

Igniting imaginations with narrative preaching

Renee Sauder

The worship leader finished reading John 8:1–11, the account of the woman caught in adultery, and the guest preacher stepped into the pulpit. I settled comfortably into my pew, expecting the typical sermon, three points of evidence that would support a central theme.

But I was in for my first experience of narrative preaching, and I found myself listening with rapt attention as the sermon led me

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right into the gospel story. The preacher spoke from the perspective of a man in the crowd who had followed Jesus into the temple, eager to hear his teaching. I joined the man in the crowd as we sat at the edge of our seats, listening carefully in breathless expectation to the young carpenter turned teacher.

I heard people walking into the hall, their sandals shuffling against the tiled floor. I heard their sarcastic talk (“Well, let’s see what he says about this!”). I shifted uneasily as the doctors of the law and the Pharisees, their

faces set in expressions of righteous certainty, pushed into the centre of the room a woman who had been caught in the act of committing adultery. I waited in breathless silence for Jesus to respond to their statement about what the law required: “The law of Moses says that such women are to be stoned. What do you say about it?”

I watched as Jesus looked at this woman in her public disgrace, tears of shame and desperation staining her cheeks. I heard the crowd murmur in disgust and anger at her shameful sin. I saw Jesus bend down, writing with his finger in the dust on the floor, then look straight into the eyes of each wise one there, and say: “Let

the one among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her.”

I looked into the eyes of these doctors of the law and Pharisees, as Jesus’ words slipped with razor sharp precision right past their defences into the hidden chambers of their hearts. I felt the convicting silence of the room, as each one who stood around that weeping woman was judged guilty by his own conscience. I watched as each of them slipped silently out of the room.

Then I watched as Jesus straightened up and asked her, “Woman, where are they? Is there no one here to condemn you?” “No one, sir,” she said softly. “Neither do I condemn you,” he told her. “Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.” I blinked away tears as the young woman left the now empty room, forgiven, the weight of her anguish lifted.

The sermon that morning brought the Word of God to life with extraordinary power, as I found myself a participant in that biblical story, as I witnessed the characters, the suspense, the emotion of what had been just words on a page. That sermon let me abandon familiar ways of looking at a text as an intellectual exercise in careful exegesis; it moved me to struggle more imaginatively with the spaces between the words. That sermon would leave its indelible imprint on my preaching, as it made me aware of the power of story to ignite our imaginations, to introduce new ideas, even to explore difficult ideas or problems.

Storytelling as a human and biblical practice

Have you ever noticed how much of our lives is occupied with stories? We are storytellers by nature. The meal is over and the dessert plates have been pushed aside, but the guests remain around the table, telling stories. A family has gathered for a funeral, and a flood of stories flows, about the one whose life they remember, whose absence they mourn. We tell stories to share the events of our day with those we love, to spend companionable time with our children at bedtime, and to pass on family history. We swap stories at the grocery store and on the front porch. We retell the well-worn stories one more time, as good friends and family members patiently listen. Stories shape our lives.

As followers of Jesus, we are part of a storytelling tradition that reaches back to the stories of Israel about God’s presence and acts

in creation and covenant and exodus and exile. Perhaps our Jewish brothers and sisters tell the story best by placing themselves in it. Every Passover, the Seder ritual observed by the descendants of Abraham and Sarah includes a question asked by a child: “Why is this night different from all other nights?” The father replies,

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“We celebrate tonight because we were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt, and the Lord our God delivered us with a mighty hand.” For many centuries, this story has been told—experienced—and it reminds us that much of biblical tradition comes to us in story form; narrative is the way many generations have received and remembered and passed down the acts of God and God’s people.

Jesus was a master storyteller. When he sought to explain the character or nature of God, he told his listeners the story about a shepherd who goes out to find one lost sheep, about a woman who will not rest until she has found her lost coin, about a father who desperately wants both of his sons to be at home (Luke 15:1–32). Jesus used what was around him—metaphors, images, people—to illustrate the most profound matters of the kingdom of God. Jesus knew stories have power to engage the hearer experientially.

Narrative preaching as embedded in biblical storytelling

Narrative preaching can take a number of different forms. Like the guest speaker I heard, a preacher can put herself in the shoes of a biblical character and tell the story as that character would. Or one might retell a story recorded in the Old or New Testament, allowing the story itself to give the sermon its shape, movement, or content. Or one might tell a personal story, one that really took place as an event in time. Our own experiences can be an indispensable resource for preaching, showing—in the words of Thomas Long—“how the Christian faith is embodied in the actual circumstances of life.”¹

Many years of preaching have taught me that long after they have forgotten the rest of a sermon, people can still recall the stories. It is the stories people remember, connect with, and take home. It is the stories and images they refer to when I make

pastoral visits. Such is the power of narrative to move the heart and touch the human soul: listeners participate, connecting their experience with the story that is told, finding new perspective on their lives, new insights into the text, new understandings of the world.

