Quest for the Perfect Sermon:  
Gospel-centered, Story-shaped Preaching

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Abstract

Preaching has taken it on the chin in recent years. The value of sermons is suspect. And yet, I serve a congregation where listeners gather every week with a sense of expectation that they will hear God speak to them through the sermon. I am curious about how this expectation develops and how this expectation shapes the congregation. In my context, we emphasize gospel and storytelling in sermons, and so a focus on gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching narrowed the scope of my project. The first step of my exploration attempted to define the gospel. Next, I looked at storytelling. Finally, I looked at preaching and how it shapes listeners within my congregation, Cedar Hills Community Church, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. In the final stage of exploration, I convened three collaborative study groups to study preaching texts, discuss sermon preparation and evaluate sermons. I used a narrative inquiry research approach to collect feedback formally from the study groups and informally from the congregation. By listening carefully to the stories the congregation told, I explored this thesis: gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching shapes listeners so that they will be equipped to share the story of Jesus in a way that invites others to lean in and say, “Tell me more.” After spending so much time in a story-rich environment, it made sense to report on the project with a story.
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Every morning brings us news from across the globe, yet we are poor in newsworthy stories. This is because nowadays no event comes to us without being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing happens that benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep story free from explanation as one recounts it.

Preface

Quest: In Search of the Perfect Sermon

As long as we have stories to tell each other, there is hope.  

— Henri Nouwen

It’s nice to step outside,
in the early morning light,
after a hard,
bleak
winter
and hear birds singing.
Even if crisp air lingers,
snow dots the landscape,
and ice crystals cling to windshields.
I wonder, do birds feel?
Frost?
Daybreak’s anticipation?
The already-warm rays of the early morning sun?
The joy of singing?
Hope?
It’s nice to start a new day with a chirp
after a long,
dark,
night.
Houston, we have a problem.

–Jim Lovell, Apollo 13

Here is the problem: too many words, too little story. People use “the Jesus story as a word-warehouse from which they take items that serve their verbal designs but ignore the story itself.”¹ Excessive words, story poverty.

Not many in the Christian community contest the primacy of Jesus. But surprisingly there are a great many who contest (or simply ignore) the canonical primacy of story. Inspirational slogans, apologetic arguments, grammatical analysis, historical reconstructions, consumer psychologies, meaningful encounters, bullying threats, and energizing challenges crowd out story. The name Jesus occurs often enough in these various and sundry verbal projects, but the story is more often than not ignored or overlooked.²

I am a recovering word-warehouse, story impoverished preacher who longs to do better.

In the history of the world, I wonder how many perfect sermons have been preached – the proper word, at the proper time, delivered with a pitch-perfect tone. What is the ratio of perfect sermons compared to god-awful sermons? Dumb verbal commentary about god-knows-what delivered at the wrong time and place, aimed at the wrong audience. Pitch perfect, tone deaf or somewhere in between? What is the ratio of decent sermons compared to sub-par sermons? Probably still not good, and I know this, honestly, even if I look only at my own preaching. This should not be. Preaching is too important.


² Ibid., 63.
When I was a young gun associate pastor, I thought, “Give me a chance in the pulpit. I will deliver superior sermons that are both engaging and true.” When given a chance, on select summer holidays and random evening services, it was painful. For everyone. My performance in the pulpit embarrassed me and disappointed those who listened with delivery so poor that nobody bothered to listen to the content which was, no doubt, a blessing since my twentysomething's spin on the text was also lame. Everyone would have celebrated decent.

I wanted to find my preaching voice. I imagined that I could preach a perfect sermon, and if not perfect, at least above average. I started to explore not just good preaching but also good communication. In search of my voice, I listened critically to others, and I listened carefully to myself. After eight years of listening, I received this glowing compliment from a friend, “You’re getting better.” And then God called me to another congregation.

My application to Cedar Hills Community Church arrived after the deadline and addressed to the wrong congregation. My cover letter read: “Dear Search Committee of First Reformed Church, please consider my application to become your next pastor.” By some miracle, the good people at Cedar Hills interviewed me nonetheless, and then they called me to be their next pastor. Their top priority for me – preaching.

On my first Sunday, I preached to about a hundred people. I set the tone by detailing my lack of preaching experience. I confessed that when I candidated, I intentionally did not preach my best sermon because I did not want them to get their expectations too high. I did not promise perfect sermons, but I reassured them, “The
Word of God is living and active, and if we gather every week to listen, God will speak. You have called me to this place so I will do my best.”

After the service somebody jumped me on the way to coffee, “I’ll be honest with you,” he blurted out, “you were not my choice, but I guess we’re stuck with you now.” Another leader cornered me and whispered, “I was on the search team, and I was not impressed with your preaching. I voted for the other preacher.” That was my welcome to the pulpit at Cedar Hills twenty-two years ago. I am still preaching to these people.

Anne Lamott says, “Hope begins in the dark, the stubborn hope that if you just show up and try to do the right thing, the dawn will come.”

I’ve spent the last two decades of my life showing up, trying to do the right thing as a preacher.

* * *

The best story wins.

– Bobette Buster, Do Story

Ernest Hemingway once made a bar bet about writing a story with the least number of words. So goes the legend. Hemingway wins the bet by writing six words on a napkin: “Baby shoes for sale. Never used.”

“The six most powerful words in any language are, ‘Let me tell you a story.’”

Humans, it turns out, are wired for story so that “human minds yield helplessly to the suction of story.” J.K. Rowling suggests that “unlike any other creature on this planet,

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human beings can learn and understand without having experienced. They can think
themselves into other people’s places.”6 People do that with stories.7 Luci Shaw claims,
“Story and poetry are the most familiar and accessible ways for human beings to
understand the world.”8

“Apple didn’t describe the original iPod as a 6.5-ounce music player with a five-
gigabyte drive. It simply said, ‘1,000 songs in your pocket.’ This is the way human
beings communicate, so this is the way Apple communicates.”9 This story sold millions
of iPods.

Paul Willis runs a family farm in Nebraska. His philosophy is “Let a pig be a
pig”10 at least until it becomes a burrito and this story is part of Chipotle’s plan to sell
food with integrity. People should know their food.

Arthur Riolo sells more homes than all of his competitors combined. “You drive
up and down the hills of the neighborhood as he points out house after house (houses that
are not for sale). He tells you who lives in that house and what they do and how they

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6 J.K. Rowling, Very Good Lives: The Fringe Benefits of Failure and the Importance of

7 Poet C.K. Williams suggests that losing this ability is “narrative dysfunction” which leads to
mental illness.

8 Luci Shaw, “Reversing Entropy” In Shouts and Whispers: Twenty-One Writers Speak About
Their Writing and Their Faith, edited by Jennifer Holberg. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing
Company, 2006), 205.

9 Ken Segall, Insanely Simple: The Obsession the Drives Apples’ Success (New York:
Portfolio/Penguin. 2012), 98.

14, 2014).
found the house and the name of their dog and what their kids are up to and how much they paid. He tells you a story.”

Therapist Dan Allender notes, “Everyone has a story. Put another way, everyone’s life is a story. But most people don’t know how to read their life in a way that reveals their story.” Miss the story, miss out.

Prosecutor John Bobo coaches lawyers, “every case creates a story in a jurors mind” and “the 90% of human experience that does not fit into established narrative patterns falls into oblivion.” Telling the right story is the difference between winning and losing a case.

Brene’ Brown, shame researcher, does not roll out Webster’s definition when she wants us to explain key terms like vulnerability. She tells a story. “A man sitting with his wife, who has stage four cancer, making plans for their young children – that’s vulnerability.”

Consultant Nancy Duarte built an award-winning firm that has curated over a quarter million presentations that shaped the perception of the world’s leading brands by telling stories because “people love stories” and stories move people to action.

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Filmmakers, novelists, farmers, business executives, therapists, lawyers, realtors, and researchers all recognize the power of story to shape and reshape the world.

* * *

Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.

—Anna Bartlett Warner, *Jesus Loves Me*

Fredrick Buechner describes the beginning of a story as “a time, a place, a set of characters, and the implied promise, which is common to all stories, that something is coming...” Simple enough. The simple gospel story of my childhood implied a promise of something big. Flannelgraph Jesus walks on water, feeds 5000, heals the sick, makes the lame walk and the blind see. Jesus preaches good news, dies on the cross, rises from the dead and ascends into heaven. Jesus did all this because he loves me. Jesus chooses to compensate for the world’s faults, including my own so I can go to heaven when I die.

Simple enough until I thought about it, then I realized that Jesus was born into a tale already in progress. The times, places, people, and plots surrounding the Jesus stories are the middle of a story that started before his birth and continues for generations following his resurrection. The story is filled with promise, but as the story increases in complexity, the promise of it also grows more complex. Some warn, “Don’t make it too

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16 The seemingly endless discussion about the definition of story parallels Flannery O’Connor’s observation that everyone knows what a story is until they sit down to write one. We know what a story is until we try to define it. Hauerwas and Burrell in “From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics” offer a useful starting point. “The feature common to all stories which gives them their particular aptitude for illuminating real life situations is their narrative structure.” They call this structure plot. Plot is “a connection among elements (actions, events, situations) which is neither one of logical consequence nor one of mere sequence.” When a plot moves a person from one point to another – that is a story. Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory. Jones. *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997), 177.

complex, have faith like a child. Jesus loves me this I know.” Others warn, “Don’t make it too simplistic. Don’t underestimate the implied promise. Make room for depth.”

The simple-complex tension of the Jesus story piqued my curiosity and led me to this project which focuses on the story as it is found in the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. The nature of the Christian story also connects the Jesus story to other texts of the Old and New Testaments. The posture for exploring these texts was that of listener. This posture is less interested in defining or explaining and more interested in engaging and reacting. The story tells, the listener pays attention. Curiosity is the listener’s greatest asset.

Each storyteller makes his or her case by telling “their” story, and the listener eavesdrops, attends to the details, and begins to vibrate with the story. I started my exploration of the story by reading Mark in one sitting as a whole story. I scribbled findings on pages with columns noting story elements like character, plot, setting, theme, point of view, tone and style. I later added columns for Matthew, Luke, and John. Then I reviewed my notes. The storytelling nature of the gospels was self-evident with each gospel storyteller supplying different details but telling the same story.

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18 I use the term “Christian story” in the same way as Michael Root in his essay “The Narrative Structure of Soteriology.” He means by this term that “the stories that make up the Christian Bible (are) read as constituting a single comprehensive narrative.” I will use the term the “story of Jesus” throughout this project to mean the same thing even if my focus remains in the gospels. Hauerwas and Jones, 265.

19 The word “listener” used throughout this project will refer to one engaging with the story of Jesus. This will usually refer to one listening to a sermon but may also include, watching a film, reading a text or exploring a comic book.

The story nature of the gospel led me to ask, “How do filmmakers tell stories?” This question led me to watch current, popular movies. Conclusion: filmmakers know how to tell stories that connect with audiences, and they do it by connecting audiences to their humanity. Movies tell powerful stories that provide “viewers both experiences of life and greater understanding of their culture.” “Cinema is the art form of transformation” because it is “through the act of telling and hearing stories” that audiences are inspired.

The movies I watched followed a pattern in which disruption of a routine launched journeys that led to discovery and transformation. Along the way, the journeys included a searches and ordeals. The journeys ended with life reimagined. The best stories launched their journeys with an audacious premise that hooked the listener and left the outcome of the journey in question. The best stories also engaged the craft of telling which weaved together both content and technique, substance and style.

Finally, I preached a series of sermons based on the Gospel of Mark beginning with this audacious premise – Jesus is the Son of God who came to earth. With new storytelling tools in hand, I told the story of Jesus following the journey pattern and engaging the craft of storytelling. With this sermon series, I also embarked on an

21 The movies I watched included Gravity, Frozen, All is Lost, The Hunger Games, Star Trek Into Darkness, Man of Steel and Iron Man 3.


experiment in collaborative sermon study and evaluation. In my exploration of the story of Jesus, two trajectories emerged: a gospel-centered trajectory and a story-shaped trajectory.

All four paths of discovery – gospel, film, story, and preaching – contributed to this research question: How does gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching form listeners? My thesis is simple: gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching shapes listeners so that they are equipped to share the story of Jesus in a way that invites others to lean in and say, “Tell me more.” This project explores this thesis by listening to people tell their stories. In this journey, I hoped to discern how people connect their stories to the gospel and how to make the gospel story more accessible. The context for this exploration was Cedar Hills Community Church, in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

This paper moves from exploring personal narrative (Chapter 1), to gospel (Chapter 2), to preaching (Chapter 3), to gospel-centered preaching (Chapter 4), to story (Chapter 5), to story-shaped preaching (Chapter 6). Finally, I explore the impact of gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching (Chapter 7).

*   *   *

Tell me more.

–Athenian Philosophers, Acts 17:32

Propping a preacher up behind a pulpit does not guarantee a listener tuned into his or her voice.25

Is the preacher with Bible open before 100, 200, 300 listeners about to become extinct? Yes, if he or she thinks that parishioners will continue to listen to a person who monotones and monologues pedantic erudition and theological esoteric to persons who listen because of some type of denominational obligation,

institutional habit, or attendance at church, because that is what normal people do, at least, if they live in Indiana or Ohio.26

Even if some think that preaching is facing extinction, I am not ready to surrender the pulpit. I preach every week to a congregation with high expectations. A congregation that listens by leaning in. At times people mouth words in anticipation. At times laughter erupts. At times tears. At times it is so hushed I can make out the squeak of a hearing aid nine rows back.27

Blame the Holy Spirit for the hush. The Spirit, as in the opening verses of Genesis, hovers over the chaos of our congregation vibrating in our midst to stir up what God desires to stir up.28 Any sermon “however interesting and informative, will have failed its purpose unless at some point and in some way the preacher’s words’ about God have become God’s Word to him and through him to the hearers.”29 To presume to hear God’s voice, speak God’s story and experience God’s transforming power in the middle of a sermon is not possible apart from the Spirit.

While the Spirit of God hovers over the congregation, the Spirit also hangs over the preacher. “How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is


27 And I know who that hearing aid belongs to.


written: ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’”

Resonance is the sweet spot that vibrates the preacher, the message, and the listener in sync with the Holy Spirit. “Tell me more” equals resonance.

“Resonance occurs when an object’s natural vibration frequency responds to an external stimulus of the same frequency.”

Sound waves blasting next to a plate of salt become visible when the grains of salt self-organize in patterns according to the frequency of the sound waves. If preaching matches the frequency of Spirit and listener, then the message will vibrate the listener into transformation.

The activity of God’s Spirit within the human heart is mysterious. Transformation is God’s responsibility, and yet, God calls and gifts preachers. This project explores the discovery of a preacher's voice through the responsible use of preaching gifts, sermon preparation, message content and sermon delivery believing that God calls and uses preachers to carry out God’s mission. “Through the mouths of preachers, he will do his work – just as a workman uses a tool to do his work.”

*The King’s Speech* provided the resonance that vibrated this project into existence. In the opening scene of the movie, the second son of King George V (Colin Firth) prepares to give a speech that will be broadcast throughout the United Kingdom. More than a quarter of the World’s population is listening. The opening scene created a sense of dread as the king’s son is headed for the gallows. When the speech starts, it

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30 Romans 10:14-15


32 John Calvin, from a picture hanging in my office.
reveals a man barely able to speak because of his stutter. A mere four minutes into the film my heart ached for this voiceless man.

Later the story revealed that this son of a king had endured a life of isolation, pain, and fear because of his impediment. He was not good enough. All the trappings of royalty did not spare him but added to his sense of inadequacy. His greatest fear was that he would one day be a king without a voice. As the story unfolded, it became inevitable that he would inherit the throne. Lionel Logue (Geoffrey Rush), a speech therapist, dared to imagine this future. Lionel vibrated with a story about a stuttering man who would be a bloody good king. On the eve of his coronation, King George VI admitted his fear that the Kingdom was about to be burdened with a voiceless king.

King George VI: [Logue is sitting on the throne] What are you doing? Get up!
You can't sit there! GET UP!

Lionel Logue: Why not? It's a chair.

King George VI: No, it... That is not a chair. That is... that is Saint Edward's chair.

Lionel Logue: People have carved their names on it.

King George VI: [Simultaneously] That... chair... is the seat on which every king and queen...

Lionel Logue: [Simultaneously] It's held in place by a large rock.

King George VI: That is the Stone of Scone. You ah-are trivializing everything.
You trivialize...

Lionel Logue: I don't care about how many royal arseholes...

King George VI: Listen to me.

Lionel Logue: ...have sat in this chair.
King George VI: Listen to me. Listen to me!

Lionel Logue: Listen to you? By what right?

King George VI: By divine right, if you must. I am your king.

Lionel Logue: No, you're not. You told me so yourself. You said you didn't want it. Why should I waste my time listening...?

King George VI: [Yelling, angry] Because I have a right to be heard! I HAVE A VOICE!

What could be worse than a voiceless king? A voiceless preacher? Who would waste their time listening to a voiceless preacher? To be a Spirit-filled preacher worth listening to – that is the vision that started this project.

King George VI turned out to be good enough to make a bloody good king.

* * *

A story begins when our desires collide head on with reality.

–Dan Allender, *To Be Told*.

Once I imagined preaching a perfect sermon, I could not stop thinking about it. The notion vibrated within for months. Ideas about this flawless sermon quivered while reading a novel, shuddered while watching a movie, convulsed while listening to a comedian, trembled while dwelling in the Word. A call pulsated to life even while I shook with reluctance. I stumbled forward, searching until I resonated with the hope born of discovery. This seven stage journey is the story of my project.33

1. Routine.
2. Call
3. Reluctance
4. Search

33 Duarte, 30-34.
5. Ordeal
6. Discovery
7. Return

The story-telling style of the paper attempts to model the journey of discovery that leads to preaching gospel-centered, story-shaped sermons. If it is a good idea that a sermon can be an inductive narrative of discovery, could it be a good idea for this project?\textsuperscript{35}

*The Courage to Teach* invites educators to wander down a path of learning that involves self-awareness through storytelling\textsuperscript{36} because “good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.”\textsuperscript{37} Palmer insists that “teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one’s inwardness, for better or worse.”\textsuperscript{38} And because of this “we must do something alien to academic culture; we must talk to each other about our inner lives – risky stuff in a profession that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical,

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{35} Why Narrative? Apparently the word is still out on this question. And the first word that comes to mind is risky. But the risk seems worth it in terms of the interest generated in pursuing an audacious premise verses taking a more predictable journey.
\item I like the straightforward answer to the question “Why narrative in theology?” given by Johann Baptist Metz: “If the category of narrative is lost or outlawed by theology as pre-critical, then real or original experiences of faith may come to lack objectivity and become silenced.
\item Theology is above all concerned with direct experiences expressed in narrative language. This is clear throughout Scripture, from the beginning, the story of creation, to the end, where a vision of the new heaven and the new earth is revealed. All this is disclosed in narrative.” Hauerwas and Jones, 252.
\item \textsuperscript{36} Autobiographical storytelling in particular.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 2.
\end{itemize}
the distant, the abstract.” Eugene Peterson makes similar observations about theological education.

Unfortunately, we live in an age in which story has been pushed from its biblical frontline prominence to a bench on the sidelines. Our contemporary unbiblical preference, both inside and outside the church, is for information over story. We typically gather impersonal (pretentiously called “scientific” or “theological”) information… in order to take things into our own hands and take charge of how we will live our lives. And we commonly consult outside experts to interpret the information for us. But we don’t live our lives by information; we live them in relationships in the context of a personal God who cannot be reduced to a formula or definition.

The “Bible is basically, and overall, a narrative – an immense, sprawling, capacious narrative.” If the basic form of the Bible is a story, then gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching makes good sense.

In 1966 Rudolf Flesh published Why Johnny Can’t Read. Flesh lamented the changes in society that contributed to illiteracy. In 2009 T. David Gordon wrote Why Johnny Can’t Preach noting that today’s preachers are not delivering engaging sermons because of illiteracy. Gordon’s thesis proposes that Johnny can’t preach because Johnny does not read. But what if Johnny or Jeanie Reader did preach engaging sermons, what would happen? This question shapes the story to follow.

The quest for a perfect sermon is a story about a preacher’s journey, the people who shaped the journey, and the people who were shaped by the journey. Will these...

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39 Ibid., 12.

40 Eugene Peterson, Eat This Book: A Conversation in the Art of Spiritual Reading. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2009), 41.

41 Ibid., 40.

42 Metz again makes a clear appeal. “For too long, we have tried to suppress the narrative potential of Christianity and have confined it to credulous children and old people.” Haurwas and Jones, 255.

43 Johnny can read but chooses not to and so became functionally illiterate.
people respond with, “Better luck next time?” Or will they say, “Tell me more!” If the journey results in decent sermons that vibrate people into life-transforming resonance with God’s Word, it will be worth it. And if the perfect sermon emerges, that will be a great story.
Chapter 1

Routine: What’s your Story?

To be a person is to have a story to tell.  

—Isak Dinesen

On June 6, mother, great with child, went to the doctor because she felt awful. The doctor X-rayed her stomach and then announced, “You’re carrying twins. Come back tomorrow, I will deliver them.”

The next day labor was induced, but no babies were delivered. Slower than expected progress led the doctor to administer more drugs to speed things up. “This is taking too long,” he explained, “I am leaving for vacation tomorrow.”

In the early morning hours of June 8, baby #1 arrived. Five minutes later, baby #2. Together they weighed as much as one normal baby. The doctor, satisfied with his work, left for Mt. Rushmore. Father, worried about keeping his children in shoes, left for work. Mother went home 15 days in a row without her babies. The twins remained baby #1 and #2 for more than a week. Nobody was ready to name a baby. Definitely not a pair. When visitors stopped to see the twins, mother warned, “They are not much to look at.”

Eventually, the twins were christened, Jonathan Russel and Robert James. Fifty birthdays had passed before they heard the details of this story. When they finally got mother to spill, she said, “Nothing special, no big deal.”

Mother discovered that she was expecting twins less than 24 hours before her drug-induced labor. She delivered two tiny,

unremarkable, name-less, eradiated preemies who arrived by the hands of an impatient
doctor with vacation luggage in his trunk. No big deal.  

Jonathan Russel grew up focusing on imperfections that most would describe as
no big deal. He was a boy named after an apple with one “l” missing from his middle
big deal translated to “Not good enough.” Normal and ordinary also translated into “No
big deal.” The visible “not good enoughs” were only the tip of the iceberg.

Johnathan and Robert lined up plastic army men at opposite ends of the hallway
and then killed them off with rubber bands. It never occurred to them that a stray shot
might take out an eyeball. A rubber band to the eye stings like the dickens and stings
even worse if self-inflicted from a rubber band stretched too far. In spite of numerous
facial welts, they never equated rubber bands with ocular extraction.

Later the ammo switched to dirt clods, and when they tired of mowing down
miniature soldiers, they started targeting each other. The one significant casualty of the
Great Dirt Clod War happened to be Jonathan’s eyeball. Robert later insisted that it was
his and to this day they do not know which one actually took the hit. It worked that way

45 Life is full of imperfections. Remove all imperfections, and you remove life from a story. A
flawed story that is alive is more powerful than a ‘perfect’ story. Annette Simmons, The Story Factor:
104.

46 Every good narrative, including our own, has a dynamic quality. Like stories, lives have a
beginning, a middle and an end that include specific contexts, unique characters, plot twists, conflicts or
crises, along with resolutions that set up the next episode... As the story unfolds, however, the sequence,
actors and plot development are only the most visible features. In reality, our stories are structured, in large
part, by forces that reside beneath the surface. Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, Hidden Worldviews:
Eight Cultural Stories That Shape Our Lives (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 18.

47 The twins never had the opportunity to test mom’s theory, “It’s always fun until someone loses
an eyeball.”
with the twins sometimes. They can both verify that a dirt clod hurts far worse than a rubber band.

It’s a small miracle that they kept their eyesight to adulthood. Occasionally Jonathon thought about the blessing of blindness or at least partial blindness. If he had lost an eye, he would have been special. He knew a kid who could pop his glass eye in and out. He was a rock star. He removed his eyeball so often that it started to fall out on its own. If he did not squeeze his eyelid shut when he sneezed, his eyeball shot across the room. He was special. Jonathan was normal.

Being a twin might be special but, if both twins are odd, then twindom doubled your outsider status. Jonathan never felt special or odd; he felt ordinary, but with no removable body parts to increase his star power, he felt like he did not measure up. When other kids called out, “Hey twiiin!” it was not a celebration or an invitation. It was an accusation. Jonathan ran home and cried.

Jonathon felt safe at home and most safe at the kitchen table even though his stool wobbled. The night father assembled the stools a phone call interrupted construction at a critical moment. To this day that stool leans on miss-glued legs. Jonathan remembers that night because he sat on the evidence daily and the story of that phone call was often told with great fanfare. One of father’s many stories whose punch line involved him messing up, self-deprecating humor being his specialty. Around the table, everyone practiced set-up and punch line\(^{48}\) so that nobody ran the risk of feeling good enough for long.

\(^{48}\) Michael Jr. suggested “set-up and punch line” as the basic framework for a joke or a story at the Global Leadership Summit, August 11, 2014. He claimed that “comedic storytelling can change the world.”
Father says, for the benefit of whoever happens to be listening, “I heard that two Germans (his tribe) were out in a field sleeping. One complained to the other that he was cold (set-up). So the other got up and shut the gate” (self-deprecating punch line). It felt normal and safe. Even if one twin tilted precariously.

Jonathan and Robert learned their names as set-up and punch line. For all who failed to recognize the twins, there were two outs. Some called them “Twin” while others always addressed them in tandem as though two names were one “RobertnJonathan.”\(^{49}\)

When asked his name, Jonathon once replied, “RobertnJonathan.” Twins, no big deal – interchangeable.\(^{50}\) No big deal until one day Jonathan realized he hated his name. He has been JR ever since.\(^{51}\)

* * *

And the word became flesh and dwelt among us.

–John 1:14

No meal was complete without the toaster. When the tuna noodle casserole vanished, peanut butter toast appeared to fill the cracks. On liver and onion night an entire loaf of cracks needed filling. Peanut butter toast ushered in story time. Updates on the snow drifting in the country, complaints about the Minnesota Vikings losing again, debates about the wisdom of shooting bottle rockets out of your zipper. At the table, JR

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\(^{49}\) Which was soon altered to “BobbynJohnny” and it did not escape Jonathan’s notice that Robert got first billing even though he was the younger of the two. It always bugged Jonathan.

\(^{50}\) It was rumored that father once placed Jonathan and Robert incorrectly on the wrong ends of their crib, messing up the system designed to safeguard their identities. Another fatherly foul-up of family lore and one that may have corrected a potential hospital switch. Maybe “RobertnJonathan” is the safest name for the twins.

\(^{51}\) Except for one brief stint in Jr. High as Johnny Rocket. Shortly after changing his name to JR, Robert decided he want to be BJ.
felt almost special.\textsuperscript{52} At the conclusion of each meal, everyone present heard a particular story that went something like this: “God speaks to us, and we speak back.” Every meal another chapter of this story.\textsuperscript{53} Day after day. Routine.\textsuperscript{54}

Six at mealtime was normal but, with some frequency, others joined around the table. Special guests were always welcomed, always entitled to good hospitality, and always eligible for set-up and punch line. When mother and father entertained, they did not believe in a kid’s table. Everybody sat together, everybody ate the same food, and everybody participated in the same conversations. JR met a lot of people this way.

A missionary who happened to be the visiting preacher one Sunday became the most memorable. He hailed from Russia. A fat, bearded, stern figure – he reminded everyone of a Russian bear. Or Moses. His passionate preaching inspired awe while his booming voice forced attention. While he preached, JR marveled that a man so large could talk so long without a break to snack on one of the children. Or take a breath.

Mother picked up the Russian bear at the airport. He slipped past her in the deplaning process and had to be paged. He did not hide his displeasure over the delay or

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{52} Not every meal or every word was so special. Once JR’s older brother let the f-bomb slip out. Father launched from the table, grabbed the offender, and kicked his butt. And not just once. JR learned a different kind of lesson about the power of words.
\item \textsuperscript{53} The routine was followed every time. Not sure about the listening. The hearing sometimes had to overcome the distraction of father popping out his false teeth with his tongue and then sucking them in again after making the kids laugh and making mother angry.
\item \textsuperscript{54} We have a story to tell, a name to communicate. There are no substitutes for this story or this name. Even if we do not yet know all that it means to say that Jesus is Lord. We will have to learn as we go. Leslie Newbigin, \textit{Truth to Tell: The Gospel as Public Truth} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991), 34.
\end{itemize}
the fact that a mere mother – and one with twins in tow – was assigned to fetch him. His demeanor did not invite chit-chat.55

By the time this imposing bear arrived for Sunday’s lunch, JR wanted a kid’s table. Instead, the Russian beast sat between the twins. After a thunderous prayer for our meal, he removed his tie and then the bear turned into an ordinary person. He talked with an indoor voice, laughed often, and ate a normal lunch. He loved mother’s homemade bread soaked in butter. Breadcrumbs littered his thick beard, the discovery of which brought a laugh that shook the table. He talked about his kids, his flower garden,56 his travels around the world, and God’s work in Russia.

The bear spilled some cheese soup on his shirt. Even though he was preaching again that night, he said, “No problem, my tie will cover that up.” When the missionary from Russia stepped into the pulpit that evening, JR listened to a normal man tell God’s story. He listened better even if, at one point, the family pew shook as everyone fought to stifle giggles created by thoughts of the soup stain hiding under his tie. And the Word became flesh. Losing a hand in the mouth of a hungry bear would not have left a bigger impression.

* * *

A library card is the start of a lifelong adventure.
—Lillian Jackson Braun, The Cat Who Could Read Backwards

55 By the time his trip ended mother was so comfortable with the missionary from Russia that when he inquired about shopping for a gift for his wife she said, “The bus stops at the corner, you can take that. I’m not taking you.” And the Russian bear took the bus.

56 The table shook with giggles when the Russian bear described the delicate process of planting Pansies which involved some sweet talk to the seedlings.
Mother started the tradition of weekly visits to the bookmobile while JR was still in a stroller. He thought that a library on wheels was cool, and Madam Librarian’s ability to drive the mammoth wheeled collection inspired him. He loved the way the driver’s seat swiveled and morphed into a check-out counter. One summer his librarian crush seduced him into winning the summer reading contest. He consumed 105 books to earn a bookmark with a photo of Madam Librarian standing beside the bookmobile.

Curious about honey, he asked his mother where it came from. She said, “Look it up,” and pointed to the encyclopedias. Even as a kid JR recognized the extravagance of owning these volumes. He decided to read them from cover to cover. He found the articles on famous dams riveting. And the article on Egypt, especially the part about the Egyptian mummies. He imagined a mummy encased deep inside the Hoover Dam. Curiosity provided spark and words provided fuel to transport JR around the world and beyond.

When JR grew up, he still visited the library every week. First stop, “New Releases.” He sought something he would not normally read which is ironic because JR would read anything. Once he selected a new release with the title *Assholes: A Theory*58 scrawled in bold black letters on a white jacket. At the check-out, a woman from his church stepped up behind him with her two small children, glanced at the title and

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57 The library browsing experience is strongly associated with the concept of serendipity. There is something powerful about the idea that patrons will find on the shelves books that they did not expect to find… For some people, it is impossible to come out of the stacks without armfuls of books, even if they went into the stacks seeking just one. John Palfrey, *BiblioTech: Why Libraries Matter More Than Ever in the Age of Google* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 207-208.

58 If or theory is right, there exists a certain type of moral personality, and it is an objective matter of fact who is or is not a person of that moral kind. Aaron James, *Assholes: A Theory* (New York, Doubleday, 2009), 33.
quickly turned the kids around. He tried to explain his habit of reading random books and that, by the way, this one was not about anyone they knew. She did not buy it for a second.

He left the library with a stimulating book and a nagging question, “What are the theological implications of what just happened?” Since assholes are “a given fact of life” what’s the problem? JR thought, bibliically speaking, that asshole could be translated “fool” which may be less provocative but also less accurate. The Bible describes a wide range of fools from the simple, to the unwise, to the dumbass, to the rebel. JR concluded that the Bible could help with fool management and he determined to study more so that he could bring biblical wisdom to bear on this important topic.

JR grew in fool management techniques by paying attention to the Bible, philosophical discourse, and the neighbor kid who left his bike out in the rain. His exploration continued each Sunday as JR listened to the pastor preach and watched the organist fight with the choir director. He listened to sermons detailing the badness of people, and he met people who were screw-ups. JR noticed that, after telling bad news about our foolishness, the preacher always told the good news about a God who never

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59 James, 173. Don’t blame JR for Asshole Theory, he simply picked up a book, blame Professor James or the human race.

60 A person counts as an asshole when, and only when, he systematically allows himself to enjoy special advantages in interpersonal relationships out of an entrenched sense of entitlement that immunizes him against the complaints of other people. James, 4.

61 At this point JR had no idea he was practicing contextualization. Years later he discovered that “sound contextualization means translating and adopting the communication and ministry of the gospel to a particular culture without compromising the essence or the particulars of the gospel itself.” Keller, Center Church, 89.

62 JR decides that the technical name for our bad-assness is “total depravity” and notes that in most Christian circles it is impolite to call someone an asshole even though we recognize that the percentage of assholes (fools) inside and outside the church is the same: 100%.
gives up on foolish people but, in fact, loves assholes. The preacher never said it quite that way, but JR did.

Bad news sensitivity led to good news receptivity for JR since being “not good enough” needed redemption. JR needed not just any kind of preaching, he needed good news preaching.

* * *

You must strive to find your own voice.  
—Mr. Keating, *Dead Poets Society*

JR learned to type from old Mr. Dennis in Business Class. F, f, f, space. J, j, j, space. F, j, f space. In the days of white out, Mr. Dennis, with only had nine and a half fingers, could type 70 perfect words a minute. Half of the pointer finger on his right hand was missing which served to make a dramatic statement whenever he wagged it at the class for slacking off. And it made him seem a little crazed when he reminded us that he lost his fingertip in a knife fight during the war.

