Film Narratives in Preaching

by

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Abstract
This project challenges the assertion that sermon illustrations should be pared down to the shortest length possible. In a controlled study of 100 sermon listeners, film narratives that ranged between two to five minutes in length within a sermon text, were confirmed to be very effective in working to deepen an individual’s understanding of a selected scripture passage. This project demonstrated that short and long versions of the same narrative were both effective in working to communicate the meaning of the sermon. For this sermon project four distinct narrative sermons were composed. Each sermon deployed scenes from fairly well known mainstream movies. The following films: Dead Poets Society, The Shawshank Redemption, Shadowlands, and A River Runs Through It, were each paired with a specific scripture text. Illustrations from film were purposely selected for their capacity to connect with listeners at a deep emotional level. Each of the four sermons was edited to produce two versions—one that deployed a short version of the film narrative (2-3 minutes in length) with the other utilizing a longer version (3-5 minutes in length) of the film narrative. In this way, the project was able to compare the reaction of listeners to sermons that were identical except for the illustration length. The eight narrative sermons used in this project ranged in length from about nine to thirteen minutes. For consistency, the project relied on sermons that were videotaped and then shown to viewing groups in in
controlled setting. Each group watched a total of four sermons and answered a standardized set of questions after each sermon. Several questions ventured to quantify aspects of the listeners experience. In two of the four sermons, the shorter narrative was slightly more effective in “leading to a deepened understanding of the scripture or gospel passage.” In one case, the shorter narrative was significantly more effective than the longer version; and for one of the sermons the longer version was judged to be more effective. In the case where the longer sermon illustration was judged to be the most effective, the narrative material comprised almost 50% of the sermon length. This project clearly demonstrates that narrative sermons which utilize scenes from film can be very effective in assisting to communicate the meaning of the sermon. This was true even in instances where the film illustration was unfamiliar to the listener. By extension this project demonstrates that narrative material from other sources including literature and journalism might be profitably used to advance homiletical purposes.
FILM NARRATIVES IN PREACHING

Evaluating the Effectiveness of Film Narratives Used in Sermons with Specific Attention Given to the Effect of Short vs. Long Narratives

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Film Narratives in Preaching

Introduction

Reason for the Project

Humans have been telling stories ever since we developed a language to communicate. From the very beginning of storytelling a parallel concern surely arose as to what makes a story effective. My introduction to narrative preaching began in seminary where I was exposed to the writings and sermons of Fred Craddock. Craddock’s use of story, combined with his attention to the structure of the sermon, allowed me to hear the gospel in a new way. His deft deployment of the literary techniques of suspense and discovery not only captured my interest, but have also served to shape and inform new generations of preachers. Over the past few decades the field of narrative preaching has accumulated a large cast of advocates and promoters, along with a growing list of critics. For more than twenty years I have used a narrative approach in crafting my Sunday sermons. During much of that time I have been haunted by the question “What will make my sermon more effective in communicating the good news of the Gospel?” More than once I have had the experience of pairing a story with a scripture passage in a way that I thought provided a great theological insight into faith—only to be greeted after the service by an engaged sermon
listener who affirms how much they liked the story that I told (for example, a story that involved fishing), and then enthusiastically begins to describe a fishing story of their own that is completely unrelated to the intended proclamation of the gospel. At a fundamental level I would like to know whether listeners of narrative sermons are simply enthralled by a good story or if the narrative piece actually assists in making deeper theological connections. In this project I will attempt to survey and measure listeners responses to narrative sermons.

To my great shock I have found almost no systematic analysis designed to gain deeper insights into the effectiveness of narrative sermons. There does exist a considerable volume of commentary and reaction to narrative sermons in general, with opinions offered as to the speculated effectiveness of sermons that deploy story, but there seems to be no interest in conducting quantitative research in an attempt to obtain measurable results. Likewise, in the narrative sermon discussion, seldom is there any reference to the several disciplines that contribute to our understanding of narrative discourse. In the field of homiletics, there seems to be a basic assumption that preachers have an innate understanding of narrative elements and know how to deploy stories in an effective manner. There is actually a considerable body of academic work in the field of Narrative Theory. Having a working knowledge of the basic components of narrative theory would seem a prerequisite for the task of beginning to analyze and discuss the effectiveness of narrative sermons.

**Project Goals**
For my Doctor of Ministry preaching project my overall goal is to examine and gain a deeper understanding of the way the power of story can be effectively deployed in sermons. It is my aim to survey some of the obvious academic strands of research and knowledge that could inform and provide a foundation for evaluating and critiquing the narrative structure of sermons. There is a wealth of research and analysis in the field of narrative theory as applied to both literature and film that has enormous potential for informing the conversation regarding the effectiveness of narrative preaching. Any paper that ventures to discuss the effectiveness of the narrative approach must be grounded in this larger conversation. In my research of sermon listeners I will venture to ask directly whether the selected illustration was effective or not with an opportunity to record impressions elicited by the illustration.

Within the larger context of narrative studies, my project has adopted the specific goal of attempting to discover whether there is a relationship between the length of the story or illustration used in a sermon, and the quality of the listener’s response to the sermon. For a long time, as I craft my sermons, I have wondered which will be more effective in engaging listeners. Whether it would be better to take my time and let a narrative story unfold in a way that includes depth, color, and nuance; or is it better to compose a concise, pared down version of the story. For this project, I crafted four sermons that utilize scenes drawn from mainstream American narrative films to assist in communicating the meaning of the sermon. I recorded each sermon in two versions. One sermon was generous with regard to the amount of time devoted to the movie illustration. The other version of the sermon
was exactly the same except that the illustration was pared down to a significantly shorter length. On average the illustration was two minutes shorter in the pared down version.

In designing a questionnaire to elicit listener feedback I developed three strategies. The first strategy was to simply ask respondents if they thought the story illustration deployed within the sermon that they heard was: too short, just right, or too long. The second strategy was by indirect means, to attempt to see if listeners recorded a greater number of specific images, phrases, or emotions for the longer or short version of the story. The third method for venturing to gain insight into the effectiveness of illustration length is by measuring and comparing the reactions of two distinct groups. I will compare the aggregate data of all the respondents who heard the short version of a sermon, to the aggregate data of all the respondents who heard the long version of the same sermon. The data collection by survey represents an attempt to quantify the effectiveness of illustration length in service of the larger sermon.

**Project Design and Challenges**

The origin for this project was grounded in a simple desire to improve the quality of sermons that use a narrative approach. To that end, any insights that increase the preacher’s awareness and understanding of the tools and techniques that could contribute to a strong narrative structure are valuable. While greater awareness and attention to the craft of narrative preaching may indeed improve the quality of an individual’s preaching—the specific
ways in which one’s preaching improves will likely be difficult if not impossible to measure. In the course of selecting illustrative material for narrative preaching I have consistently wrestled with the question of what is the ideal length for a story as it is deployed in the sermon. In thinking about the task of measuring the effectiveness of components of narrative preaching it occurred to me that it should be possible to quantify the effectiveness of illustration length. The task of determining which is more effective, a short or a long version of a story, presents several challenges. This project is based upon the assumption that the survey results, and analysis of the collected data, could provide some valuable insights for narrative preachers.

For my project I selected four different story illustrations from popular movies. Each movie illustration was paired with a specific scripture text to create four distinct sermons. From each movie I composed a short and a long version of the illustration while the remainder of the sermon text was identical. I recorded on video both the long and short versions of each sermon giving me a total of eight sermons to work with in my project. I then developed a set of survey questions designed to elicit information regarding how individuals perceived each sermon. I gathered sermon viewing groups together and showed each group a total of four sermons. At the end of each recorded sermon the study group was asked to fill out an eleven question survey.

Participants in this project were unaware that I had created two different sets of sermons. They were also unaware that I created two different viewing groups—a “red” group and a “blue” group. Each group watched a total of four sermons, two long and two short. The sermon lengths for the red viewing groups were the opposite of the sermon lengths for the
blue viewing groups. For the red groups the format was: sermon 1 = short version, sermon 2 = long version, sermon 3 = short version, sermon 4 = long version. For the blue groups the format was the reverse: sermon 1 = long version, sermon 2 = short version, sermon 3 = long version, sermon 4 = short version.

The first and most straightforward aspect of my project questionnaire was to simply ask each listener if they thought: 1.) the story illustration was: a. too short, b. just right, or c. too long; along with asking if they thought: 2.) the sermon length was: a. too short, b. just right, or c. too long. These two questions recorded the immediate impression of sermon listeners. With each respondent watching a total of four sermons, two short, and two long, one can look at the aggregate data for individuals and see if there is a correlation between illustration length and effectiveness as directly recorded by the respondents.

A second method to attempt to quantify the effectiveness of each individual illustration was to ask the respondent to record “any specific images, phrases or emotions that you related to” in the specific story illustration. One might suppose that the more effective version would elicit a more consistent range of responses and show a correlation to the central message of the sermon. Admittedly, this is a much less direct survey method and requires a level of interpretation. I have included this survey approach in the hope that it might provide useful results.

My third approach to analyze the data is to compare the aggregate data from all the people who watched the short version of the first sermon in Group A, to the aggregate results of
all the people who watched the long version of the same sermon in Group B. This comparison can be done for all four sermons since each Group was shown sermons of the opposite length.

Of course, I am hoping to discover some definitive results—data that clearly points to proclaiming that it is better to deploy either a short or long version of a story illustration when adopted from film. If the results are less than definitive—then perhaps the project will identify questions that will be fruitful for further research. The project research will also identify the level of effectiveness that listeners assigned to each movie illustration. That could lead to an interesting discussion about the quality of each illustration and whether each particular selection was a good fit for the scripture passage that it was paired with.

**Project Format**

I selected excerpts from four mainstream American films and incorporated the story into my preaching text to assist in conveying the meaning of each sermon. For the first sermon, I used a scene from the opening of the movie *Dead Poets Society*. In this sermon, I simply tried to elicit and contrast the feelings of academic boredom to those of adventure and discovery. My intended use of the illustration was to pave a way for thinking about the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:13-20) in a positive light, and to suggest that the Gospel invites us to a deeper life of engagement and faith.

The film *The Shawshank Redemption* provided an opportunity to highlight the themes of imprisonment, limitation and confinement, and to talk about things that bind us. Scenes
from the movie provided a contrast to the command of Jesus regarding Lazarus “Unbind him, and let him go.” The selected movie scenes help the sermon move beyond a literal examination of John 11:32-44 which focuses upon the raising of Lazarus.

The third sermon utilizes several scenes from the movie Shadowlands. The movie is paired with a gospel passage where some Sadducees pose a hypothetical situation and then ask a follow-up question that attempts to trap Jesus. The question put to Jesus is set up so that anything that Jesus says about the resurrection will sound silly. The movie scenes selected highlight the themes of physical and emotional suffering and point to ways we can be distant from one another. In a powerful scene from the movie, Joy insists that her husband Jack should focus upon the here and now of their relationship—pain and all. The passage lends itself to reflecting upon how Jesus was open and vulnerable to the sufferings of the people that he encountered and that we are called to be vulnerable and love in a similar fashion.

The scenes from the movie A River Runs Through It used in the fourth sermon makes perhaps the most direct connection to the given biblical passage (2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; the passage where king David learns of the death of his son Absalom). In both the movie and the scripture passage a father loses a son. The movie scene invites reflection upon the complex nature of family relationships and how we as people of faith are called to respond to one another even when relationships are broken.

Each listener survey asks questions that attempt to measure the effectiveness of each movie
illustration. This information is useful simply to learn about the effectiveness of each film narrative. The design of the project further attempts to discover if there is a real difference between using a short or long illustration in service of the sermon.

**The Power of Story**

If Jonathan Gottschall were a preacher, he would be a narrative preacher. To begin his book *The Storytelling Animal*, he does not start by providing a definition of what constitutes a story. He does not venture to tell the reader the three most important qualities of stories. Neither, does he trace the historical development of stories told through the ages. Rather, Gottschall sets up an ingenious challenge. After providing a very brief introduction to Nathaniel Philbrick’s work *In the Heart of the Sea*, Gottschall encourages the reader to resist succumbing to the power of the tale. Gottschall provides context for the narrative that follows. He relates “The whaleship Dauphin is zagging off the South American coast. The Nantucket whalemen are straining their eyes for the streamy plumes that announce their quarry. The Dauphin’s captain, Zimri Coffin, spots a small boat bobbing on the horizon. He roars to the helmsman to bring the boat under his lee.” Then he presents a passage from Philbrick’s story:

> Under Coffin’s watchful eye, the helmsman brought the ship as close as possible to the derelict craft. Even though their momentum quickly swept them past it, the brief seconds during which the ship loomed over the open boat presented a sight that would stay with the crew the rest of their lives. First they saw bones—human bones—littering the thwarts and floorboards, as if the whaleboat were the seagoing lair of a ferocious man-eating beast. Then they saw two men. They were curled up in opposite ends of the boat, their skin covered with soars, their eyes bulging from the hollows
of their skulls, their beards caked with salt and blood. They were sucking the marrow from the bones of their dead shipmates.¹

With a mere 125 words of text, Gottschall provides the reader with a compelling experience of the power of story to engage the reader. This experience allows Gottschall to proclaim with authority that “If the story teller is skilled, he (or she) simply invades us and takes over. There is little we can do to resist aside from abruptly clapping the book shut.”²

Narrative is assumed to be a fundamental way that people make sense of the world. A means of communicating common to all cultures. Narrative theory is a discipline that ventures to examine how and why narrative texts function. It is a discipline that is relevant to the medium of preaching—a form that depends upon language and story to communicate.

**Grounding in Narrative Theory**

In the field of homiletics one can find frequent references to narrative preaching. Among the proponents of narrative preaching one finds occasional references to other disciplines, but rarely are there explicit references made to the foundational concepts upon which the field of narrative theory has been established. The simple definition, that narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, seems unknown in preaching circles.³ The study of the various ways in which narrative incorporates rhetorical elements that have the capacity to evoke strong feelings and shape meaning is an aspect of

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¹ Gottschall, pp. 2-3.
² Gottschall, p. 4.
narrative theory relevant to the field of preaching. Narrative theory also pays considerable attention to how texts are interpreted and understood and how narrative conveys truth. At a minimum a grounding in the basic concepts of the field of narrative theory would help make explicit many of the variables that a preacher will attempt to shape and control in crafting a narrative sermon. Chapter Two will examine some of the relevant insights that narrative theory provides for the discipline of preaching.

**Narrative Structure and Film Theory**

More than any other genre of the mass media—film has engaged in a robust discussion and worked to articulate and refine the constellation of elements that contribute to produce compelling emotional experiences. Carl Plantinga, professor of film studies at Calvin College, observes “…emotion and effect are fundamental to what makes films artistically successful, rhetorically powerful, and culturally influential.”⁴ Plantinga goes on to argue that “A film’s narrative structure is clearly designed to cue emotional, visceral, and cognitive experience.”⁵

Good films usually contain strong story lines with emotional content that will resonate with viewers. When a preacher looks to film for illustrative material to use in a sermon, the scenes have already been crafted and shaped to heighten and underscore a central theme. Scenes from films that are retold in a sermon will not only connect with listeners who have seen and are familiar with the film, but if careful attention is paid to the retelling of the movie scene it will resonate with individuals who never saw the movie. The use of film narrative can provide the preacher with a powerful tool to connect with listeners emotions.

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⁵ Plantinga, p. 34.
If that experience is joined to an exercise of theological discovery, then the combination could provide a powerful means for expanding the listener’s awareness their faith. Chapter Three ventures to highlight some of the concepts from the growing field of Film Narrative Theory as they apply to narrative preaching.

**Narrative Preaching**

A great deal of the success for the widespread adoption of narrative preaching must reside in the response of listeners—both from preachers themselves and from parishioners sitting in the pew. While many point to the publication of Fred Craddock’s work *As One Without Authority* in 1971 as a tipping point that propelled preachers to consider and adopt a narrative style—in truth the use of narrative in sermon composition is a practice that has been around a long time. What was significant about Craddock’s work was that he began to explicitly examine the structure of sermons and give thought as to how to use narrative structure to introduce suspense, and to create a sense of surprise and discovery. His attention to narrative applied to the imaginative retelling of biblical texts as well as incorporating illustrative material into the fabric of the sermon. It must be said that one of the reasons for Craddock’s success in advancing the narrative form forward is his ability for astute theological reflection combined with what seems an innate gift for storytelling.

