

Making a Scene in the Pulpit

Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners

Alyce M. McKenzie

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Introduction

“Don’t make a scene.” This command is usually hissed through clenched teeth. Maybe spoken by a mom to a toddler at Target: “No, we’re not buying that. Put it back. Don’t make a scene.” Maybe spoken by a man or woman to a date in an elegant restaurant: “Keep your voice down. We’ll talk about this later. Don’t make a scene!” Maybe spoken by a lawyer to her client on the way into the courtroom: “Let me do the talking when we get in there. Don’t make a scene.”

“Don’t make a scene” means “Don’t draw bystanders into our drama.” My advice to preachers these days is exactly the opposite: “Make a scene. Do everything you can to draw bystanders into our drama. For God’s sake, make a scene in the pulpit!”

The narrative preaching of the past thirty-five years or so has assumed that human beings are hardwired to be story makers, engaged in a life-long project of making a coherent plot out of the disjointed scenes and situations of our daily lives. There is a growing conviction that many people may not have the skill or even the will to be engaged in this ongoing, plot-building project. Our ubiquitous handheld devices have shrunk our screens from panoramic to palm size. Our attention spans have likewise shortened and become more diffuse. We used to yearn for the ability to be in more than one place at a time. Now we have it. We have the ability to be sitting in a coffee shop with friends while checking scores, texting other friends, verifying a fact on Wikipedia, and catching up on scenes from our favorite shows. This has led to a condition some social commentators call *Continuous Partial Attention (CPA)*. Rather than being in more than one place at one time, we can now be fully present nowhere at one time.

The dynamics of shrinking screens and shortened, divided attention spans have shaped people's perception of God at work in the world. It is becoming harder and harder to sell the panoramic biblical narrative of salvation from creation, fall, and redemption to new creation. Understandably, given the violence and chaos of our day, it's hard not to be more attuned to the randomness and injustice of life than to instances of justice, mercy, and order in our world. As screens and attention spans have shrunk, so has the faith of many people in panoramic salvation metanarratives.

While not everyone is skilled at crafting a narrative arc out of their life experiences, just about everyone seems to love sharing moments of their lives with others. We still love scenes, small segments of a larger story. We upload scenes from our lives for others to experience. We watch and rewatch scenes from others' lives on YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram.

The scene as a unit of human perception appears across many different disciplines. The advertising executive uses scenes from daily life to persuade viewers to invite her product into their daily lives. The sportscaster covers scenes, not only on the field, but also from the personal lives of players. The lawyer is skilled in crafting compelling closing arguments that paint a scene of innocence or guilt. The psychotherapist helps patients reframe or reclaim scenes from their past. Teachers in many fields use case studies, scenes held up as cautionary tales or as positive examples. Scenes are everywhere. Biology has mitosis and photosynthesis. Chemistry has reactions. Math has equations, and music has measures and movements.

In the pages that follow, I zoom in on that segment of story called a scene. I define a *scene* as novelists, playwrights, and screenwriters do: the action that takes place in one physical setting in more or less continuous time. Scenes are similar to the anecdotes that have traditionally been used to illustrate the points of a sermon. But they are a more vivid version. Rather than tell us about something, they invite us into somewhere (setting) to identify with someone (characters). They use sensory detail and dramatic energy to invite us in as participants, rather than leave us standing on the porch or sitting in the stands as spectators. They are designed to create experiences rather than report them.

There are sound anthropological, biblical, and communicational grounds for giving attention to that segment of story known as the scenes. Preaching in scenes is congruent with how people experience life today. It honors the authority of Scripture, not primarily as divine data,

but as an unfolding divine drama with acts and scenes within those acts. Just as story has been shown to be a genre that has cross-cultural, cross-generational appeal, the same can be said for scenes. They gain and hold attention, providing compelling conveyances for exegetical and theological teaching. Scenes in sermons can function, as they often do in literature and film, as ethical simulation chambers for dealing with real-life challenges, drawing us in to identify with characters, undergo changes with them, and take that changed perspective back into our world.

Chapter 1, “Scene Is the New Story,” explores the dynamics of our culture’s fascination with scenes, from Instagram to movie trailers to viral YouTube videos. Whether it’s a sorrowful scene—a young Iraqi woman Neda, dying in the street in Iraq in 2009; a natural disaster—a tornado in Joplin, Missouri; an everyday, adorable pet trick—a dog helping a puppy down the stairs; or an everyday human interaction—like “Uncle Henry gets surprised at Christmas,” we love scenes. In the narrative arc of popular television dramas, it is the suspenseful, forward moving dynamic of individual scenes that keeps viewers on the hook for the whole season of episodes . . . and then for the next season.

Chapter 1 traces the rise of the narrative preaching of the “New Homiletic” and makes the argument that *narrative*, the foundation of preaching theory and practice in many circles since the final quarter of the twentieth century, needs to give more attention to the smaller unit of a story known as a *scene*. *Narrative* and *story* are terms that are often blurred in contemporary usage. For example, a lawyer might say to his client, “We need to create a convincing narrative.” In that popular usage, *narrative* and *story* are viewed as identical. But for our preaching purposes, we distinguish them from one another. I find Fred Craddock’s distinction helpful. “Narrative refers to the shape or movement of the sermon. It is not a piece of the sermon. It describes the whole, not a component.”¹ A narrative sermon, then, isn’t narrowly understood as a sermon on a biblical story, or a sermon that contains a story. As Eugene Lowry puts it, “A narrative sermon is any sermon in which the arrangement of ideas takes the form of a plot involving a strategic delay of the preacher’s meaning.”² Essentially, he is identifying narrative with plot.³

The narrative shape, or plot, of sermons is most often, though not always, a movement from tension to resolution, from ambiguity to clarity, from bad news to good news, from guilt to grace, from death to life.⁴ A story, by contrast, is a specific sequence of events (or scenes) with a beginning, a middle, and an ending. For example, the story of the three little pigs has a narrative plot that moves from equilibrium to upsetting

the equilibrium to the reestablishment of equilibrium. Within the story are several scenes: The story begins with the three little pigs being sent out into the world by their mother to “seek out their fortune.” The first little pig builds a house of straw, but a wolf blows it down and devours him. The second little pig builds a house of sticks, which the wolf also blows down, and he devours the second little pig.

