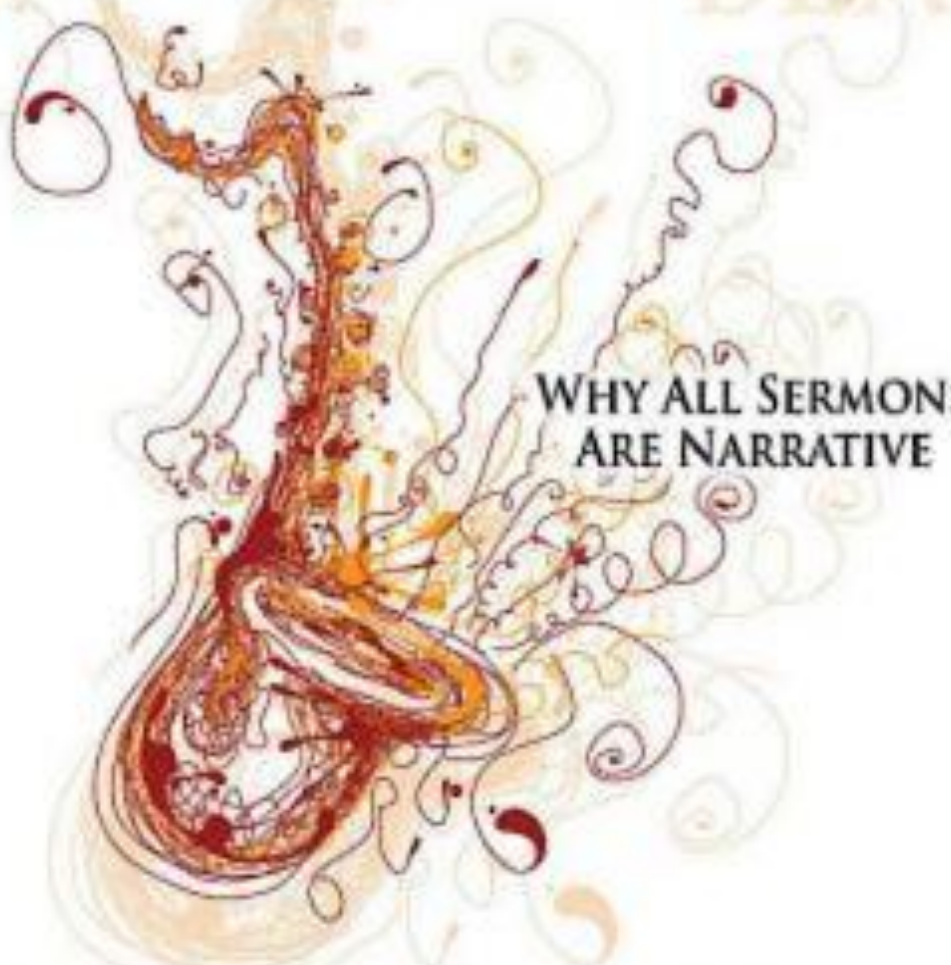


THE
HOMILETICAL
BEAT



WHY ALL SERMONS
ARE NARRATIVE

EUGENE L. LOWRY

The Homiletical Beat

Why All Sermons Are Narrative

By Eugene L. Lowry

Abingdon Press

Copyright © 2012 Eugene L. Lowry

All rights reserved. ISBN: 978-1-4267-5143-1

Contents

Preface,
1. Introduction,
2. The Three Levels of Narrativity,
Level One: Narrative as Temporal Modality,
Level Two: Narrative as Strategic Aim,
Level Three: Narrative as Embodied Form,
3. Encountering the Aristotle Blues,
4. Recovering the Voice of Orality,
Notes,

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

The term *narrative preaching* as affirmed in this writing does not refer to a subset option for some sermons. It is not simply a name for some homiletical genre thought particularly suitable for the use of stories, or for certain kinds of subject matter. Rather, it is the fundamental context for—indeed the underlying *modus operandi* of—the homiletical event we call the sermon. H. Grady Davis established this rationale with simple yet profound clarity over fifty years ago. Although he did not utilize the term

narrative, he described it when he said:

A sermon is not static like a painting. A painting shows itself as a whole in a single instant. Not only its entire composition, all its subjects and their arrangement, but all its minutest details stand there together, fixed in their intended relation to one another and to the whole. It is a visible design, complete and static. The eye takes it all in at once. A sermon is never like that, never has the objective completeness of a picture or a building.

