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REAL PEOPLE, REAL FAITH, REAL GOD:  
ENCOUNTERING THE DIVINE IN PREACHING BIBLICAL CHARACTERS

by  
CYNTHIA HALVORSON

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of  
Luther Seminary  
In Partial Fulfillment of  
The Requirements for the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA

2018

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## ABSTRACT

*Real People, Real Faith, Real God:  
Encountering the Divine in Preaching Biblical Characters*

by

Cynthia Halvorson

Using the Action/Reflection method, this project examines sermons which aim at the heart by using character development within a storytelling sermon style. This thesis considers the effectiveness of intentional reimagining of biblical witnesses by overlying behavioral styles and archetypical fears and desires onto various characters of the Gospel of John. It designs a methodology for intentional development of characters and examines the responses of the listeners. It asserts the value of creating space within a sermon for the listener to encounter the Divine by identifying with the people of scripture.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I look back over history and realize there were countless individuals who wanted to learn but were hindered, I shudder. And considering that women through the ages were not permitted to acquire a formal education, I wince. And realizing that women, still today, in various places on our globe are denied schooling, I feel indignation within myself. I have no explanation as to why I am so privileged as to garner such an excellent education. I am fortunate in ways of opportunity, health, and support. How could I NOT pursue this degree?

To Luther Seminary: thank you for creating and maintaining the Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching program. The brilliant professors under whose guidance I have been allowed to sit have influenced my preaching. My ministry, as well as my own personal journey, has experienced enrichment and growth through the process of acquiring this doctorate.

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To the Divine: You have loved me with an everlasting love...and that changed everything. I am eternally yours.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I suggest preaching that aims only at the intellect presents a problem for the hearer. Thus, I discuss another homiletical style; namely, one that impacts the listener's heart. I contend that allowing the characters of scripture to come to life within sermons may be a helpful tool to utilize within preaching for transformation. This style of preaching, I will argue, allows the sermon to reach the hearers' hearts, and not just their intellect.

#### **Statement of the Problem/Issue**

Preaching the Word of God is foundational to the life of the church. The Apostle Paul claimed that the proclamation of the Gospel was necessary for people to hear of the One in whom they can believe (Romans 10:14-15). In the Baptist tradition, the denomination in which I have spent my life growing and serving, communicating the truths of scripture is paramount. According to Baptist polity,

The preacher's goal is to assure hearers of God's love and of human responsibility, so that hearts and minds are opened to insights from God's word, and consciences are quickened to faith and obedience to the divine will.<sup>1</sup>

Many who have been called into vocational ministry have significant responsibilities of preaching the Word of God on a regular basis. The task of sharing biblical concepts can appear preacher-centered. However, it is important to recognize, according to Karl Barth,

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<sup>1</sup> Norman Maring and Winthrop Hudson, *A Baptist Manual of Polity and Practice, Revised Edition* (Valley Forge: Judson Press. 1991), 107.

preaching the Word of God “does not take place in a vacuum. It has a human counterpart . . . [to a] specific people in a very specific type of present, in a specific place at a specific time.”<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth’s acknowledgment of the listener reminds the preacher that effective preaching must give thought to the audience.

While considering the listener, those who preach must contemplate various styles of communication. The transferring of information has undergone significant change in our society within the last seventy-five years. The preaching style of yesteryear no longer seems as effective as it once was. Lectures filled with data and information of scripture, explanations of the nuances of the original language of the pericope, and claims that are found in the text supported with additional biblical passages appear to have lost their powerful impact. Richard Ward references Eugene Lowry’s description of didactic preaching, as if preparing for a “debate,” making points, supporting those concepts, and echoing the conclusion which was stated in the introduction.<sup>3</sup> While this style was sufficient in its day, today’s preacher needs to cultivate more creativity in order to reach the listener.

Recognizing the communication style changes, Michael Rogness states, “We live in a radically new age of communication, which has a deep and permanent impact on how people listen.”<sup>4</sup> In 1994, Rogness concluded that audiences had developed the expectation that all information be given in an entertaining manner.<sup>5</sup> Twenty years later,

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<sup>2</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1991), 89.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Ward, *Speaking of the Holy* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 92-93.

<sup>4</sup> Michael Rogness, *Preaching To A TV Generation: The Sermon in The Electronic Age* (Lima, OH: The CSS Publishing Company, Inc., 1994), 12.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

in 2014, the average American watched 5 hours of television each day according to New York Daily News.<sup>6</sup> It is likely Rogness' conclusion that society expects entertaining communication is still valid in our present day. Receiving information in engaging ways, whether through television, movies, hand-held media devices, or the Internet, has forever changed communication. As communicators of scripture, preachers can no longer ignore the expectation that in order to reach the hearer a sermon needs to be delivered in a manner which captivates the current listener's attention. It is rare that a listener will engage the substance of the sermon if their interest is not held. Karl Barth said it well, "Preachers must not be boring."<sup>7</sup>

Difficulty in communicating the scriptures in a meaningful way may also materialize due to the differing levels of each congregant's understanding and exposure to the Bible. In my context, some sit in the pew with little to no biblical knowledge; others have prepared and taught Sunday School lessons for decades. Some are young adults who are wondering if scriptural claims are true; others are older and have learned throughout life that God is faithful, even during tragedy. Reaching all groups in a valuable and life-impacting way can seem impossible.

The concepts that preachers attempt to convey can become trapped in a philosophical and theological realm adding to the complexity of meaningful proclamation. The challenges of effectively communicating the Word compel the sermonizing shepherd to search for ways to bridge the gap between scripture and

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<sup>6</sup> David Hinkley, "Average American watches 5 hours of TV per day, report shows." *New York Daily News*, Wednesday, March 5, 2014. <http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/average-american-watches-5-hours-tv-day-article-1.1711954> (accessed September 13, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Barth, *Homiletics*, 80.

congregation. Those in the pew may find themselves wondering how to connect the biblical concept to their daily lives. One of my congregational members shared that in past years he had developed a habit of “not listening to the sermon” because they were “typically boring” and did not connect to his life.<sup>8</sup> Charles Denison affirms that in a time when scientific data and measurable outcomes seem to drive society, many hearers need an artistic, relational, and right-brained approach. He states, “. . . The preacher’s task [is to] translate from the technical language of the scholar and seminary, from the left-brained study, to language for today’s spiritual pilgrim.”<sup>9</sup> The responsibility of reaching the listener in a meaningful way resides with the preacher and can seem daunting.

Ministers who regularly preach have shared with me they find themselves wondering how to best share the theological truths of scripture in a useful, life-changing, and heart-transforming way to their specific congregation. How does the preacher stay true to the text while speaking in a compelling way to an audience that is removed from the pericope by time, space, and culture? The original audiences to whom the scriptures were written and read were not significantly detached from the text. The hearer could frequently relate to the characters in the biblical stories. The current reader or listener of scripture experiences a distance of time, space, and culture. This distance often diminishes the multifaceted characters of scripture into flat, one-dimensional, superficial figures with whom few can identify. Many theological scholars have determined the characters of scripture to be one-dimensional, serving the purpose of the lesson within the story. In the case of the Gospel of John, which is the scope of this thesis, Bennema states,

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<sup>8</sup> Research participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, April, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Charles Denison, *The Artist’s Way of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster /John Knox Press. 2006), 23.

“...some scholars tend to oversimplify Johannine characters and categorize them as being flat (and) minor . . . .”<sup>10</sup> If the biblical witnesses are left lifeless and one-dimensional, their God may also appear hollow and fictitious. Could there be a possibility of reaching the listener by breathing life into these witnesses within scripture? Could the God of these characters move beyond a nebulous entity?

I believe the goal of preaching to be that of creating space for the listener to encounter the Divine and thus experience the life-changing work of the Holy Spirit. Henri Nouwen writes, “Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place.”<sup>11</sup> Knowing God as a hospitable God, I conclude that the goal of sermons is to accomplish the task of hospitality. Hospitable sermons intentionally create emotional and intellectual space for the listener to connect with the Divine.

Consequently, I presuppose the preacher must move beyond presenting scripture as merely ideas, information, and instruction. While ideas, information, and instruction have their place, sermonizing must not be limited in these ways. When proclaiming the Word presents the Divine only as a concept, a barrier may well be formed limiting a person’s ability to know God relationally. Having listened to sermons for years, I wonder if the goal for many preachers in my past has been to create an intellectual assent to the concepts of scripture. Yet, as many of my congregants have confided, intellectual assent alone leaves one spiritually stunted. Moving to a relational understanding lays the groundwork for a vibrant relationship with the Divine. Klaus Issler advocates, “The Bible

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<sup>10</sup> Cornelis Bennema, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John* (Colorado Springs: Paternoster, 2009), 11.

<sup>11</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Reaching Out: The Three Movements of the Spiritual Life* (New York: Image Books, 1975), 71.

teaches that a continuing relationship with God requires the participation of both parties: ‘Come near to God and he will come near to you’ (Jas 4:8).<sup>12</sup> Our relationship with God can *always* grow deeper and deeper.”<sup>13</sup> But how can a person come near to God if God is only an intellectual concept? Keeping sermons locked in the intellect hinders many parishioners from relationally encountering the Divine. Listeners remain stranded in their attempt to develop a relationship with God when the Divine is only represented as a theory or proposition to be intellectually mastered.

This thesis project investigates the effectiveness of preaching through story with a focus on breathing life into several of the characters in the Gospel of John. While the biblical world remains distant from today’s society, the human emotion experienced by the persons of scripture remains the same. If biblical characters can be portrayed in a sermon to acknowledge human emotion, fear, and struggle, will the listener be better able to identify with the characters in scripture? If so, will this ability to relate to the character and story enhance the listener’s encounter with the Divine? Can preaching move beyond intellectual assent of ideas, information and instruction toward an ongoing, life-giving connection with God?

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<sup>12</sup> All quotations of Scripture are from the *Today’s New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>13</sup> Klaus Issler, *Wasting Time with God: A Christian Spirituality of Friendship with God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 16-17.

## **Justification and Rationale**

### **Personal Experience**

This project holds personal importance for me and informs my understanding concerning people's ability to encounter God. I grew up in a church system which highly valued knowledge of the Bible. I sat through thousands of sermons, lessons, and devotions (personal and group), through my childhood and young adult years. I gained a solid foundation in the knowledge of the scriptures, for which I am thankful. However, for me, this didactic approach, while rich in information, remained dry and trivial. I was not able to translate the intellectual information into a vibrant spirituality. I knew "facts & data" but was stunted in my emotional, relational, and spiritual dimensions as a Christian.

When I was nearing 30 years of age, a preacher mentioned, in passing, that the Gospel of Mark commented on Jesus' emotions. With that piece of insight, I decided to read Mark with the intention of noticing the emotions of Jesus. Up until that point, I viewed Jesus as a stoic individual, likely to be without emotion. But if he had feelings, he kept them very well controlled...except for that one time with the moneychangers in the Temple. As I read Mark with this deliberate attention to emotion, to my amazement, I observed a Jesus I didn't know existed. The Jesus of Mark seemed tangible, someone with whom I could connect.

That experience changed the way I read all of scripture from that time onward. Suddenly, Jesus, and the other characters of the Bible stories I thought I knew so well, seemed more real, more life-like and less plastic, less artificial. They had facets of personality I had never considered. I reasoned that if the characters in the Bible were

more authentic than I had understood, it was probable their difficulties in life were more valid, as well. This line of thinking caused me to wonder: Was their faith more alive than I had comprehended? And what did that mean concerning their God? This wondering was an invitation for me to join into a relationship with the God and characters of scripture I had previously not experienced.

### The Congregation at First Baptist

I desire to extend an invitation to my congregation to know God in a relational way through a preaching style of storytelling with an intentional focus on characters becoming real people. The characters of scripture experienced fears and desires, and they encountered the Divine. The biblical witnesses possessed behavioral traits, and God met them at their point of need. I aspire for my congregation, also, to encounter this same God, just as the characters of scripture did.