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6 Thomas G. Long, *Preaching from Memory to Hope* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 3. While Long argues that *As One Without Authority* is “arguably the most influential monograph on preaching in out time” he also credits many contributors to narrative preaching before and after Craddock.
The critics of narrative preaching have issued a variety of challenges. The very ambiguity of the narrative form has led to a list of laments including the promotion of: unclear doctrine, pliable theology, and ambiguous ethics—all wrapped in a warm and fuzzy feel good message. That critique is overstated, but it does point to one of the challenges of a form that often relies upon the listener to make connections and extract meaning. Others have claimed that narrative preaching tends to isolate texts from the larger biblical and canonical context thus destroying the cohesiveness of the Christian faith. Long points to another critique—one that claims the use of ordinary stories in narrative preaching reduces the divine to an everyday experience as determined by the preacher's authority alone. This says the critics results in a kind of tyranny from the pulpit. Acknowledging and taking the

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8 Long, p. 10.
Chapter One

The Power of Story and Narrative Theory

Through the ages we have recognized great storytellers. Humans have been telling stories ever since we developed language to communicate. One imagines that from the very beginning of storytelling their arose a parallel interest in what makes a story effective. What likely started as informal acknowledgement of storytellers and writers with a gift for engaging listeners has developed into a network of analysis and criticism that includes and spans several academic areas. The field of narrative theory is a modern discipline that ventures to recognize, make explicit, and analyze the many components involved in communicating a story.

Definition of Narrative
The field of narrative theory examines both the characteristics and qualities of a story, and the method by which a story is communicated (technically called the narrative discourse) in an attempt to deepen our understanding of how stories communicate. A helpful starting definition for the field of narrative theory is provided by Project Narrative at The Ohio State University. They observe that “Narrative theory starts from the assumption that narrative is a basic human strategy for coming to terms with fundamental elements of our experience, such as time, process, and change, and it proceeds from this assumption to study the distinctive nature of narrative and its various structures, elements, uses, and effects….Narrative theorists, in short, study how stories help people make sense of the world, while also studying how people make sense of stories.”

While scholars argue over a precise definition for the term narrative—a good starting point is that “narrative is the representation of an event or series of events.” Here the word “event” denotes action and a narrative gives shape to one or more actions as they unfold over time. Most scholars make a distinction and assign the term story to denote events and their representation, and they use the term narrative discourse to indicate how the story is conveyed. The story consists of what is told. The story includes the characters, events, actions, and setting or location(s). We learn about the story through discourse. Discourse takes up how the story is told. Discourse determines the order that the events of the story will be revealed. It assigns the point of view, whether a narrator is employed, and what style is used. A single story could be taken up by different authors and rendered very differently by changing the modes of discourse. The careful analysis of discourse can reveal how the reader/listener/viewer of a story can be led to form different reactions to the same story.

Narrative Coherence and Meaning

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Preachers wade into the waters of narrative theory whether they know it or not every time they step into the pulpit. In the composition of their sermons preachers frequently select at least one or more stories from the assigned Sunday lessons. Standing behind each story selected from the lectionary for a particular Sunday is the larger story of God’s revelation to humans through time. In addition to the stories drawn from scripture, a narrative sermon may make use of one or more stories drawn from other sources. The field of narrative theory identifies and makes explicit many elements utilized to communicate a story. Preachers can only benefit from an intentional and discerning use of the insights gleaned by narrative theorists.

The specific area of rhetorical narrative theory “assumes that texts are designed by authors (consciously or not) to affect readers in particular ways;...and since reader responses are ideally a consequence of those designs, they can also serve as an initial guide to (although, since misreadings are possible, not as a guarantee of) the workings of a text. At the same time, reader responses, including affective and ethical ones, can be a test of the efficacy of those designs.”

When preaching engages in the goal of moving listeners in a specific way or leading them to adopt a specific outlook it utilizes rhetoric in its narrative approach. James Phelan adds some depth to how the narrative rhetorician engages with their work.

The rhetorical approach conceives of narrative as a purposive communicative act. In this view, narrative is not just a representation of events but is also itself an event—one in which someone is doing something with a representation of events. More formally, the rhetorical theorist defines narrative as somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened. This conception has several significant consequences for the kinds of knowledge about narrative the approach seeks. It gives special attention to the relations among tellers, audiences, and the something that has happened. The focus on purposes includes a recognition that narrative communication is a multi-layered event, one in which tellers seek to engage and influence their audiences’ cognition, emotions, and values.

Grasping the importance of the rhetorical approach H. Porter Abbott exclaims “The rhetoric of narrative is its power. It has to do with all those elements of the text that produce the many strong or subtle combinations of feeling and thought we experience as we read.”

Around the turn of the 5th century, Augustine of Hippo argued that meanings found in one part of scripture must “be seen to be congruous with” meanings found in other parts. While one may challenge Augustine’s view of biblical interpretation, the thrust of his argument stands as a principle of narrative theory—the assumption that “some kind of deep coherence or wholeness lies behind...the whole text.” Put another way “to the extent that you are considering narrative as a communicative process, then authors, and their communicative purposes, matter: there can be no rhetoric without a rhetor.”
In deciding what information to utilize in constructing a sermon narrative, every preacher must select what information to utilize and what to exclude. In this way certain facts, events, details impressions and interpretations are privileged at the expense of others. Even small details matter. In his examination of the novel form, E. M. Forster gives an example where adding just two words to a sentence changes the entire understanding of an event. Forster famously argued that there is a great difference between a narrative that simply states “The king died and then the queen died” and a narrative that reads “The king died and then the queen died of grief.” The narration of the second version makes the causation of the queen’s death explicit as opposed to the first version where one is left to speculate whether there is a more than a superficial relationship between the death of the king and queen. Constructing a narrative is to place things in order. As Forster demonstrates it also creates the possibility of indicating cause and effect, and assigning meaning. This process is central in the task of preaching.

**Narration**

As a simple definition, the narrator is simply the one who tells a story. The preacher is by default the narrator of the sermon, yet a closer examination of a sermon text will reveal that in most cases there are several narrators. Each scripture text is associated with a narrator with the possibility of multiple narrators. When Nathan approaches king David to make explicit the sin that the king has committed (2 Samuel, chapter 12) he narrates a story, thus making Nathan an additional narrative voice. Unless drawn from personal experience, each story used in a sermon introduces a new narrator. I suspect that most of the time little thought is given to how multiple narrative voices fit together within a sermon.

If preaching was subjected to the rigor of narrative analysis one might ask many questions regarding the narration of a sermon. To start one might ask if the preacher is a reliable narrator? Narrative theory prompts one to ask: “What are the elements that contribute to a preacher’s trustworthiness as a narrator? What things detract? Am I impressed by the preacher’s breath and depth of experience?” These are not small questions. The intelligence, reliability, and integrity of the preacher are to some measure evaluated and weighed by listeners every time he or she steps into the pulpit. In a similar way, the hearers of a sermon will judge the preacher’s selection of and use of stories in the sermon.

In most sermons the preacher is not the only narrator. Each of the four gospels were written with a unique voice and narrate a distinct perspective of the life of Jesus. As the principle narrator of the sermon there are many ways in which the preacher could use an individual gospel passage. We might enquire whether the preacher ascribes a high level of authority to a particular gospel writer, or whether the preacher questions the gospel author’s version of events. We could stand back and ask if a preacher’s critical questioning stance towards an individual gospel writer might actually enhance his or her perception as a reliable narrator in the mind of members of the congregation. In some congregations such a stance might undermine the preacher’s authority as narrator.

For preachers who follow a lectionary, the biblical texts that a preacher uses for preaching are given and fixed. There is a limited palate from which to draw material. On the other hand, given that part of the preacher’s task is to meet and engage the congregation in their experience of the world, the preacher has an almost unlimited amount of material from the realm of human experience at their disposal. The selection of what stories to include in a
sermon will likewise affect the perception of the narrators reliability and authority. Do the stories ring true? Are they trite or cliché? Is the story well matched with the other texts selected and does the story serve the sermon as a whole? Each selection will ultimately reflect upon the preacher who narrates the sermon.

**The Truth of Narrative Fiction**

The four sermons that I crafted for this project utilize stories taken from film. Three of the movies that I used: *Dead Poets Society, The Shawshank Redemption*, and *A River Runs Through It*, are purely fictional works. The remaining movie, *Shadowlands*, while based upon real events in the life of C. S. Lewis, at times takes liberty with known facts, and of course the film has to invent much of the dialogue. The clear use of fiction in a sermon raises some interesting issues. What are we to make of something that never really happened or in the case of the movie *Shadowlands*, a story that is told without knowing all the facts? There has been a robust debate among academics as to how we respond to fictional stories and characters.

At a surface level the term fiction conveys the sense that something is made up. In common usage fiction can mean falsehood. We have an immediate sense that fiction is different from the collection of data and the facts of science. It is by definition is the opposite of non-fiction. For these and other reasons, some people never warm up to or outright reject fiction as a means of communication. These individuals never seem to be able to get past the notion that fiction narrates something that never really happened. And yet, there has long been the notion that fiction points to a different kind of truth. In the 4th century BC, Aristotle labeled the truth of fiction as a philosophical or universal truth and compared it favorably to the truth found in history. Using the tools of fiction an author has the flexibility to assemble many ideas in a way that could evoke deep thought and or strong feelings. Fiction is often used as a way to raise important questions and point towards deeper meaning. The impact that many fictional works have upon individuals, and society as a whole, leaves us with the question: “Why do we often care so much about narrative fictions and why do they have the potential to move us?"

The paper titled “*How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?*,” is illustrative of the struggle to understand how the fate of fictional characters can move us. Published in 1975, the article still generates an active scholarly debate. Colin Radford sums up the dilemma succinctly when he asks “How can we feel genuinely and involuntarily sad, and weep, as we do, knowing as we do that no one has suffered or died?” After a lengthy examination of the subject Radford’s conclusion is that “our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very ‘natural’ to us and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in incoherence (emphasis mine).” In the same paper Michael Weston accounts for our being moved by providing the larger context that “our responses to characters in fiction are responses to works of art.” Weston adds that “what we are moved by…is not independent of the significance we see in the work as a whole.” Here Weston recognizes that fictional works are associated with an invitation for discussion, interpretation and critical review. He concludes “the importance of art to us is one way this concern to make sense of our lives appears. The possibility of our being moved by works of art must be made intelligible within the context of such a concern.”

In taking up the question “*How Can We Be Moved by the Fate of Anna Karenina?*” Weston offers an important insight. He compares an incident from real life to a scene from *Romeo and Juliet*. He observes:
We can be moved by the mere statement of facts, but not by the mere statement of what occurs to fictional characters. You can be moved by my telling you that my son was killed last night in a car crash, and in a way which renders irrelevant the details of events leading up to his death. (I am not saying such details are always irrelevant, but they sometimes are.) But for my saying “Mercutio is dead” to evoke your sadness, you must have been attending to the play.\textsuperscript{8}

Weston continues and observes that if we are moved by Mercutio’s death it is a result of the larger context of the play. In other words, we need considerably more context to be moved and to form an emotional response to a fictional character. This insight has particular relevance to the preacher who is using a scene from a film or work of literature. How much of the story should be—needs to be included is a crucial question. The preacher must decide how much context, color, and detail is required for the listener to make an emotional connection to the story or vignette.\textsuperscript{8}

**Summary**

Narrative fiction has a power to engage listeners, evoke strong emotions, and point to deeper truths. In the selection and adaptation of a particular story for use in a sermon the preacher should be aware of the many factors that could contribute to the effectiveness of the story’s deployment. If the story is used to evoke deeper emotions the narrative must be long enough for the listener to make connections to the people and events introduced by the preacher. In whatever way a preacher orders his or her sermon there is an expectation that not only will the individual sermon have a cohesiveness, but that it will fit into a the larger whole of Christian experience. The challenge for a narrative preacher is to be comfortable using the tools of both the novelist and a journalist and join them together to effectively engage the congregation with the good news of the gospel.
Once upon a time, storytelling was synonymous with a communal activity. Long before the advent of radio, television, and film, and before the printing press, storytelling was an oral event that took place when a teller and audience gathered to share a common experience. When we curl up to read a good book or watch a movie at home it is easy to forget that for most of history storytelling was a public and communal affair. Jonathan Gottschall reminds us that “For uncounted millennia, story was exclusively oral. A teller or actor attracted an audience, synched them up mentally and emotionally, and exposed them to the same message.” A movie theater provides a modern context for the ancient art of storytelling. Gottschall provides this helpful observation:

Go into a movie theater. Sit in the front row, but don’t watch the movie. Turn around and watch the people. In the flickering light, you will see a swarm of faces—light and dark, male and female, old and young—all staring at the screen. If the movie is good, the people will respond to it like a single organism. They will flinch together, gasp together, roar with laughter together, choke up together. A film takes a motley association of strangers and syncs them up. It choreographs how they feel and what they think, how fast their hearts beat, how hard they breathe, and how much they perspire. A film melds minds. It imposes emotional and psychic unity. Until the lights come up and the credits roll, a film makes people one.
Narrative preachers who use illustrations from film have made the simple observation that there is power in the storytelling form. The motion picture industry is driven by story and narrative. Before actors are hired, shooting locations are contemplated, or a music score commissioned, a film needs a story to tell. To this extent, the goals of narrative preaching and film overlap in their desire to create a common shared experience with their audience.

**Film a Different Medium**

Many movies are based upon well known books that are adapted to the medium of film. Although the genre of literature and film both depend upon narrative structures to communicate—the motion picture industry works with a much bigger creative palate. It is an audio and visual medium. In the case of film there are many added variables that assist to shape the viewers experience. In film the narrative structure is expanded beyond what one finds in literature to further engage viewers. Carl Plantinga explains:

> It is a film’s narration, consisting of it’s narrative structure, style, and point of view, that shapes the overall experience it offers. Watching a film is a temporal experience, as we are drawn into mental activities and responses that flow inexorably onward, intermixed and building upon each other. Filmic narration determines the temporal processes of cognitive play, affective experience, and character engagement.⁸

A major difference between the art of congregational preaching and the motion picture industry is that Hollywood is almost laser focused upon turning a profit on each film. To reach a mass audience, commercial filmmakers depend upon the film narrative making
strong emotional connections with their customers. Carl Plantinga affirms that “The classical Hollywood cinema is a mode of filmmaking designed to elicit strong emotions, and it does so in large part by means of identifiable conventions.” In fact a film storyline is constructed with a saturation of emotional content. Again Plantinga explains:

“Emotions provide narrative information that is necessary for audiences to follow the narrative….Emotions, moreover, assist the film’s narration in the creation of sympathies and antipathies for characters. Emotions also provide a direction for audience desires for one narrative outcome over another. Storytellers both elicit and depend upon narrative emotions such as anticipation, suspense, and curiosity. In sum, the spectator’s emotions assist in the comprehension and interpretation of the narrative.”

When a movie is based upon a full length novel the challenge of the screenplay writer is often to distill the story to its essential elements without losing the distinctive qualities that provide the novel’s appeal. Good filmmakers have become adept at crafting scripts that engage the viewer with an efficient telling of story. They draw upon the viewers emotions and invite identification with one or more characters. Filmmakers use cinematic conventions to consciously manipulate the audience’s emotions. For Hollywood movies this means that “Narrative form is not simply a matter of the organization of cues to facilitate story comprehension; it also encourages a chronological pattern of emotional response.”

A talented director who is able to engage viewer emotions can create powerful responses. In one sense this is no different than the task of an author who creates compelling fiction.
As Lisa Cron reminds us “When we’re fully engaged in a story, our own boundaries dissolve. We become the protagonist, feeling what she feels, wanting what she wants, fearing what she fears….we literally mirror her every thought. It’s true of books and it’s true in movies, too.”

The challenge for a screenwriter is that they have so much less time to engage their viewer. Each scene must advance the story and deepen viewer interest. It is that compression and intensification of storylines that prompts film critic Roger Ebert to observe that “Of all the arts, movies are the most powerful aid to empathy,…”

Each of the four sermons in my project use illustrations taken from mainstream Hollywood films. In each case it was a combination of the theme and emotions evoked by specific scenes that suggested their pairing with a scripture text. None of the illustrative examples approach the brevity suggested by David Buttrick or many other narrative preachers who advise keeping stories short. Even the short versions of sermon illustrations used in this project exceed 200 words in length. I would argue however, that this represents the minimum length for a story if the purpose of the material is to create an emotional connection with the listener. Of course the effectiveness if each illustration is a complex thing to measure. It is related to the quality of the original material, is this case culled from films, the appropriateness of the material to the sermon, and the preachers talent in incorporating the material into their sermon. Here are the four scripture/movie scene pairings that I used for my project.

**Four Narrative Illustrations adapted from Film**
1. Matthew 5:13-20 paired with scenes from Dead Poets Society

*Dead Poet’s Society* is a film about an unconventional English teacher who ventures to engage and inspire the young men who enter his classroom at a prestigious prep school. A major thrust of the film involves how their teacher, Mr. Keating, encourages his students to question and challenge conventions. Poetry is at the heart of their collective examination of life and the human condition. In my sermon I attempted to contrast two scenes from the movie. I describe the movie’s opening, which begins with a stuffy academic convocation. By recounting the scene, I hoped to evoke the same sense of boredom and tedium for learning that the movie depicts. The second scene that I employed was one of discovery which included the Robert Herrick quote “gather ye rosebuds while ye may,…” and the Latin phrase “carpe diem,” both which serve to launch the class on a voyage of adventure and discovery.