Indeed, a sermon exists within a wholly different category. Joining the sermon in this other genre are events provided by music, drama, and cinema. Fundamentally these are not visible designs set in space, but temporal arts functioning in time. Truth is, as Davis explained it:

A sermon is like music, not music in the score but in the live performance, where bar is heard after bar, theme after theme, and never all at once. A sermon is like a play, not the printed book but the action on a stage, which moves from a first act through a second to a third, and the drama is never [experienced] ... all at once. A sermon is like a story told aloud, where each sentence has gone forever into the past before the next is spoken.

Here, the ear is primary, not the eye—not so much fixed in space as carried along in time—moment by moment, beat by beat. And if you miss this fundamental difference between these separable categories of function—between *all-at-once* and *moment-by-moment*—the sermon is robbed of its very nature. Simple as that.

It is important to observe now that language regarding "mouth to ear as contrasted with hand to eye," as utilized in this writing, ought not be construed in an unthinking literalism. The underlying issue here has to do with the difference between temporal sequence and the all-at-once. Hence, in the case of those who are deaf, as Stephen H. Webb puts it,

"The muscles of the limbs take the place of the muscles of the throat." So too, the eyes function as the ears. Again, the contrast is between the set and the in-motion. Likewise, those at the opera who do not speak Italian have subtitles in order to understand the operatic voices and hence interpret the movements on stage. And the opera moves on from note to note and theme to theme.

No wonder H. Grady Davis went on to say: "If we wish to learn from other arts, we must learn from these arts based on a time sequence." He even continued his observation about the connection with music by saying, "I must play [assertions] ... as a musician plays ... principal themes." Davis was joined forty-six years later by Kirk Byron Jones, who in 2000 declared, "Musicians play notes; preachers play words."

Presentations whose form is lined out *moment-by-moment* are narrative by definition. Presentations whose form occurs *all-at-once* are not. Musical presentations are narrative by form. A sculptural presentation is not. The primary medium of preaching is time, moving moment-by-moment. Hence, narrative is its primary form. This is what I mean when I speak of the narrative principle of preaching.

So it is that by means of this principle we keep time with the Word. This is what preaching is all about, and the exploration and explanation of this understanding was the primary purpose in both my Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale in 2009, and the William Self Lectures at Mercer University/McAfee School of Theology in 2011, on which this book is based.

CHAPTER 2

The Three Levels of Narrativity

It's Sermon *Time*.

That's the right name for it. I have been calling attention to it by use of the term *narrative* for decades now. Sometimes I have employed the term

plotted preaching. Other writers have differing terminology for similar commitments.

Fred Craddock once spoke of "inductive preaching," Lucy Rose moved toward "conversational preaching," David Buttrick preferred "plotted mobility," Charles Rice focused on "story preaching," and Henry Mitchell spoke of the sermon route toward "celebration." Believing that several of us were on the same page—or at least on similarly concerned pages—Richard Eslinger featured five of us as participating in what David James Randolph once coined as the "New Homiletic." Eslinger considered the new homiletical movement the "Copernican Revolution in homiletics."

So at the heart of the matter, what is it precisely that in spite of several key differences joins these similar theorists together? Clearly, I believe, it is that all of us have focused on the crucial concern about *sequence*. Whether Mitchell is moving toward the sermon celebration, Buttrick pressing toward a new corporate consciousness, Rose putting matters into an ongoing conversation, Rice telling a story, or Craddock talking about the necessity of anticipation within the sermon—all are talking about *temporal sequence* as basic to the preaching event. I call it *narrativity*—not an optional choice for the sermon, but the central thread, the formative principle of what the sermon is.