Each dialogue between wolf and pig features these memorable lines:

“Little pig, little pig, let me come in.”

“Not by the hair on my chinny chin chin.”

“Then I’ll huff, and I’ll puff, and I’ll blow your house in.”

The third little pig builds a house of bricks. The wolf is unable to blow his house down, so he tries unsuccessfully to trick the pig out of his house. Finally, the wolf comes down the chimney and lands in a cauldron of boiling water the pig has set there. The pig cooks and eats him. In milder versions, the first and second little pigs escape out the back door of their houses and run to their brother’s house for safety; the wolf, after falling into the water, runs away and never returns. Whichever version of the story you prefer, there are several scenes within it. I know that for a fact, having dramatized them for three children and a grandchild, complete with huffing and puffing!

I offered the Beecher Lectures on the theme of “Making a Scene in the Pulpit” in 2015; following my final lecture, a man raised his hand and asked, “What is the difference between a scene and a story, illustration, or anecdote in a sermon?” It was one of those moments when the question is so basic that your mind, even after months of reflecting on a topic, goes blank! Here is what I wish I had said: “What I mean by a scene is a story event within a story.⁵ For example, the story of the prodigal son has at least six scenes or story events: (1) the boy asking for his inheritance, (2) his squandering it in various forms of excess, (3) his decision to return home as he sits with the pigs; (4) his trip home rehearsing what he will say to his father, (5) his father’s greeting; (6) his father’s encounter with the older son. To use a contemporary example, the story of your relationship with a close friend is composed of several scenes: how you met, a time you got each other in trouble, a time one of you came to the other’s defense, and so forth. To qualify as a scene, a brief story, anecdote, or illustration in a sermon must have a healthy dose of “show” and not just “tell.” Like an extroverted host, a scene invites us to come into the house rather than stand out on the porch looking in. By means of memorable sensory detail, emotional appeal, and a significant theme, often involving conflict, it invites us to identify with the characters and the action

and to be affected by our participation. A scene makes spectators into participants.

Think of it in terms of a play. The play has an overall plot or narrative movement. It is a story with a beginning, a middle, and an ending, which is why many plays have three acts. Within each act are several scenes. To qualify as a scene, the theater goer, novel reader, or sermon listener must be able to pull it out of its larger context. Even if listeners/viewers don't know the whole story, there should be enough detail and energy in a scene to make them want to explore the broader story. This is precisely the dynamic of "making a scene in the pulpit!" It is a method tailor-made for those unfamiliar with, or even indifferent to, the plot (narrative) of God's saving dealings with humankind and the stories that make it up. We draw them into one scene and pique their interest in its broader story.

Chapter 2, "The Preacher as Scene Maker," deals with the identity of the scenic preacher and the habit of attentiveness key to the preaching task. It traces the ability to craft scenes back to the sages of Scripture who brokered their close observation of life around them into scenic wisdom teachings (proverbs and parables) for their communities. In order to preach in scenes, preachers need first to be able to discern scenes within and around them. This chapter commends the model of the preacher as sage for today's preachers. It highlights the fundamental habit of the preacher that, in my book *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons*, I named the "knack for noticing." This habit of noticing elements of character, scene, and conflict applies to the preacher's inner life, the life of his/her congregation and community, and the biblical text. I've named these three arenas "inscape," "landscape," and "textscape."⁶

Chapter 2 also treats the reader to scenes from sermons preached by pulpit masters of the past. Much traditional preaching has been three-point preaching, using scenes in a somewhat limited way as illustrative anecdotes for logical points. People couldn't always remember all the points, but their favorite story lived on in their imaginations. Some of the best preachers throughout the ages of Christian preaching have been those who have known how to make a scene in the pulpit.

Chapter 3 is entitled "Making a Scene in the Scriptures." The ultimate Scene Maker is God, and this chapter offers a biblical grounding for the use of scenes in our preaching.

Chapter 4, "Making a Scene in the Sermon," begins with a theological basis for scenic preaching in the theo-drama of Kevin Vanhoozer's

The Drama of Doctrine. It goes on to describe the reasons why scenic sermons are tailor-made for serial-tasking audiences who find sustained reflection on a single topic to be a challenge. It shows why scenic sermons today need to be clear, compelling, and, at the same time, to acknowledge the complexity and ambiguity in people's lives. It offers three models for the use of scenes in sermons. One is the *deductive sermon* that gains hearer attention by opening with a scene, a form that is especially suited to teaching those who are theologically and biblically untutored. The other two sermon models, the *multi-scene sermon* and the *single-scene sermon*, are primarily inductive, not giving away the full theme at the outset, but designed to unfold with high-definition clarity. The multi-scene sermon begins with an attention grabbing scene from either the Bible or today. It works well in preaching to distractible serial taskers, capturing and holding their attention and unfolding from scene to scene with a clear connective theme. Yet another model is the single-scene sermon that takes as its home screen a scene from Scripture, the preacher's personal life, an historical scene or a contemporary scene. Designed for those experiencing CPA (continuous partial attention), it seeks to pull them into one scene and then repeatedly draws them back into it. That scene becomes the stage setting for a one-act play in which all the action takes place in the same setting on stage, with no curtains or blackouts. The preacher invites listeners to join the scene onstage and points to connections between their experiences and Scripture.