Everyone knew that Mr. Dennis was in the war because every class started with a war story. And a poem. It was a strange to hear poetry from such a large man, a walk to the beat of a different drummer man, a Robert Frost man, “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.” Most of the stories were about his days on Okinawa. Sometimes Mr. Dennis cried while reciting a story, poem or typing assignment. If nobody would listen to him, he talked to himself or at least moved his lips as if he were talking.

Mr. Dennis told the class about the time he became separated from his unit and found himself behind enemy lines. He survived by remaining motionless in a ditch for
three days. Mr. Dennis remained hopeful by reading poems and remembering Bible stories. Daniel in the lion’s den, David and Goliath, Jesus raising Lazarus, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry Wordsworth Longfellow, Henry David Thoreau. When the advancing lines caught up with him, he said, “The woods are lovely, dark and deep, But I have promises to keep, And miles to go before I sleep, And miles to go before I sleep.” He was discharged from the army with a Section 8. He still carries the book of poems that saved his life; held together by a rubber band.

“You can’t read a poem fast,” explained Mr. Dennis, “Slow down and pay attention.” Most of the poems that he shared with his classes talked about making the most of the days one has been given. Carpe Diem.

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,  
Old Time is still a-flying;  
And this same flower that smiles today  
Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,  
The higher he’s a-getting,  
The sooner will his race be run,  
And nearer he’s to setting.

That age is best which is the first,  
When youth and blood are warmer;  
But being spent, the worse, and worst  
Times still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time,  
And while ye may, go marry;  
For having lost but once your prime,  
You may forever tarry. 63

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63 Robert Herrick, “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time.”
Mr. Dennis was passionate about helping his students find their way. He quoted Mr. Keating, “You must strive to find your own voice. Because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all.” He believed that every student had a voice worth hearing. Every student could become anything she or he wanted. Between the tap, tap, tapping of typewriter keys, he quoted Sylvia Plath, “The worst enemy to creativity is self-doubt.” And Rudyard Kipling, “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you, If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you... Yours is the earth and everything in it.”

The more years Mr. Dennis taught, the more zealous he became. And more convincing. Everyone’s favorite typing exercise was free typing. “Type whatever you want, let it flow, don’t worry about mistakes, find your voice, dream!” Mr. Dennis shouted, “Type, type, type!” And JR let it flow. While sitting in Mr. Dennis’ class, JR dreamed about enlisting in the army, becoming a poet, or pursuing a career as a typing teacher.

When JR returned to Business Class after spring break, Mr. Dennis was missing in action. He died planting potatoes. They found him out in his garden with the potato fork still in his hand, a book of poems in his pocket. Mr. Dennis’s replacement told no stories and quoted no poems. The whole tying class showed up at the funeral. It was JR’s first. The funeral folder had two verses, one from the Bible – John 3:16, and one from Emily Dickenson – “Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul.”

A few weeks after that funeral, JR watched a pick-up truck slide off the road. Loose gravel scattered as the truck rolled over. Tents, coolers, and kids ejected. By the time JR pulled to a stop, the truck had expired wheels up in the ditch. The sound of
screaming kids filled the air. If you asked JR what happened next, he would say, “I don’t remember.” He simply reacted. Racing to the nearest farmhouse, he called for help before returning to pull crying kids out of the ditch, direct the rescue personnel to those in need, collect scattered car parts, and watch the paramedics pull a sheet over the motionless driver. On the way home, he cried. “Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,” JR muttered to himself.

The accident caught JR’s attention. “The world is a mess.” JR laments. “A man wakes up in the morning planning to enjoy a camping trip and ends up dead in a ditch.” This is not the way it’s supposed to be. JR felt depressed. He felt like he was personally responsible for doing something about the mess. JR wanted to fix every problem and his inability to fix the mess, created despair. JR found a poem to express his lament:

To His Supreme Holiness, the Lord:
I sometimes wonder how you can bear
The dreadful burden of knowing everyone’s thoughts.
The anguish, the heartbreak, the agony.
How can you even relax?
Maybe you try not to get too involved,
Or maybe you spend all night, weeping.

Why did you create such a sad world?
Why don’t sandwiches grow on trees?
Why do infants die?
Why do honest people get cheated?

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64 You are a hero. I am a hero. We are all, every single one of us carrying within us a Nelson Mandela or Joan of Arc or Luke Skywalker or Mother Teresa or Hellen Keller. We are Bilbo Baggins and Erin Brockovich and Oprah and Harry Potter. Lissa Rankin, *The Anatomy of a Calling: A Doctor’s Journey from the Head to the Heart and a Prescription for Finding Your Life’s Purpose* (New York: Rodale, 2015), ix.

65 Navigating your journey is one of the cornerstones of living a meaningful, rich, authentic wholly healthy life. Ibid., ix.

66 Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. in *Not the Way It’s Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin*, describes the mess as vandalism against shalom. An assault on peace that comes in various forms – corruption, perversion, pollution, disintegration, parasite and folly – to name a few. His short definition: “sin is culpable shalom-breaking.” JR says, “Sin is mess making.”
Why do the poor get crushed to the wall?  
Personally, I would turn down your job in a second.67

*   *   *

I bet you cried on the day you were born; it means you are human.  
—Marilyn Robinson, Lila

JR lived a charmed life. Now he wondered if that was why trouble upset him so.  
He was blessed, and he thought he had earned his blessing.68 Good Karma.69 He lived a  
good life, he deserved a reward. Trouble depressed JR. Isn’t his faith supposed to protect  
him from heartache, isn’t that how the story goes? This messed up JR’s image of life,  
jumbled like an unfinished puzzle.70 He could not make the puzzle pieces fit when  
brokenness engulfed his life, and he was shocked that even very small messes created big  
disruptions.71  

While JR wondered about how to make sense out of the mess, he reflected on the  
story of Joseph. Sold into slavery, tossed into prison, abandoned and forgotten – Joseph  
took the long view of his story.

67 Victoria Sweet, God’s Hotel: A Doctor, A Hospital and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine  

68 If you worked hard you could get good grades, get into a good college, go to grad school or  
follow some other professional path, and you would be happy. With few unfortunate exceptions, you would  
be successful if you obeyed the rules of our society: if you followed the latest medical advice, kept  
informed by reading the New York Times, got a good education, obeyed the law, made prudent investments,  
and stayed away from bad things like drugs. (Charles Einstein, The More Beautiful World our Hearts Know  
is Possible (Berkley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2013), 1.

69 Hinduism hiding in JR’s story? Or moralistic, therapeutic deism? If God helps those who help  
themselves by living good lives, then God owes JR a trouble free life.

70 JR saw a paradigm as a puzzle where all the pieces fit together to form a view of the world. If  
all parts of the story fit together, then the paradigm makes sense. If puzzle pieces do not fit, it disrupts.

71 One intense data point will disrupt your story of how the world works. Rankin, 88.
Then Joseph said to his brothers, “Come close to me.” When they had done so, he said, “I am your brother Joseph, the one you sold into Egypt! And now, do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you. For two years now there has been famine in the land, and for the next five years there will be no plowing and reaping. But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives by a great deliverance.\(^{72}\)

God still spoke, even in a mess.\(^{73}\)

If God still speaks in a mess, then JR wondered if God wanted to speak through him. When JR decided that God did, Pastor Sam was the first person he told. JR visited the pastor’s study under cover of darkness. He announced, “I’m being called to preach.”

Without flinching, Pastor Sam replied, “If you can do anything else, do it.”

“What?”

Sam repeated, “Don’t become a preacher if you can do anything else.”

JR was pissed off. He felt set-up, and he did not get the punch line.

The week before JR started high school, Pastor Sam met with him at the kitchen table. Pastor Sam talked about reaching out with the gospel. He described high school students coming to faith in Jesus. He chatted about God using people to accomplish God’s mission and then he said, “I believe God can use JR to reach Kennedy High School with the gospel.”

JR thought, “Yes, God can use me.” And isn’t a call to preach an extension of Pastor Sam’s invitation to reach out? Isn’t this what Sam hoped for all along? When JR told Sam his call to preach, he expected to get a high-five. Instead, Pastor Sam balked.

\(^{72}\) Genesis 45:4-7

\(^{73}\) God speaks most often through the whispers, not shouts. God is found in the shadows rather than the blinding light. And sometimes the whispers are very low, and sometimes the shadows are very dark. William Willimon, Undone by Easter: Keeping Preaching Fresh. (Nashville TN: Abingdon Press, 2009), 33.
“Don’t buy a suit designed for someone else. Your calling is too important, and the call to preach is too hard.” That made JR want the call even more, but it was also confusing. JR asked, “What path should I take?” Pastor Sam said nothing.

* * *

You can settle for a less than ordinary life, or do you feel like you were meant for something better? Something special? –Captain Christopher Pike, Star Trek

“Velocity”
In the club car that morning I had my notebook open on my lap and my pen uncapped, looking every inch the writer right down to the little writer’s frown on my face, but there was nothing to write about except life and death and the low warning sound of the train whistle.

I did not want to write about the scenery that was flashing past, cows spread over a pasture, hay rolled up meticulously — things you see once and will never see again.

But I kept my pen moving by drawing over and over again the face of a motorcyclist in profile —

for no reason I can think of — a biker with sunglasses and a weak chin, leaning forward, helmetless, his long thin hair trailing behind him in the wind.

I also drew many lines to indicate speed, to show the air becoming visible

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74 JR’s old world was falling away and he was not yet in his new world. This is called “the space between stories” and it can be very unsettling. Rankin, 56.

75 Once having crossed the threshold, the hero moves in a dream landscape of curiously fluid, ambiguous forms. Rankin, 25.
as it broke over the biker’s face

the way it was breaking over the face
of the locomotive that was pulling me
toward Omaha and whatever lay beyond Omaha
for me and all the other stops to make

before the time would arrive to stop for good.
We must always look at things
from the point of view of eternity,

the college theologians used to insist,
from which, I imagine, we would all
appear to have speed lines trailing behind us
as we rush along the road of the world,

as we rush down the long tunnel of time —
the biker, of course, drunk on the wind,
but also the man reading by a fire,
speed lines coming off his shoulders and his book,
and the woman standing on a beach
studying the curve of horizon,
even the child asleep on a summer night,
speed lines flying from the posters of her bed,
from the white tips of the pillowcases,
and from the edges of her perfectly motionless body. 76

Chapter 2

Call: Bad News, Good News.

In a survival race, I’m quite sure poetry will long outlast reality TV and Twitter.

—Robert Pinsky, *The Writers Almanac*

Poetic language has been described as “language that moves like Bob Gibson’s fastball, that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace.” Poetic language invited JR to step on the gas when the “not good enough” voice tempted him to ride the brake. Speed lines be damned. The world of explanation and self-help tips urged him to control life by eating right, exercising, keeping hands and feet inside the car at all times, obeying the speed limit, and getting eight hours of sleep every night.

The poet George Lucas was the first to remove JR’s foot from the brake. The poem was *Star Wars*. “The opening fanfare from the London Symphony Orchestra hit me square in the face, shoving me hard into my seat. If seeing the words ‘A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away’ was like a first kiss, then hearing that first chord of the Star Wars theme was my cherry getting popped. Scratch that – this was bigger, more important than a sex metaphor. My life was beginning that day. It was a rebirth.” JR’s instincts told

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78 Walter Bruggemann introduced JR to the phrase “prose flattened world” and the idea that prose results in “truth greatly reduced.” And of course “reduced speech leads to a reduced life.” And JR is sure that by poets Bruggemann also means songwriters, comedians, novelists, storytellers, and preachers.

him that a person does not find his or her place in the galaxy without giving it some gas. Rebirth is too big for prose, it needs poetry.\(^8\) Life needs poetry.\(^8\)

In his search for his place in the galaxy, JR started to look for poetic language that was big enough to cope with life’s messes. He found it in the call to sainthood. “The greatest saints are not those who need less grace, but those who consume the most grace, who indeed are most in need of grace.”\(^8\)

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,  
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!  
Yonder on Calvary’s mount outpoured,  
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.

Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin.

Sin and despair, like the sea waves cold,  
Threaten the soul with infinite loss;  
Grace that is greater, yes, grace untold,  
Points to the refuge, the mighty cross.

Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin.

\(^8\) John 3 illustrates the clash of prose thinking with poetic language. Jesus invites Nicodemous to consider a rebirth experience, Nicodemous is left wondering how to enter back into his mother’s womb. “Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, ‘Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him.’ Jesus replied, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can see the Kingdom of God unless they are born again.’ ‘How can someone be born when they are old?’ Nicodemus asked. ‘Surely they cannot enter a second time into their mother’s womb to be born!’ Jesus answered, ‘Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.’” John 3:1-8.

\(^8\) The language in Pacitti’s *My Best Friend is a Wookie* was also “rich in nerd-minutiae with references firing off like Death Star quad-turbo-laser-cannons.” Tales of Darth Vader, Tatooine and Jar Jar Binks might fail to meet normal expectations for poetry and yet, this illustrated for JR the richness of poetic language.

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide.
What can avail to wash it away?
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide,
Brighter than snow you may be today.

Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;
Grace, grace, God’s grace, Grace that is greater than all our sin.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,
Freely bestowed on all who believe!
You that are longing to see His face,
Will you this moment His grace receive?  

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I apologize because of the terrible mess the planet is in. But it has always been a mess.

—Kurt Vonnegut, *If This Isn’t Nice, What Is? Advice to the Young*

The first time JR made a grown man cry was during a catechism class. As Mr. Steele explained the profound truth that our only comfort in life and death is that we belong body and soul to Jesus, JR and his pre-adolescent classmates pelted him with dumb. After thirty minutes of this barrage, Mr. Steele’s shoulders started to heave, and the tears started to flow. Sobbing, he kicked out the whole bunch of brats. The next time class convened all the mothers sat in, Pastor Sam was the teacher, and Mr. Steele was nowhere to be found.

JR’s first church broke into two factions fighting for control of worship demonstrating that dumb is not limited to teenagers. Deacon Bob told the Elders to stick their old hymns where the sun doesn't shine. The Mary and Martha Study stopped talking to the Women’s Prayer Circle. The organist slashed the drummer’s tires. Somebody

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83 Julia H. Johnston, “Grace Greater Than Our Sin”

84 Brats are young assholes.
wrote hate mail to the pastor. The winners eventually locked the losers out of the building. JR lost.

When JR first thought about the mess in the world, he did not realize that he needed to focus on the saints first. When asked to explain why people, even saintly people, screw up, JR said, “Keep your anthropology low.” Pastor Sam always said, “Heaven have mercy on us all - Presbyterians and Pagans alike - for we are all dreadfully cracked about the head and desperately in need of mending.” In light of the desperate need of mending all around him, JR had low expectations of everyone and concluded that total depravity was the one doctrine that was empirically verifiable.

Low anthropology gave JR a handle on the gospel. He appreciated the goodness of the good news once he faced the badness of the bad news. JR emailed his fellow church refugees some favorite low anthropology quotes:

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85 In JR’s community some mothers wondered if they can afford a roof over their heads or the next meal and if their teenagers will return home from school alive. This was the kind of mess that often attracted more attention and rightly so. JR believed that the search for brokenness should not start “out there” but should start much closer to home.

86 People accuse me of being negative or of losing sight of the fact that human beings are “mostly good.” So I pause and consider their opinions. And then I start to judge them for having those opinions. “How naïve” I say to myself. Then I realize I’m sinning in the middle of a theological discussion. Which brings me back to square one: low anthropology it is.

Recently, I met a lovely person who told me that she spends her time with incredible people. When the topic of low anthropology came up, she suggested that perhaps I just wasn’t being choosy enough in who I spent my time with. At first it seemed like a helpful reflection. Have I surrounded myself with good-for-nothing rascals and not realized it?

Less than two minutes later I got into my car and switched on the news: human trafficking, helpless refugees drowning, and yet another black man died in the custody of law enforcement. Things are bad, folks. And we made it that way. But what interests me is that strange time between these optimistic conversations with people and the reality of the world smacking me in the face (again), either through an interaction with another person or my own sinful narrative. Sarah Condon, “Low Anthropology is my Love Language,” Mockingbird, http://www.mbird.com/2015/04/low-anthropology-is-my-love-language/, (accessed June 12, 2016).

87 Pastor Sam quoting Herman Melville whose Moby Dick provided a classic picture of low anthropology.
- I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world, but still I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am. John Newton
- All the persons of faith I know are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. Every congregation is a congregation of sinners. As if that weren’t bad enough, they all have sinners for pastors. Eugene H. Peterson
- Jesus is not the man at the top of the stairs; He is the man at the bottom, the friend of sinners, the Savior of those in need of one. Which is all of us, all of the time. Tullian Tchividjian
- The confessing church of American Ragamuffins needs to join Magdalene and Peter in witnessing that Christianity is not primarily a moral code but a grace-laden mystery; it is not essentially a philosophy of love but a love affair; it is not keeping rules with clenched fists but receiving a gift with open hands. Brennan Manning
- Christianity is one beggar telling another beggar where he found bread. D.T. Niles
- It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance. Jesus Christ

It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick and JR knew this was true of everyone, including himself. “Keep your anthropology low” as a mantra applied to JR’s brokenness. For JR, the good news of the gospel came alive in direct proportion to his grasping the reality of the bad news about himself. “The Gospel is bad news before it is good news.” The bad news mess creates a perfect storm of need. In the middle of brokenness, JR discovered that God had not given up on people.

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On my forty-ninth birthday, I decided that all of life was hopeless, and I would eat myself to death.

—Anne Lamott, *Plan B*

People are a mess, and the world is broken. JR once thought that the problem of sin and brokenness was exclusively a people problem. And his “not good enough” self-perception made it easy for JR to point his finger at himself. Pride, greed, lust, wrath,

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gluttony, envy, sloth: to name seven deadly problems. People sin, sin is the problem that needs fixing, people need fixing. With this perspective, JR overlooked texts like this:

I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies. For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. Who hopes for what they already have? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.  

JR learned to see tragedy induced groaning all around. Hurricanes, tornados, cancer and tooth decay. His conviction that somebody needed to do something about the mess grew, lest we all eat ourselves to death.

In Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close, JR read about a world facing the aftermath of 9/11. Oskar Schell, the nine-year-old narrator, observed, “Isn’t it so weird how the number of dead people is increasing even though the earth stays the same size, so that one day there isn’t going to be room to bury anyone anymore?” Oskar described the feeling created by the mess as “heavy, heavy boots” and he sought a way to navigate this heaviness. JR felt the weight of the dilemma.

They bring us to this pastel room, point to the lockers, point to the dressing rooms. It could almost be a gym, only there’s a wheelchair, there’s Health News,  

89 Romans 8:18-25

90 In Jonathan Safran Foer’s novel, Oskar faces such heaviness that he concludes “Nothing is beautiful and true.” 43.
there’s a complicated flower jigsaw puzzle,
there are romance novels to borrow
in case you will be returning often.
We change into gowns that tie in the back;
some of us get to keep on our shirts,
some our pants;
we all wear shoes.
Those of us who have come so often
wait comfortably,
take care of the new ones,
offer answers, directions, suggestions.
Only we are careful not to say
how long we’ve been coming
or what we have or
what they’ve done
or are about to do.\textsuperscript{91}

Sometimes messy people collaborate with a broken world to create the worst possible situations. Drought, corruption, prejudice, and earthquakes conspire to wreck entire communities with suffering and injustice so that the whole world groans. “How wretched! Who will rescue from this body that is subject to death?”\textsuperscript{92} Poems, novels, and scripture helped JR imagine a beautiful world where God has not given up on the mess. Like Oskar, he developed a more nuanced worldview that allowed for renovation in the middle of ruin. He imagined God completing a massive project to renovate the story of cancer, and poverty, and injustice, and the whole world.

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Jesus himself remains one of the most compelling figures in all human history.
N.T. Wright, \textit{Simply Good News}

\textsuperscript{91} Susan Herron Sibbert, “The Radiation Waiting Room”

\textsuperscript{92} Romans 7:24.
The Gospels introduce Jesus with an audacious premise: Jesus is God who enters the world to set right all that is wrong.\textsuperscript{93} This Jesus created a stir. The gospel storytellers told stories about the game-changing nature of this upheaval.\textsuperscript{94} The story about the life and death of Jesus, the mission and message of Jesus, and the community Jesus started amazed JR. He wondered, “Is this story too good to be true, are these storytelling witnesses reliable?”

JR learned about witness testimony by watching Matlock. “I object your honor, the witness is biased; she is sleeping with the prosecutor and is the ex-wife of the defendant.”

“Objection sustained.” The judge, looking for the facts, suspects bias because the witness has relationships with the players in the case. A potential conflict of interest discredits her testimony. Subjective testimony in this setting is not preferred.

JR discovered another arena of testimony in the world of storytelling. In this world, passionate participants make the best witnesses. Witnesses gain accuracy, believability, and passion because they have a stake in the story. The listener wants the storyteller to make it personal. She experienced something first hand and has something

\textsuperscript{93} They (the early Christians) thought that it was only when you looked hard at Jesus that you understood what true God was like. That’s why the stories about Jesus – the four Gospels or good news books – are quite complicated. They show Jesus not parachuting down from a great height to dispense solutions to all problems, no zapping everything into shape like some kind of Superman, but living in the mess and muddle of a very difficult moment in history and absorbing the pain and the shame of it all within his own life, within his own body. The Gospels are challenging. They don’t wear theology on their sleeves. They ask us to come into the world of story and find out what it is like to live there. N.T. Wright, \textit{Simply Good News}, 131-132.

\textsuperscript{94} Jesus life, his announcement of God’s Kingdom, his radical redefinition of that Kingdom, his death on a Roman cross – we can be certain of all that. Few historians of any background or belief deny those facts. Jesus’ resurrection falls into a different category. Not because it wasn’t a historical event in the sense of something that actually happened in history. But because if it \textit{did} happen, it set a new standard for our understanding of the way the world is. N.T. Wright, \textit{Simply Good News}, 59.
to say about it. She draws the listener in with added credibility. Participants are preferred over neutral, detached bystanders.\textsuperscript{95} The gospel storytellers curate eyewitness testimonies from those who saw the events they recorded.\textsuperscript{96} These witnesses provided testimony that invites trust. This perspective on testimony grew JR’s confidence in the trustworthiness of these early witnesses and sparked greater curiosity about what they had to say.

Mark starts his testimony of Jesus with six words: “Gospel beginning: Jesus Christ – God’s Son.” It is an audacious premise that arouses curiosity, taps emotion, and creates energy. The pace of Mark’s story generates urgency. Mark is in a hurry; no prolog, no genealogy, no angel choirs to slow the story down. Within the first half dozen paragraphs, John the Baptist is introduced, Jesus is tempted in the wilderness, John the Baptist is imprisoned, Jesus calls his disciples, and Jesus starts healing people. All this wrapped around the announcement of why Jesus has come: “The Kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”\textsuperscript{97}

Matthew’s testimony starts with a genealogy so long that JR was tempted to skip it. Matthew’s story looks backward at the intricate connection of Jesus with the people of Israel, God’s promises, and ancient prophecies. In the first two chapters alone Matthew

\textsuperscript{95} The ideal witness was not the dispassionate observer but the one who, as a participant, had been closest to the events and whose direct experience enabled him to understand and interpret the significance of what he had seen. Richard Bauckham, \textit{Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospel as Eyewitness Testimony} (Grand Rapids MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 9.

\textsuperscript{96} Bauckham insists that this eyewitness testimony makes it possible for us to read the Gospels “in a properly historical and a properly theological way” because this is the most trustworthy kind of testimony. Ibid., 7.

\textsuperscript{97} Mark 1:15
refers to at least four different books\textsuperscript{98} of the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus is the one who comes to save his people, and the fulfillment of this hope drives the story forward.

Luke’s testimony offers journalistic precision, including a clear statement of purpose about what he hopes to accomplish with his storytelling:

Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.\textsuperscript{99}

Luke wants to present an orderly account, and then he does. His detailed story establishes Jesus in the context of a place and a time.

John tells a spiritual story about the signs that point to the deity of Jesus. John’s testimony maintains a lofty vision of Jesus with intriguing word pictures, images, and symbols. The themes of life and death, light and darkness frame an epic struggle in which the Word does not remain distant and aloof but instead comes to dwell with and among us. The Word made flesh, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

JR noticed four points of view, one story.\textsuperscript{100} No single gospel gives the whole story, or could. “We know that his testimony is true. Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written.”\textsuperscript{101} Each gospel writer selects specific

\textsuperscript{98} Isaiah, Micah, Hosea, and Jeremiah.

\textsuperscript{99} Luke 1:1-4

\textsuperscript{100} McKnight, 81.

\textsuperscript{101} John 21:24-25
elements to shape the story, and they are careful not to tell too much but to “leave a lot of
blanks in the narration.” This sparseness invited JR to enter the story to discover the
truth of it for himself.

* * *

The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no
unsettling news.

–Walter Brueggemann, Finally Comes the Poet

The good news in the gospel stories is not immediately clear. Some characters
receive healing, some reprimand. Some of Jesus’ words comfort, some disturb and
disrupt. Jesus is beloved and betrayed. Jesus performs miracles and suffers a gruesome
death. Those who follow Jesus experience flashes of insight but remain largely baffled
and confused. The story can be unsettling.

Mark’s gospel is some kind of joke. It announces itself as the story of the Son of
God but doesn’t begin with glory. Instead, it starts in obscurity in the wilderness.
It portrays the disciples – surely the leaders of the church in Mark’s day – as
bungling fools. They watch Jesus perform one miracle, then doubt his ability to
do the next, they see and believe but when it matters they run away.103

Where is the good news here?

The good news emerges from Jesus’ mission. “And Jesus answered them, ‘Go and
tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are
cleansed, and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news
preached to them.’”104 Luke’s testimony includes a story of Jesus reading from Isaiah:

102 Peterson, 42.
103 David F. Wells, “Who is he Kidding?” http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.
104 Matthew 11:5-6
“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

These passages cast a vision of the renovation that Jesus wants to achieve.

JR was tempted to simplify the gospel. An elevator speech gospel – a clear, two-minute gospel – once sounded appealing. He started to rethink this. “People are always saying, what is the irreducible minimum gospel. I don’t want an irreducible minimum gospel; I want the whole gospel.” A robust gospel sounds like a better idea than a reduced gospel.

At the center of the Story of Jesus is the narrative of his birth, his life and teachings, his miracles and actions, his death, his burial, his resurrection, and his ascension and exaltation. Inherent to the Story of Jesus are labels that define him and identify him and his role in completing Israel’s story: Messiah, Lord, Son of God, Savior, and Son of Man. The Story of Jesus as Messiah and Lord resolves what is yearning for completion in the Story of Israel. This Jesus is the one who saves Israel from its sins and the one who rescues humans from imprisonments.

Jesus: A Theography suggested reading the whole Bible as a single story. Instead of two Testaments, Old and New; think one story, Part 1 and 2. The story of

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105 Luke 4:18-19

106 Oversimplification leads us to something like saying that the movie The Sound of Music was about guitars or that the movie Titanic is about the North Atlantic. John Frye, Patheos, http://www.patheos.com/blogs/jesuscreed/2017/01/20/beyond-tiny-gospel/ (accessed March 1, 2017).

107 The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized and rendered inane. Bruggemann, 1.


109 McKnight, 37.


111 Viola, 10.
God unfolds through the nation of Israel until it finds consummation in Jesus. Part 1 details God's plan revealed in the nation of Israel. Part 2 details God’s action with one Israelite in particular – Jesus, the Jewish carpenter from Nazareth. Jesus completes the story of Part 1. In this way, the story of Jesus is not detached from the story of Israel. Reading the story this way helped JR engage instead of feeling like he walked into the middle of a movie.

The story of Jesus was told in the context of a Jewish community by storytellers familiar with the story of God in the nation of Israel. Part 2 references Part 1 texts, prophets, worship practices, history, genealogies, and customs as it tells the story. The story of one man, in particular, rises to the center of Part 2, but this man is not isolated from the bigger story out of which he comes. Peter’s sermon in Acts 2 shows this connection. Peter quotes the prophet Joel and King David as he unfolds God’s plan for the nation of Israel, and then he gets to Jesus:

Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know— this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death because it was not possible for him to be held by it.

Peter proclaims Jesus as the one who fulfills God’s plan. Peter tells a story that moves toward the consummation that God desires. This consummation is good news.

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112 McKnight, 81-91.

113 If we want to get the full impact of the story of Jesus and the way of Jesus, there is no substitute for taking a long, slow, leisurely pilgrimage through the pages of Genesis to Malachi, getting the river of narrative flowing through our bloodstream, observing the enormous attention given to place and person, so that our story is rooted in the immediate and the local, in named people in a neighborhood, among the animals and angels alive in those forests and deserts. Eugene Peterson, The Way of Jesus, 39.

114 Acts 2:22-24
When JR arrived at the Part 2 chapters written by Paul, he noticed that Paul’s writing was often un-story-like. This abrupt style change combined with what seemed like new content created confusion. Does Paul tell a different gospel? Does the gospel story disappear? These questions were important for JR because some of his pastor buddies insisted on a dramatic difference between the gospel of the Gospels and the gospel of Paul.

JR turned to Pastor Sam for advice. Sam pointed out passages that gave a framework for understanding Paul’s gospel.

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.  

Pastor Sam suggested that Paul defined his mission as the proclamation of a message about Jesus. Sam also suggested that, while Paul often gave theological implications of the gospel story rather than retelling the story of Jesus itself, one passage brought explaining and telling together:

Now I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preached to you the gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.  

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115 Romans 1:1-6  
116 1 Corinthians 15:1-8
If the gospel was everything that had to do with Jesus life, death and resurrection, then Paul regularly pointed toward the story of Jesus and also explained how his suffering, death, and resurrection accomplished God’s plan to renovate a broken world. Paul was another witness to the one story. One gospel, many vantage points. Jesus fulfills promises about God’s Kingdom coming. Jesus the Messiah performs wonders and miracles. Jesus was crucified, dead and buried, and he rose again on the third day to conquer sin and death. Jesus created a new community of love. Jesus promised to come again to set all things right. This is good news.

* * *

Preach the Gospel at all times, if necessary use words.
—Worship Leader Sally, attributed to St. Francis

One of JR’s passions was to get the gospel right. He grew up hearing that gospel equaled personal testimony according to the formula: my rotten life before Jesus, how I met Jesus, my wonderful life since meeting Jesus. People shared their personal testimonies hoping to create a desire in others to meet Jesus. This always bothered him. Even as a kid JR recognized the pressure to make his personal testimony as interesting as possible. This truth struck home when he first witnessed a grown man cry in church. He thought he saw the power of the gospel and at the same time his cynical little heart was wondering how to embellish his own testimony. Unfortunately, JR’s testimony went like this: he was a good kid, he met Jesus in Sunday school, and he remained a good kid after he met Jesus.

In high school, JR became a student leader in his youth group. JR’s faith grew, but he was also frustrated. After the gospel talk at a Gym Night, a kid responded to the
gospel invitation. He looked clueless. JR followed through with his assignment of walking the kid through *The Four Spiritual Laws*. The kid prayed to accept Jesus as his Savior and JR reassured him that he was now saved. When JR asked if he had any questions, he had one, “Can I go to the pool now?” The kid left, JR never saw him again, and JR wondered, “Did that kid hear the gospel?”

JR felt tension created by a lack of gospel clarity that confused the call to salvation with the gospel. People heard the plan of salvation, confessed sins, and prayed the sinner’s prayer while knowing virtually nothing about Jesus. This confused people. When a worship leader in JR’s church said, “Preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words.” this confused people. Of course, she meant that Christians must live good lives and demonstrate love, and she was right, but it caused confusion, and she confused things further when she added, “We are the only Jesus some people will ever see.” JR fired off an email:

Dear Sally,
Thanks for leading worship yesterday. I appreciate your willingness to lead, and I want to remind you of the importance of your leading. Your words matter and your comments yesterday “preach the gospel at all times, if necessary use words” created confusion. Our doing good is not the gospel.

The gospel is about the good that Jesus *did*. Many people today focus on improving behaviors as a way to reach out, and it is important to remember that good behavior is a response or fruit of the gospel but not the gospel. This is very confusing. The gospel is not behavior modification, live better, be good. This is

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117 Our emphasis on the call to personal faith has created a “salvation culture.” A culture that focused on and measures people on the basis of whether they can witness to an experience of personal salvation. Our salvation culture tends toward asking one double-barreled question, “Who is in and who is out?” or more personally, “Are you in or are you out?” McKnight, 30-33.

118 With low anthropology in mind, JR’s standard comeback to this statement was, “Is your opinion of Jesus that low?”

119 Remember this Sunday school song? “Love, love, love, love. The gospel in a word is love. Love your neighbor as your brother. Love, Love, love.” Love might be a fruit of the gospel but JR thought this kind of song led to a lot of confusion and requires unlearning before gaining clarity about the gospel.
law, not gospel. Clarity about the gospel forms communities that focus on the story of Jesus and what Jesus did.

The Gospel is not becoming a better, more moral person. If this is our goal, we may be better off telling Aesop’s Fables or joining the Rotary Club. Doing good is a fruit of the gospel, it is not the gospel. Please be careful, get it right and stop confusing people. Thanks again for serving, Pastor JR.

