even if some do not recognize the reality of that rule until very late in life? Is our labor then finally irrelevant as a way to follow God’s commands? Is God so free as to be unconcerned with our labor? These are only a few of the questions that arise from a hearing of this story sermon whose announced subject is the rule of God. Some story sermons might leave us grasping for meaning, as this one surely does.

But stories do that. They yield multiple meanings by their very nature as stories. The Bible’s stories are far from propaganda. Propaganda is designed to spread specific ideas or doctrines as opposed to any other ideas or doctrines. In propaganda there is only one way to hear. I hope the biblical examples I have chosen suggest clearly and forcefully that these stories are not univocal; they are rich and complex, the source of ongoing reflection and proclamation. And because that is so, the sermons that arise from them can take several focuses and still be faithful witnesses to the story itself. The trick is in the telling. One reading and telling of Jonah, for example, is hardly the only way that great tale may be told. Many more possibilities await the attentive reader.

2. Stories in Post-Biblical Preaching Through the Reformation

Given the rich narrative traditions of the Bible, it would be no surprise to imagine that many preachers from the very beginning of the histories of church and synagogue used story material to illuminate the Bible’s meaning for their hearers. Though we cannot understand fully the memorable scene described for us in Nehemiah 8, where Ezra the scribe stands above the people of a rebuilding Jerusalem and reads to them the Torah of God from early morning until noon, what occurs there has been repeated in gathered assemblies for over 2500 years. When it is said, “So they proclaimed the book, the law of God, with interpretation; they gave the sense, so that they (the people) understood the proclamation” (Neh.8:8), ever since preachers have tried to do the

same, namely, “proclaim with interpretation” in such a way that “the people may understand the proclamation.” And a part of those attempts at interpretation was the use of stories. From Tertullian to Augustine to Gregory the Great, from the second to the sixth centuries CE, stories, analogies, and other forms of practical illustrations make up a significant part of the preachers’ arsenal. O.C. Edwards, for example, offers a brief appraisal of a sermon of Augustine’s based on Ps.31, in which the preacher says that bad Christians are worse than pagans since “something may still be made out of the them (the pagans), just as something can be made from the logs in the carpenter’s yard, in spite of all the knots and the twists and the bark.... But from the twigs and trimmings he cleans off the carpenter can make nothing, they are only fit for firewood.” Though this is an illustration from the world of the preacher and his hearers and not formally a story, one can see the kernel of a story here, as the congregation is asked to imagine the carpenter at work in his shop.

Gregory the Great (ca.540-604) is said to have been “the first great preacher who attempted, in anything like a systematic fashion, to introduce non-scriptural illustrations into his instructions, to drive a religious truth with the help of an apposite story.”¹⁰ Examples may be found in his Homily 37, based on Luke 14:16-33.¹¹ Gregory in this sermon uses two extended stories of faithful priests and a bishop to drive home his point of the necessity of imitating the behaviors of the pious if one is to gain the heavenly reward.

If Gregory was the first well-known preacher to use stories in his sermons, he was far from the last. The preachers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were often characterized by their interest in stories as ways to convey meaning to their hearers. Perhaps the best example is Bernard of Clairvaux (1094-1153), whose sermons and sermonic writings employed stories extensively. In his *Parabolae*, a compendium of sermon stories, the titles of these sermonic illustrations suggest the sorts of stories that were told: “the king’s son, the conflict of two kings, the king’s son sitting on a horse, the church that was captive in Egypt, a king’s three sons, the Ethiopian woman married by the king’s son, the eight beatitudes, and the king and the beloved servant.”¹²

In the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Edwards announces “an explosion of preaching.”¹³ And sections of the fuse that ignite the explosion are collections of sermon *exempla*, designed for preachers to add insight and interest to their preaching. Such collections were rich in content from the Bible, secular history, patristic writings, poems, prose fiction, contemporary events, small personal incidents, and stories known only to the compiler.¹⁴ One can readily see that collections of “100 Snappy Sermon Starters” and “Jokes and Stories That May Be Told from the Pulpit” have at least an 800-year history!

The Reformation did not quench the interest in the use of stories in sermons. In fact, it could be said that Martin Luther brought that use to a new and exciting level. When one reads especially his many Christmas sermons, one gets very close to what might be called the origins of Protestant story preaching. Read the following portion of Luther’s 1522 sermon, “The Gospel for Christmas Eve, Luke 2.”

