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Telling Stories, Teaching Scripture: The Educational Possibilities in Narrative Preaching

KATIE HAYS

I think James Thompson has been looking at my computer hard drive. Specifically, I'm afraid he's been poking around in my "sermons" folder, the one that contains all the notes and manuscripts from which I've preached over the last nine years. Each file is titled according to the main scriptural text that it addresses.

Alphabetically, as you scroll through, you see many titles from John, a few dozen from Luke, dozens more from Mark, and—because we recently finished "Year A" in the Revised Common Lectionary—a slew of sermons from Matthew. Sprinkled throughout are smaller collections from Genesis, Exodus, the prophets, and Acts. I am, according to Thompson's book *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today*, one of those contemporary preachers in the "new homiletic tradition" that avoids the Pauline corpus in favor of narrative texts and narrative sermons.¹

In *Preaching Like Paul*, Thompson levels some dead-on criticism at the new homiletic, the most popular form of which is called narrative homiletics. Thompson and others who share his concern² contend that narrative preaching is born out of the preacher's desire to present sermons that are appealing and interesting to her hearers. Preaching interesting sermons often comes at the expense of preaching authoritatively from the "unappealing" or non-narrative sections of the Bible, Thompson asserts.³ While conceding that narrative is an important mode of biblical revelation, critics of narrative homiletics argue persuasively that the exclusive choice of the narrative genre for preaching (both in text selection and in sermon form) has kept preachers and their listeners from engaging the deep theological reflection in the Pauline corpus.

Thompson elaborates several specific shortcomings of narrative homiletics in his introduction.⁴ At least one aspect of that criticism is especially relevant to the context in which I preach: namely that inductive, narrative preaching often assumes too much on the part of the listeners. In a congregation located far from the Bible Belt and in which half the members come from religious or secular backgrounds that did not place a high premium on Bible learning, to say the least, how can the imaginative stitching together of stories featuring contemporary and biblical characters and plots provide the healthful diet of theological reflection that is required for their spiritual maturity?

"We have difficulty imagining our congregations responding to [Paul's] dense theological argumentation," Thompson concedes in the voice of a preacher like me. "We prefer a story that speaks to the narrative of our own lives."⁵

Well, yes. It's true that postmodern preaching has turned away from the expository, "three-points-and-a-poem" sermons based almost completely on explaining Paul's dense language that many of us grew up hearing two or three times a week. Thompson studiously avoids the word "expository," however, instead describing Paul's preaching in the epistles⁶ as "evangelistic," "theological," and "pastoral/ecclesial."

He wants the reader to understand that the call to Pauline preaching is not a call back to the days when the preacher's entire project was limited to explaining, phrase by phrase, the last 10 percent of the Bible.⁷ "Preaching like Paul" is not quite the same as "explaining Paul's letters." Thompson is trying to say to prac-

tioners of narrative homiletics, “What you’re doing is not good enough, but what I want you to do is not quite what you think.” Fair enough.

I would counter, however, that not all narrative preachers are doing what Thompson thinks we are doing. Telling stories from the pulpit, biblical or contemporary, because people like stories better than argumentation, is not the first or even the main characteristic of true narrative preaching. Rather, narrative preaching is grounded in the most profound kind of theological reflection; it grows out of a narrative theology that creatively imagines and enacts encounters between God’s story in the Bible and the human story.

A sermon in the narrative mode is built on several theological premises, which are detailed below.

Premise #1. God’s Word is not a discourse wanting explanation but a person, Jesus, wanting relationship. His own words to us most often took the form of narrative, metaphor, and parable. His life, death, and resurrection became the narrative lens through which all other stories, biblical or otherwise, must be interpreted.

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Premise #2. God’s self-revelation through Jesus Christ is narrated in the Bible, which is an extended story told from the very beginning to the very end of the world as we know it. Every part of scripture functions within that meta-narrative to move the plot

along, such that no part of it can be isolated and interpreted apart from the rest.

Premise #3. The lives of individuals, churches, societies, and the human race are lived narratively rather than episodically. As we mature, we learn to see how the events and relationships in our lives fit together to form the story of ourselves.

Premise #4. Good preaching creates a moment when God’s self-revelation intersects with (or crashes into) our stories of ourselves.⁸ In this moment we can repent of our past, or be strengthened in our present walk, or see the future way more clearly.⁹

Correspondent to these points, I am committed to several principles in my church’s experience of the good news of the kingdom of God each week.