As soon as JR hit send he regretted it. Sally did not appreciate his tone and resigned as worship leader. To invite more conversation, JR sent out some quotes:

- Ignorance of the distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principle sources of all the abuses which corrupt and still corrupt Christianity. Theodore Beza.
- Virtually the whole the scriptures and the understanding of the whole of theology – the entire Christian life – depends on the true understanding of the law and the gospel. Martin Luther
- The purity and integrity of the gospel stands or falls with the absoluteness of the antithesis between the function and potency of law, on the one hand, and the function and potency of grace, on the other. John Murray
- The law comprises everything in Scripture which is a revelation of God’s will in the form of command or prohibition, while the gospel embraces everything, whether it be in the Old Testament or in the New, that pertains to the work of reconciliation, and that proclaims the seeking and redeeming love of God in Christ Jesus. Louis Berkhof

JR explained, “Clarity about the law and the gospel rescued me from legalism, the endless calls to do more, and the burden of being the only Jesus people will ever see.”

The second email did not convince Sally to return.

Throughout the movie Saving Private Ryan, the characters question the wisdom of the mission to save Private Ryan (Matt Damon). Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) and his squad complain, “He better be worth it.” The rescue of Private Ryan climaxes when Captain Miller recognizes that the cost of completing the mission will be the lives of

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120 The whole quote from Captain Miller is “He better be worth it. He better go home and cure a disease, or invent a longer-lasting lightbulb.”
eight other men. Captain Miller looks Ryan in the face and says “Earn this.” Imagine the pressure.

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The gospel means that this universe is a perfectly safe place for you to be.

–Dallas Willard quoted in Soul Keeping

All Quiet on the Western Front tells the story of German schoolboys fighting in the trenches of WWI. The film shows one young man after another picked off on the battlefield as the war drags on. The imminent threat of death creates unrelenting tension right up to the final scene when the main character, Paul Baumer, turns his focus briefly toward a butterfly just beyond his muddy trench. A single sniper’s shot rings out, and a reaching hand falls lifeless. The grief of that climactic moment encapsulates the heartache created by war. The story left JR grasping for hope.121

JR heard war-weary people groaning while they wait to receive a message from the front. Victory or defeat? Wives wait for a reunion with husbands. Children wait to hug their fathers. All wait with anxious anticipation for the arrival of the messenger’s news to free them from the dread of war. Good news ignites sighs of relief and cheers celebration. Joy replaces grief. Life replaces death. Gospel. Good news flows from both the message and the telling of it when peace marks the beginning of a new day.

In 1918 at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month, peace finally arrived at the conclusion of an epic struggle. Peace was good news. The announcement of peace

121 All Quiet on the Western Front is considered one of the great anti-war movies which JR did not know when he first watched it. Based on JR’s reaction to the story – it worked. JR’s early exposure to the power of great filmmaking and great storytelling moved him to look for good news in movies. Incidentally, the book by the same name, published on November 11, 1928 became one of the first books burned by Adolf Hitler during his rise to power in 1933.
was also good news. The announcement invited telling because a war-torn world needed good news about the renovation of ruin. Because war is not the only pathway to ruin and hopelessness, JR longed to bring gospel news. Terror attacks and super storms; starving children and divorce court; bankruptcy and cancer; addiction and abuse; injustice and poverty – the world needs good news. Good news vibrates the heart alive.\textsuperscript{122}

Gospel good news engages head and heart.\textsuperscript{123} The “purpose is not merely to narrate the deeds and words of Jesus but to show how these did, in fact, lead to the experience of salvation and to the formation of the community of the saved.”\textsuperscript{124} JR embraced the call to share this gospel, “confident that God is able to orchestrate everything to work toward something good and beautiful.”\textsuperscript{125} In Jesus, God renovates everything to become good and beautiful. In Jesus, God demonstrates that God has not given up on the world. This is the Gospel.

\begin{quote}
The desert and the parched land will be glad; 
the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. 
Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; 
it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. 
The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, 
the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; 
they will see the glory of the Lord, 
the splendor of our God. 
Strengthen the feeble hands, 
steady the knees that give way; 
say to those with fearful hearts,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{122} Word-work is sublime because it is generative. Toni Morrison, \textit{What Moves at the Margin: Select Nonfiction}. (Jackson, MS: University press of Mississippi, 2008), 203.

\textsuperscript{123} While much of the study of the Gospels through history has been concerned with an intellectual analysis of the texts as a basis for doctrine or ethical behavior, in the ancient Mediterranean world oral performance was generally oriented toward emotional impact. Whitney Shiner, \textit{Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark} (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), 57.

\textsuperscript{124} McKnight, 83.

\textsuperscript{125} Romans 8:28, The Voice (Thomas Nelson, 2011).
“Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert. The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow. And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness; it will be for those who walk on that Way. The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it. No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.126

The gospel is God’s announcement of good news, and it is possible because God, in Jesus, renovates our stories and our sighs.127

126 Isaiah 35:1-10

127 Our task as image-bearing, God-loving, Christ-shaped, Spirit-filled Christians, following Christ and shaping our world, is to announce redemption to a world that has discovered its fallenness, to announce healing to a world that has discovered its brokenness, to proclaim love and trust to a world that knows only exploitation, fear and suspicion. The gospel of Jesus points us and indeed urges us to be at the leading edge of the whole culture, articulating in story and music and art and philosophy and education and poetry and politics and theology... a world view that will mount the historically rooted Christian challenge to both modernity and postmodernity, leading the way in the postmodern world with joy and humor and gentleness and good judgment and true wisdom... And if the Gospel of Jesus is not the key to this task then what is? N.T. Wright, The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is (New York: Harper One, 2011), 196.
Chapter 3
Reluctance: Preacher’s Voice.

Once you finally leap into your hero’s journey and cross the first threshold, you’ll soon find yourself on the Road of Trials.

—Lissa Rankin, The Anatomy of a Call

JR loved science because Mrs. L loved science and Mrs. L loved students. On countless afternoons Mrs. L held court in the science lab with an entourage of curious scientists watching things dissolve or burn or explode. Mrs. L translated science into cool. The bridge building contest was the coolest. Engineering miniature bridges made of balsa wood consumed the entourage. Nobody more than JR, and it showed that day he won the contest. This sealed JR’s destiny – he would be an engineer.

Ten days before embarking on his dream career path, JR chatted with Pastor Sam. They explored JR’s love affair with words, his intense curiosity about new ideas, and his desire to connect truth to the real world. JR pitched asshole theory to Sam. He did not bite but instead pitched Bible College, “You need the Bible.” He said, “This is the most important book you can study.” One week before classes started JR changed his major from engineering to philosophy at a state university.

The first textbook JR purchased, The Study of Human Nature,128 introduced Hinduism, Confucianism, Islam, Plato, Kant, Marx, Freud, Descartes, Hobbes, Hume, Rousseau, and Sartre. He discovered B.F. Skinner's behaviorism, J.S. Mills’ utilitarianism, and Konrad Lorenz’s ethological diagnosis of human aggression. JR placed these new ideas alongside the Bible to create a strange soundtrack of ideas. Mythology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, religious studies – intellectual history from ancient to

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modern, a chorus of discovery. JR scrawled “All truth is Gods truth” on the cover of the
textbook. JR would be a philosopher.

During his first semester, JR also encountered Eugene Peterson’s *A Long
Obedience in the Same Direction*. It impressed him that a preacher quoted Fredrick
Nietzsche, who JR had never heard of before but, who he happened to be reading for a
class. JR found Nietzsche's evocative style and outrageous ideas compelling even if his
views were hard to swallow. On the other hand, he thought that Peterson was as cool as
a library on wheels for his ability to find something useful in Nietzsche. This sealed the
deal, JR would become a philosophy quoting preacher.

Seminary provided discoveries of a different wavelength so that JR understood
for the first time that being a preacher meant one also had to be a pastor. One night, on
a break from memorizing Hebrew vocabulary, JR and his roommate commandeered a
canoe to relocate the fountain in the chapel pond. Presumably in anticipation of such a
scheme, the fountain’s secure anchor prevented the attempted removal and resulted in a
capsized canoe. One of the Hebrew scholars on board, lacking sufficient swimming
proficiency, nearly drowned. The aid of a passing professor prevented this doomed
voyage from becoming an unspeakable tragedy.

Professor “Doc” Andersen proved to be a sympathetic lifesaver who took a
personal interest in both wayward sailors. In the immediate aftermath of this near
drowning, the professor provided pastoral care that focused on pain-sharing but soon

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129 He also discovered that many philosophers faced potential starvation if they did not also flip
burgers at McDonalds.

130 Who knew that preachers had work to do all week? Reading more Eugene Peterson,
particularly *Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*, JR discovered that pastoral work keeps the preacher
from becoming a prima donna or an asshole by dragging her or him into the everyday world.
morphed into a long-term investment in JR. They talked about pastoral roles that did not involve standing behind a pulpit. Professor Doc became Pastor Doc, shaping JR’s call. JR would become a pastor-teacher.

JR once heard that the place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet. He had a hunch that the deep gladness part of the call might be bull shit, at least sometimes if you are called to pastor, preach, and lead. Pastor Sam warned JR about the challenges of pastoring and preaching. Sir Earnest Shackleton’s leadership of a failed expedition provided a perfect cautionary. “The ability to find One’s voice and to hear and call other voices into harmonious sound

131 One preacher’s opinion about the gladness of his call:
You deceived me, Lord, and I was deceived;
you overpowered me and prevailed.
I am ridiculed all day long;
everyone mocks me.
Whenever I speak, I cry out
proclaiming violence and destruction.
So the word of the Lord has brought me
insult and reproach all day long.
But if I say, “I will not mention his word
or speak anymore in his name,”
his word is in my heart like a fire,
a fire shut up in my bones.
I am weary of holding it in;
indeed, I cannot.
Cursed be the day I was born!
May the day my mother bore me not be blessed!
Cursed be the man who brought my father the news,
who made him very glad, saying,
“A child is born to you—a son!”
Jeremiah 20:7-9, 14-15

132 Sweet describes leadership as an “acoustical art.” Both terms matter because it is about listening (acoustics) and one never quit masters it (an art). Sweet, Leonard sweet, Summoned to Lead. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan. 2004), 17.

133 Shackleton is considered to be a successful failure because after his boat sank, he and his crew survived some of the harshest conditions on the planet. In 1915 they failed to reach Antarctica and they failed to make a single discovery but they survived the most hostile place in the world. They did it without modern tools and not a single member of their expedition was lost. Alfred Lansing, Endurance: Shackleton’s Incredible Voyage (New York: Basic Books, 2007).
is the essence of a Shackleton-inspired definition of leadership as the acoustical art of imagining the future.\textsuperscript{134} Shackleton “could ‘tell it like it is,’” but was willing to tell it like it is \textit{not} but ought to be.\textsuperscript{135} Reaching people where they are \textit{not}, that is the challenge. If Shackleton’s journey is a model – the path will be treacherous and all who follow should be warned.\textsuperscript{136}

* * *

Effective preachers need to reflect on who they are.

–Michael J. Quicke, \textit{360-Degree Preaching}

The MTV show “Made” shaped teenagers who aspired to be something different. The show made the untalented into the talented: competitive water skier, rock star, prom king, skateboard trickster, bull rider. High school students were given an expert mentor and a limited time in which to be made. Each episode explored the pain required to pursue the dream: relational pain from breaking into a new social circle, physical pain from the tumbles required to learn a new skill, emotional pain from facing unexpected barriers. Some accepted the pain and succeeded, others avoided the pain and failed.\textsuperscript{137}

The rector droned on while Mr. Bean fought to keep his eyes open. This classic bit of British humor was not lost on JR. Bad preaching gets a well-deserved knock; it puts

\textsuperscript{134} Sweet, 18.

\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{136} The ad Shackleton placed to recruit the members of his expedition read: Men wanted for hazardous journey. Low wages, bitter cold, long hours of complete darkness. Safe return doubtful. Honour and recognition in event of success.

\textsuperscript{137} Have to love “reality” TV.
people to sleep and worse. JR feared becoming a boring preacher. He wanted to be made into a great preacher. Preachers blame listeners for not paying attention, but JR knew that preachers share the responsibility. It was entirely too convenient and self-serving to explain a congregational snooze by the short attention span or spiritual indifference of the listener. JR thought that preaching should reward an energetic, conscientious listener. When attentive listeners are not rewarded for their attentiveness, they eventually become inattentive.

JR witnessed inattention first hand, and while not deadly, it certainly was not funny. He wondered about reading as a cure for the boredom of those who listen to him. He also wondered if he was ill-suited for the task. Like Moses: “Who am I? Why should they believe me, I am not eloquent but slow of speech and tongue?” He identified two targets for improvement – reading and speaking.

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138 Is Acts 20:9 another Mr. Bean episode? A young man named Eutychus, sitting in an open third story window, lulled to sleep while Paul preached on and on fell to the ground and died. “Epic fail” preaching?

139 We (preachers) are no longer careful, close readers of texts, sacred or secular. Gordon, 49.

140 Ministers have found it entirely too convenient and self-serving to dismiss congregational disinterest on the basis of attenuated attention spans or spiritual indifference. In most cases, the inattentiveness in the congregation is due to poor preaching—preaching that does not reward an energetic, conscientious listening. When attentive listeners are not rewarded for their energetic attentiveness, they eventually become inattentive. Gordon, 17.

141 There is a profound difference between reading information and reading texts. The former permits disinterest in the question of how the matter is composed; its interest is only in the content. Indeed, the skill of rapid reading was designed precisely to achieve better efficiency when reading for information, by actually training the mind to ignore most of the articles, prepositions, adjectives and adverbs. But reading a text is a laboriously slow process; when one reads a text, one is reading a piece of literature that survives beyond its initial generation largely because of its manner, irrespective of its matter. Gordon, 43.

142 Many presentations are boring. Most are a dreadful failure of communication, and the rest are simply not interesting. Duarte, 8.

143 Exodus 4:10
JR’s first pastor job landed him preaching backup to a senior pastor who preached many versions of a single sermon. “God blesses you when you are good.” This sermon always had the same application – try harder to do better. This message frustrated JR because no matter how hard he tried, he could not do enough. This message also produced anxious, exhausted people who routinely fought about which good behaviors would be most fruitful in earning God’s blessing. The more JR heard this message, the more it bothered him. When asked to preach this message, the words stuck in his throat.

Concerns about preaching consumed JR. If the listener is inattentive and the message is suspect, what’s the point? He started to worry, “Am I really called to preach?” If he was called, then he faced a road filled with hard work. The question “Does preaching work?” was not hypothetical, it was existential. JR’s angst caused him to wonder if could be made into a preacher, and was it worth it?144

* * *

Don’t tell the bishop, I’m not too keen on sermons. Too boring.
—Father Brown, Father Brown Mysteries

When JR’s dog tried to understand, he tilted his head and lifted his ears. When he wanted to make himself clear to the dog, JR spoke louder and slower. “LAAYYY

144 Nicolas Lash writes in “Ideology, Metaphor, and Analogy” about the way narratives also must be “made” or constructed. His language of “metaphor” and “analogy” is particularly relevant to JR’s questions about narrative preaching. Analogy points toward metaphysical explaining, metaphor toward imaginative storytelling. About the storyteller Lash writes, “Conscious of his responsibility to help his audience to “shape” their experience, to “make sense” of their world, he journeys along the way, not of analogy but of metaphor.” The journey of metaphor is not without dangers as the storyteller might “make the world, in our imagination, conform to how we would have it be.” Hauerwas and Jones, 117.

Lash concludes that we dare not abandon analogy or metaphor but does suggest that “the storyteller comes first in as much as Christian religious discourse, as a constitutive element in the practice of Christianity, is paradigmatically narrative (and, more specifically, autobiographical) in form.” Hauerwas and Jones, 135-137.
DOOOWWNNNN.” Doggie head tilt. Fredrick Buechner described English-speaking tourists traveling abroad in the same way:

Preachers often make the same mistake. They believe if only they speak the ancient verities loudly and distinctly and slowly enough, their congregations will understand them. Unfortunately, the only language people really understand is their own language, and unless preachers are prepared to translate the ancient verities into it, they might as well save their breath.145

Good preaching does not waste breath. When JR raised the question, “Does preaching work?” he was asking about good preaching, not breath-wasting preaching. He wanted to explore the best of the best. JR was interested in the kind of preaching that makes heads tilt, and ears lift. Preaching in the listener’s own language that makes the listener say, “Tell me more.”

JR presupposed that preaching mattered. If he was called, then he ought to preach, and it ought to make a difference. He assumed this in spite of loud voices to the contrary.146 Some voices passed a death sentence on preaching since listeners did not recognize authority, distained monolog, and demanded entertainment.147 Evidence supporting this verdict came from many directions. The most significant indication of the death of preaching was personal and came with pain when the preacher realized that nobody was listening.

It helped JR to list his preaching assumptions:

- The person of the preacher is a vital element in effective preaching.148
- Listeners are active participants in preaching.149

145 Fredrick Buchner, Secrets in the Dark, 22.
146 Preaching is broken everywhere. J. Sittler quoted in 360-Degree Preaching.
147 Craddock, As One Without Authority, 1.
149 Ibid., 25.
Preaching brings the Scripture forward as a living, normative voice for the community.\textsuperscript{150}

The Holy Spirit is active in the preacher, listener, and community.\textsuperscript{151}

Preaching requires a historical, pastoral, liturgical and theological context.\textsuperscript{152}

Preaching requires good listening.\textsuperscript{153}

Preachers have something important to say.\textsuperscript{154}

The most significant mentoring JR received from Fred Craddock focused on understanding the nature of speech against a backdrop of silence. JR lived in such a noisy world that it was hard to imagine sound breaking into silence – there was so little silence. A phone erupting in the middle of the night was the most disruptive sound JR could imagine. Jesus was that kind of disruption. Jesus broke the silence. “The silence surrounding God’s activity and purpose has been broken, not by our noisy opinions but by God’s revelation. Revelation is not simply about grace but is itself an act of grace.”\textsuperscript{155}

Since God broke the silence, preachers should too.\textsuperscript{156}

JR’s preaching convictions were strengthened by Bible verses like these:

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{150} Craddock, \textit{Preaching}, 27.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 29.

\textsuperscript{152} Craddock, \textit{Preaching}, 47.

\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 84.

\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 69.

\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 5.


\textsuperscript{157} Isaiah 55:10-11
• Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.\textsuperscript{158}
• For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.\textsuperscript{159}
• All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.\textsuperscript{160}
• Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction.\textsuperscript{161}

JR resonated with these passages. They shaped his preaching imagination. The prophet Ezekiel inspired his imagination most of all.

The hand of the Lord was on me, and he brought me out by the Spirit of the Lord and set me in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. He led me back and forth among them, and I saw a great many bones on the floor of the valley, bones that were very dry. He asked me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

I said, “Sovereign Lord, you alone know.”

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to these bones and say to them, ‘Dry bones, hear the word of the Lord! This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you, and you will come to life. I will attach tendons to you and make flesh come upon you and cover you with skin; I will put breath in you, and you will come to life. Then you will know that I am the Lord.’”

So I prophesied as I was commanded. And as I was prophesying, there was a noise, a rattling sound, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and tendons and flesh appeared on them and skin covered them, but there was no breath in them.

Then he said to me, “Prophesy to the breath; prophesy, son of man, and say to it, ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Come, breath, from the four winds and breathe into these slain, that they may live.’” So I prophesied as he commanded me, and breath entered them; they came to life and stood up on their feet—a vast army.\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{158} Romans 10:17
\textsuperscript{159} Hebrews 4:12
\textsuperscript{160} 2 Timothy 3:16-17
\textsuperscript{161} 2 Timothy 4:2
\textsuperscript{162} Ezekiel 37:1-10
Pastor Sam wasn’t a rock star in the pulpit, but he valued preaching and delivered decent sermons that made scripture clear and made scripture real even though he faced two potential roadblocks – he had a lisp, and he could not keep his pants up. Sam managed sagging pants by dropping his arms, catching his elbows right below his belt, and shrugging his shoulders. He did this like clockwork so that sermon progress could be tallied by counting the number of shrugs. He was a seven shrug preacher. Sam did not even try to manage his lisp. In spite of these impediments, JR loved Pastor Sam’s preaching because Pastor Sam believed in preaching.

Pastor Sam brought dead bones to life. More accurately “dead boneth.” When Sam knew that JR was committed to becoming a preacher he started emailing quotes:

- The primary task of the Church and the Christian minister is the preaching of the Word of God. D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones

- To preach the text truly and the gospel every time, to engage the culture and reach the heart, to cooperate with the Spirit’s mission in the world – we must preach Christ from all of Scripture. Timothy Keller

- Preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. Paul

- My conviction is that preaching is nothing less than sharing the in-breaking of God’s good news to create new people in new community. Christian preaching, at its best, is a biblical speaking/listening/seeing/doing event that God empowers to form Christ-shaped people and communities. Michael J. Quicke

- God’s Word, working through God’s Spirit, is God’s primary instrument for growing God’s church. Jonathan Leeman

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165 2 Timothy 4:2-3


167 Leeman, 18.
Pastor Sam always said, “God communicates and for our benefit. That sets God apart.”

C.H. Dodd described an apostolic pattern of communication suggesting that “much of our preaching at the present day would not have been recognized by the early Christians” JR resonated, he rarely heard sermons following this pattern:

1. Announcing that the age of fulfillment has dawned.
2. Announcing that the fulfillment of this age has taken place through the ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
3. Announcing that, by virtue of the resurrection, Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God as Messianic head of the new Israel.
4. Announcing that the messianic age will shortly reach its consummation in the return of Jesus.

Dodd also pointed out that, for the early church, the message and the proclamation of the message converge in apostolic preaching.

Within the New Testament there was “an immense range and variety in the interpretation” of the message and yet in all interpretations “the essential elements of the original” message were kept in view. The proclamation of this message appeared to be central to both the formation and the preservation of early Christian communities. Apostolic preaching “worked out bold, even daring ways of restating the original gospel” while remaining true to “its fundamental convictions.” They proclaimed a message affirming that from “the events out of which the Christian church arose there was a

168 One of Pastor Sam’s best sermons ever was about the prophet Isaiah contrasting the idol gods and God Almighty. Idols made with human hands remain mute while God continues to speak, as God has done for generations. Isaiah 44:7-20.

169 Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching, 10.

170 Ibid., 13-17.

171 Ibid., 21-24.

172 Dodd, The Apostolic Preaching, 76.
conclusive act of God, who in them visited and redeemed his people; and that in the
corporate experience of the church itself there was revealed a new quality of life.”

Preaching mattered.

JR’s confidence in preaching bolstered, one question remained. Can preaching
work if words lose their meaning?

* * *

Words! Words! Words! I’m so sick of words.

—Eliza Doolittle, My Fair Lady

Recycling once meant wrapping smelly fish in a newspaper before throwing both
in the garbage can. Once upon a time a lone garbage can and a single truck collected the
rubbish on trash day. JR lived in a world where three different trucks empty three
different colored bins weekly. Environmental sensibilities insisted on this. Even with an
ever-increasing awareness about conserving limited resources, JR noticed one resource
often overlooked by the environmentally conscious: words.

A call for the stewardship of words revealed that some did not overlook this
resource. Failure to steward words devalues them which leads to a crisis of
communication, knowledge, and understanding. This concern, it turns out, is not new. In

173 Ibid., 77.

174 Two dogs in a cartoon talk to each other. One dog says to the other, “I had my own blog for a
while but decided to go back to pointless, incessant barking.” Paul Wilkinson, “Thinking Out Loud”,
http://paulwilkinson.wordpress.com/2013/10/12/the-corruption-of-online-journaling/ (accessed September
29, 2013).

175 Slovenliness of our language makes it easier to have foolish thoughts. Abuse of words leads to
unfortunate, inaccurate, ugly communication. Marilyn Chandler McEntyre, Caring for Words in a Culture
of Lies (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 4-7.
1946 George Orwell lamented the same problem.\textsuperscript{176} Orwell blamed ineptness, confusion, and indifference for creating ineffective communication that resulted in the loss of meaning. Orwell urged clear speaking and writing so that people would use “language as an instrument for expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought.”\textsuperscript{177} Good communication required stewarding words.

Orwell was optimistic in giving rules for word stewardship.\textsuperscript{178}

- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Those who steward words do not to take language for granted but recognize and embrace the power of words to transform. Word power is a two-way street impacting both the speaker and the listener. Good stewards believe in their ability to transmit

\textsuperscript{176} Each of these passages has faults of its own, but, quite apart from avoidable ugliness, two qualities are common to all of them. The first is staleness of imagery; the other is lack of precision. The writer either has a meaning and cannot express it, or he inadvertently says something else, or he is almost indifferent as to whether his words mean anything or not. This mixture of vagueness and sheer incompetence is the most marked characteristic of modern English prose… As soon as certain topics are raised, the concrete melts into the abstract and no one seems able to think of turns of speech that are not hackneyed: prose consists less and less of \textit{words} chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of \textit{phrases} tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house. George Orwell, “Politics and the English Language”, George Orwell Library, \url{http://www.orwell.ru/library/essays/politics/english/e_polit} (accessed July 1, 2013).

\textsuperscript{177} Defenseless villages are bombarded from the air, the inhabitants driven out into the countryside, the cattle machine-gunned, the huts set on fire with incendiary bullets: this is called \textit{pacification}. Millions of peasants are robbed of their farms and sent trudging along the roads with no more than they can carry: this is called \textit{transfer of population} or \textit{rectification of frontiers}. People are imprisoned for years without trial, or shot in the back of the neck or sent to die of scurvy in Arctic lumber camps: this is called \textit{elimination of unreliable elements}. Such phraseology is needed if one wants to name things without calling up mental pictures of them. Ibid.

\textsuperscript{178} The decadence of our language is probably curable but this invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them. Ibid.
messages, trust their words, and partner with the listener. Good stewards are optimistic and charitable. JR internalized his optimism, “Trust my words, trust the listener.”

When the preacher stewards words, she or he “not only trusts his words to the hearers” but also trusts hearers to listen because “the Word of God needs the ear.”

Craddock offered more coaching about the place and power of words in preaching:

1. Faith requires words. “If God addressed man through the text, the word of God must, by its very nature be spoken. The church is completed by its own understanding of a God revealing himself through words to share its message through… the spoken word.”

2. The preacher should understand that the proper posture is “first of all as a listener to the word of God.” Listening comes before speaking.

3. Preaching both presupposes and creates a listening community. “The spoken word is never an isolated event; it takes place where at least two or three are gathered together.”

4. Because words matter, it is helpful for preachers to pay attention to “the ordinary experience of conversing, talking, listening and speaking.”

Even when people claimed a high view of Scripture, JR knew that they still disregard words, even biblical words. People said, “To be honest, I don’t read my Bible that much.” And then add, “Why should I read it? I’d rather experience Jesus first-hand, the Bible is just words.” A Christian author coaching about spiritual growth suggested, “Forget words. Words are the least reliable purveyors of truth.” JR cringed.

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179 Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 31.

180 Ibid., 42.

181 Ibid., 43.

182 Ibid., 43.

183 Ibid., 47.


185 Today is the last day that I’m using words. They’ve gone out, lost their meaning. Don’t function anymore. Madonna, “Bedtime Story”
Common sense suggested that words do convey meaning and that, with a little curation, they may function even more meaningfully. Preaching presupposes the importance of words.

In 2008 Nigel Tomm published a twenty-three volume novel entitled *The Blah Story*. Tomm wrote 1.3 million words. The opening paragraph from Volume 1:

It was a blah blah blah blah for blah blah blah in blah. Blah blah blah, blah to blah about blah blah blah. Blah decided blah blah blah blah. Blah blah very blah blah blah blah a blah. Blah blah blah blah. Blah blah blah, blah blah blah blah. JR decided he did not need to read the rest even though the publisher described the book as “overwhelmingly creative.” They got it half right; it was overwhelming. Words as a bunch of blah, blah challenges the meaning and usefulness of language. Can each person actually place whatever meaning she or he chooses on words? No. This is not how real people function in real time. People expect words to mean something. People write and speak because they intend to communicate meaning.

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186 My favorite scene in the 1987 movie Broadcast News is the moment when young Aaron, who has just graduated as valedictorian of his high school class, is attacked in the schoolyard after the ceremony by two roughnecks whose object seems to be to take him down a peg. As they run off Aaron picks himself up and, considering how to deliver the unkindest cut possible hollers after them by way of revenge, “You will never know the joy of writing a graceful sentence.” McEntyre, 22.

187 Certainly, no one can preach who has no respect for words. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, 6.


189 Tomm does manage to capture three English language records: longest word, longest sentence and longest novel. (The longest sentence is contained in four volumes, 16-19, and includes 2,403,109 words; 15,403,732 characters – with spaces – over 3,248 pages. In Volume 19 we find the 3,609,750 letters that compose the longest word in the world.)

190 There is actually a definition offered for the 3.6 million letter word in *The Blah Story* which contains all previously known longest words. The word means the current day or date between real and imaginable today. Tomm, *The Blah Story*. 
When JR reported, “My dog licked my face,” his words described reality.\textsuperscript{191} Communicating this message allows access to reality by identifying a type of animal behaving in a certain way. If this incident is reported as “A cat brushed against JR’s leg,” the interpretation misses the mark. Because words are useful, discussion happens, interpretations adjust, and communication works.\textsuperscript{192} People use words to probe and discern probable and improbable meaning.

People read a text, analyze it, and then discuss superior and inferior interpretations. People tell stories hoping to impact the listener, and the storyteller is judged based on his or her clarity. People preach sermons hoping to connect with listeners in ways that have more, not less meaning. Difficulty in understanding may be a problem that lies with the speaker, or with the listener. The challenge is addressed by speakers who hone their craft and listeners who actively engage.\textsuperscript{193} Active engagement refreshes meaning.\textsuperscript{194} And if the words themselves become stale then “find new words or

\textsuperscript{191} JR describes his world to the best of his ability. He knows that some people are better at describing reality and some are worse, but he can make this judgment because words have meaning.

\textsuperscript{192} Nigel Tomm might disagree but in the everyday world of communication JR does not think that “interpreting a text is like lying in a field and seeing shapes in the clouds, entirely subjective and fanciful.” (David McCullough, Jr. \textit{You are not Special}, 105) It doesn’t work that way in reality.


\textsuperscript{194} There can be no absolutely passive reading, many people think that, as compared with writing and speaking, which are obviously active undertakings, reading and listening are entirely passive. The writer or speaker must put out some effort, but no work need be done by the reader or listener. Reading and listening are thought of as \textit{receiving} communication from someone who is actively engaged in \textit{giving} or \textit{sending} it. The mistake here is to suppose that receiving communication is like receiving a blow or a legacy or a judgment from the court. On the contrary, the reader or listener is much more like the catcher in a game of baseball.

Catching the ball is just as much an activity as pitching or hitting it. The pitcher or batter is the \textit{sender} in the sense that his activity initiates the motion of the ball. The catcher or fielder is the \textit{receiver} in the sense that his activity terminates it. Both are active, though the activities are different. If anything is passive, it is the ball. It is the inert thing that is put in motion or stopped, whereas the players are active, moving to pitch, hit, or catch. The analogy with writing and reading is almost perfect. The thing that is
put old words together in combinations that make them heard as new, and make you understand in new ways."

* * *

There is nothing to writing. Just sit at your typewriter, open your veins, and bleed.

–Red Smith

JR reflected on his preaching journey. “Preaching is nothing,” he mused, “Simply bleed while standing before the congregation. Naked.” JR learned this during his first preaching lab. Create your baby, deliver your baby, let five clueless students hack your baby to death, and then watch a videotape of the whole bloody mess while Doc shakes his head slowly from side to side. Simply watching the video would have been torture enough. This was JR’s first experience of bleeding in the pulpit naked. Short-term cutting for long-term survival.

written and read, like the ball, is the passive object common to the two activities that begin and terminate the process.

We can take this analogy a step further. The art of catching is the skill of catching every kind of pitch-fast balls and curves, changeups and knucklers. Similarly, the art of reading is the skill of catching every sort of communication as well as possible.

It is noteworthy that the pitcher and catcher are successful only to the extent that they cooperate. The relation of writer and reader is similar. The writer isn’t trying not to be caught, although it sometimes seems so. Successful communication occurs in any case where what the writer wanted to have received finds its way into the reader’s possession. The writer’s skill and the reader’s skill converge upon a common end. Adler, 8.

195 Buechner, Secrets in the Dark, 57.

196 One bad winter in the Arctic, and not too long ago, an Algonquin woman and her baby were left alone after everyone else in the winter camp starved. Earnest Thompson Seton tells it. The woman walked from the camp where everyone had died, and found at a lake a cache. The cache contained one small fishhook. It was simple to rig a line, but she had no bait, and no hope of bait. The baby cried. She took a knife and cut a strip from her own thigh. She fished with that worm and her own flesh and caught a jackfish; she fed the child and herself. Of course she saved the fish gut for bait. She lived alone at the lake, on fish, until spring when she walked out again and found people. Seton’s informant had seen the scar on her thigh. Annie Dillard, The Writing Life, (New York: Harper, 1989), 12.
In this delivery room, Doc expected JR to execute verse-by-verse exposition, offer careful textual analysis, convey compelling explanations, and develop clever principles of application. These creations should be swaddled with an ingenious (but clear) outline and presented with a flourish. If delivered with alliteration all the better. To prevent sermons from becoming lectures,¹⁹⁷ they should be punctuated with touching, if highly fabricated, illustrations to drive home the point.

The only thing that saved JR in preaching lab was Doc. If Doc had not fished JR out of the pond and felt some commitment to his long-term survival, then JR certainly would have failed preaching lab. If Doc had not held his hand, JR might be selling used cars now. “Three-points-and-a-poem-Doc” delivered sermons with mesmerizing skill and power. Every student wanted to preach like him. “How do you do it?” they asked.

Doc replied, “Before reading the morning newspaper, read the Word of God. No Word. No newspaper.”

“What else can we do?” they asked.

“If you want to be a great preacher,” Doc insisted, “Be a great reader. You must read fiction. Always have a novel on your nightstand.”