Nobody took pity on this young woman who was about to give birth for the first time; nobody took to heart the heaviness of her body; and nobody cared that she was in strange surroundings and did not have any of the things which a woman in childbirth needs. Rather, she was there without anything

ready, without light, without fire, in the middle of the night, alone in the darkness. Nobody offered her any of the services which one naturally renders to pregnant women. Everyone was drunk and roistering in the inn, a throng of guests from everywhere, and nobody bothered about this woman.¹⁵

Here Luther uses what some contemporary preachers call their “holy imagination” to tell the story of Jesus’ birth by fleshing out imagined details: the heaviness of pregnancy, the strangeness of the place, the lack of fire and light, the drunkenness, indifference and implied debauchery of the inn dwellers, carousing in that very inn from which Mary and Joseph had just been excluded. The sense of place is palpable, however imaginative the reconstruction of it!

But Luther allows his imagination such free rein not merely to entertain. Here is the next sentence of the sermon: “Therefore see to it that you derive from the Gospel not only enjoyment of the story as such, for that does not last long.... But see to it that you make his birth your own.” Here the reformer summarizes two of the most important reasons for employing story preaching; first, though he warns against enjoyment for its own sake, by implication what he has done is in fact very enjoyable indeed! The congregation who was there on that day will not soon forget (he may be too modest here) the dark and cold and terrifying circumstances of the birth of the Lord. But the second reason for using such a style is that “his birth must become our own.” That is, his birth is for us, and we must receive it in all its wonder and mystery, in all its earthiness and terror. No preacher since has combined these two aspects of the gospel, its mystery and its earthy reality, better than Martin Luther.

3. Stories in Post-Reformation Preaching

In O.C. Edwards’ history of preaching, the word “story” in the index is not mentioned from page 231 to page 712! That might imply that stories were not significant in preaching from the fourteenth century until the twentieth. As we have already noted, Luther used the narrator’s art to great effect in the sixteenth century, and the subsequent four centuries saw their share of story in sermons as well. I am certain that Edwards knows this fact well, but just could not include all discussions even in a book of 800 pages!

When the Reformation made its way to England, many of the greatest preachers were also among the greatest poets. Thus, the relationships between preaching and literature were very close. The names are familiar: John Donne, Lancelot Andrewes, Jeremy Taylor, George Herbert. The latter wrote in “A Priest to the Temple,” “A verse may find him, who a sermon flies,” suggesting that poetry may possess a stronger evangelical power than a sermon. From these seventeenth-century divines, both poets and preachers, arose the narrative power of hymns in the eighteenth century, represented by the two greatest of hymn-writers, Isaac Watts and Charles Wesley, whose hymns often extended to great length in their attempts to tell a fuller story. (See, for example, Wesley’s 14-verse version of “Come, O Thou Traveler Unknown,” that expounds a Christological reading of Genesis 32:24-32, based on Matthew Henry’s exposition.)¹⁶ These long narrative hymns suggest the ongoing importance of story for the preaching and worship of the eighteenth century.

In that century, too, preachers were also writers of fiction. Jonathan Swift

(*Gulliver's Travels*, *The Tale of a Tub*, "A Modest Proposal," among others), Samuel Butler (*The Way of All Flesh*), Laurence Sterne (*Tristram Shandy*), and others, turned their literary skills to both sermons and to literature. In addition, nearly every novel of the period had a prominent place for preachers and preaching. Henry Fielding, in both *Joseph Andrews* (1742) and *Tom Jones* (1749), finds preachers worthy of some withering scorn. This fictional, satiric attack on preachers and sermons continues unabated in literature of the next two centuries. Such literature perhaps culminates in the twentieth century in Sinclair Lewis' *Elmer Gantry* and Peter De Vries' *The Mackerel Plaza*, two portraits of philandering, self obsessed, money-grubbing clergymen who do not easily leave the mind.

In the United States, the first Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was fueled by preaching. George Whitefield was the epitome of the public, homiletical firebrand. Reports of his preaching beggar the imagination. Benjamin Franklin has left us a picture of Whitefield's preaching in his *Autobiography*: "His delivery was so improved by frequent repetitions that every accent, every emphasis, every modulation of voice, was so perfectly well turned...that, without being interested in the subject, one could not help being pleased with the discourse...."¹⁷ Earlier Franklin claimed that Whitefield "might well be heard by 30,000," which one could chalk up to a "preacher estimate," save that Franklin was hardly a preacher. He was, in fact, a rationalist Deist and not a regular churchgoer. His comments that even one not "interested in the subject" would still find the sermon "pleasing" perhaps referred to himself.

