Homiletics:
A Very Short Introduction

Purpose: My definition of preaching is "Proclaiming the theology of a text in contemporary context in order to transform the community of God into the image of Jesus."[1] While some transformations are instantaneous and dramatic, normally communal change develops over time—an ongoing process of becoming.

Coherence: Foremost, a sermon emerges from a biblical text and follows the text's lead theologically and functionally. From the text, the idea of the sermon emerges.[2] The preacher will want to say that one thing only, and say it well. Therefore, the focus and function of the sermon must internally cohere as it leads to the climax. The conclusion of a sermon is proof that the focus is maintained and function realized.

Climax: You have to know where you are going in order to get there. Sermons are formed from end to beginning. Sermons are not propelled by powerful beginnings but are evoked by significant ends.[3] Theological issue—what right does the preacher have to call for action at the end of the sermon? Primarily, the theology of the text should make a claim for the audience in their context. What do you want the congregation to think, feel, or do in response to the sermonic claim? Or to modify Alexander Bain's definition, a pragmatic sermon signifies belief in such a way that a community is prepared to act.[4] All language is performative, a speech act.
- Locutionary act: denotes the "meaning" of what was said. The descriptive content.
- Illocutionary act: names the force of what was said. The speaker's intent.
- Perlocutionary act: signifies the actual effect of saying something. How folks respond.[5]

And eventually, what practices and habits emerge from the theological claim of the text?

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[1] Tim Sensing, "Introduction," *The Effective Practice of Ministry*, (Abilene: ACU Press, 2013). For a more complete picture of my *Pragmatic Homiletic*, see "A Turn Toward the Listener," Parts 1 & 2 (unpublished).

[2] See my model for an exegetical working paper. The sermonic movement begins with exegesis that concludes with a theological understanding of the text and its purpose. That exegetical conclusion leads the preacher to a focus and function statement for the sermon. At this point in the process, the preacher knows where the sermon is going—the conclusion. Finally, the sermon is sequenced in such a way as to lead the audience to the conclusion. Also see **Present Tense** below.

[3] Tom Long, "Shaping Sermons by Plotting the Text's Claim Upon Us," in *Preaching Biblically*, edited by Don Wardlaw, 88.

[4] A. Bain (1859). *The Emotions and the Will.* London: J. W. Parker and son.

[5] J. L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, ed. J. O. Urmon and Maria Sbis (Cambridge: HUP), 1-4.

General Advice about the Climax of the sermon:
- Conclusions Conclude: If your meaning has not been heard before now [the conclusion], it is too late for it to be heard now. Know your conclusion before you write the sermon. Know your destination before you begin your journey.
- Conclusions Fulfill Purpose: Does the sermon do what it intends to do? Connected to Focus and Function. Achieve the anticipated climax. Conclusions are governed by your intentions.
- Affect a Closure: When you get to the end of your sermon, stop. The sermon needs to end! When through, cease-fire. Therefore use direct, simple, concrete language.
- Build Connections to Response. Be direct and personal. Convince people that the message is related to them. Be hopeful and expectant. Trust the people to do right.
- Responses May Vary: There is more than one way and one time to respond to a sermon.

Movement: While your destination is discerned first during the exegetical process, you do not begin the sermon on Sunday at the ending. The sermon will begin at the beginning. The sermon is not static like a painting but flows moment by moment through time. The metaphor is not the score of notes on a page but the live performance of the music.[6] The movement of the words through time is plotted sequence that moves from here to there—beginning to end. In the homiletical journey, do not leave the listeners behind. Aristotle, in *POETICS* (http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/poetics.html), identifies the plot as moving from conflict (tension) to complication to climax to dénouement. Or as Eugene Lowry often says, "from itch to scratch."[7] Throughout this short introduction to homiletics, my dependency on David Butrick's *Homletic: Moves and Structures* is obvious. (See **Form** below).