Concepts and information without a relational component often hinder a person from experiencing “life to the full” as Jesus promised (John 10:10). I am eager to learn: What is the listeners’ experience? Is this preaching style with a fuller development of characters meaningful? Has it enhanced their encounter with God? Does intentional inclusion of archetypical experience increase the listeners’ ability to identify with the characters of Scripture? How does the preacher allow the characters of scripture to have common fears and desires? For the listener, does the inclusion of those fears and desires make a difference in the growth of a more intimate identification with the biblical characters and ultimately with God? I’m not just the preacher at First Baptist, I am the pastor; my pastor’s heart longs for my congregation to encounter the Divine in life-giving ways and to experience God in their everyday lives. According to my own standards, if



my preaching only gives information, if it only entertains, if it never bridges the gap between pulpit and the pew, the head and the heart, I have failed. The precious people at First Baptist are too highly cherished by God for me to trivialize the responsibility of preaching.

### Larger Christian Community

I think it is important to the wider Christian community to adjust the style of preaching in order to reach the listener. We know communication styles have changed. Those who preach must also make adjustments. My hope is that the information gathered in the original research for this project may add to the ongoing conversation within the church and seminary concerning effective preaching. Could a focus on creating multifaceted characters from scripture be an effective tool to be used in preaching? Within this project, I develop intentional guidelines to be implemented in order to expand the description of characters within a sermon. According to Richard Ward, a member of the Network of Biblical Storytelling, the NOBS does not have guidelines for developing a character but rather focuses on the “narrator’s perspective.”<sup>14</sup> Having specific guidelines or tools to help the preacher create fuller characters might empower some homiletics in their crafting of sermons. I hope this project encourages further thinking and conversation in the field of homiletics concerning the persons of scripture coming to life and their encounter with God. This style of preaching, however, is only meaningful if it leads to more vitality in people’s holistic interaction with the Almighty.

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<sup>14</sup> Richard Ward, e-mail message to author, July 19, 2017.

### **A Definition of Character Development**

Character development, for the use of this thesis, must be defined. One component of the phrase resides in the word “character.” I will be using “character” to describe the people within scriptural stories. This word choice is not intended to diminish their historical existence on this earth. “Characters” are the witnesses and participants within the biblical stories. The second aspect of the phrase is the word “development.” This word will be utilized to describe the concept of re-imagining the character, allowing the persons of the biblical story to have a perspective within the story, which is impacted by their personality, their basic fears and desires, their life experience, their culture, and their world-view.

In literature, character development is the “way in which a . . . character is described and fleshed out.”<sup>15</sup> Dr. Rachel Ballon, a noted psychotherapist and a member of the Writer’s Guild of America, insists on characters developing “an emotional arc” and an “internal life.” Without these aspects, Ballon claims that characters remain flat and one-dimensional.<sup>16</sup> For the purpose of this thesis, I will be using the above definitions.

While character development can be understood as the growth and change of a character, the preacher has limited time to create extensive movement within a sermon; however, the stories of scripture share ongoing growth within the portrayal of biblical characters. By representing scriptural truths, it is likely that the storytelling preacher will present some form of growth within the character. The purpose of character development

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<sup>15</sup> “Character Development Definition,” Reference\*, Art & Literature, accessed September 15, 2017, <https://www.reference.com/art-literature/definition-character-development-1a0cb87e27929d2d>.

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting: A Complete Writer’s Guide to Story Structure and Character Development* (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2005), 58, 68.

throughout this project is to enable the character of scripture to be real, to have authentic struggles and believable fears with which the listener of the sermon might identify. While creativity is necessary for this process, the goal is not to be creative for creativity's sake. The goal is to make it possible for today's listener to identify with biblical characters, the witnesses and participants within the scriptural story, and therefore, empowering the listener to encounter the Divine themselves.

### **Research Method**

While storytelling has reached increased popularity within sermonizing the last several decades, it seems from my research that specific attention to the development of characters, the witnesses within scripture, has had little focus given to it. Yet, reimagining biblical characters impacts preaching. According to Ballon, "Story and character develop from each other. They are synergistic and each one emanates from the other."<sup>17</sup> Since story and characters derive from each other, does the story of God, the story of the Divine, the story of scripture become diminished when characters are presented in lifeless ways? This thesis project intends to learn from those who have experienced sermons where attention has been given to character development. Does this sermon style enhance the listeners' ability to identify with the biblical witness of the story? Does identifying with the character improve the listeners' ability to encounter God? I will utilize the action/reflection model to gather, ponder and analyze this information. The research will stem from four sermons, each sermon shaped around a

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20.

person from the Gospel of John. Following the four-part series, I will interview the five participants who have agreed to listen and then be interviewed for this research. These five participants will be regular attendees at First Baptist Church in Owatonna, MN where I have preached for the last seven years. Knowing my congregation is accustomed to my style of preaching which already implements some limited character development, I also hope to add two participants from outside my congregation who will listen to the four-part series and be interviewed. Hearing from these two individuals from outside my ministry context might lend some additional information to the research.

My goal is to learn whether or not a much fuller development of character (than I usually include) within a sermon enhances the listeners' encounter with God. In addition, I hope to ascertain whether the two persons, who are unfamiliar with my preaching style that aims to incorporate some character development, describe a deeper encounter with God after experiencing this style of preaching. By involving these two listeners, I attempt to create a more random selection of participants versus those who already have reached a previous conclusion concerning my preaching style.

### **Summary**

In summary, preaching is paramount to the life of the church. Changes in communication styles in the last several decades have created some obstacles to presenting a meaningful sermon unless the preacher makes necessary changes from the style of yesteryear. Those who preach are given a great opportunity each Sunday to proclaim the Word into the lives of those sitting in the pew. When the preacher keeps the characters of scripture as caricatures, the vitality of scripture may well be minimized. The Bible, in this approach, becomes limited to a textbook at best, or a fairy tale at worst,

when witnesses within scripture are constricted to one-dimensional viewing. Using character development within the retelling of the biblical stories is one possibility for sermonizing in a manner that allows the listener to identify with scriptural persons. While it is not my goal to completely eradicate sermons that focus on ideas, information, and instruction, I believe including other sermon styles in order to touch the heart, soul, and mind of the listener to be paramount. Creating sermons with the intention of inviting the hearer to “come and see” allows space for the Holy Spirit to impact the listener. My goal in this preaching style of fuller character development is for the listener to encounter the Divine in their own lives as a result of identifying with characters who encounter God within scripture. I share Michael Rogness’ thought when he states, “Retelling the story well takes effort, but it is well worth it to make the Bible come alive.”<sup>18</sup> Believing the Word of God has power to change lives, believing that encountering the divine is transformative, and believing the Gospel redeems humanity, preachers are called to proclaim the Good News in a manner that can be embraced by the listeners.

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<sup>18</sup> Rogness, *Preaching to a TV Generation*, 83.

## CHAPTER TWO

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I will discuss biblical support for crafting a sermon that aims beyond the intellect and reaches the heart. One homiletical style for which to advocate is the fuller development of the characters of scripture. This style is recommended so the hearers of the sermon may identify with these witnesses; then by identifying with the characters may also connect with the God of those characters. I will also examine my theological perspective of crafting sermons with the intention of reimagining the biblical witnesses. Throughout this thesis, I will use the title “the Divine” to refer to God. This verbiage is used to broaden the reader’s perspective beyond the stereotypical, intellectual image of God.

#### **Biblical Support**

Throughout scripture, as well as history, humans have been invited, encouraged, even moved, to have a vibrant relationship with the Divine. The Jewish scriptures portray a God who has continually reached out to humanity even while being fully present to them, from Genesis 3:9 to Zephaniah 3:17. Our Christian texts build on this belief, from Matthew 1:23 to Revelation 22:17. Relating to and with the God of scripture has been presented as a holistic experience.

## More Than Intellectual Assent

Scripture urges humankind toward a vibrant, ongoing relationship with the Divine. This relationship includes a broader “knowing” of God than a mere mental and conceptual acknowledgment of a divine being. In the early verses of John’s Gospel, the concept of “truth” appears (John 1:14, 17). Karoline Lewis states,

Truth is not fact in that it is a proposition able to be proven outside of itself. Rather, truth denotes relationship. For Jesus, to state that he is the truth (14:6) reveals that truth has been redefined as the person of Jesus Christ, yet the one who is the Word made flesh. . . . Jesus now is embodied truth and that truth represents relationship . . . .<sup>1</sup>

Within our English language and Western civilization, interaction with “truth” is often understood to be a mental activity occurring in a person’s thinking; however, John’s Gospel connects truth and relationship from the very beginning. Relationship with the Divine, this knowing of God, involves much more than the intellect; it is a holistic connection with God involving all of our being. The Torah, the Hebrew Scriptures, states, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” (Deuteronomy 6:5). This command to love God with every aspect of a person’s being has been foundational for the Jewish faith, being “recited by pious Jews every morning and evening. To this day it begins every synagogue service.”<sup>2</sup> Carrying forward the understanding of loving God with our entire being, the authors of Matthew and Mark, according to English translations of the New Testament, portray Jesus repeating a variation of this command. When asked about the greatest commandment, Jesus states the

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<sup>1</sup> Karoline Lewis, *Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries: John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Concordia Self-Study Bible: New International Version*, ed. Robert G. Hoeber (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 1527.

Deuteronomy command, the Shema, and adds “mind” to the list of ways to love God (Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30).

It is important to note that adding the word “mind” could be a translation choice of those who worked on interpreting the Hebrew Scriptures into the Greek translation, known as the Septuagint, since the addition first appeared in some manuscripts of the Septuagint. “The early Christian Church inherited the LXX (another title for the Septuagint) version of the Scriptures and the New Testament writers commonly quoted the Old Testament books from the LXX.”<sup>3</sup> In effort to make the translation more understandable to the Greek culture, the writers may have added the word “mind”. The Hebrew understanding of “heart” included what the Greeks referred to as the mind. Andreas Schuele states, “Unlike the Western cultures, which primarily associated the heart with feelings and emotions, Near Eastern culture emphasized its role in thinking, reasoning, and planning.”<sup>4</sup> The Jewish listener and reader of Scripture would have understood the word “heart” to include the thinking and reasoning components of humanity.

However, those influenced by the Western world place thinking and reasoning within the mind. Merriam-Webster denotes several variations of the meaning and the usage of the word “mind,” defining it as the locality of reason and logic, an ability to think and understand.<sup>5</sup> This was not the case for the original audience of the Hebrew

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<sup>3</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), 1241.

<sup>4</sup> Andreas Schuele, “Heart,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible D-H Vol. 2* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 764.

<sup>5</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, accessed October 12, 2017, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/mind>.



Scriptures. Sze-Kar Wan writes, “There is no word in the biblical Hebrew for ‘mind.’”<sup>6</sup> Within the Jewish tradition and the Hebrew language, the “heart” encompassed both the mental activity of thinking and the emotional aspect of compassion.<sup>7</sup> The distinction between “heart” and “mind” must be addressed within the Western world where they have been separated from each other. The Ancient Near East interwove the concept of heart and mind.

Acknowledging the mind as a crucial component of being human, a person’s connection with the Divine, while including the mind, must expand beyond the individual’s cognition. Both Judaism and Christianity embrace a central theme of a holistic relationship with God. With this understanding as the backdrop, homileticians must present Scripture in such a way as to impact the mind and the heart. When a preacher’s words are focused on creating agreement or persuasion of a doctrinal statement, the effectiveness of the sermon is limited to the intellect. Aiming a sermon at the cerebral center does not create a problem unless most sermons are restricted to the mental confines of a human being. By limiting the homilies to only the thinking capacity, the homiletician may hinder the listener from a holistic experience with God. Loving God with our mind is paramount; however, loving God with all of our being can never be trivialized to a cerebral assent.

If the preacher desires to impact the listener holistically, they must consider speaking to the western understanding of the heart. The heart, defined as, “the emotional . . . nature as distinguished from the intellectual nature” and “one’s innermost character

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<sup>6</sup> Sze-Kar Wan, “Mind,” *The New Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible Me-R Vol. 4* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 90.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

and feelings,” belongs in the intentional consideration of the homiletician.<sup>8</sup> For the listener to have an encounter with God, which goes beyond the thinking and reasoning aspect of being human, the connection must include emotions, fears, and desires. Sermonizing for the spiritual life-transformation of loving God with all of our being requires attention to be given beyond the mind, aiming at the heart. Loving God, knowing God, relating to and with God is paramount in the Christian faith. Therefore, the preacher must consider more than the intellect when crafting a sermon; the emotional and experiential aspect of the listener must also be included.

