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BIBLICAL STORYTELLING AND PREACHING

by

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February 2006

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CONCORDIA SEMINARY

BIBLICAL STORYTELLING AND PREACHING

**A MAJOR APPLIED PROJECT TO
THE DOCTOR OF MINISTRY COMMITTEE
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY**

BY

DENNIS J. GOFF

ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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ABSTRACT

This Major Applied Project seeks to clarify the relationship between a Biblical text of Scripture being “read” or “told” and how that connects to the sermon preached on that text. It is believed that in many worship settings there is often a “disconnect” between the lectionary read (Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel readings) and the sermon text selected from one of those readings. By the time the preacher begins his sermon the hearer has often forgotten the Scripture read earlier. The use of Biblical storytelling can assist the listener in hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon preached.

To evaluate the effective use of Biblical storytelling, surveys were conducted on four Sundays among sample group of congregation members. On each of the four Sundays, the sermon text (selected from the day’s lectionary) was “read” in one service and “told” in the other. Participants in the survey groups completed a survey following each of the worship services noting the impact the Scripture read or told had on their hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting that Scripture with the sermon.

The results of the participants supported the theory that when the sermon text is presented as a storytelling rather than a reading there is a stronger remembrance and connection of the Scripture with the sermon. After hearing the sermon text “told” (rather than simply read) the hearer is more aware of that Scripture and familiar with it which in turn benefits his reception of the sermon.

While the use of Biblical storytelling may not be something that a preacher wishes to use every week, it can have a significant effect upon the hearer’s ability to connect the text to the sermon.

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM IDENTIFIED

It was a Sunday morning just like most other Sunday mornings as I made my way toward church. However, what was somewhat unusual this Sunday was that I wasn't the preacher or worship leader. I was on vacation. I was going to worship with my family. I was going to sit in the pew with my wife and sons and other extended family members. This Sunday I did not write a sermon. I did not plan the order of service. I did not pick the hymns. I walked into church, received a bulletin at the door and picked out a pew to sit in . . . just like everyone else.

The church building felt warm that summer day. The windows were open and the fans were on, but it was still hot. I was sweating and I felt uncomfortable as I loosened my tie and unbuttoned the top button of my shirt. The service began with what seemed like way too many lengthy announcements. As a result I found myself twitching in the pew before the first hymn began. However, by the time we got to the Confession and Absolution I felt a breath of fresh air – spiritually. How refreshing to hear the words of absolution spoken to *me*. As the liturgy continued, we transitioned to the service of the Word.

The Old Testament lesson was announced. About that time my two year old niece who was sitting next to me decided she wanted me to hold her. I set my bulletin down to put her on my lap and by the time she was settled the lay reader had finished the reading of the Old Testament and was beginning the reading of the Epistle. His manner of reading seemed unrehearsed and choppy. The day's readings were printed on a

bulletin insert but by now that insert had fallen to the floor, so I sat and just listened. By the time I could reach for the Scripture insert, we were on our feet for the reading of the Gospel. Then, after a children's message, the confession of faith (the Apostles' Creed) and another hymn, it was time for the sermon. I truly look forward to those opportunities to *hear* a sermon rather than always *deliver* one.

The preacher began, "The text for today's sermon is the Epistle lesson . . ." My silent reaction was, "What was the Epistle lesson about? I know it was read. I heard the words. But I don't remember what it was about." The preacher began with some story out of his life to introduce us to his text but for the life of me I couldn't remember the text that had been read.

The Sunday morning worship experience I just described is all too common. In fact, I believe it is one that is repeated over and over and over again in church after church Sunday after Sunday. Obviously there are a number of variables that happen each Sunday morning. Not everyone is sitting in church with young children. The temperature in many churches during the summer heat is made bearable by air conditioning. The public reading ability of some people – lay or clergy – is often quite polished. But what is a common occurrence in many churches is that the Scripture lesson which was read earlier as a part of the lectionary readings is soon forgotten or difficult to recall when the sermon finally begins.

The experience I related above is not the only time this has happened to me. From conversations with others, much the same happens to other people too. Many a Sunday morning the lay reader has read the Scripture and by the time the sermon began

and the text announced, the connection between sermon and text is lost. Aware that this happens some pastors reread the sermon text as they began their sermon.

But is the rereading of the text the answer here? Perhaps not; at least not according to Lori Carroll. After surveying the role and reception of preaching across the country, she summarized her findings in the book *The Great American Sermon Survey*. Although the responses were varied to the question, “If you could get one message across to all preachers in the United States, what would it be?” one response was, “What a waste of time to read the Scripture twice in a row. The second reading just fills up time so he has even less homily to prepare.”¹ Doesn’t sound like “rereading” the Scripture is necessarily the answer.

Carol M. Bechtel, professor of Old Testament at Western Theological Seminary in Holland, Michigan, says, “The Scripture well read is the sermon half preached.”² Bechtel acknowledges here that the *way* in which the Scriptures are publicly presented greatly affects the retention and remembering of the text. A well read text strengthens the connection between the sermon text and the sermon preached. Therefore, this Major Applied Project (MAP) seeks to address the difficulty a congregation has in hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon proclaimed by utilizing Biblical storytelling as a way to publicly present the Scripture.

¹ Lori Carrell, *The Great American Sermon Survey* (Wheaton: Mainstay Church Resources, 2000), 99-100.

² Carol Bechtel, “Mary and Martha at Home,” *The Journal of Biblical Storytelling* 14:1 (2006): 14.

A Text Well Told is a Sermon Half Preached

Biblical storyteller Dennis Dewey shares that he often begins his storytelling workshops with an experiment. First, he stands behind a lectern and “reads” from one of the gospel selections. In this reading of the Scripture he is careful to read the story deliberately, in a manner that is typical of the way the Scriptures are usually read aloud in many worship settings. He is careful that his reading is not devoid of variation, but with the kind of minimal expression that is often the norm for the oral delivery of most printed material. However, after Dewey finishes this *reading* of the Scripture and after a few moments of silence for reflection, he steps out from behind the lectern and *tells* that same Scripture word-for-word in what is called a Biblical storytelling manner.

Before each of these exercises, Dewey asks the participants to monitor what is going on inside of them as they receive/hear the spoken Word of God. They are to look for such things as their inner reactions, thoughts, feelings, and attentiveness. Over the years Dewey has noted some of the most often repeated responses from participants.

Among them are the following:

- 1) The telling is livelier, more “life-like” than the reading.
- 2) The effort required to pay attention to the reading contrasts sharply with the virtual impossibility of not being attentive to the telling.
- 3) Listeners often report that the communication that comes across in the telling is about feelings, characters, and events. The communication that comes across in the reading is about ideas and information.
- 4) The telling results in intimacy and immediacy that is lacking in the reading.
- 5) The telling feels interactive, the reading monological.
- 6) The reading feels like a rendering of an account of events that happened a long, long time ago in a faraway place (“there” and “then”). The telling, on the other hand, seems to “happen,” unfolding before the audience’s very eyes and ears in the present moment (“here” and “now”), an experience that is often summed up in the response: “I felt like I was *there*.”³

³ Dennis Dewey, (paper presented at the second annual Network of Biblical Storytellers Scholars Conference on Biblical Storytelling and Scholarship, Navasota, Texas, 3 August 2004), 1-2.

If indeed “the Scripture well read is the sermon half preached” then perhaps one way for the Scripture to be well read is for it to be well *told* and not *read*. In so doing, then the Word of God is positioned to make a stronger connection with the hearer when the sermon is preached.

The Network of Biblical Storytellers (NOBS) defines Biblical storytelling as “. . . telling the stories of the sacred texts as they have been traditioned to us.” Furthermore, NOBS views Biblical Storytelling as a “. . . spiritual discipline that involves first committing a narrative text of Scripture to deep memory (not memorizing but internalizing the story) and then engaging with the text in a lively ‘telling’ of (the text) therefore binding together teller and listener in community.”⁴ To that end, I propose that Biblical storytelling works to create a stronger connection between the sermon and the text of Scripture that the sermon is based upon.

On one weekend a few years ago, my church (St. Paul Lutheran Church & School in Lakeland, Florida) invited Dennis Dewey to participate in our worship services as a Biblical storyteller. Throughout those services Dewey “told” about a dozen different Biblical stories. On this occasion there wasn’t a sermon preached that was based on any of those Scriptures, however the impact of that Scripture telling experience was well received from the comments of members filing out of church that day. The very next day Dewey received the following email from a young girl in the congregation:

Dear Mr. Dewey:

My name is Kimmy Black. I am one of the many intermediate children at St. Paul Lutheran Church. I just wanted to say thank you for sharing your talent with us and I also wanted to let you know that ever since I was little, I would sit in church

⁴ Network of Biblical Storytellers (NOBS) Home Page, “*What is Biblical Storytelling?*” http://www.nobs.org/what_is.html. (20 April 2005).

and try to understand the gospel lesson but I never succeeded. Now that I've heard you and your understandable lessons from the same gospel, I know what they mean when they use the term, "The Man Who Made Water into Wine." Thanks for everything!!! You brought me closer to my Savior today.⁵

This is clearly one of the goals of every preacher – to bring people closer to their Savior!

While there was no sermon preached on the occasion Ms. Black is writing about, the way in which the Word was *told* communicated to this young girl. My point here is not to make a case for there to be Scripture tellings but no sermon. However, if the reaction of Ms. Black is any indication of other people's reaction, then this is a compelling argument for Biblical storytelling as a useful homiletical aide to assist the worshiper in hearing, understanding, remembering, and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon preached.

The Project's Purpose and Plan

In the article "Heard Any Good Stories Lately?" Steven Fettke, professor of religion at Southeastern University, Lakeland, Florida writes:

When Jesus was asked in Luke 10, "Who is my neighbor?" he didn't say, "You must love all with whom you come in contact!" Nor did he say, "I have three points I want to make about loving your neighbor." Instead, he said, "There was a certain man going down from Jerusalem to Jericho . . ." Jesus preached by telling stories . . . I am convinced it is still true among believers and sinners alike, everyone would rather hear a good story than a laundry list of points or a stern lecture about musts and shoulds.⁶

The background behind Biblical storytelling recognizes some of the unique differences between orality and literacy. Practicing the art of Biblical storytelling is a return to the

⁵ Kimberly Black, E-mail to Dennis Dewey (1 March 2004).

⁶ Steven M. Fettke, "Heard Any Good Stories Lately?" *The Southeastern* (Summer 2003): 23.

culture in which Jesus lived (and those before Him) where stories, truths, and teachings were often transmitted orally long before they were ever captured in a written format.

One way to recapture that oral storytelling tradition is through the discipline of Biblical storytelling. Thomas Boomersshine is a modern day pioneer in the Biblical storytelling field. In his classic work on this subject, Boomersshine writes:

The purpose of this book is to recover the gospel as storytelling. The problem is that telling biblical stories is foreign to contemporary experience. We continue to read Bible stories to children. But the assumption is that once you grow up and learn to think, you will stop telling stories and start telling the truth. Telling the truth means that you will speak in conceptual abstractions. The only way to start an exploration of the gospel as storytelling is to learn to tell the stories. Until you have experienced the stories as stories, all arguments about the meaninglessness of “telling” the stories will be more or less meaningless abstractions. This book is therefore, a guide to journey into the gospel tradition in its original medium, oral narrative.⁷

This MAP seeks to demonstrate that the practice of Biblical storytelling is of benefit today in connecting the spoken Word with the sermon preached for the modern day hearer.

The specific project will involve the preaching of four sermons over four different weekends. These sermons will use both the traditional approach to reading the Scripture text and also the use of a Biblical storytelling presentation of the text. Surveys will be given out to the selected hearers and will seek to identify any marked differences the hearers’ report in connecting the Scripture text with the sermon.

At the 8:30 service on the first Sunday, the sermon text (selected from the lectionary for that day) will be *told* in a Biblical storytelling manner. At the 11:00 service that day, the same sermon text from the lectionary will be *read* in the typical fashion of reading the text from the lectern. The same sermon will be preached in both

⁷ Thomas E. Boomersshine, *Story Journey: An Invitation to the Gospel as Storytelling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 17.

services. This same exercise will be repeated a few weeks later. However, on this second occasion the sermon text will be *read* at 8:30 and it will be *told* at 11:00. Prior to these services I will secure a group (Group A) of 8-12 congregation members who will participate in the first two weeks of surveys. They will evaluate the connection of the Word of God with the sermon when the Scripture text is *read* or *told*.

A second group (Group B) of 8-12 people will be selected to participate in this same kind of survey several weeks later. On the first Sunday for Group B the Scripture text for the day will be *read* at the 8:30 service in the typical fashion of reading the text from the lectern. Then at the 11:00 service that same Scripture will be *told* in a Biblical storytelling manner. A few weeks later the reverse will happen. At the 8:30 service the Scripture text of the sermon will be *told* in a Biblical storytelling way. At the 11:00 service that same Scripture text will be *read* in a traditional style.

With both groups the surveys administered will seek to determine the hearers' understanding and remembering of the Biblical text as it connects to the sermon preached. The survey questions I will use are:

- 1.) Before today's worship service, how well did you know the Scripture which the sermon was based upon?
- 2.) Please write out the sermon text as best you can from memory.
- 3.) When the Scripture was read/told what captured your attention from this Word of God?
- 4.) What was the sermon about?
- 5.) Summarize how the Scripture text read/told connected to today's sermon.

The following chart summarizes the procedure I will follow.

	April 24, 2005	May 1, 2005	May 29, 2005	June 19, 2005
8:30	Storytelling	Reading	Storytelling	Reading
11:00	Reading	Storytelling	Reading	Storytelling
	Group A		Group B	

Since it will be necessary for the sermon text to be presented in a Biblical storytelling fashion each of those four Sundays, I will personally storytell the sermon text two of those weeks. However, I will also invite two other people in the congregation to present the sermon text in a Biblical storytelling manner as well. My purpose in involving other people in presenting the Scriptures in a storytelling way is so that any perceived benefit of Biblical storytelling is not directly related to one particular person's ability as a storyteller. Rather the premise of the MAP is that the Scripture told, regardless of who tells it, is a more useful way for the hearer to connect the words of Scripture with the preached word.

The Project's Theological and Congregational Setting

This project maintains that "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).⁸ Furthermore, as far as the Word of God is concerned, these words are not "taught us by human wisdom but . . . words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words." (1 Cor. 2:13). Throughout this project the presupposition will be that ". . . the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine."⁹ Martin Luther points out that, "The Holy Spirit does not work without the Word or before the Word, but He comes with and through the Word and never goes beyond the Word."¹⁰

⁸ All Scripture references are from the *New International Version*.

⁹ *Book of Concord*, ed. and trans. Theodore Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 505:9.

¹⁰ Martin Luther, cited in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume 1*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 201.

Because one of the presuppositions of this project is the belief in the authority and efficacy of the Scripture, Biblical storytelling is not attempting to add something to the efficacy of the Word. Glenn Nielsen, in his article “No Longer Dinosaurs,” points out that there are times when it appears that the preacher is leveling an assault on the efficacy of the Word by suggesting that the “rhetorical skill of the preacher is somehow needed to make the Word effective in the lives of the hearers.”¹¹ This project does not wish to elevate the rhetorical skill of the preacher or Biblical storyteller to make the Word more effective. “The means of grace, the Gospel allows for no human cooperation. The efficacy of the Word stands on its own. God works through the means apart from the speaker or hearer ability.”¹²

Related to the theology of the Word is the consideration of the *sources* from which that Word comes. When Luke set out to write an orderly account for Theophilus, his “words suggest that two kinds of sources were in existence before he began to write his Gospel. Eyewitnesses had delivered *oral* traditions on the basis of which “many” had compiled *written* narratives.”¹³ Likewise, the Commission on Theology and Church Relations (CTCR) points out that “2 Peter 1:21 and 1 Corinthians 2:13 represent both prophets and apostles as ‘speaking’ (lalein) by inspiration. This ‘speaking,’ however must not be understood as only referring to their *oral* utterances so as to exclude their *written* words.”¹⁴ If the previous statement is true then the reverse can also be said as

¹¹ Glenn Nielsen, “No Longer Dinosaurs: Relating Lutheran Homiletics and Communication Practice,” in *Concordia Journal* 12:1 (January 1999): 17.

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, “*The Inspiration of Scripture*,” March 1975, 6-7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

well. Therefore, as far as the Biblical texts are concerned they must not be understood as referring only to their *written* words so as to exclude their *oral* utterances. Additionally, it is noted that “1 John 1:3-4 and 2 Thessalonians 2:15 indicate that the apostles made no distinction between that which they proclaimed by word of mouth and that which they wrote.”¹⁵ It is not to be ignored that the source behind the written record of Scripture that we have is the oral transmission of these texts.

The congregation I serve has a baptized membership around 1400 with average worship attendance through the year of 650. We offer three worship services each weekend: Saturday at 6:00 p.m. and Sunday at 8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Many years ago (before my time there) a lay reader program was instituted. We try to involve a large number of people each taking their turn in reading the Old Testament and Epistle lessons for either Saturday or Sunday worship. Because of the number of lectors we have there is a wide variety of speaking styles as these lessons are read. Most of the lectors do a commendable job *reading* the appointed Scriptures for the day.

Having already introduced the congregation to Biblical storytelling prior to the initiation of this MAP, my observation is that they have been very receptive to any involvement with Biblical storytelling. As mentioned earlier, Dennis Dewey was invited to participate in a worship service in 2004 at our church that included the telling of several Biblical stories. Because the response to his participation was so favorable, he was invited to return again in 2005. In addition to Dewey’s storytelling, I have done some storytelling of the Scriptures myself prior to this project beginning. Furthermore, on Palm Sunday 2005 I assembled a group of 13 members in the congregation who

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

learned individual sections of the Passion narrative from Matthew 26 and 27. At the conclusion of both Sunday mornings services and as a transition into the theme of the Passion for Holy Week, each one stepped forward one by one and *told* their portion of the Scripture. This telling was very well received by the congregation.

The Project's Implications

When someone has had a favorable experience with something, then it is easy to conclude that others will respond in the same way. Having attended two of the Festival Gatherings for the Network of Biblical Storytellers, I have had very favorable experiences as an observer of these Biblical storytelling sessions. These tellings made it seem as if the Word of God was literally coming alive right before me like I have never experienced before. I sensed that I was participating in a sacred story that wasn't from a long, long time ago, but rather a story that was very present and real for me right now. Therefore, my basic assumption is that many people would likely have a similar reaction.

Preachers work hard at trying to apply all the right homiletical skills and tools so that the sermon preached will be a sermon remembered. But in addition to a sermon remembered, the Word of God needs to be remembered too. This MAP will show that the Word of God will be better retained because of the way in which it is presented. It would seem that if the Word of God was more easily remembered then a clearer, stronger connection can be made with the sermon preached.

Perhaps the practice of Biblical storytelling today can be an answer to the prayer that has been prayed for decades in "The Order of Morning Service" from *The Lutheran Hymnal*. In "The Collect for the Word" the pastor prays, "Blessed Lord, who hast caused

all Holy Scripture to be written for our learning, grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest them, . . .”¹⁶ Biblical storytelling is a way in which the hearer (not to mention the Biblical storyteller) may be able to “hear, read, mark, learn and inwardly digest” the Word of God. In so doing, then through the use of Biblical storytelling, the hearing, understanding, remembering, and connecting the text of the sermon with the sermon will be stronger.

¹⁶ *The Lutheran Hymnal*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1941), 14.

CHAPTER 2

A THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITION FOR PREACHING

Since this chapter is being written while the 2005 Master's Golf Tournament is taking place the Tournament will serve as a back drop for unpacking my theological presuppositions. In the game of golf every hole begins with the player selecting the appropriate club from his bag for his tee shot. There are a number of different clubs to choose from, but it's important to select the right one for each different shot. Which club to use, a driver or an iron, is up to the player and is based on how far it is from where the ball is to the green. Whatever club is chosen is the tool the golfer has at the moment to get the ball closer towards the hole.

In the field of homiletics there are a number of different approaches that any preacher may make in order for the Word of God to be received by the hearer in a meaningful way. Whatever approach is selected is the preacher's own choosing. While a certain sermon format or style may be selected by the preacher, we know that there are other options as well. The use of Biblical storytelling is offered as *one* option in which to make a stronger connection between the inspired Word of God and the preached word for the benefit of the hearer. Biblical storytelling is *one* homiletical tool or aide that may be particularly effective on certain occasions as the preacher seeks to connect the Word of God to the sermon for the benefit of the hearer.

During Round 2 of the 2005 Masters Tournament, a conflict arose between two players. One player (Vijay Singh) complained to tournament officials that another player (Phil Mickelson) in the group in front of him was leaving "spike" marks on the green. As it turned out Mickelson was wearing metal spikes on his shoes (most players wear soft

spikes). After investigation tournament officials determined that the spikes were within the legal eight millimeter length. While Singh and Mickelson verbally jabbed at one another for awhile over this issue, rules are rules and Mickelson didn't break any by wearing metal spikes.

Rules are rules. What sport or business or worthy activity does not have a set of rules and regulations? In Richard Lischer's book, *A Theology of Preaching*, he poses the question of why is it necessary for there to be a theology of preaching. Simply put, Lischer recognizes that "Theology monitors the church's proclamation of the gospel."¹⁷ Additionally, Karl Barth "calls theology the church's 'self-test' by which it measures its language and life."¹⁸ These comments summarize the stimulus for having a theology of the Word as it relates to the preaching task. It helps to keep the "sport" of preaching in check. Theology is the rule book, the guidelines, the parameters within which the preaching task takes place. While there can actually be a rather long list of entries for a theology of preaching, this MAP offers those that will serve as a kind of "self-test" to govern our understanding of Lutheran preaching, especially as we consider the use of Biblical storytelling.

Preaching Flows out of the Resurrection

Most sports are all about winning. In addition to a hefty sum of cash, the winner of the Masters Tournament also takes home the coveted "green jacket" (more on that later). Obviously, players play to win. They want a victory. They long to be the one celebrated and to celebrate. That's how sports work. You enter in order to win. But how

¹⁷ Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching* (Durham: The Labyrinth Press, 1992), 5.

¹⁸ Ibid.

about something where as you enter, the “prize” has already been won for you? Lutheran preaching begins at the point of celebration, victory, triumph – not because of what the preacher will do but because of what God has done.

While studying the status of preaching across this country, Lori Carrell makes a humbling comment about the high value of the preaching role in today’s society. Carrell observes:

Where do people gather to hear someone they know speak publicly? Where do they go to try to satisfy their craving for the early rhetorician’s deal – a good person speaking well about something that matters? Where is it they come, hoping to hear a credible speaker provide inspiration, information, and insight? In the United States, at the turn of the millennium, incredibly, that place is the church.¹⁹

Although Carrell is not saying here that the majority of our nation’s population is in church each weekend, nevertheless she acknowledges that a significant number of people are exposed to God’s Word each week. While the reasons and motivations for people’s attendance may be varied, they are there! Therefore, the preacher’s first motivation for preaching will always flow out of the resurrection event. It provides the “inspiration, information and insight” that comes only from Christ crucified and risen.

In Paul’s resurrection chapter he proclaims, “But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:57). Paul acknowledges the victory that God gives to us through the resurrection of Christ. Why? Because, “Death has been swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54). When Carrell writes that people are going to hear someone speak about “something that matters,” nothing matters more than the victory of Christ over sin and death and hell for the benefit of all. The kind of victory that Paul talks about here is a victory that is sure and certain. It is not a victory that is a

¹⁹ Carrell, 21-22.

“maybe.” Preaching the resurrection is not done with a sense of uncertainty or wish-fulness. No, resurrection preaching is because of the “victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” Lischer states that because of the resurrection “preaching bears in its own fiber a note of victory.”²⁰

To capture that mood and spirit of victory, we return to the post-resurrection accounts recorded in Scripture. The reactions of the women and the disciples flow out of the startling awareness of an empty tomb and express a combination of joy and amazement.

“So the women hurried away from the tomb, afraid yet filled with joy, and ran to tell his disciples” (Matt. 28:8).

“She went and told those who had been with him and who were mourning and weeping . . . These returned and reported it to the rest; . . .” (Mark 16:10, 13).

“When they came back from the tomb, they told all those things to the Eleven and to all the others” (Luke 24:9).

“They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the Eleven and those with them, assembled together and saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.’ Then the two told what had happened on the way . . .” (Luke 24:33-35).

“Mary Magdalene went to the disciples with the news: ‘I have seen the Lord!’ And she told them that he had said these things to her” (John 20:18).

All of these Scriptures reference a person or a group of people “telling” or proclaiming the message of Christ to someone else. In other words, it is because of the resurrection the women and disciples have something to *tell* others. There is good news to proclaim. “Christian preaching was born in the resurrection of Jesus. It happened in this way: one disciple, trembling, cried out in a breaking, terrified voice, ‘Christ is risen!’ And the receiver of the message made it a sermon by completing the circuit and exulting, ‘He is

²⁰ Lischer, 29.

risen indeed!”²¹ Lischer adds, “Only because of the resurrection does Christian preaching assume the significance and importance so desperately claimed for it.”²² In an article entitled, “Cross and Craft: Two Elements of a Lutheran Homiletic,” Lischer reflects: “The angel seems to be saying, ‘Look, there is a kind of speech that is commensurate with this new event called *risen*. It is risen speech. Your speech did not create this event, but it completes it.”²³

Lutheran preaching flows out of this risen speech because the resurrection event is both the power and the content with which we proclaim this message. The resurrection event is not the conclusion to the story. It’s not where we end. Instead, the resurrection is where we begin and because it is where we begin, then “the proclamation of Christ’s death and resurrection is always followed by an authoritative ‘Therefore’ (as in Romans 5:1), which connects the salvation event with the stories of our lives.”²⁴

Because of the message of God’s actions in Christ, there is power and authority – through the Word of God – for us to respond. Once Jesus gave thanks and broke the bread with the Emmaus disciples, they *therefore* “got up and returned at once . . . saying, ‘It is true! The Lord has risen’” (Luke 24:34). *Therefore*, what we do in the preaching task flows out of the resurrection message. The victory is won and so, *therefore*, there is good news to preach.

In the spirit of telling this good news of Christ’s resurrection to one another, Biblical storytelling is a live retelling of the Word. One of the unique features of this oral

²¹ Ibid., 16.

²² Ibid., 16.

²³ Richard Lischer, “Cross and Craft: Two Elements of a Lutheran Homiletic,” *Concordia Journal* 25:1 (January 1999): 7.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

discourse is that the Word of God becomes relational as the message is shared, perhaps in a similar way as the women would have shared the message with the disciples on Easter morning. Consequently, the story told is something that the teller has learned, even embodied, and so it is communicated from speaker to hearer in a similar way as the Emmaus disciples who returned and “told what had happened on the way.”

The gospel writer Matthew tells of an angel who spoke to the women and told them that the body of Jesus was no longer in the tomb. The angel said, “Then go quickly and tell his disciples: ‘He is risen from the dead and is going ahead of you into Galilee. There you will see him.’ Now I have told you” (Matt. 28:7). In response to the angel’s message the women went and did the same: “So the women hurried away from the tomb . . . and ran to tell his disciples” (Matt. 28:8). The sharing of the resurrection message had a conversational, relational, personal nature to it. Biblical storytelling may be a way to recapture and communicate the same. Dale Meyer points out that the word *homiletics* comes from the Latin *homilia* (“conversation”).²⁵ The communication of the Scriptures in a Biblical storytelling manner flows out of a conversational, relational, personal sharing of this resurrection message. Considering the sharing of the resurrection message that took place Easter morning, Richard Ward reflects on the sharing of God’s Word: “We would treat the Scripture not simply as a text fixed on a page but as an *experience to be shared* with her listeners.”²⁶

²⁵ Dale Meyer, “The Place of the Sermon in the Order of the Service” in *Liturgical Preaching*, ed. Paul J. Grime and Dean W. Nadasdy (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 13.

²⁶ Richard F. Ward, *Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 35.

The Resurrection Message is Not Only Spoken but Also Experienced

A few weeks prior to watching the Masters Tournament, I attended a few days of The Players Championship (golf tournament) played outside of Jacksonville, Florida. Walking that course for two days and assessing the difficulty of some of the shots the players would have to make certainly made me feel that I had “experienced” (maybe only vicariously) an actual professional golf tournament even as I was watching the Masters Tournament weeks later on television. While I’ve never been to the Masters Tournament in Augusta, Georgia, I can more vividly imagine what that experience was like having had experienced another professional tournament in person just weeks prior to that event.

In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *dabar* is not only translated “word” but can also be translated “event.” When the Word of God is experienced as an event that is *happening now* rather than something that already happened a long time ago, the listener is more fully engaged. Walter Ong in his classic work, *Orality and Literacy*, observes, “The spoken word is always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word.”²⁷ If the word is received in an atmosphere as if it is a “movement in time” then it is more likely to be experienced. Ronald Allen says that it is important for the preacher to understand the sermon “not as a bulletin board that posts information about God, world, church, but as an event. Things really happen during the sermon.”²⁸

²⁷ Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 1982), 74.

²⁸ Ronald Allen, “Modes of Discourse for the Sermon in the Postmodern World” in *Theology for Preaching: Authority, Truth and Knowledge of God in a Postmodern Ethos*, ed. Ronald J. Allen, et. al. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 169.

In other words, to say that “things really happen” is to say that the Word is being experienced. That is not to say that the hearer is always going to clearly know or understand what God is doing in his or her life at that time. Nor is this to suggest that the hearer needs to “feel” that such an experience is taking place. However, because of the power and authority of the Word when it is proclaimed there is an event, there is activity taking place. “Things really happen.”

In the book *Liturgical Preaching*, Dean Nadasdy entitles his essay “I Heard a Voice, and I Turned Around to See.” Nadasdy takes this title from Revelation 1:12 where John writes of having heard a voice that instructed him to write down the letters to the seven churches.²⁹ With that image in mind, Nadasdy goes on to say, “Good preaching is both heard and seen.”³⁰ It is heard and seen because it is something that is experienced. Therefore, Nadasdy admits, “We may write sermons, but we must deliver them to make them seen and heard and experienced.”³¹ To that end, Biblical storytelling may assist in engaging the hearer to experience the Word of God therefore aiding one’s hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon proclaimed.

In a similar manner Richard Lischer writes about the impact of live sound, the living voice in creating a sense of power and presence. To illustrate this he relates the following:

There is no comparison between a film of the National Theatre’s *Merchant of Venice* with Laurence Olivier, and the live performance. In the live

²⁹ Dean Nadasdy, “I Heard a Voice and I Turned Around to See,” in *Liturgical Preaching*, ed. Paul J. Grime and Dean W. Nadasdy (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 192.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

performance, the actor's power is immeasurably greater. When Olivier as Shylock is led off at the end of his enforced baptism, he emits a cry of anguish so penetratingly symbolic of all that Shakespeare was about in the play, that the audience almost forgets to breathe in its effort to become one with the character. For all the talk of word-event in post-Bultmannian circles, it is here, in the active production of sound that deep calls unto deep and the living, resonant word becomes an "event."³²

The living voice, as in the living voice of the storyteller, creates an event that causes the hearer to experience the Word of God as if it was present "here" and "now" not somewhere off in the distance – "there" and "then." When there is the "here" and "now" nature to the spoken Word of God, then a stronger connection can be made a between the Scripture text and the sermon preached.

The Performative Authority of the Word of God

A chip shot on the 16th green of the 2005 Master's Tournament Final Round may have been the most incredible shot of this tournament. Chipping for a birdie Tiger Woods put the ball on the green and, following the contour of the green, the ball rolled directly toward the hole . . . and stopped . . . and then rolled in. Amidst the accolades of the crowd, you couldn't help but hear someone shout (or wonder yourself), "How'd he do that?"

When it comes to the preaching of God's Word, the Holy Spirit brings the law and gospel to bear on the souls of people. People come to repentance and are comforted with the sweet gospel of Jesus Christ and their lives are changed, and you can't help but wonder, "How'd He (God) do that?" The answer to the question above about a chip shot into the hole on the 16th green may be "skill" or "luck." However, the answer to that

³² Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 50.

question in the lives of God's people is certainly nothing less, and indeed nothing more, than the power of the Holy Spirit working through the Word.

One of the most striking testimonies to the power of God's Word is from Isaiah.

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 words that goes out from 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).

Here the Lord states that the Word of God has a performative authority all its own. The Word of God is sown . . . and something happens. It works. It convicts. It comforts. It challenges. It creates new life. In some fashion, the Word of God through the Holy Spirit does the work for which the Lord so directs. Now, the way it works and the manner in which it works may not always be clearly understood by preacher or hearer, but this does not minimize the effective power of God's Word. In fact, Richard Lischer acknowledges, "Preaching works before it is fully understood."³³ While we may never fully understand it, the performative authority of God's Word is at work to "change lives and create new situations."³⁴ To this Biblical truth one can't help but wonder or say out loud, "How'd He do that?"

Curious as to how the Word of God has such power and yet acknowledging that it does, Lischer writes, "Every Sunday School child asks why, when Isaac discovered that he had spoken a blessing over the wrong child, he did not simply 'take it back.' He could not; the word spoken became the deed done."³⁵ In the New Testament, Jesus' word

³³ Ibid., 48.

³⁴ Ibid., 53.

³⁵ Ibid.

carries that kind of performative authority . . . As Bultmann has said, ‘His works are his words [and] his words are his works.’”³⁶

Nielsen points out that “in the preaching event, whatever is spiritually beneficial is given solely and fully by God.”³⁷ With the use of Biblical storytelling I am not suggesting that such a practice in any way “adds to” the effective power of God’s Word in the life of the hearer. Even though the preacher or hearer may not fully understand how God’s Word can have the kind of power and effect that it does to change lives, what is significant is that it does have this effect. Therefore, the Lutheran Confessions state: “Holy Scriptures ascribe conversion, faith in Christ, regeneration, renewal, and everything that belongs to its real beginning and completion in no way to the human powers of the natural free will, be it entirely or one-half or the least and tiniest part, but altogether and alone to the divine operation and the Holy Spirit.”³⁸

Luther and the Confessional writers operated with this Scriptural grounding. In his Large Catechism, Luther writes:

. . . when we seriously ponder the Word, hear it, and put it to use, such is its power that it never departs without fruit. It always awakens new understanding, new pleasure, and a new spirit of devotion, and it constantly cleanses the heart and its meditations. For these words are not idle or dead, but effective and living.³⁹

Notice that Luther is intentional to use the words “always and constantly” – “always awakens” and “constantly cleanses.” Luther’s writing here is in the context of

³⁶ Rudolf Bultmann, “The Concept of the Word of God in the New Testament,” in *Faith and Understanding*, vol. I, ed. Robert Funk., trans. Louise Smith (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 308 quoted in Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 53.

³⁷ Nielsen, 18.

³⁸ *Book of Concord*, 526:25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 379:101.

admonishing the faithful to keep the third commandment where we are to keep the Sabbath holy by the hearing and honoring of God's Word. In doing so, Luther asserts that these words (God's Word) "are not idle or dead, but effective and living."