Somebody had the nerve to ask, “What else?” again.¹⁹⁸ Doc repeated himself because he knew that most of the students read a book (if they did read) as though it were

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¹⁹⁷ Along high school hallways lecturing is unfashionable, and not without reason. Done badly a lecture will kill deader than last week’s halibut anything interesting about a subject and paint the lecturer an egomaniac, a windbag, a fool. You already know this. Lecturing is seen in the trade these days as blunt trauma, a force feeding of academic cod-liver oil, the victims of which are likely to go reeling out of the room in search of a quiet place to recover... David McCullough, You are Not Special: And Other Encouragements (New York: Harper Collins, 2014), 87-88.

¹⁹⁸ One student had the nerve to actually admit never reading a whole book. “Why waste your time reading a book,” he said, “when others who read it can summarize it for you?” Doc just shook his head slowly from side to side.
They mined Melville and Steinbeck for tidbits to fill the cracks between sermon points, creating clever filing systems to store quotes for easier retrieval. This allowed more time to watch Cheers or M*A*S*H which also were mined for illustrations.\footnote{After getting to know Doc, JR thought that homiletics professors are truly saints for patiently enduring an endless cycle of lame sermons filled with lame illustrations.}

After JR had delivered his first baby, Doc’s evaluation went something like, “I would not like to hear you preach again.” JR’s relationship with him did not soften the feedback, and he deserved it. His sermons were not good enough, and so Doc advised JR to look at team ministry where somebody else was the regular preacher. And JR did. Playing the rookie to the starting quarterback served him well. Watching from the sidelines, waiting to preach mop up on low-attendance holidays reduced the intense pressure of prime-time preaching. JR appreciated a developmental crock pot with low heat over a long time to prepare palatable, nourishing messages. JR improved. Slowly.

The first decent sermon JR preached was based on Psalm 139. The message outline was a mess with just two main points and these starting with two different letters of the alphabet. Sorry, Doc. JR crafted a story. Thank God for Sunday evening services in January with snow in the forecast. JR hoped that one of the handful in attendance would offer at least a “Nice try” or a “Not too bad.” But from the beginning, something felt different about this sermon.

I ate lunch at the Mall this week. The food court offered a quick breather from reflecting on being “wonderfully made and known.” While I ate my egg roll, I watched a mother feeding her handicapped child. He strapped in a wheelchair, she spooning pudding. He took great delight in eating, she took great delight in serving, anticipating his every move. And she delighted in him. You could see it on her face.
My thoughts moved to compare this little boy, with my own hyperactive seven-year-old. Thought they were the same age, this boy could not run, could not catch a ball, could not ride a bike, could not speak the words, “I love you.” And yet, in the eyes of his mother, he was special. “Wonderfully made and known” and loved. Blessed to be known and loved by someone in this way.

The sermon turned on the phrase “wonderfully made and known.” JR asked the listeners, “What does the face of God look like when he is delighted in us, the ones wonderfully made and known by God?” Weaving his unexpected encounter together with the text, “You have searched me, Lord, and you know me…” refurbished the message. The sermon resonated with the listeners. Or, did JR imagine it? Post-sermon comments confirmed that something special happened that night. One critic asked, “Where did that come from?” JR shrugged, and before he knew what to say, the reviewer finished, “Preach it, man, preach it.” And so JR did. Naked, bleeding, and reluctant.
Chapter 4

Nobody’s perfect, well, there was this one guy, but we killed him.

—Christopher Moore quoted in Beloved Mess

An elder in JR’s first congregation, also the township supervisor, explained every glitch in the parish and in the community with the same comment, “It would be easy if it were not for the people.” Preaching would be easy, too, if it were not for the people. And that includes the preacher. And after the preacher, every listener brings his or her own batch of glitches. Brokenness lurks at both ends of the preaching event. As it turns out, the problem is actually worse than that.

Since we are all fools, JR concluded that any communication has the potential to become a telephone game in which a whispered message enters the ear of the first listener, passes down a chain of people from mouth to ear, emerging out the other end screwed up. The final message sounds nothing like the original message. If a message can be altered unwittingly in the repeating of it, imagine if one – or all – in the chain purposefully altered the message. In this environment, how can a message be translated faithfully, delivered authentically, and heard rightly?

200 Few people grasp the preacher’s challenge. Where else in life does a person have to stand weekly before a mixed audience and speak to them engagingly on the mightiest topics known to human kind – God, life, death, sin, grace, love, hatred, hope, despair and the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ? Who is even close to being adequate for this challenge? Cornelius Plantinga Jr. Reading for Preaching: The Preacher in Conversation with Storytellers, Biographers, Poets, and Journalists. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2013), xi.

201 Every week preachers face the translators challenge. Like translators, preachers are trying to say in different words the same thing the text says without inadvertently saying a different thing in different words. Plantinga, 44.
A toddler twirls around a light pole in her front yard. JR approached, noticed bees swarming at the base of the post, and at that moment the girl started to scream. He ran, scooped up, and rescued her from the bees. At that instant, the child’s mother emerged from behind the house to see a strange man snatching her screaming daughter. How did she interpret this situation? Would an explanation of the context help? JR’s version of the story finally calmed the mother, but it took considerable convincing to overcome the mother’s version of the story and eliminate a call to 911.

JR asked his wife, “What the heck is this?” He assumes that the abstract painting has value and meaning – it’s hanging in a museum – but JR has no idea what the painting depicts. The title: “A Dew Drop Falling from a Bird's Wing Wakes Rosalie, who Has Been Asleep in the Shadow of a Spider's Web” helped little. Spending more time with the painting or learning about the artist and her style might help but JR needed more context to make sense of the painting.  

When the artifact under scrutiny changes from an experience or a painting to a text, JR still needed context to make sense of it. JR leaned into the text, the context, and his own baggage in search of meaning. “Many think interpreting a text is like lying in a

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202 Spanish painter Joan Miro, 1893-1983, remained true to many surrealist principles. His paintings reflect the belief that creative forces can be released from the control of logic and reason. He mixed abstraction, primitive and unrefined technique and playfulness to create, compose and experiment.

203 In the essay “The Story of Our Life” H. Richard Niebuhr probes the question of interpretation. He uses a helpful illustration of a fish in water to describe the preacher’s task. “From the point of view of historical beings, we can speak only about that which is also in our time and which is seen through the medium of our history. We are in history as the fish is in water and what we mean by the revelation of God can be indicated only as we point through the medium in which we live.” Hauerwas and Jones, 24.

Niebuhr continues, “We cannot point to Scripture saying that what we mean can be known if men will but read what is written there.” But it can be known through exploring our baggage and the context so that “A history that was recorded forward, as it were, must be read backward through our history if it is to be understood.” Hauerwas and Jones, 25.
field and seeing shapes in the clouds, entirely subjective and fanciful.” JR was not one who thought this way.

Doc used John Stott to help young preachers probe interpretive challenges. A bridge connects two river banks, one river bank is the gospel, the other the congregation and the preacher. The preacher does not stand in the middle of the bridge as some neutral observer but rather builds a bridge back to the gospel with baggage in tow. The preacher crosses the bridge to understand the meaning of the gospel in its context and then carries that back across the bridge to the congregation. While baggage complicates understanding, it also aides in connection with the congregation. Exploring, rather than denying baggage leads JR across the interpretive bridge.

As JR reflected on the implications of the interpretive bridge, he became restless with Stott’s model. He looked for ways to enlarge the model and found it in Michael J. Quicke’s vision of preaching as a circular conversation called the “preachers swim.” Rather than a two-way conversation between two sides of a bridge, this model suggests four conversation partners: the text; the preacher; the hearers; and the preacher and hearers together. The preacher listens so that truth is revealed; the preacher proclaims so that truth is shared, the hearers listen to the truth and then the preacher and hearer live out

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204 McCullough, Jr., 105


206 Proper contextualization is the act of bringing sound biblical doctrine all the way over the bridge by re-expressing it in terms coherent to a particular culture. Timothy Keller, Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 101.

207 Quicke, 125-139.
the truth they have just experienced. With this model, JR developed insight about the roles played in bridging the gap from text to congregation.\textsuperscript{208}

Sermons work in spite of baggage that comes from personal spin, prejudice, cultural corruption, assholes and a broken air conditioner in the sanctuary if the preacher pays attention. Pay attention to the unique perspectives that the original gospel storyteller brings to their telling. Pay attention to literary information in the text like grammar, writing style and literary type. Pay attention to baggage shaped by culture, heritage, history, personality, mood, and prejudice. Pay attention to the text, the listener, and the preacher. Paying attention led JR to name one obvious piece of luggage he drags into preaching. “Because we are all fools, it is not just any kind of preaching that is needed, it is gospel-centered preaching.”\textsuperscript{209}

JR’s bookshelves hold titles like \textit{Christ-centered Preaching}, \textit{Apologetic Preaching}, \textit{Persuasive Preaching}, \textit{Marketplace Preaching}, \textit{Biblical Preaching}, \textit{Passionate Preaching}, and \textit{Expositional Preaching}. It was tempting to add “gospel-centered” as just another book on the shelf. JR resisted this temptation by imagining that “gospel-centered” was more than a technique.\textsuperscript{210}

\textsuperscript{208} Therefore, any attempt to articulate the essence or coherence of the gospel encounters problems arising from two different kinds of pluralism: (1) the diverse expressions of Christian life and faith within the New Testament and (2) the diverse models of understanding Christian faith and life that are presupposed by various contemporary interpreters. James V. Brownson, \textit{Speaking the Truth in Love: New Testament Resources for a Missional Hermeneutic} (Harrisburg PA: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 1981), 32-33.

\textsuperscript{209} Gospel-centered preaching proclaims the gospel in every sermon. The key to preaching the gospel every time is to preach Christ every time, and the key to that is to find how your particular text fits into the full canonical context and participates as a chapter in the great narrative arc of the bible, which is how God saves us and renews the world through the salvation by free grace in his Son, Jesus Christ. Timothy Keller, \textit{Preaching: Communication in an Age of Skepticism}. (New York: Viking, 2015), 70.

\textsuperscript{210} There is not a single person who has come through the red doors of a church who is not hoping beyond hope for a salve to be applied to his bleeding wound. This hope is often buried below bravado, barely recognizable, but it beats in the heart of every human, because everybody hurts…
We should desire for the gospel to be central to our sermons the way the sun is central to our solar system. In our solar system, everything circles the sun and is brightened and warmed by it. The sun’s enormous mass creates a gravitational pull that holds the entire system together. The sun’s radiant light and heat reaches every object in its orbit.

So it should be with the gospel in our sermons. Christ the Savior is the sun, and the Bible is the solar system. Every passage, every doctrine, every theme—all of it orbits the saving work of Jesus. Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection brighten and warm the whole of God’s revelation, as well as the people in the pews and the preacher himself. The degree to which a sermon reflects these realities is the degree to which a sermon is centered on the gospel.

In a gospel-centered sermon, the gospel is like the sun, pulling every facet of the preaching event into its orbit, radiating light and heat on it all. A gospel-centered sermon is a gospel-shining sermon.211

Gospel-centered sermons require more than a passing reference to Jesus. Gospel-centered sermons make the proclamation of Jesus life, death, and resurrection central. When the gospel shines like the sun, it shapes the text, the hearers and the preacher with good news at the center.

Keeping the gospel at the center keeps other things out of the center, like advice-centered sermons that focus on improving life. Or virtue-centered sermons that

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emphasize heroes of the faith to be copied. Or politics-centered sermons, or family-values-centered sermons, or activist-centered sermons. Gospel-centered sermons announce news about what God has already done, rather than instruction about what to do for God. JR learned to ask of every text, “How does this text shine light on Jesus.”

Somewhere along the way, Charles Spurgeon got in JR’s head: “Leave Christ out? O my brethren, better leave the pulpit out altogether. If a man can preach one sermon without mentioning Christ’s name in it, it ought to be his last, certainly the last that any Christian ought to go to hear him preach.”

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Have no fear of this mess. —Dr. Seuss, The Cat in the Hat

JR liked to experiment. He behaved his way into new ways of thinking, “We will never know until we try.” He embraced failure as a learning opportunity. Try, fail, try again. Failing faster accelerated discovery. And so JR wondered, why was he so

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212 Sometimes serious, sometimes trivial, the pressure builds to make (force?) the preacher and the sermon toward relevance. “Give me something I can use.” one of JR’s parishioners regularly chides. Where does it end? Emma wants JR to preach about healing for her cat.

213 Every time you expound a bible text, you are not finished unless you demonstrate how it shows us that we cannot save ourselves and only Jesus can. That means we must preach Christ from every text, which is the same as saying we must preach the gospel every time and not just settle for general inspiration or moralizing. Keller, Preaching, 48.


215 Charles Spurgeon, undated; sermon #768.

216 The only technique that has ever been successful in explaining the world around us is experimentation. Chris Paley, Unthink: Why You Don’t Think the Way You Think You Think. (London: Coronet, 2014), 3.
reluctant to experiment with his preaching. Seminary trained him to write sermons hunkered down in the study with the door closed. For thirty years JR engaged the entire practice of sermon prep in solitary confinement. He never dared share any of this process, he never exposed an unfinished, incomplete sermon.

One day JR decided to try something different. He convened a group of collaborators to meet to discuss sermon texts and share ideas. JR started each week’s collaboration by asking, “What are your first thoughts about this passage?” The insights offered ranged from dumb and trivial, to off the wall and hilarious, to meaningful and moving. Any text could lead Emma to share concerns for her sick cat, or ignite Bill’s moral outrage, or boost Steve up on a theological soap box.

This collaborative study experiment shifted the content of JR’s preaching. The gospel in JR’s sermons had long been some variation of this basic message: Jesus is the last hope for the person who finds that she is miserable and desperate. With life so messed up that all other options fail, one clear choice remains – come to Jesus.

217 The gospel itself sounds like a failed experiment. “It is the story of a great and good man, encircled by unscrupulous enemies, betrayed by a false friend, trapped by scheming priests, condemned by a weak vacillating judge, and put to death.” C.H. Dodd, About the Gospels (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1958), 4.

218 Part of the reluctance to experiment was a fear that a sermon revealed too soon would be exposed as not good enough.

219 The routine also included Saturday night run-throughs. Standing at the pulpit JR delivered the sermon and made final tweaks. On some occasions people wandered through the building during these rehearsals and John always stopped talking until the building was empty: like a coach running secret plays during practices closed to the media.

220 It is always a relief to find another preacher to support a discovery and especially one as notable as William Willimon who said, “I am troubled by the notion that Christianity is little more than the last hope of a miserable person who has tried everything else and now, in utter desperation, decides to ‘try’ God.” William Willimon, The Gospel for the Person who has Everything. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1978), 12 -17.
1. You have a problem.
2. Jesus is the answer.
3. Repent and be saved.

Start with the mess, move to Jesus. Only after the bad news is clear is the good news given. This pattern reinforces “not good enough” and resembles scolding. And JR sensed that it was becoming less effective as listeners found themselves insulated from the mess. How does a person respond to the gospel when he is convinced, “I don’t have a problem?”

After hashing it out with his collaborators, JR noticed a new pattern:

1. Jesus is the answer.
2. You have a problem.
3. Repent and be saved.

This new pattern starts with Jesus by drawing attention to God’s revelation of God’s love in sending Jesus into the world. The starting point is love. The story JR heard from his partners was that “before you truly feel the unconditional, unending, unqualified love of God” you are incapable of repentance. No one can earn God’s love or make God love more – as demonstrated in Jesus. The gospel as more than the answer to your personal mess became the new starting point of JR’s sermons.

JR noticed this new pattern after his collaborators called him on it. They wondered why the change and were able to describe it after JR, unaware, asked, “What change?” The group first discussed the change while looking at the parable of the prodigal in Luke 15. They noted that the story follows the pattern because the son wakes

221 Be careful here. The old pattern is so ingrained in JR that he wants to add to this sentence, “This pattern starts with Jesus by drawing attention to God’s revelation of God’s love in sending Jesus into the world to fix what is broken.” Does it change the message if it does not start with the problem but instead starts, “God sent Jesus out of love? Period.”

222 Willimon, The Gospel for the Person Who has Everything, 23.
up to his mess without anyone preaching on his problem. The trigger for repentance seems to be the goodness of his father. “When he came to his senses, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have food to spare, and here I am starving to death! I will set out and go back to my father.’” The move to repentance starts with the son remembering how much his father loved – even the servants.

“I will set out and go back to my father and say to him: Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me like one of your hired servants.’ So he got up and went to his father.” The son repents, returns home and finds salvation because of the father’s love. The story includes one of the great gospel verses in the Bible: “So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.”

Luke 15 tells a story that preachers have been trying to explain for generations. Preachers talk about what Jesus might have said if he’d taken the time to explain what he meant instead of telling the story of a father with two sons. JR as a recovering explainer fought the urge to explain everything to death.

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223 Luke 15:17-18
224 Luke 15:19-20a
225 Luke 15:20
226 JR finds good times and places for explaining. Sometimes even in a sermon. When doctrine flows out of the gospel story, it becomes the sticks used to build a fire. In preaching, JR notices that too much explaining fails to deliver heat. The gospel loses its story-ness, its flame, as it develops structured layers of ideas systematically clarified:

Part 7: The Person of Christ.
   Chapter 32: The Deity of Christ.
   Point 3: The Biblical Teaching.
   Sub-point 6: The Evidence of the Resurrection.

Even when doctrine seems to flow directly out of the divine drama of scripture, JR finds that inserting explanation smooths the edges of the story and cools the temperature of the sermon. The sermon comes off
When JR started with Jesus, he became a teller of big, dramatic, interesting stories about imperfect characters who screw up, and screwed up characters who overcome. Stories that encouraged cheering the heroes and booing the assholes. Stories that made audacious claims about Jesus. JR’s collaborators told him, “Focus on the drama.” They backed up their encouragement with engagement. They rarely commented on the point of doctrine mentioned in a sermon, but they often entered into and explored the story details of the text. They said, “The gospel is the best story of all.”

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Man is born broken. He lives by mending. The grace of God is glue.
Eugene O’Neill, quoted in Beloved Mess

The gospel-centered preacher wants her congregation to obsess over God’s grace. JR remembered that Fredrick Buechner once said, “At least nine times out of ten the people who happen to be listening at all hear, not what is really being said, but only what they expect to hear.” And what people expect to hear is “an edifying story, an uplifting thought, a moral lesson.” The story of God’s grace is not always expected.

JR thought about how people listened to him when he preached:

- A husband and wife with a perfect life conspire to hide a moral failure. When discovered they blame each other for their failures.227
- A brother consumed with anger and envy kills his brother and refuses to take responsibility.228

orderly but cold. Fuel for a great bonfire without a spark to light the blaze. Gathering these layers of sticks is necessary but if we seek warmth the job remains incomplete until something ignites the pile. Ignition is the job of the story.

227 Genesis 1-3.
228 Genesis 4.
A husband offers his wife to another man to save his skin and enhance his wealth. He builds his reputation by telling lies.\textsuperscript{229}

A father offers to let a violent mob gang rape his daughters. Later these same daughters get their father drunk and sleep with him so they can bear children.\textsuperscript{230}

A wife suggests that her husband sleep with a household servant to produce an heir. She then casts the woman and her son into the desert to die.\textsuperscript{231}

A man refuses to do right by his widowed daughter-in-law who takes matters into her own hands, disguises herself as a prostitute, sleeps with her father-in-law, becomes pregnant by him and then confronts him with his hypocrisy.\textsuperscript{232}

Each of these stories ended with the good news that God intervened in spite of the mess.

The series theme: God renovates messes. At the conclusion of this series of sermons, someone suggested to JR, “You should preach these sermons again and focus on family values.” People hear what they want.

The gospel-centered preacher remains focused on the message that, in Jesus, God chooses to love broken, messy people and God chooses to keep loving them not because of what they do or do not do. “All the persons of faith that I know are sinners, doubters, uneven performers. We are secure not because we are sure of ourselves but because we trust that God is sure of us.”\textsuperscript{233} God renovates stories – this message falls on deaf ears if the Holy Spirit does not work in the hearts of those who listen to a sermon. JR supposed that the Spirit used a variety of preachers, preaching styles and sermon types but could not imagine how gospel gets through without gospel-centeredness.

\textsuperscript{229} Genesis 12

\textsuperscript{230} Genesis 19

\textsuperscript{231} Genesis 21

\textsuperscript{232} Genesis 38.

\textsuperscript{233} Eugene Peterson quoted in \textit{Beloved Mess}, 99.
The Holy Spirit hovers over the congregation, and the Word is living and active. These two truths un-burdened JR when he worried about fruit. Impact is not the preacher's responsibility. “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power.”234 Doc told student preachers, “Offer a cool cup of water to the thirsty; that is your calling.”235 Pastor Sam said, “When God needs a tool, God reaches into the tool box and selects the one best suited for the job. When called, we simply let God do God’s work without resisting too much.” Pastor Sam sounded like John Calvin: "Through the mouth of preachers God will do His work just as a workman uses a tool to do his work."236

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Every sermon has a zip code.

—Chris Green, *Ministry Nuts and Bolts*

Red once saw a billboard advertising vasectomies. “Exit Now!” it urged. The hook, “Get one side free.” For some reason, Red could not wait to tell JR. “Guess what preacher?” he asked without waiting for an answer, “I just saw a sign advertising vasectomies on I-90. Thought you would want to know. And guess where I am? Fertile, Minnesota, population 372 and shrinking.” And then JR heard a cackle, a click, and a dial tone. At that moment JR knew that Red was pondering the effectiveness of the billboard. Does it occur to a Minnesotan traveling along at 70 mph to seek a delicate medical

234 1 Corinthians 2:2-3.

235 Doc added, “One cup at a time, not the whole bucket every week.”

236 From a plaque in JR’s office.
procedure with life-shaping implications? Does “buy one get one” really sweeten the pot? JR also pondered these questions, and one more: Why did Red feel a need to share this information?

Red vexed JR. Some get a burning bush, some handwriting on a wall, some a still small voice, a nudge, or a prompt – Red got his call from the side of a semi. P.I.E. stands for Pacific International Express, but Red took it as marching orders, “Preacher Irritation Evermore.” And he did his best, so why not share intel about a billboard touting half-priced vasectomies? JR is called to preach gospel-centered sermons because he lives with vexing people who are a beautiful mess in need of love. Especially Red.

Once Red phoned and said: “The buzzards are circling.” Then he hung up. JR wondered, “Does he not realize I have caller ID?” He also wondered if it was a threat or if Red was lying in the ditch somewhere half dead. JR called right back. No answer. When JR saw him the next day, he asked, “Why the buzzard call?”

Red answered, “No meaning, I saw buzzards circling.” No prophetic premonition about death – just odd, and there is a lot more where that came from. These are the messy people JR knew. This was JR’s call: preach the story that, in Jesus, God renovates the world and these people.

JR wanted his preaching to be like a billboard announcing that God has not given up on the world. Left on his own, JR would have followed a different calling, but the story of the gospel was a big story that grabbed JR’s attention and begged him to tell it and retell it.

Tell me the old, old story
Of unseen things above,
Of Jesus and his glory,
Of Jesus and his love.
Tell me the story simply,
As to a little child;
For I am weak and weary,
And helpless and defiled.

Tell me the old, old story, Tell me the old, old story,
Tell me the old, old story, Of Jesus and His love.

Tell me the story slowly,
That I may take it in -
That wonderful redemption,
God's remedy for sin.
Tell me the story often,
For I forget so soon;
The early dew of morning
Has passed away at noon.

Tell me the old, old story, Tell me the old, old story,
Tell me the old, old story, Of Jesus and His love. 237

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237 Kate Hankey, “Tell Me the Old, Old Story”
Chapter 5
Ordeal: Exploring Story and Storytelling.

Fiction, like cocaine, is a drug... we do it for kicks.

–Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal*

Opie Taylor\(^{238}\) was late for dinner. He crashed his bicycle and had to carry it home. When Andy discovered that the crash occurred because Opie was riding with no hands, Andy was furious. He scolded Opie, “I am willing to pay for things but not when the damage is due to foolishness.” Andy suggested that Opie should learn the value of money by bearing the cost of the bike repairs.

Taking his father’s concern to heart, Opie sought and found a job at the grocery store. One catch. Opie must compete with Billy for a week to see who finally lands the job. Opie won the competition, earned the job, and dreamt of buying a new bicycle. He then discovered that Billy wanted the job because his father has been sick, the family has unpaid bills and the whole family is trying to earn money to make ends meet.

With this new information, Opie gets fired. Andy’s pride in Opie for winning the job turned to agony when he learned about Opie’s dismissal. Only after enduring another scolding does Opie spill it, “I *had* to get fired. Billy’s family has some bills.”

At that moment Andy’s pain turned into the best kind of delight. “When I was bragging on you, to Floyd and Goober, I told them how proud I was to have a boy like you. But that’s not quite true. You’re a man.”

* * *

There is no greater agony than bearing an untold story within you.

–Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*

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\(^{238}\) The Andy Griffith Show, Season 6, Episode 1, “Opie’s Job”
Two movies from JR’s childhood – *The Wizard of Oz* and *Mary Poppins* – captivated him. Flying monkeys and a magical nanny – what’s not to love? Two tales, two classic film plots.\(^{239}\) Other classics followed: *The Sound of Music, The Ten Commandments, Herbie the Love Bug*. These movies sucked him in with their witchy storytelling power.\(^{240}\) JR’s list of memorable childhood movies would be longer, but he grew up in a community suspicious of movies. A Sunday school teacher once said, “We don’t drink, we don’t dance, we don’t attend movies, and we don’t go with girls who do.”\(^{241}\) The youth group once convinced a rookie leader to take them to *Grease*. This resulted in an unpleasant intervention from the Board of Elders who feared the corrupting power of movies.

As penance, the elders packed everyone up on the church bus and sent them to the “Christian” film *A Thief in the Night*. This film horrified JR and not just because a little boy gets the guillotine at the end. The awful production value, amateur acting, confusing plot and heavy-handed message created a longing in JR for good storytelling.\(^{242}\) And so JR continued to sneak into movies. Moved by the stories, JR started to collect quotes:

- Man is eminently a storyteller. His search for a purpose, a cause, an ideal, a mission and the like is largely a search for a plot and a pattern in the development of his life story.\(^{243}\) Paul Aster

\(^{239}\) The American novelist John Gardner once said there were only two plots to all of the stories ever told: a stranger comes to town, and someone goes on a journey.

\(^{240}\) Human life is so bound up in stories that we are thoroughly desensitized to their weird and witchy power. Gotschall, 1.

\(^{241}\) We did smoke. Even the deacons and on church property.

\(^{242}\) And yet someone decided that *A Thief in the Night* merited no less than three sequels.

• Stories are a speaker’s greatest resource.\textsuperscript{244} Christopher Witt.
• Stories are a safe way to communicate because the truth embedded in a story can be presented indirectly.\textsuperscript{245} Bruce Seymour
• All good stories describe a certain something that we recognize as true. Story trumps facts.\textsuperscript{246} Annette Simons
• Every great leader is a great storyteller.\textsuperscript{247} Howard Gardner
• I had always felt life first as a story; and if a story then there is a story teller.\textsuperscript{248} G.K Chesterton
• What kind of people we become depends crucially on the stories we are nurtured on. Stories sustain us.\textsuperscript{249} Elaine Reese
• Story is one of the few vessels strong enough to bear the weight of and power of love.\textsuperscript{250} Lauralee Farrer
• From cavemen to scholars, people have been drawn to fire pits, water coolers, theaters and grave sites to share stories.\textsuperscript{251} Christian Salmon
• Stories face up to the inadmissible facts of reality and promise deliverance. They are messages of hope arising from desperate yet ordinary situations.\textsuperscript{252} Mariana Warner
• A great story lives forever.\textsuperscript{253} John Truby
• Whatever the mix, and for whatever reasons, stories have the potential to transform, for good or ill.\textsuperscript{254} Robert McAfee Brown

\textsuperscript{244} Christopher Witt, \textit{Real Leader’s Don’t Do PowerPoint: How to sell yourself and your ideas.} (New York: Crown Business. 2009), 109.
\textsuperscript{245} Bruce Seymour, \textit{Creating Stories: A Pastors Guide to Storytelling} (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2007), 19.
\textsuperscript{246} Simons, 79.
\textsuperscript{247} Quoted in \textit{Lead with a Story: A Guide to Crafting Business Narratives That Captivate, Convince, and Inspire.} By Paul Smith, 1.
\textsuperscript{248} http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/455713-i-had-always-felt-life-first-as-a-story-and
\textsuperscript{249} Reese, 200.
The formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative.255

Stephen Crites

JR knew a good story when he heard one. He never knew how many ways the idea of story could be parsed. It was complicated to define story, to differentiate between story and narrative, and to discern story type.256 JR found defining, differentiating, and discerning less helpful than engaging. Engaging with the story kept it simple.257 Narrative and story do the same thing, and they do this whether spoken or written.258 Both narrative and story relate information about an event or series of events necessary to make life meaningful.259 A story introduces conflict into a routine, continues through the struggle to resolve the conflict, and ends when a new routine is restored.260 Or not restored.261

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255 Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” Hauerwas and Jones, 91.

256 In practice, the actual everyday usage of both story and narrative is very broad which allows us to treat story and narrative as synonyms. Steve Denning, “What are the main types of stories and narratives” http://www.stevedenning.com/Business-Narrative/types-of-story.aspx (accessed 7/11/15).

257 Stephen Crites describes in “The Narrative Quality of Experience” describes two categories of story: sacred and mundane. Stories that shape “men’s sense of self and world” are sacred. “Stories directly seen or heard” are mundane. “Between sacred and mundane stories there is distinction without separation. From the sublime to the ridiculous, all people’s mundane stories are implicit in its sacred story and every mundane story takes sounding in the sacred story.” Other than making distinctions about the “depth” of stories this sounds a lot like saying every mundane story is sacred and every sacred story is mundane, which sounds a lot like hair splitting. Hauerwas and Jones, 66-71.


259 Polkinghorne, 1.

260 Stories the world over are almost always about people (or personified animals) with problems. The people want something badly – to survive, win the girl or boy, to find a lost child. But big obstacles loom between the protagonist and what they want. Just about any story – comic, tragic, romantic – is about a protagonist efforts to secure, usually at some cost, what he or she desires. Gottschall, 52.

261 A story begins when something knocks us off balance. The story progresses, or the plot “thickens” as the protagonists struggle to restore that balance and peace while the antagonistic forces block and resist them. Finally, the story ends as the struggle results in either the restoration of balance or the failure to recover it. Timothy Keller, Every Good Endeavor: Connecting Your Work to God’s Work. (New York: Penguin Books, 2012)156.
Pastor Sam once told JR to pay attention to the things that make him cry, so he did. Real life stories about heroes and villains brought tears to his eyes. These stories gave life. “Once upon a time” invited JR to leave the mess of his daily life and enter a space to experience gifts of life unrecognizable unless he stepped over the threshold into the story. Stories sustained him.

*Dr. Zhivago* was playing at the Paramount Theater in St. Cloud. That afternoon, we went into Russia, and when we came out, the snow was falling—the same snow that fell in Moscow.

The sky had turned black velvet. We'd been through the Revolution and the frozen winters.

In the Chevy, we waited for the heater to melt ice on the windshield, clapping our hands to keep warm.

On the highway, these two things: a song from *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* and that semi-truck careening by.

Now I travel through the dark without you and sometimes I turn up the radio, hopeful the way you were, no matter what.

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262 Human minds yield helplessly to the suction of story. Gottschall, 3.

263 The emotions of fiction are highly contagious. Ibid., 150.

264 Evolution favors the storyteller because stories lead to play, create social glue, sort information, make meaning, even help the storyteller get sex. Ibid., 27.

265 Humans are creatures of Neverland. Neverland is our evolutionary niche, our special habitat. Ibid., 177.

266 McEntyre, 111.

267 Joyce Sutphen, "November, 1967"
Stories brought insights. The better the insights, the better the story. As insights go, JR found thought-provoking better than obvious, intricate better than simplistic, and organic better than contrived.\(^{268}\)

Abraham Lincoln wins the Civil War and then decides he’s got enough time to go to the theater. That’s a good story. When Thomas Jefferson said, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” he owned a hundred human beings and never saw the hypocrisy, never saw the contradiction and more important, never saw fit in his lifetime to free any one of them. That’s a good story. You know the stories that I like to tell are always interesting because the good guys have really serious flaws and the villains are very compelling.\(^{269}\)

Good stories yield honest insight into the complexities of humanity. These stories resonate with the human condition; they ring true, and this truth draws the listener in.\(^{270}\)

JR breathed stories in, like air. Once in the lungs, they moved into the bloodstream so that the story was carried throughout the body and the lungs had no idea that these molecules were doing their work. They just did.

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If you want people to know the truth, tell them a story.

–Eudora Welty, quoted in *Restoring Broken Things*.

A good story results in a lot of stretching. JR explored key elements that aid in this stretching.\(^{271}\) A stranger comes to town, nobody knows if she is a hero or a villain. A

\(^{268}\) We approach any work of literature with suspicion if we think the writer is trying to make a moral point. We are afraid the evidence will be doctored, the cards stacked, the material (and ourselves) manipulated. On the other hand, it is hard to conceive of a work of literature that does not have some kind of moral intention behind it. Surely a main reason for writing is that authors feel too strongly about something not to write, and they use fiction, drama, fantasy, myth or the sonnet form to give expression to something they believe deeply. McAfee Brown, 19.

\(^{269}\) Ken Burns, “Ken Burns on Story”.

\(^{270}\) If you want people to know the truth, tell them a story. Eudora Welty, quoted in *Restoring Broken Things*.

\(^{271}\) A compelling story hands over the spark, makes it personal, tells the story behind the story, evokes the senses, and inspires the audience to action. Buster, 10-32.
pilgrim travels to a faraway land, nobody knows what troubles will block his path. A showdown pits one tribe against another. The story creates stretching.

Ahab sent word throughout all Israel and assembled the prophets on Mount Carmel. Elijah went before the people and said, “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”

But the people said nothing.