Commitment #1. We stand and read from the gospels every Sunday, no exceptions. Standing reminds us that this is our primary reading no matter where it falls in the service.

Commitment #2. We include three more readings in almost every service: usually an Old Testament passage, a psalm, and a section from one of the epistles. Thus, the meta-narrative of scripture is represented at its beginning, middle, and end each week, held together by the primary story about Jesus. We read from Paul almost every Sunday, meaning that no matter what text I choose to expound in the sermon, the apostle has had his say and has done his interpretive theological work—both in my study and in the worship service.

Commitment #3. I study the narrative nature of lived human experience and good literature, classical and contemporary, so that my sermons may ring true to my hearers. This sometimes includes a careful recreation of the narrative behind Paul’s letters, the relationships and cultural context that shaped his correspondence with the churches. Remembering the human lives behind and within Paul’s writing helps me connect his words with the human lives that gather for worship on Sunday morning. Studying these—contemporary experience, good literature, and the stories behind Paul’s letters—does *not* provide anecdotes to illustrate a biblical point. People’s lives are not anecdotes, and my congregation can smell an “illustration” from a dozen pews away.

Commitment #4. I strive to structure sermons so people will lean forward in their seats to hear the next paragraph. God’s story will whiz by unnoticed if it does not engage the hearer, and engagement is a goal I believe I share with the preacher Paul, like the preacher Jesus before him. “Whatever you do with this message,” they both seemed to say by their urgent communication of the good news, “don’t ignore it.” In con-

temporary preaching, this means employing the tools of narrative theory to build plot—a weaving together of exposition, tension, and edgy resolution—into every sermon, whether there’s a “story” in it or not.

I take seriously Thompson’s repeated reminder that “theological reflection is a vital dimension of preaching.”¹⁰ It is my intention to show that narrative preaching can and should engage in the theological reflection Thompson and I both find missing from much contemporary preaching. It is my hope that truly narrative preaching can engage my congregation in ever-maturing reflection on the meaning of scripture’s story, and their own story, and the story of what happens when the two stories meet.

The sermon I offer here is a product of lectionary preaching. On Proper 7 in Year A, the gospel text (Matt 10:24-39) is joined by the story of Hagar and Ishmael cast out of Abraham’s home (Gen 21:8-21) and a piece of Paul’s argument concerning death to sin and life in Christ (Rom 6:1b-11). In keeping with my Commitment #1, Jesus’ themes of courage and hope because of God’s desire and power to save us (Matt 10:26-31) are present throughout, although the gospel text is explicitly mentioned only briefly. Commitment #2 calls for the sermon to attend to the meta-narrative of scripture in two biblical texts by interweaving the familiar Pauline text with the disturbing Old Testament one in order to illuminate the idea “dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:11). The narrative is not the point of the sermon, but in order to bring the theological-existential point of Romans 6 into the lives of the listeners, I offer Hagar as a point of connection. (Paul, of course, did it first in Galatians 4.)

Commitment #3 leads me to ask what Romans 6 has to say to my believing audience, those who already know that they must not “sin so that grace may abound” (Rom 6:1). The issue of limited biblical literacy is far more likely to mean that they do not know Hagar’s story than that they do not understand the apostle’s imperative that we Christians have died to sin.

Finally, Commitment #4 calls for the sermon itself to be structured such that people want to know what comes next. Vivid language paints pictures that are hard to ignore and invites the listeners to see themselves in the scene the narrative presents. Skillfully explaining Romans 6 to my congregation might have led them to agree, “This is the way we Christians think.” My hope in preaching the same passage narratively is that they will discover, “This is the way we Christians live,” and then live that way. May God bless our efforts in the pulpit and the pew.

SERMON

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. (Gen 21:14)

Hagar was a woman of good sense. Born a slave, she was not prone to believe in romance or fairy tales. She understood the unfairness of life; understood that she would work hard all her life for no compensation and very little appreciation; understood that because of the blind loyalty expected from someone in her position she would often bear the consequences for other people’s mistakes. Hear this about Hagar: she did not believe for a minute that Abraham loved her, or that Sarah could continue to be the gracious mistress she had been before Ishmael’s birth. She knew before she slept with Abraham and bore his child what the consequences would be.

