The preached sermon as a happening of the gospel

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Once in a while a friend or church member asks me, “So, what’s your sermon about this week?” I usually respond with some comment about the content of my sermon. I speak about the theme of the sermon, the biblical text I am working with, or perhaps some new information or an insight that has inspired me. While I enjoy answering this question, I usually feel that my response addresses only one aspect of the Sunday morning sermon.

A sermon that is clear only on content but pays no attention to what it is doing will probably sound like an essay. A sermon that pays attention to what it is doing but with little regard to content will lack biblical and theological depth.

What is your sermon about? It’s a good question, and all week it should be in the mind and heart of the preacher. In the question, the word *about* refers to the content of the sermon. Like any other communicator, the preacher needs to be clear on content. Many preaching manuals suggest that the question, what is your sermon about? is crucial, and you should be able to answer it in one simple sentence. This “about” sentence may or may not be audibly present in the sermon, but it is in front of the preacher as she prepares and preaches. The sentence can be simple: This sermon is about Sarah’s laughter at the good—and ridiculous—news of her pregnancy. A clear sentence on what the sermon is about has a way of anchoring both the study process and the preaching moment.

What is happening in your sermon?

While the about question is crucial, another question people should ask preachers is, what is your sermon doing? This is the other side of the about question. The question, what is your sermon about? gets at content; what is your sermon doing? gets at

what is happening—or what is supposed to happen—in the preached sermon. Here we leave the world of nouns and enter the world of verbs and participles. Just as a preacher should have a clear sentence with a strong verb at the centre, that spells out what the sermon is about, he should also have a clear sentence that anchors what the sermon is doing.

Thomas Long invites the preacher, after a close reading of the text, to construct two sentences that anchor the sermon: a focus sentence and a function sentence.[1] If the focus of the sermon is God's news and Sarah's laughter, what might be the function of this sermon? Think verbs here. Do you want to encourage? Or is the goal of this sermon to challenge? to invite? to surprise? to inspire?

The structure of the three-point sermon tended to suggest that Christian faith could best be summarized in static propositions. It was *about* God, *about* the gospel, but it was not necessarily an experience of God and the gospel.

The setting of the sermon may be decisive when it comes to finding the right verb. If this setting is a funeral, perhaps the main function of our Sarah sermon may be to comfort those who are grieving their loss. Another time, this Sarah sermon might make people laugh about the ridiculous ways God enters our lives.

In the end, what the sermon is about and what it is doing need to be joined. A sermon that is clear only on content but pays no attention to what it is doing will probably sound like an essay or a report. On the other hand, a sermon that pays attention to what it is doing but with little regard to content will lack biblical and theological depth and may produce some warm fuzzy feelings that lack staying power.

The sermon as a happening: A brief history

The issue of what is happening in the preached sermon is a major theme that has dominated homiletics in North America in the last fifty years. One of the first to ask what the Protestant sermon in the twentieth century was doing was H. Grady Davis. Dissatisfied with the traditional three-point sermon, he was concerned about the shape and movement of the sermon in connection with its content. In *Design for Preaching*, Davis is constantly asking classic questions of rhetoric: what is this illustration, this sentence, this paragraph doing in this sermon? Does it need to be there? If the

biblical text one is preaching from is, for instance, a narrative, why would the sermon be organized as an essay with one argument following another?

Thinking way outside the box for his day—where the sermon was seen as a kind of argumentative essay—Davis likened the sermon to a tree with interconnected roots, a trunk, branches, and leaves. In form and content, he argued, the sermon needs to grow out of the biblical text and retain the text's intention, meaning, and happening as the sermon is preached. *Design for Preaching* is often lauded as the beginning of the "new homiletic." This paradigm shift in preaching had its beginnings, in part, in Davis's insistence that the sermon is not fundamentally words on a page but rather a happening that grows out of the biblical text and finds a hearing in the preacher and the listener.[2]

One of the first offspring of the new homiletic was narrative preaching, which continues to live and acquire new forms even today. The three-point sermon and its concluding poem may have been thorough on the content side, but what was it doing? What it was doing, in fact, was boring congregations—a good swath of Protestant churches—to death. More than this, though, the three-point sermon tended, because of its structure, to suggest that Christian faith could best be summarized in static propositions. It also tended to be a head game. It was *about* God, *about* the gospel, or even *about* transformation, but it was not necessarily an experience of God and the transformative gospel.