The prophets speak to a deep knowing of God that expands beyond intellectual assent. Jeremiah reported the Lord saying, “I will give them a heart to know me, that I am the LORD. They will be my people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with all their heart” (Jeremiah 24:7). The author of Jeremiah also states that The LORD declares, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people” (Jeremiah 31:33). The author of the New Testament Epistle, Hebrews, quotes that same passage to their audience (Hebrews 8:10). Whether using “heart” language or “mind” language, having the entire being involved in relationship with the Holy is woven throughout the Bible.

The Psalms often mention knowing God in various ways. The writer of Psalm 34 encourages their audience to “taste and see that the Lord is good” (verse 8). Using poetic license, the psalmist includes the senses as an experiential way of knowing God. The human body engages its senses (sight, smell, hear, taste, and feel) in an ability to “know.” The psalmist capitalized on this form of communicating a sense of “knowing.” Scripture

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<sup>8</sup> *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, (accessed October 12, 2017).

readily uses anthropomorphic descriptions for knowing the Divine, giving humanity the possibility of encountering God experientially. The Jesus of John's Gospel also taught in this way, claiming to be the living water (John 4) and the bread of life (John 6).

Jesus wanted his disciples to know the Divine in a vibrant, intimate way. His life's purpose was to reveal God to humanity. The author of the Gospel of John, using the image of seeing to enhance the concept of knowing, writes, "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known" (John 1:18). Later in speaking with Thomas, Jesus stated, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). Using the physical sense of sight appears throughout the Fourth Gospel. Lewis' insights are helpful as she states,

The presence of Jesus means that we will now be able to see God and invites imagination of what this possibility entails. The emphasis on sight may be taken both literally and figuratively . . . . To see God will not just be limited to the sense of sight but suggests that an experience of God in (the) Gospel (of John) is beyond constructs that have to do only with knowledge. The revelation of God in Jesus will be a fully embodied and sensorial experience.<sup>9</sup>

Jesus, as recorded in John 14 and 15, emphasizes the relational aspect of knowing God. "Anyone who loves me will obey my teaching. My Father will love them and we will come to them and make our home with them" (John 14:23). Jesus' comment, that he and God will make their "home" with the one who loves them, speaks of closeness and familiarity. This making of "our home with them" signifies dwelling together—the concept of abiding/remaining addressed throughout John 15. For the author of John, knowing God is far more than the intellectual grasping of a theological concept. It

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *John*, 21.

includes an emotional connection, expanding the “knowing” of God to a holistic experience.

Through the years, I have observed various preachers focusing on either “mind” or “heart” to the exclusion of the other. However, the Hebrew Scriptures, the Septuagint, and the English translations of the Old and New Testaments continue to convey a holistic experience and relationship with God. I believe we, as preachers, are called to create an opportunity for the listener to encounter the Divine so they might “know” and “see” the Father. The goal of these experiences is a relational, holistic expansion of intimacy with the Almighty. We cannot preach only to the cerebral center. Richard Ward affirms this thought by saying, “What we as Christians seek in worship is an encounter with God . . . . Worship is, therefore, more than rational assent to ideas and propositions . . . .”<sup>10</sup> It appears to me that scripture overwhelmingly supports the goal of preaching to be heart transformation; therefore, preachers must intentionally aim beyond the mind and include the heart.

### The Power of the Word

Preaching for heart transformation and a vibrant intimacy with the Divine would be hopeless without the power of the scriptures and the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Psalmists, who penned Psalm 19 and 119, were convinced the Word of God, the Law of God, the Commands of God, had the power to impact lives. They dedicated nearly two hundred verses within those two psalms to communicate this truth. The author of Isaiah 55 boldly reported the LORD declared, the “word that goes out of my mouth . . .

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<sup>10</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 52.

will not return empty” (Isaiah 55:11). The writer of Hebrews, agreeing with the words of the psalmists and prophets, reiterated these truths to their Christian audience saying, “For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow” (Hebrews 4:11). The author of John connects the word of God and the activity of the Advocate, saying the Paraclete would be “teaching,” “reminding,” and “guiding” the hearts of people (John 14:26; 16:13).

While preaching is the declaration of God’s word, it appears some preachers, including me, at times may trust our words about the scripture more than the biblical story itself. The expectation of those in the pulpit and those in the pew is for the sermon to say something about the pericope. Mark Allen Powell urges homileticians to be intentional in crafting the sermon to do to the listener what the scripture does. “(The laity) want(s) something to happen—something more than just a transfer of information . . . . Did the sermon do to these people what the Bible would do? Did it comfort, inspire, confuse, frustrate or anger? Or was it simply interesting and informative?”<sup>11</sup>

While those who stand in the pulpit hone the craft of preaching, we must rely on the power of God’s word and the activity of the Holy Spirit in order for hearts to experience transformation. A major question of this thesis asks, “Can a reimagining of the story within the pericope focused on the emotions and fears of the biblical witnesses reach the listeners’ minds, hearts, and souls, thereby providing an encounter with the Divine?”

As proclaimers of the Word, our communication of scripture must be compelling and true, targeting the mind and the heart, thereby engaging the entirety of a person’s

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<sup>11</sup> Mark Allan Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 98-99.

being. This was certainly the goal of the author of the Gospel of John. “These (words) are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

### **Theological Reflection**

As a pastor, I’ve learned that many people, who attend church regularly, long for a meaningful relationship with God. They have shared with me that their experience with the Divine lacks “abundant life” (John 10:10). It lacks life of any kind. It is flat and unrewarding, composed of intellectual knowledge and information. For some, the preaching to which they have been exposed has been focused on a type of cerebral “believing” or “knowing” of scripture, doctrine, and God. Congregants tell me they have been instructed in two ways: “what” to know or believe about God (doctrinal perspectives) and “what” to do (moral behavior). Little attention has been given to a vibrant relational “believing” or “knowing” of the Divine. This described my own story, as well.

Klaus Issler appropriately states, “We have been specifically designed so that only an infinite God can truly meet all our needs: emotional, relational, moral, intellectual.”<sup>12</sup> To only know God in a cerebral capacity leaves individuals yearning for something more. Many persons have shared with me and other preachers with whom I’ve spoken about their desire for a more meaningful connection to the Divine. A participant of my Parish Response Group shared that they had repeatedly tried to “believe” more fully by gaining biblical knowledge but found they still longed for something more

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<sup>12</sup> Issler, *Wasting Time With God*, 28.

within their spirituality. Concepts, knowledge, and information never fully satisfied their longing. Knowing God intellectually is likely the extent of many people's experience. The soul yearns for relationship with God. Yet, how can human beings connect to God as One with whom they can have a relationship, when God has only been known as an intellectual concept?

The Baptist tradition places high regard on the Bible, seeing the scriptures to be “the ultimate authority generally for all truth in general and specifically for matters of faith and practice.”<sup>13</sup> While having such preeminence, the Holy Scriptures are viewed as “dynamic and vibrant, not static or dead.”<sup>14</sup> This strong view of the importance of the Bible supports the need for biblical characters to be developed in such a way as to portray real people with real challenges possessing real faith in a real God. The biblical stories and their participants can be expressed in a manner that goes beyond mental concepts in order to invite the listener into the vibrant story of God. Michael Pasquerello, III, urges the preacher to embrace the authority of scripture, which includes its narrative form. He writes,

We must rediscover . . . habits of thinking and speaking that will enable us to construe the biblical narrative as the only true story of the world . . . . Insofar as we allow God's story to become our home rather than a distant land, we no longer will approach the Bible as consumers of religion seeing quotations, illustrations, self-help tips, and practical applications: rather, we will reverently receive it as the living Word addressed to God's people, as the story which furnishes our vocabulary, shapes our imagination, and forms our life for the sake of the whole creations.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> R. Stanton Norman, *The Baptist Way: Distinctives of a Baptist Church* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2005), 31.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>15</sup> Michael Pasquarello, III, “Inhabiting the Story,” *Narrative Reading, Narrative Preaching: Reuniting New Testament Interpretation and Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 180.

The sense of story and the characters within the narrative permeate the power of scripture. Powell explains, “empathy (being able to imagine being inside the story) [is] an involuntary projection that causes us to identify with one or more of the characters . . . and experience the narrative” from their perspective.<sup>16</sup> To be true to the powerful stories and characters within the pages of scripture, these narratives and their witnesses must be portrayed as much more than flat, one-dimensional characters. Amos Wilder points out, “The very nature of God as Judaism and Christianity understand it comes to expression in a story . . . .”<sup>17</sup> With this understanding, the preacher is encouraged to design the sermon as the story that is presented in scripture, leading to the development of its characters. They must be holistic with desires, fears, and behavioral patterns. When the biblical witnesses have joys and troubles, successes and failures, times of trust and times of doubt, their interactions with the Divine become important to today’s listener. We are invited into the biblical story, and the biblical story is the story of God. Because I embrace the Baptist distinctive that the truths of scripture are a powerful change-agent in people’s lives, in my understanding, the proclamation of the Word must be a full proclamation of the Word allowing the characters to be fully human. Ellingsen gets straight to the point when he writes, “We must tell the story instead of just using it as an example.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> Amos Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel: Early Christian Rhetoric* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative: Story in Theology and Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 47.



I believe the type of preaching for which I am calling will create opportunities for an encounter with the Divine going beyond the mental assent. Developing characters within a narrative sermon aims for the heart by addressing emotional aspects of the biblical witnesses; in turn, the listener may experience hope for their own holistic connection with God. Ellingsen argues the narratives of scripture invite the listener into the biblical story enhancing the possibility for the pericope to impact their lives.<sup>19</sup> This preaching style might well enhance a person's knowing of God in a relational way. The homiletician, who uses character development within the sermon, must remember, however, that all sermons need to be about the Divine. David Buttrick discusses the need for Christ also to be a "full-dimensional character" in our preaching. "The Christ we preach must not be [a] stock [character] but, rather full of the opaque mystery of God and humanity . . . . A cardboard Jesus is [not] compelling . . . ." <sup>20</sup>

The desire for relationship between Christ and humanity does not reside in humankind, other than in the way we are created in the image of God. The desire for relationship originates and exists in the Divine. "The majestic Creator of the universe desires our friendship . . . . God is personal and has created us to enjoy deep friendship with [the Divine]."<sup>21</sup> The witnesses within the biblical stories experienced the Divine reaching for them. They, in turn, embraced a relationship with God. Just as Jesus desired for his disciples of the First Century Common Era to have a vibrant relationship with the Divine, so Christ yearns for intimacy with today's Christian. Ellingsen advocates for a

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>20</sup> David Buttrick, *Preaching Jesus Christ: An Exercise in Homiletic Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988) 21.

<sup>21</sup> Issler, *Wasting Time with God*, 28.

lively story of God to be presented in the sermon in order to speak the reality of God interacting with humanity.

When preaching is a telling of these biblical stories as realistic narratives, executed with the same compelling power in which Scripture portrays them, then if properly understood, the reality of its hearers has been overcome by the biblical world. That recognition in itself is a profound insight for modern people for a variety of reasons. . . . To our modern secular consciousness God seems absent. . . . The logic of the kind of preaching which I advocate is to demonstrate that an uninterpreted secular perception of reality is a lie. The real world is the world of the biblical accounts, where God truly interacts with the people. Since they represent us, we can experience God's interacting in our own lives as well, even though God seems so distant.<sup>22</sup>

I believe this is the “believing” and “knowing” to which the author of the Gospel of John refers, the reality of the Divine operating within our lives, making their home with us, inviting humanity into ongoing relationship. As Johannine characters are portrayed with common emotions, cultural biases, historical pressures, and archetypical fears, I postulate (and am eager to discover if) this portrayal in preaching enhances the listeners' encounter with the Divine. Cornelius Bennema claims the author of John “deliberately puts on the stage various characters that interact with Jesus, producing an array of belief-responses.”<sup>23</sup> Will these “belief-responses” encourage the listener toward their own response to the Divine?

For the scope of this project, I have narrowed the research and sermon series to four characters from the Gospel of John. I intend to portray the man born blind (John 9), Mary Magdalene (John 19:25; 20:1-2, 11-18), Thomas (John 11:7-15; 14:5; 20:24-29), and Peter (John 21). Each character is developed through the use of historical and cultural

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<sup>22</sup> Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative*, 45.

<sup>23</sup> Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 1.

information, passages within John, and archetypical fears and desires. I will discuss this in greater depth in chapter four.