The film illustrations were used to explore the line from Matthew “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” Rather than viewing the law as a boring burden without life, I ventured to make the connection that the law points to a life of adventure and fulfillment as lived out and demonstrated by Jesus and his followers.

2. John 11:32-44 paired with scenes from The Shawshank Redemption
I have preached on the story of the raising of Lazarus many times. This go around I focused upon the last phrase of the gospel passage “Unbind him, and let him go.” I used the sermon to metaphorically explore what things limit and bind us, and how the gospel might point to a life of liberation and freedom.

Almost the entire story told by the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* unfolds within a fictional prison located in the state of Maine. Beyond providing an insight into the disturbing nature of prison life, the movie examines the themes of institutions, routine, and things that we allow to confine and limit our spirit. Andy stands out as a character in the movie who not only holds onto hope, but he is able to live and be for others. The scene where Andy breaks into the room that contains the PA system, and plays a Mozart aria for the entire prison population, provides a dramatic vision of freedom. Like the tomb, prison life provides an opportunity to examine what things lead toward death and what things, activities, and attitudes are life-giving. In the sermon I tried to connect the tastes of freedom that inmates discovered, even while in prison, with the new life offered by Christ to his followers.


The strange scenario, of a women with seven brothers as successive husbands, set before Jesus by the Sadducees to challenge belief in a resurrection is strange on the face of it. The context of the question connects to an even more obscure Old Testament reference. In this sermon I decided to deal with the observation that Jesus does not spend a lot of time focused
upon the nature and quality of life after death. Rather, Jesus profoundly enters into the lives of the people he encounters in the here and now, and risks loving them with abandon.

The movie *Shadowlands* tells the part of C. S. Lewis’s life when he encounters and eventually marries the American Joy Gresham. My original focus was upon the aspect of the movie that deals with Joy’s diagnosis of cancer and her ability to embrace the quality of life that she and Jack can share even knowing that her days are numbered. Upon closer examination, the movie’s inclusion of Lewis’s lectures on the “problem of pain” combined with the way that he has built up emotional walls around himself (to shield himself from pain) provided another theme to explore in the sermon. Jack eventually learns to fully invest in his relationship with Joy and to love despite knowing the cost of future loss. In the sermon I venture to use the moving example of Joy and Jack’s relationship to point listeners towards the gospel’s call to love in the here and now despite fears of future pain or loss. I believe that this type of story illustration would be difficult to reduce to half a dozen sentences.

4. 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 paired with scenes from *A River Runs Through It*

“O my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would that I have died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!” One could argue that this story, which concludes with of the death of Kind David’s son Absalom, provides one of the most poignant scenes in scripture. And yet, for the parishioner that is not familiar with the saga that leads up to this day, much
of the emotional impact is lost. More than simply the death of a son, the complete saga lays bare the pain and grief that accompanies family dysfunction.

The movie *A River Runs Through It*, similarly deals with both family dysfunction and the death of a son. Despite a family that loves him, Paul, the younger son of the two brothers, becomes lost in a world of gambling and drink. The themes of addiction, and failed efforts to help, are issues that are especially likely to resonate with many members of a congregation. By taking time to highlight some of the complexities of the relationships within the Maclean family, one has a glimpse of God’s grace at work even in the midst of a death in a family. The river imagery of the film was also well suited for this sermon as the service on that day included a baptism.
Chapter Three

The Context of Narrative Preaching

I stumbled into the field of narrative preaching. I grew up in an Episcopal parish where never once did I hear a narrative sermon. It was not until 1991, my first year of seminary, that I encountered a sermon that made effective use of a narrative format. When I discovered that there were talented preachers who made use of narrative forms in their sermons—I ventured to learn more about this genre of preaching. In my own preaching I worked to better understand how to make effective use of story and narrative in the construction and delivery of sermons. While I never really considered myself to be a great storyteller, I discovered that I liked the challenge of using stories from literature, film, and personal experience. I learned through my own observation and experience that narrative structures could arouse interest and deepen understanding and appreciation of the Gospel.

Narrative Preaching Roots

From my first introduction to the field while in seminary, using narrative seemed a fresh, innovative, and effective approach to preaching. It was helpful to eventually learn that narrative preaching has its own larger context and history of development. Charles Rice reminds us that “Narrative preaching is neither new or novel, especially in the american
experience; it has taken many forms in the pulpit."\(^8\) In fact, narratives and illustrations were used by colonial clergy well before the American revolution. The practice of using narrative material was further expanded upon by some of the Great Awakening revivalists in the 1730’s and 1740’s.\(^8\) For the most part however, during the colonial period and extending through the early years after the American revolution, doctrinal preaching was the standard fare. It was not until the twenty year period between 1790 and 1810, argues David Reynolds, that one can begin to see some change in the preaching landscape with regard to the use of narrative.\(^8\)

In the first half of the nineteenth century, Reynolds cites several factors that led to the expansion of the use of narratives and illustrations by American preachers. The innovative and daring storytelling utilized by Southern black preachers, the often emotional and illustrative sermons of the frontier evangelists, and a slow but steady evolution by northern antebellum preachers—each contributed to, and laid the groundwork for, change in the latter half of the century.\(^8\)

Reynolds pays attention to and documents the rise of the use of illustration and example from American pulpits during the latter half of the nineteenth century. The increased use of secular stories was in part propelled by preachers who were dissatisfied with theological preaching. Reynolds cites the pioneering arguments of Horace Bushnell as foundational to this movement. Beyond book learning and scholarship Bushnell argued it was the preachers duty “to be universal; to be out in God’s universe, that is, to see, and study, and
know everything, books and men and the whole work of God from the stars downward…so that, as the study goes on, the soul will be getting full of laws, images, analogies, and facts, and drawing out all the subllest threads of import to be its interpreters when the preaching work requires.”

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, Reynolds is able to rattle off numerous preachers who jettisoned traditional forms of preaching for narrative and anecdotal styles. At the sensational extreme lies the preaching of T. De Witt Talmage who claimed “‘Technical’ preaching, reduced religion to a corpse, put ‘the great masses of people’ to sleep, and changed churches into ‘great Sunday dormitories’”

In the period after the Civil War, O. C. Edwards identifies the emergence of Romanticism as a significant strand within American preaching. He cites the work of three widely known preachers: Horace Bushnell, Henry Ward Beecher, and Phillips Brooks in the latter half of the nineteenth century as groundbreaking for carving out a new niche--distinct from either the rationalists or the emotional preaching of the revivalists. Edwards is able to put into context Horace Bushnell’s inclusion of stories which provide examples and insights drawn from the realms of human experience and enquiry. He points out that this trend in preaching represents a liberation from “the formalism and structure of neoclassicism, rationalism, and moral asceticism and discipline.”

Likewise the originality of Bushnell, Beecher and Brooks and their collective ability to probe and examine the nature of their times, worked to expand the range of narrative material utilized in sermons.
By most accounts preaching in the first half of the twentieth century was marked by a period of stability until sometime after the Second World War. Lucy Rose highlights the uniformity of homiletics during this period by observing that “During the first half of this century, John A. Broadus’s *On the Preparation and Delivery of Sermons* dominated the teaching of homiletics….Not until 1958 was its dominance seriously challenged.” The preaching title that in 1958 rose to supplant Broadus’s work, as the most widely used instructional text, was H. Grady Davis’s *Design for Preaching*. Davis’s book then maintained its market supremacy until 1974. In labeling the twentieth century as *The Century of Change*, O. C. Edwards takes care to note that the change was by no means uniform. He summarizes this prevailing thought when he states that “the majority of the new movements in homiletics reported on [in the twentieth century] began after World War II, and indeed from the Vietnam era on.”

**The State of Preaching at the Middle of the Twentieth Century**

In surveying the state of preaching at mid-twentieth century Thomas Long observed “In the early 1950’s, much of mainline Protestant preaching was highly didactic.” He continued:

Sermons were viewed as instruments of instruction about the great themes of the Christian faith. Sermons were often taken up with big principles and doctrinal propositions, and they were built to carry the freight. Almost all of the major preaching textbooks recommended that sermons be, like term papers and academic lectures, logical, orderly, balanced, and symmetrical, with clearly demarcated points and subpoints.
Similar to Edwards, Long also points to H. Grady Davis’s 1958 textbook *Design for Preaching* as a turning point of transition. He sees the text as part of the first wave that prepared preaching for moving away from didactic arguments and orderly prepared points.⁸ Also taking note of the movement towards a more narrative approach, Charles Rice cites the work of the biblical scholar Amos Wilder *Early Christian Rhetoric*, published in 1964, as an important landmark in the field of homiletics.⁸ Both Long and Rice see the movement towards narrative preaching as a rediscovery of earlier forms.

Rice recognizes Wilder for laying the groundwork for homiletical advance in the latter part of the 20th century. Wilder’s interests in both rhetoric and literature informed his investigation of the literary qualities of the bible. He began with the observation that the primary literary form of the Old Testament was narrative. Wilder observed that “In Israel an earthy kind of realism came to birth such that its recitals encompass and interweave the whole story of heaven and earth and of man in unique fashion.” Narration, Wilder says, creates order: “Indeed, the biblical epic remains as a kind of cable or lifeline across the abyss of time and cultures, because man is here sustained over against anarchy, non-being, nescience.”⁸ Grounded in the narrative roots of the First Testament, Wilder explored how contemporary literature and the literary composition of biblical narratives cast light upon one another.⁸ Davis and Wilder helped to set the stage for a distinguished line of narrative preachers who by the 1970’s has begun to attract national attention. The contributions of Craddock, Lowry, Steimle, Rice, Beuchner, Forbes, and Taylor are among the recognizable
names, who along with many others, helped to shape a new generation of narrative preachers.

**Narrative Preaching in the Context of Narrative Journalism**

Beyond the change beginning to take place in American pulpits, there was a much broader revolution taking place in the field of American journalism. During the 1960’s writers like Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese and Joan Didion began employing narrative techniques previously reserved for novels and fiction, in their newspaper and magazine pieces. The “just report the facts” approach to journalism was dramatically transformed by writers who applied the narrative skills of novelists to their craft. It is worth quoting at length what this “new journalism” or “literary journalism” brought to the world of nonfiction writing.

The journalist and magazine editor André Fontaine observed:

> “What is this new art form? It is grounded almost equally in journalism and in what the English professors call creative writing—even though all writing, of course, is creative. From journalism it takes the reporter’s aggressive search for fact, his accuracy, his sensitive, trained observer’s eye, his skepticism and adeptness at checking and cross-checking the things he is told against documents, other spokesmen, experts and original sources. From the “creative” or fiction writer it takes imagination, skill at plotting and portraying character, the techniques of building a dramatic story of evoking the readers emotions and, most important, the imposition of the writer’s individual judgement on the story.”

During the early part of the second half of the twentieth century it is difficult to put into perspective the magnitude of the transformation that journalists introduced into the whole field of nonfiction writing. They opened up new vista’s of possibility in a field that was
used to a straightforward presentation of the facts. Nonfiction writers began to reach beyond the basic details of a story in an effort to make an emotional connection with their readers. Fontaine described what these writers were reaching for this way “Most people don’t act on the basis of things they perceive only with their minds. They react to things they know intellectually, intuitively, instinctually, as the result of an emotional conviction. The creative journalist involves these elements in his reader’s personality; he knows that in doing it emotions are usually more reliable than intellect.”

The transformation of the newspaper and magazine article form had a dramatic effect upon readers. Consider this brief example of a newspaper story of a child killed by a car. It is first told in the classic style, then in the style that is now termed creative nonfiction.

Susan York, 7, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Samuel York of 327 Livingston St. was struck and killed yesterday afternoon when she ran in the path of a car driven by Charles Williamson, 42, 408 South George St.

Here is the same story rewritten in a narrative form

Have you ever seen it happen? Have you seen the little body lying in the street, still and shockingly wrong, because a body doesn’t belong in the middle of a street, which is for cars. And, like all bodies, it looks flat, empty, doll-like. And the face of the mother, who comes running out in a housedress and dirty sneakers she’s been wearing to mop the kitchen floor, with none of her armor of makeup, and with her hair in rollers. And the way her face is stripped bare of the masks we all wear against the world as she kneels and picks up the child; the way disbelief, then shock, then flooding grief wash over her face so nakedly it is oddly embarrassing and you want to turn away from this too threatening
emotion. And the dulled expression on the face of the man driving the car that hit the child as he gropes to comprehend the thing that he has done.⁸

In the second rendition, the narrative story, constructed around an exhaustive amount of research has produced a story of strong emotional impact—where you live the horror and the tragedy. One can easily see how the narrative techniques developed within the field of journalism, when applied to preaching would likewise have the capacity to change the medium. During this journalistic revolution surely many preachers were introduced to and began to adopt new narrative techniques.

**Narrative Preaching Gains Momentum**

Near the end of the introduction to a collection of his own sermons, Fred Craddock describes a chance encounter with Professor Hermann Diem on a street in Tübingen, Germany, in the summer of 1969. In their conversation Craddock expressed his frustrated search for a means of preaching that would engage listeners in a time when the authority of the American pulpit seemed to be waning. Craddock describes the end of their chat this way “Professor Deim turned to leave, paused, and said over his shoulder, “Read Kierkegaard.” “I did” said Craddock “and the ultimate result was the Beecher Lectures at Yale published under the title *Overhearing the Gospel.*”⁸

Seven years before his Beecher Lectures, Craddock’s first book on preaching, *As One Without Authority* was published. In it Craddock advocated an inductive approach to preaching. His homiletical advice had the distinction of being supported by his own solid background
in biblical interpretation. Thomas Long describes Craddock’s earlier work, *As One Without Authority* (first published 1971) as:

> arguably the most influential monograph on preaching in our time. Craddock called for preachers to abandon the top down, deductive, ‘my thesis for this morning’ approach to sermons in favor of suspenseful, inductive, narratives of discovery. Preachers were to stop telling people what the sermon was about in the introduction and were instead to lure people along a journey of exploration and surprise with real-life stories and questions to the place where they could exclaim, “Aha! I get it!” at the end of the sermon.\(^8\)

In addition to Kierkegaard, Craddock cites an earlier work, the brief essay *Literature of Knowledge and Literature of Power* by Thomas de Quincey as having a great influence upon his preaching style. Craddock observes “De Quincey distinguishes between literature with the purpose of imparting knowledge and literature with the purpose of creating an experience in the reader; the one informs, the other forms.”\(^8\) In the Lyman Beecher Lectures, Craddock expanded upon the notion of using induction, story and metaphor as an integral part of the sermon.

Two years later, in 1980, Eugene Lowry published his thoughts on crafting sermons using the structure of a narrative plot. His book *The Homiletical Plot* paid special attention to the narrative structure of sermons that move from tension to resolution. In the introduction to his book *The Homiletical Plot*, Eugene Lowry reflects how his seminary training envisioned the process of writing a sermon as starting from an outline and then carefully constructing a logical whole. In searching for an image that better matched his own pulpit
experience and homiletical style Lowry used the language of literature and narrative. He observes: “Truth is... a sermon is not a doctrinal lecture. It is an event-in-time, a narrative art form more akin to a play or novel in shape than to a book.” In case there was any mistake as to his view regarding preaching he concludes his introduction by declaring “I propose that we begin by regarding the sermon as a homiletical plot, a narrative art form, a sacred story.”

In The Homiletical Plot, Lowry explored the craft of narrative preaching by examining specific narrative examples. It is striking that his first example used to provide a deeper examination of plot comes from the realm of film. Lowry observed how the overall plot of the movie High Noon moves from a felt discrepancy towards resolution. In his parlance this is also known as the move from itch to scratch, issue to answer, or conflict to resolution. Lowry observes how the medium of film is more concerned with narrative tension than merely compiling information to communicate. He highlights what captivates viewers: “In the case of the movie High Noon, it is obvious that the viewers are not held by their intrinsic interest in the history of the American frontier, in law enforcement, or in noon trains. Information—correct or incorrect—is certainly learned in the process, but these ideational ingredients, as such, do not shape the form of the narrative. The movement from problem to solution of the discrepancy shapes the form of the narrative.” It is this fundamental movement that Lowry contends defines narrative preaching.

Extending the Roots of Modern Narrative Preaching
The publication of *Preaching the Story* in 1980 aspired to ground and support clergy in crafting narrative sermons. In important ways the book provided a theological grounding for using narrative. Edmund A. Steimle looked back to the biblical texts upon which Christian proclamation is built. As a starting point he expanded upon and crystalized some of the thoughts and ideas of Amos Wilder. Perhaps most significant was his observation that “…the fabric of the biblical witness is completely and thoroughly secular, even perhaps when it sounds just the opposite in our twentieth century ears.”