Level One: Narrative as Temporal Modality

H. Grady Davis not only said, "The proper design of a sermon is a movement in time," he also said, "it begins at a given moment, it ends at a given moment, and it moves through the intervening moments one after another."

At first reading I thought that statement pretty obvious. Of course, when preachers first begin their message, they start talking, and pretty soon they get through with their message and stop talking—and indeed, they also talk in between those two points in time. But what seemed to me

then an obvious observation, I now understand to be at the heart of Davis's utterly radical transformational gift to us. It has taken me a lifetime to even begin to absorb what this means. Indeed, the homiletical guild has focused on his other gifts to us—such as the "generative idea," the "union of substance and form," and the metaphor of a sermon imaged as a tree—and somehow this more radical germinal gift has not fully been harvested. Indeed, the idea sort of shows up almost unannounced in the middle of the book, in a chapter on "Continuity: Nature and Types."

Davis continued, "A sermon is not a manuscript, not a paper outline simple or elaborate, not a sketch.... A sermon is a continuity of sounds, looks, gestures which follow one another in time." I believe that we in the homiletical community have yet to grasp fully the enormous implications of this "simple" statement. Otherwise, we would have learned to speak not so much about sermon *points* as about sermon *steps*.

And how might we identify just how radical these ideas are? The first step is to notice some images that many preachers tend to use when talking about their sermons—images spoken without apparent reflection about the unspoken assumptions that lie underneath. In fact, sometimes this kind of language is used by those who are teachers of preaching!

I have found that when preachers converse with other preachers about the sermon, often they do not speak about time, let alone about time's continuity. It is as though the sermon is sensed as an object in space. By Friday of the week, you may have heard somebody discuss his or her preparation for Sunday's sermon. When asked how she is doing with her preparation, she may say, "Well, I think I am about to get it together." *Together?* It—and—together? What do preachers mean by "get it together"? The terms *it* and *together* do not belong together in such a sentence. But the underlying assumptive image is clear: *Space*—something like the image in Sangster's *Craft of Sermon Construction*, and in Nichols' *Building the Word*.

And it has a corollary lexicon to match—a thing constructed, like on a corner lot; parts that get organized, like a jigsaw puzzle; ideas that are assembled, like in a car plant. Actually, the Lyman Beecher lecturer of 1908, William Herbert Perry Faunce, said that we do not want "sermons

built up as a carpenter builds a row of houses." Yet too often it is space that seems to be the underlying assumptive image regarding the sermon.

Instead, H. Grady Davis spoke of time and, rather than referring to outlines, spoke of forms of continuity. He knew that the sermon participates primarily in time, not space—is not *all-at-once* in place, but appears *movingly-in-sequence*, beat after beat. No wonder he said, "If we wish to learn from other arts, we must learn from these arts based on a time sequence."

All of which is to say again that whatever we do in the pulpit *is* narrative. That is, its presence is not only facilitated in the passage of time—its existence is *within* time sequence. That's where it is—nowhere else. A sermon is an ordered form of moving time—the narrative principle of preaching at work. This is only the first level of consideration, but its recognition is crucial before proceeding further.

As Toni Craven, Professor of Hebrew Scripture at Brite Divinity School, named it, we are dealing with temporal sequence, which is her definition of narrative. It is the medium of our work. It is the given in McLuhan's sense, the context of whatever other variables are chosen. Therefore, your sermon next Sunday will be narrative no matter what. That is, the sermon will in fact move from beginning to end in the medium of time. Period.

The sermon—whether deductive or inductive, whether image-based or logically driven, story or declaration, linear or episodal, improvised or manuscript in the corporate setting of worship—is an experience in timely form, as *recital*. It is not presented all-at-once like painting or sculpture. It lives in time like music, cinema, and poetry. This fact is primary to preaching, not secondary or optional.