The confessional writers were careful to point out that the effective power of God's Word is not based on any external elements. It is not due to the skill of the preacher or the participation of the people that the Word of God does its work. In the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration we read: "All who would be saved must hear this preaching, for the preaching and hearing of God's Word are the Holy Spirit's instrument in, with, and through which he wills to act efficaciously, to convert men to God, and to work in them both to will and to achieve."⁴⁰ In other words, it is "in, with and through" the preaching and hearing of God's Word that someone is saved not through any other external means. In similar fashion the Formula declares:

Man's natural powers cannot contribute anything or help in any way (1 Cor. 2:12; 2 Cor. 3:4-12) to bring about what God in his immeasurable kindness and mercy anticipates us and has his holy Gospel preached to us, through which the Holy Spirit wills to work such conversion and renewal in us, and through the preaching of his Word and our meditation upon it kindles faith and other God-pleasing virtues in us, so that they are gifts and works of the Holy Spirit alone.⁴¹

The use of Biblical storytelling to connect the Word of God with the sermon is not intended to unduly draw attention to the craft of Biblical storytelling. The benefit of any particular style or technique that a preacher may use is to assist the hearer in better receiving and applying that Word to life. If the manner in which God's Word is shared is helpful in effectively remembering and connecting the Word of God with the sermon, then Biblical storytelling has merit. Lischer reflects, "May the preacher say of his or her

⁴⁰ Ibid., 531:52.

⁴¹ Ibid., 535:71.

craft what the church arts designer said of his: ‘I don’t want my work to call attention to itself. After the service one worshiper may say to another, ‘Did you notice the candelabrum?’ The other will reply, ‘No, but come to think of it, it was beautiful.’”⁴²

The use of biblical storytelling is simply to be a servant of the Word while the performative power of the Word lies with the Word itself.

There is an “Art Form” in how the Word is Proclaimed

My youngest son, Theodore, is age 12. Many of the older golfers around the golf course where he often plays have observed him play golf on several occasions. Their response is often, “He’s a natural!” For some, it seems as if they are born with the ability. It comes naturally. As I watch a golf tournament like the Masters, it seems every drive off the tee or fairway, every chip or putt comes effortlessly. And while some of these players may indeed have some natural, innate ability we know that you don’t get to that level of play without rigorous practice and without developing some well crafted abilities. Natural ability or not, there is an “art” to the sport.

In order to communicate the Word of God technique and skill is needed in order “for the Word to be diligently and earnestly heard.”⁴³ With that in mind, Lischer writes:

The preacher holds nothing back and takes whatever risks necessary in order to insure the delivery of the gospel. The power for this kind of commitment comes from no particular preaching model in the Bible, not Peter before the Council or Paul before Agrippa, but rather from God’s own commitment in “speaking” the Word made flesh (John 1:14).⁴⁴

⁴² Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 28.

⁴³ Nielsen, 21.

⁴⁴ Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 61.

Here Lischer opens the door for the fact that the preacher will need to explore a variety of communication techniques in an effort to engage the hearer in receiving the Word so that it is “heard, experienced and remembered.”⁴⁵ In order to do this there is no one template that the preacher must use to guarantee fruitful results. However, in an effort to engage the hearer “preachers . . . are nothing less than artist or poet when serious about their craft.”⁴⁶ While the Word of God alone has performative authority, there is nevertheless still an art form to crafting the Word preached for the benefit of the hearer.

Nielsen acknowledges the homiletical tussle that exists in trying to keep in balance this issue of the authoritative and performative power of God’s Word in conjunction with the preacher’s rhetorical skill. The effective power of God’s Word is not based on the rhetorical skill of the preacher. But the rhetorical skill of the preacher may make a difference for how the person in the pew receives that Word. Therefore, it is a reasonable question to consider, “How do we do both – rely on the power of the Word alone and communicate so that contemporary ears hear this Word?”⁴⁷ While we completely embrace the performative authority of Scripture, it is also true that communication techniques, skills and abilities make a difference in how those words are received. It appears that the authors of the Confessions also wrestled with this same issue. While clearly affirming that “. . . the Word of God is and should remain the sole rule and norm of all doctrine, and that no human being’s writings dare be put on a par with it, but that everything must be subjected to it,” they nevertheless go on to say, “This,

⁴⁵ Nielsen, 27.

⁴⁶ Nadasdy, 193.

⁴⁷ Ibid.,15.

of course, does not mean that other good, useful, and pure books, such as interpretations of Holy Scriptures, refutations of errors, and expositions of doctrinal articles, should be rejected. If they are to be accepted and used as helpful expositions and explanations.”⁴⁸

While “homiletical styles and rhetorical skills and communication techniques” are not listed along with the aforementioned “interpretations of the Holy Scriptures, refutations of errors, and expositions of doctrinal articles,” they could be added to that list. Learning certain communication styles and applying them appropriately does not diminish the authoritative power of the Word of God. The pure, unaltered Word of God is what is to be communicated. Period! However, the style and technique with which that Word is presented is the art form that the preacher crafts in order to communicate the Word in a way that the hearer can receive it in a meaningful manner and “effectively engage the listening processes of today’s worshiper.”⁴⁹

Nevertheless, the Lutheran homiletician readily accepts that the authority of the Word and the preacher’s skill in communicating that Word must always be kept in proper balance. Rightfully so, Nielsen notes that the efficacy of the Word is not to take a back seat to rhetorical skill and rhetorical skill is not needed to somehow “make the Word effective in the lives of the hearers.”⁵⁰ The position of this paper does not call into question the efficacy of the Word nor does it suggest that the efficacy of the Word takes a back seat to rhetorical skill. However, this paper does seek to demonstrate that the use of certain rhetorical skills, in this case the use of Biblical storytelling, may make a

⁴⁸ *Book of Concord*, 505:9-506:10.

⁴⁹ Nielsen, 15.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

difference in order to “effectively engage the listening process” whereby the Word of God will be heard, understood, remembered and connected to the proclaimed word.

If the use of various communication styles made no difference whatsoever for the hearer in receiving the Word of God, then the landscape of contemporary homiletics would have no need for different “techniques” and “styles.” Nevertheless, the options for alternative homiletical aides are many and varied and most, if not all, of them are proposed with the goal in mind to better engage and connect the Word of God with the hearer. To that end the “new homiletic” includes “Craddock’s induction, Lowry’s loop, Buttrick’s moves, Jensen’s story, Miller’s marketplace preaching”⁵¹ and more. While some may view these methods as ways to make the Word of God more effective, that is not how Lutheran preachers view these tools. Indeed, certain communication styles have been a part of our Lutheran homiletic long before any installments to the “new homiletic.” Consider Caemmerer’s “goal, malady, means,” Aho’s “lively skeleton” and Rossow’s “gospel handles.” Each of these is taught as a way to capture the hearer’s ear and mind as the Word of God is proclaimed.

In her research Lori Carrell quotes Neil Alexander’s article “Stick it in Your Ear! Preaching as an Oral-Aural Transaction.” “People are not changed when words are spoken, but when they are heard.”⁵² Alexander’s comment gets to the root of why preachers and scholars like Craddock, Lowry, Buttrick, Jensen, as well as Cammerer, Aho, Rossow and others do what they do and why we attempt to learn what they teach. What they are doing is trying to facilitate the hearing of the words.

⁵¹ Ibid., 16.

⁵² Carrell, 39.

The ensuing project on the use of Biblical storytelling is attempting to facilitate the preaching task and effectively engage the listening process by strengthening the connection to the oral recitation of Scripture and the sermon preached. To that end, the project adheres to the principle that “rhetorical skill employed well may allow for the Word to be diligently and earnestly heard.”⁵³

Dale Meyer in his essay entitled “The Place of the Sermon in the Order of the Service” tells the story about a sermon preached by Augustine that “almost failed.” In a particular sermon Augustine was chiding the people for participating in an ancient ritual that ought not to be taking place anymore among a gathering of Christ’s faithful.

Augustine recalls that he was fulfilling two of the three purposes of a speech. He could see from their smiles that he was pleasing them with his message. Their faces also showed that they were receiving his teaching. However, he saw no tears in the audience as he preached. He was not getting through to them with a message of repentance and amendment of life. So Augustine changed his preaching plan on the spot, trying different approaches until he saw tears throughout the audience. Then he knew he was succeeding. The murderous reenactments were stopped.

That raises this important question: where lies the *persuasive* power of the sermon? The answer is not a facile, “The Gospel!” The tears came because the power of the Law and that power – *nota bene* – would not have worked had Augustine not adapted his presentation, had he not adjusted the plan of his sermon. A sermon plan (*rhetoric* in the true sense of the word and not the current connotation of speech that is untrue, the craft of spin doctors) seeks verbal and visual ways that give maximum room for God to do his convicting work through the Law.⁵⁴

This story is offered here to point out that Augustine recognized the need (there on the spot) to reform and alter his manner of rhetoric in order to impact the hearer. In other

⁵³ Nielsen, 21.

⁵⁴ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*. Transl. E.B. Pusey, et al. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica Great Books of the Western World, 1952), quoted in Dale Meyer, “The Place of the Sermon in the Order of the Service,” 17-18.

words, Augustine was acknowledging that there is an “art form” to proclaiming the Word of God so that it is “heard, experienced, and remembered.”⁵⁵

While there are a number of different rhetorical devices or communication techniques that may assist in the message being “heard, experienced, and remembered,” Biblical storytelling is offered as one way for this to take place. By engaging the listener in a “telling” of the Scripture text which the sermon is to be based upon, there can be a greater hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon proclaimed.

“The Green Jacket”

In addition to the rather large “purse” that the winner of the Master’s Tournament walks away with, one of the long standing traditions of that event is for the winner to be presented the “green jacket.” All that effort, all that skill, all those shots . . . all so that you can wear the green jacket.

Writing a theology of preaching may not win any awards or bring in the big money, but establishing this kind of foundation and framework gives the preacher something to “wear” as he goes about the preaching task. While much more could be written about a theology of preaching, at a minimum these presuppositions are to be worn by the preacher as he seeks to try on various skills or techniques related to his trade. Why? Richard Lischer writes that at times we accept the teachings of the church for their “truth-value” rather than their “use-value.” However, a theology of preaching needs both. The tenants that are proposed above are proposed for their truth-value within the

⁵⁵ Nielsen, 27.

framework of Lutheran preaching. With what follows in the next chapter, Biblical storytelling will be “tried on” and measured for its use-value in assisting the hearer in hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the Word of God with the sermon preached.

CHAPTER 3

ORAL HISTORY AND BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

Living in Florida there is always the very real prospect of being affected by a hurricane. However, many people who live in *central* Florida often feel like the chances are rather minimal of receiving any kind of “direct hit.” The year 2004 was an exception. Of the four hurricanes (Charley, Frances, Jean and Ivan) that struck Florida that year, three of them (Charley, Frances, and Jean) crossed through the center of the state. More specifically all three passed through the county (Polk) where I live, with the eye of the storm coming only within miles of my community (Lakeland). Thankfully, none of these hurricanes were greater than a category 3 (which is bad enough) when they passed through. While most of us were huddled in our homes during the howling of the wind and the pouring of the rain, those fearful hours were relatively short lived. However, the effects of these storms have lived on long after the hurricane season passed.

For days and weeks following each of those hurricanes I went around the community to help friends and neighbors clean up and talk about what they experienced. Everyone has a story to tell. Some stories were of huge oak trees not only resting on the top of their houses, but some were sitting in their living rooms. Some stories were of roofing shingles blown away and water dripping inside the house. Two of the hurricanes came within weeks of each other and so most people were not able to get their roofs repaired or even covered with a tarp before the second one hit.

I heard a story of two parents who were sitting in their family room one night while the hurricane was passing through. Their youngest daughter was asleep in her

bedroom. Or so they thought. The little girl got up to get a drink of water and go to the bathroom, and while she was in the bathroom, a giant tree in the front yard was uprooted and came crashing down on the corner of the house demolishing the little girl's bedroom. Because the girl was in the bathroom, her life was spared. From house to house, from home to home, from family to family, from person to person everyone has a story to tell.

In a Serendipity small group workshop I attended many years ago, Lyman Coleman made that exact point, "Everyone has a story to tell." Coleman hails the merits of small group ministry whereby people are gathered together in groups of 8-12 people for Bible study and prayer and personal sharing. One of the goals of this process is to engage each person in sharing their own experiences and how the Word of God impacts their lives. Every one has a story to tell. Tom Boomershine says it this way: "Story is a primary language of experience . . . One of the ways we know each other is by telling our stories. We live in stories."⁵⁶ Going around from home to home of many of my church members following the days of those hurricanes truly revealed that everyone does indeed have a story to tell, and that emphasizes the natural quality of storytelling. Even Biblical storytelling.

The Storytelling Tradition

Which came first – the spoken or written story? In Kevin Bradt's work, *Story as a Way of Knowing*, he suggests that, "Each of us is born into a world that is first wholly oral-aural . . . As newborns in the delivery room; we are able to distinguish the sound of

⁵⁶ Boomershine, 18.

our mother's voice from other noises assaulting us."⁵⁷ This thought is not unlike what Jesus says in John 10:27, "My sheep listen to my voice. I know them, and they follow me." The sheep know the voice of their shepherd. Today we might want to interpret that to mean that we know the writings and teachings of the Lord because of what we have read. However, Jesus was making a comparison between a shepherd and his sheep who actually *hear* His voice. They hear because the shepherd is speaking to them.

Writing as a regular means of communication is a rather late development in human history. It is believed that, considering the whole of human history, the first script or true writing of any kind was developed fairly late, around 3500 B.C.⁵⁸ More specifically the development of the Greek alphabet didn't take place until around 720-700 B.C.⁵⁹ For all those years prior to any kind of written script, the transmission of thought and communication happened in an oral-aural manner. Still around the world today, that remains the same. Of all the many thousands of languages spoken throughout the course of human history, only a small percentage has been transferred into a written language. While the Bible has been translated into nearly 2000 languages, in most of those languages there was no written script before the written record of the Bible. Throughout history the constant in the world of communication has remained oral communication. Walter Ong believes, "The basic orality of language is permanent."⁶⁰

In Luke's introduction to his gospel account he writes:

⁵⁷ Kevin Bradt, *Story As a Way of Knowing* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1997), 6.

⁵⁸ Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (London and New York: Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, 1982), 83.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 7.

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. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, . . . (Luke 1:1-3).

Since Luke begins by saying that “many have undertaken to draw up an account,” he suggests here that many have attempted to *write down* what all has happened. He also acknowledges that there are those who were *eyewitnesses* and so probably some of those eyewitnesses (if not all of them) shared their accounts by word of mouth. However, for Theophilus’ benefit, Luke is attempting to “write an orderly account” of what all has been going on as it relates to the life and ministry of Jesus Christ. It would seem from these introductory verses of Luke that what is recorded in his gospel record is a documentation of what has been both heard and read.

Elsewhere in the New Testament we read in 2 Peter 1:21, “For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.” In light of this text, Francis Pieper noted, “The holy men of God, being moved by the Holy Ghost, did not merely think or meditate, but they ‘spake,’ that is, uttered words.”⁶¹ Likewise, Paul writes: “This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words” (1 Cor. 2:13). Do Peter and Paul’s words suggest that what came from God was first spoken before it was ever recorded in a written form or was it first written before it was spoken?

In 2 Thess. 2:15 we read, “So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we pass on to you, whether by *word of mouth* or by letter” (emphasis mine). From the research of Susan Niditch, she concludes that, “Scholars suggest further that the

⁶¹ Pieper, 217-218.

appearance of a work in manuscript provides no assurance that the work was conceived of as a 'text' in the modern sense or even originally written, as opposed to composed orally."⁶² Likewise, Walter Ong believes that, "The Bible passages obviously are written records, but they come from an orally constituted sensibility and tradition."⁶³ Furthermore, Ong says that "writing is a derivative of speech, not vice versa, and that speech in its original state has nothing at all to do with writing."⁶⁴

Many of the various stories and other accounts that are available to us in written form today as a Biblical text are likely to have been orally transmitted long before they were ever recorded in a literate form. Even as late as New Testament times, it is understood that the level of literacy among people was extremely low. While there are varying estimates on what the actual literacy rate was at that time, it seems reasonable to conclude that no more than 10% of the population of the Roman Empire could even read.⁶⁵ Therefore, not only could most not read but even fewer could write. For the most part, "Ancient Greece was in many ways an oral society in which the written word took second place to the spoken. Far more was heard or spoken, rather than written and read."⁶⁶ As a result of the highly oral nature of society at that time, it is believed that once the inspired words of the apostles and prophets were actually put in print, what was

⁶² Susan Niditch, *Oral Word and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.), 41.

⁶³ Walter Ong, *The Presence of the Word: Some Prolegomena for Cultural and Religious History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967), 19.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁶⁵ Whitney Shiner, *Proclaiming the Gospel: First-Century Performance of Mark* (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2003), 17.

⁶⁶ Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 3.

written was influenced in part by the styles of orally produced or performed works.⁶⁷ Consequently, “It has long been suggested that oral works lie behind many of the written works of Scripture.”⁶⁸

What all of this means for the Biblical record is that in such a highly oral-aural culture, the practice of storytelling was common place, even with what we would consider to be “God’s Word.” Storytelling was everywhere, even Biblical storytelling. “In a time when oral speech was the primary mode of communication, stories provided a means of passing the time, passing on news, providing entertainment, instilling values and norms of behavior, and legitimating and critiquing the social life of individuals and communities.”⁶⁹ In other words, storytelling was a part of the culture. And because storytelling was such a part of the culture at that time, the transmission of God’s Word was often communicated in this fashion as well. After all, there were few printed texts available, and for the ones that there were, few people knew how to read them.

Aside from the practical implications of whether people in Biblical times and pre-Biblical times could read or whether there were printed texts available or not, we have the inspired words from the Holy Spirit to Moses on what God’s desire was for the passing on of what He has “spoken.” Therefore, in Deuteronomy we have what Moses was to pass on (first orally and then later in written form) to the people of Israel:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along

⁶⁷ Niditch, 6.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 40-41.

⁶⁹ Holly Hearon, *The Mary Magdalene Tradition: Witness and Counter-Witness in Early Christian Communities* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 19.

the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates (Deut. 6:4-9).

There are two things which the Lord told Moses here that are to be a “lasting ordinance” and yet seem like a lost art today – “these commandments that I give you today are to be upon *your hearts*” and “*talk about them* when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up” (emphasis mine). Although these commandments were *written down* in Moses’ day, it was also the Lord’s desire that they be *orally passed on* as well. However, this is not something that merely happens once, but is to be repeated over and over again. “Talk about them” when you 1) sit at home, 2) when you walk along the road, 3) when you lie down, and 4) when you get up. Everyone has a story to tell, and there’s no question here that when that story is God’s story it is to be told repeatedly.

In Dennis Dewey’s review of these words from Deuteronomy 6, he breaks down the Lord’s instructions into the following: “publicize” (“write these words down . . .”); “symbolize” (“bind them as a sign on your hand . . .”); “catechize” (“impress them on your children”); “theologize” (“talk about them when you are at home . . .”); and “internalize” (“these commandments I give you today are to be upon your hearts”).⁷⁰ Dewey adds, “I suspect that the metaphor reveals a fundamental understanding of ancient Israel in their experience of and relationship with the text, a veritable window into an appreciation of Hebrew spirituality: *that the primary repository of the tradition is the memory of the heart* – both the heart of the individual and the collective heart, i.e.

⁷⁰ Dewey, 4.

‘memory’ of the community.”⁷¹ Therefore, not only out of necessity at that time (because there was no written language) but out of practicality (even today) the Word of God is “told.” After all, more than anyone else, the people of God “have a story to tell.”

Given the low level of literacy in Hellenistic society, it would be quite rare that within any single group of Christians who assembled regularly there would be someone who could “read” from a printed copy of the Scriptures.⁷² Consequently, Whitney Shiner uses the word “performance” to distinguish between people who *read* the Scriptures and those who *spoke* them. As a way to distinguish between the two, Shiner suggests that, “Silent reading involves eye and brain. An oral performance involves the ear, the eye, and the whole body.”⁷³ Describing what he calls the “performance” of a text, Shiner adds:

The delivery of a speaker moves our imagination in a different way. It presents us a more realistic portrayal of actual events. It is itself an actual event. We experience a living person before us . . . We are affected by the speaker’s presence. We are affected by his emotions . . . That affects how we receive the performance.⁷⁴

The settings in which these so called “performances” took place were many and varied. A performance of a text may happen as a private or public reading, a storytelling, drama or pantomime. Many of these settings would be in what we might call a “house church” setting of not much more than 50 or so in attendance.

Christians normally met in private homes, and a recitation of the Gospel could take place as part of such a gathering. It would not require any expense, and it would let the community control who was present at the performance. It

⁷¹ Ibid., 4-5.

⁷² Shiner, 11.

⁷³ Ibid., 1.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 3.

would also allow for the performance to be connected with other church rituals, such as the Lord's Supper, prayer or the singing of a hymn. A house-church setting would mean that the audience would be rather small and the presentation would be on a rather intimate scale. Even the largest houses of all but the top strata of society would put serious spatial constraints on the performer. The narrator was forced to be close to his audience. Thus the available space would facilitate more intimate interaction, and the audience would not experience the distraction created by a stage or a pulpit.⁷⁵

Shiner's use of the word "performance" throughout his book may also be termed a "recitation." "There were a wide variety of oral or gestural performances in the Roman world that might serve as a model for a recitation of the Gospel."⁷⁶ Whether it is called a performance, recitation, or storytelling it is the use of such things as gestures, emotions, voice intonation that sets this apart from merely "reading" the text. Shiner says much the same when he writes, "Perhaps the performance of the Gospel would be most analogous to a popular storytelling style."⁷⁷

Similar terminology is used by Bruce Shields in his work, *From the Husetops*. As he identifies the communication of what we would call the "Word of God" in the first century and beyond, he writes, ". . . oral tradition studies show an amazing ability by people involved in the process of oral transmission to keep intact the core of the tradition, while giving each *performance* (emphasis mine) a character stamped by both the performer and the immediate audience."⁷⁸ Shields adds that what one person may call a "performance" another person refers to as "day-to-day holistic communication."

⁷⁵ Ibid., 51.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁸ Bruce E. Shields, *From the Husetops: Preaching in the Early Church and Today* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 21-22.

We convey not only thoughts but emotions by the way we communicate. Such full communication does not depend on word, grammar, and syntax alone. It uses posture, facial expression, gesture, and vocal intonation simultaneously, sometimes adding objects or costumes as visual props . . . If the preacher is to accomplish such multilevel communication in the sermon, that preacher must recognize the same fullness in the biblical text and its context.⁷⁹

What scholars like Shiner and Shields describe here may be termed a performance, recitation, or storytelling of a particular Biblical text.

Acknowledging the oral performance or storytelling background that the Biblical record comes out of, we can argue for returning to this same kind of setting today to recapture some of the impact and meaning that the Word of God had in its original setting. Birger Gerhardsson in his work *Memory and Manuscript* reminds us, “Words were meant to *sound*.”⁸⁰ In Richard Ward’s article, “Biblical Storytelling in the Marketplace: Limits and Possibilities,” he observes:

To “perform” literally means “to complete” or “carry through toward completion.” It is derived from the Old French words, *par* and *fournir*, “to furnish.” Biblical storytelling is an occasion when the story, as recorded in the silent printed text becomes fuller, more “complete” in the utterance of a living, breathing, *believing* storyteller. The *form* of the story *comes through* the body, mind, voice, intellect, imagination, in short, the *self* of the teller. This is more than mere “entertainment;” it is incarnation. Biblical storytelling for me is no less than the visible and aural incarnation of the story-as-text.⁸¹

While more is being written about Biblical storytelling and oral performance as it relates to the public reading or telling of the Scriptures, one has to ask why did we depart from a storytelling or oral performance approach in communicating the Word of God?

⁷⁹ Ibid., 147-148.

⁸⁰ Birger Gerhardsson, *Memory and Manuscript*, trans. Eric J. Sharpe, “Acta Seminarii Neotestamentici Upsaliensis, XXII” (Uppsala, Sweden: Gleerup, 1961), 163, quoted in Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching*, 49.

⁸¹ Richard Ward, “Biblical Storytelling in the Marketplace: Limits and Possibilities” *The Journal of Biblical Storytelling* 3:1 (1992): 10.

From Oral to Written and Written to Oral

Imagine studying the works of Shakespeare or Frost or Whitman by sitting in silence and *reading* their words and expecting to experience the force of what the author passionately communicates. Or similarly, imagine sitting in a quiet library looking at a score of music written by Bach or Beethoven or Mozart and expecting the impact or force of that music to dance off the page as you silently study it. How can the hearer fully experience the impact of poetry or prose or a lyrical tune without hearing it? Can the same not be said about the Word of God? “If the texts were always performed, always committed to memory, always presented as media events in communal settings, always highly interactive with audiences, how can we study them in abstraction only as ink on paper and assume that we have the fullness of the experience?”⁸² And although the argument can be made for the fact that in the context of a worship service today the Word of God is spoken out loud, there is nevertheless a difference between the Word being *read* and being *told*. As stated above, when many of the Gospel stories and other texts of Scripture were first being circulated, they were being “performed.” The oral history of God’s Word seems to have had a “live” performance, or personally engaging nature to it as well.

The ancients understood the power of emotion in creating our world. What we feel with our entire body, we believe much more deeply than what we think in our mind. The rhetoricians of the Greek and Roman world understood the intense power that could be generated by the embodied word. They practiced constantly to perfect the power of their presence. They also understood how to use the power of the embodied word to bring into the present the events that happened.⁸³

⁸² Dennis Dewey, “A Sea Change in Biblical Studies: Biblical Storytelling Scholarship: A Reflection on the Seminar in Biblical Storytelling and Scholarship held at the Network of Biblical Storytellers’ 2004 Festival Gathering” *The Journal of Biblical Storytelling* 14:1 (2006): 53.

⁸³ Shiner, 192.

Using the power of the embodied word to bring into the present the events that happened is one of the reasons for the use of Biblical storytelling. Richard Ward identifies that one of the goals of his book, *Speaking of the Holy*, is to identify the “oral interpretation of scripture as a resource for preaching. The way that ‘reading’ is done says a lot about how valuable the presence of the biblical text is to that community and to the sermon that reflects on it.”⁸⁴ Considering the comments from scholars like Shiner and Ward and others, one has to wonder how have we departed from a storytelling or oral performance approach in communicating the Word of God?

In Charles Bartow’s book, *Effective Speech Communication*, he acknowledges that over the years it has been taught or at least implied that,

We don’t want the Bible interpreted. We want it read straight. We don’t want any imposition of the personality of the reader on the text or on us who are listening. We think that would interfere with the work of the Spirit interpreting God’s Word to our hearts.⁸⁵

It’s a point well taken that in the public reading of God’s Word the focus is to be on God’s Word and not on the one speaking it. It is possible for the Word of God to be read or spoken so poorly or with such a theatrical flare that it ill serves the meaning of the text or the hearer’s reception of it. But while acknowledging this caution, it is also important to recognize that any reading of a text puts *some* interpretation on it no matter how it is done. In fact, to say that “we want it read straight” is putting some interpretation on it.

⁸⁴ Richard Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 39.

⁸⁵ Charles Bartow, *Effective Speech Communication in Leading Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1988), 85.

The truth of the matter is that there is some kind of interpretation going on when the Scripture is read (or told).

Take, for example, the way Jesus says Martha's name in . . . Luke 10. Does he bark it? (Martha! Martha!) or is it more gentle . . . affectionate, even? (Martha . . . Martha.) Whether you say those words with a scowl or a smile rests on an interpretive decision, and it's the hinge on which the whole passage turns.⁸⁶

Recognizing that "interpretation happens" whether it is intended or not, Bartow adds that,

The idea that we can somehow read a passage 'straight,' giving it without interpreting it, without suggesting attitude or point of view, and without having any sense of how listeners may respond to it as it is read, also needs to be discouraged. That idea needs to be discouraged because it simply is not true. Neutrality is also an interpretation . . . Together neutrality and objectivity says, "Hands off! Let's not get too involved with this thing."⁸⁷

Ah, there's the rub – to give the impression, "Let's not get too involved with this thing."

This is exactly the opposite of what is desired. God desires His people to get involved with "this thing" – God's Word. Ward notes,

When a reader stands to present a text in a worship service, that reader is communicating a complex message to an audience . . . Unfortunately for our listeners, these values and dynamics rarely operate in ways that make the meaning of a text clear or evoke the kind of response that a public reading of Scripture deserves . . . the occasion calls attention to the reader's lack of preparation . . . This creates very little anticipation in the mind and heart of the listener to hear what the preacher might have to say on this particular text.⁸⁸

How can the perception of the public reading (telling) of the Scriptures be changed?

It is not uncommon that in many of our churches today the Scripture readings for the day are introduced and read. When the reading is complete the reader (pastor or lay

⁸⁶ Bechtel, *Journal of Biblical Storytelling* 14:1, 14.

⁸⁷ Bartow, 86.

⁸⁸ Ward, 6.

person) often concludes with the words, “Here ends the Word of God today.” What might be the implied message when those words are spoken? “It’s over.” The presence of God’s Word, that is, is over. And yet since the sermon is soon to follow the preacher doesn’t want people to think “the presence of God’s Word is over” because it’s not. Calvin Miller in his book *Spirit, Word and Story* says, “Stories carry the listener along, but precepts tend to say the trip is over.”⁸⁹ While Miller’s statement is offered in the context of encouraging the merits of a narrative kind of preaching, perhaps the same can be said about the way the listener views the hearing of God’s Word in the reading of the lectionary. The Word of God is to be presented in such a way as to “carry the listener along” from the time the Scripture lesson has been read or told until the sermon is preached. When the Old Testament or Epistle or Gospel lessons are read, the desired outcome is not to think “the trip is over.” Again Bartow adds:

The question for the reader of Scripture is not this: Do I interpret this passage for the congregation as I read it or do I attempt to refrain from any interpretation? Instead, the questions are: Am I interpreting this passage responsibly? Am I responding to it appropriately? Am I attending to it with my whole being? And am I therefore leading the people of God in this act of worship as God would have led them?⁹⁰

In his work, *Thinking in Story*, Richard Jensen writes, “In an oral-aural culture . . . the goal was [for] the listener [to] participate in the inner life of the story: ‘The ancient listener or reader encountered the text not by having it ‘explained’ but by entering the world.’”⁹¹ Biblical storytelling today can be a way for the hearer to enter into the

⁸⁹ Calvin Miller, *Spirit, Word and Story: A Philosophy of Marketplace Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 19.

⁹⁰ Bartow, 89.

⁹¹ Don M. Wardlaw, editor, *Preaching Biblically: Creating Sermons in the Shape of Scripture*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), 34, quoted in Richard Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age* (Lima: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1995), 24.

world of the text. It is a way for the listener to be engaged. It is a way to communicate that the journey is not over even though the presentation of the lectionary has been complete. Therefore, the journey continues into the sermon that will follow.

Perhaps the first place for this journey to begin is with the preacher himself. It is the preacher whom Nielsen is addressing when he writes, “we need to embody the message’s content.”⁹² One implication of “embodying” the text happens with the preacher in his own study of the text. To hear the words spoken, to have them spoken again, to hear them repeated can be a valuable tool even in the setting of a pastor’s study as a part of sermon preparation. And while it’s obvious that the public reading of God’s Word is meant to be out loud, how often is it really treated like an “oral performance?”

Lischer adds:

The original proclamatory theology of the church was oral-aural. Our New Testament – both Epistles and Gospels – is a frozen record of oral discourse. Perhaps no one understood the oral nature of the Christian message better than Luther, who somewhere claims that ‘the Gospel should not be written but screamed’ and promulgated a confessional definition of the gospel that totally bypassed its written character.⁹³

When Luther encourages that the Gospel should be “screamed,” it would seem that his suggestion is not only meant in an exclamatory way but also that the message of the Gospel (the message of whatever the text of Scripture is) be clearly *heard* also by the one who will be speaking it – the preacher himself. In like manner, in addition to what Luther says, Eugene Lowry also suggests:

The best approach to sermon preparation is . . . read it aloud. Hear it and see it. The mind works differently through the ear and through the eye. Silent

⁹² Nielsen, 25.

⁹³ Lischer, 11.

thought and oral speech are quite different perceptual epistemological realities . . . one doesn't know what one thinks until after hearing one's own voice say it.⁹⁴

After studying oral performance extensively, Whitney Shiner notes the importance of memorization. From a very practical standpoint two factors come into play for the necessity of memorization in pre-literate culture. In the earliest days of literacy there were no punctuation marks or spacing as a part of most written scripts. Furthermore, since most manuscripts were hand written/copied, the reader was at the mercy of trying to decipher someone else's penmanship. Trying to discern lettering and punctuation while publicly reading did not make for a smooth delivery. Furthermore, the primary printed medium in the first century was a scroll, which would be rather cumbersome to handle while publicly reading. Since the general manner of delivery in those days was oral "performance," the speaking of the text would most likely be in an expressive way with gesturing. However, that would be difficult if the speaker who is trying to read the scroll in front of him had to also hold the scroll and roll it as he went along.⁹⁵

Therefore, in order for these Gospel performances to take place, the Word of God had to be learned/memorized. While that task might seem daunting to many today, it was actually the preferred mode in an earlier time. "Early in the second century C.E., Papias writes the he had spoken to the followers of the original disciples of Jesus whenever he had a chance. 'For,' he says, 'I did not suppose that information from books would help

⁹⁴ Eugene Lowry, *The Sermon: Dancing the Edge of Mystery* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1997), 91-92.

⁹⁵ Shiner, 103.

me so much as the word of a living and surviving voice.”⁹⁶ There are many who have believed over the years that the longer something is held in memory, the longer it remains with you. A contemporary application of what Papias understood was recorded in a newspaper article not many years ago:

A *New York Times* article (10 October 1989), demonstrating the limitations of print, chronicles the attempt of the Washington State Centennial Commission to bury a time capsule to be dug up in several generations. The Commission researched the most reliable means of storing a record of the capsule’s burial site. They concluded that computers were too quickly outdated. Books were deemed equally unreliable when the Commission found that in a similar endeavor, copies of a book that had been put in the Library of Congress were all lost. The Washington State Centennial Commission chose the means which seemed to show the most promise, the oral tradition. A group of ten-year-olds were told where the capsule was buried. In twenty-five years they will choose another group of ten-year-olds, and so on through time.⁹⁷

What the above illustrates is the power and potential of the mind and the ability to recall information. However, in addition to simply recalling information there is also what is called “sensory memorization.” Sensory memorization is the ability to make an emotional connection with information or an event that is more than simply cognitive recall of words. The use of sensory memorization is effective as a storyteller or gospel performer communicates particular stories in which the level of emotion taking place among the characters is intricate to the overall meaning of the story. To that end, Bartow believes that:

If these authors, these storytellers, letter writers, and psalmists are to come alive for us and through us for others, we will have to find, in our own experiences, feelings, or attitudes, ways of looking at things that at least are roughly analogous to those provided in the text. And we will have to use these to

⁹⁶ Ibid., 18.

⁹⁷ Melissa Heckler, “Two Traditions,” in *Who Says? Essays on Pivotal Issues in Contemporary Storytelling*, ed., Carol L Birch and Melissa A. Heckler (Little Rock: August House Publishers, Inc., 1996), 10.

inform our speech. We will have to make use of what actors and fine singers call “sensory memory.”⁹⁸

For instance, in a retelling of a passage of Scripture like the parable of the prodigal son, when the father throws his arms around his son to welcome him back, the teller would want to identify a sensory image of unexpected joy or tearful celebration. Or in a retelling of when God tested Abraham by taking his son Isaac up on the mountain as a sacrifice, there would most likely be a lump in the teller’s throat in answering Isaac’s question, “Father . . . the fire and wood are here, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” (Gen. 22:7). Martin Luther recognized, “. . . you should meditate, that is, not in the heart alone, but also externally, work on and ply the oral speech and the letter words in the Book, read them and reread them again and again, noting carefully and reflecting upon what the Holy Ghost means by these words.”⁹⁹ Whether he uses the phrase or not, perhaps Martin Luther would be a proponent of sensory memory.