At the same time that Whitefield was wooing immense crowds with the fire of the Gospel, and thereby gaining many converts, a quiet-spoken local church pastor named Jonathan Edwards was having his own impact on eighteenth-century America. As pastor in Northhampton, Massachusetts, following the fifty-five year ministry of his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, Edwards stirred his congregation and many others nearby on the Massachusetts frontier with strict Calvinist sermons, carefully constructed and very quietly delivered. O.C. Edwards says that, "Whitefield was one of the most dramatic preachers of all time and Edwards one of the most staid."¹⁸ Both men had an enormous impact on eighteenth-century American religious life.

Neither of them used stories to any appreciable extent. Edwards focused his preaching on right doctrine, carefully conceived, while Whitefield used his vocal power and oratorical skill to draw and convert the people. It remained for another group of preachers to incorporate stories as the central mode of pulpit proclamation. Early African-American preachers, influenced by the emotional preaching of Whitefield, soon joined their African story-telling tradition with lively emotional preaching to create a uniquely American homiletics.

In Henry Mitchells' discussion of black sermons he says, "Generally speaking, Black preaching is probably as varied in structure as White preaching, except that more Black sermons are apt to consist of one single Bible narrative (with or without extended comments on the side)." Whether or not this observation is statistically true, it is clear that Bible stories are often the backbone of African-American sermons. Earlier in his book, Mitchell points to two great tellers of tales, John Jasper (1812-1901), founding pastor of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia, and Sandy F. Ray (1898-1979), long-time pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York. In the brief examples he provides from these two pastors' preaching, they combined a rich folklore tradition of storytelling with deep and pro-

found acquaintance with the details of the Bible's stories. It is precisely this combination of storytelling technique and careful biblical reading that this article wants to suggest is one of the right roads to powerful story preaching in the twenty-first century pulpit.

Though these African-American story preachers bring us well into the twentieth century, their roots are far older in the American soil. And, it must be noted, it was not only African-American preachers who were using stories extensively in their preaching. In fact, by the middle of the nineteenth century, preachers were, by one account "running mad for stories."¹⁹ The author of that quip was no other than the famous Harriet Beecher Stowe, creator of a wildly popular story of her own, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. In an introduction to a later book of hers, *My Wife and I* (1871), she comments on the style of preaching that has in her time become ubiquitous.

Hath any one in our day, as in St. Paul's, a psalm, a doctrine, a tongue, a revelation, an interpretation—forthwith he wraps it up in a serial story, and presents it to the public...We have Romanism and Protestantism, High Church and Low Church and no Church, contending with each other in serial stories, where each side converts the other, according to the faith of the narrator. We see that this is to go on. Soon it will be necessary that every leading clergyman shall embody in his theology a serial story, to be delivered in the pulpit.²⁰

In that same introduction, Stowe asserted that this love-affair with fiction would soon displace Bunyan's *Pilgrims' Progress* and would lead to the following scene: "The way to the celestial city (see Bunyan) will be as plain in everybody's mind as the way up Broadway—and so much more interesting!"²¹ It is not altogether clear whether Stowe deplores this movement toward pulpit fiction or celebrates its freshness and undoubted interest, but the result of its increasing use in preaching is a decline in doctrinal preaching. Perhaps Stowe saw herself in her most famous story of the fate of Little Eva as offering what was in effect a story sermon, though the point of that sermon remains even today the source of considerable dispute.

Reynolds' claim in his article is that the increased use of illustrations and stories in the up-scale pulpits of the last quarter of the nineteenth century led "both to the decline of theology and the rise in religious fiction."²² He further claims that "pietists, Great Awakening Revivalists, Methodists, and Unitarians shared the idea of a dissatisfaction with theological preaching and made a move toward secular illustration and example."²³ He cites the famous Horace Bushnell as an example. Bushnell tried to join together the "revivals' undisciplined emotionalism" and a "Boston liberalism's frigid literariness," and called instead for "a mediating combination of scholarship, stylistic talent, effective vocalizing, human feeling, and vigor."²⁴ That this combination was in fact an apt description of the preaching of Bushnell himself should come as no surprise.

