

Jeffrey W. Frymire. *Preaching from Inside the Story: A Fresh Journey into Narrative*. Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching Series. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2022. 214 pages. \$28.00.

Narrative preaching has had a tarnished journey. Breaking onto the homiletical scene through the writings of Henry Mitchell, David Randolph, Charles Rice, Edmund Steimle, and others, this more story-oriented form of preaching seemed to be the next natural iteration of the New Homiletic movement. The New Homiletic itself drew inspiration from the return to narrative theology in the New Hermeneutic wave of biblical studies, advocated in the writings of Gerhard Ebeling, Amos Wilder, Robert Funk, and most notably Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur. Eugene Lowry (with the help of his seminary students) designed the “homiletical loop,” a way of plotting narrative sermons in a way similar to the classic Freytag Pyramid of the theatre world. Eventually, Lowry’s loop became the standard way of understanding the narrative sermon—and narrative, in general—leading him to be considered one of the most influential homileticians of the twentieth century. Others would take their spin on Lowry’s theory while others would critique it for not being “biblical” (i.e., proposition-driven) enough. Still, narrative preaching held promise as a homiletical theory and theological system. And, then, it all came crashing down, leading some invested scholars to ask what happened to narrative preaching, as much from the pulpit that claimed to be narrative preaching sounded more akin to bad anecdotes.

Granted, this is a vast overstatement of the history of narrative preaching. It did not just crash and burn nor did it completely disappear. However, the case can be made that it did not fully live up to its potential. Part of this is in the approach itself. While some have a natural talent for telling a story, most of us who recognize the value of sharing the biblical text in creative and captivating ways need to be taught how to tell a story well. Stories are how humans capture history. Stories are how we remember first dates and last farewells. And stories, biblically speaking, are how we recount our interactions with the Divine. And we need to be taught how to tell our stories well.

This is where Jeffrey Frymire’s book enters the discussion. One of the newest volumes in the Lloyd John Ogilvie Institute of Preaching Series, this beautiful conversation on the wonder that is narrative preaching soars with both hopeful promise and careful proclamation. Frymire approaches this topic from the perspective of both critical researcher and committed practitioner. The influence of Clayton Schmit’s narrative pedagogy in the Fuller doctoral program is evident throughout (chapters 1-2, specifically). Frymire knows his stuff, from exploring the depths of Aristotle’s original construction of plot to modern-day influences of playwrights and professional storytellers (chapter 4). Not only this, Frymire also delves into the science of storytelling and cognitive development, to show how humans are wired for story (chapter 3).

This is where Frymire’s contribution is so needed, as the author moves from the more classical approaches to storytelling (i.e., Aristotle, Freytag, and Lowry) to analyze and evaluate several neurological studies related to storytelling and cognitive development. This brings a rich depth to the belief that stories not only entertain but are central to the learning process and, therefore, discipleship. The overall focus, however, is not how to apply a narrative framework to the sermon but how to recognize the narrative design of the biblical text in order to allow the telling in the text to guide the crafting of the sermon (chapter 5). Yet, Frymire does not settle for simply recapturing Luke 15, but instead offers five sample sermons (chapters 6-10) in five different narrative forms from his own preaching ministry.

This is a needed contribution in an ongoing conversation. Frymire invites the reader on a journey of discovery into the wonderful world of narrative and story. Those who teach narrative preaching might consider this book as a foundational textbook; it is also recommended as a source from which to draw for broader conversations about approaches to preaching. All in all, It is a readily accessible introduction to narrative preaching.

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