Nielsen points out that while the Word alone is foundational, “experiential elements flow out of faith so grounded in the Word” and “joined to faith is the full range of human experiences. They are not to be ignored,” involving “the whole person – emotions, thoughts, will and body.”¹⁰⁰ Indeed, “the ancients understood the power of emotion in creating our world. What we feel with our entire body, we believe much more deeply than what we think in our mind.”¹⁰¹ This then has much to say for how we want to approach the public reading of God’s Word today, and the impact it can make upon the

⁹⁸ Bartow, 101.

⁹⁹ Pieper, 286.

¹⁰⁰ Nielsen, 26, 27.

¹⁰¹ Shiner, 192.

sermon preached for the benefit of the hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon proclaimed.

Biblical Storytelling Today

When Lori Carrell talks about the public preaching of God’s Word, she comments that the unique aspect of this public discourse is that the preacher will “use a specific portion of the Bible or themes from the Bible as primary source material every time.”¹⁰² While that comment may be a given for us in Lutheran circles, what Carrell is admitting is that from her exposure to a variety of worship settings, “I often have trouble figuring out how the message and the Scripture passage are connected.”¹⁰³ If that is the case, then what can be done to strengthen the connection between the two – the sermon and the Scripture text? Perhaps one option here can be a return to the oral presentation of the Scriptures in a way that resonates with a Biblical storytelling style so as to assist in the hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon preached.

One of the greatest testimonies to the merits of Biblical storytelling is what impact this rhetorical practice makes on real people. Preacher and Bible storyteller J. Lynn White writes about his involvement in Biblical storytelling. It has been a part of his ministry in three congregations he has served. In a recent presentation he talked about his early introductions to this storytelling experience. The first Biblical story he learned was from Mark 10:46-52, where Jesus brought healing to blind Bartimaeus. After learning that story “by heart,” he shared the following:

¹⁰² Carroll, 26.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 27.

Before learning the story . . . I knew various things ABOUT the story, but I hadn't heard, felt and internalized the story. I hadn't experienced the sequence of sounds and rhythms that make up the story, as well as its words. I hadn't repeated Bartimaeus' cry, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" without "the book" in my hands or in between me and the listener, nor had I said it aloud as an actual cry. I hadn't heard or felt Jesus stop, when Bartimaeus made his second cry, "Son of David, have mercy on me." It had never occurred to me that Jesus' stopping at this point in the story is a matter of dramatic pause, leaving the listener wondering what Jesus' response will be to Bartimaeus' bold and audacious cry for help which also included a messianic title.¹⁰⁴

What White experienced here is not mere subjective emotion. If anything what he experienced expresses the power of God's Word as it comes to us orally – embodied, internalized, memorized. It affects both the preaching of God's Word but also the hearer's reception of that word.

Whitney Shiner offers a similar reflection after participating in a telling of the death and resurrection account of Jesus.

The Gospel event embodying the life and death of Jesus is transformative. Transformative because it lifts me out of ordinary existence. It creates a new reality. Something in me dies. Something in me is born. It is no longer I who live. The Pauline language describes the intended effect of the Gospel event. I participate in the faithfulness of Christ. It continues to live in me.¹⁰⁵

What Shiner experienced as transformative for him is the direct result of the performative power of God's Word on him. In many ways, the performative power was perhaps more clearly experienced – not that it was more present, but more clearly experienced – in hearing and telling of God's Word as oral performance.

¹⁰⁴ J. Lynn White, "Telling the Story" (paper presented at the second annual Network of Biblical Storytellers Scholars Conference on Biblical Storytelling and Scholarship, Navasota, Texas, 3 August 2004), 2.

¹⁰⁵ Shiner, 192-193.

I offer a personal example: On one of the occasions I was preparing for a Bible storytelling for a sermon I would preach on that text,¹⁰⁶ a verse stood out strongly for me once I memorized that lesson. The Scripture was Joel 2:12-19. The liturgical occasion in the church year was Ash Wednesday, and the reading from Joel was the appointed Old Testament text. Over the years of my ministry I know I have read this text on more than one occasion and even preached on it before. But on this occasion of learning Joel 2, what a deep impression verse 17 made on me as a pastor. “Let the priests, who minister before the Lord, weep between the temple porch and the altar. Let them say, ‘Spare your people, O Lord.’”

What became so vividly clear to me as I “memorized/internalized” this text and repeated it over and over again out loud in the sanctuary prior to Ash Wednesday was the awesome task the priest had interceding between the people and the Lord! What emotion there must have been on the part of the priest as he earnestly interceded for a rebellious and stubborn people! The strength and force of those words never screamed out to me before like they did on this occasion when I stood in the sanctuary of my church and turned toward the altar to speak those words, “Spare your people, O Lord!” Richard Jensen writes about “participation in the world of the story.”¹⁰⁷ On that occasion I truly

¹⁰⁶ As a “pre survey” prior to beginning this actual project I prepared a Bible storytelling and sermon for Ash Wednesday using the Joel 2:12-19 text. In the morning service that day (11:00 a.m.) I “read” Joel in the usual fashion from the lectern. In the evening service (7:00 p.m.), I presented this text as a storytelling. Following both services I handed out a survey consisting of six questions. Following the 7:00 p.m. service, the question “How well did the ‘telling’ of Joel 2:12-19 help to prepare you for the sermon?” revealed an overwhelming preference for the storytelling method. Some of the comments written on the survey included: “A big difference between ‘telling’ and ‘reading.’” “Much preferred telling over just reading out of the Bible.” “The Holy Spirit spoke the Father’s message as clearly through you as He did through Joel.” One of the questions on the survey was, “When Joel 2:12-19 was told (as a Biblical storytelling), how well did you understand the Scripture you heard?” One person wrote, “After the sermon I fully understood.” The surveys from this particular experience demonstrated how meaningful the Biblical storytelling experience was for people in making a connection between the Scripture and the sermon.

¹⁰⁷ Jensen, 28.

felt like I was a living participant with this story as I considered how in my own ministry and my own role before God that I too am one who intercedes on behalf of His people.

In a similar way Walter Ong talks about, “A primitive hunter can see, feel, smell, and taste an elephant while the animal is quite dead. If he hears an elephant trumpeting or merely shuffling his feet, he had better watch out. Something is going on. Force is operating.”¹⁰⁸ What a number of people have experienced through the oral “telling” or oral performance of God’s Word is that force is operating. And if that force is operating when the Scriptures are “told,” then that naturally assists in the hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the living Word of God to the sermon proclaimed.

Richard Rice, a parish pastor in Brooklyn, engaged members of his congregation one Lenten season in learning and telling the passion and resurrection narrative through the season of Lent. The response by those who participated in this was very positive. As Rice reflected on that experience, he later said, “People were excited to see other lay persons telling the stories from memory. They also found the lessons more alive which in turn helped my preaching.”¹⁰⁹ Rice apparently experienced what this project seeks to demonstrate. When the Word of God is presented in a storytelling fashion, it can’t help but affect one’s preaching.

Melissa Heckler, in her essay entitled “Two Traditions,” tells of the conversation Natalie Babbitt had with some fellow storytellers:

Author Natalie Babbitt was asked at a workshop at the Storytelling Center, Inc., in New York City, if she objected to people telling her stories. Initially, she seemed surprised by the question. “No,” she said, “I’d be honored for you to tell

¹⁰⁸ Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, 112.

¹⁰⁹ Boomershine, 176.

my stories.” The audience, composed of storytellers confused by her generosity, pressed further with details of the debate raging in the storytelling world. She thought aloud with us. She said, essentially, if you don’t tell my stories, then they will simply lie in the books, unread. “Whenever you tell my story there is always the possibility that someone will go back to the book. But even if they don’t, my story has been told.” She laughed and added lightly, “Probably I should pay you to tell my stories.”¹¹⁰

Babbitt’s point is true of the Lutheran preacher as well. If the “telling” of Biblical stories encourages people to return to the “book” (Bible) or to listen more intently or comprehend more clearly the sermon preached, then the storytelling exercise has truly been worthwhile. After all, everyone has a story to tell and nothing is worth telling more than God’s story. David Schmitt adds the observation, “While the old, old story is continuously told in contemporary Lutheran preaching, the art of its telling will remain reverently studied and refreshingly new.”¹¹¹

The art of telling the old, old story of God’s Word is what this project is largely about. However, while promoting the art of Biblical storytelling, the main emphasis here remains on the clear proclamation of God’s Word and how the ancient form of storytelling may assist in the hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the living Word of God to the sermon proclaimed. Yet we continue to acknowledge that Biblical storytelling is a tool, not the main instrument in the preaching task. While it is believed that the use of Biblical storytelling makes a difference in how the hearer receives the Word, the overall goal is not that the hearer will marvel, or be distracted by, Biblical storytelling. Rather, the goal as far as the preaching task is concerned, is for the

¹¹⁰ Heckler, 19-20.

¹¹¹ David Schmitt, “Freedom of Form: Law/Gospel and Sermon Structure in Contemporary Lutheran Proclamation” *Concordia Journal*, 25:1 (January 1999): 55.

art of Biblical storytelling to better connect the Word of God to the sermon preached for the hearer's sake.

CHAPTER 4

THE PROCESS OF BIBLICAL STORYTELLING

What is Biblical storytelling and how do you do it? While there can be several ways to define Biblical storytelling, I offer the definition Dennis Dewey gives:

Biblical storytelling is a spiritual discipline which entails the lively interpretation, expression and animation of a narrative text of the Old or New Testament that has first been deeply internalized and is then remembranced, embodied, breathed and voiced by a teller/performer as a sacred event in community with an audience/congregation.¹¹²

Since Dewey's definition begins with the words "Biblical storytelling," I need to define the phrase that is the subject of this paper – Biblical storytelling. The use of the phrase "Biblical storytelling" may be a relatively recent use. Because of Tom Boomershine's book *Story Journey* (now in print for almost 20 years), the growth of the organization he founded (NOBS), and more recently the development and influence of the Seminar in Biblical Storytelling and Scholarship, the terminology "Biblical storytelling" is more widely used and accepted. Very simply, Biblical storytelling is an oral recitation (as opposed to reading) of a text of Scripture now recorded in a printed form.

The stories of Israel – the patriarchs and matriarchs of Genesis, Moses and the Exodus, the judges such as Deborah and Gideon, the kings David and Saul, and the prophets Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Daniel – have formed a unique storytelling tradition. In these stories, the people of Israel throughout the ages have experienced the actions and presence of God. These stories have been remembered as the stories of the God of Israel. By remembering and telling them, Israel experiences those events again. God becomes present and active in the storytelling event. Retelling these particular stories has enabled the physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham and Sarah to know God.

¹¹² Dennis Dewey, "Notes on the Process of Biblical Storytelling," 5 September 2002, <http://www.nobs.org/dewey/Dennis8.htm>, (4 August 2004), 1.

The stories of Jesus of Nazareth were formed by persons who were a part of Israel's storytelling tradition. The stories of Jesus, both those by him and those about him, were told by his followers as the fulfillment of Israel's hope for a Messiah. They were also stories that uniquely revealed the very character of God. The stories of Jesus' birth, his ministry of healing and reconciliation, his teachings, and his death and resurrection became for them stories about the decisive and central action of God in all of human history. In telling and listening to the stories of Jesus, early Christians made connections with their own lives that made clear to them how God was present . . .

When the stories were recorded in the Gospels, they were written down so that they could be read aloud and relearned. By writing them, the evangelists preserved their original forms so that they could be reheard and retold.¹¹³

Biblical storytelling is the telling of a text which was originally communicated orally but has since been captured in print. Perhaps the phrase "text telling" could be used since the approach advocated in this MAP can be applied to many texts of Scripture including those that are not stories in form.

Of course, certain texts lend themselves better than others to a storytelling approach in our language and culture. The narrative texts of the Gospels, for instance, as well as some of the narratives of the Old Testament are best suited for a text telling or storytelling recitation today. However, even if the text doesn't lend itself to a storytelling approach, that doesn't mean that it can't be done in a text telling fashion. For instance, I would generally not consider many of the Psalms to work well for storytelling, especially in worship. However, according to Bruce Shields:

. . . much of the Hebrew Bible was meant to be recited and thus was composed for the voice and the ear. The longest single chapter of the Bible is Psalm 119, consisting of 176 verses. It is composed as an acrostic, each section of eight verses beginning every verse in the section with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet so that the twenty-two sections could be kept in order without

¹¹³ Boomershine, 19-20.

the help of writing . . . Psalm 119 is an intricate piece of literature with built-in mnemonic devices to encourage its oral use in the life and worship of Israel.¹¹⁴

Whether or not those mnemonic devices work with the English translation of Psalm 119 doesn't discount the fact that this chapter may have been assembled for the ease of oral transmission. In other words, it was meant to be "told." Shields argues the same with the genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3:23-38. "It seems to the literate mind both cumbersome and unnecessary for families to memorize genealogies; but this practice is still quite common in oral cultures . . . First-century culture determined the importance of lineage; oral communication determined the mnemonic form."¹¹⁵

Likewise, there may be some of the epistles that are not constructed in story form. However, what is recorded for us today in print is a result of material first orally conveyed and later captured in print. For instance, in 1 Corinthians 11:23 we read, "For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you." "This appears to be a classic statement of oral tradition, a tradition that Paul is now writing down."¹¹⁶

The use of the terminology "Biblical storytelling" may not sit well with all because not all of Scripture seems to be in "story" form. However, considering the fact that what makes up Scripture for us today was orally transmitted, much of it can be recaptured by orally communicating or telling the text. Biblical storytelling seems to be terminology that is growing in recognition in church and scholarly circles.

¹¹⁴ Shields, 21.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 49.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 25.

Biblical storytelling is an approach that takes “spiritual discipline.” Speaking as one who has engaged in preparing for and presenting a text of Scripture in a Biblical storytelling approach, I fully agree that it is a discipline. While storytellers learn their stories in various ways (which will be discussed below), discipline is essential. My own approach has been to type out the text on 3 x 5 cards, usually one verse per card. What I have found to be most effective is to review these cards on my morning six mile walk. Depending on the length of the text, I might try to learn the verses over a one or two week period of time. Then, I will use the next several weeks to review, recite and rehearse the text over and over and over again. The rule of thumb that I have heard Dewey and others suggest is that you should give yourself a good six weeks to fully learn a text of Scripture before publicly telling it.

Because of the time involved in preparation, the frequency of including a storytelling in a worship service is often an economic decision. The time, attention and energy needed to prepare for a storytelling may be greater than any preacher can give on a regular basis. However, while I see great benefit in the preacher himself doing the storytelling, there is also the option of training and engaging lay people in this spiritual discipline as well. The use of more lay people preparing a Bible storytelling could raise the level of frequency that it is used in a congregational setting.

However, as far as the frequency of Biblical storytelling is concerned, a few other factors need to be considered as well. While I do not question the benefit of using Biblical storytelling on a regular basis in public worship, I also recognize that not every hearer will find this fully acceptable to their understanding of “Lutheran worship.” The sheer fact that this is “different” or not the “norm” may be enough to cause some people

to put up a mental barrier even before allowing themselves to experience the benefits of its use.

Perhaps a similar analogy can be made with the style of music that is used in Lutheran worship. I believe that many (not all, but many) contemporary Christian songs convey the Biblical truth in a far more relevant and engaging way than some of our traditional Lutheran hymns. Consequently, it would be *my* preference to include more contemporary Christian music in our regular worship services. However, while I have the pastoral freedom to utilize alternative music styles more in my congregation, I want to be pastorally sensitive to members and visitors alike who find that the traditional hymnody best speaks to their faith and heart language. If both (traditional hymnody and contemporary Christian music) are theologically consistent with our Lutheran doctrine, then both are options for our public worship.

However, just because I believe the benefits are there, (and many others may agree with me), this doesn't mean there will be total acceptance by all. Some people will simply be resistant because it's not what they know or what they have learned or what they have been accustomed. They aren't familiar with this approach. So, while a more frequent exposure to a Biblical storytelling style can provide the opportunity for people to see its benefits, my pastoral caution will be to prevent people from thinking I am forcing something upon them just because I like it.

Furthermore, if the goal of using Biblical storytelling is to assist the worshiper in hearing, understanding, remembering, and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon preached, then it might be best for the sermon text *only* to be communicated in this way. In other words, if the sermon text is the Old Testament lesson then the Old

Testament lesson could be offered as a storytelling while the Epistle and Gospel are traditionally read. By doing this it will help set apart the Old Testament to benefit the worshiper's hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting that text to the sermon preached.

While no presentation of the Scriptures needs to be "showy" or overly dramatic, Biblical storytelling has a more "lively" nature to it than a traditional public reading of the text. Storytelling a Scripture text involves appropriate use of gestures, facial expressions, and physical movement. Therefore, the storytelling usually doesn't take place from behind a lectern, but rather in the chancel or nave with movement and emotion. "It presents us a more realistic portrayal of actual events. It is itself an actual event. We experience a living person before us, one who has something at stake in the performance. We are affected by the speaker's presence. We are affected by his emotions."¹¹⁷ Therefore, storytelling is a "lively" expression of text.

The goal in preparing for a storytelling of a Scriptural text is to "internalize" that text rather than "memorize" it. Storytelling is not just remembering words. Storytelling also remembers emotions, settings, context and characters. Therefore, the process of preparing for a storytelling requires more time and commitment than simply memorizing some words. Internalizing a text of Scripture allows for the story to live within you and become a part of you.

In *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM*, Richard Jensen shares the collective insights of a number of different pastors on his topic

¹¹⁷ Shiner, 3.

of visualizing the Word. In response to the question: “What is the exegetical process that moves you toward visualization?” one pastor responded:

In preparing my sermons, I begin by memorizing the Gospel. This process allows me to visualize and get “inside” the text in a unique way. I visualize the parables, teachings, and accounts of any given text. In doing so, it informs what visuals I might choose to use – or not to use – in preaching.¹¹⁸

While this pastor says that he “memorizes” the Gospel, what he is really describing is that he internalizes it. He says that he learns it (memorizes it) so that it gets “inside” of him. Having the text inside of him (internalized) allows him to be able to work with it so that images and descriptions can emerge from within as he is preparing to preach. A result of the internalization of the text is that it has been embodied so that it can be breathed and voiced, so that it can be spoken and “seen.” Here is one preacher confessing his use of internalization process to better inform his own preaching.

I want to underscore, at least for my own usage, Dewey’s acknowledgement that Biblical storytelling is a “sacred event.” As mentioned earlier, storytelling is not something that is to be done for “show.” The spotlight should not be on the speaker/teller. Instead, the focus is to be on the Word of God itself. Nevertheless, the word “performer” is used in the above definition because that is what a Bible storyteller was often considered in earlier times – a gospel performer.

Judging from the way Mark’s Gospel is composed, he is a gifted storyteller. That gift was most likely developed through the performance of Gospel stories rather than through the writing of narratives . . . The ancient Mediterranean cultures valued oral performance much more highly than our culture, and the ideal for literary performance was to approximate purely oral performance as closely as possible. As a result, texts were generally memorized for performance, and the text was recited rather than read.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Richard Jensen, *Envisioning the Word: The Use of Visual Images in Preaching, with CD-ROM*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 99.

¹¹⁹ Shiner, 4.

The idea that Biblical storytelling has its roots in gospel performances flows from the thought that the composition of at least certain Biblical books began by being voiced rather than written. For my purposes, however, I would underscore that Biblical storytelling is a “sacred event” and should be done reverently. Biblical storytelling is a sacred event that communicates the sacred, authoritative Word of God.

A storyteller has a number of ways to go about preparing for the task. I offer some of the steps that Dennis Dewey uses in his workshops. My comments are in italic.

- Begin with prayer.
- Read the story aloud.
- Read the story aloud again.
- Look at the structures of the story. Where are the breaks, the transitions? What are the major chunks? Visualize the structure.
- Prepare a script of the text for learning. Break into episodes or sections according to the divisions of the story you have identified. *(In my own preparation for this script I have used note cards in which I have typed out the verses, usually one per card, in a way that is easy for me to visualize as I review the cards.)*
- What are the “feelings” or emotions in the story? *(I recognize that our Lutheran theology does not encourage a merely subjective encounter with the text. Nevertheless we acknowledge Aristotle’s pathos from his trilogy of ethos, pathos and logos. Pathos as used here refers not only to the emotions of the character but also the condition or circumstance with which the character finds himself.)* As the teller identifies certain feelings and emotions that may be a part of the story, can he identify with something similar in his life? The teller attempts to put himself in the position of each of the characters.
- Consult the appropriate exegetical and interpretative resources that assist in making sense of the story.
- Tell the story. Visualize the action and the characters as you tell it. The goal in attempting to tell this story without the aide of a written text is not so much to try to memorize it but rather “internalize” it. Dewey sometimes uses the imagery of “marinating in the text.” Internalizing the story is learning it “by heart” which is engaging your heart, mind, soul, your very being. The NOBS organization encourages its participants to strive for 75% word accuracy and 95% content accuracy.
- Feel the story as you tell it. Use appropriate gesturing of your body and variation of pitch and volume in your voice.
- Look for places where pauses are called for. Vary the rhythm of the story according to the clues given in the story itself.

- While the suggestion of the NOBS organization is to strive for at least 75% word accuracy and 95% content accuracy, this kind of Biblical storytelling is essentially a word-for-word retelling of the text without embellishments or additions to what the text actually says.
- Do not think of “bringing the story to life,” but of finding the life that is already there. Biblical storytelling is an acknowledgement of the organic nature of God’s Word. It is alive and powerful! The teller doesn’t have to go look for that life or add life to the text, but rather the text will reveal “life” to both teller and hearer.
- Find others (family members and/or friends) to whom you can tell the story to as you are in the “internalizing” mood. Invite feedback. Your hearer may ask, “Why did you tell that verse or say that word the way you did? Your discussion with the hearer may encourage some reflective evaluation.
- Tell the story of the text to yourself over and over and over again. It is suggested that you should not expect to tell a text of Scripture unless you have been working on it and it has been working on you for at least six weeks.¹²⁰

These steps can be adapted to one’s own learning style and skill in carrying out the storytelling experience. However, the primary goal is to be faithful to the text of Scripture selected.

What many Biblical storytellers experience (myself included) is that not only can Biblical storytelling have a profound effect on the hearer, but once the teller has internalized that text of Scripture, it also has a powerful effect on the teller. After spending that much time with a particular text of Scripture, you can’t help but sense that the story is now a part of you. It has been said that the deeper we dive into a story, the more the story resides in us.

The Project Detailed and Summarized

For this MAP on Biblical storytelling I selected four Scripture texts out of the lectionary to demonstrate the connection of Biblical storytelling and the sermon preached. While it is obvious that the texts selected are repeated in the regular cycle of

¹²⁰ Dewey, “Notes on the Process of Biblical Storytelling,” 1-2.

the three year lectionary (Series A), I selected two that I thought might be less familiar and two that I considered to be more familiar to the average hearer. Two of the texts are from the Old Testament and two are from the New Testament. While I preached all four of the sermons, I personally presented the Scripture texts in a Biblical storytelling way on two out of the four occasions. I asked two other people to *tell* the other texts on the other two Sundays. As stated earlier, my reasoning for this approach was to emphasize that the effectiveness of Biblical storytelling is not necessarily connected to my ability as a storyteller but rather on the merits of the Biblical storytelling approach in public worship. The two people I selected were picked because they conveyed (in my opinion) a very genuine and natural style. Before describing any further the particulars of how the survey process was conducted, I will identify the texts selected, why they were selected and a brief summary of the sermon preached.

The Texts Selected

The first text I selected was the first reading for the Fifth Sunday after Easter – Acts 17:1-15. This text I presented in a storytelling fashion on April 24, 2005 at the 8:30 service. This same text was “read” in the usual way by a lay reader at the 11:00 service.

Although Acts 17:1-15 is part of the regular lectionary for Series A, I didn’t think this text would be overly familiar to most people. Furthermore, as I searched my files I discovered I have not preached on this lesson before. However, on the previous occasions when I have read or taught about this text, verse eleven has been captivating to me: “Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see

if what Paul said was true.” As I meditated on this passage, the phrase that kept coming to my mind was “Oh, if only to be like a Berean!” This was the title I selected for the sermon.

Early in the sermon¹²¹ I asked the congregation to think about who their heroes in life are. I admitted that probably not many would pick the Christians of Berea. But why not? After all, these people received the message of Christ with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day. What great role models.

While on a mini sabbatical to write a portion of this MAP I had the opportunity to worship at several different churches. At one church I learned about the efforts of that congregation to start a mission congregation on the other side of town. In talking to some of the people of that church about their feelings on this new mission start, I soon learned that their reaction was not favorable. I heard comments like, “It’s a waste of money.” “If those people on the other side of town want to go to church, then they can drive across town and come here. We don’t need to go there.” “If they want contemporary worship, well they can just get used to the way we do things here.” As I listened to those responses I couldn’t help but think, “If only we were like the Bereans.”

This sermon was written shortly after Terri Schaivo died following months and months of a medical care and media attention over the right to withdraw or reinsert a feeding tube. I suggested that probably most of us have either been asked or volunteered our opinions on this issue. However, while ethical issues like this are never easy, what is crucial for us as Christ’s disciples is to consider, “What does God’s Word say?” After

¹²¹ All four of the sermons that were preached for this project are included in APPENDIX B.

all, the Bereans “examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true.” Do we do the same in the face of life’s challenges?

In examining the Scriptures, not only do we receive insight and direction on being mission minded and formed by God’s Word in the face of life’s issues, but the Word of God reveals to us Christ. We receive the message of Christ crucified, risen and glorified. We receive the uncompromising love of God, the forgiveness of sins and the joy of eternal life.

Actually, as the people of God who have been given the message of Christ’s victory over sin and death, we are like the Bereans because we have been given what they have been given – the Word of God, the victory of Christ, the gift of heaven being prepared for us. Thanks be to God!

The second Scripture text I selected for Biblical storytelling was Acts 1:1-14. I suspected that this text would likely be much more familiar than the Acts 17:1-15. This text was read in the traditional fashion at the 8:30 service by a lay reader, and it was presented in a story telling way at the 11:00 service by one of the two people mentioned above. The date of this service was May 1 (Sixth Sunday after Easter); however, the theme of this service was blended with the Ascension of the Lord since the actual day of Ascension was to be four days later. This also happened to be Confirmation Sunday in our church, which I addressed in my sermon as well. The title of the sermon was “Faith Survivors,” playing off the infamous *Survivor* television series. Considering that this was confirmation, I wanted to emphasize that, instead of the usual trend in our church of youth who are confirmed and then not seen again, we are encouraging and praying for faith survivors not faith dropouts.

I can't help but wonder if by witnessing the Lord's ascension these disciples said to themselves, "What are we to do now?" "Where do we go from here?" "How are we to survive?" Jesus informs the disciples that to be a faith survivor the Holy Spirit equips us with what we need. Jesus said, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8). Added to that Jesus says, "I am with you always" (Matt. 28:20).

On the few occasions when I have watched one of the *Survivor* television shows, each episode concludes with voting someone off the island. What a contrary concept to the Christian life. In fact, as far as the disciples were concerned, after having just experienced the Lord's resurrection and ascension, it was critical that they not go off their separate ways but instead stay together. The same is true when it comes to what happens after confirmation.

Last year our church went through the *Purpose Driven Life* series, and so our congregation was familiar with the name Rick Warren. Just a few weeks prior to our service on Confirmation Sunday, the members of Saddleback Community Church celebrated their 25th anniversary by holding a worship service in Angel Stadium in Anaheim, California, with 30,000 people in attendance. After a three hour worship service the stadium crowd rose to their feet to read a statement of commitment. Perhaps we can say it was a statement of "reconfirmation" for them. The statement they spoke in unison ended with the following:

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I say, "However, Whenever, Wherever, and Whatever you ask me to do, my answer in advance is yes! Wherever you lead and whatever the cost, I'm ready. Anytime. Anywhere. Anyway. Whatever it takes Lord; whatever it takes!"¹²²

¹²² John Fischer, "*The Angel Stadium Declaration: April 17, 2005*," 19 April 2005, <http://www.purposedrivenlife.com/devarchive.aspx?ARCHIVEID=980> (28 April 2005).

“Whatever it takes!” If only we would be so bold as to say the same.

While we believe, teach and confess that being a faith survivor doesn’t depend on “whatever we do,” to make such a commitment is prompted by the Holy Spirit in response to God’s gifts of salvation. We clearly acknowledge that it was Christ who did “whatever it takes” to win us back to Him. Christ is the true survivor. He who was brutally nailed to a cross, survived. Christ, who was innocent yet assumed our guilt and shame, survived. Christ, who defeated the power of hell and death, survived. Christ survived in our place and consequently in Him we survive as well. Jesus said, “Because I live, you also will live” (John 14:19).

The third Biblical storytelling text and sermon was on the Second Sunday after Pentecost on May 29, 2005. The Old Testament reading for that day was Deut. 11:18-21, 26-28. Once again, I personally presented this Scripture in a Biblical storytelling manner like I did the first week. I told this text as a Biblical story at the 8:30 service. It was read in a traditional manner by a lay reader in the 11:00 service. The title of the message was “Telling and Retelling the Story.” It so happened that this was also Memorial Day weekend.

As I approached Memorial Day this year, I wanted to be sensitive to a comment I’ve received from some of the senior men in the congregation over the years. These gentlemen have expressed their displeasure that on occasions like Memorial Day or Veterans Day I have not given proper recognition to the men and women who have served our country in the armed forces or who are currently serving.

This Old Testament scripture offers a word of instruction and encouragement to the Israelites about passing on the Lord’s word. The context recalls the commandments

which were given for the blessing and benefit of the Israelites. This chapter also recalls Israel's deliverance history from Egypt. These events are to be told and retold from generation to generation because they define who the people of God are. Verse 19 emphasizes the ongoing need to rehearse this with the people of God again and again: "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." The significance of this is not only to recall the event, but in so doing, this event helps to define who they are.

As I think about Memorial Day, what comes to mind is the many occasions I have listened to my own father and his friends tell and retell old war stories. Truthfully though, no matter how many times I have heard my father tell some of those stories, I've never tired of hearing them. In fact, the week before I wrote this sermon I went to visit my father and asked him to retell a few of these stories to me again so that I would be prepared to retell one of his war stories in the sermon if I wanted.

Why do many war veterans thrive on recalling their experiences at war? Because those experiences helped to define who these men were, and who they later became. However, one way to keep alive what happened for them was to *tell and retell* the story. Therefore, such actions often define who we are. The Word of God here in Deuteronomy calls for us all to be storytellers of an even greater story.

Someone told me one time that in the process of building their house they went around and wrote verses of Scriptures on all the framing studs before the drywall was put up. They literally wanted to have the word of God dwell in their home and for their home to be "built" on God's Word. Perhaps this is somewhat of a modern day example of what the Jewish people did with their phylacteries and mezuzahs. Whether that is

going to the extreme or not, the Lord desires that His words can be evident in our lives inside and out.

These words were being spoken to the Israelites entering the promise land. As they enter this new land, it was important that they tell and retell what the Lord has said to them and what the Lord has done for them. After all, in this new land many distractions and temptations would be before them. All the more reason for God's Word to be fixed in their hearts and minds. Much the same is true today. Before we enter the promised land of heaven, we face many distractions and temptations in this land. All the more reason for the grace of God, the forgiveness of sins, the victory of Christ, the gift of salvation to be fixed in our hearts and minds. All the more reason to tell and retell the story of Christ's life, death and resurrection.

The fourth Sunday of my sample sermons was the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, which was also Father's Day, June 19. The Old Testament lesson for the day was Jer. 20:7-13. Just like the text from Acts 17:1-15, I had not preached on Jer. 20 before, and I was quite certain that this was a less familiar text to the average hearer as well. Nevertheless, I wanted to see how the storytelling approach might help to bring this passage of Scripture to light for people. On this occasion I selected a lay person to storytell the Scripture in the first service and a lay person to read it at the second service.

The more I meditated on these words, the more I remembered the times in my life and ministry that I could say much the same as what Jeremiah was saying here. Jeremiah had a period of time when he literally was crying out, "God, why am I doing this?" And, yet, Jeremiah truly couldn't do anything else; "His word is in my heart like a fire, a fire shut up in my bones" (Jer. 20:9). Well, not only do I (and obviously Jeremiah) feel that

way at times, but I suspect many other people do as well for a variety of different reasons. For the people in the pew who are trying to hold on to faith in God in the face of some challenging and difficult times in their life, maybe they feel like shouting; “God, why am I doing this?” And yet when they (like any of us) have those moments, the Holy Spirit also reveals the promises of God. In Word and sacrament we have the promise that, “The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior” and that He “rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked” (Jer. 20:11, 13).

Several weeks before I preached on this text, I saw an article in the *Parade* section of the Sunday newspaper entitled “Extreme Ironing.” Extreme ironing is defined as: “an outdoor activity that combines the danger and excitement of an extreme sport with the satisfaction of a well-pressed shirt.” Bizarre, I know, but I used this as an introduction to this sermon that I entitled, “Extreme Living.” I found some websites on the topic and discovered a variety of “extreme ironing” pictures. While I was introducing this theme, we showed some of those pictures on our large screen in the front of the sanctuary so that people could visualize this extreme sport I was trying to describe. My point of comparison was to suggest that Jeremiah was stretched to His extreme and doing some “extreme prophesying.”

I referenced the previous chapter (Jer. 19) where Jeremiah was calling for the people to show remorse and repentance for their sinful actions. Then Jeremiah is put in stocks at the Upper Gate and was subjected to extreme ridicule. In the opening verses of chapter 20, even after Jeremiah was released from the stocks, his words seem rather extreme: “I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends . . . I will hand all Judah over to the king of Babylon” (20:4). Jeremiah sounds pretty tough; extremely

tough. Or is he? After all, in some of the verses of this text Jeremiah sounds like he's in extreme despair and extreme misery.

For a variety of reasons throughout life, many people find themselves in extreme despair at times too. Martin E. Marty writes in one of his books about what he calls a "wintry spirituality."¹²³ For instance, although we live in the "Sunshine State" here and in mid-June (when this sermon was given) average temperatures are 98 degrees with near 100% humidity; there are still times in life when you can't escape a "wintry spirituality." Because of illness, death of loved one, personal crisis, family trouble, there can be despair. Jeremiah was in the midst of an extreme spiritual winter.

However, thankfully, that's not the only extreme spiritual reflection Jeremiah expresses. He confesses, "The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior . . . He rescues the life of the needy from the hand of the wicked" (Jer. 20:11, 13). Talk about extreme. Jeremiah offers an extreme confession of the Lord's commitment and covenant with him.

The Gospel lesson for the day was the parable for the prodigal son. This son's father exhibited extreme acceptance and grace to his son. And yet how much more extreme can you get than when the sinless Son of God hangs on a cross for guilty and rebellious people? In the sacrifice of Jesus, He too "rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked."

The Survey Groups

The participants I recruited for this project were asked to be in one of two groups – Group A or Group B. Each group started out to include between 8-12 participants. The

¹²³ Martin E. Marty, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983) quoted in John Ortberg, *God is Closer Than You Think* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 152.

participants in Group A were asked to attend two worship services each Sunday on April 24, 2005 and on May 1, 2005. The participants in Group B were asked to attend two worship services each Sunday on May 29, 2005 and June 19, 2005.