Steimle expands upon this thought and reflects:

I suppose that our familiarity with the fabric of the Bible has dulled our sensitivity to its sheer secularity. In the Old Testament the story of God’s dealings with his people is studded with battles and sex and death and shady deals, with the plight of poverty-striken widows and the suffering of the innocent, with markets and temples and idols and courts and deserts and cities. And this is where the “spiritual” is discerned, not apart from it. The story is told as if God were at work in the world, which of course and indeed he was.

Steimle extends his reflections upon the fabric of biblical narrative to the New Testament where he observes that the parables of Jesus in their telling were likewise secular and worldly stories. It is here that Steimle provides a biblical and theological grounding for using contemporary stories as an integral part of the sermon narrative. He argues that for Christian proclamation to embrace its biblical roots the fabric of the sermon will be worldly in its composition.

**Story or Narrative**
Perhaps not surprisingly, in the wake of the widely read works of Craddock, Lowry, Steimle, Niedenthal, Rice, and others, the terms storytelling and narrative were increasingly associated with modern preaching. One of the challenges for the student of this field is the way that the terms story and narrative are often used in interchangeable or overlapping ways. It seems to me that broadly these terms are used in two fundamentally different ways. The work *Storytelling in Preaching*, by Bruce Salmon is representative of the approach that sees stories as units within the sermon that are used for a specific purpose. In his chapter titled *Doing Storytelling in Preaching*, Salmon articulates “The goal here is to show how stories may be used as sermon illustrations. This particular emphasis is to be distinguished from so-called ‘narrative preaching.’…Herein lies the distinction. Whereas many of the proponents of narrative preaching advocate a story form for the sermon, this book conceives of stories being used in the more traditional way as sermon illustrations.”

By contrast, the term narrative is more commonly applied to the construction and structure of the overall sermon which will likely include one or more stories. Eugene Lowry explains “Those who advocate narrative preaching typically intend a process involving plot—whether or not any particular story or narrative is utilized.” Lowry acknowledges his debt to Fred Craddock in attempting to define this type of preaching. In an explanation that predated Lowry’s work Craddock explained: “Finally, by narrative structure I am not proposing that the lecture or sermon be a long story or a series of stories or illustrations. While such may actually be the form used for a given message, it is not necessary in order to be
narrative. Communication may be narrative like and yet contain a rich variety of materials: poetry, polemic, anecdote, humor, exegetical analysis, commentary.”

**Criticism of Narrative Preaching**

The critics of narrative preaching have issued a variety of challenges. The very ambiguity of the narrative form has led some to complain and lament of the promotion of: unclear doctrine, pliable theology, and ambiguous ethics—all wrapped in a warm and fuzzy feel good message. That critique is overstated, but it does point to some of the challenges of a form that often relies upon the listener to make connections and extract meaning. Others have claimed that narrative preaching tends to isolate texts from the larger biblical and canonical context thus destroying the cohesiveness of the Christian faith. Long points to another critique—one that claims the use of ordinary stories in narrative preaching reduces the divine to an everyday experience as determined by the preachers authority alone. Long highlights the claim of critics that the congregation of such a preacher is subjected to a new kind of tyranny from the pulpit.

Beyond some of the structural and theoretical issues raised with narrative preaching, a constant complaint raised from many quarters, is the poor quality of illustrative material selected for use in sermons. Hokey, cornball, vague, contrived, overly familiar, rambling stories, and ill advised personal accounts, top the list of complaints by the hearers of narrative sermons. From Chapter nine titled: *Examples and Illustrations*, from his book *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, David Buttrick proclaims “What could kill the church
is not so much sermons as sermon illustrations!" He follows up by observing “With theological discernment at low ebb at present sermons may lack substance, and, lacking substance, may overcompensate by heaping illustrations—lengthy, overblown, often mawkish illustrations.” It seems clear that a significant vector of the criticism of narrative preaching is concerned with the basic quality and the appropriateness of the illustrative material deployed in the sermon. Acknowledging and taking the criticisms of narrative preaching seriously is first step towards improving narrative preaching without losing sight of the benefits of the approach.

The Question of Narrative Illustration Length

While the critique of the specific illustrative material selected for a sermon is often harsh, the simple popularity of narrative preaching argues that there exist many examples where narrative content was successfully integrated into the sermon. It clearly takes talent and skill to incorporate narrative material into a sermon text with a positive result. Speaking of the simple task of identifying source material Bruce Salmon observes “The preacher who uses stories regularly soon discovers that his sermons have a voracious appetite for tales to tell. There never seem to be enough. Good stories are rare and precious commodities, seldom the product of labor alone, though they are not the product of an idle mind either.”

The number and length of illustrations used in sermons covers a very wide range. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, before the age of radio and television, sermons were considerably longer than today. During this time, the preacher Dwight L. Moody, who was
famous for his use of illustrations, would typically spend forty-five minutes or more in the pulpit. One researcher observed that “Sometimes two-thirds of an entire sermon would consist only of a series of illustrations,” One of Moody’s most popular sermons consisted of eight successive stories. Typically his stories were short and came from “his reading, from history and from his own and his friends’ experiences.” In this context, illustrations were used to support a series of points explored in the sermon. In any particular illustration there is little narrative detail. One would not really think of them as story or narrative sermons in the way those terms are used today.

Among modern teachers of preaching, David Buttrick is perhaps the most consistent with Moody’s earlier style of illustration use. Buttrick is emphatic in insisting that sermon illustrations must remain brief in order to serve the larger purpose of the sermon. He asserts that “There is scarcely an illustration that ever needs to exceed a half-dozen sentences in length.” The notion of short illustrations is paired with Buttrick’s belief that each illustration must be balanced with a framework of content, and that only one illustration per sermon “move” is permissible.

One might think that Edmund Steimle, whose name is associated with story and narrative preaching, would be an advocate for using longer illustrative material, yet he also finds wisdom in brevity. Steimle argues that the sermon as a whole “will be as lean and spare as the fabric of the bible.” He continues that it will “…force us to cut and trim the words
criticisms of narrative preaching seriously is first step to improving and better articulating the benefits of narrative preaching. In the end, the effectiveness of narrative preaching will have to rely upon conversations and some type of evaluation with sermon listeners.

In the end, the effectiv-ness of narrative preaching will have to rely upon conversations and some type of evaluation with sermon listeners.

we use, the juicy adjectives, the fancy alliterations, the quoting of hymns, and the abstrac-tions—especially the abstractions.”

If the question of illustration length were put to Steimle it would seem that he would be inclined to argue for the shortest length possible. Even Bruce Salmon, who you would think from the title of his book Storytelling in Preach-ing, would be a advocate for longer narrative units, has this to say about the story length “Story development demands continuity and singleness of purpose. It is critical that the escalating ambiguity of a story not be diluted by additional characters or subplots. Them-atic unity will not tolerate interruptions. Let the thirty-second television commercial, not the two-hour feature-length movie, be our guide.”

In the field of homiletics there is an abundance of anecdotal observation and opinion re-garding the ideal length of illustrative material. Despite the abundance of opinion, I have found little in the way of research that attempts to measure the effectiveness of narrative sermon material. With regard to the specific question of the most effective story or illus-tration length, almost all of the opinion comes down on the side of the concise, snappy and short stories. Yet for all the emphasis on brevity, there seems to be scant supporting research for the shorter is better conclusion. In the end, the effectiveness of narrative preaching cries out to be measured by some systematic form of evaluation with sermon listeners.
Chapter Four

Sermon Project Design

Project Goals

My first goal in this project is to simply gain greater insight into how people respond to narrative sermons. At a basic level I would like to discover if narrative sermons are effective in providing a deeper understanding of the selected scripture passage. My particular interest is in determining whether a long or short narrative piece deployed within the sermon will be more effective. In my project I have devised a set of survey questions that will quantify the responses of listeners and provide useful comparative data.

Project Challenges and Technical Difficulties

How to measure a listener’s response to the narrative element of a sermon presents several challenges. There are many factors that could affect one’s reaction and understanding. The content of even a simple sermon introduces multiple ideas and images. In addition, during Sunday worship, there are many elements that lead up to the sermon, and a long list of things that take place after that could affect the sermon listener. From the outset, I thought that crafting a set of survey questions, would be the most direct way to measure listener reaction to narrative sermons.
For a sermon preached in the context of Sunday worship, it is a challenge to figure out how and where people could effectively provide their sermon responses. Answering a set of questions during the service would seem awkward and distracting to other worshipers. Waiting until after the service involves a long delay. The lapse of time would make it almost impossible to reliably record immediate sermon impressions.

Faced with the difficulty of providing feedback from a live sermon preached during Sunday worship, I decided to record sermons so that I could show them to listeners in a more controlled setting. Recording sermons during worship proved to have its own set of challenges. Setting up a video camera to record a sermon was not too difficult. I started by first using a stationary camcorder mounted on a tripod. This arrangement minimized distractions during the service. I soon discovered that it was a challenge to obtain adequate sound quality for my recorded sermons. While our church has a fairly high quality sound system I discovered that I did not have the technical capacity to feed or add sound to my video recording produced with a camcorder. After several failed attempts of recording sermons preached during Sunday worship, I opted to re-record my sermons in an empty church with the speaker volume turned up high. The unnaturally high speaker volume in the church was enough to produce an adequate recording volume with the camcorder.

The sacrifice of re-recording sermons in an empty church is that one looses the dynamic of spontaneity and interaction that occurs with a congregation when a sermon is preached live. No matter how hard I tried it was difficult to duplicate the energy of the sermon
preached in the context of the liturgy in the presence of the congregation. To achieve usable recordings I decided that I would have to live with the sermons re-preached without the congregation present. In an effort to provide as close a link to the original preaching context I recorded my sermons wearing my regular Sunday vestments. I even made sure that the hymn board visible behind the pulpit displayed the hymns used for the actual day that the sermon was preached.

The next technical challenge that I faced was transferring each sermon recorded on a Sony camcorder to a format that would work in a classroom setting. I was fortunate to find a person in my parish who had editing equipment and was adept at transferring video from my camcorder to a compact disc. The cd format allowed me to use a laptop and projector to show each sermon with good video and sound quality. Each sermon was given a simple title page to provide a uniform start to the sermon listening experience.

Once I made the decision to utilize a classroom setting I realized that it would be easy to show several sermons in a single session. I decided to take full advantage of those willing to give sermon feedback by asking them to watch four sermons. I attempted to keep the time commitment to an hour, but in practice each session required about 90 minutes of time. After reading a one page statement about the project, taking a minute to preview the sermon survey, and asking for and answering questions, we proceeded to the first sermon. To capture some of the feeling of a worship service, and to provide context for the sermon, the relevant scripture text was read just before watching the sermon. When the sermon was completed each listener was asked to complete a sermon survey. When everyone was
finished answering the questions we moved on to the scripture reading for the second sermon. After watching the second sermon and answering the questions each group was given a break. Bagels, juice and coffee were provided. The session then continued with sermons three and four shown in the same manner. At the very end respondents filled out a final form that asked for demographic information as well as some general questions about sermon listening.

**Project Design**

**FOUR SERMONS**

For my project, I selected four mainstream American films from which to draw narrative material for my sermons. Each film narrative was paired with a specific scripture text. The biblical texts were drawn straight from the assigned lessons of the Sunday Revised Common Lectionary. Each film narrative was selected with a particular idea as to how it would assist in conveying the meaning of the sermon.

For the first sermon, I used a scene from the opening of the movie *Dead Poets Society*. In this sermon, my idea was to elicit and contrast the feelings of academic boredom to those of adventure and discovery. My intended use of the illustration was to shape a way for thinking about the law and the prophets (Matthew 5:13-20) in a positive light and that the Gospel invites us to a deeper life of engagement and faith.

The film *The Shawshank Redemption* provided an opportunity to highlight the themes of imprisonment, limitation, and confinement, and to talk about things that bind us. I hoped
that scenes from the movie would provide a different context for understanding the command of Jesus spoken to Lazarus “Unbind him, and let him go.” The selected movie scenes allowed the sermon to move beyond a solely literal examination of John 11:32-44 which focuses upon the raising of Lazarus.

The third sermon utilizes several scenes from the movie Shadowlands. The movie is paired with a gospel passage where some Sadducees pose a situation that contemplates resurrection after death. After posing an unlikely hypothetical circumstance the Sadducees follow-up with a question that attempts to trap Jesus. The situation is set up by the Sadducees so that anything that Jesus says about the resurrection will sound silly. In this sermon I decided to focus upon the part of the story neglected by the Sadducees which was the theme of suffering and loss. The passages selected from the movie Shadowlands highlight the themes of physical and emotional suffering. The movie scenes also point to ways that individuals can be distant from one another. In a powerful scene drawn from the movie, Joy insists that her husband Jack should focus upon the here and now aspect of their relationship—pain and all. The passage lends itself to reflecting upon how in his ministry Jesus also focused upon the specifics of the here and now. The sermon points out that at the heart of his ministry, Jesus was open and vulnerable to the sufferings of the people that he encountered. The sermon ventures to suggest that we are called to be vulnerable and love others in a similar fashion.

The scenes from the movie A River Runs Through It used in the fourth sermon make perhaps the most direct connection to the given biblical passage (2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33;
the passage where king David learns of the death of his son Absalom). In both the movie and the scripture passage we learn that a father suffers the loss of a son. The movie scene invites reflection upon the complex nature of family relationships and how as people of faith we are called to respond to one another even when relationships are broken.

SHORT VERSES LONG VERSION OF THE SAME SERMON

For each of the four sermons, short and long versions of the movie illustration were developed. The short and long versions of the same sermon were identical except for the variation in the length of the illustrative material. For the short version of the sermons the illustrations ranged from 24% to 39% of the total sermon length (Dead Poets Society 24% [2min. 32 sec. out of 10:24]; The Shawshank Redemption 28% [3min. 11 sec. out of 11:34]; Shadowlands 33% [3min. 8 sec. out of 9:31]; A River Runs Through It 39% [3 min. 46 sec. out of 9:47]). Each of the shorter illustrations represented an effort to trim the story to its essential elements.

For the longer sermons the illustrations were expanded. More detail and context were included. For this project the expansion of illustration length was intentionally crafted to produce a significantly longer text. The longer sermon illustrations were each about two minutes longer than the shorter version (Dead Poets Society +2:13; The Shawshank Redemption +1:50; Shadowlands +2:44; A River Runs Through It +1:53). Producing two sets of sermons, identical except for illustration length, provided the opportunity to explore how listeners might respond differently to this single variable.
GROUP FORMAT

When I gathered groups together to watch four sermons and complete the surveys I worked to standardize each session. I read the same instructions, showed the sermons in the same order, allowed for the same break time, and as best I could served the same refreshments. The opening statement and instructions simply said that the project was attempting to learn more about how people respond to narrative sermons. I did not reveal that I also had an interest in learning how people might respond to sermon illustrations of significantly different lengths. I also affirmed that the data would only be used in aggregate—that individual names would not be attached to their data.

Each sermon viewing group watched two short sermons and two long sermons. In advance I created two different categories of sermon listeners. For my organizational purposes, about half of the project participants were placed in the category that were labeled the Red Groups. For each the Red Groups, sermons 1 and 3 were the versions with the short illustration length and sermons 2 and 4 were the versions with the long illustration length.

The other half of the project participants were placed in the Blue Group category. The Blue Groups watched the sermons with the opposite illustration lengths of the Red Groups. For the Blue Groups sermons 1 and 3 were the versions with the long illustration length and sermons 2 and 4 were the versions with the short illustration length. During the project I was careful not to reveal that there were two different listening group categories. I also did not reveal that two of the sermons in a single session had short illustrations, and that two by design had longer illustrations.
SURVEY DESIGN

Every Sunday clergy are likely to receive some measure of feedback from the congregation. Most preachers recognize that random unsolicited commentary is not the best method from which to draw conclusions with regard to sermon effectiveness. Moving beyond the haphazard offerings of opinion, there are many ways that one could solicit feedback regarding sermon effectiveness. Gathering together a focus group is one possibility. Another way to solicit sermon feedback would be to use in-depth interviews in an attempt to thoroughly probe the thoughts and feelings of individual listeners. Undoubtedly, each of these methods would provide useful information, but the results would be difficult to quantify. For this project, I decided to use a survey format that would allow for the collection of specific information from a relatively large number of individuals.

A traditional paper and pencil survey was developed in an attempt to collect useful information with regard to sermons that use a narrative approach. The survey questions were designed to measure both the overall effectiveness of the sermon as well as the effectiveness of the sermon illustration. Some of the questions focused simply upon the perceived length of the sermon and the length of the illustration used. Other questions focused upon the quality of the listeners experience. Since every sermon has a context, some of the questions ventured to provide useful background information.

After considering a wide range of questions the survey format was fixed at eleven questions. Three questions were posed that asked for a simple yes or no answer. Two questions asked directly if the sermon or illustration was: too short, just right, or too long. Three
questions allowed for open ended responses, and three questions utilized a rating system based upon a five point scale to measure responses. The survey format was identical for each of the four sermons. The only difference in the surveys was the reference to the specific scripture passage that the sermon was based on as well as the specific movie illustration.