My goal is for these characters to be biblical witnesses with whom the listener can identify. If the listener can identify with these characters, will they also come to know the God of the characters? As the biblical witnesses experience emotions, fears, desires, and operate within a behavioral pattern, will the listener be able to connect with the characters' awareness of the Divine? Will this intentional development of character within the sermon create an opportunity for the hearer to engage in a more vibrant relationship with God? I acknowledge that vibrancy in a person's relationship with God requires the work of the Holy Spirit. My goal, then, as a preacher is to create a space for the Holy Spirit's work to take place during, and beyond, the sermon experience. After all, "an effective sermon is not over when the preacher has finished speaking . . . it is completed in the reflection and lives of the people during the week."<sup>24</sup>

### Summary

I believe the Holy Spirit utilizes scripture to enhance our understanding of the Divine. However, this understanding is more than intellectual assent; it moves toward a relationship. Biblical preaching must invite the listener to a holistic experience with God. Believing the scriptural stories and their participants can impact our lives and the lives of our contemporaries, the preacher is encouraged to develop the characters within these biblical narratives, allowing them to be real people with real problems possessing real faith and a real relationship with a real God. With the pages of scripture brimming with

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<sup>24</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon: A Guide to Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 212.

the experiences of people who encountered and journeyed with God, the homiletician is urged to reimagine these witnesses in a manner with which the listener can identify.

Wilder states it well when he writes,

Perhaps the special character of the stories in the New Testament lies in the fact that they are not told for themselves, that they are not only about other people, but that they are always about us. They locate us in the very midst of the great story and plot of all time and space, and therefore relate us to the great dramatist and storyteller, God himself.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wilder, *The Language of the Gospel*, 65.

## CHAPTER THREE

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I discuss the books and theses which guided me in the designing of the sermons for the original research aspect of this project. I include works that directly impacted my thoughts, the method of character development utilized for the sermons and the conclusions represented in this thesis.

#### **Literature Review**

Multiple resources exist on the topic of storytelling for sermonizing. These writings include books authored by the late Fred Craddock, a pioneering genius in storytelling preaching.<sup>1</sup> Eugene Lowry, a skillful homiletician, advanced the conversation of narrative preaching,<sup>2</sup> and Paul Scott Wilson, a highly respected contemporary professor of homiletics, has added his guiding theory to the craft of preaching.<sup>3</sup> Many other gifted practitioners have shared their homiletical insights. Giving credibility to the use of storytelling as a viable preaching style, these authors provide many suggestions for holding the interest and reaching the heart of those in the pew. While these writings hold extreme value in the field of homiletics, I have found no research that addresses how intentional character development, the ability to reimagine

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<sup>1</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One without Authority* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979).

<sup>2</sup> Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form, Expanded Edition* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*.

and breathe life into the witnesses of scripture, might be crafted as part of a sermon. Nor did I uncover any research on the impact this sermon style has on the listener. Can today's listener identify with the biblical character even though they are removed by time, culture and worldview? If so, does the experience of identification and empathizing with the scriptural witness encourage an encounter with the Divine? The process and guidelines of writing and preaching a sermon created around authentic characters from scripture appears to be absent. I, also, did not uncover research discussing the reasons a preacher might choose to reimagine biblical witnesses within a homily/sermon. Without the research concerning the sermon style of intentional character development, it is no surprise that data concerning the impact to the listener of this style of preaching is also missing.

While not finding materials directly related to my thesis topic, I relied on multiple books in my research for this project. The desire to keep sermons culturally and historically accurate, while embracing a literary style of exegesis, required the reliance on the following books. Other resources listed below were used to develop a knowledgeable skillset for breathing life into the biblical witnesses.

#### Karoline Lewis

Dr. Karoline Lewis' commentary on the Gospel of John gives a fresh look at the Fourth Gospel.<sup>4</sup> Having exceptional skill in the original Greek language, she brings understanding to the passages of John by interpreting them through the lens of the Fourth Gospel alone. This literary approach allows her to consider the historical and cultural

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *John*.

context of the original audience of this Gospel. She accentuates various themes, which are woven throughout the Fourth Gospel, enriching the message of the passages. While Lewis does not develop characters in her commentary, she uses the historical, geographical, and cultural context to inform the author's theological claims within this Gospel. The first-century Jewish society, its worldview and its adherence to its faith traditions are paramount since the people represented in scripture cannot, nor did they, live apart from space and time.<sup>5</sup>

### Cornelis Bennema

Cornelis Bennema's book, *Encountering Jesus: Character Studies in the Gospel of John*, examines the various characters throughout the Gospel.<sup>6</sup> As he tracks numerous individuals throughout the Gospel, Bennema shows how the author of John allowed the characters to exhibit struggles in their developing comprehension of Jesus as Messiah. He also acknowledges particular characters who display real faith. In Bennema's writing, he reviewed past works (Eva Krafft, Raymond Collins, Alan Culpepper, Margaret Davies, Mark Stibbe, Francois Tolmie, Robert Maccini, David Beck, Adeline Fehribach, James Resseguie, Colleen Conway, Craig Koester, Ruth Edwards, Margaret Beirne, and Jo-Ann Brant) and concluded these authors limited the characters within the Gospel of John to flat, one-dimensional characters.<sup>7</sup> Bennema's work is helpful to my endeavors of allowing the biblical witnesses of John to become multi-dimensional. Bennema's work is

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis, "Core One: Preaching as the Word of God," lecture.

<sup>6</sup> Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 2-12.

focused on the “black space” on the page, the inked words that are written within John. Bennema acknowledges, “If the Gospels belong to the genre of ancient Graeco-Roman biography..., they need not necessarily be historically accurate in every detail.”<sup>8</sup> Seeing Bennema’s statement as permitting me to take some imaginative liberties, I went beyond the literal description in John when allowing biblical witnesses to come to life. I used archetypal components in character development for my original research sermon series and will cover this approach in the next chapter.

### R. Alan Culpepper

Alan Culpepper employs a literary critique, as he explores the Gospel of John in his work entitled, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design*.<sup>9</sup> As Culpepper examines the characters within the Gospel of John, he concludes the author is not concerned with “full-blown development of his characters.”<sup>10</sup> While claiming “the characters . . . make the plot live,”<sup>11</sup> Culpepper asserts that they are included only for the purpose of “representing a continuum of responses to Jesus.”<sup>12</sup> Culpepper’s writing cultivates an avenue for literary critique for the sermonizer who grapples with the Fourth Gospel. His understanding of the characters of John being present only to further the story of Jesus allows space for the preacher’s imagination to envision a deeper and more fully developed character.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>9</sup> R. Alan Culpepper, *Anatomy of the Fourth Gospel: A Study in Literary Design* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 104.



### Rachel Friedman Ballon

Since this project required skillful character development, I utilized Dr. Rachel Friedman Ballon's book, *Blueprint for Screenwriting: A Complete Writer's Guide to Story Structure and Character Development*.<sup>13</sup> While Ballon writes concerning many aspects of screenwriting, she places great importance on developing the character/s. She encourages the writer to grasp the emotional development of a character, as well as their goals, "value system, . . . beliefs," and behaviors.<sup>14</sup> She urges the reader to consider three aspects of the character: social, physical, and emotional.<sup>15</sup> At the end of each chapter, Ballon includes assignments to help the reader in their ability to create a believable character versus a flat or one-dimensional actor. Ballon's book was extremely helpful in guiding me as I worked to develop the four biblical witnesses within the original research sermon series.

### Richard Ward

Richard Ward provides an advantageous examination of presenting scripture in his book, *Speaking of the Holy: The Art of Communication in Preaching*.<sup>16</sup> Holding scripture in high regard, Ward skillfully argues for utilizing the imagination when interacting with the Bible. He advocates for a lively "reading," "reciting," and "retelling" of scripture, claiming that these practices will impact the preacher and the listener. Ward asserts, ". . . a preacher leads her or his listeners into an experience of the Word through

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<sup>13</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>16</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*.

the use of language and imagery . . . .”<sup>17</sup> Ward’s writings encourage the preacher in the ways of imagination and experience with the Word of God. His words affirm the trajectory of this thesis project.

#### F. Scott Spencer

Since this thesis project advocates for a preaching style which aims at the heart, it is important to include the work of F. Scott Spencer and colleagues. *Mixed Feelings and Vexed Passions: Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature* is a collection of essays reviewing emotional characteristics, stated and/or implied, within scripture.<sup>18</sup> Spencer addresses the historicity of emotive language and describes the value (or lack thereof) placed on emotions throughout antiquity to present day. He defines a language and understanding for the purpose of furthering the conversation about humanity’s shared experience on an emotional level. While respecting the critical scholarly work of the past, Spencer comments, “. . . we moderns, with due openness and diligent study, can still have a reasonable cross-cultural exchange with out ancient brothers and sisters about emotions. . . .”<sup>19</sup> The essays of the fifteen scholarly authors discuss “various emotions in biblical literature . . . confront(ing) special literary challenges” concerning scripture’s “literary context” and “literary form”.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>18</sup> F. Scott Spencer, “Getting a Feel for the “Mixed” and “Vexed” Study of Emotions in Biblical Literature,” in *Mixed Feeling and Vexed Passions: Exploring Emotions in Biblical Literature*, ed. F. Scott Spencer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 13.

## Theses

I found two theses that briefly mention aspects of character development. First, James Brown's thesis entitled, "Seeing the Sermon: Preaching from the Screenwriter's Bible", examines ways to enhance sermons by utilizing a technique of storytelling used by screenwriters.<sup>21</sup> Brown's work, which focused on the broader subject of storytelling instead of the more specific aspect of character development, was limited in its scope concerning the topic of this thesis project. His writing, however, pointed me in the direction of screenwriting. Investigating the field and subject of screenwriting allowed me to find additional information in my quest to intentionally reimagine the characters of scripture for the purposes of preaching.

Secondly, A. Barton Smith, Jr. wrote a thesis entitled, "Exploring The Use of Biblical Character Portrayals in Preaching at Arapaho United Methodist Church."<sup>22</sup> Smith's work concentrated on first-person portrayals of a biblical character during the preaching event. While Smith's two sermons for his original research were well received, Smith voices two concerns to the preacher. First, he warns against preaching "Biblical Character Portrayal" too often, as he believes this would hinder the effectiveness of first-person portrayal preaching style.<sup>23</sup> Secondly, while Smith finds this style to be a credible style of preaching, he acknowledged significant additional work and preparation was

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<sup>21</sup> James Brown, "Seeing the Sermon: Preaching from a Screenwriter's Bible" (D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, 2012).

<sup>22</sup> A. Barton Smith, Jr., "Exploring the Use of Biblical Character Portrayals in Preaching at Arapaho United Methodist Church" (D.Min. thesis, Perkins School of Theology Southern Methodist University, 1991).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 56.

required in creating the first-person biblical portrait he used in his original research sermons.<sup>24</sup>

As I interacted with Smith's work, I questioned his conclusions. While a variety of sermon styles are necessary to reach the differences in all people's learning, stories and well-formed characters with whom the listener can identify continue to impact the hearer well beyond the sermon. (I will discuss this further in chapter five.) Oral tradition relied heavily on storytelling to inform the shared perspective of ancient society. Even though we are literate, our culture still identifies with narratives. According to Kevin Kling, a playwright and storyteller, "We can't be careless with our stories, (for in them) we find what is sacred."<sup>25</sup> Smith's thesis and research focused on first-person portrayals. My thesis project focuses on biblical characters being reimagined. Both styles require additional effort and preparation. I know the time constraints on preachers must be considered. Yet, if possible, it is my thought that our congregants yearn for meaningful sermons delivered in a style that engages the listener. Ellingsen states, "Stories help hearers identify with the proclamation."<sup>26</sup> Since I believe this to be true, it stands to reason that preaching for the purpose of connecting with the Divine is likely to be enhanced with storytelling that is intentional in its character development.

Erin Bouman's thesis, "Reliable Narrators: Narrative Preaching That Not Only Delights, but Also Teaches and Moves," does not include character development, which is the specific focus of this thesis project. Bouman explores the role of preacher as

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>25</sup> Kevin Kling, *MN Original*, YouTube video, accessed January 8, 2015, <http://youtube.com/watch?v=sskPbwplrls>.

<sup>26</sup> Ellingsen, *The Integrity of Biblical Narrative*, 90.