Overall, the people I selected were people who are regular in their worship attendance and seem to demonstrate a strong commitment to their Lord and His church. A few of the people I selected responded positively on prior occasions when Biblical storytelling has been included in the worship services. For most of the participants, however, I did not know their opinion about storytelling prior to the surveys they returned. On the last page of each survey I left it optional for people to write their name. I did not want anyone to feel like they couldn't express something negative or contrary about Biblical storytelling if I knew who they were. I encouraged people to freely express their opinion. The honesty of their response was more important to me than to know who wrote what. Consequently, about half of the surveys came back signed. The rest were anonymous.

Furthermore, both groups recruited were almost evenly split between male and female. Approximately 60% of the participants are people who come from a Lutheran background. The rest, about 40%, are relatively new to our church.

However, some variables came up that I did not anticipate. For instance, I was out of town for several weeks in the spring writing the first three chapters of this paper. While I was gone I was also preparing for my four weeks of surveys. I recruited participants via my church secretary for Group A while I was out of town. I gave her a list of names that I developed for Group A along with a letter of introduction that she sent to the people on the list. Later on she followed up with each person to secure their

response. When I returned from my writing retreat I was assured that I had an adequate number of participants to meet my goal of having 8-12 people involved.

What I did not take into consideration when I was selecting people to participate was that the second Sunday for Group A (Sixth Sunday of Easter) was also Confirmation Sunday. Without remembering it was Confirmation Sunday, it ended up that a few of the families recruited had confirmation students in their family. As a result they were not able to commit to two services on May 1 (Confirmation Sunday) but were able to participate on April 24. I returned home from my time away only a few days prior to the first survey Sunday on April 24. By that time I felt it was too late to recruit additional participants. Therefore, there are a lower number of surveys returned for the May 1 services as a part of Group A.

When I recruited my participants for Group B (May 29 and June 19), I secured their willingness to participate several weeks ahead of time. However, as we got closer to those dates some people had a change of plans. They were going to be out of town for the Memorial Day weekend on May 29 but would be in town on June 19. By the time I learned this information, again it was too late to change or add participants and so the number of responses returned within Group A or Group B vary.

Despite the variables mentioned above, I am confident that I have an adequate sample to make conclusions on the impact of Biblical storytelling on a person's hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon proclaimed. The complete results of all the surveys received are included in Appendix A.¹²⁴

¹²⁴ APPENDIX A, pp 118-154.

CHAPTER 5

PROJECT RESULTS

My goal throughout this project has been to demonstrate that the use of storytelling in communicating a text of Scripture assists the worshiper in hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting that Scripture with the sermon. However, almost none of my bibliographic research on Biblical storytelling specifically combines the communication of the Scriptures in a storytelling fashion with a sermon.

There are only two references I have come across that hint at the relationship between Biblical storytelling and preaching. One is by Richard Ward in *Speaking of the Holy* where he writes, “The preacher’s work is so much easier if a text has been rendered in an evocative way.”¹²⁵ The second mention of this relationship between Biblical storytelling and preaching (referenced in footnote 103 above) is when parish pastor, Richard Rice, involved several members of his congregation in learning and telling various portions of the passion and resurrection narrative. As he analyzed what benefit that experience had on his congregation, he wrote, “They found the lessons more alive which in turned helped my preaching.” Beyond these two comments, I have not uncovered any other research on how the use of Biblical storytelling impacts the reception of a sermon. Nevertheless, I maintain (and conclude from the surveys I administered) that the use of Biblical storytelling assists the worshiper in hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting that Scripture with the sermon.

Before this project began my congregation was introduced to Biblical storytelling on a few occasions. One time was when Bible storyteller Dennis Dewey came to our

¹²⁵ Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 39.

church. While he presented several Bible stories, none of them served as a sermon text.¹²⁶ Also, in the past two years I have occasionally presented one of the lessons for the day in a storytelling way and then preached a sermon based on that text.

Additionally, in Lent of 2005 13 members of the congregation learned the passion story from Matthew 26 and 27 and told it in the Palm Sunday services. However, no sermon followed this telling.

The MAP Surveys

Surveys for this MAP were conducted on four Sundays: April 24, May 1, May 29 and June 19. The traditional reading of the sermon text and the Biblical storytelling of that text were alternated between the 8:30 and 11:00 worship services. Once again, the following chart summarizes the procedure.

	April 24, 2005 Acts 17:1-5	May 1, 2005 Acts 1:1-14	May 29, 2005 Deut. 11:18- 21,26-28	June 19, 2005 Jeremiah 20:7-13
8:30	Storytelling	Reading	Reading	Storytelling
11:00	Reading	Storytelling	Storytelling	Reading
	Group A		Group B	

On two of those Sundays I did the storytelling of the Scripture, and on the other two Sundays two lay people did the storytelling. I recruited two groups of 8-10 people in each group (Group A and Group B) to participate in the survey responses. As people arrived at church each morning, they picked up a survey sheet at the reception desk in the Narthex. They were instructed to specifically fill out the survey for the 8:30 service immediately following the 8:30 service so that their responses to that service were not

¹²⁶ Referenced in Chapter 1, p. 6.

swayed by their presence at the 11:00 service. Most surveys (however, not all) were then returned to the reception desk that morning or to the church office later in the week.

Individual names on the surveys were optional. The questions prepared for each of the surveys were the same.

1. Before today's worship service, how well did you know the Scripture which the sermon was based upon?
2. Please write out the sermon text as best you can from memory.
3. When the Scripture was read/told what captured your attention from this Word of God?
4. What was the sermon about?
5. Summarize how the Scripture text read/told connected to today's sermon.

However, one additional question was added to the survey just prior to the first week the surveys were distributed. It was critical for this project that the surveys clearly reveal any difference the hearer detected in the Scripture text being *read* versus *told* as that relates to the sermon preached. Therefore, I added one more question to the 11:00 surveys on those four Sundays. The question is:

6. Note any reflections you may have on the difference between hearing the Scripture told vs. read in your understanding of that Scripture as well as how that may have impacted your ability to follow the sermon.

The response to this question proved to be extremely helpful.

Week 1 – April 24, 2005
The Fifth Sunday after Easter
Scripture Text: Acts 17:1-15
Sermon Title: "Oh, If Only to be a Berean!"

On this first week, there were ten surveys handed out at the 8:30 service and nine were returned. The same amount was distributed at the 11:00 services and seven were returned. Although the instructions given prior to each weekend were that the surveys

were to be done immediately following each service, some people elected to take them home with them. In doing so, a few were not returned.

Nevertheless, from the surveys returned it is clear that the text selected, Acts 17:1-15, was not well known (as I suspected) by the majority of the people surveyed. Nearly all the responses to the first question which asked how well they knew this Scripture varied between “not well” and “not very well.”¹²⁷ One person wrote that they were familiar with Paul’s missionary travels but not this story. Another commented, “I knew that Paul traveled to Berea to preach, but I did not know that the Bereans were more receptive and more into the Scriptures than other communities where Paul traveled.”¹²⁸

The second question asked; “What captured your attention” as this Scripture was told/read? Among some of the responses offered following the 8:30 service when the text was “told” were:

- Facial expressions, gestures, enthusiasm with which it was shared.
- When the storyteller emphasized certain words and phrases it alerted my attention. The pastor’s tone of voice changed when he got to the part when Paul went to Berea – it was encouraging.
- How zealous Paul was in his determination to spread the Word of God.
- It became very true to life – meaningful. I could see it happening. I could apply it to the sermon and I feel it took on more meaning for my life!¹²⁹

Among the responses following the 11:00 service where the text was “read” were comments about how it was easier to follow along in the pew Bible as the lector was

¹²⁷ APPENDIX A, Survey Results, 123.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 123-124.

reading it. I don't interpret this response to show a preference for the Scripture being read, but rather it shows the "habit" our congregation has adopted.

We have placed great emphasis in our church over the past few years on looking up the Scripture readings in the pew Bible and following along. In fact, we no longer print the lectionary readings in the bulletin because we want people to become more familiar with learning their way around the Bible. We print page numbers in the bulletin and encourage people to find the readings for themselves in their pew Bibles. Therefore, we have "trained" our members to follow in their Bible as the Scriptures are being read. A couple of the survey participants commented that it was difficult to follow in the Bible and also watch the story teller. I did not consider ahead of time that people would try to do both at the same time. It was my expectation (although I should have explicitly said this) that people would naturally "look at" and "watch" the storyteller instead of trying to follow along on the printed page while the storyteller was speaking. To receive the full benefit of the storyteller's delivery of the text, it necessitates watching the teller, not following word for word on the page. One person said that she finally just closed her Bible and watched the storyteller.

Some of the other comments after hearing the Scripture "read" were:

- Listening to it read or following along in the Bible is not nearly as effective as hearing it told – eye to eye.
- I had trouble following the reading. Truthfully, it sounded like a bunch of words that I had difficulty separating into thoughts. I "heard and felt" the Scripture more in the first service. It helps me when the verses are "told" rather than read.
- The reading lacked the emphasis provided with the storytelling technique included.¹³⁰

¹³⁰ Ibid., 128.

Although it will be discussed later, the way these surveys were arranged requested that the same group of people attend both the 8:30 and 11:00 service on two weekends. While there are some disadvantages to this arrangement which will be mentioned shortly, there are also some advantages too. The comment above about how listening to the Scripture read is not nearly as effective as hearing it told comes from the fact that the same person heard the Scripture told in one service and read in another service. Having been present for both services, this person is able to make the comparison between the two. If the survey groups were set up where one group of people attended the 8:30 service and another group attended the 11:00 service, neither one would be comparing a different “style” of presenting the Scripture text on the same day.

As the third question asked for a summary of the sermon text, I was impressed with the responses from the 8:30 service, especially considering the fact that most people weren't familiar with this text. A few of the more detailed responses are:

- Paul was on his second missionary journey. He went to the synagogue in Thessalonica to preach about Jesus to the Jews. Some believed what he said. Some did not and chose to try and discredit him. The unbelievers went to Berea and talked against Paul. But, when Paul arrived in Berea and spoke about Jesus to the Bereans, the people were more open and receptive to his message. Then the Bereans turned to Scripture to check for themselves if what Paul said was true.
- As was his way, Paul went to the synagogue in Thessalonica to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. After he had shared the gospel message, some Jews and Greek women accepted Jesus as their Savior. One of the Jews, Jason, who became a follower of Jesus accepted Paul and other Christians into his home. However, other Jews in the synagogue were very angry upon hearing the gospel message and started riots to violently expel this message and its adherents from their midst. Paul was assisted by those who had accepted the gospel message to leave Thessalonica before he could be captured. After leaving Thessalonica Paul went to Berea where he again shared the message with the Jews in the synagogue. The Bereans searched the scripture to see if what Paul said was true and believed that Jesus was their savior. However, some of the Jews, from Thessalonica, came to Berea after Paul. As such, the Bereans helped Paul leave town to go to Athens. Paul left Timothy and Silas behind, indicating that they should join him later.¹³¹

¹³¹ Ibid., 124, 125.

Most all of the summaries seemed to capture the main points in the reading. Because these summaries were rather thorough and because the participants admitted that they were not familiar with the text ahead of time, I submit that their understanding of the text was aided by the use of the storytelling method together with the sermon that was preached. At the 11:00 service, the people already heard the text twice (once told and once read) and the same sermon spoken twice as well. Therefore, many people did not perceive that they were to fill out the second survey thoroughly.

With the fourth question, the responses were rather brief. However, people heard the emphasis in the sermon on how we, like the Bereans, are called to search the Scriptures. In the sermon I quoted author and speaker John Maxwell who taught one time: “You have to always be careful when someone begins a sentence saying, ‘I don’t know what the Bible says but here’s what I think . . .’” That’s a red flag, Maxwell warns. I mention this because this thought was reflected back by several people. One of the more detailed summaries is the following:

If only I could be a Berean. How do the world and/or the “church” pick our heroes? Do we pick biblical heroes (Daniel, Paul, Moses, etc.) What does the reading from Acts 17 teach us about the priority we should place upon sharing the gospel as well as how the gospel message may be rejected or received with thanksgiving. How can we learn from the Bereans to be continually open to using God’s Word to receive the gospel message as well as determine how we should respond as God’s people to the questions, concerns, and choices we encounter in this world. How can we remember that we are Berean’s – people blessed to have heard and received the message of God’s grace through Jesus Christ.¹³²

While I mentioned before that I think there is good reason for having these surveys set up the way they were with the same group of people attending both 8:30 and

¹³² Ibid., 126.

11:00, there are some disadvantages to that as well. By the time the people tried to answer question 4 from the 11:00 service, they felt as if they had already answered the question at 8:30 and may not necessarily be reflecting anything particularly new or fresh. Nevertheless, one person who offered a rather detailed summary following the 8:30 service also wrote the following after the 11:00 service:

Finding the hero in our life who it maybe – how we may choose a hero. Our heroes may be chosen for many different reasons – Biblical characters, a family member, friend, etc. When we find this hero we want to be like that hero. The Bereans can easily be labeled heroes. They listened and searched the Scriptures to see if Paul was revealing the truth, the way, the life. I liked the reference to the speaker who answered the question with, “I [don’t] know what the Bible says – but this is what I think!” A red flag for sure! Searching the Scriptures is the only answer. We must not let our emotions and human thinking interfere with finding true peace.¹³³

In general the sermon summaries after the 11:00 service were not much different from the 8:30 service.

The fifth question asked was an attempt to clarify how the Scripture text blended with the sermon and what difference there was in the “telling” of the Scripture and the “reading” for making a connection with the sermon. In the responses written after the 8:30 service, people were better able to see the connection between the Scripture and the sermon. I was able to express some emphasis with my voice inflections and body language in the telling of the text when I said; “They received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.” These words made an impact on what the participant heard and what they understood from the text. For instance, one person commented: “By being told [the text] I could visualize it and become a part of it. I felt like I was going through this time with Paul and

¹³³Ibid., 129.

his friends. By telling the Scripture it brought it to life – making it very real!”¹³⁴ Also, “The telling of the Scripture was very effective in connecting what happened in the past, happens today and can happen in the future.”¹³⁵ In the response to the 11:00 survey, one person added:

The Scripture served as the basis for the sermon, both when it was read and when it was told. When it was read I didn’t get the feeling of what was really important in the text as I did when it was told. When it was told, the speaker put emphasis and a certain amount of drama to make it have more meaning and come to life.¹³⁶

These responses, in addition to the responses to question six below, suggest that there is a perceived difference between hearing the Scriptures *told* and hearing the Scriptures *read* and how this aides in connecting the hearer with the sermon.

As mentioned earlier, I added one more question to the survey in order to clarify whether the participants notice any clearer connection between the text of Scripture and the sermon when the Scripture is read or told. Question 6 reads: “Note any reflections you may have on the difference between hearing the Scripture told vs. read in your understanding of that Scripture as well as how that may have impacted your ability to follow the sermon.” Responses to this question include:

- I believe listening to the lessons being told is much more effective toward understanding. The speaker puts in emphasis where needed, can pause for thought, and use gesture.
- The Scripture when it was told by you focused my attention on you and the emphasis given to the one verse (17:11). Your gestures and facial expressions helped to create a picture of words that was remembered . . . Your emphasis (in the sermon) on verse 11 (at least 3 times) was about the most important thing in helping me remember the message of the sermon

¹³⁴ Ibid., 127.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 127.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 130.

- Today I experienced the two extremes of watching and hearing an excellent storyteller in the first service and contrasted with a poor reader in the second service. Consequently, I got a lot more out of the storytelling.
- During the first service the telling of the Scripture was very effective and helped connect to the sermon. The reading of the Scripture during the second service didn't work and/or help with following the sermon. Note: sound system, etc. notwithstanding, I really enjoy having the Scripture told vs. read. I feel it directly increases attention and understanding.¹³⁷

What these responses point out are some of the things that a storyteller is able to do more naturally that doesn't happen when you are reading something. For instance, it is easier and more natural to put emphasis on certain words, to draw out a pause, to add certain gestures when reciting some verses rather than reading them. If in the telling of the text different voice intonation, pausing, and gestures increases attention and understanding this is good thing. Furthermore, if the presentation of the text creates a "word picture" then it is much more likely for the hearer to retain what is heard.

Another issue that is raised from some of the comments is the difference between a "good" storytelling and a "bad" one. Likewise, there is a difference between a "good" reader and a "bad" one. It is not simply that the storytelling method aides the hearers attention and understanding, it is when the storytelling method is done well. Doing this well may be a subjective issue. Yet any evaluation of one's ability will likely yield similar marks. Perhaps some readers inhibit the reception of the Scripture they are reading because they read it so poorly. Whatever approach is used, it needs to be done with skill and excellence.

In addition to the evaluation of the storytelling method verses the traditional reading of the Scriptures; the survey responses for this first week also alerted me to two other items. Although I've already mentioned it above, we have encouraged our

¹³⁷ Ibid., 130-131.

congregation to follow the readings in their pew Bibles. I didn't realize until that first weekend how significant that is for many of the people in my congregation. Perhaps in a church where looking up the Scripture lessons a head of time was not a regular habit, the need to follow along word for word may not be as great.

Another thought that surfaced from the responses was how much the preacher references the text in the sermon. A number of words or ideas that stood out for people in their summaries were because of the emphasis I placed on something in the sermon. Sometimes preachers read their text prior to the sermon, but barely reference it in the body of the sermon. In this particular sermon, as well as the other three I preached, there were repeated references to the Scripture text throughout the message. People noted that practice.

In summary, the data collected for this first sermon supports the assertion that the storytelling method better assists the hearer in remembering and connecting the Scripture with the sermon.

*Week 2 – May 1, 2005
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Scripture Text: Acts 1:1-14
Sermon Title: Faith Survivors*

This weekend was not only the Sixth Sunday after Easter in the church year but our church also observed the Ascension of our Lord as well. Furthermore, in the 8:30 worship service we celebrated the Rite of Confirmation. I specifically selected this weekend to conduct one of the surveys because I wanted a combination of familiar texts and non familiar texts. The reading from Acts 1 would likely be known by most and, in

fact, each of the participants noted they knew the Scripture text quite well. Nevertheless, my intention in picking this familiar text was to see if the telling of a familiar text made any significant difference for people's understanding of the text and their connecting the text to the sermon.

This weekend I reversed the order of the telling/reading. Our lay reader read the text at the 8:30 service. Another member of the congregation "told" the Scripture at the 11:00 service. The number of surveys returned for this second weekend is lower than the other three weeks. There were seven surveys handed out for the 8:30 service and five were returned. Seven surveys were distributed for the 11:00 service and four were returned. In part, I attribute this low return percentage with Confirmation. The Confirmation recognition and celebration afterwards created extra activity for many people. A couple of the families who volunteered to help with this project had a child in the confirmation class. While I was cautious about using them for that service, they really wanted to participate. Consequently, a few of those surveys didn't get completed because parents were caught up in the occasion for their son or daughter.

As expected, everyone who responded to the first question indicated that they were familiar with this text of Scripture. In response to the second question on the survey, only a few comments were made following 8:30 or 11:00. One person pointed out that he didn't remember hearing before that it was the men/angels in white robes who told the disciples that Jesus would return.¹³⁸ Another person felt that the reader was reading too fast and it wasn't easy keeping up with him.¹³⁹ Here is a case where it may

¹³⁸ Ibid., 132.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

not be that reading is ineffective, but rather how the reading is done. Another said that when someone is reading the Scriptures out loud she (the hearer) needs to have her pew Bible open to follow along otherwise she only hears a word here and there.¹⁴⁰ Someone else commented, “How awesome this must have been for the disciples to have been with Jesus and then to have him taken away in such a glorious way.”¹⁴¹

Following the 11:00 service one person said what captured his attention was the disciples’ question to Jesus about if this was the time He was going to restore the kingdom of Israel. Also, he noted Jesus’ response that these disciples are to be His witnesses “in Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”¹⁴² Another person mentioned that what struck her was Jesus’ assurance that He would be with His disciples and His promise to them of the “helper” that was to come.¹⁴³ One woman added that perhaps for the first time she really “heard” or paid attention to the list of names Luke gives us in this text of those who were present in the upper room. What brought this to her attention was the fact that the storyteller was able to give that list from memory without hesitation. The woman wrote on her survey, “I was impressed that the teller remembered all the names of the disciples.”¹⁴⁴

Nearly all of the participants were able to write a complete summary of the text for question 3. This may be because of how familiar they were with the text. Likewise

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² Ibid., 135.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 132.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 135.

there were accurate summaries of the sermon following both services. The sermon summaries that were given all captured the main thrust of the message. For instance:

- Luke is the writer telling us about Jesus preparing his disciples for his return to heaven and their work once He is gone. The disciples were with Jesus in Jerusalem. They had been together forty days since Jesus' resurrection. Now, Jesus tells them that He is going to the Father in Heaven. He tells them that they must stay together in Jerusalem and await the Holy Spirit which Jesus promises will be their Helper for the work they have to do once He is gone. The disciples watch Jesus ascend into Heaven. Two persons in white clothing ask the disciples why they are looking up and tell them that Jesus will return in the same way they watched Him go. In the meantime they are to return to Jerusalem and await the Holy Spirit and then carry the message of Jesus to the ends of the earth – to all the nations. They stayed together and prayed together.
- Jesus was with the disciples. He told them that he had to return to the father, but that he would send his spirit to them. He then ascended into heaven and was hidden by the clouds. As the disciples were standing there two men in white robes appear and told them not to fear, Jesus has ascended to the father, and he will return as he said. The disciples then prayed together.¹⁴⁵
- Jesus had spent 40 days with his disciples since his resurrection when they asked him if now was the time for him to bring about the kingdom of God. He told them that this was not for them to know, but that he would be going to the father, but that he would send the Holy Spirit to be with them. He also told them that they were to be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He then ascended and disappeared in the cloud. As they were standing there, two men in white came, told them not to fear, that Jesus had ascended to the father, but that he would return as he had said. The disciples then gathered together and prayed with the women and Mary.¹⁴⁶

Each of these summaries captured the essence of the ascension event. The disciples were curious as to what was about to happen. Jesus clarifies for them the new role they are to take on and carry out. While standing there somewhat dazed and perhaps even confused, Jesus was physically lifted from the disciples' presence. Although the disciples probably did not have a clear understanding about what just happened, the angels appeared, assuring these men that there is work to do. Comprehending the events of this text

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 133.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 135.

seemed to set the stage well for the sermon regarding what it means to be a “faith survivor” in our world today.

In response to question 4 detailing what the sermon was about, the summaries encouraged the need for community in being a faith survivor in a world today faced with so many challenges and temptations. The disciples who gathered together in the upper room for prayer were not there alone. They each were there to encourage one another in the faith. So too we need the same today. Their responses included:

- Using a comparison with the TV series “Survivor” the sermon talked about how the disciples must have felt when they saw Jesus ascending into Heaven. They must have wondered how they would survive with Jesus gone. In the TV Survivor, the goal is to be the last one standing using “whatever it takes” to get there. The disciples were survivors by staying together and supporting one another. The sermon pointed out that life is difficult and to survive in our faith, we need each other.
- The sermon began with a reference to reality TV shows, such as Survivor, depicting such fear, mistrust, and self centered behavior in order to “win.” In contrast, the sermon focuses on how the Scripture text provides a totally opposite alternative. First, instead of serving our selfish desires, Jesus tells us that we are to be His witnesses. Secondly, instead of working against others for ourselves, we are to be working and praying together as well as to witness more effectively to those outside the community. Finally, instead of a sole survivor, God has shown us that he has done all that is necessary for us to be with him now and in eternity. As with the confirmands are we ready to do whatever it takes to live a life of faith in response to what God has done for us to be faith survivors?¹⁴⁷
- Introduced the TV program of the “Survivors” and the big difference between the one survivor in the program compared to how we are all survivors through faith and thus by sharing and witnessing can spread out to the whole of creation. We are all one of God’s creation and He is in our presence through His Word and the Sacraments. Life is not easy and to help us through trying and joyful times we need to stay together, encourage each other and help. Through the time spent on this earth Jesus through miracles and parables displayed to us how through faith we can be survivors. References were made through the Old Testament how sacrifices were made but did not keep them from going back to old ways. Through Jesus death and resurrection we are assured of full forgiveness through His mercy and grace – agape – underserved love and mercy. The reference to the service where the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 133-134.

commitment was made was thought provoking on how we can live a life of faith. To live a life of faith we must continue to run the race and move forward by God's grace and do whatever it takes to be a survivor. Jesus the ultimate victor! Not one survivor but we are all survivors.¹⁴⁸

These summaries pointed out an emphasis that was made in the sermon that in order to be a "faith survivor" we are not to journey through our life of faith on our own. We need the presence, aid and involvement of others around us. This was especially emphasized for the confirmation students. The emphasis of community had specific application for the confirmation class and emphasized the role that the church at large has in encouraging these young people to not be faith drop outs but faith survivors.

The statement of commitment that Rick Warren prepared for his church on the celebration of the 25th anniversary of Saddleback Community Church ends with the statement "whatever it takes." I talked about how that's the kind of commitment the Lord calls for from us. However, my real point in using Warren's statement was to turn those words around and emphasized that even before we can consider doing "whatever it takes," Christ demonstrated a willingness to do whatever it would take to secure for us the promise of salvation. Each of the participants in this group, whether it was in their 8:30 or 11:00 summaries, captured the emphasis on being a faith survivor and doing "whatever it takes" in response to Christ "surviving" for us.

- We must be committed "to do whatever it takes to be a faith survivor." God was committed to "do whatever it takes" to save us from the consequences of sin, and what it took was Jesus dying on the cross, and God did that.
- As with the confirmands are we ready to do whatever it takes to live a life of faith in response to what God has done for us to be a faith survivor?
- Whatever it takes, I will become a faith survivor.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 136.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 133-134.

- To live a life of faith we must continue to run the race and move forward by God's grace and do whatever it takes to be a survivor. Jesus the ultimate victor! Not one survivor but we are all survivors.
- God does whatever it takes to work with us. In order for us to survive our faith we need to do whatever it takes.¹⁵⁰

While our Lutheran theology emphasizes that it is the Lord who went to extreme measures and who did "whatever it would take" to declare us to be eternal "survivors," this phrase ("whatever it takes") caught on after that service. The third use of the law encourages us to respond in a way that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, we seek to not only verbally confess our faith, but to live it out daily as well. Therefore, we strive to do whatever it takes to be a faith survivor today robed with Christ's righteousness daily as we face the temptations of the devil, the world and our sinful flesh.

In response to the questions about how the Scripture text told/read connected with the sermon and how this impacted the hearer's understanding of the sermon, one person summarized what was expressed by others:

As opposed to last week's previous Scripture telling the reading and telling didn't seem much different this morning. The main connection with the Scripture was realized as it was most effectively "inserted" with the sermon, further explained, and extrapolated to us today. In summary, the use of the Scripture in the sermon was more effective and stood out more than either the reading or telling of the Scripture before the sermon.¹⁵¹

There can be a number of different reasons for this assessment. It may be because the Scripture text of Acts 1 was rather familiar to begin with. It may be that neither the storyteller nor the lay reader did an exceptional job in communicating the text. (In my opinion the storyteller did a commendable job in her telling, however there were some microphone problems as she began and she had to stop and restart. Although she began

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 136.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

from the beginning the second time, this technical trouble interrupted the flow of the telling.) The above comment could also be because the perception of that hearer is that the preacher utilized the text well throughout the sermon.

One person noted that they prefer when I do the storytelling of the Scripture because they feel as if my pauses and inflections make it easier to follow.¹⁵² One of my presuppositions at the outset of this project is that the benefit of Biblical storytelling for the hearer shouldn't be based upon one person's skill at this task. However, the above statement may suggest that how well the storyteller does with his/her telling does make a difference. It is not only the manner by which something is being presented but also the ability of the presenter.

One participant felt that the lay storyteller on this occasion appeared to "recite from memory" Acts 1 rather than as if she was naturally telling someone this very story. She wrote:

I didn't feel that the Scripture lesson was "told," it was more "recited" from memory. If it were "told" to me, I would feel that the person knew about the incident as though they had actually witnessed it or heard it from someone who had actually witnessed it and wanted me to know about it too. When you "read" what Luke wrote you see how detailed he was in recording the incident – he names people that were present and actually saw Jesus ascend. To story tell this Scripture, you need to sound like Luke – "I know this story is true and I want you to know it too." This person did a wonderful job of memorizing the passage and reciting it, but that's also how it felt. I still need to follow along in the Bible whether it is read or told – I need to participate by opening the Bible to the passage and follow along.¹⁵³

Factors like the lack of preparation, lack of understanding the text, certain distractions while you are telling the text can all have an impact on how the telling comes

¹⁵² Ibid., 137.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

across. Once again, different abilities among storytellers are a factor in the hearing of a text just as there were when reading the Scripture lessons well or poorly. One final comment offered was: “I listen much better when it was told. For me personally, I get more out of the Word and service when you (Pastor) do it. You are very easy to listen to and you are very sincere in the delivery. Your pauses and inflections make it easier for me to follow.”¹⁵⁴

After reviewing the surveys for this second week, the impact of the Biblical storytelling presentation was not as great on this occasion as it was the first week. The significant factor contributing to this may likely be familiarity with the text. It could also be that since the telling was done in the second service rather than the first, participants had already heard the text read once before hearing it told. It could be that the style of the storyteller did not enhance their hearing of the Word. While I maintain that the storytelling method is nevertheless an effective method, there will naturally be times when the effectiveness is greater than at other times.

Week 3 – May 29, 2005
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Scripture Text: Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28
Sermon Title: “Telling and Retelling the Story”

The main reason I selected this text for storytelling is because it is a seminal text that embodies what Biblical storytelling is all about. While Biblical storytelling may not encourage tying God’s Word as a symbol on your hands or binding it on your foreheads, it does emphasize the significance of telling and retelling the Word of God over and over

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

again in daily life. What a blessing it would be for people to know God's Word so well that it is such a natural part of their daily life that they could easily speak about it in casual conversation on a daily basis. The very nature of what Biblical storytelling means is that the Word of God becomes a part of you.

The number of survey responses on this third week was higher than the other three weeks. There were a total of 14 surveys handed out at both the 8:30 and the 11:00 services. Twelve surveys were returned following the 8:30 although there was one person who did not respond to question 3 and another who did not respond to questions 4 or 5. All 14 were returned following the 11:00 service. At the 8:30 service the Deuteronomy scripture was read by a lay reader and in the 11:00 service I presented it as a storytelling.

For the first question, there was a mixed response among the participants in this group as to how familiar they were with this text. A few responded that they didn't know it well, while a few indicated that they were somewhat familiar with it.¹⁵⁵ One person said, "The first part I could have quoted . . . I didn't remember verses 26-28 at all."¹⁵⁶ Another member of the group added, "Parts of the Scripture was known because of living near a large Jewish community [years ago] – the part of writing it on your door post and upon your forehead."¹⁵⁷ Actually, the majority of the participants were not familiar with this text, which was surprising to me. I thought this text would be well known by most people.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 143.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

The responses were varied to the second question about what captured the hearer's attention when the Scripture was read. Many recalled the variety of images and details that are mentioned in this text. Among them were:

- That we shall teach our children the word of God – the commandments. We should tell and retell the story and fix them in our minds and in our hearts.
- The whole Scripture captured my attention. The details of how God said they would be blessed if they kept the law and cursed if they didn't.
- The challenge in the second section.
- Binding the words of God on our foreheads and on our door posts.¹⁵⁸

In general there was a clear understanding of what this text says.

However, in response to the second question there were some additional comments written following the 11:00 service when the Deuteronomy text was given in a storytelling manner:

- I noticed the congregation watching you even though they had their Bibles open. Almost everyone looked up! Telling the Scriptures gets our attention! *(This comment was by the church organist. From where she sits in the choir loft area she has a pretty good view of the congregation and could easily see if they were looking at the Bible teller or following along in the Bibles with their heads down.)*
- It made an impact to have the Scripture told among us. "Heart" and "eye" – These two words I remember because of the gestures of the storyteller. I felt like he was looking at me personally.
- The way pastor recited the text by heart and his expression is like a picture. His use of his hands and body language help me understand and feel the Word of God as he told the story. I am always impressed by his ability to recite the Word of God with so much intensity. He brings the Scripture home and into your heart.
- I really listen and pay attention to the words and gestures. Much more meaningful for me. I like the eye contact – better than watching the top of someone's head (when they are looking down to read).
- Hand motions mimicked where God's word should be shared and talked about.
- I was compelled by Pastor's presentation of the scripture reading. I felt very focused on the words and looking forward to the sermon.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 143-144.

Similarly, there was a comment made at the 8:30 service about how this person feels that when the Scripture is read, “I sometimes don’t pay attention 100%.”¹⁶⁰

Reflecting on these responses and comparing them to the responses in the first week when the Scripture was told, I saw many favorable comments about the storytelling approach. The gestures used, the eye contact between teller and hearer, the way the words are spoken all help to paint a picture for the hearer. They all contribute to the favorable reception of the storytelling approach. The comment from the organist, who looked out over the congregation during the storytelling, emphasized that fewer people were looking down than in previous weeks. Usually, as storytelling happens more and more, people often see the benefit of watching and listening rather than following along and listening. Although in previous weeks a few people wrote “See 8:30” as their responses on the 11:00 survey, no one did this in week three. In response to, “When the Old Testament Scripture was **told** in this service, what captured your attention from this word of God?” people still had something to write after the 11:00 service in addition to what they wrote at the 8:30 service. Whether it was a storytelling presentation or the quality of the storytelling experience or both, this approach to presenting the Scripture certainly had an affect.

In both the 8:30 and the 11:00 worship services participants offered a detailed summary of the text they heard in response to the third question. Almost everyone mentioned how the Word of God is to be fixed on our minds and hearts, tied as symbols and talked about with our children and others. The image used of the “tying” and “binding” was a strong one. The hearers were also attentive to the reference to blessings and curses in verses 26-28.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 138.

- Keep these words of mind in your heart and soul. Teach them to your children. Speak of them in your home, in the way, when you lie down and when you get up. Put them on your doorposts and on your gates, that you may have many days in the land of promise. Now I give you a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you keep the commands of the Lord your God. A curse if you forget the Lord your God and follow the ways of the people in the land and worship gods you have never known.
- That we should fix the words of our Lord in our hearts and mind. We should write them on our doors and on our foreheads, teach and tell our children the story of our Lord. That the commandments can be a curse or a blessing. We shall not follow other Gods.¹⁶¹
- Remember the words I have given you. Write it on your forehead and post it on your doorposts. Talk with your children about it as you go down the road and as you lie down and get up. This both a blessing and a curse. A blessing that by following God's law your life will be full.¹⁶²

Since I was the storyteller for this Scripture, I know I put my hands to my chest and my forehead when I said, "Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads." That was a natural gesture to make when telling the text, but would not necessarily be a natural action while reading it in a more formal way. Likewise, since in the telling of the text the teller is not confined to a podium or lectern stand but rather can freely move, I placed emphasis on movement and location when I said, "Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up." With a little bit of movement or lack of movement, with some hand motions (lie down, get up) emphasis on certain words can be given and such emphasis may make them stand out in the hearer's memory.

In response to question 4, "What was today's sermon about?" most of the responses from both the 8:30 and 11:00 service were much more detailed than the responses to that same question the prior weeks. There appeared to be a much clearer

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 140.