The narrative turn in preaching would not leave out content but would concentrate on experience, on what is happening as the plot or story unfolds in the minds and hearts of listeners. In short, the narrative or inductive sermon would not simply define the content of the gospel; it would *do* the gospel. Lowry's loop, Craddock's inductive move to the Aha!, Jensen's story, Buttrick's moves, and Wilson's pages—just to name a few—encourage various types of narrative movement in the preached sermon, allowing the sermon to be a happening of the gospel.[3]

A happening—of the gospel

A preached sermon at its best is a happening not of just anything but of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel *has* content and *is* an event. The word *gospel* can be defined in a multitude of ways, but

let's try this: gospel is a noun referring to the saving acts of God in creation, Torah, God's people, and especially in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. But the content of the gospel is only one of its aspects. The gospel also *does* something to people and communities; it performs something in us and for us. Paul says it is the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16). The gospel is not just content; it is also a power, a dynamic, a happening.

The new homiletic's concentration on eventfulness—as seen in the narrative sermon—is not just a rhetorical move. At its inception, people lauded narrative preaching not just because they liked stories and could finally stand to listen to the preacher. It is more complex than this. The narrative sermon came out of a mid-twentieth-century biblical, theological, linguistic, and philosophical paradigm shift that had the gospel at its centre. The wave the new homiletic was riding was a movement called the new hermeneutic, which, in its theological form, emphasized the Word of God not as static but as performative, the kergyma not only as information but as transformative, the gospel not simply as content but also as power. In sum, narrative preaching became popular not only because people like stories. Narrative preaching has its roots in a recovery of the saving and performative acts of God captured in dynamic concepts such as Word, kergyma, and gospel.[4]

In sum, preaching the content of the gospel on a Sunday morning is only one aspect of a sermon. A sermon—even if it is *about* God or Jesus—that does not have a clear sense of what it is *doing* is not a sermon in the best sense, because it is not a happening of the gospel. Nor is it enough to add happenings to a sermon, in the form of cute illustrations or stories, in order to give people an experience. The goal of preaching is not just any experience or happening. The sermon is made up of what it is about and what it is doing, but it is not really a sermon until in the moment of preaching the gospel happens.

Steps toward making the sermon a happening of God's grace

How does our preaching become a gospel event? As noted above, we need clarity about the content and the main verb or verbs of the sermon. Beyond this, a few other steps can move us toward sermons our congregations may experience as gospel happenings.

Get the essay model out of your head. The preached sermon is its own genre. A sermon is not an essay. In some ways, it resembles an essay and a story, a movie and a lecture, a comedy sketch and a sales pitch, but a sermon is its own genre. What is more, writing and speaking are different skills, just as reading and listening are different experiences. An analysis of good speeches, sermons, and lectures reveals that the sentences are generally shorter than in written prose. These oral forms rely on active verbs, keep adjectival description to a minimum, and use repetition. Many good books provide instruction in oral communication for those who have been schooled for decades in essay writing. These resources can help you write for the ear instead of the eye.[5]

Bring your voice and body to the happening of the gospel. Preaching has a performative aspect that requires body, voice, spirit, and mind working in concert. If we are serious about making the gospel happen in preaching, we need to communicate with our voices and bodies as well as with words. I am not talking about being over-the-top dramatic. Rather I am simply noting that preachers need to be aware of what our voices and bodies are doing as we make the gospel happen. Is your body doing something that detracts from the main verb that characterizes your sermon? The sermon that was supposed to comfort may be received as judging if you wag your finger in unconscious imitation of a parent scolding a naughty child. Enrol in an acting class. It can enhance your ability to bring congruence of mind, body, and voice to your preaching.

The narrative sermon as a happening is not simply a rhetorical move that will help listeners pay attention; it has its roots in a recovery of the saving and performative acts of God.