But she was a slave, and slaves are capable only of obedience, even to that which she knew would destroy her. Also, she was human, which meant that at times the desire for stability and contentment prevailed over her good sense, and she gave in to the illusion that the four of them (and now the five of them, with Isaac’s arrival) could go on living as a family forever.

And now here she was, wandering the desert. For the first couple of days, she cursed Abraham for his spinelessness and Sarah for her pettiness. She cursed the hot sun. She cursed the desert itself. She cursed the

relentless darkness that came each night, washing the landscape in inky black and raising all kinds of invisible creatures from their hideouts. She curled herself around Ishmael and maintained her tirade against the forces that had conspired to put them in this miserable situation.

By the third or fourth day, her venom was spent, along with the bread and water she'd been rationing so carefully. Hagar continued talking to herself, trying to shush Ishmael's thirsty cries, and giving up all hope that they'd be found out here. She began to accept the truth about the present situation: there were no other human beings within a million miles of this wasteland, and therefore she and Ishmael were dead. She laid her child in the shade of a tree, walked as far away as she could, and laid herself down to wait for the inevitable.

This is how sin works. It is the master; we are the slaves. We are born into it, never knowing another way, knowing only loyalty to the desires and whims of that master. We respond to it, sometimes against our better judgment, but we are not romantics. We can count the cost and predict the consequences as well as anyone, although sometimes we allow ourselves to believe the fairy tale; to believe that this might actually

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work; that we might actually find happiness by obeying this master. And we might live this way for a long, long time, believing that happiness and security are within our reach; living against conscience, against nature, against God in undying loyalty to the master of selfishness.

When we are confronted with the truth about ourselves—when our sin is exposed and the corruption of our lifestyle is shown in the light of God's will for our lives—chaos ensues. We are ripped

away from our comfort, expelled into the desert with few provisions, forced to see with perfect clarity all that has happened in our lives.

We might first curse the master that sent us here, the greed and impatience and lust that ruined relationships and exploded our home. But sooner or later, we see ourselves with clarity for the first time: we know that we have been slaves, nothing more; that we have been used and abused by our master, sin; that we have been tricked into thinking that home and hearth could be manufactured out of sinful behavior or that humans can make their own happiness apart from God.

Having walked as far as we can in the desert, we lay ourselves down to die. Dead to sin, dead to the desires and lusts that once tricked us. Now we are untouchable by the master that once enslaved us. That master leads only to the badlands, to unquenchable thirst, to the blistering sun, to the sacrifice of all we love and all we have been given.

That is where God found them, Hagar and Ishmael, huddled in the pitiful shade of two trees at least a hundred yards apart, the child crying for his mother and the mother crying for her child. Far enough apart for Hagar to avoid the pain of seeing Ishmael's pain. No one in the desert to hear their crying, far enough apart that they couldn't even hear each other—exactly the right time for God to hear their cries. A mortal observer might have counted them both as corpses by this time and passed on by, but at just the right time God stopped to speak to Hagar.

“What troubles you, Hagar? Do not be afraid; for God has heard the voice of the boy where he is. Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’ Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water. She went, and filled the skin with water, and gave the boy a drink.” (Gen 21:17b-19)

Thus Hagar and Ishmael became the first recipients of the living water that we would come to know so well. They drank, they gulped, they spilled it over their faces, and they lived. In fact, they thrived, filled with

the hope of the new promise God had made; confident that this God, the God who rescued them from the desert, would keep his promise. And he did.

That is where God finds us, as well: simpering thirstily under the thin shade of a desert tree, dead to the world, dead to sin, not a drop of life left in us. He hears our cries from that place and offers his living water for us to drink. We know that in the tradition of Hagar and all the stories of people like her, God finds us in our desolation, finds us here and offers his hand and gives us life.

There are many crying in the badlands who do not know about Hagar, who do not know about the God who comes to save when the cruel master sin has sent us out to die. They suffer the consequences of sin without knowledge of God's saving offer of living water. They are without God and without hope in the world.

But there are many more cries than these coming from the wilderness. There are many, I find, who have not been exiled there so much as they have chosen to *stay* out there, expiring in the heat.

