

Narrative Preaching

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If you want to get the attention of a crowd of surly or enervated people, the quickest way to do it is to say, “What do you think I’ve got in my bag?” The key to attention is curiosity, and the simplest form of curiosity is to wonder what mystery lies hidden in this receptacle of which I can see the outlines, but not the reality.

That’s the lure of narrative preaching. It starts from the anxiety that the members of the congregation aren’t that interested in what you’re going to say. It creates a rhetorical device that lures in the curious, entertains the disinterested, and rewards the short-concentration-spanned. To use the technique well requires confidence, because it’s tempting to tell more than one story, or over-explain the story one does tell—both of which result in diminishing returns. It’s not necessary for the story to take up the whole sermon, but it’s vital that when the listener remembers the sermon they recall the story, right up to its conclusion—and that, in remembering the story, they have as good as recalled the sermon. It’s absolutely vital that the drift of the story doesn’t contradict the argument of the sermon—otherwise the effect is worse than useless.

The following sermon I preached twice. Once was at a parish Eucharist in Easter season, with a slightly lighter mood and a more playful spirit. Several listeners, particularly those less enamored of my regular sermons, chose this occasion to say something more complimentary. The other occasion was to seven hundred schoolboys aged fourteen to eighteen; I’d been warned that this congregation was intelligent but disinclined to listen to pious instruction, so this seemed an ideal way to engage their imagination. Crucial to this sermon is the degree of humor: it’s a brilliant story, but the humor makes it deeply satisfying.

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*Sermon**The Fingersmith (Luke 24:13–35)*

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Most of the stories of Jesus' resurrection are pretty untidy. There seem to be bits left out, or non sequiturs, or sudden disappearances where a clear record should be. The story of Jesus' appearance on the road to Emmaus is different. It's perfectly crafted. It begins with two isolated disciples discouraged and disconsolate on the road; it ends with the eleven disciples joyful and united in the upper room. It beautifully allows the two disciples to set out all the pieces of the jigsaw—the mighty words and deeds of the prophet, his shattering death, their longing for him to redeem the nation, and the confusing reports of the empty tomb and the news of the angels—before Jesus himself fits all those jigsaw pieces together by connecting his prophecy with his suffering, his own story with the Old Testament story, and his resurrection as the final completion of the picture.

The Emmaus story deftly and satisfyingly sets the word of Jesus' explanation alongside the sacrament of his taking, blessing, breaking, and sharing the bread and then sees both as empowering the two disciples to be sent forth in mission as witnesses to God's glory. The account provides a mini-gospel narrative: of Jesus coming alongside us, being doubted, demonstrating his identity, being recognized, and departing. The narrative provides a whole story of discipleship: from sorrow at the start, to sarcasm as the conversation begins, humiliation as the disciples are told how foolish they are, devotion as they urge Jesus to remain with them, hospitality as they share a meal, incandescent inspiration as they realize how their hearts were on fire, to headlong haste as they scuttle back to Jerusalem and untold joy as they share the good news. And the story depicts a straightforward model of church: meeting Jesus, understanding scripture, recognizing God in suffering, joining communion, experiencing Easter, sharing faith. What Emmaus depicts about one Sunday, the church embodies every Sunday.

So the Emmaus story is about resurrection, revelation, and response. But more than anything else, this story is about recognition. The power of the story resides in the profound irony that Jesus was walking with them, but they didn't know that it was Jesus. It makes

you look rather more closely at everyone—at friends and strangers, at family members and people you scarcely know.

In one of Roald Dahl's short stories the narrator has just bought a stylish and shiny BMW and is driving it up to London.¹ He stops to pick up a hitchhiker. "He was a small ratty-faced man with grey teeth. His eyes were dark and quick and clever, like rat's eyes, and his ears were slightly pointed at the top. He had a cloth cap on his head and he was wearing a greyish-coloured jacket with enormous pockets."² Getting no answers to his questions, the narrator apologizes and says he's a writer. His guest says, "'Writin' books is okay,' he said. 'It's what I call a skilled trade. I'm in a skilled trade too. . . . The secret of life' he said 'is to become very very good at somethin' that's very very 'ard to do.'"³

Goaded by his guest, the narrator takes his brand new BMW up to its maximum 129mph. But at that point he's mortified to hear the siren of a police car. Once the police motorbike has stopped, things don't go well. "Like an executioner approaching his victim," says the narrator, "the cop came strolling slowly toward us. He was a big meaty man with a belly, and his blue breeches were skin-tight around his enormous thighs."⁴ The policeman lets his prey toast in the boiling oil he's cooked up for himself. Once he's recorded all the relevant details he turned his attention to the passenger, whom he proposes to call as a witness.