¹⁶² Ibid., 144.

understanding of both the Scripture text and the sermon preached. Although this was a familiar Scripture to some, it was not to others. Nevertheless, most all the participants clearly heard the encouragement that we are to tell and retell the Word of God again and again. It is to be a part of our life.

- Remembering the 10 commandments why they were given to Moses – to prepare the hearts/souls of the exiles upon leaving Egypt. In a society filled with many distractions we need to remember the Lord always. Waking/sleeping/walking/working with family and friends – place a sign on your home, such as, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.” Life is at its best when we place our trust in the Lord. The commandment is a gift from God to us to build relationships as his adopted children. Challenge each other to stay in the Word. It’s easy to forget the Lord with the distractions – so “be tellers of God’s story.”
- Telling and retelling the story. Today’s sermon was to commemorate Memorial Day – A day of remembrance – remembering to tell the stories that are most influential/significant in our lives, while remembering to include in these stories, the story of Jesus Christ and the significance of His love/forgiveness in/on our lives. As we recognize the man-made creations, i.e. the St. Louis arch, we are to recognize the magnificence of life and His commandments, and to understand that God has provided these for us. To know that God has prepared these commands/commandments to be carried in our hearts and minds, so we are able to resist temptation/distractions. Take the time to reach your children/friends and foe alike God’s commandments. Let people know that your family and home is a house of God, so when they enter they are reminded we are guided by God’s Word. The commandments were given to us to show us life at its best. They are not meant to restrict our lives, but a means by which we can fulfill life. By following God’s commandments we are blessed, as this is expressing honor to God and ourselves. By disobeying God’s commandments we are cursed by giving into distraction and suffering the consequences included in our telling and retelling the story of God’s love, which we are and how we are to relate is our inheritance of entering the promise land – heaven. It is our responsibility to tell and retell the story.¹⁶³
- Remembering. Remembering the meaning of Memorial Day or Decoration Day as some call it. It is not just another 3 day holiday – the beginning of summer. Some veterans tell stories of their war experiences so often that others can tell those stories just as well. This is what God wants us to do with His Word – tell it over and over until it is written in our hearts and souls. Tell it to our children and other people wherever and whatever the situation. In all that God was doing for Israel he was preparing them to live in the land He’d

¹⁶³ Ibid., 141.

promised them so they would not become like the people who lived in the land, but would never forget the Lord their God and would continue to worship Him alone. This is what God is doing for us today – preparing us for the “gift of heaven.” We need a special day like Memorial Day to help us remember the men and women who died so we can live in this great, free land, because we tend to forget so easily. We forget God loves us. We forget God has forgiven our sins and saved us from hell by sending His son to die on the cross for our sins. We forget we are sojourners here on earth and that an eternal home is heaven awaits us. We forget that God is preparing us to live in that “home.” We forget that God’s rules and commandments are not to keep us in subjection and from having fun. They are given to us so we can be free and have “life at its best”!¹⁶⁴

The sermon began with a reference to Memorial Day and how we remember those who gave their lives for our country’s freedom. We remember those people and the events of the war by telling and retelling stories about the war. Likewise, we remember our relationship with God and the freedom He gives to us in the gospel by telling and retelling His Word, His commandments, His promises. This remembering and retelling can be done in a variety of different ways while waking, walking, and working. One person wrote how important it is “remembering to tell the stories that are most influential/significant in our lives, while remembering to include in these stories the story of Jesus Christ and the significance of His love/forgiveness.”¹⁶⁵ Another person added: “God wants us to not just remember His Word and His Son’s sacrifice for us, but we need to relate this to others.”¹⁶⁶ Just about everyone included in their summary the importance of not only remembering God’s Word but the importance of sharing this with others.

The sermon also made reference to the warning given to the Israelites upon entering the promised land. They were to know God’s Word and His commandments

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., 147-148.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 141.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 146.

because upon entering that land they would be faced with many distractions. We too are faced with many distractions in our daily lives. Therefore, one of the reasons that the Lord has given to us these commandments is so that we might enjoy “life at its best.” This statement of living “life at its best” was emphasized in the sermon and it was clearly heard by several.

- There is a good reason to keep telling and retelling the Gospel story both for those we tell it to and for us for doing the telling. It needs to stay fresh. This is life at its best.
- We need to look for opportunities to tell God’s story. Over time they will be burned into our hearts and minds. “This is life at its best” really says it all about obeying God’s Word.¹⁶⁷
- The commandments were given to us to show us life at its best. They were not meant to restrict our lives, but a means by which we can fulfill life.¹⁶⁸
- Life will be at its best when we honor God first and keep these in our hearts and minds.
- God gives us the commandments to enable us to build a relationship with him – his gift was to provide “life at its best.” We were to enjoy his blessings plus heaven in eternal life.¹⁶⁹

As the participants in Group B reflected on the differences between hearing the Scripture read verses told, there was strong preference for the telling of God’s Word and how that affected their hearing of the sermon. Among the comments written are the following:

- Hearing the Scripture told was more impactful [sic] to me. Actually, I think the important point for me is the sermon itself. *Pastor actually reviews a lot of the Scripture in the sermon. His ability to draw parallels is very important (emphasis mine).*
- Your mind wonders when the Scripture is read if you do not read along. I concentrate more, listen better, get more details, enjoy a more fulfilling experience and retrain more details when the story teller tells the Scripture.
- I think when the Scripture is told I give more attention to it.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 140.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 141.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 146-147.

- To me I understand the Scripture better when Pastor Goff told it vs. being read. When pastor told the Scripture he expresses his love of the Scripture. *My understanding and ability to follow the sermon was much greater and more intense when pastor told the story (emphasis mine).*
- The Scripture told brings a heart felt means of presenting the Scripture. The Scripture told allows the presenter an avenue of utilizing their bodily expressions and a closer connection with the congregation when being on the same elevation/level as the congregation. The Scripture told gives a greater opportunity for the presenter to use more methods of communication in providing a personable touch to the message for the congregation.
- As I listened to the sermon it was easier to visualize the text because I paid more attention to the presentation of the text. Scripture comes alive with the storytelling – even though sometimes reading is done with good inflection, etc. the body language and arm movements helped me remember better.
- At 11:00 Pastor Goff was more familiar with this passage and was able to emphasize what he would later include in the sermon. It was more coherent.
- I think it depends on what kind of learner you are. I'm a visual learner so I always try to follow the text when it is read. But when it is told, I watch the teller because they make it come alive.¹⁷⁰

The comments above emphasize the connection between the Scriptures told and the sermon preached. One participant mentioned that in the telling of the text I was able to emphasize what I would later include in the sermon.¹⁷¹ That certainly is a benefit when the preacher is also the one who does the storytelling of the Scripture. Someone else who does the storytelling would not likely know what the preacher's emphasis will be. Likewise, one person wrote that her understanding and ability to follow the sermon is greater and more intense when the Scripture is told. The telling manner of presenting the Scripture provides for a greater opportunity for certain words or phrases to be emphasized in a way that seems natural in a telling but would seem unnatural in a reading. The telling helps to reinforce the main points of the Scripture and the sermon.

Overall, the responses to this survey were very favorable toward the use of the Biblical storytelling method, specifically as it relates to the hearing, understanding,

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

remembering and connecting the Scripture text to the sermon preached. One participant added:

- I felt the told version was very effective as it was 1) easily seen by the listeners as heard – you were way far away at the lectern; and 2) the eye contact and deliberate delivery were word for word what was related in the sermon. This deliberate delivery gives you time to think about what is being said, plus you used a few gestures/body language that connects with the listeners.¹⁷²
- The storytelling of the Scripture and how easy it was to follow where that fit in to the sermon is apparent to me. I think it has a large part to do with the speed of the telling vs. the speed of reading, the inflection of telling vs. lack of understanding of the reader as to meaning/inflection of what is being read, and the gestures, movement, eye contact (relate ability) of the storyteller vs. a reader who is further away in the lectern.¹⁷³

In addition to any differences there might be between reading and telling a passage of Scripture, there are certainly numerous other factors that may impact the listener. One may be the location of the person presenting the reading/telling. In our church, the lectern is located on the chancel which is elevated above the main floor. On most occasions the reading of the lessons for the day by the lay reader or pastor is done from the lectern. On those occasions when there is a storytelling of the Scripture it is done on the main floor of the nave which allows the speaker to be closer to the congregation and allows for freedom of movement. The times I have done the storytelling I have walked down the center aisle attempting to display as if I was talking personally to the people in the pews. This physical proximity is an important variable in the use of telling instead of reading the Scriptures.

¹⁷² Ibid., 143.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 149-150.

Week 4 – June 19, 2005
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Scripture Text: Jeremiah 20:7-13
Sermon Title: “Extreme Living”

In addition to this being the Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, this day was also Father’s Day. The text, Jeremiah. 20:7-13, was read by a lay reader at the 8:30 service and presented as a storytelling at the 11:00 service by someone else in the congregation. Ten surveys were passed out and nine were returned from the 8:30 service and six were returned from the 11:00 service.

In response to the first question on the survey as to how familiar the participants were with this Scripture, nearly all of them said that they were not familiar with it.¹⁷⁴ However, considering the fact that most were not familiar with this Scripture, they offered varied reflections in response to the second question on what captured their attention.

- The confidence that Jeremiah had in God and yet the contrast of his mood – despair and hope.
- The fact that Jeremiah had the courage to continue prophesying the Word of God amidst the mockery, violence, deceit, vengeance, etc. He was puzzled at the fact that with all his effort expressing/spreading God’s Word to his fellow man, that God wouldn’t provide people who were more receiving/open to his word.
- Despite the persecution of those he came to prophecy to, Jeremiah couldn’t hold in the message of God. The fire inside is too great to keep in!
- It illustrated the emotional state of Jeremiah. The inner drives he felt to proclaim God’s Word, even in the face of danger and hostility.
- The dramatic statement that was something like: “I shall make you a terror to those around you and to yourself.”¹⁷⁵

This particular text offers such a contrast in what the prophet is communicating. If the text is presented as a storytelling, the teller could not help but reflect some of that stark

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 152.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 152-153.

contrast in the intonations of his voice and the expressions on his face as he communicates the sense of frustration Jeremiah is feeling. Likewise, with the verses about the hope Jeremiah has, this would be contrasted by the tone of voice used as well. Following the reading of the text at the 11:00 service, one person wrote that they thought, “Jeremiah’s feelings were not as clear as in the telling of the Scripture.”¹⁷⁶ The intensity and emotion Jeremiah expressed in this text did not come through as much with the reading of the text as it did with the telling of the text.

As for summarizing the text, all the participants captured the basic essence of what Jeremiah was saying in these verses. Jeremiah is expressing his despair and agony over the challenge of being a spokesman for God. Yet even if he considers not continuing to prophesy, the Word of God is like a fire shut up in his bones. On the one hand, Jeremiah is in despair. On the other hand, he expresses praise to God for His faithfulness to him.

- Jeremiah complained that the Lord had deceived him. His friends and others were just waiting for opportunities to mock him. But if he doesn’t say what the Lord has put on his heart he will burst. Even though he knows his enemies are waiting to pounce, he gives praise to the Lord. The Lord will protect him and provide. He will watch over the need and the wicked ones.
- The Lord makes me a terror to my friends and to myself. If I hold in the prophesy and not prophesy then I have a burning of my heart. Friends have scoffed at me, betrayed me and hope for me to fail and fall because of the Lord’s word thru me. But I will continue to prophesy. The Lord rescues the needy from the wicked.
- The very people I bring your message to ridicule and mock me. They heap their curses upon me. They physically abuse me and make sport of me. But even if I tried to keep quiet, your words are like fire. They must come out! While I am miserable, it is you God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that will deliver me from my own people.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 156.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 153-154.

- Jeremiah is full of despair, he is saying that God has deceived him. He has thought that it would be easy to be a prophet but quite the contrary it is tough. He is not readily accepted when he preaches. Towards the end of the reading he realizes that he cannot keep holding his feelings inside. God is just and mighty. God will help Jeremiah overcome all adversity. The reading finishes up with Jeremiah singing God's praises.¹⁷⁸

The fact that this contrast in Jeremiah's feelings/emotions is so clear to the hearers is likely to be attributed to the way in which the teller emphasized this contrast in her telling of the text. The pain and frustration that Jeremiah is expressing was clearly heard in her voice and seen in her gestures. I strongly doubt that this sharp of contrast would be evident in a simple reading of the text. The sermon, however, also emphasized this contrast and so the summaries may also reflect the understanding the hearer received from the sermon as well. This further confirms that the telling of the text aides the understanding, remembering, and connecting *the sermon to the text*.

The title of the sermon was "Extreme Living." This title played off of an opening illustration I used about a rather unusual extreme sport I read about in the newspaper a few weeks before. This extreme sport is called "extreme ironing." In each person's survey this theme of "extreme" was clearly captured. Two responses summarized well the essence of the message:

- The sermon was about Jeremiah. Pastor started out by talking about extreme sports: i.e. ironing (extreme). That was compared to Jeremiah who expressed both extreme despair and extreme faith. Jeremiah was asked to do extreme prophesying. Pastor then talked about wintry spirituality and compared that to one of the spiritual seasons . It has extreme despair as one of the characteristics. Pastor mentioned that we can also experience extreme despair; but like Jeremiah God can rescue our lives with extreme faith. Because God responds with extreme faith we need to experience extreme living, i.e., address a relationship, an addiction or emotional situation with extreme actions. God wants that. Pastor gave some extreme comparisons: rejection – love, guilt – forgiveness.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 157.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 154.

- Extreme life and God’s extreme love. Jeremiah was going through extreme lows as a prophet, because of his preaching the Lord’s word of repentance. He was angry, sad, and maybe depressed. But in the midst of this, he showed extreme faith. In the parable of the prodigal son (the Gospel lesson for the day) the father showed extreme forgiveness in welcoming his son back home. Jesus has shown the most extreme love in dying on the cross for our sins. We are called to live an extreme life in response to God’s sacrifice.¹⁸⁰

In identifying Jeremiah’s extreme despair, I quoted Martin E. Marty in his book, *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart.*” Here Marty talks about having a “wintry spirituality.”¹⁸¹ Several of the respondents commented about this and made the connection with how that is not only descriptive of Jeremiah but also of our own lives.

- In his [Jeremiah’s] despair and in his hope, he turned to God. We are also to have that kind of faith – in the “winter of our souls,” we are assured of God’s mercy, love and forgiveness regardless of how we might feel.
- This wintry spirituality can be conquered by extreme faith as seen with Jeremiah as he rescues the lives of the needy from the wicked.¹⁸²
- Sometimes we can’t escape wintry spirituality. Winter comes when we lose a job, [when we feel like we have] failed as a parent and several other examples were given.¹⁸³

Quite often we are faced with disappointments, loneliness, strained relationships in marriages or between parents and children. Yet, in the face of this wintry spirituality is the hope we have in God and His faithfulness to us which leads us to offer our praise to Him.

As I review the responses to the survey questions for each of the four weeks, the most significant indicator on the survey is the responses to questions five and six. One

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 158.

¹⁸¹ Referenced in Chapter 4, pp. 79.

¹⁸² Ibid., 154-155.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 157.

person wrote the “sermon was totally connected to the text.”¹⁸⁴ Another response revealed how the hearer was unfamiliar with the text prior to the sermon, and yet the significance for this person was in how the text and the sermon connected.

From my standpoint, I didn’t know the Scripture. So the sermon was an eye-opener for me. I didn’t realize Jeremiah’s role in God’s plan or his story – so I was educated. Then the words “extreme” certainly tied the Scripture with the sermon. The power of God and what he wants us to do impacted me. Relating real life situations to the Bible readings helps me understand better and grow in my faith.¹⁸⁵

As for the difference people see between having the Scripture read versus told and how this impacts their hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the Word to the sermon, two people noted that it was a little more difficult to discern any significant differences in the way the Scripture was shared. One reason for this is that this particular reader did a better job than most. In fact, the lay reader at the 11:00 service was someone who has a theatre background and is known for being a little more expressive in his communication. He was not the scheduled lay reader for the day, but was asked last minute to substitute (which I was not aware of). A few people mentioned on their surveys that the reader did a good job of reading the lesson that day. One person added:

The person who read the Scripture in today’s 11:00 service did an excellent job of reading the text, by incorporating a lot of feeling into it . . . I would say that the understanding of the sermon and the understanding of the Bible text was most helped by Pastor Goff’s recap of events and the context of the verse.¹⁸⁶

Nevertheless, there were additional comments about the impact of telling over against the reading. Among those responses were:

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 155.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 156.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 158-159.

- I enjoyed and understood so much more listening to the “told” Scripture. The teller’s body language and expression helped to really hear and know what the Scripture was saying.
- One difference was that I felt the teller was Jeremiah – that he actually was talking to us whereas the lay reader was reading the Scripture.
- With the telling I had a sense of Jeremiah’s personal feelings . . . I get the Scripture meaning quicker with the telling. With it being read I have to hear it again or go back and read it myself.
- Hearing the Scripture told vs. read brings out the drama of Jeremiah’s situation and feelings.
- When the Scripture was told it seemed to be expressed in a way that was easier to understand and connect. The teller had the opportunity to use their whole body in expression. The reader was only able to use their voice in expression.¹⁸⁷

One person wrote on their survey: “The sermon was totally connected to the text. The sermon told us how we should and can listen to God’s Word.”¹⁸⁸ That response captures the stated goal in this project – for the storytelling method to aid in the understanding, remembering and connecting of the Scripture with the sermon.

For Future Study

As I review the procedure I followed in doing this MAP I learned some things that I would do differently if I were to repeat this kind of project again. As suggested above I would change the way I arranged the survey groups. I would recruit a group of people (Group A) who would commit to attending the 8:30 service for four weeks where two of those weeks the sermon text was read and two weeks the sermon text was given by storytelling. Group B would attend the 11:00 service for four weeks with two weeks having the sermon text read and two weeks given by storytelling.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 159.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 155.

I would also assign the distribution and collection of the surveys to another person so that I am not trying to pass them out and collect them by myself in addition to doing the storytelling. Perhaps I would even number the surveys and assign a number to the person recruited so that there can be some better follow up with surveys not returned. Since I left it optional for the participants to sign their names, I wasn't always sure who had returned their surveys and who didn't. A third party taking care of this could handle it by still allowing people's anonymity to be honored when I look over their responses.

I would also be more specific in my instructions to the participants that when they attend a service where the Scripture text is "told" they should not try to follow along in their pew Bible. Instead they should listen and watch the teller. To receive the full impact of the storytelling approach, the hearer needs to have eye contact with the teller.

Considering some of the comments I received, I would do all of the storytelling myself in a future survey format. If I do all the storytelling, that minimized the variable in the research, and I would know what I want to emphasize both in the telling of that text and in the preaching of the sermon. Also, one week the lay person doing the story telling had trouble with her microphone. After she started, she had to stop and restart because of the sound system malfunction. While that is not something that can be avoided, that would be less bothersome to me rather than a lay person. I have come to expect those things and have had to deal with technical difficulties in church on several occasions before. On the particular Sunday that this happened, it interrupted the flow and concentration both for the teller and the congregation.

As I consider the lay readers who read the Scriptures in the services on my survey weeks, I would seek for greater uniformity in their presentation as well. As mentioned,

one Sunday the lay reader happened to be a choir member and so she read the Scripture from the choir loft (which faces the congregation from one side of the sanctuary) rather than from the lectern which is where most often read. A few people commented that not seeing her (the reader) that day was somewhat of a distraction. For the first few verses they were trying to find out where she was and so didn't follow the reading as she began.

These issues I did not consider ahead of time. They surfaced in the actual project. However, I don't believe that any one of these factors invalidated the data collected. Yet, they too have helped me as I plan future occasions to use Biblical storytelling along with my preaching.

Additional Reflections

In addition to the comments written on the various surveys by participants in Groups A and B, I have received some unsolicited comments that people have shared with me when Biblical storytelling has been a part of our worship. On a few occasions people have written a comment on their attendance card in church (our attendance card has a place that says: "Message to the Pastor"). One card I received reads: "Pastor's storytelling of the scriptures is so meaningful, it has an impact on me that is greater than a lector reading to us." Another card reads, "Telling the scripture is very meaningful for me."

Furthermore, when I have involved others in storytelling I have asked them to share some of their own personal reflections on this exercise. Some of the comments I have received are the following:

- “Telling” the Scriptures is very meaningful to me.
- Pastor’s storytelling of the Scriptures is so meaningful; it has an impact on me that is greater than a lector reading to us.
- I have read these verses so often, but this is the first time I feel like I really heard the full meaning of them.

As a part of her own personal reflection, the storyteller who presented Jeremiah 20:7-13 wrote me afterwards to say:

I have learned so much about God’s Word through this experience. I have always been a Bible reader, but since I’ve begun “marinating” in the stories and really taking the words to heart, I’ve discovered that my heart is so much more open to hearing God and not just the people who wrote the words.

The storytelling process has also helped me meditate much more deeply than I did before. Once you commit the verses to heart, I find myself thinking of them more often. I guess I never really understood what “bind these words on your heart day and night” meant until now. I know that God is teaching me to do that through the storytelling process.

Each morning when I read my daily devotions I find myself looking at it in a “storybook” way, and not just reading words on a page. I have always known that God speaks to us through His Word, but I think He has opened my eyes and my heart to really be able to receive more from Him.

Overall, I find myself in a deeper relationship with God and am VERY THANKFUL that the opportunity has come for me to share God’s written Word with His people in a more personal way.¹⁸⁹

Here’s an occasion where it is quite likely that this storytelling experience did as much, if not more, for the one who told the story as it did for those who heard it.

I greatly appreciate the participation and cooperation of my congregation with this project. It is obvious that I could not have accomplished what I did without their involvement and encouragement. I believe, however, that they have received significant benefit from this exercise as well. Congregation members continue to encourage my development of Biblical storytelling and utilizing this more in the sharing of God’s Word.

¹⁸⁹ Allison Braun, RE: Storytelling, E-mail to author (20 July 2005).

CHAPTER 6

SUMMARY AND FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

Does Biblical storytelling really work? Richard Jensen asks the same question in reference to visualization and preaching.

If you take up this challenge, will it work? Is there any proof that visual images actually communicate the gospel to hungry hearts? I doubt there is any proof of the matter, any more than we have scientific proof that the words we speak in our preaching work. Can the Holy Spirit breathe life upon those who hear our words? I'm convinced that is possible. Can the Holy Spirit breathe life upon those who view our images? I'm convinced that is possible as well. Preach in words and images, poetry and painting, and entrust the effectiveness of your preaching to God's Holy Spirit.¹⁹⁰

While Jensen's comments reflect the use of imagery in preaching, the same can be said of Biblical storytelling. Preach in words and images, poetry and painting, . . . and yes even storytelling and entrust the effectiveness to the Holy Spirit. Jensen is careful here to put the true responsibility for the effective proclamation of God's Word back where it belongs – with the Holy Spirit Himself. First and foremost, the effective work of preaching (and storytelling) belongs to the Holy Spirit.

But to a certain extent, preaching also involves *our* work. We too need to be effective in the craft of preaching so people will hear, remember, and understand the message. Whether it is Buttrick's moves or Lowry's loop, the same question can be asked. Does it work? As we review homiletical aides used throughout the history of the church, many have had significant impact. Some homiletical approaches have come and gone. While one preacher may be able to effectively use Rossow's gospel handles approach, others may not be able to make that work for them.

¹⁹⁰ Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 141.

David Schmitt teaches in his “Preaching and Sermon Structure” course that a variety of sermon structures can be used: propositional, story framed format, alternating the story design, kaleidoscopic sermon structure. Which one of these works? Actually, they all can work at various times by various preachers with various texts. The same is true for Biblical storytelling. The research that has been conveyed above supports that Biblical storytelling does “work” for assisting God’s people with the hearing, understanding, remembering, and connecting the text of Scripture with the sermon. Biblical storytelling works in this way so that the Holy Spirit works through our preaching for the spiritual benefit of our hearers.

Tom Boomershine points out that the very nature of storytelling is characteristic in the very Gospel we preach.

“Gospel” is a shortened form of an Old English word, “godspell.” It means: “god” = good, “spell” = tale – “good tale.” The original definition of “spell” also reflects this storytelling character of the “godspell.” A spell was a spoken word or set of words believed to have magic power. In Old English, therefore, the word that was best equivalent for the Latin word, *evangelium*, was a tale whose telling had power.

This Latin word, *evangelium*, was in turn a transliteration of the Greek *euangelion*. This word also had two parts, *eu*, meaning “good,” and *angelion*, which was related to “angel,” a messenger. It meant “good news.” The word *euangelion* could refer to both the message and the messenger. Thus in Greek tradition a *euangelion* could also be a messenger who delivered the good news of victories in battle . . .

The gospel has lost its original character as a living storytelling tradition of messengers who told the good news of the victory of Jesus.¹⁹¹

If the gospel has lost its original character as a living storytelling tradition of the good news of the victory of Jesus, then Biblical storytelling is an avenue for the Holy Spirit to reclaim what may be lost.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 16-17.

In conversations I have had with congregation members about Biblical storytelling, I have found that most people are very receptive to its use in public worship. Consequently, I encourage the church at large to be open to the use of Biblical storytelling. It presents an opportunity for some to make a stronger connection between the sermon delivered and the Scripture it is based upon.

Marva Dawn in her recent book, *Talking the Walk: Letting Christian Language Live Again*, expresses a concern about the oral presentation of God's Word these days.

God's story is corrupted by those who dogmatize it . . . mindlessly repeat the story without exploring it afresh, or turn the story and their understanding of it into insiders' jargon that doesn't communicate with the rest of the world. The result is a private story into which no one else is invited.¹⁹²

My hope in doing this project is that those who worship will not perceive the exercise of reading (or telling) God's Word in a public worship service to be mindlessly repeating God's story without exploring it afresh. The church does not want the Word of God to go un-communicated to the rest of the world. It is not a private story. However, if God's Word is not going out to people today, what might be done to increase the Word's exposure? Biblical storytelling can be one of the ways the Word of God helps to make connections between people and the public proclamation of the Word.

Quoting again from Jensen's recent book, he writes:

A biblical passage that guides me in this and in many situations of life and ministry is 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Paul is giving a defense of his ministry of the gospel. Why does he do what he does? He indicates that he uses a grand variety of strategies in his presentation of the gospel message. "To the Jews I became a Jew," he writes. "To those under the law I became as one under the law. . . . To those outside the law I became as one outside the law. . . . To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I

¹⁹² Marva Dawn, *Talking the Walk: Letting Christian Language Live Again* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 114.

might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.”¹⁹³

Isn't that the goal – to save people with gospel message? In an effort to do so, then the church today will look for ways in which to “explore afresh” the sharing of God's Word. To that end, why not storytelling? Better yet, why not Biblical storytelling? The survey results described above support the use of Biblical storytelling for hearing, understanding, remembering and connecting the text of Scripture with a sermon preached. While Biblical storytelling may not be used by everyone every time every where, it can be used by some people some time so that, by the work of the Holy Spirit, we might save some.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY!

¹⁹³ Jensen, *Envisioning the Word*, 141.

APPENDIX A

SURVEY RESULTS

Week 1 – April 24, 2005

The Fifth Sunday after Easter

Scripture Text: Acts 17:1-15

Sermon Title: “Oh, If Only to be a Berean!”

At the 8:30 service the sermon text was presented as a Biblical storytelling. The questions and responses to the surveys from this service are as follows:

1. Before today’s worship service, how well did you know the Scripture which the sermon was based upon?

- I didn’t.
- Not well. I knew that Paul traveled to Berea to preach, but I did not know that the Bereans were more receptive and more into the Scriptures than other communities where Paul traveled.
- Barely.
- I was unfamiliar with Acts 17:1-15. I don’t recall learning about the Berean people.
- I did not know it well at all. I have heard it before but did not remember the lesson.
- Paul’s missionary travels are familiar; however, this Scripture did not come to mind as one I remember more readily.
- Not well, probably because it isn’t heard often.
- Not very well!
- I was generally familiar with the Scripture in terms of how Paul used the synagogue and was sometimes received, sometimes rejected.

2. When the Scripture was **told** in this service, what captured your attention from this Word of God?

- Facial expressions, gestures, enthusiasm with which it was shared.
- The idea that the Jews who doubted Paul’s preaching were trying to dissuade others from believing him as he moved from one town to the next. Also, that the Bereans checked the Scriptures to verify what Paul said.
- That Paul faced danger when spreading the word. Some Jews were threatened, others open.
- My attention was captured by the spirit of the Bereans and their eagerness to examine the Scriptures.

- When the storyteller emphasized certain words and phrases it alerted my attention. The pastor's tone of voice changed when he got to the part when Paul went to Berea – it was encouraging.
- How zealous Paul was in his determination to spread the Word of God.
- The positive attitude of the Bereans.
- It became very true to life – meaningful. I could see it happening. I could apply it to the sermon and I feel it took on more meaning for my life!
- How some of the Jews in Thessalonica went to such violent extremes to “reject” Paul's message in contrast with the calm and reasoned acceptance of those in Berea.

3. Please write out the sermon text (the Scripture the sermon was based upon) as best you can from memory.

- The Bereans [were] filled with joy, daily searched the Scripture to see if what Paul said was true.
- Paul was on his second missionary journey. He went to the synagogue in Thessalonica to preach about Jesus to the Jews. Some believed what he said. Some did not and chose to try and discredit him. The unbelievers went to Berea and talked against Paul. But, when Paul arrived in Berea and spoke about Jesus to the Bereans, the people were more open and receptive to his message. Then the Bereans turned to Scripture to check for themselves if what Paul said was true.
- Paul traveled to a city and local Jews were hostile to his message. Feeling threatened, they rioted and turned to government to stop his preaching. He moved on to another city and found his message was welcomed. Eventually people from the first city came and created more trouble. He once again moved on.
- The sermon was based on being as eager to study the Scriptures as the Bereans were. Not only did the Bereans study the Scriptures, but they did so on a daily basis and their lives were based on what the Scriptures said. We were encouraged to be more like the Bereans and before making decisions, go to the Scriptures. I kept thinking of the WWJD – and the real meaning of “What Would Jesus Do.” Too often many of us today don't think of what the Scriptures say.
- Picking heroes. Paul's passion and how he overcame obstacles to spread the word. He spent time at the first city – nearly a month – shows perseverance. Paul prayed to have the Holy Spirit lead him and tell him what to do. He moves on with God's blessing.
- Paul was preaching and teaching to the Jews in Thessalonica but could not reach them. So on to Berea and again with the help of Jason found these Bereans to be more attentive and understanding. They were alerted and wanted to find out for themselves whether Paul's teaching was really the truth. They were more open-minded. How important it is for us to daily search the Scriptures – each time we re-read a portion that we have already read many times before we learn something that we over looked previously. Our attitude may reflect our understanding and application at the time of the reading.
- Paul and Silas journeyed to Thessalonica and preached to the people and explain the scriptures. The Jewish people (some of them) were stubborn and caused a riot

among the people telling them false rumors about Paul and his teaching. Paul and Silas then left and went to Berea where they were welcomed with eagerness, reading and studying the scriptures diligently.

- Paul went to Thessalonica to spread the word of God. It was a great place because it was a large city full of people due to its location, the navy that was there and the fact it was a seaport. Paul went to the Jewish temple to tell others about God and Jesus. Some Jews didn't like what they heard. They were not accepting of this and told the leaders that Paul was stirring up trouble. A man named Jason welcomed Paul and was glad he had come to share God's Word. Now when the trouble started Paul and Silas and their friends left and went to another town – Berea where they were welcomed with open arms. They were receptive to God's Word and eagerly embraced all that Paul and his friends shared. They read and studied daily the Word! But the Jews followed Paul and again started to make trouble, so Paul and his friends left and continued their preaching and teaching elsewhere.
- As was his way, Paul went to the synagogue in Thessalonica to share the gospel of Jesus Christ. After he had shared the gospel message, some Jews and Greek women accepted Jesus as their Savior. One of the Jews, Jason, who became a follower of Jesus accepted Paul and other Christians into his home. However, other Jews in the synagogue were very angry upon hearing the gospel message and started riots to violently expel this message and its adherents from their midst. Paul was assisted by those who had accepted the gospel message to leave Thessalonica before he could be captured. After leaving Thessalonica Paul went to Berea where he again shared the message with the Jews in the synagogue. The Bereans searched the scripture to see if what Paul said was true and believed that Jesus was their savior. However, some of the Jews, from Thessalonica, came to Berea after Paul. As such, the Bereans helped Paul leave town to go to Athens. Paul left Timothy and Silas behind, indicating that they should join him later.

4. What was today's sermon about?

- Paul leaving one place and traveling to another city where the Word was accepted enthusiastically. The Bereans met daily to check the Scriptures to determine if what Paul said was true. In our lives, Scripture must serve as the basis upon which we make decisions, not what we think or feel. One of our heroes should be the Bereans.
- I wish I could be more like the Bereans. Instead of forming an opinion on what I think or on what someone has told me, I should (like the Bereans) check Scripture to see what God says about any and all ideas and circumstances. God's Word should guide my view and my opinion. The Good News that I heard in the sermon is that I am among the chosen that the Holy Spirit works in and brings God's Word to.
- Paul's passion and endurance to overcome obstacles to spread the Scripture. As the Jews discredited him, Paul stopped at nothing. Some of Paul's audience were not willing to study the Scripture and felt threatened by him and the Word.

Others were open and willing to study. Today, we can react to our opinion and not bother to research the Scripture.

- Today's sermon was about being like a Berean – researching the Scriptures on a daily basis to determine how we should act and react in our daily living.
- The reception of Paul in the city was not good so he moves to another city – Berea. They are hungry for the word. They are a good example of what we need to do and what we should be. The “bottom line” – examine the Scriptures daily. With the story of – Teri Shiavo – “What does God's Word say?” a red flag is to say/think, “I don't know what the Bible says, but I think . . . ,” We are to be like the Bereans. We are the people to whom God's message is directed. We have opportunities like them.
- Sermon today started out with finding the hero in our life. Different Biblical characters were mentioned. We may choose our heroes for many different reasons. Reference was made to the man who replied, “I know what the Bible says – but this is what I think.” A red flag for sure! Trusting in our thinking and our emotions will not give us true peace. We need to search the Scriptures. Your heroes were the Bereans.
- Follow the Scripture as you make decisions throughout your life. Look for inspiration from Biblical characters. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts, deeds, etc. Avoid negative attitudes and antagonistic views. Look forward with joy!
- We need to open our hearts to hear and accept God's word and will for our lives like the Bereans! We should daily study His Word, turn to God for guidance and direction, and trust that He will be with us in all our days, with all our struggles.
- If only I could be a Berean. How does the world and/or the “church” pick our heroes? Do we pick biblical heroes (Daniel, Paul, Moses, etc.) What does the reading from Acts 17 teach us about the priority we should place upon sharing the gospel as well as how the gospel message may be rejected or received with thanksgiving. How can we learn from the Bereans to be continually open to using God's Word to receive the gospel message as well as determine how we should respond as God's people to the questions, concerns, and choices we encounter in this world. How can we remember that we are Berean's – people blessed to have heard and received the message of God's grace through Jesus Christ.

5. Summarize how the Scripture text **told** in this service connected to today's sermon.

- Enthusiasm with which people received the Word and checked Paul's teaching and preaching against it. If only I could be more like the Bereans.
- The Scripture lesson told us about a group of people who heard a message and then checked Scripture for the truth. They relied on Scripture as their guide, not on the opinions of others or their own emotions. In the sermon we were reminded that we should always go to God's Word for the truth and to help us from opinion.
- The Pastor explained Paul's challenges. He then gave examples for us to understand in today's environment what Paul faced. It's too easy to form opinion by listening to others but not studying.