The first two questions of the survey asked if the scripture passage and/or the movie illustration were familiar before hearing the sermon presented in the group session. These were important control questions since they helped to provide an insight as to whether the sermon material was presenting completely new ideas or if it was building upon previous experiences.

The third question asked directly if the sermon deepened the listener’s understanding of the gospel or scripture passage. The eleventh question asked for basically the same information that was requested in question three except the response was recorded upon a five point scale. Both questions attempted to discern if the sermon was successful as measured by a perceived deepening one’s understanding of the scripture or gospel passage. While these two questions do not provide a perfect measure of the success of a sermon, they do venture to provide a qualitative measure of each individual’s response.

Questions four and seven are open ended and encourage the listener to record specific images, phrases, or emotions related to the scripture passage, and to the film illustration. These were the least successful questions of the survey. Many responders simply left the questions blank. Anecdotally some said that it was difficult to recall specific images.
Overall, the responses to these two questions were limited with few discernible patterns emerging. Since the responses were so uneven and almost impossible to quantify, I decided to exclude these questions from my data analysis.

Questions five and six venture to learn more about the listener’s response to each specific sermon illustration. Question five asks for a response as to the effectiveness of the illustration based upon a five point scale. Question six asks directly if the length of the illustration was too short, just right, or too long. In combination these two questions should provide very useful information.

Questions eight and nine are structured exactly the same as questions five and six. These two questions relate to impressions about the overall sermon. Question eight asks about sermon length, and provides a point of comparison to question six which asks about the illustration length. Question nine asks how engaging the listener found the sermon. It is different from question eleven which asks how effective the sermon was in deepening one’s understanding of the gospel or scripture lesson. Not knowing in advance how listeners would respond I decided to ask both questions. My advance bias was that I would rather preach a sermon that ranked effective as the highest aspect, and listed engaging as a secondary measure. In truth, I would aspire to have responders rank a sermon as both highly effective and engaging.
For this project, a large volume of information was collected. Each participant in this project completed four sermon response surveys. Examining a single individual’s set of responses to four different sermons is an interesting exercise in itself. In this study however, the more useful insights were designed to be derived from an examination of the aggregate data. Of central importance in this project was the analysis of the responses of the groups who watched a short version of a sermon as compared to the responses of the groups who watched the long version of the same sermon. Given the number of survey questions asked there are many ways that one could combine data to provide insightful information. One example would be examining the data to see if there was a significant difference in the rating of the overall effectiveness of the sermon between the group who said the illustration was too long verses the group that said the illustration length was just right.

The Survey also included a set of questions that provided demographic data. These questions extended the way that the data can be analyzed. The five demographic questions included in the survey provided information regarding: age, sex, level of education, religious identification, and race. It is clear from the data collected that the respondents of this study do not comprise a representative cross section of either the Episcopal Church or the population at large. The demographics for this study were mostly older, well educated, white, Episcopalians, with more women participating than men. This however, was the group from my congregation, and other congregations in the Bay Area that showed up ready and willing to participate in my study. They were for the most part enthusiastic participants willing to contribute over an hour of their time to provide sermon feedback. At the very end of the survey I asked five questions about the participants sermon listening
experiences over the past year. These five questions were kind of an afterthought, but they provided some added insights into the sermon listening experiences of the people surveyed.

FROM SURVEY TO DATABASE AND GRAPHING RESULTS

After sermon listener responses were collected by survey the data was entered into two Excel spreadsheets. One spreadsheet contained all the data from the Red Groups. The other contained all the data collected from the Blue Groups. I considered utilizing several other programs for analyzing survey data. Some programs were attractive precisely because they were designed with an eye towards representing survey data results. In the end a the high learning curves associated with using a new database combined with the realization that every program had its own limitations—led me to stick with Excel. Out of a vast array of graphing possibilities I selected a sample of graphs that best display the project results.
Chapter Five

Sermon Project Analysis

Matthew 5:13-20 and
Dead Poets Society
When participants in this project gathered to listen and respond to four sermons, the first sermon they watched paired a text from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:13-20) with scenes from the movie *Dead Poets Society*. In crafting this sermon, my idea was to use the movie illustration to highlight how things that are commonly perceived to be tedious and boring can actually be exciting and transformative. This was the gift that the teacher in the movie, Mr. Keating, imparted to his students. I attempted to show how in affirming the Law of Moses, Jesus was likewise pointing believers toward a life of challenge, adventure, and love. The far majority of project participants were familiar with the gospel passage that was used in this sermon (Fig. 1).
There was a much more even split among sermon listeners regarding whether individuals were familiar with the film *Dead Poets Society*. In total, 48 of the project participants recorded that they were familiar with the movie before hearing the sermon. 49 participants said that illustration from *Dead Poets Society* was not familiar. Examining the split for each sermon, 41% (19/46) of the individuals who watched the short version of the sermon recorded that the film was familiar. While a larger percentage, 55% (29/53) who watched the long version of the sermon, said the film scenes were familiar (Fig. 2).

![Figure 2](image-url)
Both the long and short versions of this sermon began with a scene from the movie. The short version of the illustration took two minutes and 33 seconds to tell which was 24% of the sermon length. The long version of the illustration accounted for an extra two minutes and 11 seconds of the sermon, for a total of four minutes and 45 seconds which was 37% of total sermon length. The survey that sermon listeners completed included three questions that measured responses on a five point scale. These questions ventured to measure: story effectiveness, sermon engagement, and deepened understanding of the gospel (Fig 3). For the shorter version of this sermon, two of the three categories (story effectiveness and deepened understanding) recorded slightly higher average ratings when compared to the long version. Only in the category of sermon engagement did the long version record a higher score. This result supports the notion that a shorter story illustration would be preferable as it produces equivalent or slightly higher positive responses. The shorter length would seem to argue for greater efficiency in communication.
It is important to note that for each version of the sermon there were individuals who recorded impressions at the extremes of the rating scale. For the short version of the sermon, two individuals recorded a 1 for the effectiveness of the movie illustration, while nine individuals recorded the highest rating of 5. In the long version, only one person gave the story illustration the lowest rating of 1, while ten individuals gave a rating of 5. So while there was considerable variation in individual response, on average for the two versions of the Dead Poets Society sermons, the shorter illustration was both more concise and slightly more effective.
There were other interesting ways in which one could examine the data. Those familiar with the gospel text used in the sermon gave higher average ratings for both the short (3.73) and long (4.00) versions of the sermon (Fig. 4). By contrast individuals not familiar with the passage from Matthew’s gospel recorded lower average ratings for both versions (3.50 short, 3.36 long) of the sermon.

For the short version of this sermon, if you had previously seen *Dead Poets Society*, the average rating for deepening understanding of the gospel was actually a tiny bit lower (3.68) than for those who said that the movie was unfamiliar (3.70) (Fig 5). This data point was surprising at first, for my starting assumption was that if the scripture or film were
familiar for a group—the average ratings would be higher. The results for the longer version of the sermon confirmed my expectations. Those familiar with the movie recorded a 3.72 average ranking, which was higher than those unfamiliar with the movie, who recorded a noticeably lower average ranking of 3.46.

![Figure 5](image)

When asked to share one’s sense of the length of this pair of sermons, respondents recorded dramatic differences. For the short version of the sermon 70% (33/47) judged that the total
sermon length was just right, while 26% (17/53) recorded that the sermon was too long (Fig. 6). By contrast, for the long version of the sermon, only 32% (17/53) of the respondents thought that the sermon length was just right. The percentage who thought that the long version of the sermon was too long increased to 66% (35/53). This was a significant difference, and begins to make a case for claiming that the shorter version of the film illustration produced the more effective sermon.

![Figure 6](image_url)
For both the short and long versions of the sermon using the *Dead Poets Society* illustration, the highest ratings on average for the effectiveness in deepening an understanding of the gospel were recorded by those individuals who judged the sermon length to be just right (Fig. 7). The 33 individuals (70% of the short sermon group) who judged the short version to be just the right length gave an average rating of 3.88. The 17 individuals (32% of the group) who judged the longer version of the sermon to be just the right length gave an average rating of 3.83. These averages are fairly close, but it is notable less than half (38%) of the people listening to the longer sermon judged the length to be just right—most of the rest thought that it was too long.

**Figure 7**

Based on Perception of Sermon Length
Did the Sermon (Matt. 5:13-20/Dead Poets Society) Deepen Understanding of the Gospel?
When one looks at the groups who thought that this sermon was too long, one can see a decline in the level that the sermon was felt to deepen understanding of the gospel. While only 12 individuals (12/47 or 27%) thought the short version of the sermon was too long—that number expands to 35 individuals (35/53 or 66%) who thought that the full length version of the sermon was too long. The 17 people (33%) who said that the length of the longer sermon was just right, reported an average score of 3.83. By contrast, the 35 individuals (35/53 = 66%) who thought that the sermon was too long reported an average rating of 3.44. This was a significant drop and it reflects the experience of the majority of those who listened to the long version of the sermon.

Individuals who were happy with the length of the sermon, either the short or long versions, recorded ratings that were essentially the same. There was only a 0.05 of a point difference (3.88 short vs. 3.83 long). When one examines the reaction of those who felt that the sermon was too long, the average ratings were significantly lower (- 0.63 short, and - 0.39 long) (Fig. 7). For the longer sermon viewing group—the lower rating was shared by a much larger group (35/53 66%) who felt that the sermon too long.

In summary, there seemed to be several measurable factors that affected how this sermon resonated with listeners. On average, if a person was familiar with the gospel passage from the Sermon on the Mount the effectiveness of the sermon was rated slightly higher. Likewise, the groups who had seen the movie Dead Poets Society, recorded even higher ratings for the sermon’s quality of deepening an understanding of the gospel. On the whole, the
short version of the sermon was as effective, or more effective, with listeners than the longer version. The longer version recorded a noticeable increase in the number of people who experienced the sermon as too long. Yet, the longer version of the sermon produced at least two interesting results. The first observation is that viewers of the longer version of the sermon reported *higher* sermon engagement (3.82 vs. 3.71)(Fig. 3). The second interesting observation is when you compare the two subgroups who thought that the sermon was too long—it was the *longer* sermon, that elicited higher ratings for deepening understanding of the gospel (Fig. 7). This anomaly is something to examine in the next three sermons.
John 11:32-44 and
*The Shawshank Redemption*
This was a sermon where the far majority of listeners were familiar with the assigned gospel passage (Fig. 8). The story of the raising of Lazarus was known to over 90% of the project participants (91% of those who watched the short version of the sermon and 93% of those who watched to the long version). In crafting this sermon, my perception that the gospel was well known allowed me to move away from a simple examination of the story details. I decided to build the sermon around the words that Jesus spoke to Lazarus at the very end of the gospel reading “Unbind him, and let him go.” I felt that the *The Shawshank Redemption* was a good match as the themes of imprisonment and confinement are carried throughout the movie. In retrospect, I believe the fact that the gospel, sermon theme, and film illustrations are well matched, accounts for why this sermon received the highest average ratings for the categories that measured effectiveness on a five point scale.
The short version of this sermon was eleven minutes and 34 seconds in length with the illustration material comprising a little more than three minutes (3:11) of that total, which was 28% of the total length of the sermon. The longer version of the sermon was thirteen minutes and 24 seconds long with the narrative material from the film totaling just over five minutes (5:01). The narrative parts for the longer version amounted to 37% of the total length of the sermon.
For both the short and long versions, well over half of the participants were unfamiliar with the movie scenes used in the sermon (Fig. 9). The group of individuals who were familiar with this movie, prior to viewing the sermon, recorded higher favorable responses on average than those who had not seen the movie. This was true for both the short and long versions of the sermon (Fig. 12).

For this sermon, between the short and long sermon versions, there were not significant differences among the three areas of rating. Statistically, the average rating of the effectiveness for deepening the understanding of the gospel was the same for both the short (4.11) and long (4.13) versions of this sermon (Fig. 10). Likewise, the ratings for the effectiveness of story illustration and the engagement of the sermon were also very close (effectiveness of story: short 4.20, long 4.23; engagement of the sermon: short 4.37, long
4.29). Taken alone these results support the thesis that the length of the sermon illustration has little or no effect upon the measured effectiveness of the sermon.

For both the short and long versions of this sermon, the average ratings were higher for the groups that were familiar with the John gospel passage (Fig. 11). This group represented the largest majority of project participants familiar with the gospel before the sermon was preached (81/88). The two small subgroups (4 individuals short-version, and 3 individuals long-version) that were unfamiliar with the story of the Raising of Lazarus gave somewhat lower overall rankings. It is interesting to note that the group familiar with the gospel in the longer sermon group scored slightly higher average responses that the short sermon group.
Those familiar with the film recorded about the same level of deepened understanding for both the short and long versions of the sermon (Fig. 12). The average level of deepened understanding for those familiar with the film was measurably higher than those who were unfamiliar with the film, for both the short and long versions. In this case, the difference in the average results between those who watched the short or long version of the sermon is almost negligible. On the other hand, familiarity with the film provided a small but noticeable level of deepened understanding for both versions of the sermon.
Digging a little deeper, 85% (45/53) of people who listened to the short version of the sermon reported that the length of the sermon was just right (Fig.13). Only 4% (2/53) reported that the sermon was too short, while 11% (6/53) of the individuals who listened to the short version of the sermon said that it was too long. Interestingly, for the long version, which was almost two minutes longer, 81% (38/47) of the listeners affirmed that the length of the sermon was just right. No one reported that the sermon was too short. 17% (8/47) reported that the sermon was too long. There was one non-respondent.
The 45 individuals who thought that the short version of this sermon was just the right length recorded the highest rating for deepening understanding of the scripture for any of the four short sermons (Figs. 13 & 14). Their average response was 4.22. For the six individuals (11%) who thought that the short version of the sermon was too long, their average reported effectiveness of the sermon in deepening their understanding of the gospel dropped to 3.17. This was more than a full point below the average of those who thought the length of the sermon was just right (Fig. 14).
For the long version of the sermon, the number who thought the sermon was too long numbered eight (17%). Interestingly, the average reported effectiveness of the sermon in deepening understanding of the gospel for that group dropped to 2.88. This was a 1.5 point drop (from 4.38 to 2.88) and perhaps indicates a risk of using a longer story illustration. In this case, the number of individuals who thought the sermon was too long when compared to the short version, increased slightly and their collective measure of achieving a deeper understanding of the gospel dropped significantly. On the other hand, if one looks at the 38 individuals (81%) who reported that the long version of the sermon was just right—their collective measure of achieving a deeper understanding of the gospel increased to 4.38. That average is 0.16 higher than even those who listened to the short version of the sermon and reported the length was just right. This is an interesting way to slice the data, for it suggests that utilizing a longer illustration risks losing a slightly higher number of listeners who will get less out of the sermon. However, it has the potential to deepen the level of understanding for the rest of the listeners. This insight is not apparent if one simply looks at the averages for short verses long sermon listeners. Admittedly, the risk/reward ratio is not great and the data affirms that the longer version, on the whole, does not out perform the shorter one.

The short version of the sermon has one other interesting quality. The two individuals who said that the sermon was too short combined to produce the highest average rating for effectiveness in deepening understanding of the gospel. While the data sample is small, perhaps it argues there is a benefit for leaving the sermon listener wanting more.
Luke 20:27-38 and
Shadowlands
This sermon had perhaps the most strained connection between the Gospel passage and film illustration. The encounter where the Sadducees pose an unlikely question to Jesus and then seek to force him to articulate details about the resurrection is possibly the strangest gospel lesson assigned in the lectionary. My approach in the sermon was to contrast speculation about relationships in the afterlife with the challenge and difficulty of dealing with suffering and loss while one is living. In the movie Shadowlands, not only did C. S. Lewis talk about the themes of pain and suffering, but he entered into a marriage where his wife was dying of cancer.

One of the evaluation challenges with this pairing of scripture and movie, was that the sermon didn’t really fit in with at least one of the standardized questions that was asked at the end of each sermon. When you think about it, question 11 “On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was this sermon in deepening your understanding of the gospel?” could not be adequately addressed. The sermon addressed a concern which was the opposite of what the gospel posed. The sermon dealt with suffering in the here and now, while the gospel posed a question about life after the resurrection. Regardless of how the question was posed, individual responses as to whether the sermon deepened one’s understanding of scripture seemed to fall within the pattern of response for the other three sermons. Perhaps listeners simply responded to the question on the level of “did I learn something new related to this gospel passage.”

The short version of this sermon which included scenes from the film Shadowlands clocked in at just over nine and a half minutes (9:31) with the illustration composing 33% of the
sermon length (3:08). The longer version of the sermon ran 11:17 with the illustrative material amounting to 44% of the sermon length (4:55).