Surely the capstone of this movement from doctrine to story in the pulpit is to be found in Charles Sheldon, who in the early days of the 1890's read to his Topeka, Kansas, congregation the chapters of his novel that eventually appeared as *In His Steps*.²⁵ This novel of the Social Gospel movement had sold more than eight million copies by 1920, and remains in print more than one hundred years after its initial publi-

cation. Thus, by the turn of the twentieth century, stories were deeply planted in the pulpit soil both of white and black preachers of whatever class in America.

However much the actual preaching of the early years of the twentieth century used stories, much of the commentary on preaching at the same time was not convinced of story's importance. The most read introduction to the art and craft of preaching was John A. Broadus' 1870 work, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons*, a work that has continued to be used in numerous institutions to the present day; a fourth edition of the work appeared as late as 1979.²⁶ Broadus had little good to say about stories. In his list of 16 patterns of sermons, stories find no place.²⁷ In his discussion of the need for imagination in sermon preparation, at every turn, caveats are added to control an over-eager imagination. After calling a "historical imagination" "one of the most powerful allies of preaching," he quickly adds, "but here there is demanded a moderation and reserve, a care in distinguishing between the real and the supposed, which in some books and many sermons are sadly needed."²⁸ Stowe may have imagined that preachers were "mad for stories," but Broadus, whose book appeared only one year prior to Stowe's, thinks otherwise.

This is especially clear in a quotation I used in my earlier book on narrative preaching: "A speaker must always subordinate narration to the object of his discourse, the conviction or persuasion which he wishes to effect. He must not elaborate or enlarge upon some narrative merely because it is in itself interesting or follow the story step by step according to its own laws."²⁹ Here are the implications of that statement. First, every story is always subordinate to the "object" of the discourse and must not be allowed to overwhelm that object. Second, the object of every sermon is "conviction or persuasion," and a story must not be told in such a way as to short-circuit that concern. Third, stories may be so interesting in and of themselves that they could overwhelm the basic object of conviction and persuasion. Fourth, and perhaps most important for the concerns of this article, the story must not be followed "step by step according to its own laws," because again the object of conviction and persuasion could be lost in the interest of the story and the sermon reduced to a form of entertainment. In nearly every way he can say it, Broadus warns against excessive use of interesting stories, too wild an abuse of a storied imagination. Genuine conviction and persuasion can only occur through reasoned argument, carefully laid out, sequentially supplied, intellectually conceived and presented. Charles Sheldon may be selling a religious story by the boxful, but Broadus warns against an over-active, over-imaginative use of story in the pulpit. It could be said that the approaches represented by Broadus and Sheldon, so clearly in opposition, continued that opposition throughout the twentieth century.

That this opposition was too simplistic, and finally not all that helpful for the practice of preaching, is made plain by a recent analysis of Paul Scott Wilson. In an evaluation of Richard Eslinger's post-modern cultural-linguistic model of homiletics, Wilson accuses him of a sort of reductionism, pitting "symbols and imaginative constructs" over against "abstract reasoning" as "stark alternatives" rather than valuable approaches, each in their own right.³⁰ In short, one need not choose a story homiletics to the complete exclusion of a more abstract one, assuming thereby that one has chosen the better part. The purpose for this article is not to present *the* homiletical approach that should always be used, an approach that will save a floundering pulpit ministry. Story preaching has great value for anyone who would proclaim the word of God in

as many ways as may be conceived. To paraphrase the maxim of George Herbert, “A story may speak to one from whom an abstract sermon flies.” But hardly always.

The twentieth century’s turn toward narrative and story has been well-catalogued in several places. Wilson in his recent book is representative of this history. Modern movements toward narrative as a basis for homiletics began in the new hermeneutic (see Fuchs and Ebeling) which argued that when the word is an event, when language is an event, then words not only contain ideas but fashion events. Words do much more than convey ideas; they perform and create events. Thus, since the Word of God encounters us as an event of God that *does* things, not merely *says* things, preaching should work hard to make that encounter possible. “As a result..., homiletics started to turn to narrative and plot to reflect the way people experience life and God, and away from abstract propositions or points.”³¹ The question of the structures of these sermons became very important as the movement grew, but Wilson argues that “the original strength of the narrative movement was its theological ability to generate experience through which God might be perceived.”³²

Add to this performative function of language the conviction, voiced most memorably by Stephen Crites, that human experience itself possessed a “narrative quality,” and the interest in narrative and story grew ever stronger.³³ Books and articles appeared in profusion, trumpeting the fresh and exciting ways that narrative and story could invigorate the moribund pulpits of the late twentieth-century West.