- Acts 17:11 was repeatedly used in today's sermon – being like a Berean and daily and eagerly reading the scripture to determine our living and to see if what is said is true. Repetition is good – not only was the scripture paraphrased, it was used in example of our own lives today.
- Throughout the entire sermon references to the told scriptures was introduced and then explained in ways referring to how the Scriptures work daily in how we live our lives. Jesus came to my mind as my hero as I listened throughout the sermon. Struggles confront us at all stages of our lives. But Jesus is always with us through the Holy Spirit. He daily showers us with His blessings and in Him only can we find true peace.
- The oral text was woven throughout the sermon. It also brought in how these thoughts and actions of both the Bereans and Thessalonians are still true in today's life, even in the church.
- By the scripture being told I could visualize it and become apart of it. I felt like I was going through this time with Paul and his friends. By telling the Scripture it brought it to life – making it very real!
- The Scripture text told in this service effectively connected how the telling leads to hearing which can lead in rejecting and accepting of the gospel message as it applies to each of us and all of us today. Just as during the very beginning of the sharing of the gospel message people may reject or accept the grace being offered. They may do so in the same manner as for the same reasons (selfish, lazy, ego, etc.) The telling of the Scripture was very effective in connecting what happened in the past happen, today, and can happen in the future.

At the 11:00 service the Scripture text was read in the traditional manner by a lay reader. The questions and responses to the surveys are as follows:

1. Before today's worship service, how well did you know the Scriptures which the sermon was based upon?
 - Not very well. However, I was aware that Paul had traveled and spread the word.
 - This scripture was not as familiar as Paul's trip to Rome via ship. Here Paul constantly encouraged the crew displaying his faith in the Lord during the storm and shipwreck.
 - I heard/saw it in the first service. It was unfamiliar to me until then.
 - Familiar with it because of the 8:30 service.
 - I didn't.
 - Well, after having attended the 8:30 service I was much more informed than I was yesterday. I was familiar with Paul's missionary journeys, but not the details.
 - See 8:30.

2. When the Scripture was read in this service, what captured your attention from this Word of God?
 - By following along in the Bible, I could spell the words. I believe I may be a visual learner.
 - It was much easier to follow in the Bible as it was being read. I found myself missing something as it was being told. Rather than jumping back and forth from observing the story teller and trying to follow in the Bible I finally settled on watching and listening to the teller in the 8:30 service. In this service I realized that I must be a visual learner; however, when I give my undivided attention to the story teller I enjoy and get just as much as when it is read.
 - I had trouble following the reading. Truthfully, it sounded like a bunch of words that I had difficulty separating into thoughts. I “heard and felt” the Scripture more in the first service. It helps me when the verses are “told” rather than read.
 - Listening to it read or following along in the Bible is not nearly as effective as hearing it told – eye to eye.
 - Nothing special – was at times difficult to hear. (I wasn’t following along in the Bible.) The reading lacked the emphasis provided with the storytelling technique.
 - Unfortunately, I could not understand the person reading the lesson. The microphone sounded muffled. The only way I could understand the reading was to follow along in the pew Bible. Also, when she started reading, it was confusing because she wasn’t at the lectern. My instinct was to try and establish where the person was who was doing the reading.
 - See also 8:30. Either the choir microphone was not working correctly or I was sitting too far back, but couldn’t hardly hear or understand what was being read at this service.

3. Please write out the sermon text (the Scripture the sermon was based upon) as best you can from memory.
 - Paul was traveling and telling about how Jesus had been crucified to pay for our sins. He came to Thessalonica and went to the Jewish temple to meet the people and tell them about Jesus. He spent 3 days sharing the news, but soon some of the Jewish leaders became jealous and began to stir up trouble. This led to Paul and Silas, who were staying at Jason’s home, to be arrested. But they posted bond and left going to a town 60 miles away – Berea. The people there were eager to hear about Jesus and opened their hearts and minds to God’s Word. Soon the same Jesus that had persecuted Paul located them in Berea and once again stirred up trouble so Paul and his friend left Berea and went further to the coast to spread the word.
 - As I mentioned in Question 2 [on the 8:30 survey] today I remembered much more detail of the text as it was read. His preaching in the synagogue. His persuasion of some of the Jews, Greeks and some women to follow him and

Silas. More detail on the riot formed in the market place. Paul's leaving to go to Berea without Silas and Timothy.

- Text – based on Acts 17:11. The idea in the sermon was being EAGER to study the Scriptures on a daily basis.
- Same as 8:30.
- The Bereans received the Word with enthusiasm and daily checked the Scriptures to see if what Paul said was really true.
- Paul was visiting several cities to preach about Jesus. Many people who heard the message believed. But, there were some who did not like what he was saying and they tried to turn people against him. The agitators told the crowds that Paul was preaching about another “king” other than Caesar. The crowds listened to the talk against Paul and became riotous and went after Paul and his fellow missionaries. However, Paul moved on to Berea and preached there in the synagogue. The people of Berea were open and captive to Paul's message and they checked the Scriptures to ascertain the truth for themselves. When the agitators came to Berea, the people were armed with the truth of Scripture.
- See 8:30.

4. What was today's sermon about?

- Who is our hero? Who is the wind beneath our wings? We should be more like the people of Berea. We need to be open and eager to hear and live and share God's Word – Good News of Jesus Christ. We should study the Word of God daily and try to apply it to our lives. Also, just as God was with Paul and guided him, so, too God guides us and is always with us.
- Finding the hero in our life who it may be – how we may choose a hero. Our heroes may be chosen for many different reasons – Biblical characters, a family member, friend, etc. When we find this hero we want to be like that hero. The Bereans can easily be labeled heroes. They listened and searched the Scriptures to see if Paul was revealing the truth, the way, the life. I liked the reference to the speaker who answered the question with, “I [don't] know what the Bible says – but this is what I think!” A read flag for sure! Searching the Scriptures is the only answer. We must not let our emotions and human thinking interfere with finding true peace.
- Hero – who is your hero – is it Biblically based – if so who? If we were to be like the Bereans, we would research the Scriptures on a daily basis to help us with our daily living.
- Same as 8:30 – however it made me think more about heroes and positive influences in my life.
- Heroes we have, people we would desire to be like. As the Bereans daily checked the Scriptures to determine the validity of Paul's words, so as we face problems and challenges in our life, we should turn to Scripture to determine what it says. Our actions should not be based upon what we think or feel.
- Same as reported in 8:30 service survey.
- See 8:30.

5. Summarize how the Scripture **read** in this service connected to today's sermon.
 - The Scripture served as the basis for the sermon, both when it was read and when it was told. When it was read I didn't get the feeling of what was really important in the text as I did when it was told. When it was told, the speaker put emphasis and a certain amount of drama to make it have more meaning and come to life.
 - Paul and his followers were determined to spread the Word to all people. And this he proceeded to do by referring always to the Scriptures proclaiming that Jesus is the Christ. We too must daily refer to the Scriptures to discipline us in our daily living. As I listened to the sermon and how comforting the Scriptures are – I think Jesus is my hero. Struggles confront us throughout our lives but Jesus is always there to strengthen and give us peace. Without this hope our lives would be unbearable. With His grace and mercy he showers upon us daily undeserved blessings.
 - Same as 8:30.
 - Served as the basis for the sermon. Maybe I am not sure if I understand what you mean by "connected."
 - The sermon very clearly connected to the scripture reading. The Bereans heard the message and searched the Scripture for truth. In the sermon, Pastor said – Oh, if only we could be more like the Bereans. We need to always search God's Word for truth and guidance.
 - See answer to question #2.

6. Note any reflections you may have on the difference between hearing the Scripture (Acts 17:1-15) **told** vs. **read** in your understanding of that Scripture as well as how that may have impacted your ability to follow the sermon.
 - See above.
 - If I will keep my focus on the teller instead of trying to follow along in the Bible, I feel I was able to follow the sermon along with the Scriptures in both services. In the 11:00 service I followed along in the Bible. I like the **told** method, however at this point I don't feel I would want this method used at all services.
 - I believe listening to the lessons being told is much more effective toward understanding. The speaker puts in emphasis where needed, can pause for thoughts, and use gestures. A great intro to the sermon. It made one wonder how it was going to be presented in the sermon.
 - The Scripture when it was told by you focused my attention on you and the emphasis given to the one verse. Your gestures and facial expressions helped to create a picture of words that was remembered. The person reading the Scripture made it even more difficult to focus since that individual was not at the lectern. Your emphasis on the 1 verse (at least 3 times) was about the most important thing in helping me remember the message of the sermon.

- Today I experienced the two extremes of watching and hearing an excellent storyteller in the first service and contrasted with a poor reader who was not very visible in the second service. Consequently, I got a lot more out of the storytelling. However, not all people are good storytellers and usually the reader is at the Lectern and speaks more clearly (like the person who read the Gospel today.) Basically, I feel that people need to be in God's Word with a hands – on experience – following along with the reading in the pew Bible. Storytelling the scriptures lessons is very meaningful on occasion when you have a talented storyteller, and I enjoy it. However, I need the experience of touching God's Word with my hands and my eyes as well as my ears.
- During the first service (told) the telling of the Scripture was very effective and helped connect to the sermon. The reading of the Scripture during the second service didn't "work" and/or help with following the sermon. Note: Sound system, etc. notwithstanding, I really enjoy having the Scripture told and I feel it directly increases attention and understanding.

Week 2 – May 1, 2005
Sixth Sunday of Easter
Scripture Text: Acts 1:1-14
Sermon Title: “Faith Survivors”

At the 8:30 service the sermon text was traditionally read. The questions and responses to the surveys from this service are as follows:

1. Before today worship service, how well did you know the Scripture which the sermon was based upon?
 - Very well.
 - Quite well. While studying Bethel Bible Series, I did an outline on Acts.
 - I had heard the Scripture before service and studied it often.
 - Pretty well.
 - The Scripture Acts 1:10-11 was familiar to me.
2. When the Scripture was **read** in this service, what captured your attention from this Word of God?
 - How awesome this must have been for the disciples to have been with Jesus and then to have him taken away in such a glorious way. How alone they must have felt but were assured that He will return.
 - The fact that Jesus had spent 40 days with his disciples after his death and resurrection and was now going to the Father. Jesus promised to send them a helper, and reminded them of their mission.
 - As long as I have the pew Bible open to correct passage and follow the Scriptures, I can keep my attention on all the verses. Without doing this, I only pick up small phrases.
 - Mostly I had forgotten that the men/angles in white robes told the disciples that Jesus would return as he left in this passage.
 - To be honest, I was at the piano and I watched and heard Scripture, but didn't "hear" it. I kept thinking – "slow down. It wasn't until the 10-11 verse I "heard it."
3. Please write out the sermon text (the Scripture the sermon was based upon) as best you can from memory.
 - The ascension – the disciples following Jesus to witness His Ascension. After His Ascension they returned to Jerusalem where they gathered to pray. They needed to find a replacement for Judas. The disciples were with Jesus the 40 days after the resurrection. They were instructed not to leave Jerusalem until the gift of the Holy Spirit was given to them and they then would be Jesus' witnesses.

- Luke is the writer telling us about Jesus preparing his disciples for his return to heaven and their work once He is gone. The disciples were with Jesus in Jerusalem. They had been together forty days since Jesus' resurrection. Now, Jesus tells them that He is going to the Father in Heaven. He tells them that they must stay together in Jerusalem and await the Holy Spirit which Jesus promises will be their helper for the work they have to do once He is gone. The disciples watch Jesus ascend into Heaven. Two persons in white clothing ask the disciples why they are looking up and tell them that Jesus will return in the same way they watched Him go. In the meantime they are to return to Jerusalem and await the Holy Spirit and then carry the message of Jesus to the ends of the earth – to all the nations. They stayed together and prayed together.
- Jesus was with the disciples. He told them that he had to return to the father, but that he would send his spirit to them. He then ascended into heaven and was hidden by the clouds. As the disciples were standing there two men in white robes appear and told them not to fear. Jesus has ascended to the Father and he will return as he said. The disciples then prayed together.
- The sermon was based on Acts 1:10-11 with a message to the Confirmands. What I remember the most is to become a “Faith Survivor” and whatever it takes to get there. I thought the duet “Take My Life and Let it Be” fit well into the message.

4. What was today's sermon about?

- The sermon was initiated using the TV program “Survivors.” Reference was made to how difficult it is in our world to survive. Our lives are confronted with so many obstacles. Life is not easy and the Lord did not promise good days all of the time. When we have faith in the Lord, and He is always with us, we will survive. And as we survive we can be sharing this faith and be witnesses. It was pointed out as we remember episodes in our lives we must remember to share with others. We need each other. Reference was made to the Old Testament – sacrifices, etc. We need to make no such sacrifice – it was made for us through Christ's death and resurrection. We are survivors.
- Using a comparison with the TV series “Survivor” the sermon talked about how the disciples must have felt when they saw Jesus ascending into Heaven. They must have wondered how they would survive with Jesus gone. In the TV Survivor, the goal is to be the last one standing using “whatever it takes” to get there. The disciples were survivors by staying together and supporting one another. The sermon pointed out that life is difficult and to survive in our faith, we need each other. Example of the sixth commandment being difficult to obey when a high number of teenagers are sexually active. To be a “faith survivor” we need to be in God's Word and in God's House and support one another. We must be committed “to do whatever it takes to be a faith survivor.” God was committed to “do whatever it takes” to save us from the consequences of sin, and what it took was Jesus dying on the cross, and God did that.

- Forgiveness and communion.
- The sermon began with a reference to reality TV shows, such as Survivor, depicting such fear, mistrust, and self centered behavior in order to “win.” In contrast, the sermon focuses on how the Scripture text provides a totally opposite alternative. First, instead of serving our selfish desires, Jesus tells us that we are to be His witnesses. Secondly, instead of working against others for ourselves, we are to be working and praying together as well as to witness more effectively to those outside the community. Finally, instead of a sole survivor, God has shown us that he has done all that is necessary for us to be with him now and in eternity. As with the confirmands are we ready to do whatever it takes to live a life of faith in response to what God has done for us to be faith survivors?
- Whatever it takes, I will become a faith survivor.

5. Summarize how the Scripture text **read** in this service connected to today’s sermon.

- We are survivors through His death, resurrection and ascension. The disciples will receive the Holy Spirit and thus share and witness. Through faith we too, can share and witness remembering that the Lord is always with us. The disciples were faith survivors and we too are faith survivors.
- The disciples stayed together and supported one another following a very difficult time. They must have felt that they had lost Jesus when they saw Him ascend into Heaven. They must have wondered how they would survive. What a wonderful example for us today. As the sermon pointed out – life is difficult – we are faith survivors by following the example of the disciples – stay together, worship together, support one another, rely on Jesus’ promises, stay in the Word, reach out to others.
- The Scripture reading is not effective when the reader is hesitant or stumbles through the passage. I prefer a dramatic reading. The reading should reflect the key points of the Scripture with emphasis and show the power of the Word.
- The reading of the Scripture connected most effectively as it was restated on the screen (during the sermon) and reemphasized how the mission of the disciples is our mission, the death, resurrection, ascension, and return of Jesus as witnessed, experienced by the disciples is a witness to us and expected by us, and how the disciples need to work together and pray together to witness to their savior as we today need to pray and work together to effectively witness to our Lord and savior Jesus Christ.

At the 11:00 service the sermon text was presented as a Biblical storytelling. The questions and responses to the surveys from this service are as follows:

1. Before today’s worship service, how well did you know the Scripture which the sermon was based upon?

- Pretty well.
 - I was familiar with Acts 1:10-11.
 - Very well.
 - Quite well.
2. When the Scripture was **told** in this service, what captured your attention from this Word of God?
- The part about when the disciples asked Jesus if now was the time to bring about the kingdom of God, and how he told them they would be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria and to the ends of the earth.
 - From where I was sitting (piano) it was difficult to hear. The sound problems at the beginning were a distraction.
 - It was difficult hearing the “teller.” Message the same but much more abbreviated than when it was read.
 - That Luke listed the names of people who witnessed the ascension of Jesus. (I was impressed that the teller remembered all the names of the disciples.) That Jesus assured his disciples that He would be with them and they should wait for the helper to come.
3. Please write out the sermon text (the Scripture the sermon was based upon) as best you can from memory.
- Jesus had spent 40 days with his disciples since his resurrection when they asked him if now was the time for him to bring about the kingdom of God. He told them that this was not for them to know, but that he would be going to the father, but that he would send the Holy Spirit to be with them. He also told them that they were to be his witnesses in Judea, Samaria, and to the ends of the earth. He then ascended and disappeared in the cloud. As they were standing there, two men in white came, told them not to fear, that Jesus had ascended to the father, but that he would return as he had said. The disciples then gathered together and prayed with the women and Mary.
 - Jesus was lifted into heaven by a cloud that took him out of sight. As “faith survivors” we need each other. We are called to be witnesses. Statement of Commitment – Rick Warren’s church (perhaps we should learn this.) Whatever it takes (would make for a good missions statement). I will be a faith survivor in this world and will follow God. God does whatever it takes in working with us.
 - The following of the disciples with Jesus from Galilee to the place of the Ascension. 40 days after the resurrection. Witness of the Ascension, reassurance that Christ would return in the same manner. The disciples return to Jerusalem where they went to the upper room, prayed and prayed for someone who had witnessed the resurrection and received the Holy Spirit to join them in place of Judas. After receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit they were to be His witnesses.

- Same as I wrote for the 8:30 report. The teller said the names of all the disciples but I can't add that because I can't remember them all.
4. What was today's sermon about?
- The same as I wrote on the paper for the 8:30 service, only the 8:30 sermon had parts that were more directed to the confirmands. (May I give my opinion here? I think to get a true read on the difference between the Scripture being "read" and the Scripture being "told" and how this impacts the sermon, you need to have two different people reporting. Once I've reported on the 8:30 service, I have the sermon text and the sermon in my mind, and I am not fresh to make the connection in the second service. I already know what the sermon is about, so I'm not sure how hearing the Scripture in another style impacts my understanding of the sermon.)
 - Introduced the TV program of the "Survivors" and the big difference between the one survivor in the program compared to how we are all survivors through faith and thus by sharing and witnessing can spread out to the whole of creation. We are all one of God's creation and He is in our presence through His Word and the Sacraments. Life is not easy and to help us through trying and joyful times we need to stay together, encourage each other and help. Through the time spent on this earth Jesus through miracles and parables displayed to us how through faith we can be survivors. References were made through the Old Testament how sacrifices were made but did not keep them from going back to old ways. Through Jesus death and resurrection we are assured of full forgiveness through His mercy and grace – agape – underserved love and mercy. The reference to the service where the commitment was made was thought provoking on how we can live a life of faith. To live a life of faith we must continue to run the race and move forward by God's grace and do whatever it takes to be a survivor. Jesus the ultimate victor! Not one survivor but we are all survivors.
 - God does whatever it takes to work with us. In order for us to survive our faith we need to do whatever it takes. We are called upon to be witnesses. The sermon was based on Acts 1:10-11 in which Jesus went up to heaven and those left behind are to witness to others.
 - See 8:30
5. Summarize how the Scripture **told** in this service connected to today's sermon.
- See 8:30. As opposed to last week on previous Scripture telling, the reading vs. the telling didn't seem much different this morning. The main connection with the Scripture was realized as it was most effectively "inserted" with the sermon, further explained, and extrapolated to us today. In summary, the summary of the Scripture in the sermon was more effective and stood out more than either the reading or the telling of the Scripture before the sermon.
 - The Scripture verses Acts 1:10-11 were the basis.

- Just as the disciples felt alone without Jesus at their side we also feel that way at times. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the presence of Christ in our lives through the Word and Sacraments we are to share, witness and run the race and look forward to God's grace and mercy.
 - Same as I wrote for 8:30 report.
6. Note any reflections you may have on the difference between hearing the Scripture (Acts 1:1-14) **told** vs. **read** in your understanding of that Scripture as well as how that may have impacted your ability to follow the sermon.
- I didn't feel that the Scripture lesson was "told," it was more "recited" from memory. If it were "told" to me, I would feel that the person knew about the incident as though they had actually witnessed it or heard it from someone who had actually witnessed it and wanted me to know about it too. When you "read" what Luke wrote you see how detailed he was in recording the incident – he names people that were present and actually saw Jesus ascend. To story tell this Scripture, you need to sound like Luke – "I know this story is true and I want you to know it too." This person did a wonderful job of memorizing the passage and reciting it, but that's also how it felt. I still need to follow along in the Bible whether it is read or told – I need to participate by opening the Bible to the passage and follow along.
 - Today both the telling and reading helped me to follow the sermon on an equal level. As noted before, a bit difficult in hearing the teller. A pleasure to see the confirmands and hear them take their vows. Your sermon was one giving them many things to keep in mind as they continue on. If they may waver at times, may the Holy Spirit work in their hearts to get back in the race and push forward in God's grace and mercy.
 - I listen much better when it was told. For me personally, I get more out of the Word and service when you do it. You are very easy to listen to and you are very sincere in the delivery. Your pauses and inflections make it easier for me to follow. Regardless of whoever reads, if I follow along, I "hear" more. [I really think the sound system needs checking – especially when I'm down front or in the choir loft. It is many times muffled.]

Week 3 – May 29, 2005
Second Sunday after Pentecost
Scripture Text: Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28
Sermon Title: “Telling and Retelling the Story”

At the 8:30 service the sermon text was traditionally read by a lay reader. The questions and responses to the surveys from this service are as follows:

1. Before today’s worship service, how well did you know the Scripture which the sermon was based upon?
 - Not very well. I was not thoroughly familiar with these verses.
 - Not very well as I thought.
 - I had only heard the Scripture the night before.
 - Knew parts, but not details.
 - I had heard it before, but had not had to memorize it.
 - I had heard it read and have read it many times.
 - Fairly well. Heard it several times regarding child rearing and passing on faith.
 - Somewhat familiar
 - I was vaguely familiar with it, remembering that God repeated the law to the Israelites. I remembered that God said to talk about the laws daily.
 - Moderately well.
 - I was familiar with it and knew some of the lines.
 - Not very well.

2. When the Old Testament Scripture (Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28) was **read** in this service, what captured your attention from this Word of God?
 - That we shall teach our children the word of God – the commandments. We should tell and retell the story and fix them in our minds and in our hearts.
 - Nothing in particular. (When it is read I sometimes don’t pay attention 100%).
 - The list of various acts that should remind us of God’s commands.
 - The whole Scripture captured my attention. The details of how God said they would be blessed if they kept the law and cursed if they didn’t.
 - I was captivated by the entire Scripture and how it relates to my life and family.
 - ESV similar to how I remembered hearing it before in NIV. How we can pass on to our kids God’s commandments.
 - Instruction was given to people of God.
 - The challenge in the second section.
 - Binding the words of God on our foreheads and on our door posts.

- The words teach and write captured my attention in reaction to God's Word.
 - Tell others of the commandments. Don't offend them. Daily review the commandments – stay in the Word.
 - The commandments/words of God will be affixed to our hearts and minds. Follow these. You will be blessed, disobey you will be cursed. We are also responsible to pass these words to the ages/our heirs/our children and their children, etc.
3. Please write out the sermon text (Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28) as best you can from memory.
- Affix my words in your hearts and minds. Teach these words to your children and your children's children, etc. Anytime is appropriate to teach my words. If we follow His commands we will be blessed and if we disobey His commands we will be cursed.
 - Imprint the 10 commandments on your heart, in your daily walk when going to bed/getting up in the morning – place them on the home where you live.
 - We have to keep God's Word upon our minds and heart. We are to teach them to our children. We are to write them down so that we can refer to them daily. Based on how well we do with God's commandments we will be either cursed or blessed. We must eliminate distractions.
 - And keep these words on your heart and mind. Talk about them when you lie down and when you rise up. And as you walk along the road. There is both a blessing and accurse. A blessing when you keep these words and tell others and a curse when you don't.
 - You shall write this on your heart and keep it before you. Repeat it to your children. Write it on your door posts. You have a challenge to keep my commandments which are given to you today. If you keep them . . . If you do not keep them . . .
 - Hear God's words, learn them, remember them, put them on your door frames and gates.
 - Write it on your forehead, put it on your doorposts, talk about it with your children along the road, when you lie down and when you rise that you may live long.
 - Remember my commands, teach them to your children. Speak of them when you are walking, when you lie down and when you rise. If you keep these commands you will be blessed. If you do not you will be cursed.
 - Memorial Day makes us remember the past and the men and women sacrificing their lives for freedom. Remembering is important as a Christian as well. God in the old Testament prepared the Israelites when they entered the Holy Land by preparing them to remember His commands. It was easier to do this before they entered the land, because once they are in the land many distractions would influence them. As Christians, we are in a similar situation. The world around us is distracting us from God and the fulfilled life he promises us in His commandments. We need to remember and remind us of this every day, similar to what the Old Testament Scripture was describing.

- Keep these words of mine in your heart and soul. Teach them to your children. Speak of them in your home, on the way, when you lie down and when you get up. Put them on your doorposts and on your gates, that you may have many days in the land of promise. Now I give you a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you keep the commands of the Lord your God. A curse if you forget the Lord your God and follow the ways of the people in the land and worship gods you have never known.
- That we should fix the words of our Lord in our hearts and mind. We should write them on our doors and on our foreheads, teach and tell our children the story of our Lord. That the commandments can be a curse or a blessing. We shall not follow other Gods.

4. What was today's sermon about?

- The telling of the story of God and of his people. What would happen to us if we do not obey his commandments. That we should tell his story to our children and continue to teach every generation. That there is but one God and he is a very jealous God. He wants us to fix the words he has given us and remember them every moment of our lives, when we get up in the morning and it should be the last thing in our minds when we go to bed. That our Lord will bless us if we hold his commandments or we could be cursed if we do not obey him.
- Remember God's commandments so you live a full life. Do this by actively reminding yourself and others.
- Telling and retelling the story – the sermon compared how we remember Memorial Day with stories of war and how we should remember God's Word and tell of all He has done.
- Remembering God's commandments as a way of having life abundant – the way life should be. Many distractions in our world so it is important to have God's word in our hearts and minds. The way we do this is to talk about God's commandments all the time, as the verse says.
- That God is always leading us and preparing us for what is ahead. When we listen and do what God teaches life is easy to maintain – it becomes hard when we let the things of the world into our lives to cause conflict.
- There is a good reason to keep telling and retelling the Gospel story both for those we tell it to and for us for doing the telling. It needs to stay fresh. This is life at its best.
- Remembering God's word and living our lives to reflect God. That we should go and tell others especially our children.
- Just as God commanded us to keep his Word on our minds and heart we need to take every opportunity to share his word with our children and the people we come in contact with each day. Just like the memories of World War II stories that get told and retold and actually memorized . . . we need to look for opportunities to tell God's story. Over time they will be burned into our hearts and minds. "This is life at its best" really says it all about obeying God's Word.

- Remembering the 10 commandments why they were given to Moses – to prepare the hearts/souls of the exiles upon leaving Egypt. In a society filled with many distractions we need to remember the Lord always. Waking/sleeping/walking/working with family and friends – place a sign on your home, such as, “As for me and my house we will serve the Lord.” Life is at its best when we place our trust in the Lord. The commandment is a gift from God to us to build relationships as his adopted children. Challenge each other to stay in the Word. It’s easy to forget the Lord with the distractions – so “be tellers of God’s story.”
 - Keeping the word of God with you at all times and live that life the way He intends us to. Teach our children His word so that they will live everyday as He intends. We should serve the Lord in all that we do and all we say and we will live joyfully.
 - Telling and retelling the story. Today’s sermon was to commemorate Memorial Day – A day of remembrance – remembering to tell the stories that are most influential/significant in our lives, while remembering to include in these stories, the story of Jesus Christ and the significance of His love/forgiveness in/on our lives. As we recognize the man-made creations, i.e. the St. Louis arch, we are to recognize the magnificence of life and His commandments, and to understand that God has provided these for us. To know that God has prepared these commands/commandments to be carried in our hearts and minds, so we are able to resist temptation/distractions. Take the time to teach your children/friends and foe a like God’s commandments. Let people know that your family and home is a house of God, so when they enter they are reminded we are guided by God’s Word. The commandments were given to us to show us life at its best. They are not meant to restrict our lives, but a means by which we can fulfill life. By following God’s commandments we are blessed, as this is expressing honor to God and ourselves. By disobeying God’s commandments we are cursed by giving into distraction and suffering the consequences included in our telling and retelling the story of God’s love, who we are and how we are to relate is our inheritance of entering the promise land – heaven. It is our responsibility to tell and retell the story.
5. Summarize how the Scripture text read in this service connected to today’s sermon.
- The connection between the Scripture text and the sermon were expressed by: setting a good example as a teaching tool to our children. Through encouragement to one and another, continually examining who we are and how we all relate, understanding our blessings by giving thanks, realizing/confession/correcting our distractions and implementing the recipe God has provided for life at its best.
 - Remember life – Memorial Day. God gave us the 10 commandments to help us remember Him through his guides for life at its best. Daily speak of the commandments. Speak with friends, family neighbors. Imprint God’s Word

in your heart, head, so we will not be affected by the negative distractions in life. Build a relationship with Him by staying in the word. Trust in Him always, consequently we will enjoy His blessings on earth in eternity. Challenge your friends, pray for them, do not offend them. The Holy Spirit will do his work in friend's hearts when you tell the story!

- Pastor used the theme "Telling the Story" to compare his father's WW II stories with God's command to tell his good news to the point that we can repeat his Word like repeating WW II stories. That will help us win over distractions that are every day challenges. When we stumble, God is there to pick us up and keep us going.
- That we are to spread the Word of God by telling others so that they remember.
- The Scripture connected directly with the sermon by applying the Scripture to today's "ways". How we should hold firm in a not so holy environment.
- The Scripture was the basis for the sermon which amplified and elaborated on it. The sermon seemed to focus on the first portion, but included both.
- It gave instruction and the sermon explained them.
- The Scripture emphasized how we can put God's Word in our heart and minds. It also tied into the remembrance portion of Memorial Day remembering those who have died serving our country.
- God's repetition of the law reminded the Israelites to retell what he had done for them and His Word. We should do the same – not only on Memorial Day – but always. That is, everyday should be a type of "Memorial Day" for Christians – opportunities to tell and retell what God has done for us.
- It emphasizes the active role we should take in reminding ourselves of God and His commands.
- This Sunday is Memorial Day weekend – the day to remember those lost in war. Pastor gave us examples of when it first came to be in May 1868 in Waterloo, New York. How the text was about the telling and retelling of the word of God to remember them as we remember those love ones lost at war. That we should teach our children that the past is as important as our future. Remembering our Lord's commandments and telling and retelling his story to our children and our future generations to come. Obey and you will be blessed. Disobey and you will be cursed.

At the 11:00 service the sermon text was given as a Biblical storytelling. The questions and responses to the surveys from this service are as follows:

1. Before today's worship service, how well did you know the Scripture which the sermon was based upon?
 - Not well.
 - I was not familiar with this passage before hearing it at this worship service.
 - Not very well.
 - Fairly well.

- Same as 8:30 service.
- I was familiar with it, but had not ever memorized it.
- I was familiar with it and knew some of the lines.
- Not very well.
- Parts of the Scripture was known because of living near a large Jewish community – the part of writing it on your door post and upon your forehead.
- Not very well – I understood only one part which stated the positive points; learn and follow the commandments, tell them to your children, repeat them over and over so I will do the will of God.
- I was not familiar with these readings.
- I knew of it as a text, especially the reference of “tying Scripture” to one’s head. I also think this was one of the “sample texts” we were to remember for OT in college, especially the remembrance of God’s commandments and the blessings/curses to Israel as they went into the promise land.
- The first part I could have quoted the meaning. I did not have it memorized. I didn’t remember verses 26-28 at all.

2. When the Scripture was **told** in this service, what captured your attention the most from this Word of God?

- That we are to keep God’s Word in front of us at all times. That we should teach it to our children. It is for a blessing or a curse. I noticed the congregation watching you even though they had their Bibles open. Almost everyone looked up! Telling the Scripture gets our attention!
- That God wants the Word on our hearts and minds at all times of the day . . . like complete immersion.
- It made an impact to have the Scripture told among us. “Heart” and “eye” – these are two words I remember because of the gestures of the story teller. I felt like he was talking to me personally.
- The fact that there was a blessing and a curse expressed from God, pointing out the consequences of following the commandments – vs. not following and giving adoration to other gods which lead us to live sinful unfulfilling lives.
- How there is both a curse and a blessing. If you tell the story of God and keep in front of you it is a blessing, but if you ignore God’s word and don’t spread His word it can be a curse.
- The way Pastor recited the text by heart, and his expressions is like a picture – it’s worth a thousand words. His use of hands and body language help me understand and feel the word of God as he told the story. I am always impressed by his ability to recite the word of God with so much intensity. He brings the scripture home and into your heart.
- Just that someone memorized it and could tell it to me. I really listen and pay attention to the words and gestures. Much more meaningful for me. I like the eye contact – better than watching the top of someone’s head. I liked the idea that it was told down by the congregation not from the lectern.

- I don't know how much I am influenced by having heard this at the 8:30 service, and doing that survey. It seems that the "blessing and curse" passage was not as stark. The emphasis seemed to be on the first section.
 - God's word is to be a part of our hearts and minds. Teach these words to your children. Make these words a part of your home. If you obey these words you will be blessed and if you disobey these words you will be cursed.
 - Hand motions mimicked where God's word should be shared and talked about.
 - We must obey God's word and we will be blessed.
 - The repeat reminder to verbalize God's Word and in every day life, in various ways.
 - I was compelled by Pastor's presentation of the scripture reading. I felt very focused on the words and looking forward to the sermon – I think what captured my attention the most was the "choice" being offered . . . and also the consequences. Curses vs. blessings.
 - That you should keep this word with you and around you at all times and tell it to others.
3. Please write out the sermon text (Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28) as best you can from memory.

- Keep these words in your heart and soul. Teach them to your children, talk about them, post them on your doorposts and on your gate. I present you a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you follow the commands of the Lord, a curse if you do not obey the commands of the Lord and follow other gods.
- The speaker has commanded us always to be learning and reading the Word of God. We are to not only live in the world, but He should be constantly in our thoughts, and actions – and offered to our family as well. It is important to imprint the word and teach your children – so we are not distracted.
- See 8:30
- Remember the words I have given you. Write it on your forehead and post it on your doorposts. Talk with your children about it as you go down the road and as you lie down and get up. This is both a blessing and a curse. A blessing that by following God's law your life will be full.
- Same as number 2.
- You are to keep these words ever before you, on your hearts. Talk about them to your children. Talk about them as you walk, and as you rise and as you go to sleep. These commandments are both a blessing and a curse. A blessing you obey them. A curse if you do not.
- Keep these words of mine in your heart and soul. Teach them to your children. Speak of them in your home, on the way, when you lie down and when you get up. Bind them on your forehead and your hands. Put them on your door posts and on your gates that your days in the land of promise may be like the days of heaven. I give you a blessing and a curse; a blessing if you keep my words and commands. A curse if you forget the Lord your God and follow the ways of the people in the land and worship gods you do not know.