Then Elijah said to them, “I am the only one of the Lord’s prophets left, but Baal has four hundred and fifty prophets. Get two bulls for us. Let Baal’s prophets choose one for themselves, and let them cut it into pieces and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. I will prepare the other bull and put it on the wood but not set fire to it. Then you call on the name of your god, and I will call on the name of the Lord. The god who answers by fire—he is God.”

Then all the people said, “What you say is good.”

Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, “Choose one of the bulls and prepare it first, since there are so many of you. Call on the name of your god, but do not light the fire.” So they took the bull given them and prepared it. Then they called on the name of Baal from morning till noon. “Baal, answer us!” they shouted. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

At noon Elijah began to taunt them. “Shout louder!” he said. “Surely he is a god! Perhaps he is deep in thought, or busy, or traveling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened.” So they shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response; no one answered. And they danced around the altar they had made.

Then Elijah said to all the people, “Come here to me.”

They came to him, and he repaired the altar of the Lord, which had been torn down. Elijah took twelve stones, one for each of the tribes descended from Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord had come, saying, “Your name shall be Israel.” With the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord, and he dug a trench around it large enough to hold two seahs of seed. He arranged the wood, cut the bull into pieces and laid it on the wood. Then he said to them, “Fill four large jars with water and pour it on the offering and on the wood.”

“Do it again,” he said, and they did it again.
“Do it a third time,” he ordered, and they did it the third time. The water ran down around the altar and even filled the trench.

At the time of sacrifice, the prophet Elijah stepped forward and prayed: “Lord, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel and that I am your servant and have done all these things at your command. Answer me, Lord, answer me, so these people will know that you, Lord, are God, and that you are turning their hearts back again.”

Then the fire of the Lord fell and burned up the sacrifice, the wood, the stones and the soil, and also licked up the water in the trench. When all the people saw this, they fell prostrate and cried, “The Lord—he is God! The Lord—he is God!”

Then Elijah commanded them, “Seize the prophets of Baal. Don’t let anyone get away!” They seized them, and Elijah had them brought down to the Kishon Valley and slaughtered there. 

All stories are journeys, and the most interesting journeys are ones in which the outcome is uncertain. As the story unfolds, the listener discovers if Elijah will succeed or fail. Is this good news or bad news for the People of God? Is the story comedy or tragedy? Life or death? Telling the story pulls the listener. Story invites the listener to lean in and be stretched even if he or she remains unaware of the pull. Stories encourage “listening in” that takes the listener to a place he or she would not normally go.

JR was surprised about the skepticism that remained about the power of story. Pastor Sam once chided JR for his fascination with stories, “Stories belong in the kiddy

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272 1 Kings 18:20-40


274 When we read nonfiction, we read with our shields up. We are critical and skeptical. But when we are absorbed in a story, we drop our intellectual guard. We are moved emotionally and this seems to leave us defenseless. Gottschall, 152.

275 Humans are creatures of story, so story touches nearly every aspect of our lives. Gottschall, 15.

276 Stories suffer from a bad reputation – the word tends to be associated with fairytale, untrue, suspect... you resort to stories if you have a weak case or are hiding the truth. Gottschall, 15.
corner.” Sam believed that stories were irrational and so were ineffective for conveying serious and important concepts. JR argued that story proves useful in many settings - politics, education, business management, government, even the military.\textsuperscript{277} Even in settings dominated by science, storytelling proves to be an effective tool challenging long-held beliefs about the power and place of story.\textsuperscript{278}

JR argued with Pastor Sam, “Story is the most powerful tool for communication and teaching known to humans.” JR wondered, “Is it even possible to \textit{overstate} the significance of storytelling?” Those who explore this subject suggest that the “kind of people we become depends crucially on the stories we are nurtured on.”\textsuperscript{279} Stories orient and reorient the way the listener looks at life. After entering into the story of Elijah and the Prophets of Baal, the listener would never look at the twelve altar stones the same.

This raised a new question for JR, “If stories shape the listener generally, then what about faith stories specifically, what do they do?”\textsuperscript{280} This question moved JR beyond pragmatic queries about the usefulness of stories to theological inquiries about

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\textsuperscript{277} Salmon, 1.
\textsuperscript{278} Haven, 15-17.
\textsuperscript{279} Reese, 199-200.
\end{flushright}
the reality-shaping impact of stories. Setting individual stories within God’s story had
the power to shape and unsettle.

Part of a story’s effectiveness in both shaping and unsettling stems from the
complexity that a story allows. The king, the prophets, the people, the altar, the water,
the bull, the fire from heaven, the bloody slaughter at the conclusion – these elements
create tension or disconnect. This unresolved state becomes the place where the listener
enters for the purpose of working things out. JR resonated because this was his journey
and working out his place in God’s story vibrated with life. Effective storytellers
capitalize on this vibration. By creating either resonance or dissonance, the storyteller
draws the vibrating listener deeper into the story. As the listener vibrates, she is both
shaped and unsettled. As long as the story continues, the shaping and unsettling continue.

* * *

The best storytellers don’t master story but rather drink from the river of story and
courage others to drink.

–Annette Simons, The Story Factor

One of JR’s pastor buddies suggested that stories make room for baggage because
storytelling is always situational. When his buddy suggested that JR read a book about it,

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281 The most compelling reasons why stories have such power to engage us is the narrative form of
human experience itself. Human experience is structured in time and narrative. We comprehend our lives
not as disconnected actions or isolated events but in terms of narrative. We conceive of our lives as web or
stories – a historical novel or mini-series in the making. We think in stories in order to weave together into
a coherent whole the unending succession of people, dates, and facts that fill our lives. We tell stories in
order to live. Anderson and Foley, 5.

282 The worldview of a Christian, if it is to remain a Christian worldview, needs to be set within
God’s story. Wilkens, 22.

283 Good stories are always slightly precarious places to go because even those that are deeply
familiar retain the ability to surprise, challenge, and disconnect. McEntyre, 116.
he was intrigued enough to check it out on one of his trips to the library. JR latched on to the author’s description of the cable of meaning. A cable has an outer covering and an inner mesh protecting three inner strands. This cable represents the path to meaning. The outer layer is the story of community, the inner mesh is common imagination, and these protect three intertwined aspects of faith: spiritual practice, spiritual artifacts, and spiritual values. As long as the community has a common story and the ability to express that story through a shared imagination that story has meaning.

Storytellers understand the cable of meaning. Successful storytellers wrap stories in a sleeve of universal human experience, then cover it with a mesh of cultural artifacts so that it resonates with the listener’s “faith.” In this way, diverse experiences find common ground. The common humanity of teller and listener creates points of connection or cables of meaning.

Filmmakers create cables of meaning in their stories. A movie can take a viewer to 18th Century England, first century Rome, Narnia, or to a galaxy far, far away and still resonate with that viewer. Filmmakers tell stories that bridge vast historical and cultural gaps to convey meaning to diverse audiences. The story stretches, unsettles and comforts because it does, in fact, convey meaning. Novelists and poets possess the same ability.

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285 Ibid, 33-34.

286 Ibid, 36-37. Tickle’s three inner cables are named spirituality, corporeality and morality.

287 Although our experiences may be very diverse, we recognize common experiences that bind us to other human beings as well. Brownson, 29. See also Figure 1, page 42.
JR remembered the poetry of Mr. Dennis and how that crazy old man connected with a bunch of teenagers. Mr. Dennis discovered a cable of meaning.\textsuperscript{288}

Through the dark and stormy night  
Faith beholds a feeble light  
Up the blackness streaking;  
Knowing God’s own time is best,  
In a patient hope I rest  
For the full day breaking!\textsuperscript{289}

If conventional did not work, Mr. Dennis turned to unorthodox.

“Every Dog’s Story”  
I have a bed, my very own.  
It’s just my size.  
And sometimes I like to sleep alone  
with dreams inside my eyes.

But sometimes dreams are dark and wild and creepy  
and I wake and am afraid, though I don’t know why.  
But I’m no longer sleepy  
and too slowly the hours go by.

So I climb on the bed where the light of the moon  
is shining on your face  
and I know it will be morning soon.  
Everybody needs a safe place.\textsuperscript{290}

These connections, even if quirky, connected JR to a bigger story. When finding the way into that bigger story, JR suspected that it was easy to underestimate the power of words that work like a bomb waiting to explode.\textsuperscript{291} The words of Mr. Dennis exploded in JR to create a lover of poetry, fiction, and scripture.

\textsuperscript{288} The cable of meaning for Mr. Dennis and his typing class involved a common story = anxiety when threatened; a shared imagination = laugh at the absurd; spiritual practices = memorizing verses and stories; spiritual artifacts = books of stories and poetry; spiritual value = never give up hope.

\textsuperscript{289} John Greenleaf Whittier, “Barclay of Ury”


\textsuperscript{291} Printer’s ink has been running a race against gunpowder these many, many years. Ink is handicapped, in a way, because you can blow up a man with gunpowder in half a second, while it may take
JR grew up in a faith community where Christians were known as “people of the book” even if many in the community spent more time talking about the book than reading it. JR listener’s lived in a community that was dead last in biblical literacy. Right behind Las Vegas. Getting people to read was tough. Getting them to read the Bible tougher. And this was not changed by the fact that everyone was in the middle of this grand story. Or that God made promises about the impact of this story.292

If more people would just read, they would discover the ticking of the bomb about to go off.

The Lord sent Nathan to David. When he came to him, he said, “There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him.

“Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him.”

David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan, “As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die! He must pay for that lamb four times over because he did such a thing and had no pity.”

Then Nathan said to David, “You are the man!”293

Boom!

292 As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:10-11

293 2 Samuel 12:1-14
The Christian gospel is rooted in language. —Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book*

The power of story creates danger. Think Uncle Ben, Peter Parker, and Spider-Man: “With great power comes great responsibility.” JR wondered, “How does the power of story get misused?”

Stories told to sell seemed suspect. Vendors create a story, or a lie, for the express purpose of shaping behavior and channeling emotion to sell a candy bar or a politician. The story, designed to do something other than simply tell a story, is used to manipulate. Marketing in recent years has moved from selling a product to selling a brand to selling a story. JR called stories used in this way propaganda.

Another danger – narrative overload caused by so many stories, too little time. Too much clutter, too much noise. Without time to vet stories, stories lose meaning. Stories, as instruments of control, work well in an environment where there are so many stories that it becomes difficult to track them. The winner becomes the storyteller who shouts the loudest. Awash in tidbits and snippets that do not translate into full blown stories, individuals and communities become fragmented and disoriented. The result

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294 The systematic looting of language can be recognized by the tendency of its users to forgo its nuanced, complex, mid-wifery properties for menace and subjugation. Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge. Toni Morison, *What Matters at the Margins: Selected Nonfiction*. (Jackson, MS: University Press of Jackson Mississippi, 2008) 201.

295 Salmon, 10.

296 Ibid., 13.

297 Fake news?
disconnects stories from reality so that people stop trusting stories. Once overload sets in, it becomes increasingly difficult to discover meaning, so people give up. With so many stories, and every story accessible, and all stories given equal weight, people experience a dismantling of meaning.298

“Storyhacking” was one path JR discovered that leads to greater responsibility. People create and tell stories to make meaning and establish order in a chaotic world. To connect through storytelling, the teller must consider “the vast amount of stories people have already concocted and cemented in their heads.”299 “‘Storyhacking’ recognizes pre-existing stories and the need to enter an existing story before a new story can be formed. ‘Storyhacking’ creates a bridge between stories. ‘Done wrong, ‘storyhacking’ not only fails to penetrate the existing story, it strengthens its force field and bolsters its guardrails. Done right, ‘storyhacking’ doesn’t just inspire or entertain, it creates new paradigms and establishes tangible hope.”300

“Storyhacking” invited JR to pay attention so that, when telling a new story, he is also sensitive to revising existing stories. To do this well, JR realized that he must listen responsibly to the stories being told around him and then tell winsome stories that bridge the gaps between people and their stories. JR applied this learning to the telling of the gospel story and found hope for laying a cable of meaning focused on a common text and


299 Ibid.

300 Ibid.
common human experiences.\textsuperscript{301} Read the same text, explore the same story, and then talk about it.\textsuperscript{302} With great power comes great responsibility.

\textsuperscript{301} First, all biblical interpreters are working with the same text. Brownson, 28.

\textsuperscript{302} Ibid., 29.
Chapter 6: 
Discovery: Story-shaped Preaching.

Jesus was a carpenter, and he worked with a saw and a hammer.
– Johnny Cash, “Jesus was a Carpenter”

I met Jerry in 2001 when he and Mary moved to town. My first impression, “Jerry is a man with a very sweet soul.” And everything I learned about Jerry since then confirmed my impression.

When somebody needed a handyman or a craftsman, Jerry stepped up and offered to help. And when Jerry offered a helping hand he did not do the job half way – his work was careful and exact – nothing but the best. Jerry never cut corners. I watched Jerry work on projects around the church. Whether it was remodeling this stage or building our coffee carts – he was not satisfied until it was exactly right. The word that comes to my mind is “master craftsman.”

And though Jerry did excellent work he never thought it was quite good enough and he never sought attention or recognition for it. I even had the thought that Jerry would not be too happy with my talking about it even now. It takes a special kind of soul to do excellent work and then remain humble or even anonymous.

I also watched with amazement how well Jerry cared for Mary. As her health declined, he did whatever it took to walk with her. He hurt when she hurt. He rejoiced when she rejoiced. Jerry loved Mary so well. And how he grieved when she was gone. It broke his heart.

303 JR’s funeral sermon for Jerry Smith.
I learned something new about Jerry this week – he was a Johnny Cash fan, and his favorite song was “Ring of Fire.”

Love is a burning thing
And it makes a fiery ring
Bound by wild desire
I fell into a ring of fire

I fell into a burning ring of fire
I went down, down, down and the flames went higher

The taste of love is sweet
When hearts like ours meet
I fell into a burning ring of fire

Jerry loved like that, and it takes a special soul to love like that.

Over the years I discovered that Jerry loved his family. He cherished the time he had with you, and he was very grateful. Whether working on a project like rebuilding a tractor or spending time playing games and laughing, Jerry loved his family and his family time. The most delightful discovery this week came when I watched a video of Jerry sucking helium out of a balloon and then cracking everyone up with his Mickey Mouse voice. That was Jerry. It takes a special kind of soul to grow a family that loves each other well.

As I was thinking about the work involved in fine woodworking, or restoring an antique tractor or building a family or building an excellent life – the same words came to mind – master craftsman. And that made me think about Psalm 139.

You have searched me, Lord,
and you know me.
You know when I sit and when I rise;
you perceive my thoughts from afar.
You discern my going out and my lying down;
you are familiar with all my ways.
Before a word is on my tongue
you, Lord, know it completely.
You hem me in behind and before, 
and you lay your hand upon me. 
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me, 
too lofty for me to attain.  

As I read these words, I see God’s hands holding us as a master craftsman. A master carpenter pays attention to the details of color and density and grain, so God pays attention to our lives. The carpenter knows the hardness and strength and durability of a particular wood. God knows the character and the quality of our lives. God’s skilled and loving hands hold us carefully in the way someone who knows all about us would hold us. God perceives our every thought; God understands our longing and our desires. God knows us, heart and soul.

Jerry knew God as a master craftsman. Jerry knew his life was in God’s hands - always and I believe that knowledge grows a sweet soul. This became particularly clear in Jerry’s last days. He trusted God’s hands to hold him always.

Where can I go from your Spirit? 
Where can I flee from your presence? 
If I go up to the heavens, you are there; 
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. 
If I rise on the wings of the dawn, 
if I settle on the far side of the sea, 
even there your hand will guide me, 
your right hand will hold me fast. 
If I say, “Surely the darkness will hide me 
and the light become night around me,” 
even the darkness will not be dark to you; 
the night will shine like the day, 
for darkness is as light to you.  

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304 Psalm 139:1-6. 
305 Psalm 139:7-12. 
Jerry faced some difficult days, and he did it with grace. I never heard him complain.

Maybe somebody did, but everyone I talk to said the same thing – Jerry was gracious.

Jerry was grateful. Jerry was satisfied. Jerry was appreciative. A sweet soul who seemed to know that God was always with him. On good days and bad. Wherever I go, whatever I do, God is with me. Where can I go to get away from God? Nowhere. And this is really good news if God is a master craftsman.

For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother’s womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
your works are wonderful,
I know that full well.
My frame was not hidden from you
when I was made in the secret place,
when I was woven together in the depths of the earth.
Your eyes saw my unformed body;
all the days ordained for me were written in your book
before one of them came to be.
How precious to me are your thoughts, God!
How vast is the sum of them!306

Johnny Cash has another song entitled “Jesus Was a Carpenter.” Jerry loved this song too. One of the verses in the song declared:

Jesus was a carpenter
and he worked with saw and hammer.
And his hands could join a table
True enough to stand forever.

God, the master carpenter, created our inmost being, knitting us together in the womb so that we are fearfully and wonderfully made to last forever. God, the master craftsman, did a good job in crafting Jerry. The evidence was a sweet soul – a soul lovingly created and crafted.

306 Psalm 139:13-17.
God is building a house for those who believe, and that house is described by Jesus in John 14 as “My father’s house, a house that has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.” Can you imagine the many rooms in the Father’s house? And the careful preparations to get those rooms prepared and ready – just right? And if God prepares a place for us – then he will come someday and take us to be with him.

And we believe in the promise that anyone can come to this place through faith in Jesus because Jesus did every good work necessary to prepare the way. Jesus took every step, with no shortcuts, so that all who believe might have forgiveness and eternal life.

And Jerry – as sweet as his soul might have been – was not perfect. He would be the first to tell us. Jerry believed in Jesus, and so he was ready to see the home prepared for him. The day before Jerry passed away I visited him, and I shared some scripture and prayed, and then I said something like “You are in the hands of Jesus.”

And when I stopped talking Jerry said, “I trust you.” And at first I thought – wasn’t that sweet – he trusts me – he trusts the words I just shared with him, that he is in Jesus’ hands. That is great. But after I left I started to wonder if Jerry was having a little chat with Jesus at that moment – telling Jesus, “I trust you.” It would not surprise me one bit because he was a man with a very sweet soul, who trusted Jesus and knew he was in the hands of God the master craftsman.

Oh lead me gently home father
Lead me gently home
When life’s toils are ended
And parting days have come
Sin no more will tempt me

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There from thee I'll roam
If you'll only lead me father
Lead me gently home
Oh lead me gently home father
Lead me gently home father
If I fall upon the wayside
Lead me gently home
Lead me gently home father
Lead me gently home
In life's darkest hours father
When my troubles come
Keep my feet from wandering
There from thee I'll roam
Lest I fall upon the wayside
Lead me gently home. 308

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Only trouble is interesting. Hell is story-friendly.
– Charles Baxter, quoted in The Storytelling Animal

The kitchen crew preparing the funeral luncheon joked around with JR, “Too bad we don’t get to hear such nice things unless we are dead.” Emma wanted to hear her eulogy before she dies so she can offer edits.

It was during a funeral that JR first experimented with the shape of his sermons. A three point sermon seemed too stiff for such an occasion. Grieving family and friends are not really looking for a verse by verse exposition. But they do listen. Funerals “storyhack.” People want to hear about life and death at a funeral, and so JR tinkered with the shape his sermons. He tried to tell the story of the gospel and the story of the

308 Johnny Cash, “Lead me Gently”.

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deceased as one story, so those gathered at the funeral could see how the life of their loved one fell in the middle of a bigger story. Story-shaped preaching.309

As JR practiced telling stories that connected individual stories to God’s story, he learned to pay attention.310 He looked for clues in the life of the person. He explored props from the life of the person. He listened to the stories the family tells. He pulled ideas from common community stories. A sermon always emerged that people want to hear and these sermons touched people deeply.

Of course, people do like to hear stories about themselves, and a funeral, one would think, is a perfect place to tell these stories. JR faced the challenge of keeping the individual story firmly located in the bigger story so that it did not become self-absorbed. Story-shaped sermons certainly have the possibility of becoming all about us. JR countered this tendency by starting with God’s story rather than our story.311 Starting

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309 Defining story-shaped preaching might be even more difficult than defining biblical preaching. Joel B. Green in the essay “The (Re-) Turn to Narrative” offers a workable definition. In a story-shaped sermon “the biblical narrative is present as an alternative framework within which to construct our lives, and so challenges those who would be Christian by calling for a creative transformation of the stories by which we make sense of our lives and the world. Our task is to make our lodging the Genesis-to-Revelation narrative so that our modes of interpretation are conformed to the biblical narrative, so that this story decisively shapes our lives.” Joel B. Green and Michael Pasquarello III, Eds. Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003), 17.

By “narrative” we do not refer primarily, as in recent homiletical theory, to a particular genre of sermon, to the sermon as a particular art form, or to a certain “style” of preaching. To use the categories borrowed by Lowry from Aristotle, we are not concerned with a sermon that moves from a problem to its resolution to the consequences of that resolution. We will be concerned in part with narrative as a genre in which much of the Bible is cast, but more so with narrative as a theological category, a way of making sense of grasping and making sense of the whole of history. Green and Pasquarello, 18.

310 It is absolutely crucial, therefore, to keep in constant touch with what is going on in your own life’s story and to pay close attention to what is going on in the stories of others’ lives. If God is present anywhere, it is in those stories that God is present. If God is not present in those stories, then they are scarcely worth telling. Fredrick Buechner, Secrets in the Dark, 33.

with God placed individuals in the middle of a grand narrative of which a personal story was simply part of a much larger whole.\(^{312}\)

Seeing the story first as God’s story changed the question JR asked about the sermon. Instead of asking how to make a text interesting, or helpful or relevant, he asked, “What is this story doing to change us as God’s people?”\(^{313}\) Starting with God, not self, opens our story to renovation.\(^{314}\) JR held the identity-shaping story of God and the day by day story of people in tension paying attention to both stories.\(^{315}\) Paying attention created resonance. Failing to notice created nothing.

JR once visited a church alive with energy. As he entered the building, he sensed a buzz as people vibrated with life. It enlivened JR with expectations. When the congregation gathered in the sanctuary, the buzz faded. The service proceeded smoothly, the singing unremarkable, the sermon adequate but the hour felt inert. The post-service coffee time immediately escalated back to life. JR finally had to ask someone, “What’s all the excitement about?”

The answer, “Last night we won the state basketball championship!” A couple of students from this small town congregation were stars of the basketball team, and nearly everyone present that morning attended the game the night before. And yet, no hint of

\(^{312}\) It is subtle but it is always – “My story is part of God’s story” not “God’s story is part of mine.”

\(^{313}\) Openness requires that we approach the biblical text with a willingness to be taught, challenged, confronted, humbled and converted. Green and Pasquarello, 70.

\(^{314}\) Ibid., 70.

\(^{315}\) Assembled by the risen Christ who we worship, we are being incorporated into God’s grand story of salvation climaxed in the dramatic events of resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit to create a new people called the church. Ibid., 74.
this anywhere in the service or the sermon. Apparently, one of the members noticing a disconnect said, “The sermon stunk but last night was great.” JR wondered how the story of God connected with the story of this community.

* * *

Just tell the story.

−Mark Brunett, **Survivor** producer

Preaching is often perceived as passive: the preacher stands before the audience to deliver a prepared monolog while the audience sits unmoved.316 This monolog is perceived as a useless, sacred cow.317 JR was not interested in preserving a sacred cow that was ineffective but saw the promise of preaching that was more biblical and more engaging.

David McCullough318 challenged the educational status quo by suggesting that the lecture was not dead. This in an environment of passive students with limited curiosity and “the attention span of a Buff-bellied Hummingbird and frames of reference narrower than a Popsicle stick.”319 McCullough fostered learning communities that enabled collective discovery with story-shaped lectures that drew students in with a bigger story. It worked because story-shaped lectures are not passive but fully engaging.320

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316 Monolog, some suggest, is not a biblical practice but a pagan, Greek practice that has become a sacred cow for Protestants – especially Reformed Protestants. Frank Viola and George Barna, *Pagan Christianity: Exploring the Roots of Our Church Practices* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2002), 87-97.

317 Frank Viola and George Barna, 89-97.

318 Infamous for delivering a graduation speech in which he reminded the graduates that they, in fact, were not that special.

319 McCullough, 87.

320 Give your story, then, a well-formed sympathetic protagonist. Give him or her something to want. Then bring on the interferences, the challenges, with a reward or a frustration to greet him or her at the end. Toss in some atmospheric detail and, especially at the beginning, a humanizing moment or two.
Reminding people of God’s story invited them into the story as an act of discovery. “We all have a story to tell – the one we are living. That’s the epic adventure… and we don’t tell the story by playing it safe and pretending the narrative is just about us. There is something bigger happening than you getting up, drinking coffee, taking out the garbage, and going to work.”\[321\] Story-shaped sermons helped people figure out that something bigger was happening. The story-shape created gaps that the listener engaged to find her into a dialogue.\[322\] The listener entered a conversation of discovery with God, the preacher and herself\[323\]

When JR told his preaching buddies about story-shaped preaching, their first reaction was always, “Great, we need better illustrations.”\[324\] Stories as illustrations only,

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\[322\] One of the things I so admire about your sermons is that you oftentimes let us make the connections. It’s a hard discipline to allow that to happen, but you know, just as any good teacher knows, that often you don’t want to say explicitly what you know because when you say it explicitly, it cannot be known by the learner in the way necessary for it to be known truthfully. I think that’s the reason why stories like that are so crucial for the sermon, because the story doesn’t say – it shows. Stanley Hauerwas to William Willimon in Preaching to Strangers, 53.

\[323\] Wilkens, 18.

\[324\] A few months ago I received a letter inviting me to speak to a group of ministers on the subject of storytelling. It was a good letter and posed a number of thoughtful questions such as: How do you use stories effectively in sermons? How do you use a story to put a point across? To what degree do you make the point of your story clear to your listeners instead of leaving them to work it out for themselves? And so on. They were all perfectly reasonable questions to which I think useful answers can be given, but the more I thought about them, the more I found that something about them gave me pause. The trouble was that they were all questions that had to do with how to tell a story instead of what stories to tell and to what end; and the kind of stories they rightly or wrongly suggested to me were stories as anecdotes, as attention-getters. As illustrations, stories to hang on sermons like lights on a Christmas tree. Maybe I did the letter writer an injustice, and that isn’t what he had in mind at all, but if so, all I can say is that that’s the kind of stories I have often heard in a church myself. And why not? They have their place. They can help make the medicine go down. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized that even if I believed I could give some helpful literary advice along those lines, that was not what basically interested me.
and these stories often rehashed and predictable, miss the point and potential of full blown story-shaped sermons. Story-shaped sermons took listeners on a story-journey whose outcome was uncertain. The shape of the sermon either started the listener on a journey or moved them along on a journey already in progress. The middle of the story let the listener roam around, exposed to the gap between what is and what could be. The end destination was often very different than the one originally expected. The story of the journey shaped the sermon.

Nancy Duarte called the story-shape of this journey a “Sparkline” which is a graphic representation of a story, speech, or sermon. “This line moves up or down between what is and what could be.” The “Sparkline” runs throughout an entire presentation and looking at the line reveals the story shape of the presentation. While every presentation has a unique “Sparkline,” many have a flat line with little movement between what is and what could be – these presentations have less story form. More movement, more story form.

And yet what the letter reminded me of is that yes, storytelling is itself immensely interesting and immensely important. Not just for preachers and preachers-to-be, but for Christians in general. Storytelling matters enormously because it is a story, of course, that stands at the heart of our faith and that more perhaps than any other form of discourse speaks to our hearts and illumines our own stories. Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, 83.

When you can state the theme of a story, when you can separate it from the story itself, then you can be sure the story is not a very good one. The meaning of a story has to be embedded in it, has to be made concrete in it. A story is a way to say something that can’t be said any other way, and it takes every word in the story to say what the meaning is. You tell a story because a statement would be inadequate. When somebody asks what a story is about, the only proper thing is to tell him to read the story. O’Conner, *Mystery and Manners*, 96.

The hero’s journey can have as many as 12 steps. Most sermons do not include that many.

Duarte, 46.
Applying this concept to his sermons, JR discovered flat “Sparklines.” Either the sermon starts with what is – the problem – and only lifts us to the solution at the very end, or the focus was on what could be with no connection to the reality of what is taking place in the real world. Both of these approaches failed to energize the listener, and so attentive speakers added illustrations to spice things up and re-engage attention, before moving along the same flat line. Illustrations acted like defibrillators to revive a flat-lined sermon.

The “Sparkline” became a tool that helped JR shape sermons that did not flat-line. The presentation form, or story-shape, was not a formula to spice it up but a strategy to engage the story.\(^{328}\) The contrast between what is and what could be was the story that energized the listener.\(^{329}\) This approach discouraged “stories” as add-ins or illustrations and insisted on “story” as the shape of the sermon. When stories were used, they reinforced the bigger story and produced engagement.\(^{330}\) JR followed a set of rules to guide his story-shaped preaching:

- Every listener will persist in a state of rest unless compelled to change.\(^{331}\)
- If the preacher knows the resonant frequency of his congregation and tunes to that, the listener will move.\(^{332}\)
- Use the big idea to filter out all frequencies other than the resonant frequency.\(^{333}\)
- Listener interest is directly proportional to the presenter’s preparation.\(^{334}\)

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\(^{328}\) Duarte, 46.

\(^{329}\) Ibid., 48.

\(^{330}\) Ibid., 53.

\(^{331}\) Ibid., 95.

\(^{332}\) Ibid., 73.

\(^{333}\) Ibid., 123.

\(^{334}\) Ibid. 191.
Jesus is God speaking.

—Eugene Peterson, *The Jesus Way*

Life is a grand narrative in which God enters his own story:

The world *is* God's self-exposing story. Indeed, the truth that God is telling his story through humanity is seen finally in humanity's own penchant for storytelling.

Still, this master artist is not content to tell his story merely through the created universe. He tells a story within the story too, by appointing people throughout the narrative to record his direct communication with his characters. So emerge the Scriptures, an even deeper revelation of the mind and heart of the divine author. The Scriptures reveal to us that in this particular drama, the characters are created for a loving relationship with their author.

This world, like all good stories, vibrates in tune to its author's heart. This fact remains, despite the catastrophe of the fall, for the fall itself is part of the story. The Scriptures flow with a verdurous life-force shunted from the veins of the Almighty. But even this is not enough. The author of life insists on entering his story, Hitchcock-like. Only his role is no cameo. When God enters the story, he takes up the central role, and suddenly it becomes apparent that his role was central all along. And since this is the archetype of all stories, it is fitting that in it, the author's bone, flesh, and blood are all, quite literally, laid bare. Anything else would be anticlimactic.

In the appearance of this author within his own story, all of the other minor roles foreshadow and echo his critical one. In that grand denouement which is the incarnation, all other lives suddenly take on a whole new meaning and importance. In addition to their contribution to the story within their own plot arches, each individual life becomes a living echo of the story's main character, Jesus Christ.335

When engaged in story-shaped preaching, the sermon is the story of incarnation. Every sermon embodies the story of God with us. Word made flesh.

“Good storytellers construct their narrative world carefully. World making is a central part of the storyteller’s enterprise.”

Story-shaped sermons were not merely about style, though style influences effectiveness. Story-shaped sermons were not entertainment, though they may be entertaining. Story-shaped sermons were not an escape from our world, though they might offer a momentary reprieve. Story-shaped sermons were not fiction, though some stories within the sermon may be manufactured. Story-shaped sermons lifted the listener from the mundane realities of life so that she or he began to see what could be and what should be.

Story-shaped sermons vibrated the listener's heart in resonance with God’s heart.

Driving across Illinois on I-80, JR had a perfect view of the approaching storm. Somewhere between Geneseo and Annawan, he ran into the black, and then it grew darker, and then JR hit a bolt of lightning. He heard the electricity pulsating through the roof of his car accompanied by a simultaneous clap of thunder. The fear of severe weather, building for miles, now bore the fruit of panic. Anxiety escalated when the radio announced a tornado warning at the mile marker JR just passed. What should he do? Should he stop or go? He drove on, arriving at his destination without getting sucked into a tornadic vortex. JR collapsed into bed a nervous wreck, listened to the sounds of the rumble strip on the side of the road makes the same sound as lightning pulsating through the roof of your car.


337 The story is about people who at one and the same time can be both believing and unbelieving, innocent and guilty, crusaders and crooks, full of hope and full of despair. In other words, it is a book about us. And it is also a book about God. Fredrick Buechner, “Bible” www.Fredrickbuechner.com/ (accessed June 6, 2014).

338 Storytellers invariably feel a deep connection with their stories. This is not surprising, given that every good story is a revelation of it author’s being. This world, like all good stories, vibrates in tune to its author’s heart. The world is God’s self-exposing story. Shanks.

339 Did you know that driving over the rumble strip on the side of the road makes the same sound as lightning pulsating through the roof of your car?
storm, and wondered what kind of damage he would find in the morning. At first light, a glance out the window revealed a beautiful morning. Thank God.

JR remembered another stormy day. His daughter had, on several occasions, attempted a premature entrance into the world. The threat of her early arrival created panic about the storm a preemie would bring. Each time labor started, various medical interventions persuaded her to wait. In the early morning hours of June 5, it was still much too soon, Lilly Dawn arrived. Perfect. Her name means beautiful morning. The storms past, a new day, another chapter in the story.

JR shared his deep gratitude for this beautiful morning on a pleasant spring day, years later, when Lilly’s social work cohort graduated. People offered words of congratulations and encouragement. JR told them about his drive through the storm a few days earlier, and about Lilly’s stormy beginning. Then he said, “Thanks for sailing into a world of storms to work with people cast out facing thunderous waves. People in some cases who have never enjoyed peaceful days in safe harbors. You will serve people in the middle of dark and scary nights, with fear and anxiety. You will serve them by telling stories of beautiful mornings, and in telling these stories, you will help people find a way to a new day. Thank God.” In private JR told Lilly the haiku version of her calling.

