

Preaching with Variety: Narrative, Poetry, and Discourse

The Bible God has given us is overflowing with variety. It was written by over forty authors, in three languages, on three continents, over a couple of thousand years, and yet is united by the Spirit into a single masterful work that points us to Christ. The Bible is anything but dull. The Bible God has given us is what you might expect from the kind of God we find in it: creative, diverse, and fully united. It doesn't remain aloof and abstract, but engages with real life in all its fullness. This session looks at the main three types of literature in the Bible: narrative, poetry, and discourse. If we can rightly understand the types of literature, we can tap into their unique strengths to make our preaching the best it can be!

Peter Mead is a mentor at Cor Deo, a mentored study and ministry training programme in Chippenham, England. He is also involved in the leadership of a church plant. Peter studied at Multnomah Biblical Seminary before getting his Doctor of Ministry degree under Haddon Robinson at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, in the area of expository preaching. Peter's latest book, *Foundations: Four Big Questions We Should Be Asking But Typically Don't*, was released in September 2015 - go to FourBigQuestions.com for more information. He wrote *Pleased to Dwell* (also Christian Focus), as well as his blog for preachers: BiblicalPreaching.net. You can follow him on Twitter at twitter.com/petermead. He is married to Melanie and they have six children.

I. Diversity & Unity: The kind of Bible God would inspire!

A. Three broad types of literature

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

B. Implications for preaching

1. The form of literature is inspired, not just the content
2. God anticipates variety in our preaching (& helps us)

II. Understanding Narrative. How do stories work?

A. Elements of Narrative

1. Setting

- i) Historical
- ii) Geographical
- iii) Situational

Why did God give the majority of His Word in the form of narrative? Part of the answer lies in the incarnational nature of narrative. It is theology fleshed out in concrete. Real lives, real situations, real challenges, real responses. Narrative engages us, and that is exactly the way God would have it - because He seeks to engage us.

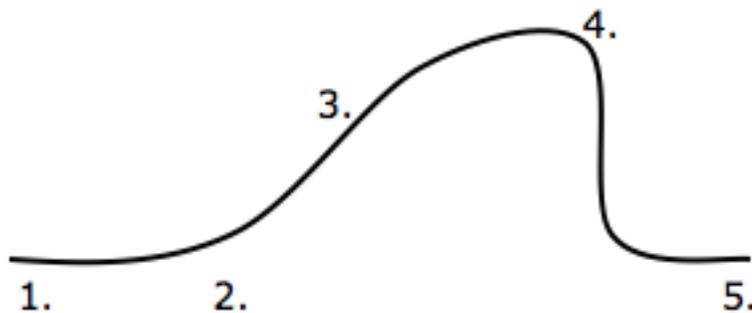
2. Narrator

- i) Detached observer
- ii) Theological commentator

3. Characters

- i) Perfect examples to follow
- ii) Perfect examples not to follow
- iii) Flawed humans

4. Plot – the unfolding story



B. Understanding Plot – the dynamics of an unfolding story

- 1. Setting
- 2. Tension Created (Conflict)
- 3. Tension Develops (Crescendo)
- 4. Tension Resolved (Climax)
- 5. Resolution / Denouement

III. Preaching Narrative. How do stories affect our sermons?

A. Telling the story

1. Trusting the storyteller
2. Re-presenting the story

B. Case Study – Luke 19:1-10

Luke 19:1-10

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through. ² And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." ⁸ And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." ⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

1. It was written as a story because story is powerful – **tell the story!** (People gladly read a good book twice, or watch a good movie twice. Don't apologize for telling a familiar story. Don't assume people know it and merely talk about it. Tell the story!)
2. **Interpret carefully.** Narratives are easy to read, but often difficult to interpret and preach. Remember to pursue the author's idea and purpose, don't just look to "find a message."
3. Remember to **check the written context** for the narrative. A story typically sits in a flow of stories that are making a bigger point.
4. Be diligent to **observe every literary feature**, it's all there by design. (Look at the plot – especially the tension and where it is resolved; as well as characters, repetition, narration, dialogue, etc.)
5. **Remember God** is a key character in every biblical story. Don't preach a story as if it is merely a human-interest story with a helpful moral for us. In the parables, Jesus is teaching in light of people rightly responding to Him and His programme.
6. **Introduce wisely.** Don't introduce the message with the text, but rather surface a need in the listeners to draw them into the text.
7. Allow all the details to **reinforce the main idea** of the story, rather than moralizing the details and preaching multiple disconnected points.
8. **Experience it, don't just analyze it.** It is tempting to analyze the story as if it is from an epistle. Don't. Instead try to preach so that the story forms in the minds and hearts of the listeners. Help the image form in their imagination!