Narrative preaching is effective when we locate the intersection between our own lives and the lives of the actors in the biblical drama. To connect the biblical text with a story that will help explain it, lift it off the page, and give it another dimension is the creative and imaginative challenge of narrative preaching.

A few years ago, I was asked to preach at a spring weekend gathering of some ninety congregations of Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. It was an opportunity to acknowledge and celebrate our diversity as a conference, while affirming Christ as the centre, the point of unity around which we gather despite our differences.

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Ephesus to find unity as the body of Christ. I remembered the neighbourhood of my childhood and told this story: Around seven o'clock on a warm summer Saturday evening, a gaggle of neighbourhood kids would show up. Nobody had to tell us. We just knew to meet under Bauman's cherry tree. It was time for our weekly game of hide-and-seek or sheep-in-the-pen. We emerged from our houses like a swarm of bees. The two oldest boys—Mark and Neil—would get us organized. They would begin choosing teams from the motley assortment of kids who had gathered to play. We would run and hide and

chase each other until the sun went down. When it finally got so dark that we couldn't see each other well enough to continue the game, we'd head for home, disappearing behind our front doors as quickly as we had emerged. Until the next week, when we'd gather again under the cherry tree.

We were a diverse bunch of kids from different church backgrounds and family settings. Some of us were good at baseball;

others excelled at spelling. Some of us had brand new bikes, while others rode hand-me-downs with rusting handlebars and broken spokes. But under that cherry tree, all our differences evaporated into an acceptance of one another, creating a sense of belonging that made it fun just to be together and play.

This story was for me the image of the church evoked by Paul's letter to the Ephesians, which envisions a faith community reconciled to one another, brought together by Christ, who breaks down the barriers that divide us.

Narrative preaching as exercise in imaginative ways of seeing

Coming up with stories requires some imagination. Barbara Brown Taylor describes this imaginative process this way:

I am writing a sermon on Saint Luke. I know he was a physician and I know he was an evangelist, but everyone knows that and it is boring. I start imagining his black bag, his doctor's bag, and what is in it. I look once and see pills and bandages; I look twice and discover it is full of gospel stories with power to heal, and in that imaginative act a sermon on gospel medicine begins.

The theological word for this experience is revelation, but the process, I believe, is imagination. In the imaginative act, two ideas are struck together and sparks leap through the air between them, revealing familiar notions in a new light.²

Taylor describes the imaginative process as a way of seeing. To see something requires the ability to notice it in all its dimensions—height, depth, breadth, length.

My brother-in-law is an artist. Joe loves to paint under the open sky. Trees and flowers, mist and clouds, buildings and bridges find their way onto his canvas. I have watched him paint. On one day I spent with him, he parked his van on a dusty, abandoned parking lot full of gravel and weeds and began to unload his equipment. I looked at our surroundings and saw nothing and wondered why we had stopped in this windswept place. But Joe sees what I do not. He saw an old grain elevator, a piece of prairie

history, and captured the past on canvas. He saw colours and shapes, angles and shadows, and I watched as these images were collected and painted, and I realized that I was seeing everything differently, from the new perspective he showed me.

The previous day, I had complained about the number of transcontinental freight trains that barrel through his prairie hometown. They cross Main Street, stopping traffic, causing delays. I had been stopped at the railroad crossing at least three times that day. A short drive from one end of town to another became a lengthy ordeal, leaving me frustrated and impatient.

But then I saw the railroad crossing on Main Street as he captured it in a painting he called "Crossing Meditation," and I began to see things differently. I saw an invitation, an opportunity to use the wait while a train passes as a time to pause, reflect, meditate. I was reminded that more is there than meets the eye. I need to look beyond the appearance of things and uncover insights and truths that lie hidden beneath the surface. This is an imaginative task.

Jesus pointed to a wildflower, a field lily, and said with a grin, "Even Solomon never had clothes like that!" He stopped along a crowded street, with jostling crowds of working people and

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soldiers hurrying off to who knows where, and to the puzzlement of his disciples, he stood and stared at his feet for a long while. Then they saw that his sad eyes were fixed on a dead sparrow, a twisted, trampled fluff of feathers, and he told them, "God never misses seeing one of these, you know."

Look, Jesus said. Look at the silver coin, lying in some dark corner of the room until a woman who will not give up sweeps it into the light. Look at the young boy with the small lunch of loaves and fishes, and know that whatever you offer is enough to work a miracle with. The Gospel writers knew the

power of these stories to heal hurts, soften hearts, and increase our ability to see ourselves, our neighbours, our world, through God's eyes. We are forever indebted to them for writing the stories down and inviting us to enter into them, and so equipping us with the means to bring God's Word to our lives.

These are the stories I treasure, and these are the stories we tell and retell in our preaching, as we faithfully carry out the task of communicating God's good news.

Notes

¹ Thomas Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 40.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *The Preaching Life* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1993), 45.

About the author

Renee Sauder is currently serving in her fourth congregation as an intentional interim pastor in Mennonite Church Eastern Canada. She is always on the lookout for stories to engage her congregations.