As you prepare your sermon, pay attention to your Aha! moments. One school of thought suggests that our Aha! moments during sermon study are our best clues to how we can make room for the gospel to happen in the preached sermon. In the sermon, we might be able to retrace the steps we took to get to our Aha![6] Our gospel moments are not necessarily emotional happenings—although they may be just that. It could be that in our study we have gone through a paradigm shift of the right or left brain variety; perhaps a new insight seems to bring together the text,

the church, and a situation in the church. Any of these experiences is a clue to what the happening of the gospel may be for that sermon.

Spend time with the good news in your sermon. As preachers, we are prone to want to impress the congregation with everything but the good news. A sermon that spends most of its time diagnosing social or personal ills, giving historical-critical background to the text, or spinning an unrelated story can limit the time we can devote to naming the good news we have discovered. Paul Wilson suggests that at least 50 percent of the sermon should be proclamation of the good news.[7] Although it may feel wooden at first, this is an excellent exercise. It is hard, risky, and requires a holy imagination to name what God is doing in the world. Nonetheless, preaching the gospel with its accompanying hope, promise, and renewal is what the preacher is called to do.

Look for what is happening in the biblical text, not for the point of the text. True, we often must choose one incident, image, or line of a text to dwell on in the sermon, and our focus sentence may name a truth of the text. Nonetheless, it is always good to see the incident or line that we have chosen in its dynamic and dramatic context. What happened before and after this incident or line? What is God doing here to bring the community or the individual from slavery to liberation, from sin to salvation, from despair to hope, from exile to home? In other words, what is the event or happening of the gospel that looms large for you this week, which you can carry with you into the pulpit?[8]

Work through the reality that you are speaking for God in your sermon. Nearly every Christian tradition and every generation of preachers must somehow tackle the paradoxical reality that sinful humans can—humbly, but with conviction—voice God's good news. Many Anabaptist-Mennonite churches have shifted from sometimes autocratic and patriarchal preaching to informal sermons that resemble sharing time. Neither extreme makes much room for a happening of the gospel. Somewhere in the middle is a place where the preacher has been called and given authority to speak in ways that allow the gospel to happen in our worship. John Calvin argued that the Spirit uses our frail words to speak the gospel to those who are present. In other words, we do have work to do, but the Spirit is also living, mov-

ing, and making things happen as we do our work of preparing and preaching.[9]

Remember that the gospel is a happening. What is your sermon about this week, and what is it doing? What do you want it to do? You are speaking of an event not only of Bible times and places; the gospel is also present in every place and every moment when God is breaking into our reality. God has made Sarah laugh. She is laughing back there in ancient Canaan but also in Kitchener and in Santiago. God is bringing good news here, now, and always. Take a risk and tell us about it. But don't just tell us; show us. Introduce us again to the God who makes good news happen.

Notes

[1] Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 86–91.
[2] See H. Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958).
[3] For a good summary of and bibliographic information about Fred Craddock, Eugene Lowry, David Buttrick, Paul Scott Wilson, and other key figures in the new homiletic, see Richard Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletic Method* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002). The latest assessment of narrative preaching is *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching? Essays in Honor of Eugene L. Lowry* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), edited by Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer. Also fresh off the press is Paul Scott Wilson, ed., *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2008); in it some two hundred brief articles—centering mostly on current issues—address virtually every aspect of preaching.
[4] To get a handle on how the new hermeneutic contributed to the new homiletic, see these articles in *The New Interpreter's Handbook of Preaching:* "New Homiletic," by Paul Scott Wilson (398–401); and "Hermeneutics," by Stephen Farris (31–37).
[5] See, for example, G. Robert Jacks, *Just Say the Word: Writing for the Ear* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), esp. 92–95. A new book on the performative nature of the sermon is *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), edited by Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit.
[6] On the issue of making the Aha! happen for the listener, see anything by Fred Craddock. A good place to start might be *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985).
[7] Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989). See especially the section on "page four."
[8] To learn how to see movement or event in a text, rather than just seeing "the point," read David Buttrick. As a starting place, go to www.homileticsonline.com/subscriber/interviews/buttrick.asp.
[9] Karl Barth does a fine job of highlighting the paradox of the preaching life; see Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1971).

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