In presenting both the Lyman Beecher and the William Self Lectures, the basis for this work, I used a piano to explain further. I played all the single melody notes of a well-known hymn of the church, slowly and without any rhythm. I began with middle C: C C C C C C, D D D, F F F F F F F F F F F, G G G, A A A A A A A A, C C C. The last three Cs were an octave above

middle C. Then I asked the audience to name the hymn of which these are the melody notes. Of course none was able to answer. I feigned disappointment, saying,

I am surprised that you are so unfamiliar with the hymnody of the church. Well, that was "Amazing Grace" ... yes it was.... Well, I have a confession to make. I did not play the notes in sequence!

Now, you have every right to say "if you don't play the notes in sequence, how dare you call it anything, let alone Amazing Grace?" You know, those thirty-five notes—six Cs, three Ds, eleven Fs, and so on.... Somebody could compose another song altogether, using the same thirty-five notes—but occurring in a different order. So I decided to do just that—and composed a different song made up of exactly the same thirty-five notes—but in a different sequence. I have titled it "Unamazing Grace." I will play it now.

I played my new song, and then remarked, "Now, please understand that I do know the proper sequence for 'Amazing Grace.'" I then played it in a jazz idiom in order to make it clear that when you change the sequence of the notes, you are playing a different song. And when you change the sequence of your words in the pulpit, you are preaching a different sermon.

No wonder Fred Craddock once said that "*how* one preaches is to a large extent *what* one preaches." Or, as Ciardi and Williams expressed it in *How Does a Poem Mean?*: "The way in which it means is what it means." And in large part, the *how of it* depends on decisions about temporal sequence. (The other companion component of sermon form has to do with language choice—to which we will move later in the next section.)

So why is it that such different worlds of presentational shape as between static all-at-once forms (for example, painting and sculpture) and moment-by-moment forms (for example, music and preaching) play such a small role in homiletical theory? How can it be that this clear and profound aspect of the work of H. Grady Davis seems to have been

allowed to drift to the periphery in our work? I believe it has to do with a linguistic definitional confusion.

I confess that even I who have been advocating "narrative preaching" through several books and decades appear to have been content to view "narrative preaching" as an option—although for me the preferred option. Yet what H. Grady Davis declared was that the sermon, viewed generically, is simply one of several presentational forms of art that happen by means of temporal sequence, rather than all at once. The elemental fact of temporal sequence in the sermon is one manifestation of the narrative arts. How is it then possible for the subject to be considered otherwise?

I believe it has happened by means of confusion about the difference between the terms *narrative* and *story*. For a long time I have battled against presuming those terms to be synonymous. The matter came clearer to me in preparation for the Beecher and the Self Lectures. It was colleague Thomas Long who presented the issue so clearly—albeit perhaps unintentionally. Long preceded me in presenting both the Lyman Beecher and the William Self Lectures on preaching. The issue emerges in his first lecture in both lectureships.

Finding Clarity about the Terms Narrative and Story

Long's first lectures both at Yale and Mercer form the beginning of their written form published as *Preaching from Memory to Hope*. On page 2 of the very first chapter the banner across the page announces the opening theme: "The Rise of Narrative Preaching." And on the very next page he mentions three writers he believes are central to the subject of narrative preaching. H. Grady Davis is the first theorist chosen. Long described Davis as the one who "argued that preachers should no longer think of sermons as didactic arguments with orderly points but as living organisms, moving, dynamic, growing; in other words, a preacher should imagine a sermon more like a short story than a legal brief." Said Long: "It felt like a fresh breeze," and "became the most popular preaching textbook in American seminaries for fifteen years."