It looks like this: Having been convicted of the seriousness of sin, a person flings herself into the desert, away from sin, away from temptation, essentially dead to sin and all the false joys that accompanied it. This person sacrifices "all the vain things that charmed her most" and gives herself up for dead. *This is a religious person*. This is a person who comprehends the seriousness of her selfishness, who wants to give up her life for her God, however imperfect that life is, in a show of solidarity with the God who gave himself up for us. *This is a Christian*, one who identifies with Jesus of Nazareth, the one who went to his death for the sake of sin. This is a person who understands Rom 6:1-3 before she even reads it:

What then are we to say? Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin go on living in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death? (Rom 6:1-3)

And this person *is* dead, dead to sin. The rest of her life will be spent struggling to *remain dead*—avoiding wrongdoing, steering clear of temptation, never straying far from the punishing desert heat. Her religion will consist of remaining dead—keeping a list of things not to do, staying out of harm's way, resisting selfish impulses, lying very still, waiting for *rigor mortis* to set in. And she will do it in the name of Jesus. "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus have been baptized into his death?"

But please, let us not remain there, perpetually mourning our deaths under the punishing desert sun. Let us not weep for so long that we forget to listen for God's voice, to look for his face, to reach for his hand when it is offered. Because he does offer. God does not leave his children to languish in the blistering heat of our own sinfulness. Just as he reached out to Hagar and offered her life anew with her son, so he reaches out to us and offers us newness of life with his son. Romans 6 goes on to say:

For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his . . . The death he died, he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives, he lives to God. So you must also consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus. (Rom 6:5, 10-11)

This is the truth of the gospel: as we die to sin and find ourselves freed from its power, we are also coming alive. We die with Christ in order to be raised with Christ. Make no mistake: our sin is so great that it could kill us for good. In the gospel text this morning [Matt 10:24-39], we hear Jesus warn his disciples that it could take not only our bodies but our souls as well. But he has done the work to make sure that never has to happen, to make sure that none of God's children are left in the desert to die ever again. When we end up there, he comes to get us, offering living water for our parched bodies and souls.

Christianity, then, is about so much more than remaining dead to sin, keeping ourselves from temptation, and fleeing every evil. It is a new way of being alive, of fully enjoying every blessing we have been

given and fully embracing our citizenship in the kingdom of God, our adoption into the family of God. With Hagar, we find new life in the desert. We flourish, we drink, we eat, we love, we serve. In short, we *live* through the power of the one who holds life in his hand.

“God is not God of the dead, but of the living” (Mark 12:27). He has invited us to spend our lives among the living. Knowing how much God loves his children, having seen demonstrated time and again the lengths to which he would go to rescue a child from desolate and dangerous places, we hear again the apostle’s imperative: “So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and *alive to God* in Christ Jesus.” And so we must.

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END NOTES

- 1 James W. Thompson, *Preaching Like Paul: Homiletical Wisdom for Today* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 14-15.
- 2 Most notably Charles Campbell in *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).
- 3 Thompson, 6.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 9-14.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 6 Thompson shows that New Testament scholarship’s previous emphasis on Greco-Roman letter-writing as a key to understanding Paul’s letters obstructed our understanding of the oratorical nature of his correspondence. The apostle dictated his correspondence, which was in almost every case a follow-up to preaching he had delivered in person, and the letters were shared by reading them aloud. Thus Paul’s letters reflect an oratory style and can be gleaned for information about his preaching rather than his skills as an essayist. See chapter 3, “The Shape of Paul’s Preaching.”
- 7 However, Thompson at one point does say, “The preacher takes on the role of Paul’s emissary, communicating and explaining the apostle’s words, re-presenting their persuasive power” (83). If that’s not expository preaching . . .
- 8 Douglas John Hall, *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 91. “Theology lives *between* the stories—God’s story of the world, and humanity’s ever-changing account of itself and all things. Theology is what happens when the two stories meet” (91). By this definition, all truly narrative preaching is theological reflection.
- 9 David Fleer and Dave Bland address the tension that exists in these premises in their essay “Tension in Preaching” in *Preaching from Luke/Acts*, (Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2000), 21-37. Where should the sermon begin: with the world of the biblical text, as the postliberal theologians would have it? or the world of the hearers, as the “new” homileticians insist? Fleer and Bland challenge that “traffic on the hermeneutical bridge” (34) must flow in both directions.
- 10 Thompson, 109.