Chapter 4 depicts the characteristics of successful scenes: clarity of purpose, imagery, and significant detail, to name just a few. It offers examples of these characteristics from the sermons in chapter 5. Chapter 4 highlights two key benefits to preaching in scenes: (1) "Scening" our teaching portions vivifies exegetical and theological teaching by placing it in the context of a scene. (2) Preaching in scenes can help the preacher avoid common pitfalls in delivery.

Chapter 5, "Scenic Sermons," offers several sample sermons that illustrate the use of scenes in sermons as described in chapter 4.

Rather than chastise contemporary people for their shortened attention spans, *Making a Scene in the Pulpit* encourages preachers to harness the human fascination with scenes for the development and delivery of our sermons. Its core strategy is to invite listeners into scenes—from Scripture, history, literature, or contemporary life—and, once they are there, to point them toward the larger story of God's forgiving, transforming relationship with humankind. The dynamic of making a scene becomes the golden thread that glimmers through the whole process of

preaching, from observation of scenes from the preacher's daily life, to interpretation of texts from Scripture, to sermon shaping and sequencing, to sermon delivery. Finally, it provides a wonderfully precise portrayal of the purpose of the sermon: to send listeners out into the scenes they'll play in their lives during the next week, equipped to act out their parts in ways that are kinder, more just, and more courageous, than last week.

Scene Is the New Story

The house lights dim. The audience stops rustling candy wrappers. The curtains open. There is the Grinch in a Santa hat, standing by a mantle hung with stockings, loading a family's Christmas gifts into a sack. A little girl in footie pajamas enters the room. We are about to be drawn into a scene.

The defendant is being escorted by the police from courthouse to jail. An angry crowd is gathering, trying to block their way. Somebody throws a rock. That's all it takes. We are about to be drawn into a scene.

"No one wants her in this town. She doesn't belong here," the women were saying as she stepped in line behind them at the post office. As soon as they spotted her, their faces flushed and they offered a syrupy greeting. We are about to be drawn into a scene.

He sends both of his wives, his two maids, and his eleven children across the Jabbok River and is now alone, by the river, in the dark, dreading the encounter with his brother that will occur the next day. Out of nowhere, a man hurtles toward him and grabs him in a death hold. The struggle that will last all night begins. This is Genesis 32:22–32, and we are about to be drawn into a scene.

Scenes. They are everywhere: in our daytime thoughts and nighttime dreams, in plays, books, contemporary and historical experiences, and in the Bible. In a stage play or film, a scene is a unit of story or a story event within a larger story; it is "an action through conflict in more or less continuous time and space" that has a significant impact on a character's life.¹ I've shortened the definition to this: "the action that takes place in one physical setting in more or less continuous time." A scene has a setting, a

plot, characters, and a degree of conflict. In the hands of a skilled novelist, playwright, or preacher, it has one theme—not three, not five, but one.

Here is the scene that depicts how I first came to be fascinated with scenes. The class was held on the top floor of Stuart Hall at Princeton Theological Seminary. You know Stuart Hall even if you've never been in Stuart Hall: dark red stone exterior, high ceilings, dark paneling, the smell of layers of lemon oil consistently applied since 1876. It was the fall of 1990. I trudged up the stairs, twelve-pound “portable” computer in hand. I was late for class, a graduate seminar in the practical theology PhD program on the subject of Old Testament Hermeneutics, co-taught by professors Thomas G. Long and Patrick D. Miller. It was a bad day to be late. It was the day we were to sign up for our thirty-page papers on interpreting a genre of Old Testament literature for contemporary life. It was to be due in three weeks. By the time the clipboard came to me, someone had already nabbed the patriarchal narratives. Someone had purloined the psalms. Someone had appropriated the apocalyptic passages. Someone had even lapped up the legal codes. This left one lone, unclaimed genre: proverbial wisdom. Of course! This was a group of budding practical theologians; what use did they have for proverbial wisdom? A fellow student, whom, up until that point, I had regarded as a friend, leaned over and said, “Good luck getting a sermon out of a one-liner, McKenzie!”

After class I headed directly to the seminary library. What I discovered there made my situation seem much brighter. I discovered that proverbs had the shortest bibliography of all the genres! I checked out an armful of books and headed for home. That evening, after I put my children to bed, I opened the Bible to the book of Proverbs. I couldn't help but remember a witticism by William H. Willimon, who had remarked more than once in oral presentations that “reading the book of Proverbs is like taking a long road trip with your mom.” With a long suffering sigh, I began to read.

Can fire be carried in the bosom
without burning one's clothes?
6:27

There is a way that seems right to a person,
but its end is the way to death.

14:12

It is not good to eat much honey,
or to seek honor on top of honor.
25:27

Like a city breached, without walls,
is one who lacks self-control.
26:28

The crucible is for silver, and the furnace is for gold,
so a person is tested by being praised.
27:21

The fear of others lays a snare,
but one who trusts in the LORD is secure.
29:25

At breakfast the next morning, I read a couple of proverbs to my then seven-year-old daughter, Rebecca. My second grader was clearly overwhelmed: “That’s just what everybody already knows, only in words you can picture.”