4. Disenchantment with Narrative/Story

So had narrative/story triumphed? Hardly! Even while the tide of narrative preaching literature was reaching flood stage, huge dams were being built to staunch the flow. That the flow has turned into a trickle can be seen in the 2005 Tom Long article, “What Happened to Narrative Preaching?”³⁴ In this article, Long offers some reflections on the reason for the decreasing interest in the kind of preaching that was talked about at length in the 1970’s and 1980’s. The critiques have come, he says, from the right, the left, and the center. From the right comes the charge that such preaching is “too soft, too doctrinally unclear, too ethically ambiguous, too shy about evangelism.”³⁵ From the center comes the claim that story sermons too often tell the wrong stories, “anecdotes of human experience or alleged plot structures in the imagination, rather than the gospel narrative of Jesus.”³⁶ From the left comes the charge that the very act of telling stories to a congregation has caused these story preachers to exercise “their privileged positions of power to grind down all human differences, have lifted their own views of experience to the level of the universal, and commanded the hearers to fit their lives into this frame, ... all the while hiding behind a false front of seemingly neutral and objective but really power-laden language.”³⁷ These are sharp critiques indeed and need to be addressed with seriousness if a story homiletics is to be practiced at all.

I believe that each of these arguments was preceded by the trenchant comments of Richard Lischer in his 1984 essay, “The Limits of Story.”³⁸ I want to give extended discussion to this piece, since I find it to be the most important and most carefully argued of the critiques of narrative/story preaching to have appeared. Lischer divided his critique of narrative preaching, as he conceived such preaching (there is, unfortunately, in the article no ready definition of what Lischer actually means by story or

story preaching), into four categories: aesthetic, ontological, theological, and socio-political.

1. Aesthetic problems. "Art," says Lischer, "is intrinsically autotelic, not a means to an end" (p.27). That is to say a story has its own intrinsic meaning and always holds the danger of existing apart from the contexts of its production. Hence, in agreement with Erich Auerbach, Lischer says that the Bible is a group of stories "fraught with background." This fact means that individual Bible stories ought never be told apart from their necessary background in the larger story of Israel and in the larger story of the mission of Jesus and the church. Isolated stories, however well told, however engaging and lively, inevitably lead to "moralism and universalism" (p.27). In the former, the preacher, rather than preaching the gospel of God's salvation, preaches instead a general moral code: "be kind," "be generous," be helpful." In the latter, the preacher assumes a universality of experience; we are all finally alike, s/he says, and the scandalous particularity of Jesus' sharp demands disappears into a fog of generalities worthy more of the Rotary Club than the church. Sermons are left with announcements of "transient expressions of grace" (p.27), avoiding historical contexts and dogmatic underpinnings.

And this does not exhaust the dangers of aestheticism, according to Lischer. There are very practical dangers to address, too. Though these story sermons claim to be simplicity itself, they are in fact far from simple. First, there is a huge hermeneutical distance between *the* story and *my* story. The great story of God as found in the Bible is far different from mine, and to tell the Bible's story as if it were only an ancient version of the story I live is to reduce the Bible only to a mirror of things I already know, when it often is the sharpest of challenges to things I only think I know. Second, "the real irony is what began as a quest for authenticity in preaching (i.e. in telling a story) results in a thickening of the veil between the pulpit and the pew" (p.29). "Just telling a little ole' story" does not bring me closer to my hearers; it clouds their attempts to hear the gospel that would save them. Rather it offers them a snapshot of grace, a reduced and trivialized portrait of the saving work of Christ.

These are significant claims, calling into deep question any homiletics based on story. And I agree with Lischer that these critiques can and surely have surfaced in some of the story sermons I have heard (and preached). Nevertheless, as the saying goes, "the proof is in the pudding." It may not finally be the case that "all" story sermons are necessarily subject to the summary judgments that Lischer has offered in his first objection.