Sermon project participants reported that the passage from Luke’s gospel (Luke 20:27-38) was more familiar than I would have guessed (Fig. 15). A clear majority of sermon listeners for both the short and long versions of the sermon reported that the passage was familiar.

By contrast, the movie Shadowlands was far less familiar than the films referenced in the previous two sermons (Fig 16). More than two thirds of sermon listeners (67 out of 98 total) reported that they were unfamiliar with the movie. One of the questions that the
response survey did not answer was whether the sermon listener was familiar with the life of C. S. Lewis. The longer version of this sermon in particular dealt with themes from various writings and lectures of C. S. Lewis. The number of people unfamiliar with this movie highlights the need for the preacher to take care in retelling scenes drawn from film

so that they are accessible for the listeners who did not see the movie.

By looking across graph of the average responses for: the effectiveness of the story used in the sermon, the level that the sermon engaged listeners, and how effective the sermon was
in deepening understanding of the gospel--one can see that the shorter version out performs the longer version by a small and consistent margin (Fig. 17). While the longer version of the Shadowlands sermon does not seem to significantly diminish engagement or understanding, it is tough to argue that the added length adds to the quality of this sermon in any measurable way.

While the majority of respondents for this pair of sermons said that they were familiar with the passage from the gospel of Luke, it is interesting to note that for the shorter version of the sermon, the group that responded that they were unfamiliar with the gospel reported a slightly higher level (3.82) of deepened understanding (Fig. 18). By contrast those who
responded to the longer version of the sermon, and were unfamiliar with the gospel, reported a significantly lower rating (3.39). For both the familiar and unfamiliar categories the short version of the sermon out performed the longer version for deepened understanding of the gospel.

*Shadowlands* was the least familiar movie used in this project (68% unfamiliar with the film). Those who watched the short version of the sermon, and were unfamiliar with the film, actually recorded slightly higher ratings (3.80)(Fig. 19) than those who were familiar with the film (3.69). This was a pattern of response similar to the short sermon listeners for whom the scripture passage was unfamiliar. For those who watched the longer version
of the sermon, and were familiar with the film *Shadowlands*, there was a dramatic difference in the measure for deepened understanding of the gospel (Fig. 19). The average reported ratings were significantly higher. They were in fact dramatically higher than the ratings for the short version. Perhaps this represents the magnitude of deepened engagement for those who saw and liked this well regarded film.

Interestingly, the percentage of listeners who thought the sermon was just the right length was practically the same regardless of the length of the sermon. (Fig. 20). This is a fascinating number, because the illustrations used in the long sermon totaled almost five minutes - two minutes longer that the shorter version.

**Figure 19**
Based on Film Familiarity & Actual Sermon Length
The number of individuals who thought that the sermon was too long increased from 4% (2/47) for the short version, to 15% (8/53) for the long version of the sermon. In a data set with many small differences this is significant. Only 4% (2/47) of listeners of the short version, and less than 2% (1/53) of listeners for the long version thought the sermon length was too short.

In yet another way to slice the data (Fig. 21), the comparisons in ratings between the short and long versions of the sermon are very close. For this pair of sermons the narrative element represents the largest portion of the total sermon so far. While it is only a tiny drop off, there is a slight decline in the overall rating for the longer sermon. It is interesting
to note that the eight individuals who reported that the long version was too long, recorded a higher rating of deepened understanding than the average of the two individuals who said that the short version was too long. The two individuals who recorded that the short version was too short also provide an interesting data point. Together they produced the highest rating for this sermon. Looking across the data sets for this sermon, the shorter version emerges as slightly more efficient in evoking positive responses from listeners.
2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33 and

*A River Runs Through It*
Despite the great acclaim that accrues to Faulkner’s work *Absalom, Absalom!*, the majority of the people who watched the fourth sermon, which incorporated the tragic story of the death of David’s son Absalom, were unfamiliar (57% unfamiliar) with this scripture text (Fig. 22). For the sermon, I paired the Second Samuel scripture with scenes from the movie *A River Runs Through It*, which is about a family who also experiences the tragic loss of a son. I had the challenge of having a baptism on the day that this text from the Old Testament was assigned by the lectionary. I ventured to weave aspects of the water imagery, which occurs as a motif in the movie, into this sermon alongside the Second Samuel text.

**Figure 22**

*Number of Respondents Familiar With 2 Samuel 18:529, 15, 3-33*

- [ ] 2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33 *A River Runs - Short*  
  - Gospel/Scripture Familiar: 19  
  - Gospel/Scripture Unfamiliar: 32

- [ ] 2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33 *A River Runs - Long*  
  - Gospel/Scripture Familiar: 23  
  - Gospel/Scripture Unfamiliar: 24
The sermon that emerged from the pairing of the Second Samuel passage and scenes from *A River Runs Through It* utilized the longest narrative segments for any of the four sermons. The illustration segments for the short sermon approached four minutes in length (3:46) and composed 39% of the sermon length. For the long sermon, the illustrative material was a total of five minutes and thirty-nine seconds which was 49% of the sermon length. Similar to *Shadowlands*, the movie *A River Runs Through It* was unfamiliar to a wide majority of sermon listeners. A total of 64% (62/97) of those who responded had not seen the film (Fig 23). A slightly lower percentage of those who watched the short sermon were familiar with the movie (33% vs. 39%) than those who watched the longer version.
In several ways this pair of sermons was unique. As already mentioned, both the short and long versions contained the longest narrative sections when compared to the other three sermons. Almost half of the longer version was composed of narrative material. This was also the only pairing of scripture with film illustrations where the longer version of the sermon received, across all three categories that were measured with a five point scale, higher ratings (Fig. 24).

The category of story effectiveness showed the largest difference and was 0.61 higher for the longer sermon. The extent to which the sermon engaged listeners was 0.31 higher for the longer sermon, while the average level to which the longer sermon deepened understanding of the scripture passage was 0.27 higher. The only other example from this project where the quantitative ratings for the longer sermon were even close to exceeding the
shorter—was the sermon that paired John’s gospel with illustrations from *The Shawshank Redemption*. For that pair of sermons, the differences were measured by hundredth’s not tenth’s.

The story about king David and the death of his son Absalom, used as the principal preaching text, presents a challenge for attempting see if the sermon deepens one’s understanding of the scripture. In some ways this text is very binary. A father loses his son and experiences grief. One might ask: how much more room is there for understanding this passage? It raises the question: “Is understanding of scripture deepened simply by exploring the grief that a father experiences in losing a son?” Perhaps this explains why

![Figure 25](image)

*Figure 25*

Deepened Understanding of 2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33 Based on Gospel/Scripture Familiarity & Actual Sermon Length

for this sermon, the individuals who were unfamiliar with the scripture passage recorded a deepened understanding at a higher level than those who were familiar with the text (Fig. 25)! It simply may have been the first time that these textual newcomers encountered the
story and had been encouraged to think about it—thereby deepening their understanding of the scripture passage. It is also possible that there are other explanations for why those who were unfamiliar with the scripture text registered such high ratings. This cut of the data also points to the longer version of the sermon resonating at a slightly higher level than the shorter one (Fig. 24).

**Figure 26**

Deepened Understanding of 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 Based on Film Familiarity

![Bar chart showing deepened understanding of 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33 based on film familiarity.]

The minority of project responders, who were familiar with the film *A River Runs Through It*, showed a mixed response with regard to the question of achieving a deepened understanding of the scripture (Fig. 26). For the short version of the sermon, those familiar with
the film recorded the lowest average response. By contrast, for the longer version, those familiar with the film recorded the highest level of deepened understanding by far. The individuals unfamiliar with the film also recorded a mixed response.

Similar to two of the other three sermons, the far majority of project participants felt that whether they listened to the short or long version of the sermon, the length was just right. A slightly higher percentage of project participants reported that the longer version of the sermon was too long (13%, 4/47 verses 8%, 4/51). This also happened to be the lone sermon pair where not a single person reported that either the short version or long version were too short.

Figure 27
Reported Perception of Sermon Length
2 Samuel 18:5-9,15,31-33/A River Runs Through it
Cutting the data according to the perceived length of the sermon shows two interesting things (Fig. 28). First, for the individuals who thought that either the short sermon or the long sermon were just the right length, the longer sermon recorded a moderately higher score (+0.46). The other thing that the graph shows is that the risk of preaching a sermon with a longer illustration is that a larger portion (in this case slightly larger) will feel that the sermon is too long and the rating for that group will slip. Considering the wide majority that felt that both the short and long versions of the sermon were just the right length, one would have to say that the longer version of this sermon out performed the shorter version. The added length was clearly a benefit for most listeners.

![Figure 28](image-url)
Chapter Six

Sermon Project Final Summary
Collecting and interpreting data from a total of eight narrative sermons was a challenging task. The four pairs of sermons were each very different from one another. Each pair merited close analysis in an attempt to understand what people responded to in the sermons. Of particular interest were differences caused in listener perception based upon the illustration length. Having examined each sermon pair individually, it is helpful to display the data from all four sermon pairs together on one graph. The following seven graphs are presented in the same order used for the examination of the sermon pairs in Chapter five. Several consistent patterns emerge along with a few easily discernible exceptions.

Overall the project participants indicated that they were fairly familiar with the scripture passages used in the four sermon pairs (Fig. I). Fairly predictably, the Matthew and John selections were well known, the Luke and 2 Samuel selections were less well known. Only
the group viewing the short version of the 2 Samuel sermon had a large majority who were unfamiliar with the text.

In contrast to familiarity with scripture, the majority of listeners were unfamiliar with the films that were mentioned in the sermons. Only the group who watched the longer sermon using material from *Dead Poets Society* recorded a majority familiar with the film (Fig. II).

**Figure II**  
Number of Respondents Familiar With the Film Referenced In All Sermons

Having established the participants background knowledge in the areas of scripture and film familiarity, it is interesting to see how each group rated aspects of the sermon based upon the three survey questions that used a five point rating scale (Fig. III). One can discern a general pattern that the overall the ratings for short and long versions of the same sermon are pretty close. In the sermon that pairs Luke with the movie *Shadowlands* the
The short version of the sermon is rated higher on average in all categories. The pairing of the 2 Samuel text with the illustration from *A River Runs Through It* is the lone example where the longer version of the sermon outperforms the shorter one on all counts. The first two pairs of sermons demonstrate mixed responses that fall within a very close range.

![Figure III](image)

Familiarity with the biblical text used in the sermon was a variable that fairly predictably produced higher aggregate ratings for deepened understanding of the scripture passage. The group familiar with a scripture passage registered slightly higher levels in the majority of instances (Fig. IV). The margin was not so wide however, as to indicate that unfamiliarity with scripture was a significant impediment to engaging with the sermons in a meaningful way.
In a similar way, advance familiarity with the film used in the sermon illustration also seemed a minor factor in contributing to a deepened understanding of the scripture (Fig. V). The notable exception was with the sermon that paired 2 Samuel with illustrations from the movie *A River Runs Through It*. That sermon deployed the longest narrative section (5:39 which was 49% of the sermon length) and not only registered the highest level of deepened understanding (for the group familiar with the movie), but also showed the greatest disparity between those familiar and unfamiliar with the film. This single sermon points out the possibility that a longer narrative illustration may have the potential to deepen listener understanding, but it also carries the risk of losing a small portion of the listening group and diminishing their sermon experience.
The sermons used in this project ranged in length from about nine and a half minutes to almost almost thirteen and a half minutes in length. The illustration materials used in the longer version of the sermons added about two minutes on average. When asked directly to comment about the perceived length of each sermon, the far majority of listeners said that the overall sermon length was just right (Fig VI). This was true even for the longer sermons. The glaring exception was the long version of the sermon that used material from Dead Poets Society. Since the illustration length was the only variable that changed, it is clear that in the longer version of the Dead Poets Society sermon, listeners felt that both the illustration and sermon were too long. Conversely, the overall data shows that sermon listeners in this project were not overly distressed by a few minutes of added length.
For six out of the eight sermons, the groups who perceived the sermon length to be just right recorded the highest levels of deepened understanding (Fig. VII). A close relationship between these two factors makes intuitive sense. It was surprising to discover that in two cases, the individuals who thought the sermon was too short, recorded much higher levels of deepened understanding of the scripture passage (John/Shawshank—short 4.5 and Luke/Shadowlands—short 4.0). Admittedly, this category was based upon a very small sample size, but it perhaps speaks to a very positive experience where the sermon listener is left wanting more.
Except for the case of the longer version of the sermon that used illustrations from the film *Dead Poets Society*, only small numbers of individuals recorded that the sermons they listened to were too long (Fig. VI). This was true even for the longer version of the sermons. However, for the handful of respondents who did record that a sermon was too long, in most every case there was a significant drop off in the effectiveness of the sermon as measured by deepening understanding (Fig. VII).

The case of the longer version of the sermon that combined the text from 2 Samuel with the film *A River Runs Through It* is particularly interesting. In this instance, the group who thought the longer version of the sermon was just the right length--recorded significantly higher results than those who liked the length of the shorter sermon. This was the only case where the longer version of the sermon scored significantly higher (the sermon that
combined John’s Gospel with *The Shawshank Redemption* recorded only a slightly higher score) than the shorter version.

**Using Narrative Sermons Moving Forward**

When I began this project, I had the idea that narrative sermons that used a longer story, might deepen the listener’s emotional connection to the whole sermon in a way that sermons with shorter stories do not. In reviewing much of what was said in the literature about narrative preaching there was a consistent theme of shorter is better. This ranged from David Buttrick’s advice that an illustration be no more than six sentences in length,⁹ to the reflections of Bruce Salmon who advised “let the thirty-second television commercial, not the two-hour feature-length movie, be our guide.”¹⁰ In each case, neither claim was supported by empirical data.

From this project it is clear that long illustrations can communicate with listeners effectively. Even the short sermons in this project deployed narratives that ranged in length from two and a half to almost four minutes. In two cases, the longer version of a sermon elicited responses that rated equal to or higher than the short version (Fig. III). The sermon that combined the scripture story of the raising of Lazarus with scenes from the movie *The

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⁹ Buttrick, p. 147.
¹⁰ Salmon, p. 41.
Shawshank Redemption, was arguably the most effective in this project. The long version of this sermon utilized over five minutes of narrative material.

When one looks at the collected data from all eight sermons one notices that on the whole the shorter versions were more efficient in connecting with the sermon listener. On average the longer versions of the sermons rated slightly lower. The sermon that paired the 2 Samuel reading with the film A River Runs Through It stands out as an exception. Not only did the longer version of the sermon out perform the shorter in all three of the measured categories (story effectiveness, sermon engagement, deepened understanding of scripture--Fig. III), but the narrative component comprised almost half of the sermon length. Another interesting aspect of this sermon was that for the handful of individuals who felt the sermon was too long—the rating of deepened understanding of the scripture dropped significantly (Fig. VII). From this single example it seems clear that sermons with longer illustrations may have the potential to reach deeper levels of engagement and understanding, but they also run a greater risk of listener drop-off—that a small portion of listeners will experience a measurably diminished listening experience (Fig. VII).

Looking ahead to my future preaching, I will continue to look for occasions to pair scripture passages with scenes from movies. It is clear that the use of imagery from film is positively received, and that listeners were not just engaged by a good story. They also recorded an experience of deepened understanding of scripture. I am confident that using a two and a half to three and a half minute illustration will continue to serve my congregation very well and that this type of narrative sermon can be very effective in communicating the gospel.
By extension, I also believe that stories from many other sources can be profitably used to produce effective narrative sermons.

For this project I selected four sermons out of many that I had preached where I used illustrations from movies. It was a challenge to find four sermons that would neatly lend themselves to being crafted into both a long and short version. When I originally preached the sermon that used material from the film *Dead Poets Society* it was at its maximum length. This sermon clearly benefited from paring down the narrative material. Selecting sermons for this project highlighted the fact that there is not a formulaic process that matches film to scripture text, and that it is not always obvious exactly how much material to include in the sermon. Moving forward I have a better sense that it is safe to gravitate toward the three minute length for an illustration. However, for the right pairing of scripture and film scene(s) (or any other narrative material), I will be unafraid on occasion, to use up to five minutes of narrative text if I think the situation is right.

This project has prompted me to be more attentive during my movie viewing—to be on the lookout for scenes and themes that might assist and compliment future sermons. I learned from this project that a film need not be one that is familiar to the congregation to successfully serve a homiletic purpose. The key is to select an engaging story. Learning the extent to which stories used in film are crafted and shaped to maximize their emotional impact, has heighted my interest in looking to movies to provide engaging narratives. With the
ability of the film industry to dedicated considerable resources to storytelling and screen-writing—I am confident that film will continue to be a rich source from which to draw sermon material.

Another thing that I learned from this project is the value of sermon feedback. While I am not likely to ever launch a project of this magnitude again—I can envision selecting a couple of Sundays over the course of the year to gather a group to parishioners and asking them a series of questions about their listening experience. In such a setting, I will be relieved of the pressure of attempting to control every aspect of the listening experience. I will simply want to continue to gain insights as to what makes a given sermon effective.