Through the slats
of the outhouse door
Everest! 

340 On the journey the storyteller is a guide who knows what lies around the bend and where the resting places are, and disclose those secrets judiciously, in due time. Other metaphors for story may be similarly useful. Stories are mirrors; they are windows; they are invitations that beckon us to enter into a new place that becomes curiously like home. Stories are safe spaces that offer refuge from confusion even as they involve us in their own complications, and even though they may threaten our dearly held ideas in ways that are quite real and consequential. McEntyre, 122.

341 Margaret Chula, “Everest”
When JR walked into Ron’s hospice room, his eyes were closed. JR greeted his wife Beth and then announced his presence to Ron by saying, “It’s Pastor JR, and I’m not going to preach to you today.” No response.

Beth said, “Why don’t you tell him a story. Ron always loves your stories.”

JR took her invitation to tell Ron about the passage he reflected on earlier that day. “Isaiah 9:6 talks about a child born for us and given to us—a child upon whose shoulders will rest a great responsibility. The phrase ‘rest on his shoulders’ caught my attention because I always thought that carrying the weight of the world requires some very broad shoulders. Not child shoulders. I like the idea of a child not just watching over us, but also carrying the weight of the world for us.”

Ron is a giant with oversized shoulders, and those shoulders have borne a heavy burden for more than a dozen years due to deteriorating health. Diabetes, heart surgery, a broken hip, a stroke, another broken hip—Ron bore this, plus all the normal burdens of life, on his massive shoulders. “Ron,” JR said, “you have carried it all long enough. Jesus can shoulder your burdens now. How does that sound?”

Ron’s eyes cracked open. For a moment.

The next day Ron’s speed lines disappeared forever.

After the funeral, Beth said, “He sure liked to listen to your stories and so do I.”

JR appreciated the support because sermons sometimes felt like long, hard deliveries of premature babies who arrive with more questions than answers. These

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342 So let the preacher remember this and preach to us not just as men and women of the world but as children, too, who are often much more simple-hearted than he supposes, and much hungrier for, and ready to believe in, and already in contact with, more magic and mystery than most of the time even we are entirely aware of ourselves. Buechner, Telling the Truth, 97.
preemies must arrive on schedule – every Sunday morning at 8:30 – ready or not. The
deadline looms. When JR stepped up to the pulpit, he stripped off his clothes, opened his
mouth, told a story, and hoped it made a difference.

Doc said that one cool cup of water a week was enough, but JR wondered if it was
ture. Stand in front of the congregation and bleed stories to people who may or may not
be in a coma. “Ho! All who are thirsty come to the waters and drink.”

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343 Isaiah 54:1

Sing, O barren one who did not bear.

– Isaiah 54:1

The Bible talks a lot about the begetting and the birthing of babies. “And unto Enoch was born Irad: and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech.”

People have babies. Sometimes even the barren conceive. And Begetting and birthing, and with unexpected frequency, twins. And finally, one who should not become pregnant does.

Luke started his gospel with the story of two births: John and Jesus. He is the only storyteller who brings up the birth of John. As in days of old, the barren one will conceive and “her child will be a central figure in the history of the fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham centuries before.” Telling Elizabeth’s story takes the listener back to the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachael, and Hannah. This is the set up for another birth story involving a virgin engaged to a man named Joseph. “Mary is a virgin, and therefore in a sense, she is as barren as possible. In the former cases, the barren women asked God to be able to conceive, and God responded. In this case, it is God who takes the initiative.”

Framing the story of the gospel with births is not just a clever tool or technique. The story of the babies is the gospel.

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344 Genesis 4:18


346 Ibid. 16-17.
In a way, all those earlier births were announcements and signs pointing to this particular birth. But this birth is even more extraordinary than that of Isaac and the rest. It is a virgin birth. In this context, it is interesting to note that at one end and the other of this list of barren women are two acts of conception that are more marvelous than those of Rachael, Rebekah, and Hannah. At the beginning of the chain there is Sara, an elderly woman whose womb was dry. At the end, there is Mary, a young virgin. 347

Sarah, Rebekah, Rachael, and Hannah for years did not need to worry about baby shoes, and then they give birth to children who fulfill God’s promises. The story of Jesus is understood best when it finds its place within this larger story of fulfilling God’s promise. In gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching the story of Jesus finds its place.

Gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching organizes sermons around the biblical story line. Organizing a sermon around the basic plotline of Scripture makes it story-shaped. Organizing the sermon around the story of Jesus makes it gospel-centered. Within this basic framework, JR picked up various biblical themes such as barrenness and birth to give shape to a story within the story. JR noticed three themes, in particular, that added richness to his understanding of the biblical story: Home/Exile; Covenant/Promise; Kingdom/Servant.

“Home is a place where life flourishes fully. The story of the human race, however, is one of exile and longing for homecoming.”348 This story raises the question, “How does a person find her way home?” The answer to this question is found in Jesus who made his home among people, who was betrayed and rejected, but who was resurrected and is now preparing a home for us. Jesus “takes our place and experiences

347 Gonzalez, 17.

348 Keller, Center Church, 41.
the exile” we deserve so that we can be brought home again. The story of the prodigal in Luke 15 is the classic story of finding the way home.

The covenant theme reminded JR that God makes promises to his people, and God keeps God’s promises throughout time and eternity. God promises to be God of the people, and the people promise to be God’s people. One of the key questions related to this theme is, “How can God be both faithful and true to his law and word and faithful and committed to us?” The story told in response to this question is the story of Jesus the obedient one who keeps the law perfectly. Even though perfect, Jesus takes the curse of the covenant that comes against disobedience so that we can enjoy the blessing that comes from the perfect righteousness of Jesus.

Praying, “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven,” acknowledges the Kingdom themes of the Bible. This theme highlights the need for a king to come and free people from slavery. In the history of God’s people, no leader successfully prevented “God’s people from falling into idolatry, servitude, and exile.” Would any king be powerful enough to protect the people? Yes, Jesus was the king who brings the Kingdom, and he establishes it not by force but by surrender. The servant king lays down his life to establish the Kingdom. The Kingdom came near when Jesus walked the earth, and one day the king will fully establish the Kingdom.

349 Keller, Center Church, 42.

350 And of course, the people fail to be keep their promise, being fools and assholes, and so God figures out a way to keep both halves of the promise himself.

351 Keller, Center Church, 42.

352 Ibid., 43.
These themes guided JR while suggesting paths for application. The home/exile theme invited reflection on Sabbath rest; peace and justice; and living in community. Covenant suggested themes of guilt, shame, nakedness, faithfulness, God’s presence and sanctuary. Kingdom/servant themes opened opportunities to explore idolatry, freedom, and wisdom in living. To name a few. Or, in other words, we are not good enough, but we are made good enough in Jesus.

* * *

Permission to cover my nakedity.

—Corporal “Radar” O’Reilly, M*A*S*H

Pastor Sam once warned JR, “As the church grows you will get more specialists; which is just code for weirdoes.” This was true. When JR arrived at his first church, the sound tech was an elderly gentleman everyone called Red. That rare breed of sound technicians who also happened to be hearing impaired. He got the job because he could repair broken microphones. So the church had a cobbled together sound system run by a deaf guy. Red was merely one of many specialists.

It took JR months to discover that Red’s given name was Farley. He had a twin brother named Harley, and even though Farley was the oldest, everyone always referred to them as “Harley and Farley.” That angered Farley, so everyone called him Red because he showed his anger on his face. Red was an anomaly in a congregation of perpetually happy faces. Red was famous for offering this compliment after a sermon, “That wasn’t totally unbearable.” Which made JR wonder what he would say if he actually heard the sermon.

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353 Keller, Center Church, 42-43.
JR did not know if others write sermons with particular people in mind, but Red was often on his mind while working out a message. Christmas Eve was for Red. The title: “The Island of Misfit Toys.” The topic: Red. He did not show that year. Snowstorm. JR suspected God’s providential care.\textsuperscript{354} The Bible explains why JR remained a pastor on this island of specialists: “We loved you so much we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well because you became so dear to us.”\textsuperscript{355}

When Tish Harrison Warren described her congregation, she also described JR’s:

I go to a church full of older people who live pretty normal, middle-class lives in nice, middle-class houses. But I have really come to appreciate this community, to see their lifetimes of sturdy faithfulness to Jesus, their commitment to prayer, and the tangible, beautiful generosity that they show those around them in unnoticed, unimpressive, unmarketable, unrevolutionary ways.\textsuperscript{356}

Harrison also describes her people as “Average sinners and boring saints.” JR’s people are normal and so probably boring as well, except that they were notorious sinners. So, JR had job security with this flock of specialists who were never good enough.

These people were a mess, and JR felt like the maid, “No matter how many times you save the world, it always manages to get back in jeopardy again. Sometimes I just want it to stay saved! You know, for a little bit? I feel like the maid; I just cleaned up this mess! Can we keep it clean for... for ten minutes!”\textsuperscript{357}

\textsuperscript{354} JR later edited the sermon down to a newsletter article describing how we are all just like the misfit toys. It met with rave reviews. These specialists all seemed to like seeing themselves as misfits and getting a reminder that God loves misfits.

\textsuperscript{355} 1 Thessalonians 2:8.


\textsuperscript{357} Mr. Incredible in \textit{The Incredibles}.  

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Red stopped being a sound tech so he could be a worship leader. When he leads worship, he insists that we pray the Lord’s Prayer together. JR insisted that he use an updated version without the King James language. That pisses Red off. The congregation regularly prayed the Lord’s Prayer while the red-faced one leading the prayer oozed crabby. Once, before Red led the prayer, he offered some introductory comments. He recalled his harsh, German father teaching his children to pray and he remembered how much kinder and gentler his own father became while praying, “Our Father...” like someone flipped a switch. Red said that he longed to be softened like his father and that if anyone had the power to make that happen, it was his Heavenly Father or Jesus.

After the service Red made a beeline for JR, catching him before JR could duck into the handicapped bathroom. Red looked JR in the eye and announced, “You used the ‘s’ word again in your message today, I’ve told you, that is unacceptable.”

“The “S” word?”

“Yes,” he said, “Rhymes with fucks.”

So much for kinder and gentler.

Last year Red went to Menards to get a free screwdriver. He fell in the parking lot and broke his hip. When JR saw him at the hospital, he was hopped up on morphine, and it was the happiest he’s ever been. He was looking forward to the surgery; he thought everyone was doing a great job caring for him, and he was glad that the preacher had come to see him. JR asked if they could send him home with more of whatever they were giving him. Red laughed. His daughter said that it was turning into one very expensive screwdriver. Red laughed and promised to quit smoking.
A couple of days after surgery JR saw Red at the nursing home. He seemed like a kinder, gentler version of himself. JR wondered if he was still on drugs. He was not. JR asked, “How are you doing?”

Red smiled, “Not half bad, considering.” After getting the updates on all the particulars, JR found out that Red was expecting to be there about a month if everything went as it should. He seemed fine with that. In fact, Red seemed fine with everything. JR asked anyway, “Are you worried about anything?”

Red started to say he had no worries, but then he paused and said, “I am worried about my wife. Ruthie does not handle these kinds of things very well. Will you pray for her?”

JR said, “I will, anything else?”

Long pause, “You know my brother, Harley, I haven’t talked to him in twenty years. He won’t return my calls. He has cancer. Pray for him.”

JR said, “I will pray for Ruthie and Harley right now. And you too.” When he reached over to put his hand on Red’s shoulder, he said, “If it is okay, preacher, I’d like to hold your hand.” So they did, and JR prayed that God’s Kingdom would come into this room and that God’s will would be done, here just as it is in heaven. And he prayed for God’s will to be done for Ruthie, and Harley, and Farley. After the “Amen” JR saw tears rolling down Red’s face.

Red said, “Thanks.”

JR said, “My pleasure, I’ll check on you again in a couple days.”

Red said, “I’d like that. Now buzz off. I have a broken hip, and I’m tired.”
When JR returned a couple of days later, Red proudly showed off his “free” screwdriver and demonstrated his new grabber tool by pulling his walker over to the bed. At some point in the conversation, he admitted that he had no idea why he was so crabby and “Don’t hold your breath waiting for me to change.”

JR admitted that he always hoped for some change on the Island of Misfit Toys even if it is slow in coming. “Some people are really worried about the church; they see vultures circling, but I am much more hopeful than that,” JR added, “I think we have a great church.”

Red and Ruthie agreed.

* * *

All sad stories come untrue.

–Sam to Frodo, *The Lord of the Rings*

“A boring sermon is boring because it fails to bring the truth into the listeners’ daily life and world. It does not connect the hopes, narratives, fears, and errors of people in that particular time and place.” Gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching is not boring. It touches on questions about daily life in a particular time and place: questions people are asking. It answers these questions in language that is understandable and in a style that is engaging. Gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching does not under-adapt by focusing exclusively on challenging the failures in the world. And it does not over-adapt by only celebrating the world’s potential. It sees a world with “both human flourishing and human idolatry” and so gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching appreciates and

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358 Keller, *Center Church*, 89.
challenges. It shows people how the plotlines of the stories of their lives can only find happy endings in God’s bigger story of Jesus. In Jesus, God has not given up on the world.

This vision of gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching matches the story ending described in Revelation 21:5 where a loud voice from the throne says, “Behold, I am making all things new.” God says that one day God will set all things right. This is the gospel voice of the storyteller preacher who takes the gospel and its lofty vision of a good and beautiful world into the reality of everyday life.

JR discovered that all good stories start and end in the real world. Without this connection, something vital is lost. Preaching that disconnects the story of God’s renovation from the real world is a waste of time because it fails to announce that every sad story comes untrue. The world, filled with sadness, cursed by sin, groaning in anticipation, will be refurbished. All that is wrong will be set right. All that is broken will be fixed. God’s Kingdom arrives, the exiles come home, and God’s dream for humanity is fulfilled.

When JR read Luke 15, he wondered if the parable of the two sons is about twins. The passage never says how much older or younger the brothers are. He wondered if they shared the same birthday. If that was the case, these two brothers likely grew up with a relationship that was much closer than most. They were inseparable. They were Luke and Leah, Farley and Harley, BJ and JR.

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359 A contextualized gospel is marked by clarity and attractiveness, and yet it still challenges sinners’ self-sufficiency and calls them to repentance. Ibid., 87.

360 Ibid., 90.
But of course, even the closest twins, also find their own path. If necessary, they will exaggerate differences to make their way. Good twin, bad twin. The good twin plays by the rules, the bad twin is a rebel. And so it is no surprise when the rebel brother makes his request, “Give me my inheritance.” He could never be good enough anyway, and so not long after that he leaves, devastating his father, shattering his brotherly relationship. It is more than even a good, twin brother can accept. The family has been embarrassed for the last time. The older brother says, “Good riddance.”

But after a couple of days, the older brother reconsiders. The bond is too strong. He loves his brother. He longs to refurbish his brotherly relationship. He loves his father. He wants to restore the relationship of his twin with their father. He packs his bags and begins a journey. He searches until he finds his brother. They return home arm in arm.

But of course, that is not how the story goes. The elder brother did not seek the younger. Instead, he complains bitterly when the younger returns and takes offense at the party thrown on his brother’s behalf. The story ends with the younger brother at the party with his father and the older brother outside the party without his father.

JR realized that the story is not simply about the younger brother, squandered wealth, and wild living. Both brothers use flawed strategies in their attempt to find their way. Both embark on a journey of self-salvation. The younger regains his standing as a son because it is, in fact, the father who is prodigal – recklessly extravagant – with his

361 Neither son loved the father for himself. They both were using the father for their own self-centered ends rather than loving, enjoying, and serving him for his own sake. This means that you can rebel against God and be alienated from him either by breaking his rules or by keeping all of them diligently. Jesus uses the younger and elder brothers to portray the two basic ways people try to find happiness and fulfillment: the way of moral conformity and the way of self-discovery. Each acts as a lens coloring how you see all of life, or as a paradigm shaping your understanding of everything. Each is a way of finding personal significance and worth, of addressing the ills of the world, and of determining right from wrong. Keller, Prodigal God, 29.
love. The same love is available to both brothers but, when the story ends, one has responded and one has not yet responded to this love.\textsuperscript{362}

Rebellious self-discovery and self-righteous moral conformity will not achieve the renovation the brothers need. They need a firstborn son who will come to the rescue. The true elder brother who will leave his home, go to a far country and pay the price to bring his sisters and brothers home. In Luke 15, the shepherd seeks the lost sheep, the woman seeks the lost coin, but nobody seeks the lost son.\textsuperscript{363} The gospel announces a true elder brother who spares no expense to find his siblings.

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God made man because God loves stories. –Elie Wiesel, \textit{The Gates of the Forest}

Emma never stopped talking about her cats. She had seven. Everyone who knew her knew all seven by name and ailment. Everyone did not know about Emma’s deep grief. Emma’s only daughter arrived three weeks before Emma’s 40\textsuperscript{th} birthday. Just before that moment when a woman surrenders to the fact that she will never give birth. Emma’s life orbited around Becky. A kitty. Dance lessons. Ice cream. A ball glove. Roller skates. A new bicycle. Whatever Becky wanted, Becky received. And yet, Becky

\textsuperscript{362} The younger son’s flight from the father was crashingly obvious. He left the father literally, physically, and morally. Though the older son stayed at home, he was actually more distant and alienated from the father than his brother, because he was blind to his true condition. He would have been horribly offended by the suggestion that he was rebelling against the father’s authority and love, but he was, deeply.

The elder brother is not losing the father’s love in spite of his goodness, but because of it. It is not his sins that create the barrier between him and his father, it’s the pride he has in his moral record; it’s not his wrongdoing but his righteousness that is keeping him from sharing in the feast of the father. Keller \textit{Prodigal God}, 44.

\textsuperscript{363} By putting a flawed elder brother in the story, Jesus is inviting us to imagine and yearn for a true one. And we have him. Keller, \textit{Prodigal God}, 84.
was not spoiled. She was hardworking, kind, and grateful. She did her chores with a smile, made time to chat with her friends – young and old, and never took Emma’s love for granted. Two peas in a pod, mother and daughter.

Becky grew to be a beautiful young girl and a wonderful athlete. Her athletic talents multiplied her poise and composure. Becky never missed an opportunity to throw the ball around. And Emma never missed a game. And so it seemed normal that, when a friendly game of softball followed the church picnic, Becky would play, and Emma would watch. Emma saw the thrown bat. Becky did not. It hit her in the left temple, and nobody at the game had any doubt about the seriousness of the blow. An ambulance arrived too late. Becky died before her sweet sixteenth birthday.

Emma recently turned 86. Becky has been gone for 30 years, and Emma still can’t talk about Becky without crying. So, she talks about her cats instead. Incessantly and always with grave concern for their well-being.

The kid who threw the bat was also a teenager. Tyler had just graduated from high school that June. Tyler was the son of Emma’s best friend, Sally. Becky’s funeral was Tyler’s last time in the church. He could not bear the thought of facing Emma. Emma and Sally sat together in church every week. And they have done this for 30 years. They share a deep grief, talk about cats, and never mention Becky or Tyler.

Sally is quick to defend Emma and her oddities. “She carries such a burden.” Sally never mentions her own burdens. She drives Emma to the vet, and then they go to the park and watch kids play ball. Sally articulates something that Emma cannot, “God is writing a story, and it is a good story, and it is not finished yet.”
The Kingdom of God is like a woman who took yeast and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.

—Jesus, Matthew 13:32

I love an underdog story – especially a sports underdog story. My top five sports underdog movies are:

- Rudy
- Miracle on Ice
- Hoosiers
- Rocky
- Remember the Titans

Favorite underdog quarterback Tom Brady. Brady was the 199th player selected in the 2000 NFL draft. 6th round. 6 quarterbacks picked ahead of Brady:

- Chad Pennington
- Giovanni Carmazzi
- Chris Redman
- Tee Martin
- Marc Bulger
- Spergon Wynn

Three of these never started a game in the NFL. Two never played in an NFL game.

Brady started as the lowly backup to Drew Bledsoe and got into his first game only because Bledsoe was knocked out with an injury. At this point in his career, Brady had thrown a total of three passes as a professional. Brady went on to lead the Patriots to the playoffs and into Super Bowl XXXIV against one of the best offensive teams ever. The St. Louis Rams were known as “The Greatest Show on Turf.” The Patriots, 14 point underdogs, pulled out a stunning victory with a last second field goal. Brady, the guy

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364 A gospel-centered, story-shaped sermon preached by JR.
drafted in the sixth round, has been to seven Super Bowls, winning five times in his 17 seasons. One of the best quarterbacks in NFL history and a great underdog story.

Underdog stories alert us to the unexpected, dramatic turnarounds.

The parables of Jesus make me think underdog. Parables tell about the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is God’s dream for humanity. God’s dream for a dramatic turnaround.

God’s dream for humanity is like a treasure buried in a field. When found, the finder sold everything and bought the field. God’s dream for humanity is like a merchant searching for a pearl of infinite value. When found, the finder leverages every asset to buy it. God’s dream for humanity is like a farmer planting a mustard seed in his field. Though it is the smallest of all seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden shrubs so that birds perch in its branches.

The thing that is small, imperceptible, becomes a big deal in fulfilling God’s dream for humanity. We are often attracted to big deals. We want to go where the action is. We want to be part of something important.

When we watch the election results, we might be tempted to think – this is a big deal – this is where the action is, God will use these movers and shakers to make things happen. Politicians are a big deal… People in the media, big deal… The wealthy… The famous… The successful… Big deals. Look for God’s Kingdom coming to the centers of power, in the spectacle, in the mainstream, in the spotlight. Right?

Or maybe, keep an eye on the underdog. The Kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.
The Sunday school definition of a parable: An earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus used common everyday situations to drive home a simple truth. Parables, I was told, aimed at common, everyday people who might have difficulty getting the point, so Jesus made the truth accessible. He put the truth on the bottom shelf so anyone could get it.

Now I’ve started to look at parables in a different way. If Jesus was trying to make it clear and simple – he failed. The usual reaction to the parables was befuddlement. Even the disciples had to pull Jesus aside later and ask, “What?” They needed Jesus to run it past them again so they could have another chance to figure it out. It seems more likely that Jesus was telling parables to disrupt. Jesus wanted us to see things in a new way. Look for the unexpected.

We are not used to seeing it. Maybe that is why parables of the Kingdom are strung together. The treasure does not make sense, what about the pearl? Not clear, what about the net? What about the seed? Seeing it yet? Try this, the Kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.

The Kingdom is this woman on the margins of society, on the edges, confined, limited to domestic work in the kitchen. We want to know where the Kingdom of God is. Where are the boundaries? Who is in? Who is out? Are we in or out? The Kingdom is like a woman with 3 measures of flour, 60 pounds, that is like a bushel of flour.

Any of you make bread? Ever mix up a bushel of flour. That is a lot of dough.
The Kingdom is like a woman – presumably a robust, healthy woman is going to kneed a bushel of flour into bread.\textsuperscript{365} Why is she mixing so much bread – we don’t know – she is just mixing it up. Something unexpected going on in the kitchen. And there is an unexpected word used to describe mixing – it is a word that actually means hiding. This woman is hiding a little yeast in a giant dough ball.

This is not the kind of yeast that comes from a packet. A few powdery grains mixed into the dough. This yeast is leftover dough that was rotten, slimy, and putrefied. Take a little of this leaven and mix it up in the dough to make a new batch of bread. The Kingdom of God is like a woman who takes some of this slimy, disgusting, putrefied yeast and hides it in this huge dough ball and makes enough bread to feed the whole neighborhood. God’s dream for humanity is like that.

Have you ever known the Kingdom of God to come in the wrong way? Through unexpected people? In an unexpected place, at an unexpected time? To be honest, I usually think of the Kingdom of God as us. We, good looking, upstanding, members of the church, we are God’s dream for humanity. And then Jesus comes along and blurs the lines by saying, “The Kingdom of God is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into about sixty pounds of flour until it worked all through the dough.”

God accomplishes God’s purposes in ways we never expect. God uses people in small, ordinary ways and then shows up when we do not expect it. Yeast hidden in a dough ball. Know any stories like that?

A baby, born in a barn, nailed to a cross, laid in a tomb, raised from the dead to fix all that is broken in the world. An underdog story.

\textsuperscript{365} JR was indebted to William Willimon and his sermon “A Little Yeast” for the images of the woman, the yeast, and the dough ball.
Red was my friend. Many of you gathered here might say the same thing.
Unless you are family, but even then you might say Red was your friend. He had a lot of
friends. If we only paid attention to Red’s exterior, we might expect that he had no
friends. That nobody would show up for his funeral.

The first time I met Red, he scared me. Pastors are required to meet all kinds of
people and be nice to them. When I looked Red in the face, I wasn’t sure which eye to
look at. I finally landed on the eye that was looking back at me. By then Red’s fist was
waving it in my direction. I had no idea what provoked that.

My son wasn’t too sure about Red either. The first time Ben walked past him, Red
said, “Hit me in the stomach.” Ben started to cry. Red said, “You need to toughen up,”
and made a fist, “When I was your age I did 100 sit-ups a day. Hit me in the stomach.”
Ben did, and Red cackled.

About ten years ago my wife, Mary, introduced me to a snow blower which had
the unfortunate characteristic of not starting when it was cold outside. After one cold,
snowy day, failing to get the thing to start, I took it to Red. And of course, he made me
feel like the dumbest guy on the planet while he paced in his garage. Cigarette hanging
from his lip while he complained about the work I just brought him.

And because he would not take my word on it, he grabbed the cord, pulled it
once, and that damn thing started. One pull. And from that day on he never let me forget

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366 A sermon for Red who was diagnosed with cancer on Friday and died nine days later in the
middle of JR’s Sunday sermon.
it. That’s what friends do. And from that day on, whenever I had a mower or a snow blower that needed work done, I sent Mary. Red liked her so much more anyway. She was his friend.

Over the years Red made friends working at the school, volunteering at booster club, racing cars, fixing lawnmowers, doing odd jobs. Red would help anyone, anytime, but there was always a price to pay. He came back.

One of my favorite stories was about the lengths he would go to get a job done to help a buddy. Race day, blown engine in the first race, Red trailered the car, took it home to the garage, replaced the engine, and got back in time to run in the last race. He warmed up the motor by leaving it run on the trailer on the way back to the track.

Red was miserable for months, “I’m sick and tired of feeling sick and tired.” But he kept at it. Last weekend he took a snow blower job. “I’ll get to it when I feel better.” He did not want to leave a friend hanging.

After Red helped you, he might show up at unexpected moments with something to adjust, or some comment to add, or just to be crabby. He popped in around the church from time to time, and when he left we all wondered, “Why exactly did he come?”

I got a big kick out of his phone manners. When he was done talking he hung up. No goodbye, thank-you or see you later – just click. I’d be left holding the phone, “I guess that is it.” I’m not telling you anything you don’t know. Each of you can tell stories about the odd things Red did – you were his friend too.

Some of you knew Red from his many years of attending sporting events. And not just his family’s events. He was such a fixture at softball games that they built him a
little perch behind the backstop so he could harass players, coaches, and umpires. He was an equal opportunity pest.

Some of you know him from the Beaver’s Booster Club. Last Friday he was presented with the Crystal Beaver. One of the coolest awards I’ve ever seen. “A lifetime achievement award,” the presenter said. “Not many people get this award.”

In classic Red style, he asked, “Do you have to die to get one?”

Red befriended all kinds of living creatures. Who hasn’t heard the story of his rescuing the baby squirrel? I loved the way he told that story. My favorite part: when he describes pushing the little head into the dish of milk until bubbles came up, and then, at the critical moment, he pulled the head out, and that squirrel started drinking.

I heard words come out of his mouth that the average preacher never hears. Cigarette on his lip, open gas can, and a stream of foul coming out. It was a wonder he never blew himself up.

I wonder, is gruffness the ticket to more friends. But of course it wasn’t his gruffness that attracted us, it was his heart. I don’t know if it was always this way, but the last few years it did not take much for the emotion to well up from his soft heart so that he couldn’t even talk.

I wondered if that soft heart is what made him a good friend. The Bible talks about a friend who sticks closer than a brother. Which makes me think about Jesus and the friends of Jesus. John 11 describes one of Jesus’ friends. “Now a man named Lazarus was sick. He was from Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha… So the sisters sent word to Jesus, “Lord, the one you love is sick.”

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367 John 11:1-5
Jesus’ friend was Lazarus. And his sisters Mary and Martha. Jesus loved them. And Lazarus became sick, and he died. This is how Jesus reacted to the loss of his friend: “When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come along with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and troubled. ‘Where have you laid him?’ he asked. ‘Come and see, Lord,’” they replied. Jesus wept. Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’ Jesus wept for his friends. The shortest verse in the Bible, but it tells us about the heart of Jesus. Because Jesus loved his friends, Jesus wept.

But Jesus did more than weep – Jesus realized that something needed to be done about sickness, and grief, and loss, and even death itself. Something needed to be done, and Jesus could do something about it.

“Jesus, once more deeply moved, came to the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across the entrance. ‘Take away the stone,’ he said.

‘But, Lord,’ said Martha, the sister of the dead man, ‘by this time there is a bad odor, for he has been there four days.’

Then Jesus said, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believe, you will see the glory of God?’

So they took away the stone. Then Jesus looked up and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.’

When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, ‘Take off the grave clothes and let him go.’

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368 John 11:33-36
369 John 11:38-44
Jesus raised his friend to life. But this wasn’t all that Jesus did. Jesus actually went to a cross and died and went to a tomb so that everyone could have life.

This is how he explained it to Mary and Martha. “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?’”

Jesus is the resurrection and the life, and this gives us hope on a day like today that the one who believes in Jesus will live, even though they die. That is good news. In Jesus, God gives life. In Jesus, God when our friend has died.

I found it interesting that Red, toward the end of his life, took a greater interest in family and friends and their relationship with God. I don’t know that he would say it this way, but he was wondering if the people he loved had a friendship with Jesus.

Red had some rough edges. We all have rough edges. We don’t do all the good that we want to do, and sometimes we do the bad we know that we should not do. We make messes. And sometimes we wonder what the people we that love will think of us. Will they be proud of us? Will they love us?

If we are blessed to live in a good family, we know that we are loved even when we mess up. If we have real friends, we know they accept us for who we are.

“A friend loves at all times.”

The friend who is closer is Jesus and if we are friends with Jesus – then we are loved and accepted just as we are.

The Bible says that every one of us has sinned, we have all fallen short, we’ve all messed up but while we were still sinners Jesus died for us. And if we believe in our

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370 Proverbs 17:17
hearts and confess faith in Jesus with our mouths we are saved. We are forgiven. In Jesus, there is no condemnation so that nothing can separate us from the love of God.

Red knew about God’s love, he had a friend in Jesus.

Red’s wife was telling me that she was out in the family room last week and she heard Red having a conversation but she only heard Red’s part of the conversation, and he kept agreeing. “Okay, yes, alright,” he said.

She wondered what this was about – she walked into the room and asked him what he was talking about. And he said, “I am having a talk with Jesus.” That’s what friends do – they talk. And whatever Jesus was saying, it was a good thing that Red agreed with Jesus.

The first time I sang the song “I am a friend of God, I am a friend of God, I am a friend of God, He calls me friend,” I thought it was weird – I’m not used to thinking about God as a friend. In Jesus, God is mindful of me, God hears me when I call, God is thinking about me, God loves me. God is my friend.

Red was my friend. And I am sad that he is gone. Even in this sadness, I have hope because Red was a friend of Jesus and more importantly, Jesus was a friend of Red’s. And that is good enough for me.
Epilogue
Resonance: Finding my voice

Oh shit.  

―Stephen King, *Different Seasons*

My wife stepped into the garage as I swept the floor and said, “I can’t be married to you anymore.” I did not think I would survive.

Mr. Optimistic, I could not remember facing a significant loss or obstacle. I lived forty years without a deep grief. Before this moment I would have said, “I live a charmed life. I am blessed.” My parents installed a positive outlook in all their children. Our father, in particular, saw the half empty glass as mostly full no matter the contrary evidence. He often encouraged, “Cheer up, things could be worse.” This optimism, a derivative of a deep faith in God, believed that God is in control, and so we could always expect the best. This worldview, summarized, fit nicely on a bumper sticker or T-shirt: “God is good. Life is good!” That was about to change.

The potential of divorce shook me to the core. I immediately began to despair. Holding only a thin hope for reconciliation, I knew in my gut that this moment was a much deeper crisis than anything I had ever faced. My worldview guaranteeing a good resolution tried to engage: I wanted reconciliation, I was sure God wanted it too, maybe all would be well. I could still hope. Barely.

The precipitating event leading to my wife’s confident declaration about the dissolution of our marriage was her discovery of porn on my computer. This discovery shattered the illusion of model husband and perfect marriage. Negative emotions erupted. In fact, I was told that the porn was just the straw that broke the back of a long
dissatisfaction with me as a husband. It became increasingly apparent that there would be no reconciliation. My marriage would not be fixed. Fifteen months from that day I would be divorced.

During the next season of my life, I was married to heartache and turmoil. The routine of grief almost destroyed me. A friend who often processed this pain with me usually remarked at some point with sarcasm, “Divorce is the gift that keeps on giving.” This comment prompted me to share the other half of my father’s encouragement, “Cheer up things could be worse, so I cheered up, and sure enough, things got worse.” I processed my grief.

- I grieved lost relationship. I loved being a husband and father; these relationships were important to me, and I valued them deeply. I experienced intense loneliness as I learned to live with the loss of these relationships.

- I grieved a tarnished reputation. I do not like to fail, and I do not like anyone to know when I fail. Divorce exposed me as a failure. The ideal pastor and his ideal family were broken. To process a brokenness involving my moral failure was hard grief work.

- I grieved the loss of control. I clearly cannot manage my life. I need help. I feared becoming the freak at the carnival side show from which people avert their gaze. A tragic tale discussed over coffee while somber heads wag in disgust and I can’t do a thing about it. I spent the many nights wandering through my neighborhood trying to figure out what to do.