The sages responsible for coining and collating the book of Proverbs in the years following the Israelites’ exile from Babylon certainly did not follow the advice, “Don’t make a scene!” They trained their laser wisdom vision on multiple scenes in daily life around and within them and crafted their observations into vivid proverbs to guide the young and foolish and to remind the older and wiser. Centuries later, Jesus took a page out of the sages’ playbook and preached, not only in short sayings, but also in parables, a genre that is a longer narrative cousin to the proverb. The sages’ (including Jesus) homiletical example became the inspiration for my career-long passion for scenes.

The Rise of Story

Early Christian preachers imitated the homiletic of Jesus and the sages, preaching in scenic proverbs and parables, challenging listeners to discern how to apply them to situations in their daily lives. But when the preaching of the gospel entered the mission field of the Greco-Roman world, the scenes—which drew you in, changed you, and sent you out to

play your part on the world stage—suffered a demotion. Their new role was to serve as anecdotes that illustrated the sermon’s conceptual points.

The expectations of non-Jewish audiences were shaped by several centuries of rhetorical training, the art of persuasive public address, perfected by Greek and Roman teachers. They drummed into their young students’ heads that speeches should teach, delight, and persuade.² Unfortunately, they divided reason from imagination, relegating the former to teaching and persuading and the latter to delighting. It was the function of the content, the logical argument, to teach and persuade. It was the function of style, word choices, and flourishes of delivery, to delight. Metaphor and imagery were seen as ornamental, as sugar sprinkled on ideas to make the medicine go down. This “great divide” between reason and imagination has influenced centuries of preachers to separate images, stories, scenes, and metaphors from ideas, concepts, and lines of thought.³

For the first several centuries, the purpose of Christian preaching, modeled after the rhetorical models of the Greeks and Romans, was persuasion. As the centuries rolled on, it morphed to explanation, as propositional preaching came to the fore. Such preaching took a couple of different forms. One that arose in the late medieval period was known as the “university sermon,” in which the preacher takes a central theme and divides it into three parts with explanations of each. Yet another was the Puritan Plain style sermon, which has its roots in earlier rabbinic strategies of exegesis/application. The preacher begins by offering background on the ancient text, then draws from it several doctrinal points, finally applying them to the contemporary congregation. The “three points and a poem” became the sermonic form of choice, with some notable exceptions, until the fourth quarter of the twentieth century. It is a time-honored form, still viable today.⁴ The sermon, “Finding Faith amid Your Fears,” in chapter 5 is a two-point deductive sermon that opens with a scene.

In the early 1970s, a movement arose that came to be called “the New Homiletic”; it focused on narrative and plot rather than propositions in preaching. It became the dominant approach to preaching from the mid-1970s to the early twenty-first century. It based its reliance on narrative on theological and biblical grounds; God’s interactions with humankind as reflected in Scripture have an interactive narrative shape. Texts are not reducible to propositions but are language events that seek to impact the existential experience of readers.⁵ So much for a theological, biblical rationale for narrative. Now all that was needed was an anthropological one. And in 1971, Stephen Crites, religion and philosophy professor

at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, provided it in an influential article titled “The Narrative Quality of Experience.” In it, he claimed that “The formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative.”⁶ He argued that human beings experience and process life in a narrative shape, attempting to craft a coherent, continuous plot out of the disjointed scenarios of daily life. His article contributed to the ongoing work of theologians, philosophers, ethicists, and biblical interpreters who believed that narrative was more than a faddish interest in storytelling. Rather, it was central to theological interpretation, ethical reflection, and biblical hermeneutics.

As Crites was writing his article in the early 1970s, I was sitting in church in New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, the small town on the Susquehanna River where I grew up. I was listening to three-point sermons, which, though they had their moments, often left me wondering, “When life is so interesting, why is preaching so boring?” Fred Craddock, a young New Testament scholar and preacher, was wondering the same thing. In 1971, he self-published a critique of modernist, propositional preaching with a title tailor made for the recalcitrant, authority-averse 1970s: *As One without Authority*.⁷ His book described traditional preaching as the preacher going on the whitewater rafting trip of biblical exegesis for the sermon and bringing the congregation back a keychain. He advised preachers to take the congregation along on the trip. He advocated preaching that encouraged listeners to be active participants rather than passive recipients, nodding in intellectual assent, what he called “javelin catchers” for the preacher’s ideas. Craddock instigated a move away from propositional, didactic, authoritarian sermons toward sermons with plots. The narrative preaching that dominated homiletics from 1971 to 2000 was shaped by the dynamics of plot, moving from the bad news of how the human condition is to the good news of how it could be, by God’s grace.⁸ Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, other preachers and teachers of preaching joined in Craddock’s critique, offering their own versions of the whitewater rafting trip. Eugene Lowry’s “Lowry Loop” followed the narrative flow of Aristotle’s *Poetics*: from equilibrium, to disequilibrium, to resolution and transformation.⁹ Henry Mitchell’s classic *Black Preaching* recommended that the preacher “start low, strike fire, end high,¹⁰ His work, and that of Frank Thomas in *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God*, sought to offer the genius of African American preaching to preachers of all ethnicities. Says Thomas, “The nature and purpose of African American preaching is to help people *experience the assurance of grace* (the good news) that is the gospel of Jesus the Christ.”¹¹

David Buttrick's "moves" mapped out a line of thought, carefully segmented and sequenced to arrive at a liberating destination.¹² Paul Scott Wilson's *Four Pages of the Sermon* moved from trouble in the text to trouble in the world to good news in the text to good news in the world. Patricia Wilson-Kastner, in her book, *Imagery for Preaching*, offered Ignatian meditation as the form of the sermon plot. Guided by it, the preacher and people enter into the biblical story with an intention, ask for God's grace, experience the story, and gives thanks for the resulting insight. All these sermon forms are variations on the plot of complication-resolution or problem-resolution. They are microcosms of the overarching Salvation Plot of creation, fall, redemption, and recreation.