The limitations of this project are obvious. It relies on the narrative sermons of one preacher and evaluations completed by a very skewed demographic of project participants. In addition, filling out surveys only scratches the surface of examining the many complexities that influence an individual’s response to a sermon. That being said, this project has provided some valuable insights into how narrative sermons are received by listeners. It is my hope that future investigation might build upon the work of this project.
ABBREVIATIONS


Sermon Texts

Eight Sermons Used for Project

Short and Long Versions Combined
(Short Version—omits blue text, adds green text)
(Long Version—entire text, except green text)
Sermon preached by the Reverend Eric Kimball Hinds at The Episcopal Church of Saint Matthew, San Mateo, California, on 9 February 2014, The Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany, Year A. Lessons: Isaiah 58:1-9a (9b-12); Psalm 112:1-9(10); Corinthians 2:1-12 (13-16); Matthew 5:13-20.

Preparing for a time honored ritual a mother makes the final adjustment of her son’s tie. A bagpiper assembles his pipes. A senior faculty member reviews the order of events—ensuring the uniformity of a time worn ritual. Outside the chapel a procession has formed which includes boys carrying four banners. They read: TRADITION, HONOR, DISCIPLINE, & EXCELLENCE. All in all it appears a stuffy, even pompous, opening convocation for an elite preparatory school.

It is the opening scene from the 1989 Movie Dead Poet’s Society, and after the opening convocation the film follows the schedule for the first day of class. Boys file into class. Chemistry first, then Latin, followed by Trigonometry. As an observer you can almost taste the stale academic air surrounding ancient and dusty textbooks—matched with a suffocating feeling fostered by fossilized teachers who by rote put young minds to sleep.

And so one has low expectations for the 20 boys seated at their desks for the start of English class when the teacher, Mr. Keating, makes his appearance at the front of the room, and then walks to the back of the room, where he silently signals the boys to follow. They gather in the hallway in front of the display case documenting the exploits of graduates of past generations.

For the first day of junior year English, Mr. Keating gathers his class in front of a display case documenting the exploits of graduates of past generations. It is an early scene from the 1989 movie Dead Poets Society.

A student is asked to read the first stanza of the poem To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time by Robert Herrick

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles today
To-morrow will be dying

Mr. Keating explains that the latin form for that sentiment is: Carpe Diem which translates to “Seize the Day.” Mr. Keating then asks his students “Why does the author use those words?” And when the boys are hesitant to offer an explanation he says “Because we are food for worms lads. Because believe it or not—everyone of us in this room are going to stop breathing--turn cold--and die.” Knowing that he has their attention, Mr. Keating (Their teacher) then invites his class “to step forward [over here] and peruse some of the faces
from the past.” He observes that “you’ve walked past them many times but I don’t think you have really looked at them”

Mr. Keating continues “They are not that different from you are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones--just like you. Invincible--just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe that they are destined for great things--just like many of you. Their eyes are full of hope--just like you. Did they wait until it was too late--to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? And then Mr Keating says “But If you listen real close you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on--lean in--listen--do you hear it? Caaaaaar paaay [Stage wisper], Caaaaar paaaaay [louder], Carpaaaaaaay Deimm! Seize the day--boys. Make your lives extraordinary!”

As inspiring are the lessons from the English classroom of Mr Keating--there is little or no reference to a life of faith--or the Christian Vocation. In our world there are some circles where if you choose to identify yourself as a Christian--people will look at you kind of funny. One assumption is that by proclaiming yourself a Christian, you have self-identified as being a part of group that can be described as goodie-two shoes--stick-in the mud kill-joys, who are against most means of having fun. Melba toast tea totalers--amused by the most inane entertainments. In other circles, the label Christian conjures up an inflexible and rigid ideology--belief that pronounces immediate judgement upon the decisions and lifestyles of others.

Both images are of course unfair caricatures of Christian thought and practice. And so we might ask the question “What does it mean to be a faithful Christian?” “To be religious at the core of our being?” It is not a new question--it was in fact an active question--a question of considerable importance during the life and ministry of Jesus

In this morning’s gospel passage we heard Jesus make reference to the Scribes and Pharisees, and even for those who are not biblical scholars, the mention of Scribes and Pharisees conjures up notions of strict adherence to the law--blind traditionalists--frozen in their adherence to a rigid and unyielding set of laws that bind and constrict the human soul.

Isn’t that what Jesus railed against? Wasn’t Jesus at odds with the Scribes and the Pharisees? Isn’t that who he broke away from? In order to set the religious heart free? Well that all sounds well and good until we read this morning that Jesus affirms that “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”

How is that possible? The Scribes made it their life work to copy and write the Law--and the Pharisees were lay folk dedicated to the observance of the law. How is one to exceed--their dedication? That not only sounds difficult, but tedious, onerous and boring!

Well we can begin to contemplate what Jesus might be getting at by observing that part of the answer must lie in the notion that in his day there was something scandalous about being a follower of Jesus. Of His being willing to reach and stretch for something new. It is important to note that Jesus did not teach his followers that they should take Judaism lightly. And Jesus did not say that one should be careless with regard to their conduct.
Rather, Jesus steadily and consistently expanded the circle of care and compassion with his followers; reaching out not only to those isolated by circumstance and misfortune: the infirm, the sick, & the Poor; but also taking it upon themselves to reach out and embrace even to those who by their choices and behavior placed themselves at odds with accepted religious expression.

It is Good News for us that it his core Jesus did not seem to be embarrassed by Humanity! Rather, Jesus saw every occasion as an opportunity to invite those who had lost their way-into a richer and deeper life of relationship and meaning. If despised Tax collectors, sordid and tawdry prostitutes, and other notorious sinners--found with Jesus an open invitation to experience and participate in community---living into the fullness of a life and faith with the love of God squarely in the center--then how much more is there a place for each one of us--with our unique combination of gifts, foibles and flaws--to be a part of God’s life giving community?

Jesus was both: accepting and demanding; loving and forceful; traditional yet creative--always demanding our full Attention. The 20th Century contemplative, Thomas Merton, put it this way

*If a man is to live, he must be all alive, body, soul, mind, heart,(and) spirit.* *(Thoughts in Solitude)*

Each of us have had the experience of how education can be drudgery--A tedious and boring exercise that leaves the learner feeling: discouraged, empty, and unfulfilled. By contrast we know that learning can also be a liberating breath of fresh air. Jesus invited his followers--invites us today, into a deeper relationship with God. To a life of adventure!

Jesus understood that the goal of faith & the law is not to control--and hold down but to liberate the Human Spirit.*To Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,* is to see that life is filled with possibility. That seizing every Day is a part of our Christian Vocation--Where we become the salt of the earth--opening up great possibilities and expanding the circle of Christ’s scandalous, abundant and enduring love.
Sermon preached by The Reverend Eric Kimball Hinds at The Episcopal Church of Saint Matthew, San Mateo, California on 4 November 2012, The Feast of All Saints.

In his prelude to predicting that the Tigers would win the World Series in 5 Games--USA Today reporter Bob Nightengale observed that the Detroit players could only be amused by the antics of the Giants--But even a doubting Nightengale had to reach back to biblical imagery to put into proper context the play-off heroics of the men in Orange and Black. He observed that “they (Detroit) saw the San Francisco Giants pull off their Lazarus act time and time again, winning a record six consecutive elimination games, and become overnight media darlings.”

LAZARUS--The poster child for all signs of life gone. A man who flatlined, became a stiff corpse, and passed out of this world. A man pronounced dead--then wrapped in burial cloth and placed in the tomb--whose decomposition after only 4 days, already created a stench. The dead man—Lazarus provides the occasion to demonstrate the most astounding of miracles. At the command of Jesus he breaks the bonds of death--and Lazarus emerges to embrace the land of the living.

The story of the raising of Lazarus is an interesting one to assign for the feast of All Saints. At one level the story blurs the line between the living and the dead—and by referencing our mortality it invites us to contemplate the generations--the great cloud of faithful witnesses--that have lived and died and gone before us. And by thinking of that long line of saints, the heroic and ordinary ones--the saints we sing about today--then we also see why baptism, our means of grafting a new person into that great company--is so fitting for this day the feast of All Saints. At another level the story of Lazarus raises profound questions. What should be our response when a loved one dies? Is it reasonable, or even healthy for one--rather than to accept death to wish that the person were still alive?

In this Gospel story the words and action of Jesus provide an ambiguous answer--for while Jesus clearly grieves the death of his friend Lazarus, and the gathered group observes him weeping, Jesus makes it clear that it is not because of their grief over the death of Lazarus--or even for their Love that he decides to intervene. Rather, Jesus says to Martha “Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?” and then speaking to his heavenly Father Jesus says “...I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.”

And so it seems that the main purpose of Jesus calling forth Lazarus is not to reunite loved ones or to put aside their grief--but rather the purpose of the miracle is to affirm belief through a manifestation of God’s Glory--an ultimate proclamation that Jesus was sent by God. As told by John this story stands as a spectacular demonstration of God’s power over the whole realm of life and death--and it affirms that Jesus is in constant communion with God. The Challenge for modern day Christians, with a miracle story of the magnitude of the raising of Lazarus, is that while for a first hand witness the event could not help but to rivet one’s attention and provide a compelling springboard for belief--but for individuals removed from the event by almost 2 millennia—it can seem more like a side show than an
event central to the proclamation of the Gospel good news. And yet there are other aspects of this amazing story that grasp hold of the listener still--including the utterance of Jesus as Lazarus emerges from the prison of the tomb--“Unbind him, and let him Go!”

The command “Unbind Him” could simply refer to the burial cloth used to wrap a body before burial--but Perhaps at a deeper level of engagement with this story--the phrase “Unbind him” allows us to understand Jesus as proclaiming complete authority of the Gospel to liberate Lazarus--and each and every one of us--from all that binds us. Unbind him and us—from the snares of life that entangle and imprison us in bonds sometimes as strong as death.

One of my favorite movies--The Shawshank Redemption involves the theme of imprisonment. The movie, based upon a novella by Steven King, and it describes prison life in Shawshank, a fictional correctional house in the State of Maine. One of the disturbing aspects of the movie is that it is brutal in its portrayal of the violence, starkness and drudgery of prison life. It is difficult to watch the movie without experiencing some level of the despair and futility of the prisoners all serving long hard time.

From the start one learns that Andy--the central character has been wrongly imprisoned—And his innocence does not protect him from the hardships of an institution that reduces life to the routine of grey bleak walls in perpetuity. Andy eventually makes friends with another inmate known as Red who describes life at Shawshank this way. He observes: At first you can’t stand those four walls, then you get used to them, then you depend upon them, and then you get to love them.

As one watches the movie and contemplates Andy’s predicament it begins to dawn of the viewer that the institutionalization of prison could be taken as a metaphor for the routine of everyday life. That perhaps, like prisoners, we can come to depend a bit too much upon predictable routines and institutions, that our ways of thinking about the world can become narrow and restricted, letting the walls of conformity limit our thought about who we are--or even who we can become--

And that we are ever in danger of thinking more about our own selfish needs rather than about the lives of others. It is an unnerving thought to contemplate that aspects of our everyday ordinary life--by their familiarity and our uncritical acceptance may actually Bind and constrain us. While serving his undeserved time in prison Andy could easily have descended into a survival mode looking out only for himself--that is why one of my favorite scenes of the movie is when Andy manages to subvert the guards and lock himself in room the room that houses the prison public address system. All alone and without anyone to stop him Andy places a Mozart record on the turntable, and turns up the volume of the microphone so that all of Shawshank, prisoners and guards alike, are given an experience of listening to a portion of The Marriage of Figaro. Andy’s friend Red put it this way & said I have no idea to this day what those two Italian Ladies were singing about--Truth is, I don’t want to know, some things are best left unsaid. I like to think they were singing about
something so beautiful that it can’t be put into words and makes your heart ache because of it. I tell you those voices Soared--higher and farther that anybody in a great place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made those walls dissolve away--and for the briefest of moments, every last man in Shawshank felt free. One realizes in that moment that through his actions Andy is able to Live and to Be for others. His spirit is able to soar, and in giving to others Andy’s life has meaning, especially through his ability to set the others free.

One of the images connected to the waters of Baptism is a death of sorts submerging under water brings to mind a drowning--a death to a life of self-centeredness and the beginning of a relationship with God and with the people of God. Emerging from the waters of Baptism marks a new beginning--alive to all the possibilities of a journey lived with and for Christ. It initiates a relationship with the creative force of the universe that is always connected to hope and possibility--and ever calls us to shed the bonds and shackles of doubt, fear and limitation--and a life lived only for one’s self.

When Andy eventually breaks out of prison, he emerges from a sewer pipe into a stream of water with rain pouring down from the heavens. For one long glorious moment Andy looks up to heaven with both arms upraised alive to the new possibilities before him. For a Christian the baptismal imagery is unmistakable. In Baptism a new life opens for us.

It is as if the words spoken to Lazarus are spoken to us “Unbind him and let him go” speaks to our deepest desire to be free of all that is not of the Goodness of God, and to be a person with and for others--able to fully embrace a life called forth by the Creative Voice of God.

Some things forever stick in your mind--and back from the days when I taught Sunday School I still remember the lesson plan which provided some historical background to explain the differences between the major Jewish religious sects that existed during the life of Jesus. In describing each group the preparatory materials mentioned how the Sadducees, the group mentioned in today’s Gospel, did not believe in the resurrection of the dead. And then the material provided the corny line that I still remember: “They did not believe in the resurrection that is why the are Sad--You--See”

As it turns out--understanding the religious perspective of the Sadducees is kind of important for understanding this mornings gospel passage. Of all the religious questions that have been posed for Jesus to answer--this morning’s gospel utilizes one of the strangest scenarios in an attempt to force an uncomfortable answer.

First of all, the question makes reference to an arcane aspect of the law of Moses. It is a law whose existence argues against our simply identifying practices found in the pages of the Old Testament and claiming that they are sanctioned by God for all time. We find the obligation of a brother to conceive and raise children with his sister-in-law in the event that his brother dies, to be an awkward, even an embarrassing practice, that comes to us from the Old Testament. We could this morning consume an enormous amount of time examining the cultural context of a practice that was above all designed to ensure the survival of one’s tribe and lineage into the next generation, but the scenario proposed, rather than seeking a genuine answer, attempts to suggest a situation that forces an admission that the notion of life after death is silly on the face of it.

The proposed story is so strange, with concluding question of “Which of the seven brothers will be the husband of the woman in the resurrection?” that we almost lose sight of the fact that within the imagined story seven individuals die. That’s seven funerals, seven catastrophic events for a widow to survive. More pain, suffering, and loss--than most of us could imagine or endure. And we should note that rather than Jesus having as a primary concern--the proclamation of the quality of life after death--Jesus spent the far majority of his life and ministry proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is in the here and now, breaking into our very midst, even though we live in a world with unfairness, suffering, and pain.

Most of us I suspect were born into Christian families and grew up--and grew into--a life of faith. I am always fascinated by individuals, who after living for some time as an atheist, convert as adults to the Christian faith. The confirmed atheist, Oxford professor C.S. Lewis, was perhaps an unlikely candidate--to not only become a Christian, but to become a noted apologist for the Christian faith. Lewis in fact became immensely popular for his ability to explain aspects of Christian theology and faith. And so Lewis moved from a person who would have found the posing of the question in this morning’s Gospel amusing and of little or no consequence when he was an atheist--to a person willing to engage with the challenges and complexity of Christian faith lived out in the world.

In an early scene from the movie Shadowlands, a movie about a part of his adult life, Lewis demonstrates his willingness to contemplate human suffering when at a lecture he recounts
the recent events of a tragic bus accident in London where 24 young cadets were killed. He asks his audience “Where was God? Isn’t God supposed to be good? Does God want us to suffer?” And then Lewis continues and reflects “I’m not sure that God’s primary concern is our happiness...[God] wants us to be able to love and be loved. [God] wants us to grow up.” And then in a famous turn of phrase Lewis asserts that “…pain is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.” In the final metaphor of his lecture, Lewis likens us to blocks of stone with God the sculptor carving the human form. He concludes his talk by saying “The blows of God’s chisel which hurt so much--are what make us perfect.”

There is much in Lewis’s talks and writings to contemplate, and yet for all his talk about suffering, one learns, at least in the movie, that Lewis has done much to shelter and protect himself from a depth of life that would expose himself to emotional vulnerability and pain. This all changes when he meets the American Joy Gresham. Joy comes to see the walls that C.S. Lewis erected around his heart and how he has essentially isolated himself in a world of books and ideas.

Similar to the marriages of this morning’s gospel story C.S. Lewis marries Joy (secretly) out of a sense of obligation--in this case, to extend to her British citizenship. It is only when Joy is diagnosed with cancer that Lewis begins to discover the depth of the feelings that he has developed for her. This is a turning point in a their relationship--one that many of us recognize, and in one way or another will have to face one day.