2. Ontological Problems. Lischer here calls into question the claims of Crites (and Paul Ricoeur) that "historicity is the form of life correlative to the language game of telling." Though we do tell stories to describe and to shape our lives, stories' very drive toward resolution is itself a large problem ontologically. "The stories we tell may provide the sense of order so desperately needed *or* they may appear transparently palliative to those whose experience has resisted the broom that sweeps in one direction" (pp.29-30). Resolved stories are not always the stories we know in our own lives. Much we experience is in fact non-linked events without chronological, logical, or organic order, more like the writing of Proust, Joyce, Kafka, and Beckett than Dickens or Austen. The fact is, says Lischer, "many simply do not have stories" (p.31). They are the severely handicapped, the addicted, the poverty-stricken, the hungry, the imprisoned, "and many other margined ones whose lives are structured not by the

syntaxis of story but by immediate needs or bewilderment at the unrelatedness of things” (p.31). “This is not to say that they do not *need* story, only that it has ceased to be reputable currency.” Lischer implies here that those who find themselves living lives generally unstructured have little patience with transient experiences of grace. Put another way, those who wait for Godot, imprisoned in trash cans, have a hard time hearing a nice, well-rounded, resolved story. Lischer concludes his ontological critique by saying, “Before preaching says ‘Once upon a time,’ to the captive or the broken-hearted, it sits where these storyless, forgotten people sit and then proclaims the good news of the Lord’s deliverance” (p.32).

Again, I agree that neat and easily resolved stories do not at all exhaust the full range of human experience. Any preacher who would dare to utter a sweet story of personal victory into a congregation filled with persons whose own lives are a shambles of unconnected and devastating events is not worthy of the name preacher. I would like to think that Lischer is attacking the rare straw person here who only strides toward the pulpit occasionally. Alas, my own experience knows his critique is all too telling. I often wonder exactly whom the preacher is addressing when s/he tells the wondrous story of family unity into a room filled with broken homes and shattered lives.

However, stories need not be like this at all. Indeed, in the Bible, few stories possess the neatness or roundedness that Lischer decries. They have an openness, a call to the deeps, that stand starkly over against the tales Lischer seems to be railing at.

3. Theological Problems. Lischer agrees that “theology lives by story”; the great story (and stories) of the faith are the very stuff of theological reflection. However, theology must also have “precise modes of conceptualizing and interpreting,” else theology will be “reduced to repetition or recital and lose its power and flexibility to address new situations” (p.34). In short, stories must always be conceptualized and interpreted, or they will be only stories, told again and again in the vain hope that they might one day serve as the means of transformation that is the essence of the gospel. Stories by themselves run the risk of meaningless repetition unless they are used as vehicles of meaning in ever-changing contexts. “How can they hear without a preacher,” cries Paul in Romans 10:14, and surely he means by that someone who can expound just how the story of Christ can be for me, as it was for him, the center of my salvation.

By this critique, Lischer would seem to rule out some of the very sort of preaching I propose to do, namely, pure narrative, wherein the telling of the story itself *is* the sermon. But here Lischer and I do not at all disagree. The very ways in which the stories are told imply clearly “precise modes of conceptualizing and interpreting.” The art of these tellings is found in part in the subtle ways that the work of interpretation is hidden in the telling itself.

4. Socio-Political Problems. Perhaps here Lischer offers his most pungent arguments against stories in preaching. Several quotations attest to the disastrous dangers he fears. He observes that in the 1960’s the very basic movement toward societal change engendered by racism, the war in Vietnam, and other social earthquakes moved toward a sense of “wonder” instead. “If we could not speak with assurance of God (note the 1960’s ‘Death of God’ fad) and summon our hearers to faith and justice as the twofold *telos* of the Christian life, we could with growing theological warrant reflect with our congregations on the richness and interrelatedness of experience.” This movement was “inevitably a turn from others toward the self” (p.35). In this

general critique Lischer is surely correct. Gone from our pulpits, with but few exceptions, were the prophetic voices of Amos and Hosea and the prophetic Jesus whose deep concern with poverty and riches have been all but forgotten in the rush toward mega churches and mega budgets along with the concomitant reduction of moral concern to sexual behavior and reproductive rights. We now, much, much more than we should, “come to the garden alone,” leaving our brothers and sisters to fend for themselves. Lischer’s angry screed is not uttered without real provocation. He concludes, “It can be argued that story does not provide the resources for implementing ethical growth or socio-political change” (p.35).