“reliable narrator.”<sup>27</sup> She utilizes the Gospel of John and explores the role of narrator within the story revealed in the Fourth Gospel. I mention her work since it discusses storytelling sermons and the significances of the narrator. The examples used by Bouman within her thesis stem from the Gospel of John. With these three components in mind, I concluded that Bouman’s thesis is linked to my own thesis project, while our particular topics are distinctive.

### **Summary**

The thesis project I propose focuses on intentional biblical character development within the sermon and its implications for enhancing the listeners’ encounter with the Divine. While there is a great deal of research and writing compiled around the concept of storytelling within the sermon, the above-reviewed works aided me in breathing life into the biblical witnesses. Can today’s sermon listeners identify with characters from scripture? If so, will those listening find themselves encountering the Divine? If the answer is “yes” to these questions, I want to become a skillful practitioner in developing characters from the pages of scripture. As I relate specific guidance in this practice, it is a further hope that other preachers may be inspired by the thesis to consider this as one of the styles they develop in their preaching ministry.

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<sup>27</sup> Erin Bouman, “Reliable Narrators: Narrative Preaching That Not Only Delights, but Also Teaches and Moves” (D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, 2015).

## CHAPTER FOUR

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I present the project utilized for the original research sermon series, the context in which the sermons were preached and how information would be acquired from those who agreed to participate. I point out the need for contextual knowledge and discuss variables for the preacher to consider. Next, I briefly explain using the DISC assessment information and the Enneagram types to create more fully developed characters within the sermon. I discuss forming the characters actions according to their behavior style and basic desires and fears.

#### **Project Description**

Since I desire to know if bringing biblical characters to life enhances listeners' ability to encounter the Divine, I utilized the action/reflection model for my original research. Thomas Long claims, "When we identify with a character in a story, whatever happens to that character happens to us at the level of imagination."<sup>1</sup> Building upon that claim, I seek to discover how those in the pew might experience a sermon that is intentional about character development within the story from the pericope. This project aims to discover the answer.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 75.

The context for this research was conducted at First Baptist Church, affiliated with the American Baptist Churches, USA. This denomination holds the scriptures in high regard while caring deeply about social justice, as well as the autonomy of the local church. The story of First Baptist Church begins in 1857, making it the first church in Owatonna, Minnesota. The prominent Pillsbury family donated an organ to the congregation when they were building their new facility in 1893. The church structure was built around the organ, which is listed in the Minnesota Historical Registry. From the 1880's until the 1950's, First Baptist Church was the religious center for cadets who attended Pillsbury Military Academy. Today's congregation is proud of their heritage. At the time of the original research sermon series, the parish consisted mostly of 30-years and older adults. Many of them have attended church for decades. They value serving others, both within the church and the broader community. They are immensely concerned for the under-privileged, a reputation that directs people who need economic help to the church during the week. The people of FBC understand their unique mission to be one of helping those in need. Being located in downtown Owatonna affords this congregation the opportunity of ministering to those who find themselves as vagrants, homeless, or in need.

The city of Owatonna's story is highly agricultural and widely known for its entrepreneurial businesses, including manufacturing. The town is located within forty-five minutes in three directions of major cities within Minnesota; consequently, Owatonna is not a major hub. Most of the residents are Euro-Americans who are middle-class and hard-working people with traditional family values. Owatonnans are typically

conservative, both politically and fiscally, and utilize “Minnesota-nice” as a dominant interaction style.

The above description of this community and its residences is given so that the reader might understand the context in which the original research sermon series was conducted. It is my intent to enable the reader to possibly perceive what type of people listened to the sermon series. Comprehending the demographics of the audience may also help to inform the possible explanations of the responses of the listeners.

For the perimeters of this research, I designed the project to consist of four sermons from the Gospel of John, striving to develop four different characters—one per sermon. By preaching four homilies, the worshippers and I would experience the process four times with four differing characters. The biblical witnesses from John who were chosen for this series included three males and one female, three active followers of Jesus and one who wasn’t sure of Jesus’ identity. Reimagining these four characters with their differences would broaden my experience, since in the past, I have created sermons with less than full development of the character within the pericope. I surmised the participants would also gain a more extensive perspective experiencing this preaching style four times.

Following the sermon series, I interviewed those who had agreed to participate in this original research. Each one engaged in a relaxed yet guided conversation concerning questions the interviewees had received before listening to the sermons. The participants were informed that they could choose whether or not to read the questions before their experience. I will interact with the interview questions in Chapter Five. (See Appendix I for interview questions and answers.)



Since the thesis question is subjective (Does bringing biblical characters to life enhance listeners' ability to encounter the Divine?), the interview consisted of questions concerning the participants' experience with the sermon in the series. Several questions probed them to consider their connection with God as a result of these particular homilies. Consequently, the information gathered is qualitative based on the experience of those who participated in this project.

For the purpose of clear expectations, before the sermon series, the participants agreed to the following:

1. Attendance to hear at least three of the four sermons. If it is necessary to miss one of the sermons, the participant will commit to listening to that sermon on the church website.
2. Being interviewed within five days of the last sermon preached.

I planned to interview five individuals from within my ministry context. I also designed the project to include two individuals from outside my ministry context who were part of the Owatonna community. I wondered if, or how, their experience of the sermons would differ from those who typically sit in the pews at First Baptist Church. The participants were chosen by availability/willingness, both genders, the three age groups represented within the congregation—those in their thirties/forties, fifties/early sixties, and those retired. Since the context of this research has little diversity in ethnicity, the sampling of participating individuals also reflects this lack of diversity. To my surprise, eleven individuals either agreed to my request concerning their participation or volunteered to participate when they heard about the series; six were a part of the congregation, and five were from the Owatonna community at large.

### The Push to Develop Characters

Early in my doctoral studies, I spent considerable time pondering how preaching through storytelling impacted the listener. Since I was a student at the time and had recently studied methods to gather anonymous data, I designed a survey to solicit information from the congregation on how a storytelling sermon style might affect those who listened to these sermons.

In September 2015, I distributed a paper survey stating the survey was designed to be anonymous with the hope that I would get honest feedback. The survey consisted of two statements and asked for the level of agreement, from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree.” The first statement was: *Listening to preaching in story form helps me relate to the characters in the Bible.* Seventy-five percent agreed or strongly agreed. Twelve percent were neutral while twelve percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. The second statement was: *Listening to preaching in story form helps me understand scriptural truths in a way which connects to my everyday life.* This time, eighty-three percent agreed or strongly agreed. Twelve percent were still neutral. Only five percent strongly disagreed. I was shocked to see the variation in the percentages. Twelve percent were neutral in both questions. But the second question (understanding scriptural truths) was higher than the first question (relating to characters). Seven percent had moved from “strongly disagree/disagree” concerning relating to characters to “strongly agree/agree” about scriptural truths. Even though both statements had a high percentage of agreement, the story-type sermons I was preaching were apparently more likely to help people understand a scriptural truth than to help people relate to the characters in the Bible. While understanding scriptural truths is a worthy goal, it was only one aspect of my

preaching objective. I wasn't preaching solely to the intellect. I longed to impact the heart, the emotional, the relational core of the listener.

Each person who hears a sermon has his or her way of listening and relating to the message. Knowing there are likely to be as many variations of connecting to sermons as there are listeners, I contemplated the survey results. Could it be the person in the pew listened for scriptural truths? Was that something they had learned to expect from a sermon? Or could it be the characters of the pericope, even within the re-telling of the scriptural story, were unrealistic without human struggle? Rachel Friedman Ballon in writing about her experience teaching at UCLA Writer's Program states, "No matter how great the story if the characters were stock or stereotypical the screenplay flopped."<sup>2</sup> My desire to recreate biblical witnesses so that listeners might relate to them, as well as relate to the God of those witnesses, increased as a result of the survey.

### Contextual Considerations

As I was visiting with a friend, she shared that the youth minister at her church preached the previous Sunday morning telling an updated version of the story of Zacchaeus. In the sermon, the speaker referred to the character as "Zack" who came down from the tree and invited Jesus to his house for a "pizza party." The preacher gave the characters of the biblical story a speaking dialect befitting a California Surfer with phrases such as, "Hey, Dude." My friend was perplexed. She appreciated the attempt to make the story relevant to today's culture, but at her core, she found it "distracting and

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<sup>2</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 71.

distasteful.” Replacing “Zack’s” context wasn’t beneficial; instead, it created difficulty for at least this one listener. It seemed to me that when characters were lifted out of their context, the listener instinctively struggled to relate to the character.

Karoline Lewis repeatedly points to scripture and its stories residing in a historical and cultural context. The characters and their narratives are located within time and space.<sup>3</sup> Remaining true to the historical, cultural, and biblical context of the account impacts the story. The worldview of the first-century audience of the text dramatically influences the understanding of the passage. The concepts portrayed and the challenges expressed were significant within the society of its original hearers.<sup>4</sup> Recreating details of the story must be true to the era in which it occurred. The Gospels tell a story of Jewish people who are under Roman rule. This backdrop impacts the story. “It takes creativity to retell the story well . . . . One must also learn about the background and historical context of the text, so that the details of the story do not contradict the setting.”<sup>5</sup>

My experience supports the concept that preachers can trust those in the pew to join the speaker in their journey to another time and space. Listeners regularly do this imaginative exercise. Theatrical productions, movies, fictional and nonfictional stories, even video games, move their audience to another time and place. Often, the historical and cultural context is essential in grasping the full impact of the biblical narrative. It is necessary for the homiletician to give the listeners opportunity to step into the setting of the scriptural story.

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<sup>3</sup> Lewis, “Core One” lecture.

<sup>4</sup> Leander E. Keck, *The Bible in the Pulpit: The Renewal of Biblical Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1978), 108.

<sup>5</sup> Rogness, *Preaching to a TV Generation*, 83.

Considering details of the biblical story bolsters the listeners' ability to connect with the narrative and its witnesses. Dr. Lewis reminded students that the details within the Gospels, such as geography, are meaningful.<sup>6</sup> Utilizing the geography, topography, and climate conditions of the story encourage the hearer to imagine the physical stimulation the biblical character might be experiencing. Is the setting outside of the city? Is there a nearby waterway? Does the road include an incline? Is the sun high in the sky? Here is an example of this attention to details from the sermon I preached from John 9 concerning the blind man:

His mother clicked her tongue, like all mothers do, and smoothed his clothes. There was no reason not to look presentable. He appreciated the care even though it didn't matter. Within the next few hours, he would be filthy, the dust of the road sticking to his skin and his garments. That was just the way it was for those who begged along the roadside.

The roadside, away from the temple grounds (John 8:59), is the setting. I imagined the road to be a dirt road with crowds that pass causing dust to be stirred up for those who are sitting for hours along the roadside at ground level.

In the story of the blind man in John 9, the man's ailment is present, but the concern as to the reason for his blindness takes center stage in the conversation between Jesus and the disciples. The historical/cultural context includes the presupposition in that society the man or his parents had sinned.<sup>7</sup> In today's society, blindness is scientifically understood as a condition of the body; it may be an issue in the eye or the nerves.<sup>8</sup> People (hopefully) don't carry the same shameful stigma today, as a Jewish person would have

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<sup>6</sup> Lewis, "Core One" lecture.

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, *John*, 126.

<sup>8</sup> Andrew A. Dahl, MD, "Blindness," *MedicineNet.com*, accessed September 29, 2017, <http://www.medicinenet.com/blindness/article.htm>.

in the First Century CE since any “physical ailment” was associated with punishment for sin.<sup>9</sup>

While this might be helpful information for the pericope’s context, inviting the listener into the dilemma of the blind man requires intentionality. The contextual presuppositions need to be addressed without making it mere knowledge. Incorporating the details regarding the association of blindness and sin into the story brings the listener along on the narrative journey.

Using the contextual details can aid the imagination of the hearer in wondering what emotion the biblical witness might have experienced. The imagined emotional response adds depth to the character. One example, taken from the original research sermon concerning the blind man, is as follows:

He hated how people acted. Sometimes their words were so cruel. His parents were good people; yet, they had been judged harshly . . . as if, as if having a child born blind was a punishment from God due to some sin they had committed. “What sin? What sin? What sin?” He hated how people gossiped. And what sin could he have done before he was born?? People could be so cruel.<sup>10</sup>

Each preacher will have his or her own style of including the historical and cultural information. Weaving it throughout the sermon, referring to these assumptions of culture, can be helpful to the listener as they journey into the biblical narrative with the preacher.