Not everybody got on board the narrative train as it moved out of the homiletical station. Richard Lischer, in an essay in 1984, "The Limits of Story," questioned the privileging of narrative as the most appropriate rhetorical mode for the discovery of the self and the experience of God.¹³ He pointed out that there are expanses of both Scripture and human experience that are not narrative in shape, and that stories need interpretation. In an era when many people are biblically illiterate, he asked, why jettison the teaching function of preaching in favor of a story that supposedly speaks for itself? He was suspicious of the complication-resolution plots of the New Homiletic, quoting literary critic Hugh Kenner, who called plot "a broom which sweeps everything in the same direction."¹⁴ Finally, he noted that "stories can provide a desperately needed sense of order or they may arrogantly impose order on the disorder and anarchy of life as it is."¹⁵ A more recent criticism of narrative preaching comes from theologian Francesca Aran Murphy in her book *God Is Not a Story: Realism Revisited*. She warns that narrative theology runs a danger of shrinking God to the confines of an anthropological appetite.¹⁶

The Erosion of Story

We have a lot to thank the New Homiletic for: its respect for the listener, its understanding of the sermon as dialogue, not monologue, and its view of the people as partners in the message, not passive recipients. But it was founded on two assumptions that, in recent years, have been called into question from a number of quarters. One is that listeners are biblically literate. Listeners know the stories, themes and overarching Salvation Story (metanarrative) of the Bible well enough to make connections with their ongoing life stories without much help from the preacher. The second assumption is that listeners have the narrative competence

to be crafting ongoing life stories they can access and connect to biblical themes and stories.

Biblical Illiteracy/Indifference

It's not 1971 anymore. People don't know the biblical stories that make up the metanarrative of salvation. Some would argue they didn't then. Be that as it may, an even more formidable obstacle today is that not everyone is all that interested in learning the biblical stories. The Pew Research Center's recent statistics on "America's Changing Religious Landscape" show that the number of people who identify themselves as Christians has dropped sharply over the past seven years, while those who list themselves as having no religious affiliation (the "nones") are increasing, and not just in the under-thirty-five age group. Everybody has their reasons. Some people consider themselves to be "spiritual but not religious," not wishing to affiliate with any institutional religious organization. Others self-identify as atheists or agnostics. Still others regard religion as irrelevant. They don't feel it is a necessary requirement for surrounding themselves with a supportive community or living an ethical life that includes a commitment to social justice.¹⁷

Unimpressed by Christian Public Witness/Damaged by Church

Still others aren't buying our metanarrative because they don't find us Christians to be particularly compelling advertisements for our own story. Rather, they find us to be judgmental and joyless.¹⁸ In 1971, the same year Stephen Crites wrote his article "The Narrative Quality of Experience," and Fred Craddock wrote *As One without Authority*, John Lennon wrote "Imagine," a track on the album of the same name. The song's lyrics encourage the listener to imagine a world at peace and a world with no religion. The impediments to a world at peace, according to the song, are living for fear of punishment or hope of reward rather than focusing on the present. Other impediments include religion, violent nationalism, and materialism. These factors are presented as divisive, working against unity and peace.

In 1971, when *Imagine* was released, the U.S. was just entering the second decade of involvement in Vietnam. Eighteen-year-olds had just gotten the vote. Carroll O'Connor was portraying a sexist racist on the CBS sitcom *All in the Family*. It was just three years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. That year, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld

the use of busing to achieve racial desegregation in schools. Several major cities—including Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Camden, New Jersey—experienced incidents between police and ethnic minority citizens that sparked riots. While a majority of Americans identified themselves as Christian and as churchgoers, *Imagine* appealed to a growing dissatisfaction with rigid governmental, religious, and social authority. *Imagine* became the most commercially successful and critically acclaimed album of Lennon’s solo career. In 2012, *Imagine* was voted number eighty of the top five hundred albums of all time.¹⁹

In the almost fifty years that have passed since 1971, lots of people have joined Lennon in imagining no religion. Many people view religion as the culprit in the woes of our world. When religious extremists, on an almost weekly basis, slaughter innocent people in public places, it is not hard to understand this perspective. Others name religion’s role in discrimination against lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, and intersex persons. David Kinnaman’s 2007 book, *Unchristian: What a New Generation Thinks about Christianity . . . and Why It Matters*, lists the reasons for the disaffection with institutional religion felt by those younger than thirty-five. One reason is that they view the church as judgmental with regard to persons who do not self-identify as heterosexual. Yet another group of people want nothing to do with Christianity because they have experienced abuse at the hands of church leaders charged with nurturing and protecting them.²⁰

We should not be surprised at these weighty challenges to our Christian narrative. They call us to accountability, especially when our story factors out our complicity in ongoing discrimination and inequity in our society. Making a scene is not just a rhetorical strategy the preacher demonstrates to the people from the pulpit. It is a way of congregational life in the world in which both preacher and people participate. For ten years I attended a church in Yardley, Pennsylvania, that had the same small sign over every exit. You couldn’t walk out of any door without reading it: “When the worship is over the service begins.”