Form:[8] Now that you know where you are going, how will you travel? All sermons have structures that are determined by <u>sequence</u> and <u>selection</u> of content. While text form (genre) influences the sermon's form, it is not a prison but an inspiration to the imagination. Of the various forms possible, the sermon script below allows flexibility. All sermons preached in my classes must follow the sermon script format. The sermon script resembles the structured episodes found in storyboarding. See *STORYBOARD* for a link to various templates.[9] Buttrick calls each episode in the storyboard a "move." Moves are internally developed primarily through the use of arguments, stories, and images. The

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[6] Henry Grady Davis, *Design for Preaching*, 163-164. Davis's text in 1958 moves away from the idea of "outline" when conceiving of a sermon. The classic text is often cited as the beginning of a movement called the "New Homiletic." See Sensing, "After the Craddock Revolution: A Bibliographic Essay." *Leaven* 11 (Fourth Quarter 2003): 211-219.

[7] Eugene Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 15-21.

[8] Homiletics spends more time on sermon forms and structures than any other topic. Texts that summarize various sermonic forms are Ronald Allen, *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*; O. Wesley Allen, *Determining the Form*; and Richard Eslinger, *The Web of Preaching: New Options in Homiletical Method*. The first and third of these resources have extended discussions and examples of Buttrick's methodology. For a more extended listing of homiletical resources, see my bibliography @ www.homileticalsensings.com.

[9] Or simply use Google images and search for "storyboard" or "storyboard template." Also see David L. Barnhart & L. Susan Bond, "Homiletix: Using Comics to Teach Buttrick's Model."

storyboard depends upon understanding sermon form as narrative. Narrative is the larger category and "story" is a sub-classification. Of the various ways narrrative is used in the literature, I am delimiting the definition to narratival logic or the plotting of thought and action.[10] Buttrick, in *Homiletic*, sees plot in three modes:

Mode of Immediacy: Primary works with narrative texts. With my emphasis on the rhetorical and narratival structures, I can incorporate this mode easily to all literary genres in the Bible. I do this by emphasizing the present tense. The text presses upon consciousness in the present time. It makes connections as it is being preached to my lived experiences. As the sermon progresses through the plotline, the hearer follows and the connections to live experiences continue through time. We hear and are formed by the performative movement of the text. In the mode of immediacy, plot comes from the text.

Mode of Reflection: Buttrick prefers the mode of reflection for non-narrative texts. Hebrews is an example. The Hebrew preacher is reflecting on the story of Jesus so concisely outlined in Hebrews 1:1-4. The Hebrew preacher is standing back and considering the story as a whole and making the point about Jesus as mediator of a better covenant based on better promises and a greater priesthood, therefore we should remain faithful to our salvation. It is a reflection on the story not a retelling of the story. The plot of Hebrews is based on reflection of the gospel story and not the gospel genre (Matthew-John). Hebrews has plot and narratival substructure. It uses stories. It utilizes an "exemplar, conclusion, exhortation" logic.[11] But it is not told as a story. It is told more like a meditation, "a word of exhortation." Likewise, Paul's letters are reflections on the story too. The plot of the rhetorical argument given in the text is a reflection of three narratival sub-plots (Paul's story, the recipients' story, and the substructure of God's story).[12] When using the sub-plots, the preacher tends towards the mode of immediacy more than the mode of reflection. Reflection is not interacting with the movement of the text or the occasion of the writing, but on "the field of meaning in consciousness configured by the text" (Buttrick, 323). The sequences of the text (literary and rhetorical structures) are no longer important. This mode is most like systematic theology. This is not static. The reflection still has an intending towards. The reflected thought still is flowing towards an end. In the mode of reflection, plot comes from the theological field of meaning and its intending to do something.