The safe thing for Lewis to do would have been to keep his distance and turn away, but instead Lewis opens his heart and allows himself to be vulnerable--and to not count the cost of future loss. Lewis decides to marry Joy in a public religious ceremony, and during a period of remission form the cancer he and Joy take a trip together out in the English countryside.

Jack--as Joy has come to call Lewis is enthralled by the closeness and the beauty of their time together. He wants to savor every moment. It is Joy who comes out and says “You know it’s not going to last.” To which Jack responds “We shouldn’t think about that now--let’s not spoil the time we have together.” And then Joy shares a profound insight. She says “It doesn’t spoil it--it makes it real!” In the midst of acknowledging that she is going to die Joy asserts that the pain of her death--is actually a part of their joy now. It is as if to say--we risk love despite the cost, knowing the cost--and that is something like the way God loves the world.

In his life and ministry Jesus consistently, unfailingly, extended himself--ever reaching out to embrace others--without ever counting the cost. His love was extravagant, and when he was once directly questioned by his disciples about the time after death, Jesus simply affirmed that“...I go to prepare a place for you--that where I am, there you may be also.”

We are not usually given the knowledge of the time of our death--and Jesus provided few details about the resurrection, but what Jesus did do was dedicate an enormous amount of time and energy to living a life characterized by an abundance of care and compassion. A life characterized by a willingness to risk and to love with abandon. Jesus demonstrated
that the life of the gospel--is the only life worth living, and He ever invites us to follow, without counting the cost--without ever stopping first to ask questions about how it all works out in the end.

Sermon preached by The Reverend Eric Kimball Hinds at The Episcopal Church of Saint Matthew, San Mateo, California on 12 August 2012 at 9:00am, The Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost. Lessons: 2 Samuel 18:5-9, 15, 31-33; Psalm 130; Ephesians 4:25-5:2; John 6:35, 41-51.

At the start of the Movie A River Runs Through It there is a scene where the father of the Maclean family, who is a Presbyterian Minister, walks with his two young boys between Sunday services along the river that runs through town. It is an idyllic scene with majestic mountains providing a backdrop for the walk along the edge of a slow, gently burbling
section of river. In the course of their walk the father picks up a piece of river rock and pointing to the textured pattern of the surface he explains that “Long ago rain fell upon mud and it became rock--half a billion years ago” Then he adds “But even before that--beneath the rocks--are the words of God.” And then he simply invites them to listen to the sounds of the river.

As the movie unfolds we learn of the importance of the river to Father and sons. The river is the place where the father taught the boys to fly fish--and fishing becomes a bond and lifelong passion. The river is also the favorite site for their father to pass on wisdom of the Christian faith--of course emphasizing that Christ’s disciples were fishermen. It was a mix of church and outdoors that allows Norman, the older son, to later write that “In our family there was no clear line between religion and fly fishing.”

The image of a river reminds me that the first baptisms took place outdoors, with baptismal candidates wading out from the banks edge to water waist high or deeper, there to be fully immersed in the running water of the river. It was the great Christian writer Tertullian who in the second century said “Christians are made not born” And there is a way I think that the setting of the great outdoors “God’s cathedral of the natural world,” provides a context for expanding our notion of the significance of baptism, of highlighting that baptism is the beginning of forging a lifelong relationship with a God who is involved in all of creation.

While it may be impractical for us to head out to the bay or to seek out the surf of the Pacific for our baptismal celebrations, some have observed that for something as important as the making of a new Christian--in our liturgy we place an enormous amount of symbolic weight upon three small scoops of water. While I believe that at St. Matthew’s we have been successful in creating a rite of beauty and substance--our taming, or domestication, of the sacrament of baptism--risks our losing touch with the depth and power of the event we gather to celebrate this morning. What is unmistakable however, in our approach baptism is that it takes place in the very midst of this gathered community, and today it is at the heart of our common worship together.

Liturgical scholar Aidan Kavanagh asserts that “Sacraments...enable new dimensions of meaning to be discovered in and beyond their proper contexts” And this insight alerts us to the notion that we can profit from an intentional effort to deepen our understanding of our common sacramental life.

In another early scene from the movie A River Runs Through It the Maclean brothers sneak out of their house late at night to join three friends who have commandeered a family car. In the midst of their clandestine, nocturnal, camaraderie Paul, the younger Maclean brother, announces both an invitation and challenge to the group--to borrow a neighbors boat and to ride “the chute” an imposing section of whitewater on the Big Blackfoot River. It is a scene that we recognize as a ritual of adolescence, the beginning of rebellion and asserting independence from parents and from rules.

A wave of enthusiasm envelops the five boys, and by dawn they manage to place the “borrowed” old row boat on a bank of the river upstream from the falls. Above the falls the roar of rushing water is daunting. The river is wild, and frothing, far beyond human
control--and what seemed like a great opportunity for adventure--now seems foolhardy. Only Paul, (played by Brad Pitt) who is as gregarious and likable as he is impulsive, always living life on the edge, remains undaunted for making the whitewater run. One by one the friends back out, and against his better judgement, Paul’s older brother Norman, reluctantly agrees to venture down the river as a show of solidarity with his brother--an attempt to maintain a fraternal bond which continues to fray throughout the rest of the movie.

On that day, to the disbelief of their companions the brothers somehow survive the run through the falls. In our journey to the baptismal font it is easy to lose sight of the dangerous aspects of water, of the way that submersion under the surface brings to mind the danger of drowning--and in fact baptism speaks of a death of sorts to one’s solidarity self. If we apply baptismal imagery to the emergence of the Maclean brothers from the waters of a raging river--then we also see that our baptism is not an inoculation, a spell that will protect us from all danger and conflict, rather it is a promise that God travels with us in our life journey.

Paul and Norman’s conflicts with one another and their competition for their parents love--is a universal story as old as Cain and Able. We encounter a variation of the story this morning in our first lesson where we discover a father--King David and his Son--Absalom leading opposing armies on the field of battle. It perhaps goes without saying that the journey to such a point is filled with family heartache and events that have spiraled out of control. By the end of this morning’s lesson it is David the King who must shoulder the death of a son who has turned against him. With this story I wonder how things started out between David and his son? They were a Royal Family. I wonder if David had a chance to play with Absalom as a young boy? Did he get to ride in a chariot or tag along to inspect the troops with his dad? Were they allowed any quiet times together? And I wonder in the end how David dealt with his grief?

If you saw the movie A River Runs Through It then you know that the parents, like king David, also tragically lose their son. He became lost in a world of gambling and drink. Norman the older brother for years agonized over how he could help his younger brother. In providing a partial answer to the question Paul acknowledges that even though much concern and assistance is destined to fail--maybe the person still gains some comfort from knowing that someone is trying to help. In a sermon, preached after the death of his son, Norman’s father reflects that even when our help fails we are still able to love--to love others completely even without understanding.

By the end of the movie one realizes that the river is a metaphor variously signifying: Grace, Redemption and the Word and Love of God. The river runs through and unites the lives of Father, Mother, and both sons. Extending the metaphor to baptism we can observe that a young preacher from Nazareth embraced baptism in a river to mark the beginning of a remarkable life that was drenched with the love of God.

Baptism marks our beginning--an event that embraces the full complexity of human life and affirms that through all our joys and celebration, through even the toils, snares and
stumbles of one’s life--the abiding love of God is to be found running like a river—right through the middle of our life.

Sermon Surveys

Preaching Project Introduction
(read before viewing the first sermon)

Four Sermon Surveys & Demographic Form
Sewanee Preaching Project Introduction

To be read to the entire group who have volunteered to participate in the sermon listening and response study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a research project designed to learn more about how individuals respond to sermons. Today you will listen to a total of four sermons that have been previously recorded. Each of the four sermons use a narrative approach. Narrative sermons are ones that use some form of story to assist in conveying the meaning of the sermon. The story element could be drawn from a personal story, the news, literature, film, or popular culture. Each of these four sermons utilize stories that come from movies. Before each sermon is shown—the most relevant scripture passage—taken from the set of lessons assigned to the day that the sermon was preached—will be read aloud to help provide a context for hearing the sermon.

After listening to each sermon you will be asked to respond to eleven questions. In a moment I will ask you to preview the questions that you will be asked to answer after listening to the first sermon. Some questions can be answered by a simple Yes or No. Some ask you to use a rating scale. You will notice that some of the questions are open ended and ask you to recall any images, phrases or emotions that come to mind. For most if not all of you—this will be different than your normal listening experience. Do your best to recall and record what left an impression. If nothing comes to mind simply say so. If a flood of images, phrases, or emotions come to mind—do your best to briefly list each one. [Now take out the 1st set of
questions and look them over. Let me know if you have any questions.]

While you listen to the sermon—you are asked not to take any notes or make any comments. Simply listen, then and after the sermon is finished, record your responses on the form provided. Please make every effort to record your honest reactions. The project does not benefit by giving gratuitously high ratings. Rather the project depends upon your careful and considered responses to each individual sermon.

After listening to all four sermons and recording your responses—there will be ten more short questions. Five general background questions, and five questions about your recent sermon listening experiences. This study will be working with aggregate data. Your name is not connected to the data and is recorded on a sign-in sheet simply to confirm the number of respondents. Your individual answers will be anonymous. A report of the results will be available later this year.

In advance—thank you for your participation in this research project.

Before we begin—are there any final questions?
Sermon Response Survey  
Response to Specific Sermons  
SERMON ONE

1. Was the passage from Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 5:13-20) that began with Jesus proclaiming “You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored?” and ended with “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” familiar to you before hearing this sermon?

   Circle either:  Yes  or  No

2. Was the story illustration from the movie Dead Poets Society familiar to you before hearing this sermon?

   Circle either:  Yes  or  No

3. Did this sermon deepen your understanding of the Gospel passage?

   Circle either:  Yes  or  No

4. If there were any specific images, phrases, or emotions that you related to in the passage from Matthew’s Gospel (Matt. 5:13-20) please briefly list them below:

   ______________________________________________________________

5. On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was the story from Dead Poets Society in the context of the overall sermon? (circle one number)

   1  2  3  4  5
   Not effective  Somewhat effective  Very effective
6. Was the length of the story from the movie *Dead Poets Society* 
   Circle one: a) too short  b) too long  c) just right 

7. If there were any specific images, phrases, or emotions that you related to in the story used from *Dead Poets Society* please briefly list them below:

______________________________________________________________

8. Was the length of the sermon 
   Circle one:  a) too short  b) too long  c) just right 

9. On the scale of 1-5 shown below, the degree to which the sermon engaged me was (circle one number) 
   1  2  3  4  5 
   Not effective  Somewhat effective  Very effective 

10. What was the central message of the sermon as you heard it? 

______________________________________________________________

11. On the scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was this sermon in deepening your understanding of the gospel? (circle one number) 
   1  2  3  4  5
Sermon Response Survey
Response to Specific Sermons
SERMON TWO

1. Was the passage from John’s Gospel (John 11:32-44)—where Jesus learns of the death of his friend Lazarus and goes to the tomb and calls for him for him to come out—familiar to you before hearing this sermon?

Circle either: Yes or No

2. Was the story illustration from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* familiar to you before hearing this sermon?

Circle either: Yes or No

3. Did this sermon deepen your understanding of the Gospel passage?

Circle either: Yes or No

4. If there were any specific images, phrases, or emotions that you related to in the passage from John’s Gospel (John 11:32-44) please briefly list them below:

5. On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was the story from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* in the context of the overall sermon?

(circle one number)

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6. Was the length of the story from the movie *The Shawshank Redemption* Circle one:  a) too short  b) too long  c) just right

7. If there were any specific events, phrases, or emotions that you related to in the story used from *The Shawshank Redemption* please describe briefly below:

8. Was the length of the sermon Circle one:  a) too short  b) too long  c) just right

9. On the scale of 1-5 shown below, the degree to which the sermon engaged me was (circle one number)

   1  2  3  4  5

   Not effective  Somewhat effective  Very effective

10. What was the central message of the sermon as you heard it?

11. On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was this sermon in deepening your understanding of the gospel? (circle one number)

   1  2  3  4  5
1. Was the passage from Luke’s Gospel (Luke 20:27-38) where some Sadducees reference the law of Moses and ask Jesus about the resurrection by posing a question about a widow and her seven husbands—familiar to you before hearing this sermon?

Circle either: Yes or No

2. Was the story illustration from the movie Shadowlands familiar to you before hearing this sermon?

Circle either: Yes or No

3. Did this sermon deepen your understanding of the Gospel passage?

Circle either: Yes or No

4. If there were any specific events, phrases, or emotions that you related to in the passage from Luke’s Gospel (Luke 20:27-38) please describe briefly below:

5. On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was the story from the movie Shadowlands in the context of the overall sermon? (circle one number)

Not effective Somewhat effective Very effective
6. Was the length of the story from the movie *Shadowlands*

   Circle one:  a) too short  b) too long  c) just right

7. If there were any specific events, phrases, or emotions that you related to in the story used from the movie *Shadowlands* please describe briefly below:

   ________________________________________________________________

8. Was the length of the sermon

   Circle one:  a) too short  b) too long  c) just right

9. On the scale of 1-5 shown below, the degree to which the sermon engaged me was (circle one number)

   1     2     3     4     5

   Not effective         Somewhat effective         Very effective

10. What was the central message of the sermon as you heard it?

   ________________________________________________________________

11. On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was this sermon in deepening your understanding of the gospel? (circle one number)

   1     2     3     4     5
Sermon Response Survey
Response to Specific Sermons
SERMON FOUR

1. Was the passage from Second Samuel (Chapter 18:5-9,15,31-33) where king David weeps over the death of his son Absalom—familiar to you before hearing this sermon?
   Circle either: Yes or No

2. Was the story illustration from the movie A River Runs Through It familiar to you before hearing this sermon?
   Circle either: Yes or No

3. Did this sermon deepen your understanding of the scripture passage?
   Circle either: Yes or No

4. If there was a specific event, phrase, or emotion that you related to in the passage from Second Samuel (Chapter 18:5-9,15,31-33) please describe briefly below:

   ________________________________________________________________

5. On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was the story illustration from the movie A River Runs Through It in the context of the overall sermon? (circle one number)

   1     2     3     4     5

   Not effective Somewhat effective Very effective
6. Was the length of the story from the movie *A River Runs Through It*

   Circle one:  a) too short  b) too long  c) just right

7. If there were any specific events, phrases, or emotions that you related to in the story used from *A River Runs Through It* please describe briefly below:

8. Was the length of the sermon

   Circle one:  a) too short  b) too long  c) just right

9. On the scale of 1-5 shown below, the degree to which the sermon engaged me was (circle one number)

   1  2  3  4  5

   Not effective  Somewhat effective  Very effective

10. What was the central message of the sermon as you heard it?

11. On a scale of 1-5 shown below, how effective was this sermon in deepening your understanding of the scripture passage? (circle one number)

   1  2  3  4  5
Sermon Response Survey
Background Questions

1. What is the religious denomination with which you most strongly identify?
   ☐ Episcopal
   ☐ Roman Catholic
   ☐ Lutheran
   ☐ Presbyterian
   ☐ Other _______________________

2. Are you male or female?
   ☐ Male ☐ Female

3. In what year were you born?_____________

4. What is the highest level of school you have completed or the highest degree you have received?
   ☐ Less than high school degree
   ☐ High school degree or equivalent (e.g., GED)
   ☐ Some college but no degree
   ☐ Associate degree
   ☐ Bachelor degree
   ☐ Graduate degree

5. Are you White, Hispanic or Latino, Black or African-American, American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific islander, or some other race? (check all that apply)
   ☐ White
   ☐ Hispanic or Latino
   ☐ Black or African-American
Sermon Response Survey
General Questions about Your Sermon Listening Experience

1. Approximately how many sermons do you hear in a year?

2. On a scale of 1-9 below, what is the average effectiveness of the sermons that you have listened to in the past year? (circle one number)

   1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9
   Awful  Needs Work  Average  Very Good  Excellent

3. Of the sermons that you heard in the past year—what is the approximate percentage that you would identify as principally using a narrative approach? Narrative sermons are ones that use some form of story to assist in conveying the meaning of the sermon. The story element could be drawn from a personal story, the news, literature, film, or popular culture.

   Check One:

   ☐ 0%  ☐ 10%  ☐ 20%  ☐ 30%  ☐ 40%  ☐ 50%  ☐ 60%  ☐ 70%  ☐ 80%  ☐ 90%  ☐ 100%
4. Use the scale of 1-9 below to answer the following question. In your experience over the past year, for sermons that use a narrative approach what was the average quality of the preacher's ability to successfully utilize the story to convey the deeper meaning of the sermon? (circle one number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
Awful Needs Work Average Very Good Excellent

5. Over the past year how many different preachers have you heard? _____