Commentaries can be useful resources in the quest of keeping the story historically and culturally accurate. Bennema states, “The historical data available to us from other sources (literary and non-literary) should supplement the data that the text

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<sup>9</sup> Lewis, *John*, 126.

<sup>10</sup> See Appendix B.

provides about a character.”<sup>11</sup> Scripture and other informative sources can instruct the preacher concerning the historical and cultural nuances. In this technological age, reputable online resources are often also beneficial to the homiletician.

### Choices

Authors, storytellers, and communicators make choices in how to convey the message they want the listener or reader to grasp. Any given pericope allows space for the preacher to make distinctions. Yet, for the homiletician who is concerned with staying true to the text, options can be limited. Karl Barth reminds the preacher, “The text itself must always be the master, not we.”<sup>12</sup> Those who preach are not given a blank slate. Preachers must ask, “What is the authorial intent of a text?” Powell states, “Seminarians are encouraged to avoid *eisegesis* (reading their own ideas *into* a text) and are taught to perform *exegesis* (reading the author’s ideas *out of* a text).”<sup>13</sup> Wrestling with the text’s meaning must inform how the biblical character within the passage behaves.

While staying true to the text is imperative, the preacher has creative liberty within the story. One freedom can be to reimagine the story from a different perspective than that of the main character. Richard Ward advises, “Some characters are at the center of the action while others are on the margins. What happens if we give voice and presence to those who are silent or marginalized by the story?”<sup>14</sup> Imagining the text through the eyes of a supporting character can bring new understanding for the hearer of

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<sup>11</sup> Bennema, *Encountering Jesus*, 13.

<sup>12</sup> Barth, *Homiletics*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 92.

<sup>14</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 99.

the sermon. Powell encourages the person preparing the sermon to intentionally identify with the person within the story with whom the preacher might empathize.<sup>15</sup> Asking such questions as, “If I were in this story, which role would I play?” can lead to a broader meaning of the narrative. Powell then states, “Casting the scriptures helps us to discern polyvalence, to identify a fuller range of options by which audiences can and do create meaning for themselves out of the raw materials the text provides.”<sup>16</sup>

Another flexible, yet important choice or consideration in recreating the character is that of “goal.” Why are they doing what they are doing? Ballon claims, “Each main character behaves in a certain way, because of the specific goal (they) want to reach.”<sup>17</sup> Determining the biblical witness’ goal will determine their action. While a goal may be a physical accomplishment, it is often driven by an emotional or spiritual need. Ballon calls these “external or false goal and internal or real goal.”<sup>18</sup> Within the sermon and reimagining of Peter from John 21 (see Appendix H), the external goal was to go fishing. His internal goal was to find normalcy since Jesus’ execution had shaken his world.

Peter knew fishing. He had grown up fishing. He knew the boat and the equipment. He could fish without thinking about it. Besides, he felt at home on the water. And he could feel small on the vast water. Yes, that’s what he needed—normalcy and a sense of smallness. He was going to go fishing.

Some pericopes give space for the goal of the character to be molded.

The preacher must make choices within each pericope from which they speak.

Engaging the scriptures in lively ways can encourage the listener toward meaningful

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<sup>15</sup> Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 60.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>17</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.



encounters with the Divine. In *Bringing the Word to Life*, Ward and Trobisch write, “Telling the story by switching perspectives . . . often de-familiarizes a familiar story and opens the ears of . . . (the) audience as they explore and experience a familiar text anew.”<sup>19</sup> While scripture communicates historical and foundational concepts, it also tells the story of real people encountering a real God.

### Real People, Real Troubles

Being a student of human nature is helpful. Alyce McKenzie encourages the preacher to give thought to human fears, motives, feelings, and experiences.<sup>20</sup> I desired a template to aid the development of scripture’s witnesses. Since I have some basic learning of personality studies, I utilized a couple of these tools to help reimagine and breath life into the biblical characters.

The first tool I utilized was DISC. DISC is a behavior assessment tool formed by psychologist William Marston.<sup>21</sup> Marston recognized that people function with certain behavioral styles. Does a person make statements or ask questions? Are they task-driven or people-driven? Observing these traits within an individual assists in understanding other behaviors they might possess. An example might be: When stress is introduced into

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<sup>19</sup> Richard F. Ward and David J. Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life: Engaging the New Testament through Performing It* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013), 86-87.

<sup>20</sup> Alyce M. McKenzie, *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Everything DiSC*. <https://www.discprofile.com/what-is-disc/overview/> (accessed for the purposes of this thesis: October 2, 2017). For more information concerning the DISC assessment, I recommend: Bill Bonnstetter and Judy Suiter, *The Universal Language DISC: A Reference Manual* distributed by Target Training International. I have referenced this book many times to expand my knowledge or in my preparation for leading workshops about DISC. Another resources is Merrick Rosenberg and Daniel Silvert, *Taking Flight! Master the DISC Styles to Transform Your Career, Your Relationships... Your Life* (Upper Saddle River: FT Press, 2013).

their lives, how might they behave? Any personality or behavioral assessment can be helpful in viewing the dimensions of a biblical character. I chose the DISC assessment because of my familiarity with the information.

The second tool I employed in the project was the Enneagram. The Enneagram is a historical assessment understanding the human psyche to be categorized within nine personality types. These types are each formed by a basic desire and basic fear.<sup>22</sup> Since all nine types possess a core fear and desire, this tool was helpful in imagining what might be motivating a character. In desiring to recreate biblical witnesses with whom today's listener could identify, acknowledging these archetypical fears and desires seemed appropriate.

These two tools gave me an awareness of solid behaviors, desires, and fears with which to help me identify with these biblical witnesses. For some, I was able to pair a person whom I actually know with the character in scripture. This pairing revealed additional dimensions of the character.

### Reimagining the Biblical Witness

While the narrative could be encountered from viewing and sensing the motivation of various characters who make an appearance in the story, I stayed with the main character for each of the four research sermons. With the historical and cultural context already researched, I applied Richard Ward's questions to my wondering. "What

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<sup>22</sup> "Enneagram of Personality," Wikipedia, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enneagram\\_of\\_Personality](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enneagram_of_Personality) (accessed for the purposes of this thesis: October 2, 2017). For more information concerning the Enneagram, I recommend: Richard Rohr and Andread Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001). Another resource is: Ian Cron and Suzanne Stabile, *The Road Back to You: An Enneagram Journey to Self-Discovery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2016).

if (I) were in this same situation? How would (I) feel?”<sup>23</sup> Concerning Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18) I asked, “Have I ever felt deep grief? How would I feel if I approached the grave only to discover that the body was missing?”

Exploring other roles in the witness’ life can expand a character’s composition. Ballon asks, “What are the roles your character plays? Is he a lawyer, a doctor, a clerk, a father, a husband, a lover, a son, a brother, a criminal, an atheist, an athlete, a cousin, a scientist, a child, etc.”<sup>24</sup> What other relationships and responsibilities might the person from scripture possess? In the case of Mary Magdalene, she appears alongside Mary, the mother of Jesus, at the cross (John 19:25). What kind of relationship did these two have?

Ward encourages the reader of scripture to ask, “Where do the writer’s sympathies seem to be?”<sup>25</sup> This discovery may lead to authorial intent of the story or expand the dimensions of a forgotten character of the story. Ward and Trobisch claim,

Some characters in biblical texts are skillfully drawn, while others appear simply as functionaries or foils. In either case, their presence in texts is a lively one and presents an opportunity for the biblical interpreter to bring them into clearer focus for study and even pure delight!<sup>26</sup>

Developing characters with which the listener of the sermon can identify requires the sermon-writer to continue in their wondering and imagining. McKenzie doesn’t mince words when she says, “A preacher who wants to engage listeners’ interest and teach them biblical themes and theological beliefs had better befriend (their)

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<sup>23</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 67.

<sup>24</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 126.

<sup>25</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> Ward and Trobisch, *Bringing the Word to Life*, 16.

imagination.”<sup>27</sup> Freedom for the imagination, while observing the behavior of the biblical witness throughout the passage, as well as other pericopes, helps craft a believable character. Does the witness behave like an extrovert or an introvert? What other behaviors might follow that pattern? Does the character smile with their whole face or is there a subtle twinkle in their eye? Using a behavioral assessment can magnify the possibilities of how a character might function.

Some behaviors are clues to internal angst. Is there anything in their actions or response to struggle that speaks to a basic fear? Ballon insists, “Without knowing why characters behave as they do, a writer isn’t able to make them real.”<sup>28</sup> Within the Gospel of John, both Thomas and Mary Magdalene are followers of Jesus. Yet Mary is at the foot of the cross and Thomas is not; Mary is at the grave and Thomas is not. What basic fear or desire might cause Mary Magdalene to remain in those places? What basic fear or desire might hinder Thomas from remaining at those locations? What if Thomas is cautious by nature needing more information to make decisions? (I envisioned Thomas with a C behavior style because he needed more information and proof that Christ was alive. See Appendix E.) What if Mary Magdalene is less cautious making quick decisions? (I portrayed Mary Magdalene with a D behavior style envisioning her to be a rather determined person in order to explain her willingness/compulsion to stay at the cross and return to the grave. See Appendix C.)

While working to conceptualize the character of the narrative, Ballon encourages the writer (or the preacher for the purposes of this project) to create a biography of the

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<sup>27</sup> McKenzie, *Novel Preaching*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 59.

character, including the physical, social and emotional aspects of the character.<sup>29</sup> While the physical and social features might add to the character, “the emotional life of your character helps you learn about the person beneath the ...mask.”<sup>30</sup> Since the preacher is concerned with the spiritual, which in my experience is always connected to the emotional, developing the emotions and motivations of the witness within scripture is paramount.

By reaching this point in the knowledgeable imagination, the preacher has hopefully chosen a behavior style and an Enneagram type that is not in opposition to the information given in the text. While preachers make choices in their envisioning, they cannot go against what is stated in scripture. Smith, in his D. Min. thesis, acknowledges this form of preaching requires “careful listening to and probing in the text,” as well as making some informed assumptions “as to how this person would have expressed a variety of emotions.”<sup>31</sup> With the aid of behavior styles and Enneagram types, the homiletician has some guidelines for the emotional inner life of the character. It is possible for the imagined narrative to run the risk of expressing only the speaker’s emotions. Utilizing these various types guards against every biblical witness responding with the feelings common for that preacher. The homiletician, who desires to preach to allow the *listener* to identify with the witness of the narrative, must expand the emotional capacity of the characters within their sermons. Including the basic fears and desires of various Enneagram types creates emotional breadth for the biblical witness.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 41-43.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>31</sup> Smith, *Exploring the Use of Biblical Character Portrayals*, 56.

Developing the emotional life of the biblical witness creates opportunity for the Divine to influence the character. Rachel Friedman Ballon, in describing the necessary emotional development of the character for screenwriting, states,

When your main character experiences a change or transformation in the climax, it will be believable and not forced if you have motivated the change throughout your entire script in every scene. If a character becomes courageous in the climax, he would have to be fearful in the beginning of your story. That's his emotional transformation. He must develop and struggle throughout the script in order to emotionally change from fearful to brave.<sup>32</sup>

The progression from fear to trust, as well as other emotional journeys, is the direction scripture often moves. Consequently, as characters are reimagined, it is likely they will follow the same trajectory. A near-perfect character seldom encourages the listener to believe that they too can respond to Christ with faith. In developing a character, Ballon indicates, “Give (the characters) the same internal problems humans have, so they will come alive and be real. You need to develop the psychology of your characters to avoid the stereotypical or stock characters....”<sup>33</sup> The Gospel writers do not portray the biblical witnesses as flawless. The preacher would do well to avoid creating almost-perfect-people; doing so, creates distance between the character and those in the pew.

A repeated experience in scripture portrays God meeting the biblical witness at their point of need. Allowing the character to need God is holding to the truth of all humanity expressed in scripture. One example of this movement in the research sermon series is the blind man (John 9). The blind man was excluded (cultural experience of

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<sup>32</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 64.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

those with ailments) but longed to be included (common desire). After being thrown out of the synagogue by the Pharisees (exacerbating his emotion), Jesus purposely went out and found him (common desire). While a resolution is not always found within the pericope, the over-arching theme of scripture declares God's faithfulness. The preacher must proclaim the same.