The Appeal of Alternative Stories

In his book *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World and Our Preaching Are Changing*, homiletician David Lose points out that we preach to postmoderns, secularists, and pluralists, each of whom, for differing reasons, is not buying our metanarrative of creation, fall, redemption, and recreation. Postmoderns aren’t buying our claim that God can be

known. Secularists aren't buying our claim that daily life is an arena in which God can be known. Pluralists aren't buying our claim that Christians have a distinctive story of human identity and divine activity in the world.²¹

Others aren't buying our metanarrative because they've already bought into a competing one. Among several options offered by Steve Wilkens and Mark Sanford in their recent book *Hidden Worldviews: Eight Cultural Stories that Shape Our Lives* are: individualism ("I am the center of the universe"), consumerism ("I am what I own"), nationalism ("My nation, under God"), and scientific naturalism ("Only matter matters").²²

Our Story Is Too Neat and Tidy

A lot of people, especially under thirty-five years old, aren't buying the complication-resolution metanarrative of salvation anymore. Rather, many people's view of life mirrors the title of a macabre series of children's books by American author Dan Handler writing under the name Lemony Snicket: *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. One of his more famous quotes is this: "Fate is like a strange, unpopular restaurant filled with odd little waiters who bring you things you never asked for and don't always like."²³

A couple of years ago, I was teaching an elective class on narrative preaching with a group of twenty-somethings. I was trying to get them to break down a theme for a sermon into smaller units and brainstorm how they would flesh it out. "So, class," I began, "Let's look at Matthew 8:23–27, Jesus calming the storm. The focus that we will be using for our sample sermon was inspired by my research into Jesus' pet name for the disciples in Matthew: 'Little faith ones.' Unlike Mark's Gospel, the disciples in Matthew do have a little faith, and it can grow, so it's not a pejorative nickname. So here is our sermon focus: 'Our faith grows, when, in the high gales of life, we turn to Jesus and find that he is present and able to help us.'"

As I turned to write it on the whiteboard, the barrage of questions began.

"What do you mean by *faith*?"

"What do you mean by the *high gales*? They aren't the same for everyone!"

"How can we assure people of calm seas when life is so dangerous and uncertain?"

"Why should I trust someone who falls asleep when I need him the most?"

At that point, I was calling on our Lord for assistance myself! But, given our current cultural context, I shouldn't have been surprised at my young students' unwillingness to fall in line with my plot without question.

Atrophy of Story-Making Skills

Some cultural theorists are saying that the issue is not that contemporary people don't want to buy into our salvation narrative. It is that they can't, because they have lost the narrative competence to make connections between the "Story" and the disjointed episodes of their daily lives. These days not everyone agrees with Stephen Crites and the New Homiletic that human beings are hard-wired to process life by crafting a coherent life story. One of these is Galen Strawson, a British analytic philosopher and literary critic. In a recent essay, "Against Narrativity," Strawson posits that, while some people, whom he calls "diachronics," process life through narrative, others, whom he calls "episodics," live from moment to moment and in no way see themselves as crafting a coherent, ongoing narrative."²⁴

In a recent essay, "Out of the Loop," Thomas G. Long contests Strawson's dismissal of narrativity. Long understands the episodic phenomenon, not as a description of a type of person, but as a description of our cultural context that has eroded our innate story-shaping skills. To put it bluntly, many people's narrative chops have atrophied. They aren't in the habit of creating holistic narratives out of the disparate events of their daily lives. Rather, they (or maybe "we") are immersed in the episodic experiences of life with neither the skills nor the will to look beyond them. In our attention deficit, high-tech, visual culture, many have lost the skill to be engaged in an ongoing process of making a story of their lives. Long suggests, rather, that many people are living in "random bursts, our attention fleeting from *American Idol* to the troop movements in the Middle East to the desire to purchase a more powerful cell phone, a kind of cultural attention deficit disorder."²⁵

Amid the talk about episodics and loss of narrative competence these days, story is still hanging in there. Findings in recent years, from neuroscience, biology, and psychology, support the view that we are indeed hardwired to make cause-and-effect connections between the scenes of our lives. This view is reflected in scholarly works like that of the late Nobel Prize winner, Dr. Gerald Edelman's 2006 book *Second Nature: Brain Science and Human Knowledge*.²⁶ It also appears in popular works, like English professor Jonathan Gottschall's 2012 book, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*; and writer and writing coach Lisa

Cron's *Wired for Story: The Writer's Guide for Using Brain Science to Hook Readers from the Very First Sentence*.²⁷

Jonathan Gottschall, a young English professor at Washington and Jefferson College, was driving down the highway on a brilliant fall day, spinning the FM dial on the radio. A country music song came on. He was not a country music fan, but there was, he says, something heartfelt in the singer's voice. Instead of turning the channel, he listened to a song about a young man asking for his girlfriend's hand in marriage. The girl's father makes him wait in the living room, where he stares at pictures of a little girl playing Cinderella, riding a bike, running through a sprinkler, and dancing with her dad. The young man in the song suddenly realizes that he is taking something precious from the father. He is stealing Cinderella. Before the song was over, Gottschall was crying so hard he had to pull off the road. Chuck Wicks' song "Stealing Cinderella" captured the bittersweet experience of being a father to a daughter and knowing you won't always be the most important man in her life.

I sat there for a long time feeling sad but also marveling at how quickly Wicks' small, musical story had melted me—a grown man, and not a weeper—into sheer helplessness. How odd it is, I thought, that a story can sneak up on us on a beautiful autumn day, make us laugh or cry . . . , alter the way we imagine ourselves and our worlds. How bizarre it is that . . . the story maker penetrates our skulls and seizes control of our brains.²⁸

So the idea came to him for a book called *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human*, published in 2012, in which he uses insights from biology, psychology, and neuroscience to understand why we love stories. More than loving them, we need them to make us human. They are "the flight simulators of human social life."²⁹ Our love for story is an anthropological appetite with an important social function. I am convinced that we are still story makers—plot providers—but that our skills have atrophied. Drawing people into one episode or scene and then helping them connect it to God's encompassing story exercises their weakened story-making skills.

