

The Sermon in the Twenty-First Century

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For generations the form of the sermon remained unchanged. The format, defined by the Dominicans in the thirteenth century, was essentially to propose a thesis and support it with multiple illustrations and biblical references. A length of one hour was not uncommon, and until recent generations, quite acceptable if the homily was well argued. They proposed that the outline of a good sermon looked something like this:

Propose a thesis.

Provide an illustration that supports that thesis.

Offer three points in its defense.

Provide a second illustration to support the thesis.

Offer three points in its defense.

Provide a third illustration that supports the thesis.

Offer three points in its defense.

Restate the original thesis.

For those of us who grew up in the U.S. education system of the twentieth century, this format could be summarized in the same way we might summarize the task of writing a theme paper for English class: Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Tell them what you told them.

This format was standard for most preaching for hundreds of years. During the Protestant Reformation, which was accompanied by the invention of the printing press and an increase in literacy, this format reached its zenith. Preachers could proclaim sermons that lasted well over an hour. But if they made their point clearly enough, defended it with illustrations and biblical references, and came to a clear conclusion, the listeners were mesmerized.

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It is said that the great Protestant preacher, Jonathan Edwards, who wrote the famous sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God,” preached in a monotone, with his glasses perched on the end of his nose, and never looked up from his text. Still people swooned in the aisles. He obviously made his case and proved his point.

All this changed with the advent of modern media. First radio and then television brought immediate communication and visual images into our living rooms. Radio serials and sitcoms abounded. We flooded our lives with stories. Attention spans shortened. As we all heard silver-tongued radio announcers, and watched beautiful, well-spoken faces on television and in the movies, delivery of a sermon became as important as its content.

At the same time, literacy levels and educational advancement soared. The more people learned, the more they felt they were their own best expert. Challenge authority became the rallying cry of a whole generation.

The renowned preacher Fred Craddock caught the implications of all these changes in his seminal work, *As One without Authority*. He introduced the concept of intuitive preaching. The preacher, rather than being an authoritative expert on all themes religious, became one who knew the story of the gospel and how it resonated with our story. Instead of beginning a sermon with a general theme that would be outlined throughout the course of the sermon, the preacher told a specific story, one that implied general understandings. Instead of preaching from the general to the specific, the preacher started with the specific and hinted at the implications we could draw from the homily ourselves.

This intuitive style of preaching has been used widely over the last few decades. But it may be under assault by still more changes in the communications patterns of our culture. With the advent of the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, texting, and so many forms of digital communication, we are still going through a communications revolution at least as important as the ones we went through with the invention of the printing press, and with the introduction of radio and television. We do not know yet when this revolution will settle down. In the meantime, it is rapidly influencing the way we receive information, share information, and create information. And so it has its effects on preaching.

Generational theorists say that the way we communicate with one another is changing, with media preferences for each generation. The older we are, the more likely we are to favor print media, and the younger we are the more likely we are to favor instant, Internet communication. This too, affects preaching. If we are lucky enough to preach to four generations in our pews we may encounter the following:

- The silent generation (age seventy and above), who love print media, will be thrilled if we can make a case and argue a point just like the Dominicans encouraged all those years ago.
- The baby boomers (age fifty-two to sixty-nine), who grew up in the dawning days of television with one sitcom after another, will love it if we tell a story that leads to an intuitive conclusion.
- Generation X (thirty-four to fifty-one), who began the Internet revolution, will love it if we can provide emotionally laden content with sound bites they can remember.
- Whereas the millennials (ages eighteen to thirty-three), who swim in the waters of digital media that the rest of us only wade into, will ask, “Why are you talking? Why are you still talking? When do I get to talk?”

This is the world in which current preachers find themselves. The selected sermons that follow and the notes from their authors will illustrate just a few of these themes: narrative preaching from Sam Wells, use of metaphor as sound bite and memory hook from Kate Spelman, and, at the top of their mind for many clergy today, preaching on the issues of the day from Bishop Rob Wright.