"What's your job?" he asked sharply. "I'm an 'od carrier." "A *what*?" "An 'odcarrier." "Spell it." "H-o-d c-a-" "That'll do. And what's a hod carrier, may I ask?" "An 'od carrier, officer, is a person who carries the cement up the ladder to the bricklayer. And the 'od is what 'ee carries it in. It's got a long handle, and on the top you've got bits of wood set at an angle

¹ Roald Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," in *The Wonderful Story of Henry Sugar and Six More* (New York: Puffin Books, 2013). "The Hitchhiker" from THE WONDERFUL STORY OF HENRY SUGAR AND SIX MORE by Roald Dahl, copyright © 1945, 1947, 1952, 1977 by Roald Dahl Nominee Limited; copyright renewed 2005 by Felicity Dahl, Chantal Sophia Dahl, Theo Dahl, Ophelia Dahl, and Lucy Faircloth Dahl. Used by permission of Alfred A. Knopf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, a division of Penguin Random House LLC. All rights reserved.

² Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 28.

³ Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 29.

⁴ Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 31.

. . .” “All right, all right. Who’s your employer?” “Don’t ‘ave one. I’m unemployed.”⁵

The policeman concluded his inquiries in triumph.

“You won’t be driving this fancy car of yours again for a very long time, not after *we’ve* finished with you. You won’t be driving *any* car again, come to that, for several years. And a good thing, too. I hope they lock you up for a spell into the bargain. I’ll see you in court, both of you.”⁶

After the police officer has gone, the narrator resumes the conversation with his passenger.

“Why did you lie to him?” “Who me?” he said. “What makes you think I lied?” “You told him you were an unemployed hod carrier. But you told *me* you were in a highly skilled trade.” “So I am,” he said. “But it don’t pay to tell everythin’ to a copper.” “So what *do* you do?” I asked him. “Ah,” he said slyly. “That’ll be tellin’, wouldn’t it?”⁷

Then the narrator notices his passenger rolling himself a cigarette—an operation the man performs with incredible speed and dexterity.

“It’s because I’ve got fantastic fingers. These fingers of mine,” he said, holding up both hands high in front of him, “are quicker and cleverer than the fingers of the best piano player in the world!”⁸

Then the story takes on a different shape.

Suddenly, my passenger was holding up a black leather belt in his hand. “Ever seen this before?” he asked. The belt had a brass buckle of unusual design. “Hey!” I said. “That’s mine,

⁵ Dahl, “The Hitchhiker,” 33.

⁶ Dahl, “The Hitchhiker,” 33.

⁷ Dahl, “The Hitchhiker,” 34.

⁸ Dahl, “The Hitchhiker,” 35–36.

isn't it? It is mine! Where did you get it?" He grinned and waved the belt gently from side to side. "Where d'you think I got it?" he said. "Off the top of your trousers, of course." I reached down and felt for my belt. It was gone.⁹

In no time the narrator realizes his shoelaces, his watch, his driver's license, a key ring with four keys on it, some pound notes, a few coins, a letter from his publishers, his diary, a stubby old pencil, a cigarette lighter, and last of all, a beautiful old sapphire ring with pearls around it belonging to his wife—every single one of them begins to emerge like a string of sausages from the voluminous pocket of his passenger.

"So you're a pickpocket," the narrator says.

"I don't like that word," he answered. "It's a coarse, and vulgar word. Pickpockets is coarse and vulgar people who only do easy little amateur jobs. They lift money from blind old ladies." "What do you call yourself, then?" "Me? I'm a fingersmith. I'm a professional fingersmith." He spoke the words solemnly and proudly, as though he were telling me he was the President of the Royal College of Surgeons or the Archbishop of Canterbury. . . . "Listen, I could take the false teeth out of your mouth if I wanted to and you wouldn't even catch me!" "I don't have false teeth," I said. "I know you don't," he answered. "Otherwise I'd 'ave 'ad 'em out long ago!"¹⁰

But then the fingersmith pulls off the coup de grâce.

In the long delicate fingers of his right hand, the man was holding up in triumph the two books he had taken from the policeman's pockets. "Easiest job I ever done," he announced proudly. . . . "That copper's got nothin' on either of us now," he said. . . . "You're a fantastic fellow!" I exclaimed. "Thank you, guv'nor," he said. "It's always nice to be appreciated."¹¹

⁹ Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 36–37.

¹⁰ Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 39–40.

¹¹ Dahl, "The Hitchhiker," 40.

Like the Emmaus story, the story of the hitchhiker is one of recognition. Initially the narrator's mind is intrigued by this ratty-faced man with gray teeth, whose eyes are dark and quick and clever, whose ears are slightly pointed at the top, and whose jacket has enormous pockets. But when the police officer gets involved, it's no longer just an arm's-length mind game. The narrator's heart is thumping, as he faces loss of license, loss of reputation, loss of money, and quite possibly loss of liberty. The hitchhiker turns out to be his savior, and the narrator's eyes are opened, and he recognizes a true fingersmith, who transforms everything when he produces the police officer's two pocket books, containing all the evidence against him.