The Scenic Quality of Experience

While many people are suspicious of our tidy, metanarrative plot and may even have lost their narrative chops, they still love being drawn into

scenes. That's why movies use trailers. That's why YouTube has three billion video views a day. That's more than twenty-five times the audience of the Super Bowl. Every minute, three hundred hours of new video are uploaded to YouTube. That's way more than all the TV networks' combined airings in a year."³⁰ People get drawn into scenes. That's why, even though you can fast forward through the commercials, you still watch some of them—maybe more than once. The prevailing wisdom is that an online video should run a maximum of three minutes. Then there are microvideos, called *vines*, six-second videos with infinite looping capability. There is Instagram, with its newly increased limit of sixty seconds, up from fifteen seconds. There are “60 second docs,” described as “a diverse series of documentaries that provide a new look into the most unique characters, expressions and practices that make up the world. Life. One minute at a time.”³¹ Many people enjoy inviting others into brief scenes from their own lives and being drawn into scenes from others' lives.

On the web, just as in life and the Bible, scenes run the gamut from touching to terror-filled, from humorous to horrific. A dog helps a puppy down the stairs. A man with a scimitar stands next to a man kneeling, his head shrouded in a black hood. A duck steals a bag of chips from a 7-11 store. Neda Agha-Soltan bleeds out in Kargar Street in the 2009 Iranian election protests in Tehran, in what may be the most widely witnessed death in human history. More recently, scenes that have gone viral have been musical—like the choreography to Ed Sheeran's “Shape of You”—or humorous—Ping Pong Trick Shots, Ed Sheeran Carpool Karaoke, and Bad Lip Reading of the 2017 Inauguration. I confess it took all the self-discipline I have at my disposal to extract myself from these engrossing YouTube scenes and return to writing about them!

I'm thinking about writing a new version of Stephen Crites' 1971 article, “The Narrative Quality of Experience.” I would call it “The Scenic Quality of Experience.” Maybe before we ever graduate to story, human existence and experience is fundamentally scenic in form. Maybe we are hardwired to be drawn into scenes (the action that takes place in one physical setting in more or less continuous time) before we ever make connections to a larger story.

The Ubiquity of Scenes

A former generation of homiletical thinking argued that narrative runs through all human disciplines. I make that case for scenes. Scenes abound in the Bible. I was introduced to scenes through my study of biblical

wisdom literature's genres of proverbs and parables.³² But the wisdom literature has no cornered market on scenes; they appear in every genre of Scripture. Think, for example, of the vivid scenes in the patriarchal narratives. Think of the metaphorical scenes and actions of the prophets: Ezekiel's valley of dry bones (Ezek. 37), Amos' plumb line (Amos 7:8), Isaiah's naked walkabout (Isa. 20:2), and Jeremiah's trip to the potter's house (Jer. 18). There are accounts of Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus (1 Cor. 15:3–8; Gal. 1:11–16; Acts 9:3–9), and his portrayal of a scene of Eucharistic corruption (1 Cor. 11:17–22). There are the vivid apocalyptic scenes like the one from Daniel 7: a vision of the Ancient One on his throne and the "one like a human being / coming with the clouds of heaven" (Dan. 7:13). There is Revelation's scene of "a new heaven and a new earth . . . coming down out of heaven from God," complete with a divine voiceover (Rev. 21:1–4). The Gospels offer scenes of healings, exorcisms, conflictual encounters, miraculous calming of storms, and multiplication of loaves and fish. They depict the scene of Mary running from her encounter with the Risen Lord to tell the good news to disbelieving disciples. There are also violent, visceral scenes: the mass slaughter of those who get in the way of God's chosen people (1 Sam. 15); a king killed on the toilet (Judg. 3); a woman gang raped and cut in pieces (Judg. 19); a couple who drop dead because they withhold part of their church offering (Acts 5:1–11); a man stripped down, beaten, and nailed up on a cross. All these scenes throughout the canon deserve the attention of what chapter 2 will introduce as the sage's (the preacher as wisdom seeker and teacher) "knack for noticing" in preaching.

Scenes function in a variety of disciplines beyond the usual suspects of novels, plays, movies, and short stories. Music has measures. Math has equations. Education, psychology, and forensic anthropology have case studies. Law has closing arguments. The hard sciences are characterized by scenes invisible to the naked eye, which reside at the center of our physical world. Biology has mitosis and photosynthesis. Chemistry and physics have actions and reactions, which can rearrange the reactants' atoms to produce new substances.

Scenes also abound in the arts and social sciences. To find them requires only a short walk around the campus of Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, where I teach in the Perkins School of Theology.

Last spring, students in my Creative Sermon Design course gathered in the lab at the Temerlin Advertising Institute at SMU's Meadows School of the Arts. Institute Professor Carrie La Ferle told my students: "The goal of a television commercial is to get viewers to invite you

product into their life story.” She went on, “In the early days of television, advertising was about a pitch person telling you facts about the product. Today’s ads are mini-narratives, scenes that depict characters who need the product with whom (we hope) viewers identify. They have to be better than ever since people can fast forward through them.”

Over at SMU’s Guildhall, in the graduate, video-game education program, students’ screens glow with the video games they are designing, complete with scenes and levels and passwords to move from level to level.

Last year I invited Gretchen Smith, theater historian, performance studies scholar, and playwright from the Meadows School of the Arts, to lead us in a workshop on crafting scenes in sermons. Half the class was working on sermons on the Prodigal Son. Half were working on Jacob wrestling with the man on the banks of the Jabbok River. Professor Smith began with this advice, “In any scene, you must first ask the question, ‘What is at stake for the character(s)?’ If there is nothing at stake for them, why should we, the audience, care? It will not be a memorable scene. Nor will it propel us to the next scene.”