### Describing the Action

With the historical and cultural context in mind, as well as the inner life (determined by a particular behavioral style and Enneagram type) of the biblical witness in place, the homiletician continues imagining the narrative. The process requires some freedom in allowing the character to evolve within the imagination as the story unfolds. "Novelists...expressed a sense of discovery (concerning the) . . . characters . . . ." <sup>34</sup> As the preacher studies the passage, the question becomes, "What do you see?" Paul Scott Wilson advocates for thinking of a sermon in much the same way a filmmaker would film a scene. <sup>35</sup> What action is taking place? When Jesus says something that is hard to understand, what facial expressions do the disciples make? When Jesus asks Peter for the third time, "Do you love me?" (John 21), what body language does Peter display? What happens to his shoulders? Does he cross his arms? What direction is his gaze? Is he looking at the ground? Does he unknowingly roll his eyes? Does he bite his lip? Describing the actions of the character within the story gives the listener the opportunity to visualize the scene. Wilson claims, "Listeners can visualize someone if we give them

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<sup>34</sup> McKenzie, *Novel Preaching*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 10-11.

visual clues.”<sup>36</sup> The visual description also guides the listener. Telling “how (the characters) look and behave, (and) what their hands are doing” will encourage the listener to “infer the emotion.”<sup>37</sup>

Sight, that which can be seen, is only one of the sensory abilities of humans. Hearing, taste, smell, and touch can also be engaged in the telling of the story. McKenzie advocates for evoking the senses. “If your language is full of things that can be seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched, you create a world (the listener) can enter.”<sup>38</sup> Wilson encourages the preacher in this way: “We can film in color and provide through our words something for the congregation to hear, touch, taste and smell. Preachers can practice using concrete language . . . .”<sup>39</sup> What did the blind man (John 9) hear as he sat along the road? What did his skin feel? As the sermon develops the experience of the senses, the listener begins to experience and visualize the biblical story.

Rachel Friedman Ballon gave her students the assignment of observing the ways people talk. The discovery was “that people don’t talk in long speeches.”<sup>40</sup> Wilson writes, “Monologues and extensive dialogues are rarely as effective as a brief quote here or there to give a sense of real people speaking.”<sup>41</sup> Within the four pericopes for the research sermons created for this project, the dialogue followed an easy format since the exchanges were brief. However, many of the accounts in the Gospel of John contain

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>37</sup> McKenzie, *Novel Preaching*, 62.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>39</sup> Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 86.

<sup>40</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 88.



lengthy passages of Jesus teaching and speaking. When reimagining these passages, I begin by considering the context. Who is hearing Jesus' words? How does the audience in the passage respond to Jesus' words? What kind of facial expressions or visible gesture might be described to those listening to the sermon?

In the Good Shepherd discourse (John 10), the Jews were divided. Some thought Jesus was "demon-possessed and raving mad" (John 10:20). Others disagreed (John 10:21). By envisioning both groups of Jews around Jesus, listening to him, what facial expressions might be visible on faces of the people who are impressed with the healing of the blind man? What might be the body language displayed in the group that opposes Jesus? Another option is to imagine one or two of the disciples standing close by in the same scene. What is it that they see? Are they concerned? Do the words of Jesus make an impact on them? Interjecting these descriptions within the lengthy discourse can break up the monologue telling a visible story of both groups and the various characters who are observing the scene.

Paul Scott Wilson, "as a general principle," encourages the preacher to "stay out of the minds of the characters." He urges the homiletician to "speak primarily through words that provide the actions and speech of the characters."<sup>42</sup> I respectfully disagree with Dr. Wilson. Emotional angst takes place within human thought. In order for characters to come to life, their inner lives must be present. Ballon insists on the importance of "develop(ing) your characters with an emotional arc to prevent them from being flat and stereotypical. Your characters' internal world needs to have . . . many . . .

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 88.

emotions . . . .”<sup>43</sup> For a person to relate to the biblical witness, the hearer likely needs to connect empathically. Mark Allen Powell states,

Empathy (is) an involuntary projection that causes us to identify with one or more of the characters in a story and experience the narrative in ways determined by that identification. . . . Empathy is what enables us to cry at sad stories and tremble at scary one. In a muted sense, we feel what we would feel if the story were real and we were experiencing it as the characters do.<sup>44</sup>

While there is the hope that the listener will understand the emotional inference, Powell informs the preacher that they “need to be explicit and intentional about establishing that particular empathetic connection.”<sup>45</sup> Describing the action must be interwoven with the emotional life of the character.

In the research sermon concerning Thomas, I employed the action of Thomas pacing while I described his mental struggle. (See Appendix F.) Upon reflection after I preached the sermon about Thomas, I realize the pacing concept needed more inclusion in the sermon so the listener could more easily visualize Thomas pacing. I could have better developed Thomas’ actions by saying. “One, two, three steps and turn around. Only to repeat the three-step rhythm again. And again. This small room where Thomas slept was far too small for him to pace effectively. But what else was he going to do? Sleep eluded him while his heart and mind wrestled with the words of his friends.” Referring to Thomas’ action more often would have enhanced the visual for those in the pew.

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<sup>43</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 58.

<sup>44</sup> Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 29.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

## Summary

In summary, this chapter discusses the original research sermon series created for this project. The project was conducted at First Baptist Church including members of the congregation, as well as community members who have never attended First Baptist Church. Each of the four sermons focused on one character from the Gospel of John, the blind man (John 9), Mary Magdalene (John 20:11-18), Thomas (John 20:24-29), and Peter (John 21). The purpose of these sermons was to reimagine these biblical witnesses and to allow them to be multi-dimensional characters with whom the listener could identify or empathize. Historical and cultural contexts both form a character within time and space. Imagining a personality type or behavioral style for the biblical witness informs the action and perspective of the scriptural participant. Including basic desires and fears expands the character within the narrative. With these components in place, the biblical witness behaves according to the historical and cultural context, as well as the desires and fears the preacher has given to the character. When they encounter Jesus within the narrative, the participants are changed, experiencing life-transformation. My goal for each of the sermons within the project series was to create space for the listener to experience a similar life-transforming encounter with the Divine.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes those who participated in the interviews and reports the data collected in the Action/Reflection Model employed in this project. The data is analyzed in light of the demographics of the participants, those within the congregation and those within the community but not a part of the congregation. Gender, some behavioral traits, and online versus in-person listening are other criteria that come under consideration in the analysis. The success or failure of the project is weighed in light of the anticipated outcomes, as well as the responses of the participants' experience.

#### **Proposed Outcomes**

The primary outcome of this project is to determine whether or not the development of characters within the biblical story enhances the listeners' ability to encounter the Divine. My theological perspective is that the Spirit of God actively invites human beings into a loving relationship with the Divine. Consequently, I view the preacher's role as one of removing barriers so that the listener may connect with God. Jesus' words according to John 1:39, "Come . . . and you will see," molds my belief that sermons need to provide hospitality, opening up new vistas for imagining real-life biblical characters, creating space for the Holy Spirit to interact with the hearer, guiding the person toward heart transformation. I desire to craft sermons that augment the listeners' ability to experience the presence of God. At the outset of this thesis project, I

postulate that through these encounters people can experience an enhanced relationship with the Divine. My goal in this project is to learn whether or not character development within a storytelling sermon improves the listeners' ability to identify with the biblical witness, and consequently, connect with the God of the character.

### **Demographics of Participants**

As I designed this project, my goal was to have seven participants, five from within the congregation where I have pastored for several years, and two from the community who had not encountered my preaching style in the past. Through the last few years, as a student within an advanced degree program in biblical preaching, my sermons morphed as I experimented with various tactics. My storytelling became more vivid than before my engagement with the biblical preaching program. I practiced “seeing the sermon”<sup>1</sup> and describing actions of those involved within the pericope from which I preached. The research for this thesis project was my first attempt with intentionally utilizing the DISC and the Enneagram for creating the personality of the biblical witness. I did, however, attempt previously to utilize some components of character development for a couple of years prior to this sermon series. Consequently, I was concerned that the listener from within the congregation might be influenced since they had been previously exposed to this sermon style. Therefore, I wanted to supplement the pool of research participants with a couple of listeners from the community.

Eleven people participated in the major part of my research gathering; some were explicitly invited into the research pool, others volunteered. Six individuals were from

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, “The Four Pages of the Sermon” (lecture in the D.Min. program, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, MN, June, 2015).

within the congregation and five from the community. With eleven participants, seven were able to meet the attendance requirement (three of four Sundays in attendance) outlined in the parameters of this project. The other four individuals experienced illness and family responsibilities that hindered their physical presence. However, all eleven participants listened to all four sermons, whether in person or online.

The participants chosen for this project represent the demographics of the congregation where the research sermon series was preached. Nine of the eleven participants are professional, whether current or retired, and fit socio-economically within the middle class. Two of the eleven are non-white per race. My examination of the demographics of congregational members' revealed the following age groups present within the congregation: 30s-40s, 50s-60s, and retired people. Of the original seven who were asked to participate, four were men and three were women. Four additional women volunteered.

Within the behavioral styles represented in DISC, there is a demarcation between task-oriented and people-oriented individuals.<sup>2</sup> Since I utilized the DISC in the development of the biblical character for the sermons in the project series, I wondered about the task-focused versus people-focused divide within the group of participating listeners. Even though these descriptors were an after-thought, the group of eleven was evenly divided, comprised of six task-oriented individuals and five relationship-oriented persons.

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<sup>2</sup> Bonnstetter and Suiter, *The Universal Language DISC*, 174.

### **The Interviews: Questions, Answers, and Analysis**

#### **Q. 1: Did you attend/listen to all four sermons?**

All eleven participants heard all four sermons: Six people attended all four services. One person attended three services and listened online to the missed sermon. Three persons attended two services and listened online to the other two sermons. One participant listened online to all four sermons.

#### **Q. 2: What is the expectation you have for any given sermon?**

In designing the question, I offered some options to stimulate an answer. I did not want to guide them in any given direction that could shape the results of the research. So, I posed the question to a friend and asked them to compile a list of expectations. I included their list of words in the question: Instructive? Uplifting? Corrective? Thought-Provoking? Appeal to the head or the heart? Other?

Four of the eleven individuals said they had no expectations; however, they proceeded to share the lack of connection they had experienced with sermons in the past. It appears these four individuals had the anticipation of a lack of connection or a sense of non-engagement with a sermon. Neither non-engagement nor a similar option was posed as a possibility within the question. Nevertheless, four participants had learned (some place, some time) to predict a lack of connection. Others who were interviewed voiced various positive thoughts, some having more than one stated expectation. Six of the eleven shared they expected sermons to provide some form of knowledge.

#### **Q. 3. In what ways did you see yourself in characters of the sermons?**

Eight of the eleven identified with the biblical witnesses from the sermons, with three identifying with all four characters who were depicted. While I hoped that most of

the participants would identify with two, maybe three biblical witnesses, I didn't expect that any of them would connect with all four of the characters. Three of those interviewed, with no prompting from me, made specific mention of identifying with the *emotions* of the biblical witnesses.

In looking at the answers given by the participants, I realized I wanted to perform a more thorough analysis of which participants had which experience. Of the six participants who are task-focused, five identified with the characters. Of the five who are people-focused, three identified with the characters. One of the people-focused individuals who did not connect with the characters confessed to being very guarded with all things associated with church. Slicing the statistics another way, I discovered that of the four males, two connected and two did not, while of the seven females, six connected and one did not. Also, for the group who attended the service, six identified with the biblical witnesses, one did not. Of the participants who listened online, two identified with the characters, and two did not.

**Q. 4. Was there one particular character with whom you identified?**

In the previous question, eight of eleven claimed to identify with a character from one of the sermons. However, when asked which particular character they had identified, instead of only eight participants naming a biblical witness, ten of eleven participants named a character. Five of those interviewed named more than one. Six individuals identified with Thomas, five with the Blind Man, four with Peter, and two with Mary Magdalene. The participants mentioned connecting with Thomas' doubt, the Blind Man's lack of belonging, Peter's concern of being forgiven, and Mary Magdalene's grief and excitement.