Think about those three stages of recognition, because they're exactly the same three stages the disciples go through on the road to Emmaus. The first is about having an open mind. The disciples have to be cajoled into having an open mind—Jesus is pretty blunt with them and calls them fools. But perhaps the crucial thing is that Jesus hears them out. He doesn't interrupt them or say he knows what they're thinking. He stays tuned to the end of what they have to say. Then he tells the same story back to them in a revealing way.

The second dimension is having an open heart. "Were not our hearts burning within us?" the two disciples say to one another. There's a difference between having an open mind and having an open heart. You can have one without the other. It's interesting the disciples only realize their burning hearts in retrospect. They're on edge. They could be in danger. They've been badly hurt. Their hearts are tender and protected. They thought they were just opening their minds. But it's gone beyond that.

And then, finally and conclusively, they have open eyes. I wonder whether their eyes really could have been opened without their minds and their hearts being opened first. So many research studies find that we see what we're looking to see. Because the two disciples could not comprehend their companion being Jesus, their eyes refused to see him beside them. The conversation and the meal together changed their heads and hearts, and only then could they see the nail marks in the hands of the one who broke bread and the face of the one who was crucified—their risen Lord.

Open minds, open hearts, open eyes: three stages of resurrection faith. I wonder which is the important one for you. Maybe you struggle with information overload, and it's hard to keep an open mind, to discover new things. Perhaps you've been deeply hurt, and you're reluctant to let your heart be open to burn with hope again. Or possibly

there's truth or love or life staring you in the face and for some reason you just can't see it.

But the resurrection is this. Christ the fingersmith has stolen your thoughts, your feelings, and your sight, and you can't get them back until you open your mind and heart and eyes to him. And when you do, you will no longer stand still, looking sad, but will feel your heart burning within you as he opens up his life to you.

Commentary

I begin the sermon by asking the congregation to take seriously the sophistication of the Emmaus story. Luke's Gospel is a much more elaborate work of literature than the other Gospels, and the Emmaus Road story is perhaps its most exquisite vignette. Because the language of the Gospels is familiar and the stories apparently simple, it would be easy for the lay Christian to miss the intricacy of what's going on on the road to Emmaus. Having set up an expectation of detail and complexity, I'm seeking to entice a closer degree of listening than usual by the time I begin the Roald Dahl narrative itself.

There's a choice to be made in using a published narrative. You either rapidly summarize the background detail in order to focus down on the precise event or dialogue you seek to scrutinize; or you attempt to narrate the whole story, risking drawing in too much extraneous information and losing the focus. In this case it was the whole narrative I was after and, being a short story, it wasn't too difficult to encompass it within the constraints of the sermon. It's almost never best to quote whole paragraphs or more without adaptation: besides being lazy, it invariably loses energy and sharpness. You have to make the story your own, but interspersing quotations with linking passages that suit your purpose. In particular in this sermon I'm keen to highlight the humor. It was necessary when preaching the sermon to adopt a suitable accent for the fingersmith to distinguish his voice from that of the narrator. The story is so funny that the preacher has to work hard to keep a straight face when delivering it: it's much less funny if the preacher starts giggling and loses the detached air that the fingersmith in the story himself adopts.

The actual narrative takes up about 50 percent of the sermon. It's certainly the most memorable part, but the work that the rest of the sermon does is to help the listener enjoy the Emmaus story the more through the lens of the Dahl story. I have no idea whether Roald Dahl consciously or unconsciously worked with the Emmaus Road story as

a template for his own; but the correspondence is more than superficial, and to see the power of each story unfold side by side should significantly enhance the listener's engagement with the Emmaus story. The threefold structure of recognition is a way of highlighting the correspondences in the two stories. But it's also a way to help the listeners not only read the story but allow the story to read them.

Any listener who may be thinking they're the Thomas—the outsider, the skeptic—is drawn back in by the line that says “I wonder which is the important one for you.” This is a technique I learned from Jerome Berryman in his *Godly Play* program. The listener is invited to settle on the category—open hearts, open minds, open eyes—that most resonates with their aptitude or need. Rather than let the two stories stand side by side, this creates a structure for the listener to do some real and rewarding work. What listeners most value about sermons is not what the sermon told them but what the sermon induced them to think for themselves. This technique engages such a response.

Finally this sermon uses a technique that I call the “twist,” which I learned from the broadcaster Alastair Cooke, who used it from time to time in his “Letters from America” in the 1940s–1990s. It allows the listener to think all is well and they're on top of all the material, and then with a rush at the end reincorporates material from earlier in the piece to suppose and thrill and delight and transform. The twist is fundamentally the theological approach of Karl Barth, who won't let us think the story is about ourselves, but ensures we ultimately realize it's always about God. I try not to overuse this technique, but so long as I do not employ it more than once every half-dozen times, I find it continues to take listeners by surprise and thus evokes joy and wonder.