Mode of Praxis: I handle the mode of praxis by incorporating action throughout the sermon. I do not make this a separate category or mode at all. Function statements have strong verbs with behavioral and affective ends. Belief and action in concrete situations are bound and cannot be separated. How one lives in the world as a Christian and how the text/reflected theology is connecting to our world is the same to me. Here is where
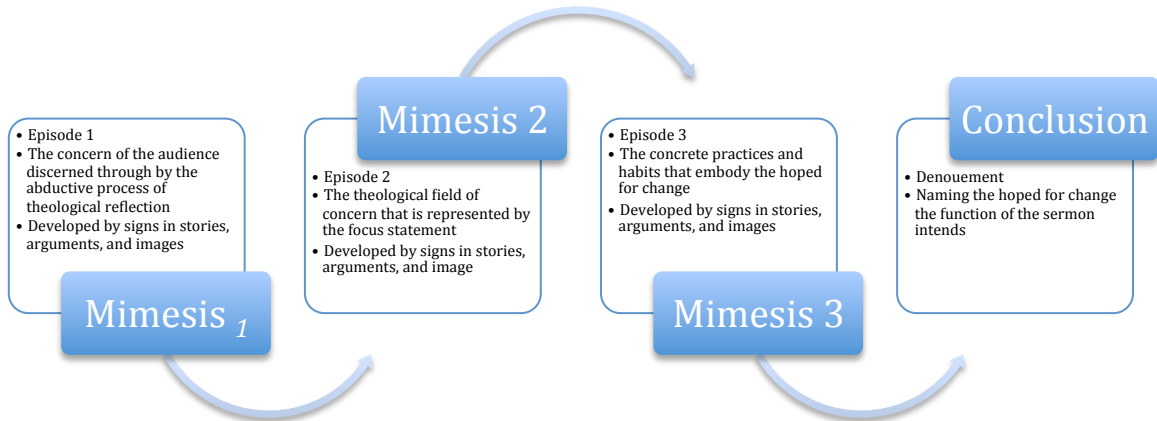
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[10] Ronald Allen, "Theology Undergirding Narrative Preaching," in What the Shape of Narrative Preaching? Edited by Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer (St. Louis: Chalice, 2008), 27-28.

[11] Lawrence Wills, "The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity." *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984): 277-99.

[12] James Thompson, "Narrative Preaching from Romans," *Preaching Romans*, eds. David Fleer and Dave Bland (ACU Press, 2002), 53-74.

Buttrick is the most abiblical. He does not need a text but only a theological field of meaning. Theological fields of meaning bear witness on situations that affect Christian behavior. He is right. We do this all the time. He is making it overt. However, for me, I want to make the connection to the text and the text's witness to theology overt. In the mode of praxis, plot comes from the situation of our lives and how a field of meaning addresses that situation.

Tom Long offers a helpful suggestion about emplotment taken from Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative*.[13] MIMESIS$_1$ is a prefiguration of the practical field of prefigured time. It includes the meaningful structures, symbolic resources, and temporal character of the world in action. The congregation's way of living in the world, discerned through pastoral ministry, ethnography, and cultural analysis, is the everydayness of their prefigured lives. MIMESIS$_3$ is the refiguration of the future. The congregation's way of living is slowly transformed into God's way of being in the world. MIMESIS$_2$ is the pivot between the two, it mediates the witness of Scripture to God's life through plot, an emplotment of configuration. If the episodes of the sermons are represented (imitated) by the moves of emplotment of transfiguring MIMESIS$_1$ into MIMESIS$_3$ by way of configuration, then the following sermon form takes shape:

Mimesis 1
- Episode 1
- The concern of the audience discerned through by the abductive process of theological reflection
- Developed by signs in stories, arguments, and images

Mimesis 2
- Episode 2
- The theological field of concern that is represented by the focus statement
- Developed by signs in stories, arguments, and image

Mimesis 3
- Episode 3
- The concrete practices and habits that embody the hoped for change
- Developed by signs in stories, arguments, and images

Conclusion
- Denouement
- Naming the hoped for change the function of the sermon intends

The diagram above resembles a storyboard, a device used to visualize the plot of the unfolding episodes of a script.[14] MIMESIS$_1$, MIMESIS$_2$, or MIMESIS$_3$ might take more than

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[13] Thomas Long, *Preaching From Memory to Hope* (Westminster John Knox, 2009).