*If you can see it, they will see it,
and if they see it, then they will feel it,
and if they feel it . . . it might even make a difference in their lives!*

9. **Apply specifically.** Apply the idea of the story in specific and tangible examples that are relevant to our story today.
10. **Be creative** in your preaching – consider whether first-person preaching may be more effective, whether a visual aid would help, whether a contemporary paraphrase might recreate the impact of the story, etc. (If you are creative, do it well – better to be understated than "too much.")

IV. Discourse: A Narrative Snapshot

A. The functions of direct communication

1. The author's intended effect

2. Tone, mood and other indicators

B. The context of direct communication

1. Historical context

2. Written context

C. Interpreting direct communication

1. Considering context (written & historical)

2. Considering content (details & strategy)
 - a. Structural study

^{NAU} Ephesians 1:15-23

¹⁵ For this reason I too, having heard of the faith in the Lord Jesus which *exists* among you and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ do not cease giving thanks for you, while making mention *of you* in my prayers; ¹⁷ that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give to you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in

the knowledge of Him. ¹⁸ *I pray that* the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you will know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, ¹⁹ and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe. *These are* in accordance with the working of the strength of His might ²⁰ which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, ²¹ far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. ²² And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

b. Word study

- i. Consider the underlying Hebrew or Greek term (use concordance or Bible software to get to it)

- ii. Study every use of that term within the author's books, or book, or section

- iii. Analyse how the author uses the term, then check your understanding with a Bible dictionary

3. Considering intent (stated & implied)

4. Determining idea (“saying something about something”)

D. Preaching direct communication

1. The “simplest form of preaching” (but don’t assume that application is always simple and direct)

2. Frame the narrative for “story effect”

V. **Poetry: When Only A Song Will Communicate**

A. The location of biblical poetry:

Psalms & Wisdom (Job, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Proverbs) & _____

B. Studying Poetry

1. Be aware of main poetic forms (lament, praise and thanksgiving), but don’t try to force a poem to fit a framework.

2. Take note of any historical indicators, but don’t try to force a poem to fit in a historical situation that is only guesswork.

3. Note especially how Hebrew poetry is built using parallelism (typically two lines where the second completes the first). Be sure to read poetry in light of this (rather than studying only half a parallelism, or contrasting two elements that are actually reinforcing the same thought).
4. Look at the structure of the poem, but don't dissect it so that all emotion is drained away.
5. Notice the mood of the author and the images used to move the reader.

C. Preaching Poetry

1. Typically follow the structure of the poem unless you have good reason to change the order, but preach the poem holistically (rather than making it act like an epistle).
2. Take full advantage of the imagery and emotion of the poem to help the listener engage with their hearts as well as their heads.
3. Don't rush – poetry is designed for pondering, not a clipped logical presentation.

D. The basic building block of Hebrew poetry: the parallelism

Eg. Proverbs 29:18

Where there is no vision, the people perish,
(But happy is he who keeps the Law.)

The community of God's people need the _____ of _____
 taught to them or they will go _____!

E. Structure and imagery in poetry

Psalm 113

¹ Praise the LORD!

Praise, O servants of the LORD,
praise the name of the LORD!

² Blessed be the name of the LORD
from this time forth and forevermore!

³ From the rising of the sun to its setting,
the name of the LORD is to be praised!

⁴ The LORD is high above all nations,
and his glory above the heavens!

⁵ Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,

⁶ who looks far down on the heavens and the earth?

⁷ He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap,

⁸ to make them sit with princes, with the princes of his people.

⁹ He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children.

Praise the LORD!

Recommended resources

Search on “story,” “narrative,” “epistle,” or “poetry” on BiblicalPreaching.net – there is plenty on the site!

Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (Basic, 1981)

Jeffrey Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety* (Kregel, 2007)

Kent Edwards, *Deep Preaching* (B&H, 2009)

Ray Lubeck, *Read the Bible for a Change* (Authentic, 2005)

Steve Mathewson, *Preaching Old Testament Narrative* (Paternoster, 2002)

Haddon Robinson, *Biblical Preaching, 3rd edition* (Baker, 2014)

Torrey Robinson, *It's All in How You Tell It* (Baker, 2003)

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