- I grieved the loss of hope. I, Mr. Optimistic, who could always find the silver lining, had lost his way. I could see no good end to all this. I would lose my wife,
kids, home, career, dreams, and confidence. I hated myself. I fixated on the sad state of my life day and night. I thought and rethought mistakes. I lost sleep. I lost 50 pounds. I thought my life was not worth living. I disgusted myself. I evaluated my worth as a man, my role as a father, my call to ministry and decided I was not worthy.

- I grieved the loss of faith. In the middle of this great grief, I had wonderful support. People walked with me, prayed for me, and offered tidbits of God’s perspective. I don’t recall anyone sharing dumb-ass platitudes or unwanted advice. Even with this support, I struggled to hold on to my faith. I had expected God to intervene in some dramatic way to restore the brokenness. When that did not happen, I wrestled with confusion and anger.

This is my story.

In the darkest moments of my struggle, God blessed me with people who cared. I was loved, and one of the greatest blessings was a congregation that did not toss me out. The congregation offered me a path to restoration as their pastor. After a time of intense work with a counselor and an accountability team, I continued in my role as pastor. Their grace was a gift that covered a multitude of sins including the many days when they deserved a far better performance from their distracted pastor than they received. My gifts and my calling were affirmed by the congregation long before this issue was settled in my mind.

In many (most?) stories, pastors who experience moral failure and divorce are shown the door. The outcome of my story was very different, and I wondered why. This wondering started me thinking about the stories we tell as a congregation and how they
shape us. One of the stories we tell more often than any other is the parable of the prodigal son in Luke 15.\textsuperscript{371} We believe in a prodigal kind of grace – a lavish grace extended to all – and we believe in it because we believe this story. And I received the blessing of that grace first-hand.

Did a congregation learn to extend grace by listening to stories of grace? Is storytelling that powerful? These questions about the shaping power story nudged me toward deeper exploration of preaching, gospel, and storytelling. Somebody sent me a card during my darkest days that propelled me forward. The cover of this card had a simple quote from Martin Luther, “Everything that is done in the world is done by hope.” The words inside the card gave me hope.

* * *

The true alchemists do not change lead into gold, they change the world into words.

–William H. Glass, \textit{The Writer’s Almanac}

“Who has time to go back to school?” I don’t know how many times I said that. “I am too busy.” And yet, I am very curious about the formative power of preaching. I want to be a better preacher. Coached by Brene’ Brown to “Dare Greatly,”\textsuperscript{372} I jumped in. With full-blown uncertainty about my ability to succeed, I asked my questions about preaching, gospel and story. I explored my hunches. I launched an intervention designed around a collaborative exploration of God’s stories. I changed years of habits and patterns

\textsuperscript{371} My secretary has kept a file of every sermon I preached since I started at Cedar Hills. She catalogues them by text and topic. When she informed me of the update at year 20 she said she discovered something very interesting. She discovered one text that I had preached on every year. Luke 15.

\textsuperscript{372} Choosing to be curious is choosing to be vulnerable because it requires us to surrender to uncertainty. Brene’ Brown. \textit{Daring Greatly}, 52.
that have served me well in sermon writing and delivery. I ignored convention in
reporting my discoveries. I surrendered to uncertainty. This is my story.

I hoped to learn something about how gospel-centered, story-shaped sermons
shape those who tell and listen to them. My hunch was that telling gospel stories would
generate more evangelism\(^\text{373}\) so that the congregation would become fluent in gospel
storytelling to friends and neighbors outside the congregation. I expected that as the
congregation heard the stories of Jesus and practiced talking about them, that they would
be emboldened to tell others about Jesus. I did not see this happen, but I did sense
growth in winsomeness. Engaging, charming, sweet, pleasant – these words describe the
people who explored gospel-centered, story-shaped sermons with me.

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And there was a man named
Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector, and rich. And he sought to see who Jesus
was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature. So
he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was to
pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him,
“Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So
he made haste and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it,
they all murmured, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a
sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my
goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it
fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house since
he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the
lost.”\(^\text{374}\)

The Lenten journey explored the roads leading to the cross. Starting in the
wilderness, it followed Jesus through Galilee, to Jericho, to Bethany, to Jerusalem and
then to Golgotha. On Easter, the journey finished by walking with the disciples on the

\(^{373}\) What Scott McKnight in *King Jesus Gospel* calls gospelling.

\(^{374}\) Luke 19:1-10
Emmaus Road. The journey on the road with Jesus revealed people transformed by their encounter with Jesus.

As I dwelt in the Luke 19 text, I started to wonder what Zacchaeus saw from his treetop perch. To gain perspective, I stood on my desk which led to preaching the sermon from the top of a step ladder as a way to invite the congregation to enter the story in a new way. My only concern about this approach was that I would experience the story from a new angle while the congregation maintained their usual vantage point. I faced this concern by singing “Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Man” as an invitation to look at the story with a fresh perspective.

The contrast on the Jericho Road is the receptivity of Zacchaeus and the hard-heartedness of the religious leaders in the crowd. God is slow to anger and abounding in love. Zacchaeus recognized God’s love. The religious leaders missed God’s love. The story turned on verse 7: “And when they saw it they all murmured, ‘He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.’” Everyone is stunned by this move. Zacchaeus is stunned to experience God’s love. The religious leaders are stunned that God would love a sinner. The sinners are also stunned that Jesus would eat with a sinner. God is abounding in love.

Response to this sermon came as two comments, a text, and a note. The first commenter made a beeline toward me immediately after the conclusion of the service and said, “I never looked at that story that way before. When you climbed the ladder, I climbed it with you.” The second comment came during coffee time. She said, “As you stood atop the ladder and described the crowd following Jesus, I closed my eyes, and I could see the crowd in vivid detail. It was like I was there.” That afternoon I received
this text: “FYI my kids have been randomly singing the Zacchaeus song all day! So if normally distracted kids were paying attention, you could assume you got some sleepy adults to wake up too! Great idea and message.” A couple of days later this note arrived in my mailbox: “Great sermon yesterday, especially the part where Jonah complains because God is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in love. Wow, that hit home. The ladder was a nice touch too.”

While not every sermon connects in the same way and certainly not every sermon produces specific feedback, the response to this message is encouraging. I’ll take four verbalized comments for one sermon to the bank any week. While engaged in the practice of delivering gospel-centered, story-shaped sermons individuals regularly enter into the story, engage with the story personally and then find ways to talk about it. This practice holds hope for shaping disciples.

In the body of my paper, I resisted explanation for telling a story. If I were to attempt an explanation for the shaping power of the collaborative work done by our study group I would speculate about Holy Spirit empowered embodiment. In this process, the Holy Spirit used our group study, used my preaching gift, and used the congregation to put flesh and blood around the text. The group experience embodied the text as we shared what mattered to us in relation to the text we were reading.

A comment like, “Your whole self was in that sermon today,” initially caught me off guard because I think I am all in every week. After unpacking the comment, I concluded that this feedback is not just about me – it is also about the commenter who

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375 The spoken word is never an isolated event; it takes place where at least two or three are gathered together. It presupposes that which it also creates: community. Craddock, *As One with Authority*, 43.
heard the sermon in new ways because she was part of the collaboration. The listener felt “her” whole self in the sermon today. That is embodiment.\textsuperscript{376} The content and the delivery of the collaboratively crafted sermons increased the sense of the participants’ connection with the Word.\textsuperscript{377} Increasing this connectedness increased the shaping in several ways.

- **Openness to wondering.** The collaborative groups started each week with wondering. The start-up question was, “What are your first thoughts or questions about this passage?” Each person in the group took the opportunity to share their response before we explored any person’s wonderings more fully. This exercise challenged the groups. After asking the group to “wonder,” nobody said anything. After I had modeled the practice by sharing my wondering, the immediate response was to offer answers to my question. Wondering without answering was hard. As the groups practiced wondering the number of wonderings grew.

- **Acceptance of mystery.** Each of the study groups demonstrated a shift through the weeks of their study toward greater comfort with leaving questions hanging. Even though participants were encouraged to ask questions accompanied with the reminder that “we are not looking for answers now – we are just asking;” the most common response immediately following any question was to attempt an answer. As the weeks progressed, the group sat longer with questions and displayed a greater willingness to leave more questions unanswered. Some participants even

\textsuperscript{376} One area for further exploration will be the relationship between embodiment and gimmick. One person raised this question when commenting that the sermons in this series felt gimmicky.

\textsuperscript{377} One of the reasons why the ancients considered the disembodied words of written books to be lacking was the understanding that communication involved the whole body. Shiner, 127.
began to encourage this behavior by reminding the group “to sit with the question for a while.” One participant regularly learned to say, “We don’t need all the answers.” This behavior showed growing openness to the mystery, ambiguity, and uncertainty that comes with storytelling.

- Deepened humility. Another shift in the posture of the group was a move toward humility. As participants heard other questions, they recognized that they had “not thought of that.” As participants responded to stories told by other group members, it became clear that they discovered new angles on familiar passages. This learning created a posture of gratitude in the discovery. Rather than showing signs of being threatened, group members verbally acknowledged “good question” or “thanks for sharing” and followed up by amending a previous question or answer. These exchanges pointed toward deepened humility.

- Greater compassion. Related to the sense of humility was a spirit of compassion and empathy. Occasionally questions or stories revealed personal angst or concern and the group received these stories with care and compassion. Levels of disclosure grew as the group experienced a safe place to share. Rather than offering answers, the group expressed concern, demonstrated a willingness to sit in the mess of the stories, and invited more wondering about the situation.

- More stories. Telling stories led to telling more stories, Bible stories, and personal stories. The most common refrain was some version of, “that reminds me of…” which led to more storytelling. The growth in storytelling was true of the formal groups as well as informal feedback. A handful of unsolicited emails started by saying, “The story you told Sunday made me reflect on this story…”

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• Greater stake in the delivery of the sermon. The individuals who belonged to the study groups developed a stake in the impact of the sermons. This investment percolated into texts, emails, phone calls and conversations outside of the group; many of them with specific interest to my thoughts on how the message was received. The group tuned into the sermons with heightened expectation, and they monitored the congregation’s response with unexpected curiosity. The group wanted to help me understand the texts, they wanted to help me explain the text, and they wanted to see the congregation get into the text. This vested interest also created unexpected camaraderie among the participants of the group when we discovered our collective voice. Individuals celebrated those moments in which they heard the group voice emerge in a sermon. They celebrated the experience of an enhanced sense of partnership in preaching the Word. They celebrated signs within the congregation of love for the Word.

Openness, humility, and empathy translated to winsomeness. The group loved gathering, and others wanted in. One fruit of our gospel-centered, story-shaped collaboration was winsomeness. One of the fruits we did not see was more evangelism. Gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching did not seem to result in greater freedom or frequency of people talking to a friend about Jesus. If it did, we did not hear a single story about it.

* * *

God majors in communication. He means to get our attention.

—Darius L. Salter, Preaching as Art

One of my theories going into the collaborative intervention was about an individual’s ability to find their place in a story. I thought that if a good story was told, it
would shape an individual so that he or she would find her or his place in the story. I expected this experience to apply to everyone. While I saw that this happened generally, my biggest surprise was that it was not always the case. One study group was looking at Luke 15, and after reading the parable of the prodigal son, I asked, “Which character are you in this story?” All seven participants that night remained silent. After prodding, four of the seven were able to identify with a character, but three remained steadfast, “I don’t see myself as any of the characters.” Later in the session, it came out that two out of three could see themselves as the guests who came to the party to help the father celebrate the return of his son, but one hold out remained. She could not find her way into this story.

My sense is that those who can remain outside a story will always be a minority, but it does blow my theory that storytelling can be so compelling that it will always draw anyone in at any time. Clearly on this day, in this case, it did not work that way. It makes me curious about why this happens, which could be another exploration if one wanted to develop this project further.

It was no surprise that people in the collaborative study group and those in the congregation noticed changes in my preaching. In an attempt to embody stories I experimented with delivery, and these experiments drew attention and generated responses. People noticed and commented. The story about Jesus calling his disciples was delivered while wandering up and down the aisles. The story of the paralyzed man dropped through the roof was delivered while lying on a backboard. The story of Zacchaeus from up on a ladder. The story of the Last Supper sitting at a kitchen table. These changes attempted to embody some detail of the story, and they successfully generated attention, conversation, and stories. Other changes like eliminating sermon
notes, repeating a key phrase, speaking louder, or faster, or softer or slower helped 
preacher and listener get into the story. The review – both formally and informally 
indicated successful engagement if not some level of embodiment with each of these 
changes.

One question that surfaced during these changes: Is that a gimmick? There is 
room to explore this question in greater depth. When do these changes shift from 
embodiment to gimmicks? When does an attempt to embody a story shift from being 
helpful to being a distraction?

* * *

Jesus is not idle, nor has he developed laryngitis. —Richard Foster, Tweet

For the final week on the road with Jesus in the Lenten Journey, I decided to do a 
recap focused on the story of The Triumphal Entry in Mark 11. In our group study, 
someone suggested that Jesus’ arrival in Jerusalem signaled a defining moment in Mark’s 
story – what kind of king would Jesus be? I decided to go with this theme and later 
discovered that this message fell on Preschool Sunday. On this Sunday we welcome as 
many as 200 extra guests into our service to watch their preschoolers sing. These guests 
do not regularly attend, and many of them do not belong to any faith community. When 
factoring siblings into the equation, easily half of these guests are under the age of 10. It 
creates a challenging communication dynamic. The words chaos and bedlam come to 
mind.

My growth in rhetorical courage coupled with our new collaborative voice 
emboldened me. I decided to target this recap of Mark’s gospel to children. For my
introduction, I planned to tell the story of the three little pigs as an introduction to the story of King Jesus. The writing of the sermon came easy, but I soon felt uncertainty creep in. At Saturday night’s rehearsal, full-blown cowardice came over me. Even with significant tweaks and adjustments, I still had my doubts about this sermon.

Sunday morning adrenaline did nothing to ease my concerns. I delivered the message to the first service (a traditional service with older saints and only a handful of children), and I felt like the sermon bombed. My courage wavered. Looking for a prop to lean on, I tied myself to my notes. The sermon ended ten minutes early. As the congregation filed out I had my normal quota of polite “nice sermon pastor” but I knew this sermon needed help. I dismissed the idea of a full-scale rewrite but made one quick adjustment.

As I turned to re-enter the worship center for the next service, one of my study group participants intercepted me. She put her arm on my shoulder looked me in the eye and said, “That was the best sermon in this whole series. I just wanted you to know that my Sunday school class was all abuzz about it. Everyone thought it was wonderful. We were touched deeply; I thought you needed to hear that, and I just wanted to encourage you before you go back in there.”

I entered the worship center and saw it filled to capacity. Children vibrated with excitement. In the midst of the pre-service commotion I resolved to preach the same message, but this time, I decided not to take my notes into the pulpit. While I delivered the sermon, I sensed rapt attention, felt an intense connection and experienced emotional
King Jesus was exalted, God’s presence touched us, and the Spirit hovered over us. At that moment I experienced a more embodied voice. I’m grateful for the collaborative partners who helped develop this voice.

I told a colleague who knows our congregation well that our congregational story was the story of the prodigal from Luke 15. He said, “Of course it is.” I did not pick this story as our story – the congregation picked it and handed it over to me. They did not hand it over literally it was more a process of discovery by paying attention to the story of God at work in our midst.

Pastoral ministry involves surrendering control, trusting God and loving the people of God. Grace and listening are the heart of gospel-centered, story-shaped

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378 While much of the study of the Gospels through history has been concerned with an intellectual analysis of the texts as a basis of doctrine or ethical behavior, in the ancient Mediterranean world oral performance was generally oriented toward emotional impact. Shiner, 57.

379 At 11:16 that night I received this email: “Hi Kent, just had to write and tell you what we think about your Sunday Service today. Just when we think you have done it all, here you go again and blessed us all one more time. Our Great Granddaughter Hadley, who is a student at Noah’s Ark Pre-school, was sitting on her Dad’s lap mesmerized with you during your three little pigs sermon. She didn’t take her eyes off you once! We are so fortunate to have you doing what you do best. We think a lot of children (and adults) learned a lot about life from you and "our hair on our chinny chin chin" was excellent. Thank you, Mal and Lila.”

380 The day after I wrapped up my first draft of this paper a member of my congregation showed up outside my office. Kelly wanted me to hear her story. Kelly attends our worship service every week with her children and without her husband Andrew. The last time Andrew worshipped with us was when we baptized their daughter three years ago. Andrew was in the service Sunday because their daughter was singing with the preschool kids but Andrew left during the sermon due to a restless kid. He listened to the sermon over a loudspeaker in our gathering space. Kelly was disappointed that he did not stay in the worship center to listen.

That night Andrew asked, “How does he do that?”

Kelly did not understand. “Do what?”

“How does Pastor Kent say exactly what I need to hear when he preaches?” He replied as he described to Kelly exactly what he’d heard that morning.

And the Spirit hovered over the chaos.
preaching. God is good. God desires to make everything good and beautiful. Even through preachers who are not good enough. I’ve made enough mistakes in my ministry to ruin two congregations (at least.) But God is gracious. Part of my story was a painful, messy divorce. But that is not the whole story. I am blessed to carry out a calling I love with people I love. God bless these strong-willed, outspoken people who care deeply about the church and love their pastor. Gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching is about love.

After a recent sermon, a member of my congregation said, “When you preach I notice two things: you love the Word, and you love us.” I thanked him for the encouragement and asked him how he noticed. He said, “It’s obvious.”

Love like this does not happen by accident. Standing before the same people week after week is hard. It might be easier to bring your show to town for a few years and then bail before it gets messy. It worked better for me to stick around and grow with these people. Better, but not easier. Time spent pastoring, listening, preaching, storytelling, confessing, and apologizing has grown a beautiful community. I would have missed out if I bailed.

* * *

I have a voice.

—King George VI, *The King’s Speech*

After working hard to serve the church for many years, I’m still curious. How can I grow as an effective pastor/storyteller? After this project I see one path for growth being more collaborative sermon study. Several additional questions also surfaced.
1.) How does storytelling impact leadership? It seems that gospel-centered, story-shaped leadership also holds much potential for shaping disciples and could be explored more fully.

2.) How can we listen better to the popular stories told in culture? Our congregations live in the middle of a stream of stories that shape them. Exploring these stories could also be profitable.

3.) How do stories shape culture? I’m also growing more curious about how stories shape culture and could see more exploration in the culture-shaping power of gospel-centered, story-shaped messages.

   Staying in one place for a long time helps me relax. The mess is still there in the morning. I can work hard and then walk away knowing that I did what I could do today. Somebody once encouraged me to craft a personal mission statement. I wrote four words: “Love people. Speak truth.” Today I might add “Stay Curious.” Six words to encapsulate what I know about gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching and how I found my voice.
Appendix A
Qualitative Research

As a realtor might say, “Location, location, location,” a researcher might say, “Problem, problem, problem.” In *The Craft of Research*, the authors suggest that “research usually begins not with dreaming up a topic but with solving a problem that landed on you.” And of course, this problem creates enough trouble, or potential trouble, that it drives the researcher to “ask questions whose answers you hope will help you solve it.” This is as good a starting point as any for my project.

I preach every week in an average Midwest congregation, and I wonder if preaching works. In the face of what seem to be growing assumptions that preaching is a waste of time, I face a problem every week as a preacher: “Is anybody listening?” Stated more delicately, I wonder about the effectiveness of preaching and the possibilities of making it more effective.

In my setting, the problem developed into a question of improvement. The people in my congregation did not complain about preaching but seemed to arrive each week with eager anticipation. They responded positively both during and after sermons. They invited others to come listen. Sermons seemed to have a shaping effect. The church grew, and all could have continued as is with no apparent problem. But.

One characteristic of the congregation bothered me. People often seemed to lack engagement with the Word. People did not open their Bibles to read along, and they did not keep them open to follow along during sermons. So I began to wonder if sermons

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382 Ibid., 57.
could be more engaging and so I followed a typical pattern for research development. A practical problem motivated a question, which motivated a research problem, which sought a research answer, which hoped to solve a practical problem.\textsuperscript{383}

My research question: Will a collaborative approach to sermon preparation yield engagement in gospel-centered, story-shaped sermons at Cedar Hills Community Church? I investigated this research question with four different groups of individuals selected as representative samples of the congregation. These individuals participated in four different collaborative study groups. The individuals were given the sermon texts for a series of messages and agreed to read the passages in advance of each study group meeting. During the collaborative study intervention, the group convened on Tuesday two weeks before the preaching of the passage, read the passage together and discussed the passage together. Various tools were provided to keep individuals pointed toward the text and to assist in the discussion. (See Appendix B: Handbook)

The collaborative study group also served as a focus group to review each sermon after the preaching of the sermon. The format for the assessment was to ask open-ended questions that prompted story telling about engagement and impact of the previous week’s sermon. I served as the mediator of these groups by asking prompting questions and capturing notes and reflections. At the conclusion of each week’s study session, the group was encouraged to reread the passage again at home, continue reflection, and share additional thoughts at any time before the preaching of the sermon. A second method of assessment used during the period of intervention was to ask individuals within the whole congregation to complete sermon evaluation forms. The sermon evaluation forms were

\textsuperscript{383} Booth, 58.
discussed within the pastoral staff and with our board of elders to elicit further insights and stories about impact and engagement. A final method of assessment was the collection of informal feedback consisting of unsolicited individual conversations, emails, texts, and comments.

Participatory action research introduces an intervention to explore the potential for transformation.\textsuperscript{384} The following list describes the characteristics of this research that applied to my project:\textsuperscript{385}

1. The research process involved participants in learning skills of inquiry.
2. Participants worked together as a group, and the facilitator supported group cohesion and collective inquiry.
3. All aspects of the inquiry were understandable and meaningful to the participants.
4. The researcher acted as a facilitator and collaborator; participants were coequal.
5. The facilitator recognized and valued the participants’ perspectives and contributions.
6. Status and power differences between the inquiry facilitator and participants were minimized as much as possible.

Participatory action research is valued for its practical nature, but it does present a unique challenge. “Action research explicitly and purposefully becomes part of the change process… as a result, the distinction between research and actions become quite


\textsuperscript{385} Ibid., 58-59.
blurred, and the research methods tend to be less systematic, more informal and quite specific (to the setting).”386 The blurry-ness of this type of project created a challenge, at times, as it became difficult to differentiate between our participating in “the project” and our normal life together as a community.

The tools selected to conduct narrative research added to the blur. Data collection used focus group interviews designed to elicit stories. This narrative research methodology became a vehicle for understanding and explaining the lived experiences of the participants in the collaborative study group. “Narrative Research is a vital contributor”387 to action research whose focus is to explore how participants make sense out of life.388 Narrative research holds that we all have stories, and these stories are shaped by our lives and give shape to our lives.389 “Narrative analysis is a flexible and multi-adaptable tool because it is rooted in a basic ontological understanding of how people construct their lived experiences.”390 Story makes meaning. The challenge with this tool is that “the purpose of narrative is to give meaning to the world, not describe it scientifically.”391

This challenge then invites more telling and less explaining (as modeled throughout the paper). While this might be less than satisfying if we are looking for more

386 Sensing, 60.
387 Ibid., 158.
388 Ibid., 163
389 Ibid., 158.
390 Ibid., 167
391 Ibid., 158.
precise or systematic results, it is very consistent in its attempt to embody the methodology. Gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching is a narrative practice, and so I intentionally aimed at more telling and less explaining. Others have tried to explain the power of story.\textsuperscript{392}

1. Story provides us with possible human experiences.

2. Story enables us to experience life situations, feelings, emotions, and events that we would not normally experience.

3. Story allows us to broaden the horizons of our normal existential landscape by creating possible worlds.

4. Story tends to appeal and involve us in a personal way.

5. Story is an artistic device that lets us turn back to life as a lived experience.

6. Story evokes the quality of vividness in detailing unique and particular aspects of life that could be my life or your life.

7. Stories transcend the particularity of their plots and protagonists, etc., which makes them subject to thematic analysis and criticism.

I chose to explain less and model more believing that the model works, so the explaining is not necessary.

This choice also created some blurry-ness when exploring theological implications. This type of research invites the exploration of theological implications. Richard Osmer suggests four tasks of practical theology:\textsuperscript{393}

1. The descriptive-empirical task asks, “What is going on?”

\textsuperscript{392} Sensing, 162.

\textsuperscript{393} Richard Osmer, \textit{Practical Theology: An Introduction} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).
2. The interpretive task asks, “Why is it going on?”
3. The normative task asks, “What ought to be going on?”
4. The pragmatic task asks, “How might we respond?”

These four tasks offer an attractive outline for this project. In Osmer’s terms, one starts with priestly listening to see what, moves to sagely wisdom to understand why, engages prophetic discernment to suggest ought, and concludes with doing some kind of servant leadership as a response.

The nature of story and storytelling, however, resists such systematic structure in favor of narrative flow. The what, why, ought, and how is absorbed into the story so that each piece may not be immediately obvious. The blurring of these tasks is not a deal breaker. Osmer suggests that the practical theologian can begin with any of the four tasks and that they can be explored in any order. Osmer uses the concept of the hermeneutical circle (or, better still, the hermeneutical spiral) to clarify the relationship between the four tasks. Although the four tasks are distinct, they are also connected. The interpreter must constantly move between tasks, which leads to an interpretive spiral.\(^{394}\) This model fits with a narrative approach to research and reporting.

If forced to explain the flow I envisioned in my project, I started with the normative “ought” of gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching. Sermons ought to be delivered in this way. Then I moved to the empirical descriptive “What.” Two questions came from this move, “What is gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching?” and “What is the shaping impact of this kind of preaching?” The third move was the interpretative “why”: “Why does gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching shape us?” The final move

\(^{394}\) Osmer, 22.
led to the pragmatic “how” involving the intervention of collaborative study groups. How were the individuals in these groups shaped? How does the gospel-centered, story-shaped preaching for the imagination and practice of those who hear it? The core questions of my project were explored by sharing stories, which led to the story of how JR learned to preach gospel-centered, story-shaped sermons.
Appendix B
Handbook: The Stories We Tell

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Gospel
Beyond the Tiny Gospel, By John Frye

What if I said to you that the story of the movie *The Sound of Music* was about guitars? Would you disagree? What if I said the story of the movie *Ben Hur* is about chariot wheels? What if I said the story about the movie *Titanic* is about the North Atlantic Ocean? You would think I was a little (or maybe hugely) short-sighted about these magnificent films. Why reduce the story of the von Trapp family to the topic of guitars? Are there, in fact, guitars in *The Sound of Music*? Is not the scene with Captain Georg von Trapp (Christopher Plummer) entering the room with a guitar singing a major turning point in the story? What about those *Ben Hur* chariot wheels? Aren’t those very wheels the source of incredible tension in the (1959 film) chariot race scene? Where did the *Titanic* sink? I rest my case. But I know you’re not convinced. Why? Because each of “my” views is a horrible reduction of those tremendous, expansive stories.

How you feel about my reductions of great stories is, I think, how Jesus and Paul would react to the contemporary reductions of the New Testament Gospel. The gospel is very simple in the minds of most people. A friend reported to me recently the gospel is obvious; it’s the pathway to salvation. Really? Did early Christians and Christians through church history die for a plan of salvation? Here is what other friends suggested the gospel is: John 3:16. This mind you even though this singular verse is in, wait for it, the GOSPEL of John! Another said “forgiveness of sins.” Is that the gospel or a wonderful benefit of the gospel? One suggested “an eternal home in heaven.” Again, that is a popular expression of the gospel—going to heaven when you die. Oh, my. There is so much bad theology and reductionism in that view of the gospel. One person offered that the gospel is “God’s power to save.” I believe that idea is a reflection of Romans 1:16 but is that the gospel itself or the energy that the gospel has? What if Romans 1:1-5 is Paul’s succinct summary of the gospel and the rest of Romans unpacks its dimensions, implications, and benefits?

I’ve been reading Scot McKnight’s *The King Jesus Gospel* and N. T. Wright’s *Simply Good News*. As a pastor, I recall the radical exposé of the reduced Western gospel by Dallas Willard in his book *The Divine Conspiracy*. Dallas coined the phrase “the barcode gospel.” In this gospel, Willard contends, the only thing any Christian really needs from Jesus is “a little blood for their sins.” That’s it. Even more telling about the reduced gospel, as McKnight observes, many Christians cannot imagine why we need to know anything about Jesus as Israel’s Messiah. We all know “Christ” is simply Jesus’s last name. What’s “Messiah” got to do with the gospel?

According to Paul’s own definition (description) of the New Testament gospel in 1 Corinthians 15; the gospel is the Story of Jesus the Christ bringing to completion and expanding the Story of Israel. Tom Wright contends that the more Jewish the gospel is, the more universal its impact on the dark powers resisting new creation. Even more, YHWH, in the resurrected Jesus of Nazareth, now reigns a King over all other powers in the universe. This is the good news! “Our God reigns!” This news must now more than ever be announced. It is the only news that saves this fractured universe by producing new creation.
The grand story of the New Testament gospel in the USA, with its deep roots in the Old Testament, has been reduced, like making guitars the story of *The Sound of Music*.


**The King Jesus Gospel**

Four categories related to understanding the gospel:

- *The Story of Israel* – The gospel is NOT the story of Israel; it is IN the story of Israel. Without the story of Israel, there is no gospel.
- *The Story of Jesus* – Jesus’s story is the resolution of Israel’s story.
- *The Plan of Salvation*, (the themes of judgment, atoning sacrifice and the need for a personal response) – we can’t have a salvation plan without Israel’s story or Jesus’s story. Therefore, the Old Testament is crucial. With ONLY a salvation plan, ‘the story of the Bible disappears and so does the gospel!’ The Plan of Salvation is NOT the gospel.
- *The Method of Persuasion* – methods of persuasion change throughout history. The danger of a method-focus is we lose sight of the story of Israel and the story of Jesus.

Observations about Paul’s gospel:

- Paul preached this gospel to the Corinthians. ‘By it they are saved.’
- Paul didn’t invent it. He received it and passed it on.
- The message of 1 Cor. 15 is Christ died, was buried, was raised and appeared.
- It completes the Story of Israel ‘according to the Scriptures’. Paul’s gospel is rooted in the Scriptures. ‘The Story of Jesus is locked into one people, one history, and one Scripture.’
- Salvation is the result of the gospel story of Christ that completes the Story of Israel – salvation because of Christ dying ‘for our sins.’ Old Testament references to atonement.
- It’s about the whole life of Christ – it’s ‘more than the story of the cross.’ It’s birth to ascension to second coming. His burial sets up the resurrection. His appearances evoke bodily resurrection.
- It’s about a Person: Christ as King.
- End story: God the Father glorified.

**Jesus and the Gospel**

The Gospels are four accounts of one gospel. The gospel is to tell the Story of Jesus. The gospel accounts don’t tell us the Salvation Plan or the Methods of Persuasion, but the gospel accounts do have a ‘saving impact.’

The question is not: Did Jesus preach The Plan of Salvation / justification by faith / personal salvation? It’s: Did Jesus preach Himself as the completion of Israel’s Story?

Jesus is the gospel. Mary, Zechariah and John’s confessions lead to this. Jesus connects His message with Kingdom (Israel’s hope). Jesus believed God’s Kingdom was ‘breaking into history’ (Mark 1: 15): a new society, a new citizenship (the unexpected are citizens).
Jesus preaching Himself: ‘The good news is being proclaimed to the poor’ (Luke 7:22-23). ‘The Spirit has anointed me to preach good news’ (Isaiah 61).

Sharing the gospel (gospelling) today:

- Our gospelling should summon listeners to confess Jesus as Messiah and Lord. Unfortunately, it ‘seeks to persuade sinners to admit their sin and find Jesus as Saviour.’
- Acts gospelling was driven by the Story of Israel rather than a salvation or atonement story.
- Although God’s wrath is uncomfortable to hear, it is never far from New Testament gospelling.
- The ‘problem’ in the message is in Israel’s story rather than our own. The ‘problem’ is humanity’s failure at ruling as images of God. The resolution is God sending His Son to become King, thus showing once and for all Who should rule.
- The gospel, in proclaiming ‘Jesus is Lord of all,’ does conflict with Caesar, but the point of the gospel was not about being ‘intentionally subversive.’

Creating a Gospel Culture:

- We have to become People of the Story – read it and allow it to shape us.
- We have to become People of the Story-that-is-completed-in-Jesus. Read the gospels and connect to the Bible as a whole. Use the church calendar to tell the story.
- Jesus’s story continues in the story of the church. Know the story of Adam right up to the most recent convert today. Know the Creeds.
- Know the counter-stories that help frame the Story: individualism, consumerism, moral relativism, scientific naturalism …

Story

Storytelling in Three Acts

Act 1. Beginning: Unexpected
   - Repotting
     o Life is disrupted so that hero sees life differently, and so discovers a need.
     o Hero needs/wants something very badly but has trouble getting it: What needs to change?
   - Free Fall
     o Wilderness, Dark night of the soul, Slough of Despond
     o The shock that comes from repotting: Will life ever make sense again?

Act 2. Middle: Regrouping
   - Clarity
     o Wake up and see life differently
     o Slow unconscious awakening
     o Will I discover who I really am? What is my real purpose?
   - Reinvention
     o Set off in a new direction
     o Honeymoon: Have I found the real me?
   - The Worst of the Worst
     o Darkest before dawn.
     o Will the hero return to his old ways?

Act 3. End: New Normal
   - Letting Go
     o Ask for help
     o Forgiveness, humility, apology, repentance
   - Transubstantiation
     o Redemption and Transformation
     o Final Test and Resolution
     o Can I live into the new me?

Adapted from Bobette Buster Do Story: How to Tell Your Story so the World Listens.