- That we should fix the word of God in our hearts and in our minds. We should tell and retell the story. We should write them on our foreheads and on our door frames that we should always talk and teach the word of God and keep his commands. We should teach and tell the story to our children as our forefather told us. Also that it can be a blessing or a curse. We have the choice to follow the commands and be blessed or disobey the word of God and be cursed.
- Keep the word of God in front of you. Post it on your doorposts, discuss it with your children and talk about it when you walk along the road. But it comes with a blessing and a curse. The blessing if you keep God's word and tell it to others and a curse if you don't.
- Fix these words on your mind and heart. Bind them on your forehead. Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you lie down, walk, sit at home when you get up. Write them on the doorframe of your home. I set before you a blessing and a curse. A blessing if you obey the commands. A curse if you disobey the commands of God and follow the commands of other gods.
- The word of the Lord needs to be upon your mind and heart. Love your God with all your heart. The Israelites were told what they needed to do to honor God as they prepared for their promised land. There will be many distractions for them. How they respond will determine if there is a curse or blessing when they arrive.
- Remember God's Word with all your heart, and with all your mind. Teach them to your children when you sit down and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your home and on your gates. See, I have put before you a blessing and a curse. The blessing if you keep all I have commanded you and curses if you do not do as I have commanded you.
- Keep my word in front of you at all times. Teach it to your children. Write it on your doorpost, on your forehead (on a sticky note in your mirror) always to remember what God's Word tells you. If you obey it you'll have blessings. If you don't obey it, you'll have curses.

4. What was today's sermon about?

- Intro: Memorial Day = remembering
Dad told stories of service
Tell – Retell – over and over again
A) Deuteronomy is a prelude to entering the Promise Land
God wants them to remember His Word.
“Love the Lord with all heart, soul, strength. Watch out. Lots of diversions in land (immorality, false gods, etc.)
Phylactery and Mezuzah – good visuals!
B) His Word is in us and defines who we are and directs us. (Every day a Memorial Day = Remember God) We are distracted too. So our days will be many not in number but in living a blessed and full life – many blessings.
Follow the ten commandments = life at it's best.

Keep God's Word in heart and mind.

If obey = blessed

If not = cursed.

Israelites respond to gift of God's Word.

How will we respond?

Our promise land = heaven. Paradise = gift.

Forgiveness, sacrifice of Son, free gift of God's love, our inheritance, hold on by faith, ignore temptations, never forget His promises.

Be not just hearers but also tellers!

- Remembering – Telling others. Just as we relate stories in our past over and over again and with gusto and enthusiasm – so also God wants us to not just remember his Word and His Son's sacrifice for us, but we need to relate this to others, especially those children entrusted to our care. God's commandments are given because God wants the best for us. It's when we live within these commands that we have a civil society, people committed to loving marriages, concern for people's welfare/reputation over what one can gain/get . . . a society "under God" and in respond to what he wants first. The reference to "many years" isn't longevity, rather it's to abundance, the fulfilled life, a life of blessing rather than curse. Hear is our "promise" a land to come. Jesus removed the curse of our disobedience so we can receive heaven as a gift. God wants more of us than just the one hour a week. He wants his word, his presence with us at all times . . . being shared with our children, grandchildren, because the world is vying for their attention. The Jewish tradition was often external remembrance of the Word with phylacteries and mezuzahs; God wants us to have His Word in our minds/hearts and that means doing it.
- Memorial Day/Decoration Day should be each day we hear God's Word. There are a lot of distractions. Storytelling – Pastor's Dad told of WW II. Telling and retelling stories is theme of the Old Testament reading. Deuteronomy is a prelude to Israelites going to promised land. Parent/grandparents need to talk to our children about what God wants each day all the days of our lives. Life will be at its best when we honor God first and keep these in your hearts and minds. If Israelites follow God's word they will be blessed. If Israelites don't follow God's word they will be cursed. How well they respond to God's gift? How will we respond? We must keep God's word on our hearts and mind. Talk about it – encourage each other. We need to keep telling "the story" each day. Don't forget it or get distracted.
- Remembering – Memorial Day – remembering God's commandment to memorize his commandments daily or we will surely forge them because of life's pressures and distractions. Therefore, we should daily recite the commandments while lying down, waking, walking at home with your friends and family. Tell them to your children. Place them on your forehead, on the lintel of your home, bind them in your hands, in your heart and in your mind, or the other gods (idols, wrong pleasures, sinful nature of mankind) will prevail over our lives. In those days people's custom was to wear a phylactery on their head which held the written commandments or use a box

(mezuzah) on their home as a constant reminder to constantly speak of the commandment. God gives us the commandments to enable us to build a relationship with him – his gift was to provide “life at its best.” We were to enjoy his blessings plus heaven in eternal life. As we were adopted into His family when He died on the cross for us our relationship is to be 24/7 not just Sunday one hour in church! Distractions of today were just as bad and many as distractions in days of old. Living outside marriage, pornography, sexual things on TV or places to visit (R and X rated movies, restaurant that displays female anatomy, playboy magazines, etc.) therefore – we need to be story tellers. Let everyone know of God’s command (the great commission) build relationship – tell of the blessings and curses God offered us. Pray for courage and follow him, trust in him, challenge each other to keep his word.

- There are things that we are told about, that can or should prepare us for what is to come. By knowing God’s Word in our hearts, our minds, will help us when temptations come. God’s word should become a part of us so when we do things and speak, people can see God in us. Follow God’s commandments and life will be at its best. In the church we learn of God’s love and the sacrifice of His Son. This faith we can hold on to as we prepare and help prepare others to enter heaven. We need to hear and tell the story of God’s love.
- Memorial Day started in 1868 in Waterloo, NY. The telling and retelling of the story. The story of God and his commands. This Sunday is Memorial Sunday the day of remembrance of our loved ones lost at war. God wants us to remember him the way we remember the stories our forefather would tell about the war they were in. God wants us to do the same with his story – to tell and retell his commands and read his words of our children and their children he wants us to fix his words in our hearts and minds. Tell and retell when we sit, walk, sleep on our door frames and gates. Put them in little boxes and carry them with us all the time – this was a Jewish custom he called phylactery. Another word he used was mezuzah – this is life at its best! How will we respond when we enter the promised land.
- Remembering. Remembering the meaning of Memorial Day or Decoration Day as some call it. It is not just another 3 day holiday – the beginning of summer. Some veterans tell stories of their war experiences so often that others can tell those stories just as well. This is what God wants us to do with His Word – tell it over and over until it is written in our hearts and souls. Tell it to our children and other people wherever and whatever the situation. In all that God was doing for Israel he was preparing them to live in the land He’d promised them so they would not become like the people who lived in the land, but would never forget the Lord their God and would continue to worship Him alone. This is what God is doing for us today – preparing us for the “gift of heaven.” We need a special day like Memorial Day to help us remember the men and women who died so we can live in this great, free land, because we tend to forget so easily. We forget God loves us. We forget God has forgiven our sins and saved us from hell by sending His son to die on the cross for our sins. We forget we are sojourners here on earth and that an

eternal home is heaven awaits us. We forget that God is preparing us to live in that “home.” We forget that God’s rules and commandments are not to keep us in subjection and from having fun. They are given to us so we can be free and have “life at its best”!

- Remembering and retelling the Gospel of salvation. (I wrote more after the 8:30 service. I would be repeating myself.) I did not hear it any differently.
- Same as 8:30 service.
- See 8:30 service. Although I do think that listening twice helps remember more details I think my recall was about the same.
- See 8:30.
- The importance of telling and retelling the Word of God; to ourselves and to our children. It’s about “equipping” ourselves to face the world’s temptation and distractions. God’s Word must be in our hearts and in our minds. This is a gift from the Lord, tell and retell the story once and over to avoid distractions. Relevant: How do we teach God’s Word in today’s world with its distractions and contradictions of God’s Word? Seek the Lord – life at its best. Don’t get caught up in gossiping, coveting, keep the word in your hearts and minds. Life is blessed when we hold on by faith. The Israelites are warned they will be cursed if they ignore the Word.
- It began with references to Memorial Day and how those who have served seem to need to retell their stories, as does anyone who has experienced a significant event. This led to the discussion of the Scripture text and how God was trying to prepare the Israelites to enter the promised land, where there would be many distractions and temptations. He wanted them to know and keep His Word in their minds and hearts before they go to the promised land so that they could live their lives as they would want. Like the Israelites, we are preparing to enter the promise land (heaven) and live in a place full of distraction and temptation. Not only should we keep His Word in our minds and hearts to live as the world want us to, but we should also seize any appropriate opportunities to tell others especially our children about what God has done for us and what he wants us to do.

5. Summarize how the Scripture text **told** in this service connected to today’s sermon.

- There were parallels drawn between us and the Israelites being surrounded by temptation and idolatry. There was also references to sharing God’s Word with others, especially our children and examples of times and occasions where that sharing is especially important.
- The sermon explained more about the scripture passage. For instance, we learned that the Israelites were being warned of the afflictions they would encounter after “wandering” in the desert for years!
- Repeat and remember God’s word and commandments each day in various ways.

- The difficult ways that we can hear, remember and talk about God's Word will help us keep it in our heart and minds. The blessings we receive from putting God first and obey his word are a real full life.
- Same as the 8:30 service, except the "told" Scripture text provided an easier personal link and reflection.
- It served as the basis for the sermon, especially the first part, about "writing on gates and doorposts."
- Just as we need Memorial Day and other special days to remember something important we need God's Word to help us remember many important truths. Just as the Jews used the mezuzah and phylactery to keep reminding them to worship the one true, God. Just as we need to hear something over and over to really remember it and keep it in our hearts and mind we need to tell the Gospel over and over to keep it in our heart and mind. We should learn to speak of it often no matter what the circumstances. It should be a part of us. We must not only be hearers but tellers.
- Memorial Day is the day of remembrance of the Word of God and his commands are to be remembered every day of our lives as our fathers and forefather tell their story so should we tell and retell the story of how God gave us his only Son, Jesus to die for our sins and give us everlasting life. Obey and you will be blessed, disobey and you will be cursed.
- That we should not only be hearers of the word of God but also tellers of it.
- Remember God's 10 commandments and follow them. Repeat them daily, waking, walking, talking with your children, family and friends about them, post them on your home. "As for me and my house we will serve the Lord." You verbally repeated what Moses repeated to the exiles to prepare their hearts, minds, souls before entering the promised land (for us = eternal life in heaven). You warned us of the blessing and the curse and the options we are offered by God – life at it's best or HELL. Build a relationship with God or the devil. Don't let distractions overpower us, stay in the word by telling others and challenging each other.
- What pastor started with was Memorial Day. Memorial Day is a day of remembrance. To reflect on those who have given their lives for our freedom. Pastor used his Dad's stories of WW II to connect with the Israelites journey. The real impact for me was drawing a connection with each of us sharing our stories of faith each day – As Pastor's Dad did with WW II stories. The repetition of the stories stamps it upon our minds. How we respond is important . . . just as Israelites were asked to respond.
- I felt the told version was very effective as it was 1) easily seen by the listeners. You weren't standing at the lectern; 2) the eye contact and deliberate delivery were word for word what was relayed in the sermon – this gives you time to think about what is being said, plus you used a few gestures/body language that connects with the listeners.
- The Scripture was told with emphasis and power. One could understand the urgency and importance of this text as it was told and repeated (telling and retelling) throughout the sermon. A good comparison was made between the Israelites and us. Both heading to the Promised Land.

6. Note any reflections you may have on the difference between hearing the Scripture (Deuteronomy 11:18-21, 26-28) **told** vs. **read** in your understanding of that Scripture as well as how that may have impacted your ability to follow the sermon.
- I think it depends on what kinds of learner you are. I'm a visual learner so I always try to follow the text when it is read. But when it is told, I watch the teller because they make it come alive.
 - The storytelling of the Scripture and how easy it was to follow where that fit in to the sermon is apparent to me. As said above, I think it has a large part to do with the speed of the telling vs. the speed of the reading, the inflection of telling vs. lack of understanding of the reader as to meaning/inflection of what is being read, and the gestures, movement, eye contact (reliability) of the storyteller vs. a reader "100 yards" away.
 - Hearing the Scripture told had a greater impact on me. Actually, I think the important point for me is the sermon itself. Pastor actually reviews a lot of the Scripture in the sermon. His ability to draw parallels is very important.
 - Your mind wonders when the Scripture is read if you do not read along. I concentrate more, listen better and get more details enjoying a more fulfilling experience and retain more details when the story teller tells the Scriptures.
 - When the Scripture is told an emphasis can and is put on different parts of the Scripture. I think when the Scripture is told I give more attention to it.
 - To me I understand the reading better when Pastor Goff told it vs. being read. When Pastor told the Scripture he expresses his love of the Scriptures. I believe we all have an inner child that loves when we are told a story. My understanding and ability to follow the sermon was much greater and more intense when Pastor told the story. I felt the Scripture coming through him – into my heart and mind I will remember this Scripture in years to come. My Pastor has grown so much in the past few years and has earned my respect and love. I feel very much at home at St. Paul's because of Pastor Goff.
 - For me, this was one of the easier Scriptures to follow as it was told and the sermon was easier to follow (as well). I realize other Scriptures and sermons will be much more difficult.
 - At 11:00 Pastor Goff was more familiar with this passage (than the lay reader at the first service) and was able to emphasize what we would later include in the sermon. It was more coherent.
 - The Scripture told brings a heart felt means of presenting the Scripture. The Scripture told allows the presenter an avenue of utilizing their bodily expressions and close connection with/the congregation when being on the same evaluation level as the congregation. The Scripture told gives a greater opportunity for the presenter to use more methods of communication in providing a personable touch to the message of the congregation.
 - As I listen to the sermon it was easier to visualize the text because I paid more attention to the presentation of the text. Scripture comes alive with the

storytelling even though sometimes reading is done with good inflection, etc. the body language and arm movements helped me remember better.

- Pastor Goff did an excellent job in telling the Scripture. It is more interesting to have it told than read.
- It emphasized the various different ways we can and should remember God's commands.
- I believe some of the key words in the "telling" of the scripture were: blessing, curses, telling and retelling.

Week 4 – June 19, 2005
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
Scripture Text: Jeremiah 20:7-13
Sermon Title: “Extreme Living”

At the 8:30 service the sermon text was given as a Biblical storytelling. The questions and responses to the surveys from this service are as follows:

1. Before today’s worship service, how well did you know the Scripture (Jeremiah 20:7-13) which the sermon was based upon?
 - Not very – read several times in past but not remembered especially.
 - Not well sorry to say.
 - I did not know the Scripture.
 - I have read it only because I have read the Bible through. I was not real familiar as if I had studied it.
 - Not very well. Had heard it years ago only.
 - I have heard/read this Scripture previously, but little to no familiarity with this Scripture.
 - I cannot recollect it.
 - Not well at all.
 - Not very well.

2. When the Old Testament Scripture (Jeremiah 20:7-13) was **told** in this service, what captured your attention from this Word of God?
 - The confidence that was in God and the contrast of mood – despair and hope.
 - How Jeremiah could have such extreme feelings (completely opposite).
 - The emphasis on certain words, “denounce him” – a lot of pressure to not step forward and sing God’s praises. The end of the reading was very joyous – Praise the Lord – captured my attention.
 - That he was angry to start with but ended up praising God.
 - The dramatic statement that was something like: “I shall make you a terror to those around you and to yourself.”
 - The fact that Jeremiah had the courage to continue prophesying the Word of God amidst mockery, violence, deceit, vengeance, etc. He was puzzled at the fact that with all his effort expressing/spreading God’s Word to his fellow man, that God wouldn’t provide people who were more receiving/open to His word.
 - Jeremiah, despite the persecution of those he come to prophecy to, can’t hold in the message of God. The fire inside is too great to keep in!
 - The passion behind Jeremiah’s pleas with God.

- It illustrated the emotional state of Jeremiah. The inner drive he feels to proclaim God's Word, even in the face of danger and hostility.
3. Please write out the sermon text (Jeremiah 20:7-13) as best you can from memory.
- Sorry, my aural memory is not that good.
 - I. Jeremiah felt extreme despair
 1. Ignored by the people.
 2. Put in stocks.
 3. Mocked by all in spite of his warnings to them.
 4. Felt totally lost.
 5. Wanted to maintain a tough outside but inside was despondent.
 - II. Cried out to God
 1. Didn't want to take the reaction from the people any longer.
 2. Was completely sick of people's reaction.
 3. Called to God to help him keep His word in his heart.
 - III. Couldn't keep quiet
 1. Had to keep on speaking out for God.
 2. His heart and soul so filled with love for God.
 3. Knew he had to turn to one true God.
 4. Had to keep on calling people back to God.
 5. Felt extreme need to continue his work.
 - IV. Shows two sides of Jeremiah
 1. Extreme despair for people and their ignorance
 2. On the inside could not contain God's Word, had to speak out about it.
 - I remember Jeremiah talking about despair, holding his feelings inside, he feels God has forsaken him. In the end verses he is praising God and is very positive. It seems that most of the verses have Jeremiah feeling very despondent.
 - Jeremiah complained that the Lord had deceived him. His friends and others were just waiting for opportunities to mock him. But if he doesn't say what the Lord has put on his heart he will burst. Even though he knows his enemies are waiting to pounce, he gives praise to the Lord. The Lord will protect him and provide. He will watch over the needy and the wicked ones.
 - The Lord makes me a terror to my friends and to myself. If I hold in the prophecy, and not prophesy then I have a burning in my heart. Friends have scoffed at me, betrayed me and hope for me to fail and fall because of the Lord's word through me. But I will continue to prophesy. The Lord rescues the needy from the wicked.
 - Jeremiah cried out in despair. He had faithfully proclaimed God's Word and had received nothing in return but humiliation and sorrow. When he withheld God's Word it became a fire in his heart. He felt an ability to continue to express it no matter the results.

- The very people I bring your message to, ridicule and mock me. They heap their curses upon me. They physically abuse me and make sport of me. But even if I tried to keep quiet, your words are like fire. They must come out! While I am miserable, it is you God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that will deliver me from my own people.
- All day I am ridiculed. Lord, how long must this go on? But you, Lord, are with me. Others say turn away! But you, Lord, are with me.
- Jeremiah describes how he is treated by the surrounding people. But he can not hold in his message from God to the Jewish people. He prophesies the dire consequences of not listening to God and follow his commands.

4. What was today's sermon about?

- The extreme of feelings – Jeremiah was frustrated and angry – he felt as if he was useless at his task – but he also had an extreme faith, a confidence in what God could do. He had to act for God as God had commissioned him. In his despair and in his hope, he turned to God. We are also to have that kind of faith – in the “winter of our souls,” we are assured of God’s mercy, love and forgiveness regardless of how we might feel. (I’ll add that having the context of what happened before the text made it all much clearer.)
- Used Jeremiah’s message to make an extreme effort to live our lives in that manner. Forgive someone – make some extreme effort to be or follow Jeremiah’s way.
- The sermon was about Jeremiah. Pastor started out by talking about extreme sports: i.e. ironing (extreme). That was compared to Jeremiah who expressed both extreme despair and extreme faith. Jeremiah was asked to do extreme prophesying. Pastor then talked about wintry spirituality and compared that to one of the spiritual seasons . It has extreme despair as one of the characteristics. Pastor mentioned that we can also experience extreme despair; but like Jeremiah God can rescue our lives with extreme faith. Because God responds with extreme faith we need to experience extreme living, i.e., address a relationship, an addiction or emotional situation with extreme actions. God wants that. Pastor gave some extreme comparisons: rejection – love, guilt – forgiveness.
- Extreme everything. Extreme ironing. (I too saw the article.) I thought the comparison between Jeremiah’s complaining and praising was all too true for our lives today. We can get caught up in how things should be and how people should act. Then we complain and tell ourselves and others that we are fed up and are going to step back. But at the same time, that desire within us continues to grow and we continue to reach out, even if it is not always the best way. Jeremiah realized or recognized that he had that desire to tell others and gave praise to the Lord for giving him the desire and keeping on. He knew that God would provide for him and also take care of the others. He had to let God take care of it. It is only our place to spread the word not beat others into submission.

- Extreme Life: Jeremiah has prophesied, and has been publicly ridiculed, and is angry on the outside. But on the inside is asking God, “Why?” But in the midst of his extreme pain and low place, Jeremiah still has extreme faith to continue to preach. God’s love is the most extreme, to give his life on the cross to pay for the sins of the world. How extreme are we to whine and complain and to reject his love after such a sacrifice. Whatever causes our spiritual winter, we should do something extreme and respond to Jesus’ sacrifice.
 - “Extreme Living” – The prophet, Jeremiah, expressed extreme prophesying as an in your face type of prophet. It was unclear to him why he was here prophesying with extreme effort, while being ridiculed. People just didn’t want to open their hearts to receive the word of God. What is the purpose of our suffering? Today we have this agony as Jeremiah did by thinking of ourselves as failing parents, strained marital/parental relationships, through disappointments, loneliness, in other words extreme despair. We can connect with Jeremiah being that we have all reached the end of our ropes. This extreme despair can be linked to a wintry spirituality. This wintry spirituality can be conquered by extreme faith as seen with Jeremiah as he rescues the lives of the needy from the wicked. God assists us as he did Jeremiah. By offering extreme love, hope, acceptance and forgiveness extreme living is where God wants us to be. We should be able to look beyond our extreme despair/wintry spirituality and look to the source for extreme hope if we believe. The Father/source/God has proven to us that he will render us His forgiveness, love and hope by His sacrifice of His Son on the cross.
 - Extreme living for God. Despite that we as Christians may have or are going through difficult times, being discontent, God has shown his extreme love for us through the sacrifice of His son Jesus Christ. What are we called to do? Go to the extreme and reflect his extreme love by exhibiting Jeremiah’s extreme faith that despite his misery in his situation, he could not hold back God’s message. Jeremiah continued to have faith that God would not only rescue him but deliver him, vindicate those who mocked and humiliated him, and call him His own.
 - The Jeremiah text, an explanation of his situation and anger. Also, a parallel to the prodigal son story.
 - God and his quest for righteous people goes to extremes. He demands all from the prophet Jeremiah and from his people, but he also goes to extremes to save us from ourselves by sending his son.
5. Summarize how the Scripture text (Jeremiah 20:7-13) **told** in this service connected to today’s sermon.
- The sermon reflected the mood and feelings Jeremiah felt: hopelessness frustration, anger but also hope, confidence, assurance.
 - Sermon was totally connected to the text. Sermon told us how we should and can listen to God’s Word and how we can and should use extreme measures to live our lives according to Jeremiah’s preaching.

- From my standpoint, I didn't know the Scripture. So the sermon was an eye-opener for me. I didn't realize Jeremiah's role in God's plan or his story – so first I was educated. Then the words extreme – certainly tied the Scripture with the sermon. The power of God and what he wants us to do impacted me. Relating real life situations to the Bible readings helps me understand better and grow in my faith.
- We can be passionate about God's word and spread the word, but God will work in their hearts. We can be hard and fast messengers.
- The prophet Jeremiah was going through extreme pain, and doubt, but still showed faith in God to continue to believe and preach.
- Jeremiah required his fellow man to listen to his prophecy and be remorseful for their actions. But they humiliated and ridiculed Jeremiah. Jeremiah reached the end of his rope, but by believing in God he was able to overcome his despair and continued to prophesy and teach the word of God.
- Jeremiah, despite his reluctance became an extreme prophet. Does your faith allow you to be an extreme Christian?
- It highlighted Jeremiah's passion and anger and loneliness.
- He demonstrated the length God is prepared to go in order to bring us onto his path.

At the 11:00 service the Scripture text was read in the traditional manner by a lay

reader. The questions and responses to the surveys are as follows:

1. Before today's worship service, how well did you know the Scripture (Jeremiah 20:7-13) which the sermon was based upon?
 - Before the 8:30 service I did not know the Scripture. It was challenging to answer the question before the 11:00 service. Based on hearing it earlier; I knew it well.
 - See 8:30 survey comments.
 - Not that well.
 - Did not know it well before the 8:30 service.
 - See 8:30.
 - I was not familiar with this Scripture passage.
2. When the Old Testament Scripture (Jeremiah 20:7-13) was read in this service, what captured your attention from this Word of God?
 - The reader used voice inflections with some words of the reading and they jumped out: violence, destruction, denounce, and deceive. I pictured complete despair with Jeremiah. Then the end of the reading was very positive.
 - It was more instruction and I heard more about praising God – Jeremiah's feelings were not as clear as in the telling of the Scripture.

- How even though Jeremiah was doing what God had called him to do he had doubts because of those against him.
 - That Jeremiah felt like God has deceived him at the beginning of the verse.
 - The words of anger and exasperation were clear and obvious to hear.
 - I probably focused more on the meaning of the scripture because I was not familiar with this passage.
3. Please write out the sermon text (Jeremiah 20:7-13) as best you can from memory.
- Jeremiah is full of despair, he is saying that God has deceived him. He has thought that it would be easy to be a prophet but quite the contrary it is tough. He is not readily accepted when he preaches. Towards the end of the reading he realizes that he cannot keep holding his feelings inside. God is just and mighty. God will help Jeremiah overcome all adversity. The reading finishes up with Jeremiah singing God's praises.
 - See 8:30 survey comments.
 - O Lord why did you call me to be a prophet and spread your word when you allow those to whom you have sent me – to curse me and persecute me. I would like not to spread your word but when I don't you would cry out from my bones like a fire.
 - The Lord has deceived me, and is mightier than I. The Lord's Word has become terror and derision to me. I have preached terror and destruction. If I hold in the prophecy, God's Word, then my heart burns. My friends and neighbors hope to deceive me, and hope that I will fall. They ridicule me. Lord I want to see your power and wrath rained down upon the wicked. For the Lord rescues the needy from the wicked.
 - See 8:30.
 - The word "extreme" was used extensively in this sermon to define the needs and purpose of Jeremiah's mission. Extreme is also used to define the faith of Jeremiah. While Jeremiah suffered extreme despair, he knew that he had to turn to the Lord and become a living, willing witness. If Jeremiah could find comfort in these circumstances; we, too, should find hope and our faith will prevail.
4. What was today's sermon about?
- The sermon today compared a contemporary activity of extreme sports with the state of mind of Jeremiah. Today we have extreme sports such as ironing and Jeremiah went thru some extreme situations. He experienced extreme despair, he held a lot of confusion and frustration inside. Jeremiah turns to God for extreme love and understanding. Pastor talked about wintry spirituality. Not even a sunny climate helps. Sometimes we can't escape wintry spirituality. Winter comes when we lose a job, fail as a parent and several other examples were given. God shows extreme love, understanding and forgiveness to us. The key question is how extreme is our hope in God?

How extreme will our response to God be? “Extreme living” was mentioned several times. It is our call to God!

- See 8:30.
 - Extremes. How far do we need to go before we know God’s love for us. No matter how hurt we are or how we feel we should let God work in us so that we can forgive those who have hurt us.
 - Extreme life and God’s extreme love. Jeremiah was going through extreme lows as a prophet, because of his preaching the Lord’s word of repentance. He was angry, sad, and maybe depressed. But in the midst of this, he showed extreme faith. In the parable of the prodigal son, the father showed extreme forgiveness in welcoming his son back home. God, through Jesus, has shown the most extreme love by dying on the cross for our sins. We are called to live an extreme life in response to God’s sacrifice and to give up an addiction that’s held us back, forgive someone, stop judging others, and ask God what we need to change about ourselves.
 - See 8:30.
 - The sermon was about finding hope during difficult circumstances. If our faith is challenged we know that we must turn to the Lord for guidance and comfort.
5. Summarize how the Scripture text (Jeremiah 20:7-13) **read** in this service connected to today’s sermon.
- Pastor used the theme “extreme” to connect to Jeremiah’s feelings and how God acted to a contemporary activity – extreme sports. He also used the term wintry spirituality to compare Jeremiah’s feelings with what we experience every day. Just as God used extreme love and understanding with Jeremiah he uses extreme responses for us. The ultimate extreme response was Jesus giving his life for us on the cross.
 - See 8:30 survey comments.
 - The extreme emotion that Jeremiah felt in spreading God’s Word and the extremes we feel in our lives today.
 - Jeremiah’s text was used as an “extreme” example of something that anyone can go through in life. It was an example of extreme faith and obedience to God.
 - See 8:30.
 - See 8:30.
6. Note any reflections you may have on the difference between hearing the Scripture (Jeremiah 20:7-13) **told** vs. **read** in your understanding of the sermon today.
- The person who read the Scripture in today’s 11:00 service did an excellent job of reading the text incorporating a lot of feeling into it. Because we were following along in our Bibles while it was being read, I believe more of the text is remembered. However, I would say that the understanding of the

sermon and the understanding of the Bible text was most helped by Pastor Goff's recap of events and the context of the verses.

- When the words were told I focused more on Jeremiah's state of mind and his chiding of the people. When the text was read I listened to this speaker's words and the reasons he gave.
- When a Scripture is read with a sense of understanding its meaning there's not generally a big difference. But when Scripture is read haltingly and or without expression then the telling makes it more alive and viable.
- I enjoyed and understood so much more listening to the "told" Scripture. Allison's body language and expression helped to really hear the words and know what the Scripture is saying.
- Actually, this was a challenge. The reader did a good job of reading the Scripture. One difference was that I felt that Allison was Jeremiah – that he actually was talking to us (through her) whereas Dean was "reading" the Scripture.
- With the telling I had a sense of Jeremiah's personal feelings. With the reading I was more aware of his initial reluctance to speak and the frustration with his words to the people. I get the Scripture meaning quicker with the telling. With it being read I have to hear it again or go back and read it myself.
- Hearing the Scripture told vs. read brings out the drama of Jeremiah's situation and feelings. But I may have less specific recollection of the reading because I am watching the reader instead of reading along in my Bible. The above is mitigated by the power point having the text displayed during the sermon.
- When the Scripture was told it seemed to be expressed in a way that was easier to understand and connect. The teller had the opportunity to use their whole body in expression. The reader was only able to use their voice in expression.

APPENDIX B

Series A
Fifth Sunday after Easter
April 23/24, 2005
Title: “Oh, If Only to be a Berean!”
Text: Acts 17:1-15

Not long ago singer Bette Midler made popular a song entitled, *The Wind Beneath My Wings*. You may or may not know that that song is actually a remake of an old Perry Como hit. In the song the words are sung, “Did you ever know that you’re my hero?” Here the singer is singing about the fact that what they have accomplished in life has been because of the modest encouragement of someone who has simply stayed off in the shadows. “You are the wind beneath my wings. Did you ever know you are my hero?”

I mention this song because no matter who we are, we all need heroes in life. We all need people who will cheer us on, who will encouragement us, who embody the qualities we admire, respect and desire to imitate. Maybe we feel at times that our heroes in life are the wind beneath our wings.

Throughout life we all have heroes, don’t we? They may be real or fictional, young or old, sports figure or movie star, politician or humanitarian, family member or friend. Our heroes are people or characters who move us to say or feel, “Oh, if only I could be like . . . !”

Who’s your hero? Who is the wind beneath your wings in life?

I wonder how many of us would point to a particular Bible character as our hero? Would any of us pick someone like . . . Daniel, for his courage and conviction? Would we select perhaps . . . Paul, for his amazing perseverance and missionary passion?

Would we choose someone like . . . Moses, for his qualities of leadership or longsuffering? Would we consider . . . Ruth, for her dogged determination and ceaseless commitment? As you consider people who inspire you and who you wish to imitate, do you ever think of any particular Biblical figure and think, “Oh, if only I could be like . . .”

Let’s think about the apostle Paul for a moment here since the lesson you heard from Acts 17 talks about him. Quite a hero of the faith, don’t you think? The story of his own conversion is inspiration enough of how God can work amazing things in people’s lives. Paul used to persecute people who were followers of Christ, but then in a dramatic turn of events . . . his life and direction forever changed. After his Damascus road conversion Paul was tireless in his effort to bring the message of Christ and His salvation to more and more people even as he faced some incredible obstacles along the way.

Here in Acts 17 Paul is on his second out of three missionary journeys. He is traveling from Philippi and passes through two places, Amphipolis and Apollonia, on his way to Thessalonica. Now Thessalonica is a rather significant city for that time. It is one of the leading cities of the Roman province of Macedonia. Thessalonica boasted a population of about 200,000 people. It was situated right along the main highway running East and West through the Roman Empire. It was a seaport town with a naval station housing the Roman navy. Thessalonica was a thriving city. There was a lot of merchant traffic passing through, cargo boats came and went through the harbor, and many Roman officials as well as military personnel lived there. The Holy Spirit directed Paul to Thessalonica because all that wealth and commerce as well as all that military muscle and political power were not all there was to life. The people of that community

needed the message of Jesus Christ as much as people of this community need the message of Jesus Christ.

Paul's normal custom was to go first to the Jewish synagogue because that is the place where people gather and talk about the sacred writings and teachings of the Jewish faith. By quoting the prophets and making reference to these sacred stories the people knew rather well, Paul could lead them to faith in Christ, their true Savior and hope.

After about three weeks Paul's message was starting to bear some fruit. In fact one of the men who received Paul's message favorably was a man by the name of Jason who extended some hospitality to Paul. But as you heard, not everyone was favorable toward the message of Christ. Paul also experienced opposition from many of the Jews. In fact, he encountered people who not only did not believe but tried to discredit him by misrepresenting what he was saying and what was happening. They were spreading rumors and exaggerating the facts. Their lives were so self-centered they were just not willing to make any changes.

It's amazing how that happens, isn't it, even in the church? Even though the uncompromising love of God is communicated, some will respond with negative attitudes or stubborn resistance or apathetic indifference.

Over the past few weeks while I was out of town, I had the opportunity to worship at three different churches. At one of the churches I visited I learned that this particular church is in the process of planting a mission congregation on the other side of town. This is a community that has been growing rapidly for several years now. The established church there is very traditional in their appearance and practice, and it seems that they are very resistant to making any changes. I had the opportunity to talk with a

few of the members about their endeavor to start this mission, and I was surprised by some of the feedback I heard. I heard comments like, “It’s a waste of money.” One person said to me, “If those people on the other side of town want to come to church, then they can drive across town to come to where we are. It won’t hurt them. We don’t need to go where they are.” Someone else said, “They can just get used to the way we do things here.”

As I heard some of those comments I couldn’t help but wonder where was the missionary spirit of these people? Where is the missionary spirit of the apostle Paul who endured what he endured, who was tireless in his effort, who seemed to stop at nothing to communicate the message of Christ?

As I read here about what is happening in Thessalonica, I wonder how could people so vehemently oppose the message of God’s unconditional acceptance and favor? And yet, we know how. When you want to do things your way, you oppose God’s message. When you want to do what you want to do and you’re doggedly determined for things to stay that way, you oppose God’s message. That’s what Paul faced in Thessalonica. And at times, that is what we face here too.

Perhaps then because the reception in Thessalonica wasn’t so favorable and in fact was rather antagonistic toward him, the Holy Spirit moved Paul on. He goes on to a place called Berea about 50 miles away from Thessalonica. But now notice here how different the Bereans react to Paul’s message. Luke tells us here in Acts, **“The Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.”**

In Paul's day there were very few printed copies of the sacred writings, so examining the Scriptures probably meant that they met together and discussed what Paul was saying. They discussed what they have learned and believed, what traditions and rituals they have followed. Paul shared with them the promises of God and of God's desire for their hearts to change. Maybe they talked openly about those things in life that are obstacles in our life with God. No doubt they talked openly about the mercy and hope that the message of Jesus brings.