Anthropology Professor Ronald Wetherington stands at the front of his classroom in Heroy Hall. Next to him is a human skeleton hanging on a hook. This is a course called “Forensic Anthropology: Stories Told by Bones.” The class recreates death scenes from autopsy reports. “All right, people,” says Professor Wetherington. “Two bullet wounds to the back of the head from a distance of 1–2 feet. Homicide or suicide?”

Millicent Johnnie, Director, Choreographer and Filmmaker, in a dance class at SMU several years ago, explained that, while movies and plays have scenes, freestyle dance has cyphers. A cypher is the circular dance space that forms naturally once a freestyle session begins. Johnnie’s research traces the cypher to the bantaba in Africa giving expression to the thoughts, values, beliefs, and knowledge of African people and their descendants brought to the New World through the Atlantic slave trade. In a recent email exchange with Johnnie, she had this to say about the cypher in relation to the scene (email exchange July 13, 2018): “The movement expressed in the cypher is a microcosm of the bigger story of struggle, resistance and the liberation of African and Caribbean people. Like in street dance, rather than tell people about the social conditions of economically poor black and brown people, we draw them a bite size scene using movement reflective of our social conditions and our cultural values. The nature of a circle is inclusive—that is, there is no hierarchy in a circle and because of this cyphers feel more egalitarian in spirit. If one understands the values of the circle and the values of the people that

make up the circle, one will understand how the circle/cypher functions as a kinetic experience of liberation.” She added, “The importance of the circle/cypher for storytelling in Africanist cultures and communities is summed up in an excellent quote from South Africa, ‘Until the lion learns to write, all stories will glorify the hunter.’ Consider the cypher as the platform for the lion to tell its story.”

I got permission to sit in on a painting class recently at SMU. I had never taken a formal art class, and I was absorbed in the sights and sounds of the scene: cathedral ceiling studio, smell of paint, students all around with their easels and canvasses. During the break, the graduate assistant for the class talked with me about scenes in painting. She told me that, in painting a scene, the artist seeks to direct your eye to something within it. “If it is an apple, for example, lines will direct your eye to the apple. Light will hit the apple. The apple will appear with definition and clarity amid the rest of the contents of the canvas.” She continued, “The question an artist asks is, ‘Where is the light in the scene?’”

For the past few years, I’ve invited Kevin Paul Hofeditz, Professor of Theatre at Meadows School of the Arts, to come to my class and give my preaching students some performance coaching. He tells them, “Actors have to know the bigger story, but act it one scene at a time. You don’t want to play the end at the beginning. When Juliet first meets Romeo, there can’t be a veil of sadness over her eyes at her knowledge of the outcome. She is fifteen, and she’s in love!”

Good Reasons to Preach in Scenes

The New Homiletic generation of preachers made the case that there were good anthropological, biblical, and theological reasons to employ narrative in preaching.

In the chapters that follow this one, I make the same case for scenes. In this time when our screens and attention spans have shrunk, preachers are called, not to give up on conveying the larger story, but to invite people into palm-sized segments of it, from there to connect them to the bigger view.

If we want to be heard by people who have minimal biblical knowledge and are living from episode to episode with rusty connective skills, some would recommend preaching lengthy teaching sermons (sometimes referred to as “six points and a PowerPoint”) to fill in the gaps in their biblical knowledge. Still others would suggest we tell a string of loosely related stories to touch hearers’ hearts. The necessary homiletical

response, I believe, is one that combines teaching and touching emotion and will.³³ It is to draw people into a scene that connects them with a story we could never have invented ourselves, a story that can connect the disjointed episodes of our distracted lives, that offers something to live and die for beyond ourselves. Over twenty years ago, David Buttrick, in *Homiletic: Moves and Structures*, asserted that the biblical narrative of salvation provides an encompassing master story into which we can place our individual stories. It gives our often incoherent, episodic lives a new prelude and a new closing chapter.³⁴ Preaching can invite people, even people with little knowledge of or interest in our story, to enter into it, scene by scene.

Speaking of scenes, we turn now to the closing scene of *this* chapter, which I have titled “Close Encounter on the DART Train.” I have permission to share this scene from my friend and colleague Dr. Rebekah Miles, Professor of Ethics and Practical Theology at Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas.

During the spring semester, Dr. Miles was teaching a graduate seminar called “Twentieth Century Ethical Thought.” She lives in Fort Worth and was riding the DART train (Dallas Area Rapid Transit) to Dallas to teach one afternoon. She had the book that would provide the basis for discussion in her class on her lap, her notes spread out on the seat beside her. She was staring out the window, mentally tweaking her lesson plan—Do I want to start with my lecture, then respond to questions, and then break into small groups to discuss them or . . . Glancing to her right, she noticed a woman staring at her. From observing details of the woman’s appearance and other sensory clues, Dr. Miles inferred that she was down on her luck, perhaps homeless. The woman nodded toward the book on her lap: “That book looks interesting. What’s it about?” Dr. Miles looked down at her copy of Reinhold Niebuhr’s *The Nature and Destiny of Man* and for a moment, she says, her mind went completely blank—and then she said, “Well, it’s about our creatureliness and how we are bound by it, within it, to some degree, but how, at the same time we have the capacity for self-transcendence, how we are limited by social structures that have both corrupt elements and, at the same time, liberative possibilities.” To which the woman responded . . . “Oh” and turned her gaze away to look out her window at whatever happened to be passing by. Dr. Miles arrived at class with a new version of her lesson plan for her graduate ethics students: “Today we begin with this question: How would you convey the metanarrative of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* to a homeless woman on the DART train so that you offer a word that might make a difference in her life?”

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