The second featured writer was, of course, Fred B. Craddock. Rightly calling Craddock's *As One Without Authority* "the most influential monograph on preaching in our time," he focused on Craddock's calling preachers to "abandon the top-down, deductive, 'my thesis for this morning' approach to sermons in favor of suspenseful, inductive, narratives of discovery." Of course he mentioned Craddock's Lyman Beecher Lectures of 1978, *Overhearing the Gospel*, with its focus on the work of Søren Kierkegaard.

Finally, and still on page 3, he turned to his third featured writer with the words, "In 1980, another teacher of preaching, Eugene Lowry, published the widely used and enormously influential preaching textbook *The Homiletical Plot* ..."

Well, I was thrilled to be included on the same page with Davis and Craddock—until I read the last part of the sentence: "... *The Homiletical Plot*, which claimed..." [Did I read that correctly? "Claimed"? Sounds like trouble ahead.] "... claimed that what really gets the juices going for hearers is not learning about ideas but resolving ambiguity, and thus good sermons should be built on the chassis of a narrative plot that moves sequentially from stirring up ambiguity to resolving it, from conflict to climax to denouement."

Well, the last part of the sentence was on target, but frankly it was troubling that he seemed to be claiming that I wasn't really interested in dealing with ideas. In fact, his remark reminded me of a particular sentence I had used when asked by William H. Willimon and Richard Lischer to write the section on "Narrative Preaching" in the *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*. It was in that section that I stated the following: "A *narrative sermon* is any sermon in which the arrangement of ideas takes the form of a plot involving a strategic delay of the preacher's meaning." I still consider that a reasonably clear description of the operative goal of good preaching. The phrase "arrangement of ideas" reflects my conviction for years now—even decades—that my work is intentionally geared toward helping preachers maximize the opportunity not only for engaging ideas, but more importantly, being engaged by those ideas. (We will explore the strategic dimension in the later description of the second narrative level of preaching.) I then turned to page 4 in Long's published form of the Beecher and Self Lectures.

(Continues...)

Excerpted from **The Homiletical Beat** by **Eugene L. Lowry**.
Copyright © 2012 Eugene L. Lowry. Excerpted by permission of
Abingdon Press.

All rights reserved. No part of this excerpt may be reproduced or
reprinted without permission in writing from the publisher.

Excerpts are provided by Dial-A-Book Inc. solely for the personal
use of visitors to this web site.

CE'd by S.W. 7-10-12

For preaching that moves, inspires, and transforms

Eugene Lowry has summarized and synthesized the most important learnings of the past two generations on preaching. He has done so with an acute artistic sensibility. He ponders what is peculiar about oral communication and how intentionality about utterance will make a decisive difference in what is heard and how it may be transformative. I anticipate that all preachers can learn a great deal from this pondering, which is as beat-filled as our best jazz.

--Walter Brueggemann, Columbia Theological Seminary

This is Lowry at his best. He has come full circle in teaching us the absolute necessity of narrative as the foundational principle of what all effective sermons should seek to accomplish: movement in time!

--Cleophus J. LaRue, Princeton Theological Seminary

A master preacher and jazz pianist, Lowry pulls his piano bench up to the pulpit in this book and accompanying recording. Not content to simply rehearse an old composition, he improvises on the melody that has run throughout his scholarly career and offers readers a new experience.

--O. Wesley Allen Jr., Lexington Theological Seminary

Lowry makes a lively case for the essential narrativity of good sermons. Following him into the worlds of jazz and diverse biblical texts, we rediscover the tension/resolution rhythm basic to Gospel preaching.

--Sally A. Brown, Princeton Theological Seminary

To read *The Homiletical Beat* is to hear a master preacher reflect on shaping sermons, understanding their musicality, celebrating their oral character, and using the lectionary without tripping on its shortcomings.

--Thomas H. Troeger, Yale Divinity School and Institute of Sacred Music

Eugene L. Lowry is William K. McElvaney Professor of Preaching Emeritus at St. Paul School of Theology in Kansas City, Missouri. He is also an accomplished jazz pianist. This book is based on the Lyman Beecher Lectures, Yale, 2009.