[14] The plot described above is only one option. If you know where you are going (the conclusion), there are many paths to get there. I can start at my house to get to the store, but I could also start at my office. The above plot resembles Buttrick's mode of reflection and the mode of praxis, *Homiletic*, 365-448. But Buttrick reminds preachers that plots can be replotted depending on what the preacher intends to do, 291-303.

one episode to fix the thought in the congregation's consciousness. When this happens, the storyboard expands. The storyboard gives the preacher the flexibility to play with selection, sequence, point of view, and alternate plots. The rhetorical shape and literary genre of the text will influence the plotline in significant ways at this point in the process.[15] The number and sequence of episodes depends on the particular sermon being preached on that Sunday. Long's use of Ricoeur is an easy way to accomplish Buttrick's mode of reflection.

Concrete: Preachers invites listeners to join them on the journey. Once on board, there are key ways to keep listeners listening. Sermons come alive by the use of concrete significant detail that is appropriate for the audience's experiences. Abstractions communicate understanding, but appealing to the five senses motivates the soul. The old writer's cliché is true, "show, don't tell." For example, teaching someone to drive a clutch on grandpa's rusty pickup in the K-Mart parking lot communicates more than "it is like learning to drive." A concretization is a story or image that enables people to experience the gospel in the present tense. One litmus test is to ask, "How does this help people to live differently tomorrow?" Or, "If people took the claim of the text seriously, what difference would it make in their lives." Much of the "nitty-gritty" is found through an active pastoral ministry where you discern individual, community, and congregational needs and concerns. Seek correspondence between the concerns of the text and the concerns of the audience. If you do not know the congregation's situation, then you can rely on these three universal concerns: Transcendence; Community; Significance. Most people care deeply about how they relate to the Eternal; how they relate to one another; and how they relate to themselves. So, respect those concerns with concrete language.

Present Tense: The folks in the pew are living. While some of them will be fascinated by a lecture, most gather broken and seek a good word of hope. However, many sermons live in the past explaining what the text meant. Instead, preach a living word for the people who are breathing in front of you. Ricouer says this well:[16]

- **The World Behind the Text**—refers to the historical, cultural, social, political, literary, and religious context of the author. What concrete conditions influenced the way the authors expressed themselves? Who comprised the original audience? The preacher uses historical-critical tools to provide boundaries to the possible meanings of the text. Because we are preachers and not academics, we use the tools of exegesis within the mode of expectancy. We anticipate God's Word, the "live wire" of theology, to address us.
- **The World of the Text**—refers to the literary, aesthetic, and

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[15] My own writings have explored the relationship between sermon form of rhetorical and literary analysis of texts. "Preaching to Colossians," *Restoration Quarterly* 54 (Fourth Quarter 2010): 207-222; "From Exegesis to Sermon in Romans 12:9-21," *Restoration Quarterly* 40 (Third Quarter 1998): 171-187; "A Strategy for Preaching Paraenesis,*" Restoration Quarterly* 38 (Fourth Quarter 1996): 207-218; "Toward a Definition of Paraenesis," *Restoration Quarterly* 38 (Third Quarter 1996): 145-158; "Imitating the Genre of Parable in Today's Pulpit," *Restoration Quarterly* 33 (Fourth Quarter 1991): 193-208.

[16] Adapted from Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson. Cambridge: CUP, 1981, pgs. 140-144.

structural characteristics—literary and rhetorical features of the text and the devices that facilitate how the language works. For example, chiasmus is a device that is used in poetry, narrative, parable, etc. The poetics of the literature open the re-appropriation of possible meanings of the text in a variety of new contexts.