A recent article by Brooks Berndt argues otherwise. In fact, he wants to claim that some of the recent movements for social change, both in the United States and elsewhere (he looks particularly at Haiti), are the direct result of the careful use of stories.³⁹ In fact, at one point in the article, Berndt uses Lischer’s own prize-winning work on the preaching of Martin Luther King, Jr., to demonstrate that King “did indeed use stories (*i.e.*, the Exodus narrative presupposed and implicit) to galvanize action.”⁴⁰ He further quotes Francesca Polletta, a scholar of social movements, who argues quite directly that “stories can elicit and guide emotions,” more powerfully than any power of exhortation based on argument.⁴¹ Finally, Berndt examines more carefully a 1985 sermon of the Haitian leader Jean-Bertrand Aristide, delivered on the Monday before Easter, wherein the ruthless tyranny of Baby Doc Duvalier was held up to ridicule and rejection. After examining the central place of stories in this sermon, Berndt concludes, “There are contexts in which narrative (stories) can play a vital role in social movements. In the tool chest of the preacher, one would be wise to not underestimate the value of narrative in the work of justice.”⁴²

In each of Lischer’s careful critiques of the use of stories in preaching, he has made significant points. Yet, each critique comes down to the misuse of stories rather than a generalized claim that stories have no place in sermons at all. Each problem he names has appeared, and continues to appear, in pulpits in many churches. I want to argue that despite the important analyses that Lischer offers, story preaching can still find a significant role in our preaching. Yet, I find his work a touchstone to which I need always to return when I propose a story homiletics.

What is needed now is a careful enumeration of just how a story homiletics can work, avoiding the important critiques of Lischer and others, and demonstrating, by judicious example, the potential power and possibilities locked into the stories of the Scripture. That work remains still to be done.

Notes

1. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, expanded edition (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 124.
2. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1971).
3. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 23.
4. Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), 4.
5. *Ibid.*, 207.
6. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1980).
7. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, expanded edition, 123.
8. John C. Holbert, *Preaching Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 42-43.
9. *Ibid.*, 93-115.

10. F. Homes Dudder, *Gregory the Great: His Place in History and Thought*, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1905), vol. I, 255.
11. Edwards, *History*, 138-140.
12. *Ibid.*, 190.
13. *Ibid.*, chapter 9, 210-238.
14. *Ibid.*, 228-231.
15. *Luther's Works*, American Edition, edited by Pelikan and Lehman (St. Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia Press and Fortress Press, 1955), Sermons II, 52:10-11.
16. This hymn may be found complete in *The United Methodist Hymnal*, edited by Carlton R Young (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 387.
17. Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1916), 196-198.
18. Edwards, *History*, 478.
19. David S. Reynolds, "From Doctrine to Narrative: The Rise of Pulpit Storytelling in America," *American Quarterly*, (1980): 479.
20. Harriet Beecher Stowe, *My Wife and I*, 1871, reprinted (New York: Riverside Press, 1967), viii.
21. *Ibid.*, x.
22. Reynolds, "From Doctrine..." 480.
23. *Ibid.*, 480.
24. *Ibid.*, 498.
25. *Ibid.*, 498.
26. John A Broadus, *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* 4th edition (New York: Harper & Row, 1979).
27. *Ibid.*, 68-74.
28. *Ibid.*, 227.
29. *Ibid.*, 132.
30. Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching and Homiletical Theory* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2004), 18.
31. *Ibid.*, 64-65.
32. *Ibid.*, 65.
33. Stephen F Crites, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," *JAAR*, 39 (September, 1971): 291-311.
34. Thomas G Long, "What Happened to Narrative Preaching?" *Journal for Preachers*, xxviii, (Pentecost 2004): 9-14.
35. *Ibid.* See Long's assessment of James W. Thompson's critique of narrative homiletics in Thompson's *Preaching Like Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 9-14.
36. This is Long's assessment of Charles Campbell's critique in Campbell's *Preaching Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 192-193.
37. John S. McClure, *Other-wise Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 81.
38. Richard Lischer, "The Limits of Story," *Interpretation* 38 (1984).
39. Brooks Berndt, "The Politics of Narrative," *Homiletic*, xxix, No. 2, (Winter, 2004): 1-11.
40. *Ibid.*, 3.
41. *Ibid.*, 3.
42. *Ibid.*, 11.