The Contour of Communication

Presentations should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. Two clear turning points in a presentation’s structure guide the audience through the content and distinctively separate the beginning from the middle and the middle from the end. The first is the call to adventure—this should show the audience a gap between what is and what could be—jolting the audience from complacency. When effectively constructed—an imbalance is created—the audience will want your presentation to resolve this imbalance.

The second turning point is the call to action, which identifies what the audience needs to do, or how they need to change. This second transition point signifies that you’re coming to the presentation’s conclusion. Notice how the middle moves up and down as if
something new is happening continually. This back and forth structural motion pushes and pulls the audience to feel as if events are constantly unfolding.

An audience will stay engaged as you unwrap ideas and perspectives frequently.

Each presentation concludes with a vivid description of the new bliss that’s created when your audience adopts your proposed idea. But notice that the presentation form doesn’t stop at the end of the presentation. Presentations are meant to persuade, so there is also a subsequent action (or crossing the threshold) the audience is to do once they leave the presentation. They need to go from committing in thought to committing in action.

Viewing a presentation’s contour helps you clearly see the contrasts. The line moves between what is (the lower position) and what could be (the higher position) to show contrasts in content. Every presentation has a unique Sparkline. No two are alike because no two presentations are alike.

**Preaching**

**Narrative Preaching**

A sermon is not a doctrinal lecture. It is an *event-in-time*, a narrative art form more akin to a play or a novel in shape than to a book. Hence we are not engineering scientists; we are narrative artists by professional function…I propose that we begin by regarding the sermon as a homiletical plot, a narrative art form, a sacred story.” Eugene, Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*.

The Lowry Loop:

- **Oops!** (Upsetting the equilibrium): The preacher begins by getting the listener off balance by introducing a problem that is at the heart of the text without giving it away. Something is not the way it is supposed to be.
- **Ugh!** (Analyzing the discrepancy): Here the preacher allows the problem of the text to get worse before the resolution is revealed. The preacher probes the heart of the problem to draw the listener deeper into the dilemma of sin.
- **Aha!** (Disclosing the clue to resolution): Once the listeners see that all logical and reasonable human answers to the text’s dilemma are hopeless, then the gospel breaks in. The gospel arrives as a counterintuitive answer that creates a “Eureka!” moment.
- **Whee!** (Experiencing the Gospel): The experience flows right out of the Aha! (which is the brief moment of sudden realization that God gives the answer in Jesus,) The gospel is now proclaimed as an answer to the dilemma of the text.
- **Yeah!** (Anticipating the consequences): The original problem is now seen through the eyes of the gospel in a whole new light. The application is discovered as a response to the gospel.


**Gospel-centered Preaching**

Gospel-centered preaching proclaims the gospel in every sermon. The key to preaching the gospel every time is to preach Christ every time, and the key to that is to find how your particular text fits into the full canonical context and participates as a chapter in the great narrative arc of the Bible, which is how God saves us and renews the world through the salvation by free grace in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Every time you expound a Bible text, you are not finished unless you demonstrate how it shows us that we cannot save ourselves and only Jesus can. That means we must preach Christ from every text, which is the same as saying we must preach the gospel every time and not just settle for general inspiration or moralizing. Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communication in an Age of Skepticism*. (New York: Viking, 2015), 70, 48.
**Workshop**

**Introduction: Gospel-centered, Story-shaped Preaching**

This workshop is designed to guide congregations and pastors into reading and listening to stories and scripture. This reading and listening are best done in community and in a setting that allows space for a leisurely conversation. Participants will also be invited to tell their stories. The goal of this handbook is to nurture curiosity that helps participants imagine how God’s story enfolds their stories. Three guidelines will help guide this journey:

1. Read each text slowly and then reread them.
2. Pay attention to stories being shared. Listen carefully, resist giving answers, or solving problems. Ask follow-up questions and stay curious.
3. Celebrate honesty and complexity. By focusing on the text rather than the application, participants can relax and remain open to God’s work in their story. Follow this path wherever it leads.

Enjoy the journey.

**Session 1: Stories About Ourselves.**

**Hook: “Getting It Right”**

In grammar school I stuttered, felt the hot panic on my face when my turn to read crept up the row.

Even when I counted the paragraphs and memorized the passage, I’d trip on the first or second word, and then it would be over, the awful hesitation, the word clinging to the lining of my throat rising only too late to avoid the laughter around me. I was never the smartest kid in the room, but I had answers I knew were right yet was afraid to say them. Years later it all came out, flowing sentences I practiced over and over, Shakespeare or Frost, my own tall tales in low-lit barrooms, scribbled in black-bound journals, rehearsing, anticipating my turn, my time, a way of finally getting it right.
“Getting It Right” by Kevin Carey from Jesus Was a Homeboy. Cavan Kerry Press, 2016.

Discuss: Have you ever felt like you were not good enough? What did you do about this feeling?

Book: Mark 1:1-14

After reading Mark 1:1-14 twice, what are your first thoughts?

What is Mark’s story going to be about?

If you only look at chapter one, what can you predict about this story?

Based on Mark 1:1-14, finish this sentence: Jesus is ___.

Look: What’s your story?

Tell your story by completing these sentences: I am ____. I was ___.

Go deeper in your story by identifying a recurring theme. _____ is the story of my life.

How does your story fit into God’s story?

Took: Storytelling Tips.

✓ Don’t hide from quirks, explore them. We are all flawed. If you remove the flaws, you remove the interest.
✓ Emotion is contagious. Talk about how you feel.
✓ If you tell a good story, there is no need to tell the moral of the story.
✓ It is not just the events in the story that make it interesting, it is our reaction to the events.
✓ The more specific you are, the more relatable you are.
✓ Don’t let the listener get ahead of you. (The preferred reaction is “Oh no she didn’t” not “Well, of course she did.”)

Session 2: Stories About Calling.

Hook: “Turning on All the Lights”

My upbringing - by a Southern Methodist mother and a Midwestern Roman Catholic father - was a contentedly secular one. Although my parents did present me for baptism in the pre-Vatican II Catholic Church as an infant, that medieval event proved so traumatic for them that we did not attend church for the next seven years and neither of my younger sisters was baptized until she was an adult. My mother’s explanation is simple: “That priest took you out of my arms, going on and on about your sinfulness, my sinfulness, everybody’s sinfulness, and I thought, ‘This is all wrong.’ You were the best thing I had ever done in my life, and I could not wait to get you out of there.”

By the time I was seven, and there were five of us, my parents decided to give the church another try. We had moved twice by then and were all feeling the need to sit still among people who were more stable than we. After the Roman Catholics, the Methodists
were the next logical choice, and before long we had found a whole congregation of them - way out in the Ohio countryside, in a white frame church with a matching parsonage and apple trees in the yard. The pastor was a kind young man with no family of his own, who soon became a regular guest at our supper table. I grew to adore him. He was vital and funny and could catch an airborne fly with one hand. He listened to me when I talked and let me lead him on tours of my projects around the house. He seemed able, when he looked at me, to see a person and not only a child, and loved him for it.

One Sunday he asked me to sit up close to the pulpit. He wanted me to hear his sermon, he said, and as I listened to him talk about the beauty of God’s creation and our duty to be awed by it, all of a sudden I heard him telling the congregation about a little girl who kept tadpoles in a birdbath so that she could watch over them as they turned into frogs, and how her care for those creatures was part of God’s care for the whole world.

It was as if someone had turned on all the lights – not only to hear myself spoken of in church, but to hear that my life was part of God’s life, and that something as ordinary as a tadpole connected the two. My friend’s words changed everything for me. I could no longer see myself or the least detail of my life in the same way again. When the service was over that day I walked out of it into a God-enchanted world, where I could not wait to find further clues to heaven on earth. Every leaf, every ant, every shiny rock called out to me - begging to be watched, to be listened to, to be handled and examined. I became a detective of divinity, collecting evidence of God’s genius and admiring the tracks left for me to follow: locust shedding their hard bodies for soft - new, winged ones; prickly pods of milkweed spilling silky white hair; lightning spinning webs of cold fire in the sky, as intricate as the veins in my own wrist. My friend taught me to believe that these were all words in the language of God, hieroglyphs given to puzzle and delight me even if I never cracked the code.

I was a willing student until the day I lost my teacher. At first all I knew was that something was wrong. Threat hung in the air as it had on those dark afternoons in Kansas, only this time it was not the weather. “Civil rights” had come to Ohio, a phrase that made adults talk loudly and lose their tempers. They chose sides and defend them; they wanted my friend to choose sides too, and he did. The doors of the church were open, he said. He would stand there to make sure they remained open, he said, so that is where they hung him -in effigy- a grotesque stuffed figure that bore no resemblance to my friend, swaying in the heat as he packed and left town.

That was when I began to understand that God’s call was not only wonderful but also terrible, that the bright gleam I pursued through the woods and fields behind my house had another dimension I knew nothing about.


**Discussion: Can you think of someone who “turned on all the lights” for you? What happened?**

**Book: Matthew 4:12-25**

After reading Matthew 4:12-25 twice, what are your first thoughts?
What lights had to go on for the disciples to follow Jesus?

What role does the “ask” play in the receiving of a call?

Based on the call the disciples received, what can you predict about the way their story will unfold?

**Took: Following a Call.**

Watch Benjamin Zander’s TED talk entitled “The Transformative Power of Classical Music.”

What role does call play in Benjamin Zander’s story?

How does a call result in “shiny eyes?”

**Look: The Anatomy of a Call.**

Guideposts and practices that help individuals navigate their call. Which of these suggestions helps you? Challenges you? Comforts you?

**Routine.**

  Guidepost: Your vulnerability is your greatest strength.
  Practice: Make empathy a practice.

**Call.**

  Guidepost: Keep your heart open so that your inner pilot light will guide you.
  Practice: Ask yourself, “What would love do?”

**Reluctance.**

  Guidepost: When the pain of staying exceeds the fear of the unknown, leap.
  Practice: Indulge in radical acts of self-care so you can rest in the space between stories.

**Search.**

  Guidepost: Stay open to mystery.
  Practice: Question your thoughts.

**Discovery.**

  Guidepost: You are not alone on your journey.
  Practice: Be still and listen to others.
  Guidepost: Be open to magic.
  Practice: Check your motives.

**Return.**

  Guidepost: Gather with your soul community to expedite your journey.
  Practice: Heal the world from a place of abundance.


**Session 3: Stories about obedience.**

Hook: “Be Cool to the Pizza Dude.”
If I have one operating philosophy about life, it is this: “Be cool to the pizza delivery dude; it’s good luck.” Four principles guide the pizza dude philosophy.

Principle 1: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in humility and forgiveness. I let him cut me off in traffic, let him safely hit the exit ramp from the left lane, let him forget to use his blinker without extending any of my digits out the window or toward my horn because there should be one moment in my harried life when a car may encroach or cut off or pass, and I let it go. Sometimes when I have become so certain of my ownership of my lane, daring anyone to challenge me, the pizza dude speeds by in his rusted Chevette. His pizza light atop his car glowing like a beacon reminds me to check myself as I flow through the world. After all, the dude is delivering pizza to young and old, families and singletons, gays and straights, blacks and whites, and browns, rich and poor, and vegetarians and meat lovers alike. As he journeys, I give safe passage, practice restraint, show courtesy, and contain my anger.

Principle 2: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in empathy. Let’s face it: We’ve all taken jobs just to have a job because some money is better than none. I’ve held an assortment of these jobs and was grateful for the paycheck that meant I didn’t have to share my Cheerios with my cats. In the big pizza wheel of life, sometimes you’re the hot bubbly cheese, and sometimes you’re the burnt crust. It’s good to remember the fickle spinning of that wheel.

Principle 3: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in honor, and it reminds me to honor honest work. Let me tell you something about these dudes. They never took over a company and, as CEO, artificially inflated the value of the stock and cashed out their own shares, bringing the company to the brink of bankruptcy, resulting in twenty thousand people losing their jobs while the CEO builds a home the size of a luxury hotel. Rather, the dudes sleep the sleep of the just.

Principle 4: Coolness to the pizza delivery dude is a practice in equality. My measurement as a human being, my worth, is the pride I take in performing my job—any job—and the respect with which I treat others. I am the equal of the world not because of the car I drive, the size of the TV I own, the weight I can bench-press, or the calculus equations I can solve. I am the equal to all I meet because of the kindness in my heart. And it all starts here—with the pizza delivery dude.

Tip him well, friends and brethren, for that which you bestow freely and willingly will bring you all the happy luck that a grateful universe knows how to return.


Discussion: What rules do you make up to guide your life?

Book: Mark 10:17-31

After reading Mark 10:17-31 twice, share your first thoughts.

Why was the man sad?

What does Jesus expect when he talks about “keeping the law?”

What is the difference between law and gospel?
Look: Living a Law and Gospel life.

Where do you live? Discuss these checklists.

Law Checklist:
✓ I obey, therefore I am accepted.
✓ Motivation is based on fear and insecurity.
✓ I obey in order to get things from God.
✓ My identity and self-worth are based on how hard I work or how good I am.

Gospel checklist:
✓ I am accepted, therefore I obey.
✓ Motivation is based on grateful joy.
✓ I obey God to get God – to delight and resemble him.
✓ My identity and self-worth are centered on the One who died for his enemies, including me.

Checklists Adapted from Timothy Keller’s, Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-centered ministry in Your City, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012, 65.

Took: Simply good news.

What is the gospel of Christianity, the good news at the heart of Christian faith? According to Wright, the good news is that “the one true God has now taken charge of the world, in and through Jesus and his death and resurrection.”

“I think we have lost touch with a basic element of the Christian faith. The Christian faith, in its earliest forms, is presented as good news. … I am arguing that the idea of seeing the Christian faith as news that is good is itself, ironically, news to many people today.”

“Christianity is, simply, good news. It is the news that something has happened as a result of which the world is a different place. … To many people then, and to many today, this was and is either nonsense or offensive or both. One can debate the merits of a religion, moral system, or philosophy, but a news event is discussed in a different way. Either the event happened, or it didn’t; if it did happen, either it means what people say it means or it doesn’t.”

What is your reaction to Wright’s position on the gospel as "simply good news?"


Session 4: Stories about forgiveness.

Hook: “The Laughter of the Forgiven.”

Early in my ministry, I counseled a woman who, some twenty years before, had been unfaithful to her husband. For years that sin had haunted her. I was the first person she had ever told about it. After we had talked and prayed for a long time, I recommended she tell her husband. (That, by the way, isn’t always the advice I give. In this case, I knew the woman’s husband and knew that her revelation, after the initial shock, would probably strengthen their marriage.) It wasn’t easy for her, but she promised she would
tell him. “Pastor,” she said, “I trust you enough to do what you ask, but if my marriage falls apart as a result, I want you to know I’m going to blame you.” She didn’t smile when she said that, either.

That’s when I commenced to pray with a high degree of seriousness. (I pray best when I’m scared.) “Father,” I prayed, “if I gave her dumb advice, forgive me and clean up my mess.”

I saw her the next day, and she looked fifteen years younger. “What happened?” I asked. “When I told him,” she exclaimed, “replied that he had known about the incident for twenty years and was just waiting for me to tell him so he could tell me how much he loved me!” And then she started to laugh. “He forgave me twenty years ago, and I’ve been needlessly carrying all this guilt for all these years!” Perhaps you are like this woman who had been forgiven and didn’t know it.


**Discussion: Do you “keep score” when you mess up? When others mess up?**

**Book: Mark 2:1-10**

After reading Mark 2:1-12 twice, share your first thoughts about this story.

What does this story say about the paralyzed man?

What does this story say about Jesus?

What does this story say about forgiveness?

**Look: Forgiveness of sins and the Bible.**

Identify five additional Bible stories about forgiveness.

What common themes run through these stories?

In what ways does forgiveness go beyond and individual need?

What is the connection between Jesus and the forgiveness of sins?

**Took: Don’t regret regret.**

In 1990, Depp got engaged to Winona Ryder, and he had tattooed on his right shoulder "Winona forever." And then three years later — which in fairness, kind of is forever by Hollywood standards — they broke up, and Johnny went and got a little bit of repair work done. And now his shoulder says, "Wino forever."

So like Johnny Depp, and like 25 percent of Americans between the ages of 16 and 50, I have a tattoo. I first started thinking about getting it in my mid-20s, but I deliberately waited a really long time. Because we all know people who have gotten tattoos when they were 17 or 19 or 23 and regretted it by the time they were 30. That didn't happen to me. I got my tattoo when I was 29, and I regretted it instantly. And by "regretted it," I mean that I stepped outside of the tattoo place — this is just a couple miles from here down on the Lower East Side — and I had a massive emotional meltdown in broad daylight on the corner of East Broadway and Canal
Street. (Laughter) Which is a great place to do it because nobody cares. (Laughter) And then I went home that night, and I had an even larger emotional meltdown, which I'll say more about in a minute.

And this was all actually quite shocking to me, because prior to this moment, I had prided myself on having absolutely no regrets. I made a lot of mistakes and dumb decisions, of course. I do that hourly. But I had always felt like, look, you know, I made the best choice I could make given who I was then, given the information I had on hand. I learned a lesson from it. It somehow got me to where I am in life right now. And okay, I wouldn't change it. In other words, I had drunk our great cultural Kool-Aid about regret, which is that lamenting things that occurred in the past is an absolute waste of time, that we should always look forward and not backward, and that one of the noblest and best things we can do is strive to live a life free of regrets.

This idea is nicely captured by this quote: "Things without all remedy should be without regard; what's done is done." And it seems like kind of an admirable philosophy at first — something we might all agree to sign onto ... until I tell you who said it. Right, so this is Lady MacBeth basically telling her husband to stop being such a wuss for feeling bad about murdering people. And as it happens, Shakespeare was onto something here, as he generally was. Because the inability to experience regret is actually one of the diagnostic characteristics of sociopaths. It's also, by the way, a characteristic of certain kinds of brain damage. So people who have damage to their orbital frontal cortex seem to be unable to feel regret in the face of even obviously very poor decisions. So if, in fact, you want to live a life free of regret, there is an option open to you. It's called a lobotomy. But if you want to be fully functional and fully human and fully humane, I think you need to learn to live, not without regret, but with it.

Transcript of “Wrongologist” Kathryn Schultz’s TED Talk entitled “Don’t regret regret.”

How does forgiveness help you live with regret?

Session 5: Stories about faith.

Hook: “Lost and Found.”

As newlyweds, Deborah and I were just your basic Sunday-go-to-meeting Methodists. We parked ourselves in the pews most Sundays, and definitely every Easter and Christmas, since in those days it was still the widely held opinion that only hell-bound heathens-and possibly lawyers-skipped church on Easter and Christmas. We kept up that pattern until 1973 when some friends from a Bible church invited us to their home for a six-week “discussion group” about life.

As it turned out, we had actually been labeled “lost,” “nonbelieving,” and “unsaved,” possibly because we had no fish stickers on our cars. (Which reminds me of one friend who, though newly “born again,” retained the bad habit of flipping off other drivers while barreling down the road in her Suburban. Even with her newfound religion, she couldn’t control her middle finger, but according to her husband, the Holy Ghost prompted her to scrape the fish off her bumper until her finger got saved.)
Unsuspecting, my wife and I joined the discussion group at the Williamsburg-style home of Dan and Patt McCoy. Dan was an ex-TCU football player who was six-foot-five and 275 pounds, so when he invited us to his house, I was afraid not to say yes. That first Sunday night, we were surprised to find exactly forty people – twenty couples, we found out later, divided equally into “saved” and “saved nots.” Patt had set out an attractive buffet-brownies, lemon bars, coffee, iced tea – but strangely, no one so much as grazed. I’ve since deduced that it’s always a trap when you don’t get to eat until after you hear the talk.

We introduced ourselves around and listened for an hour while a fresh-scrubbed, close-cropped man named Kirby Coleman addressed the whole group on the burning questions of existence: Why are we here? What is our purpose? What happens when we die? Quite frankly, I thought Kirby looked too young to know any of the answers.

After the group talk, he tracked us down at the buffet table. “Are you a Christian?” he asked Deborah.

He may as well have asked her if she was a human being. “I was born a Christian,” she replied, insulted beyond belief.

“But are you saved?” he pressed. “Are you certain you’re going to heaven?”

Deborah put one hand on her hip and pointed the other one in Kirby’s face. “Well!” she said. “My daddy paved the parking lot at the Snyder Methodist Church, and that’s good enough for me!”

Deborah Hall had had just about enough of Mr. Kirby Coleman so much so that we went back to tussle with him again the next week. And the next. And the next. Each Sunday evening, the discussion funnel narrowed further, from general philosophizing about life to pointed evangelization. After five weeks, I had it figured out: If you hadn’t accepted Jesus by the sixth Sunday, you were probably going to hell on Monday. So, one the last night after we went home, I told Deborah I was going to pray the sinner’s prayer Kirby had told us about.

“I don’t see the point,” she said. “How could I have lived this long, been in church all my life, and still have to do that? It doesn’t make any sense. Besides, it just seems too easy.”

So I prayed without her, asking God to forgive my sins in the name of His Son, Jesus. Deborah, however, cross-examined the gospel like a prosecutor on a federal case. And it was eventually the lawyerly arguments in books by C.S. Lewis and Josh McDowell that convinced her Christianity could stand up to her intellectual rigor. Finally, she prayed the prayer, too.


Discuss: How would you describe “getting saved?” Do you think of yourself as “lost?”

Book: Luke 15:11-32

After reading Luke 15:11-32 twice, what are your first thoughts?
In what ways did the younger brother need saving?
In what ways did the older brother need saving?
Who is saved and who is not saved at the end of the story?

Look: The Prodigal God

Respond to the following quotes:

- Jesus does not divide the world into the moral “good guys” and the immoral “bad guys.” He shows us that everyone is dedicated to a project of self-salvation.
- Jesus uses the younger and the elder brothers to portray two basic ways people try to find happiness and fulfillment: the way of moral conformity and the way of self-discovery.
- It’s a shocking message: Careful obedience to God’s law may serve as a strategy for rebelling against God.
- By putting a flawed elder brother in the story, Jesus is inviting us to imagine and yearn and long for a true elder brother.”
- God’s love and forgiveness can pardon and restore any and every kind of sin or wrongdoing.


Took: God’s love

Memorize Luke 15:20 and reflect on the significance of these words in your life:

*So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

Session 6: Stories about gospel.

Hook: “The Whisper Test.”

Mary Ann was born with a cleft palate before the time when reparative surgery was easily available. She was also deaf in one ear. In school, her classmates teased her without mercy. She couldn’t blow up a balloon without holding her nose or drink from a water fountain successfully.

“Oh Mary Ann,” her classmates would say, “What happened to your lip?”

“I cut it on a piece of glass,” she would lie.

One of the worst experiences at school, she reported, was the day of the annual hearing test. The teacher would call each child to her desk, and the child would cover first one ear, and then the other. The teacher would whisper something to the child like “the sky is blue” or “you have new shoes.” This was “the whisper test.” If the teacher’s phrase was heard and repeated, the child passed the test. To avoid the humiliation of failure, Mary Ann would always cheat on the test, secretly cupping her hand over her one good ear so that she could still hear what the teacher said.
One year Mary Ann was in the class of Miss Leonard, one of the most beloved teachers in the school. Every student, including Mary Ann, wanted to be noticed by her, wanted to be her pet. Then came the day of the dreaded hearing test. When her turn came, Mary Ann was called to the teacher’s desk. As Mary Ann cupped her hand over her good ear, Miss Leonard leaned forward to whisper. “I waited for those words,” Mary Ann wrote, “which God must have put into her mouth, those seven words which changed my life.” Miss Leonard did not say, “The sky is blue” or “You have new shoes.” No, Miss Leonard carefully leaned over to get as close as possible and whispered, “I wish you were my little girl.”

Attributed to Mary Ann Bird

Discussion: How does the final sentence of this story act like the gospel?

Book: Luke 8:40-56

After Reading Luke 8:40-56 twice, what are your first thoughts?

Where is the gospel in this story?

In what ways is the gospel an experience as well as an announcement?

In what ways is the gospel about bringing the dead back to life?

Look: The Mystery Box

Watch J.J. Abrams TED talk entitled “The Mystery Box.”

How is the gospel like a mystery box?

Took: Preaching the Gospel

1. Preach Christ from every text.
   There are, in the end, only two ways to read the Bible: It is either about me or about Jesus. It is either advice to the listener or news from the Lord. It is either about what I must do or about what God has done. Jesus is the true temple, the true prophet, the true priest, the true king, the true sacrifice, the Lamb, the Light, the bread. The Bible is not about you—it is about him.

2. Preach grace, not moralism.

Finding Christ in every text means that we announce what Christ has done. When preaching moralism it is easy to rely on fear and pride, even if indirectly and unconsciously, and this leads to moralistic preaching which attempts to trick the heart instead of reorienting the heart. Grace reorients the heart. Grace sermons follow this outline:
   - Here is what the text says.
   - Here is how we must live in light of it.
   - But we simply cannot do it.
   - Ah—but there is One who did!
   - Now, through faith in him, you can begin to live this way.
3. Aim at the heart (not the emotions or even the mind).

We must not assume, for example, if our listeners are materialistic that they only need to be exhorted to give more. Though guilt may help with the day’s offering, it will not alter one’s life patterns. If people are materialistic and ungenerous, it means they have not truly understood how Jesus, though rich, became poor for them. They have not truly understood what it means to have all riches and treasures in Jesus Christ. It means their affections are causing them to cling to material riches as a source of security, hope, and beauty. Thus in preaching we must present Christ in the particular way that he replaces the hold of competing affections. This takes not just intellectual argument but the presentation of the beauty of Christ.

Adapted from Timothy Keller’s *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*

**Bonus Session: Stories about Preaching**

**Hook: “The King’s Speech.”**

In this grave hour, perhaps the most fateful in our history, I send to every household of my peoples, both at home and overseas, this message, spoken with the same depth of feeling for each one of you as if I were able to cross your threshold and speak to you myself.

For the second time in the lives of most of us, we are at war.

Over and over again, we have tried to find a peaceful way out of the differences between ourselves and those who are now our enemies; but it has been in vain.

We have been forced into a conflict, for we are called, with our allies, to meet the challenge of a principle which, if it were to prevail, would be fatal to any civilized order in the world.

It is a principle which permits a state, in the selfish pursuit of power, to disregard its treaties and its solemn pledges, which sanctions the use of force or threat of force against the sovereignty and independence of other states.

Such a principle, stripped of all disguise, is surely the mere primitive doctrine that might is right, and if this principle were established through the world, the freedom of our own country and of the whole British Commonwealth of nations would be in danger.

But far more than this, the peoples of the world would be kept in bondage of fear, and all hopes of settled peace and of the security, of justice and liberty, among nations, would be ended.

This is the ultimate issue which confronts us. For the sake of all that we ourselves hold dear, and of the world order and peace, it is unthinkable that we should refuse to meet the challenge.

It is to this high purpose that I now call my people at home, and my peoples across the seas, who will make our cause their own.
I ask them to stand calm and firm and united in this time of trial.

The task will be hard. There may be dark days ahead, and war can no longer be confined to the battlefield, but we can only do the right as we see the right, and reverently commit our cause to God. If one and all we keep resolutely faithful to it, ready for whatever service or sacrifice it may demand, then with God's help, we shall prevail.

May He bless and keep us all.

King George VI, “The King's Speech” September 3, 1939

Discussion: What is the difference between a sermon and a speech? How are they the same?


After reading John 4:14-30 twice, What are your first thoughts?

What was the sermon Jesus preached in Luke 4?

What was the reaction to the sermon Jesus preached?

Why do you think the people reacted as they did?

Look: Communication Tips

Which of these tips from George Orwell would you find most helpful in making a sermon easier to listen to?

- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- Never use a metaphor, simile, or another figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Took: In Praise of Big, Honking Guilt Trips.

There is not a single person who has come through the red doors of a church who is not hoping beyond hope for a salve to be applied to his bleeding wound. This hope is often buried below bravado, barely recognizable, but it beats in the heart of every human, because everybody hurts…

For anyone to have half a chance to walk out of those red church doors and into his actual life, he must know that he is forgiven, not just for what he’s done, but for who he is. It is the preacher’s job to let him know. She must talk about what has been done for him, rather than what he must do. It’s her most important job, the job that looms so much larger than all her other ministerial concerns. It is this message alone that makes her feet beautiful.

In other words, every sermon must be a huge, honking guilt trip. Um, what? I don’t mean the tired claptrap dished (often unwittingly) out by sermonizing guilt-invokers. Things
like, “You know, you are the only hands and feet that Jesus has in the world. You know, you are the only Bible some people will ever read.”… I’m not talking about those kinds of guilt trips.

The “guilt trip” that every sermon must be is the transfer of guilt, from the rightly condemned sin junkie onto the wrongly condemned Christ Jesus. The sermon must be a beast of burden, carrying the hearer’s red-handed guilt straight into the speared side of Christ on the cross, plunged into the fountain of water and blood, which bleaches away all evidence of our criminality.

Paul Walker, “A Splendid Failure” Mockingbird.com
Collaborative Study Tools

Sermon Study Guidelines

1. Pray. Ask God to speak through God’s Word.

2. Dwell in the Word. Read, read, read and pay attention. Read again.

3. Stay on the path of the Word. When tempted to add assumptions from outside the Word, resist. When tempted to subtract from the Word, resist. Commit to seeking nothing more or less than scripture so that we remain open to being formed by the Word.

4. Name our baggage. When we are aware of the baggage we import to the text, admit it. Be aware of how our baggage shapes the text. The text should shape our baggage not the other way around.

5. Follow the map of context. The pressure to be relevant moves us too quickly to applications. By understanding the text in context, we discover ways the original audience may have applied it, and this leads us to better applications.

6. Follow the signs. We handle the text better if we understand how it fits into the whole of a book. We understand story by paying attention to plot, character, setting, details, and gaps. We follow literary signs by looking at language, history, culture, genres, and themes.

7. Travel together. Work out the meaning in community. Live out the meaning in community. Talk it through. Together is better.

8. Make an announcement. Resist the urge to explain everything. Explain less and tell the story more. And tell our story in light of God’s story.

Sermon Evaluation

Critiquing sermons is not a new thing for most congregations but doing it formally and intentionally is. Regular evaluation is priceless. Here below are some thoughts about this process and the form used at Cedar Hills. If you’re a pastor, do you know how to evaluate if you preached a good sermon? Does the thought of someone critiquing your preaching seem wrong or make you uncomfortable? If you’re not a pastor, how do you know if your pastor preached a good sermon? What makes a sermon good or bad? Regular sermon evaluation can help explore these questions.

Who should do an evaluation? Elders and leaders hopefully know how to evaluate sermons, but if not the form will help them know what to look for. Leaders-in-waiting with leadership potential can grow by engaging with the process of evaluation. Ordinary people will benefit by knowing you care enough to ask and you will benefit from their perspective. If you’re not a pastor, don’t surprise your pastor on Sunday or Monday morning with an unsolicited sermon evaluation! Even with good motives, this feels overbearing. If you think this could be a helpful practice sit down with your pastor, look over the evaluation form and discuss what it would look like to do a formal critique.
Sermon Feedback Form

These comments were prayerfully prepared by _____________________ to help give (preacher) __________________ constructive feedback his or her sermon on (date) ________________.

Sermon title: ___________________________ Key Text: _________________________

Overall Comments:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Beginning:

Did the opening capture your attention? □ Yes □ No
Comments:

Did the introduction touch some need? □ Yes, directly □ Yes, indirectly □ No
Comments:

Did it prepare draw you into a story? □ Yes □ No
Comments:

Additional comments on the beginning, including suggested areas for improvement:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Middle:

Did the sermon have one central idea? □ Yes □ No
In 10-20 words, state the main point of this sermon as you heard it:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Was the biblical story clearly explained? □ Yes (Please explain.) □ No
________________________________________________________________________

Were any parts unclear to you? □ Yes (Please explain.) □ No
________________________________________________________________________

Were any transitions that seemed rough or unexpected? □ Yes (Please explain.) □ No
________________________________________________________________________

Additional comments on the body of the sermon, including suggested areas for improvement:
________________________________________________________________________
End:
Was the conclusion effective? □ Yes (Please explain.) □ No

Was the sermon successful in engaging heart, mind and soul? □ Yes □ No

Did the sermon cause a change in an attitude? □ Yes □ No

Is the sermon likely to change a behavior? □ Yes □ No

Did the sermon hold your interest for the entire message? □ Yes □ No (Please comment.)

Additional comments on the conclusion including suggested areas for improvement:
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________________

Sermon structure and content: (Check all that apply.)

Biblical Story
☐ Key point came out of the biblical story. ☐ Key point came from outside the biblical story.
☐ Biblical story was merely a pretext for the minister’s own idea.
☐ The sermon had a story shape.

Evangelical Tone
☐ I got the impression that God is for us. ☐ I had the impression God is mad at me.
☐ I had the impression I am lost apart from Jesus. ☐ I had the impression I am saved in Jesus
☐ The sermon was gospel-centered.

Unity, Movement, and Order
☐ The sermon had a clear main point. ☐ The sermon built momentum.
☐ All parts were unified. ☐ Earlier parts contributed to later parts’ full effect.

Instructiveness
☐ The sermon significantly engaged my mind. ☐ The sermon touched my heart.
☐ The sermon made me rethink something about God, Jesus, the church, or myself.
☐ The sermon did not hold my attention. ☐ The sermon told a story.

Delivery: Circle any of the following areas and either compliment or constructively critique them.
Eye contact/facial expressions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Comments</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voice (clarity, variety)</td>
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<td>Pacing/using of pauses</td>
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<td>Wording (correctness, grammar, colorfulness)</td>
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<td>Posture/body language/gestures</td>
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<td>Distracting habits</td>
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<td>Use of humor</td>
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What aspect of the sermon (e.g. major point, story, or technique) are you most likely to remember the longest?

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<th>Final Comments:</th>
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Bibliography