- **The World in Front of the Text**—refers to what takes place when one reads, between the words on the page and the "real" readers who engage it.[17] So, consider the widow, the single mother of two brats and one angel, a couple married 65 years, the teen who comes alone, the postmaster, the insurance broker, and the nurse. What does the text say in their context? What factors influence hearers as they interpret the words? How do texts inspire them? How do different hearers respond to the theology of the text? How has the Bible shaped history and society in the centuries since it first appeared (giving clues how others shaped their lives in response to the Word)? In other words, "What is the live wire of theology that still speaks in the 21st Century to the people in front of me?" The theology of the text, if we believe, orients our lives and changes who we are and how we live.

"The world in front of the text" is where hermeneutics and homiletics work. "The world behind" and "of the text" controls how the reader/hearer sees/hear "the world in front of the text." When most readers first read, they normally read with the immediate situation in mind ("in front of the text"). As trained readers with various textual critical tools at our disposal, we read "the world of the text" and the "world behind the text" first to make sure we have boundaries set to interpret "the world in front of the text" appropriately. Remember, the Living Word of God is being preached on a particular Sunday within a time and location that is not repeatable. It is contextual. Therefore, preach in the present tense.

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[17] For my understanding of the recontextualization process of hermeneutics, see Sensing, "Wearing Trifocals: Reappropriating the Ancient Pulpit for the Twenty-first Century Pew." *Restoration Quarterly* 48 (First Quarter 2006): 43-54; and "Reimagining the Future: Past Tense Words in a Present Tense World," In *Preaching Eighth Century Prophets*, edited by David Fleer and Dave Bland, 199-133. Abilene, TX: ACU Press, 2004.

Sermon Script Format

Title
Text

Rhetorical and Theological Argument of the Text: Approximately 200-300 word summary. Identify the form and function of the genre. If the pericope has a significant literary device (e.g., parallelisms, inclusio, diatribe, chiasmus, etc.), then describe how the device is working.

Focus Statement of Sermon: A theologically oriented subject and an active verb that states what the sermon is all about. Be clear and concise.

Function Statement of Sermon: The sermon's intent. Naming the "hoped for change." Format: "To [strong behavioral or affective verb] [identify the audience] to [second active verb]…" Be clear and concise.

Plot Line of Sermon: A paragraph consisting of the first sentences of each move. Indicate if the sermon is in the mode of immediacy or the mode of reflection. When writing the plot line, separate the moves using an asterisk (*). [First sentence from the introduction. *First sentence from move 1. *First sentence from move 2. * First sentence from move 3. *Etc.].

SCRIPT

First paragraph of the introduction: Introductions indicate intention toward but due not solve or provide resolution. The need for the sermon, the "itch" (antithesis, trouble, or tension) is highlighted. The introduction is a transition from the liturgical setting to Move 1.

Move/Episode 1 [Do not use a sub-headings to name the Moves]
- First sentence of the move [same as the first sentence of your plot line].
- Description of the move indicating development: argument, image, and/or story (50 words). [1]
- Closing sentence [an inclusio of the first sentence of the move]. Make sure you affect closure of an episode before transitioning to the next.
  [A note about transitions]
  - · Make sure there is closure before you transition to something new.
  - · Transitions point to the path, the direction you are heading.
  - · Transitions connect to the next (and, but, yet, if, then, reconsider, etc.)
  - · Transitions anticipate content of the next step in the homiletical journey.

Move/Episode 2
- First sentence of the move [same as the second sentence of your plot line].
- Description of the move indicating development: argument, image, and/or story (50 words).
- Closing sentence [an inclusio of the first sentence of the move].

Repeat the pattern for the remaining moves and/or episodes.
- First sentence of the move [same as the next sentence of your plot line].
- Description of the move indicating development: argument, image, and/or story (50 words).
- Closing sentence [an inclusio of the first sentence of the move].

Last paragraph of the conclusion: The climax must cohere with the focus and function statements.

[1] Include 4-7 analytical footnotes explaining why you do what you do (specifically relating to, theology, exegesis, genre, and homiletical method).