I have to admit to you that when I think of people who are an encouragement and inspiration in life I can't help but count the Bereans to be among some of my heroes. Why? Because they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true. They were people who realized that life wasn't just about them, but life is also seeking God's will and desire for you. After all, God is the very one who fashioned and formed you, who crafted and created you. It only stands to reason to want to know God's desire for your life and my life and for the world around us.

Back a few weeks ago just about every newspaper around here covered the Terri Schiavo story on the front page. In the days following her death there were a number of conversations I had with people, as I'm sure many of you did too. Over and over again people say, "What do you think about what has happened to Terri Schiavo?"

Now to be completely honest with you, I have to admit that I don't think this is an easy call for anyone to make. I don't know that many people would want to be faced with the kind of decision that family was faced with. Furthermore, there were too many unhealthy family dynamics going on that complicated matters even more. But to guide

our actions how essential it is to go back to God's Word. We clearly see what God's Word says about life and how God created life and how God desires that the life He has created be honored and preserved and cared for.

I'm not suggesting that some of these more controversial issues we face in life are always black and white . . . but, oh, if only we would seek to decide on this issue or that issue by first examining the Scriptures and seeking God's direction.

In a similar way, one of the church publications on my desk when I returned last week carried a front page article on how our national church body (The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod) is in discussions with other Lutheran church bodies about same gender relationships. You may be interested to know that the response of your church in that article is that, while we want to be sensitive to the struggles that people deal with in life, we want to always return time and again to the more fundamental question of what does God's Word say. We desire that the words of Scripture, not merely our feelings or emotions, guide our actions with whatever the issue is.

I remember hearing church leader and inspirational speaker John Maxwell say one time, "You have to always be careful when someone begins a sentence saying, 'I don't know what the Bible says, but here's what I think . . .'" That's a red flag, Maxwell warns. It's a red flag when we don't search the Scriptures first.

Notice what the posture and attitude of the Bereans were: **"They received the Word of God with eagerness and examined the Scriptures daily to see if what Paul said was true."**

Is that your practice in life? Is that my practice? The truth of the matter is that far too many times we are not like the Bereans. Sometimes our Bibles go unopened.

Sometimes our opinions are offered way before we ever give any thought as to whether God has spoken on this issue or not. Too many people are willing to watch an afternoon segment of Oprah to get some guidance in life but are not so willing to open up their Bibles and study what God's Word says about some of the issues in life we are facing.

Oh, if only to be like the Bereans! I don't know about you, but I have to count the Bereans among my heroes in life. If only I could be more like them. If only we all could be.

But actually, when you think about it, we are like the Bereans. We, like the Bereans, are people to whom the Holy Spirit brings the message of Jesus Christ.

No matter who you are or where you are in life or what you have been through or what you are going through right now, God's mercy and favor for your life is what God wants you to know and believe and hold on to.

No matter who you are, there are wounds and hurts we all have in life which need to be healed.

No matter who you are, your life can get off track and your priorities can be misdirected.

No matter who you are, you are people whom God created and whom He loves unconditionally.

If only we could be like the Bereans. And yet, in a way, we are. We are like the Bereans because it's for us, too, that the message of Jesus comes this day.

God's Son embodied a human form like ours and experienced the physical effects of life and death so as to bring you new life and hope.

For the pain in your heart and the grief you feel, God brings you healing.

For the regrets and misgivings you have in life, God brings you forgiveness and offers you a new beginning.

For the weakness you feel in your spirit, Christ brings you strength so that you can lean on Him.

In Jesus there is acceptance and peace.

In Christ there is unconditional love for you.

You are like the Bereans because you are people to whom God speaks His patient love, His promise of redemption, His joy and forgiveness.

You are people who receive the mercy and compassion of Jesus Christ that lifts you up and carries you beyond life's pain and disappointment. You are people for whom Christ became victorious over the threat of hell and death.

So now, you are people who have the opportunity to respond in the same way the Bereans responded . . . to receive the Word of God with eagerness and examine the Scriptures every day.

Oh, to be like the Bereans. Considering that you are recipients of the good news of Jesus Christ in your life . . . you are. And because of God's work in you and through you, you too may just be someone's hero that inspires them to live a Berean kind of faith as well.

Amen.

Series A
Sixth Sunday after Easter
Ascension Celebration/Confirmation
April 30/May 1, 2005
Theme: “Faith Survivors”
Text: Acts 1:1-14

Sometimes I shake my head over what are called reality TV shows that are on these days. One such reality show that has seemed to survive several seasons is the show, *Survivor*. When this show first came out, I remember thinking, “What does a show like this have to do with reality?” After all, it seems to be about cut throat competition, mistrust, people taking advantage of each other, greed, looking out for yourself whatever the costs . . . But actually, when you think about it that is reality, isn’t it? Unfortunately, in many ways in life, that’s reality. So how do you and I survive?

My concern here is not so much how do the contestants on the television show *Survivor* survive. But in this world where there is greed and mistrust and going after what you want in life whatever the costs . . . how do people of faith survive?

Survival. I wonder if maybe that was one of the first thoughts the disciples had after witnessing the Lord’s ascension. “How will we survive?” Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, tells us:

After Jesus said this, He was taken up before their very eyes and a cloud hid Him from their sight. They were looking intently up into the sky as He was going, when suddenly two men dressed in white stood beside them. “Men of Galilee,” they said, “why do you stand here looking into the sky? This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.”

For three years Jesus had been with these disciples, nearly every day if not every day. In their presence He performed miracles, He taught by use of parables, He healed the sick

and raised the dead, He demonstrated and embodied abounding mercy and amazing love for people. But now, what were the disciples going to do? They watched Jesus' body rise up into heaven and a cloud covered Him from their sight and they saw Him no more. Not only were these disciples wondering; "When's He coming back?" but they were probably also wondering; "What are we going to do now?" "How will we go about doing what needs to be done?" "Where do we start?" "How will we survive?"

Notice that there are a few things that are said and that happen next in our text that offers some insight to being "faith survivors" today. First of all, according to Luke the final words that Jesus spoke to the disciples were: **"But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."** In other words, Jesus made it clear to the disciples, and consequently to each of us here, that this game of life is not merely about surviving, it is about sharing. Life is about taking what you have experienced and learned in your own relationship with Jesus so that it can be shared with others.

A few verses later in chapter 1 of the book of Acts we learn that the disciples determined it was necessary to replace Judas as one of the 12. As a replacement, the disciples proposed two men, and here's what they said about what that disciple was to do: **"For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection."** As you and I are called to be the Lord's witnesses we are called to live out and communicate not only the victory and triumph of Jesus Christ over the affects of sin and death and hell in life, but to communicate that that victory and triumph is for us all. You are a witness. No

matter who you are as a person of faith, as someone who acknowledges faith in Jesus Christ, you are a witness of Him. That is what the Lord calls you to be.

But now notice a second thing here that we are told in Acts. As a witness, you aren't on your own; you aren't left to fend for yourself. Jesus said to the disciples before He ascended, **"You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you."** In other words, even though Jesus is no longer physically present, He is still present. In what Matthew recorded about this event, Jesus said to the disciples: **"And I am with you always even to the end of the age."**

When Jesus ascended into heaven, visibly the disciples could not see Him anymore. But He was still with them. The same is true for us as well.

When Jesus promised that He will still be with His disciples, He didn't mean this in the sense that He will merely remain in their memory. When someone close to you dies, you can't help but feel that that person is still a part of your life by some of the memories left behind. Holding on to the memories can actually be helpful when someone we love is no longer with us. But this is not what Jesus meant when He said to the disciples, **"I will be with you always."** It's not just a matter of remembering Him, but there are actually tangible ways in which Jesus makes His presence known in our lives. He has given you His Word that He desires to be a part of your daily life. There is a meal whereby Jesus gives to you a part of Himself – His very body and blood. If you and I want a reminder that Jesus is indeed with us always, well here they are – His Word and the Sacrament which equip us in our witness.

For those of you who watch the show *Survivor*, you know that one of the critical things that happens is that members of the tribal council come together to vote someone

off the island, thereby dwindling the group down to one remaining survivor. However, when it comes to being a faith survivor, the opposite is what is needed. Did you notice what the disciples did after they witnessed the Lord's ascension? They did not each go off their separate ways, but they met together. Luke tells us, **"They all joined together constantly in prayer, along with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers."** They needed each other. They supported each other. They encouraged each other. They helped each other. They worshipped with each other. They took responsibility together to carry out what Jesus asked them to do.

Why is that important? It's important because to be a faith survivor in this world is not easy.

It's Confirmation weekend here so I think it's worth mentioning that being a faith survivor doesn't just happen automatically. Confirmation is a time when you publicly declare your faith in Jesus Christ, but living out your faith doesn't always come easily.

In fact in Confirmation, we study the Apostles' Creed where we confess that "God created the heavens and the earth," which also means that He has created your life and mine. God delights in you whom He has created. But life is not easy. For some reason there is quite an increase these days of depression among teenagers, and the statistics of teen suicide are far greater than any of us would want to imagine. Life is not easy.

In Confirmation we learn in the 6th commandment that it's God's intention for us to remain sexually pure prior to marriage and once married to express physical intimacy only in that marriage relationship. However, the statistics these days on teenagers who

are sexually active is far higher than most of us are comfortable admitting. Life is not easy.

In Confirmation we learn that in the Lord's Prayer we pray: "Give us this day our daily bread" and so we trust God to provide for what we need in our daily life. Yet just look around you, the desire to want more and more and more is overwhelming. Life is not easy.

You see what happens at Confirmation may seem like a relatively easy exercise, but to live out your faith on a daily basis needs encouragement and support and prayer and nurturing, because life is not easy.

No wonder the disciples met together. The ascension of Jesus was not the end for them. It was really the beginning of a new stage in their life. Confirmation is much the same in our life and tradition today. This is not the end of some process. Rather, it's a crossroads to what lies ahead where the challenge is for you to be a faith survivor. And no matter where you are in your journey of faith, you don't want to try to go it alone.

As you know, last fall our church walked through the study of the *Purpose Driven Life* where we focused on the themes of worship, fellowship, discipleship, mission, and ministry. Just recently Rick Warren's church, Saddleback Community Church, celebrated their 25th anniversary. Saddleback Community Church held their first public worship service as a church on April 6, 1980 with 205 people in attendance. Two weeks ago they assembled in Angel Stadium in Anaheim, California, to celebrate their 25th anniversary. There were 30,000 people in attendance. After a three hour worship celebration, the stadium crowd rose to their feet to read a statement of commitment about how they desire to do God's will for the next 25 years. Here's what they said:

Today I am stepping across the line. I'm tired of waffling and I'm finished with wavering; I've made my choice, the verdict is in and my decision is irrevocable. I'm going God's way. There's no turning back now!

I will live the rest of my life serving God's purposes with God's people on God's planet for God's glory. I will use my life to celebrate His presence, cultivate His character, participate in His family, demonstrate His love, and communicate His Word.

Since my past has been forgiven and I have a purpose for living and a home waiting in heaven, I refuse to waste any more time or energy on shallow living, petty thinking, trivial talking, thoughtless doing, useless regretting, hurtful resenting, or faithless worrying. Instead, I will magnify God, grow to maturity, serve in ministry, and fulfill my mission in the membership of His family.

Because this life is preparation for the next, I will value worship over wealth, "we" over "me," character over comfort, service over status and people over possessions, and pleasures. I know what matters most and I'll give it all I've got. I'll do the best I can with what I have for Jesus Christ today.

I won't be captivated by culture, manipulated by critics, motivated by praise, frustrated by problems, debilitated by temptation or intimidated by the devil. I'll keep running my race with my eyes on the goal, not the sidelines or those running by me. When times get tough, and I get tired, I won't back up, back off, back down, back out or backslide. I'll just keep moving forward by God's grace. I'm Spirit-led, purpose-driven and mission-focused so I cannot be bought, I will not be compromised, and I shall not quit until I finish the race.

I'm a trophy of God's amazing grace so I will be gracious to everyone, grateful for every day, and generous with everything that God entrusts to me.

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I say, "However, Whenever, Wherever, and Whatever you ask me to do, my answer in advance is yes! Wherever you lead and whatever the cost, I'm ready. Anytime. Anywhere. Anyway. Whatever it takes Lord; whatever it takes! I want to be used by you in such a way, that on that final day I'll hear you say, "Well done, thou good and faithful one. Come on in, and let the eternal party begin."

Now how's that for a confirmation statement? Whatever it takes, Lord, I'm there.

Whatever it takes! I'm going to be a faith survivor!

Now I don't mind admitting to you that those words put a bit too much emphasis on what you and I will do. However, the truth of the matter is that we are weak,

imperfect people by nature and no matter what our best intentions are, nothing will happen without God working in us and through us. However, just think about this – how willing are you or how willing am I to say, “Lord, whatever it takes I’ll follow You?” After all, that’s really what we are saying at our Confirmation. How willing are we to be so intentional in our daily life as to be a faith survivor? How willing are we to be so engaged with God through His Word and sacraments? How willing are we to experience the presence of God in worship on a regular basis that we commit to being here every week? How willing are we to say, “Whatever it takes, Lord, I’m there.”

But now, think about those words – “Whatever it takes!” I ask you to think about those words because when you think about it . . . that’s really the theme of how God has dealt with us, isn’t it?

When you read through the Old Testament, you get a feel for how all the laws and the traditions the people were given, were given in order to help connect them to God, but that wasn’t enough. When you read about the sacrifices and offerings to remove their guilt and reconnect them to God’s mercy, that wasn’t enough. When you read about the number of prophets that the Lord sent to speak to them to draw them back to Him again and again and again, that wasn’t enough. So God went one step further because God was willing to do whatever it takes for you.

So He sent His Son in human form, in flesh and blood. He allowed His Son to be the ultimate, complete, once-and-for-all sacrifice. As the Son of God, Jesus was perfect and yet He was punished for our imperfectness. As the Son of God, Jesus experienced the painful effects of suffering. As the Son of God, Jesus came to love each of you unconditionally, but He was hated and beaten and put to death for it.

Now why would God let all that happen to His Son? Because He was willing to do whatever it takes for you to be connected to Him.

You and I find our selves separated from God and yet the purpose of Jesus' sacrifice is to buy us back through the forgiveness that He offers. There are times when we make promises and we give God our best intentions, but all too often they come up short. However, His mercies are new every morning and great is His faithfulness for our life. There are times when we experience disappointments in life and there are hurts we feel. However, we don't have to live our lives burdened by those disappointments and hurts because Jesus makes all things new. There are times in life when we wish things would have gone a different direction. However, with the Lord's forgiveness and peace we don't have to live our life in regret.

The reason that you can rely on the uncompromising mercy of God is that God is willing to do whatever it takes for you . . . even to allow for the death and resurrection of His Son to win you back for Him.

The problem with the television show *Survivor* is that one by one, participants are voted off the island until there is one last survivor standing.

We are here today to declare that Jesus Christ has won the ultimate victory. He's the winner. But, so too, are you. In Jesus Christ, you are a true faith survivor.

Amen.

Series A
Second Sunday after Pentecost
May 28/29, 2005
(Memorial Day Weekend)
Title: "Telling and Retelling the Story"
Text: Deuteronomy 11:18-21,26-28

An annual Memorial Day remembrance began on May 30, 1868, in Waterloo, New York. Ever since that time, a day has been set aside once a year to acknowledge the men and women who have given their lives in service to our country. Many people have also called Memorial Day, Decoration Day, recognizing the tradition of decorating the graves of fallen soldiers. But over the years Memorial Day has become little more for some people than a three day weekend, at best unofficially marking the beginning of summer. Nevertheless, as the name implies, on this Memorial Day weekend we wish to do a little remembering.

I grew up in the early 60's and remember television shows like *Hogan's Heroes* and *McHale's Navy* that harkened back to the days of World War II. In my early years I can remember my father talking about his navy days serving on a PT Boat. In fact, my father repeated some of those old Navy stories over and over and over again.

For instance, I remember how he often told about the time when he and his crew were caught in a typhoon out in the South Pacific. Of all the crew members on board, Dad was the only one who didn't get sea sick even with waves 20 feet high. Some of the guys were so sick, he said, he would tie them to the gun mounts to ride out the storm because they were too weak to stand on deck. Now, if I've heard that story once I've heard it 50 times over the years. But you know when something happens in your life that

makes a significant impression on you, you can't help but tell it and retell it . . . over and over and over again.

Telling and retelling the story. For some people who have served in the armed forces through the years, telling and retelling some old war stories may in part be what Memorial Day is all about.

However, in a similar way this is also descriptive of today's Old Testament Scripture – telling and retelling the story.

You've probably gone through an exhibit or an attraction before and sat through an explanation about it before you actually experience it. I remember the summer our family spent a few days in St. Louis, and one of the things we did was to go to the top of the St. Louis arch. But before we took that rather unusual elevator ride to the top, we saw a film about how the concept for the arch was conceived and the various stages of its construction. Knowing that information gave me a greater appreciation for this arch like structure before I ever arrived at the top.

In a similar way we have before us the book of Deuteronomy. What the Lord says in Deuteronomy serves as a kind of prelude for the Israelites before entering the promised land. These Israelites have been wandering around in the wilderness all these years. Time and again they heard about what lies ahead . . . but they haven't arrived there yet. One of the reasons they haven't arrived yet is that there are some things the Lord wants to prepare them for before they arrive. There are some things He wants them to know and remember and hold on to and never forget once they enter into this new land.

After what has seemed like a lifetime of hardship this promised land will seem like paradise to them. But, even though it may be appealing and satisfying to them, there will also be many temptations and distractions there as well.

After all, the people already living there, the Canaanites, are not people who honor the one true God. They worship many foreign gods. The kind of immorality and behavior these people exhibit is not consistent with what the Lord has been trying to teach the Israelites over the years. This is why we hear in Deuteronomy: **“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts.”** Now, these commandments are to be upon their hearts because, if they are not already fixed on their hearts when they enter the land, then it will be all the more difficult to learn and follow God’s Word once they arrive. The kind of people and pleasures and possibilities that are already there will be a distraction and temptation. So, fix what the Lord has said to you in your heart and your mind.

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them as you sit at home, as you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

Fix these words in your hearts and in your minds so the Lord is so much a part of your life before you enter the land that you are equipped to deal with what lies ahead.

In response to what the Lord says here, a Jewish custom has emerged over the years of taking these specific words of Scriptures and writing them on scrolls. Those scrolls are then placed in a little leather box called a phylactery which Jewish men either

tie around their forehead or their left arm. Likewise, there is also a small wooden or metal box called a mezuzah where these Scriptures are also placed in and positioned over the doorframes of their houses as a sign that all who dwell there are to be guided by God's Word.

Actually, I've considered before that, if I were building a house today, I just might be inclined to write on the framing studs and inside the wallboards words of Scripture that I would want to guide my life, my family, and my home. But actually none of those practices are what the Lord is really referring to here. It is not so much that these scrolls are literally strapped to your arms or placed above your doorframes, but that the Word of God is to be in your hearts and in your heads. The Lord's desire is that His words, His truth, His promises are to be so imbedded in our lives that they are a natural part of us.

In an effort for that to happen, the instruction here is given to parents, primarily fathers, to teach God's Word from their youngest days on, looking for the opportunities to tell and retell the sacred stories of what the Lord says and does in our lives. After all, we, too, live in a land that has many a distraction in it, don't we?

As I think about planning our family vacation this summer I think it will be a road trip for us again this year as there are several destinations where we wish to stop along the way. As I think about driving up I-75, I think about how many times through the years we have made that trip and how the interstate is littered with billboard after billboard advertising a certain café . . . a café, that let's just say, isn't a place for family dining. Now I don't know how any of you have dealt with situations like this before, but perhaps this is an occasion to turn to our kids and say something like: "So, what kind of

place do you think that is?” Maybe this is an opportunity to illustrate that this isn’t what God intends for us to do with our bodies. Maybe this is an opportunity to do what the Lord says here when He says, **“Teach them to your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.”** In other words, telling and retelling the truth of what God says in our life is to be a part of what we do on a daily basis. It’s not a matter of shoving religion down anyone’s throat. But it’s about a relationship with God. Your heavenly Father loves you enough to sacrifice His only son for you. Your relationship with the Lord is not to be a piece of your life but He is to be your whole life. You are who you are because He is who He is.

Just imagine then how difficult, not to say contradictory, for some parents to try to teach their children the Biblical truth of how the Lord wants intimate relations between a man and a woman to only take place in the setting of a marriage when Mom is living with some one outside of marriage or when Dad is living with some one outside of marriage. How critical it is for us to do what the Lord is saying here about talking to our children because in the land where we are living just about every television show and every movie that has more than a G rating displays relationships between two people who aren’t married to each other or uses language where there is the frequent misuse of God’s name.

In the land where we are living this is all just considered commonplace. But while this may be the norm here, it is not what the Lord wants for His people. So, parents, how critical it is for us to talk about this with our children as we sit at home, as we go about our daily life, as we drive down the interstate, as we lie down and get up. In other words,

who we are as God's people and what our relationship is to be with Him and each other is something that we need to continue to tell and retell.

Why? **“So that your days and the days of your children will be many in the land that the Lord swore to give your forefathers, as many as the days that the heavens are above the earth.”** Now this isn't meant in the sense that the chronological days of your life will be more if you do what God says. But rather what He is talking about here is living an abundant life, a full life, a blessed life.

I remember in my early years of ministry I was teaching a Bible class where we were talking about the commandments and a woman in the class said something that made all the difference in the world for many of the people there. She said, *“It's obvious why the Lord gave us the commandments. It wasn't to restrict our enjoyment of life or limit our fun which is what people tend to conclude. The reason the Lord gave us the commandments was because this is life at its best! This is life at its best.”*

If you seek for God to be first in your life above everything else, this is life at its best. If you don't misuse the Lord's name but worship Him faithfully, this is life at its best. If you honor the marriage relationship between husband and wife, this is life at its best. If you honor and preserve life rather than take it away or destroy it, this is life at its best. If you do not gossip about other people, this is life at its best. If you don't let yourself get caught up with wanting more and more and more because that is what other people do (which is coveting), this is life at its best. Living life at its best is living a full, abundant life which is what the Lord is promising here in this text.

Here in our text from Deuteronomy the people of Israel are standing on the banks of the river ready to cross over into the promise land and they are there because the Lord

has brought them there. They are there because the Lord is going to give this land to them. There is nothing they have done and nothing they can do to be worthy of this new land. It's the Lord's gift to them. They are about to receive this new home because of God's love for them.

But now, once they receive this gift, what will they do with what they receive? Here's where the blessing and curse part comes in. They will continue to experience the blessing of their relationship with God by seeing this land as a gift, giving Him thanks and worshipping Him in response. Or they will experience the cursed consequences of giving in to all the distractions and temptations that will be right before them.

So, what will they do with what the Lord is giving to them? Likewise, what do we do with what the Lord gives to us?

You and I sit here today on the banks of another promised land – heaven. There isn't a thing we have ever done or will ever do to convince the Lord we are worthy of heaven. Heaven is a gift the Lord is preparing to give you because the Lord bought and paid for your life through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. In Jesus Christ you are given the gifts of forgiveness, acceptance, the blessing of being adopted into God's family, the promise of being an inheritor of His love. Eternal life, freedom from hell, heaven itself is all waiting for you to receive.

But there are a lot of distractions along the way in this life before getting to heaven, aren't there? There are a lot of things that can get in the way and trip you up. Just like the people of Israel entering the promised land there are all kinds of things in our world around us that aren't good for us. So how important it is that along the way in life we talk about what the Lord has said and keep His words in our hearts and minds. How

important it is that we challenge one another to keep before us the Lord's commands and instructions so that we can live life at its best here and not forget who we are and what we have been created for. How important it is that we tell and retell of God's promises for our lives as we sit at home, as we drive down the interstate, as we rise up and lie down. And yet when we find ourselves misguided in life or going a direction the Lord would not want us to go, He has given us time yet to return to Him, to confess our error and through His forgiveness to set our sights on heaven once again.

It's no wonder that there is an annual Memorial Day in our country. It's too easy to forget that the freedom we enjoy here was at the expense of those whose lives were offered to defend our country.

Likewise, how easy it is to forget the blessings God gives us all if we don't keep telling and retelling one another that following God's commandments is living life at its best.

How easy it is to forget the merciful love of God in Jesus Christ if we don't tell and retell one another about His unconditional love.

How easy it is to forget that this world here, life as we now know it, is not our final destination along the way but that heaven is our home.

How easy it is to forget the Lord is preparing a place for us, a new promised land, if we don't continue to tell and retell one another about the forgiveness He offers.

My prayer here is that we will not only be hearers of this Word but that we will be tellers of it, that we would tell and retell God's story. . . which is our story. . . all throughout life.

Amen.

Series A
Fifth Sunday after Pentecost
June 18/19, 2005
(Father's Day)
Title: "Extreme Living"
Text: Jeremiah 20:7-13

For whatever reason I find myself somewhat intrigued by the so-called "extreme sports" that are popular these days. Sports like . . . sky diving, mountain climbing, skateboarding, bungee jumping. Maybe it's a selfish desire to hold on to a sense of youth while I see myself passing through middle age. Whatever the reason, these kind of "extreme" activities are captivating to me. Now, I admit that by nature I'm way too hesitant to engage in most extreme sports. But there is still something appealing about some of them.

Well speaking of the extreme, I came across an article just a few weeks ago in the Sunday newspaper that caught my attention . . . not because I want to do this but because it just seems so . . . odd. Maybe you saw it too – "extreme ironing." Yes, you heard me right – extreme ironing. The article defined it this way: "*Extreme ironing is an outdoor activity that combines the danger and excitement of an extreme sport with the satisfaction of a well-pressed shirt.*" Extreme ironing of all things? What's up with that?

Apparently the extreme part of this activity involves the odd and obscure kind of places you can find to iron – like hanging from a rock at the base of Mount Rushmore . . . or kayaking in the Atlantic Ocean . . . or hitched to the back of a taxi on the streets of New York City . . . or even underwater deep sea ironing.

Believe it or not an effort is actually underway for extreme ironing to be considered as an Olympic sport in the 2008 Beijing games. Of all the activities that I think could be “extreme” ironing is not one that readily comes to mind. How about you?

Back in the days of Jeremiah and some of the other prophets, I bet they didn’t have much of a concept of any kind of extreme activity. But when you hear what is happening here in our text I think we can make a case for the fact that there seems to be some pretty extreme prophesying going on here.

Maybe you remember that what Jeremiah was doing as a prophet was not anything he ever really wanted to do. In fact the Lord simply came to Jeremiah one day and said, **“I have appointed you as a prophet to the nations.”** Hoping to get out of it Jeremiah’s response was, **“I don’t know how to speak; I am only a child.”** But, lo and behold, being a spokesman for God, calling people to repentance, appealing to people who have gone astray to return back to God was what God wanted Jeremiah to do. And so it’s what he did.

But to more fully appreciate what is happening here in our text, you have to get a feel for what has just happened beginning in the chapter prior. So in Jeremiah 19 we read:

Jeremiah . . . stood in the court of the Lord’s temple and said to all the people, “This is what the Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, says: ‘Listen! I am going to bring on this city and the villages around it every disaster I pronounced against them, because they were stiff-necked and would not listen to my words.’”

Over and over again Jeremiah had warned the people and called them to show remorse for their way of life and yet they didn’t. However, you can tell by the words I just read, that even though Jeremiah didn’t want this job as a prophet he was now an in-your-face

kind of prophet. He didn't sugar coat the fact that these people were rebellious and obstinate towards the Lord.

However in the opening verses of chapter 20 we learn that the response to what Jeremiah said was not very well received. In fact, the court official there in Jerusalem had Jeremiah arrested. He was arrested and put in stocks at what is called the Upper Gate, a very public, heavily trafficked kind of place. You can just imagine that all through the day there was a stream of people who passed by and saw Jeremiah there. How embarrassing that was for him. How humiliating. So I'm sure you can understand that Jeremiah's anger must have just been boiling by the time he was released the next day.

But now talk about extreme. Jeremiah was let out of these stocks; he's just been publicly humiliated and yet he was ready to spit nails. He was not going to take this kind of treatment lying down and he's convinced that the Lord wasn't either. All you have to do is read the first six verses of Jeremiah 20 and you can easily see that Jeremiah is one tough, in-your-face, extreme kind of prophet. He's at a point where he's not going to take it from anyone. He didn't have to be scaling down a mountain or jumping off a cliff. His words are extreme enough. He said to these people:

For this is what the Lord says: I will make you a terror to yourself and to all your friends . . . I will hand all Judah over to the king of Babylon, who will carry them away to Babylon or put them to the sword. I will hand over to their enemies all the wealth of this city . . .

Jeremiah has had it and he wasn't going to take it anymore. At least that was what Jeremiah wanted these people who had publicly humiliated him to think.

But now we come to the words of our text. Jeremiah wanted these people to see that he was pretty tough on the outside. He was doing some pretty extreme prophesying.

But as you've already heard so far, there seemed to be a whole different picture going on, on the inside.

The reality for Jeremiah is that there was a tremendous amount of frustration and uncertainty and misgiving and vacillation going on within him. It is as if Jeremiah is saying, *"Lord, after all this time, after sermon after sermon, after being publicly humiliated, after being rejected, after being threatened, after being cursed and ignored by the very people You have sent me to speak to . . . why? Why, Lord? Why am I doing this?"*

"I am ridiculed all day long," he says, **"everyone mocks me."** The word of the Lord, he says, has brought me nothing by **"insult and reproach all day long."** Talk about extreme. Here we have a prophet who is in extreme despair, extreme misery, maybe even in extreme depression.

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever felt, *"God, why is this happening? God, why have you allowed this? God, what possible purpose could my suffering serve?"* If you can imagine a time in your life when you have felt extreme hurt or extreme disappointment, then perhaps you can imagine what is pulsing through Jeremiah's veins right about now. There are those times in life when everything seems hopeless and Jeremiah had hit that wall. Maybe you've been there before in your life too. Maybe you are there right now.

Old Testament scholar Ellen Davis has written that words like what Jeremiah is saying here are unparalleled in other religions. In no other ancient culture, she says, did people speak to their god in language that was so frank and even rude in places. People of other religions prayed. They made requests, offered worship, cursed their enemies.

But only Israel, only the people of Israel spoke so boldly to God of their complaint. But they did so for good reason. Only Israel believed that God, the God who made the heavens and the earth, who made you and me, only God cares that we are in pain at times in life. Only God cares about what is happening in your life and only God can do something about it. Jeremiah was being honest with God by expressing extreme despair. But he did it because he knew God has extreme care for him.

Martin E. Marty, in his book *A Cry of Absence: Reflections for the Winter of the Heart*, makes a comparison between our spiritual life and the seasons of the year. Here he talks about what he calls a “wintry spirituality.” A “wintry spirituality” is for those times when the warmth and joy is taken away from us and a sunny disposition just isn’t enough. We all know that, although you might be able to relocate to a part of the country like the Sunshine State to avoid colder weather, you cannot always escape those times in life when you find yourself in a spiritual winter.

Regardless of what the temperature or humidity is outside, maybe for some people winter comes when you lose your job or find yourself in some sort of vocational crisis. Maybe winter comes the day you receive word from the doctor that the test results are positive. Maybe winter comes when you feel like you have failed as a parent. Maybe winter comes when your heart aches over how someone you love has hurt you. Maybe winter comes when you finally get so overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness and disappointment in life.

The reasons may vary but the effect can be the same. Jeremiah, in the words of our text, is in the middle of a spiritual winter. He’s had it. He’s fed up. He can’t take it anymore.

But you know the extreme despair and sense of hopelessness wasn't the only extreme emotion Jeremiah was feeling here. You see, underneath his feelings of extreme despair were convictions of extreme faith.

The Lord is with me like a mighty warrior; so my persecutors will stumble and not prevail . . . Sing to the Lord! Give praise to the Lord! He rescues the life of the needy from the hand of the wicked.

You see, you can't say those words if there isn't also extreme faith. Even in his despair, the Lord was able to let Jeremiah see that there was hope. There was purpose in what he was doing. Jeremiah here was like the man who went to Jesus so that Jesus would heal his son of an evil spirit. The boy's father said, **"I believe; help me overcome my unbelief!"** In other words, "Lord, I believe. But Lord, help me with my doubts and fears and frustrations and misgivings."

As much as Jeremiah may have felt like quitting this prophesying gig, he realized that

If I say, 'I will not mention him 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.

In other words, as much as Jeremiah felt that so much of what he was suffering from was from being a prophet, he can't imagine doing anything else. He had to speak the name of God. He had to call people back to God. He had to hold on to the hope that he had in God. He had to be a living witness for the one true God even though that may not be what was popular with everyone else around him.

In the verses of our text Jeremiah voiced extreme despair. But because God is who He is, Jeremiah also voiced extreme hope. Thankfully, Jeremiah knew where to turn when he was faced with extreme despair and hopelessness, and it wasn't to himself.

Instead he turned back to the Lord. **“He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.”**

Jeremiah recognized here that this means the Lord can even rescue his life. And if that was true, then the same can be said about everyone else as well . . . even the very people Jeremiah was called to prophesy to . . . even you and me. After all, the Lord wants people to come to Him and He will even go to some pretty extreme measures to demonstrate just how much He loves His people.

How extreme is your despair at times in life? How extreme is your hope? How extreme is your God?

Talk about extreme. In the parable from today’s Gospel the younger of the two sons asked for his share of the inheritance from his father. Now in today’s world that kind of request may not seem like it is out of the ordinary. But in those days, that was quite an insult to the father. It was as if saying to the father, *“I wish you were already dead so I could receive what is coming to me.”* That’s extreme boldness.

But here in this parable we hear that the father gave his son what he asked for. The son took the inheritance and left his father’s home, and there was no indication here that the son will ever return, that the father will ever see his son again. Talk about extreme hurt on the father’s part.

But then when the son had wasted and misspent the inheritance and didn’t know where else to go, he returned to his father. And notice here that the father was waiting for his son. Upon seeing his son coming toward him, the father ran out to greet him and kissed him and embraced him and set in motion the fixings for a huge celebration in his

honor. Talk about extreme. The father demonstrated extreme love, extreme acceptance, extreme forgiveness.

And that's how God deals with you and me as well. There may be extreme rejection on your part toward God, but there is extreme love on God's part towards you. There may be extreme despair on your part, but there is extreme hope on God's part toward you. There may be extreme guilt on your part, but there is extreme forgiveness on God's part toward you.

How much more extreme can you get then when the sinless Son of God hangs on two pieces of wood, suffering physical pain beyond what we could ever imagine, and pleads from that cross for His heavenly Father to forgive us?

How much more extreme can you get than in the sacrifice of the one man Jesus Christ for every single person on earth?

How much more extreme can you get than for us to rebel and resist, for us to complain and criticize, and yet the Lord is still there. No matter what your spiritual winter is, **“He rescues the life of the needy from the hands of the wicked.”** From God to you that's extreme love, extreme devotion, extreme acceptance.

Sounds to me as if it calls for a pretty extreme response from us, don't you think? Why not give to God like you've never given before? Why not finally forgive that person that you have been holding a grudge against all this time? Why not take the steps that are needed to finally, once and for all, deal with and walk away from that addiction or habit or behavior that is getting in the way of your relationship with God and the people in your life? Why not finally determine that you are not going judge other people

but you are going to work on what the Lord wants to do in your life? Why not do something extreme in response to Christ who has done something pretty extreme for you?

Extreme living . . . in response to God's extreme love for you. Do you really think that makes any difference in life? Just ask Jeremiah. It's what he's been talking about all this time.

Amen.

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