Three participants answered they did not see themselves in any of the characters (question 3); however, two of the same three named a character/s with whom they identified. One of the three used unsure language (“probably”) which could mean they were trying to find an acceptable answer to the question as it was posed. Another one of the participants, which had earlier stated that they did not identify with the characters, proceeded to name three characters and explained their connection to those characters.

When I chose the pericopes, and thereby, which characters from John to use for my original research sermon series, I included Mary Magdalene in order to have a female in the series. I had preached on the Woman at the Well (John 4) and Mary pouring perfume on Jesus’ feet (John 12) less than two years before this project series. Consequently, I avoided preaching on those texts again since so little time had passed.

I was surprised when one of the interviewees who identified with Mary Magdalene was male. In the interview, he voiced that he related to her grief. Women being able to identify with male characters didn’t surprise me. Many women, who are over thirty years of age, have learned the skill of identifying with male language since it was the default for centuries. I didn’t expect one of the men to identify with Mary Magdalene. The emotions within the character portrayal were the connection.

On a personal note, I struggled in writing the Mary Magdalene sermon. Legend and tradition have besmirched her reputation claiming she was a prostitute before Jesus was in her life. Scripture does not make this direct claim. However, I didn’t want to address this straightforwardly in the sermon. I wanted somehow to reclaim her reputation as a strong woman. Scripture certainly supports her tenacity and strength. At times like these, Richard Ward’s comments ring true. “Some ‘old, old stories’ are experienced by

many as oppressive, violent, or so far removed from our own frames of reference that we do not bother with them. Such stories cry out for fresh, life-giving interpretations.”<sup>3</sup> I, personally, struggle with the ways some women of scripture have been depicted by some preachers and some commentators, i.e. the woman at the well, the woman caught in adultery, as well as Mary Magdalene. My aversion to how women in scripture have been traditionally viewed created a barrier for me as I attempted to envision Mary Magdalene. I wanted to redeem the view of Mary of Magdala. In my planning for this project many months prior to its implementation, I had not grappled with the difficulties of preaching about the Resurrection during Lent. This combination, desiring to redeem Mary Magdalene’s reputation and not fully recognizing the impact Lent would have within my own thinking, caused some significant distress when writing the sermon. The writing experience was challenging. The words did not flow and my personal emotions were askew.

On the Sunday when I preached the Mary Magdalene sermon, there was a first-time visitor in attendance. She readily told me before the worship service began that she was not much of a “church-going person.” She came because her friend had invited her. At the close of the service, as I was customarily shaking hands at the door, she approached. Her puffy eyes and red nose revealed that she had been crying.

“Did they tell you about me?” She asked as she pointed to her friends.

“No.” I said shaking my head. Then she shared that her significant other of 20 years had passed away two weeks prior.

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<sup>3</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 92.

“How did you know I needed to hear,” she asked as she pointed to the ceiling, “that He knows my name?”

This story is not reflected in any of the interviews or data gathered for this research project. However, it was a great reminder that I cannot know all that is going on in the lives of the listeners of the sermon, but hopefully, I can create an opportunity for people to encounter the Divine.

**Q. 5. Was this sermon series a meaningful experience? If so, in what way?**

All eleven participants answered this questions saying “yes”, some with great enthusiasm. Since the eleven participants represent a small sampling of several sectors of society, it might be theorized that a storytelling type sermon with intentional character development might be a meaningful experience for many. In asking about people’s expectations within a sermon (question 2), six out of eleven wanted some form of knowledge, an engaging of the mind. However, all participants of this research, including the six who were anticipating information, found the experience meaningful. These numbers suggest that aiming a sermon at the “heart” has an impact on the individual who might be expecting a “head” experience.

**Q. 6. Has your experience with God changed since listening to these sermons? If so, in what way?**

Of the eleven participants, seven said yes (two males, five females), three said no (one male, two females), and one (male) didn’t answer the question. The “yes” category can be divided into three groups: four see God as more pertinent in their lives, two experienced a reassurance of God’s activity in their lives, and one said scripture is more

relatable. Another aspect gleaned from the “yes” group: five are task-focused individuals and two are people-focused individuals.

All three participants who replied with “no” listened online, two being task-oriented individuals, one being a people-oriented individual. The one, who is people-oriented and answered “no,” said their relationship with God was very close before listening.

**Q. 7. Does God seem “more real” and/or closer to your daily life than prior to listening to these sermons?**

Nine of eleven individuals responded positively with an overarching thought of God being present and active in the lives of humanity. Three of the nine expressed their understanding that their growth in a relationship with God was an ongoing process; this sermon series was just one contributing component. Of the group who do not regularly attend First Baptist Church, three participants strongly stated an increased sense of God’s closeness in their daily lives.

**Q. 8. Did you discuss any of these sermons with someone who didn’t hear the sermon?**

Knowing different people engage in various degrees of verbal connection, it seemed to me to be important to analyze the responses to this question according to the DISC continuum of “verbal” versus “reserved.”<sup>4</sup> Of the eleven, four (three are verbal, one is reserved) *discussed* the sermon with another person; four (three are reserved, one is a verbal) *mentioned* these sermons to another; and three (all three are verbal) did not discuss the sermons. The sermons in this research project caused sufficient impact within

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenberg and Silvert, *Taking Flight!*, 123.

eight out of eleven (four are verbal, four are reserved) that they discussed or mentioned these sermons to another person. The eight who spoke of these sermons to others commented that they mentioned the sermons to family and friends. One discussed the sermons with a co-worker.

The purpose of the above question was an attempt to discover if the sermons were meaningful enough to have caused any verbal expression to someone who had not shared the event. It is my experience that people will discuss a shared event with another participant. However, discussing or mentioning a sermon experience with someone who had not shared the experience might suggest a very profound impression had been created within the listener.

Seven of the participants (those who mentioned the sermons and those who answered “no”) expressed discomfort by facial expression or embarrassment in their tone of voice, when answering this question. In chapter six, I suggest possible explanations of this conveyed uneasiness.

**Q. 9. The Thesis Question is: “Does bringing biblical characters to life enhance listeners’ ability to encounter God?” How would you answer that question? What does it mean for you to “encounter God”?**

All eleven participants answered “yes.” Five individuals indicated scripture became more meaningful with this style. There was an over-all ease expressed in the ability to relate to this sermon style, as well as to the biblical witnesses and God.

Encountering God was described by nine of the participants as a sense of God’s presence for them personally and in everyday life. One person encounters God by serving others.

### **Analysis beyond the Questions of the Interview**

With the interviews guided by the questions, some participants shared broader answers than merely responding to the questions alone. Three participants made before-and-after comments. One individual commented they disliked sermons and had spent years sleeping through them. However, they do not sleep through the storytelling sermons, especially the ones when the characters come to life.<sup>5</sup> Another interviewee shared, “God has always been important to me, but He was so removed from everybody and everything, even though I knew He was in our lives . . . I’ve learned more from your preaching than in my whole life.”<sup>6</sup> A third participant jotted down answers to each of the questions before listening to the sermon series. Following the series, in preparation for the interview, they answered the questions again. At the close of the interview, they shared that the sermon series had “opened-up” their heart toward God in a way they had not experienced prior to these sermons.<sup>7</sup> These three comments indicate a positive movement within these individuals in conjunction with this sermon style.

While interviewing the participants of this project, I was again reminded each person brings their journey, their experience, their story into the hearing of the Word. One person shared that they were extremely “guarded” saying that while these sermons were “very well done,” they remained “guarded” throughout the experience.<sup>8</sup> During the

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<sup>5</sup> Research Participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 27, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Research Participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 28, 2017.

<sup>7</sup> Research Participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 28, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Research Participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 30, 2017.

interview with this individual, many answers had a positive response followed by a qualifier that stemmed from the “guarded-ness.”

During two of the interviews, the words “comforting” and “comfortable” continued to appear in their descriptions of their experience of these sermons. Another made the point that these sermons helped to “eliminate stress” for them. I am unwilling to attach a specific meaning to these comments; however, there seems to be an implied ease to the sermonic event. Having a “comfortable” experience or having stress eliminated allows the listener to engage in the sermon. These words (“comforting,” “comfortable,” “eliminate stress”) describe a response within the heart, the feelings of the individual.

The two groups, those from within the congregation and those who had not attended worship in this congregation before this sermon series, had differing responses. While those who were interviewed responded favorably concerning their experience with this sermon style, the individuals from the community had a stronger, more energized, and more enthusiastic response than those within the congregation. The congregational participants spoke in generalities and mentioned past sermons. Their reported results included a longer timeframe than the project sermon series itself and mentioned sermons other than those preached for the original research.

Although I did not set out to evaluate the online listening experience against the in-person experience, these two different experiences (online listening versus in-person listening) formed without any intentional planning on my part. Due to four participants listening via the church website more than the original parameters outlined, I was able to make observations and comparisons between the online listening experience versus the in-person experience. Those who listened online often touted the benefit of fewer

distractions. They shared that they were able to stay focused instead of being distracted by the commotion within the sanctuary.

All of the interviews for this research were conducted in-person, and I experienced a significant difference in interviewing the individuals within the two groups. The in-person listener was much more engaged in the interview. They shared more, both concerning the questions we planned to discuss, as well as other aspects of their lives. The online listener was less engaged during the interview. Of the group of four online participants, two were a part of the First Baptist congregation, and two were from the Owatonna Community; two were task-oriented, and two were people-oriented; three were verbal, and one was reserved. However, they all focused on strictly answering the questions. The interviews with the online listeners were approximately thirty minutes long, while the interviews of the in-person listener were forty-five to fifty minutes in length. Did the in-person listener have a stronger connection to the preacher? If so, was the stronger connection attributed to the shared experience? Powell claims, “The sermon (is) an auditory, participatory event that occurred at a specific place and time— a recording of the sermon might be deemed a ‘copy’ of it in some diminished sense...”<sup>9</sup> Could it be that the online listeners were involved in a “diminished” experience of the “auditory, participatory event,” thus impacting their connection with the preacher?

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Allen Powell, email message to author, October 11, 2017.



For a wider range of differences between on-line listeners to sermons and those who listen during a worship service, see *Cyber Sermons. Examining the Effectiveness of Preaching Podcasts*, a D.Min. thesis submitted to Luther Seminary in 2012.<sup>10</sup>

For more specific comments given by the participants during the interviewing process, see Appendix I.

### Summary

In this chapter, I reported the results of the interviews with the participants who agreed to listen to a four-part sermon series designed for the original research within this project. I analyze the responses to the interview questions and look at the variables of the answers and the participants. I unpack various traits of the participants attempting to understand their responses.

The resounding answer to the thesis question (*Does bringing biblical characters to life enhance listeners' ability to encounter the Divine?*) as shared by the participants of this research project is “yes.” Many described movement toward God as a result of these sermons. Richard Ward would not be surprised. He stated,

Characters and settings written into biblical texts come to life in the listener's imagination, arousing a listener's empathy for a character's situation and collapsing the distance separating the world of the listener from the world of the

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<sup>10</sup> I believe the insights gained from the interviews I conducted of those who listened to the sermons in worship and from those who listened to several or all of the sermons online continue the discussion of the D.Min. thesis by Joel Hoogheim, “Cyber Sermons. Examining the Effectiveness of Preaching Podcasts” (D.Min. thesis, Luther Seminary, St. Paul, 2012).

Hoogheim concluded that whether the listeners were in person or listening online, they “heard much of the content of the sermons similarly.” Podcast listeners found that they could better control their “external environment” which granted them “the opportunity for greater concentration.” However, the podcast listener “missed the visual cues and the community connection.” (p. 87). Hoogheim stated, “In the end, sermon podcasts, while experienced as a worthwhile endeavor for the congregation, could not and cannot replicate or replace the experience of gathering together in God's name at the same time in the same place with fellow Christians.” (p. 80).

text. Empathy makes identification with the characters in their situations more possible.<sup>11</sup>

I anticipated receiving an affirming reply to the thesis question. However, I was surprised at the extent of the positive response. In Smith's thesis, he warns against overuse of the first-person portrayal of biblical characters due to his concern about the amount of time it takes to prepare, plus a fear of the first-person portrayal losing its effectiveness. While this may be his experience and concern with first-person portrayals, the experience of the participants in this research project appreciated the storytelling focus. They insisted that storytelling sermons, created with intentional character development, impact the listener. Since the answer is "yes," this methodology of sermonizing may be a tool that some preachers desire to hone and utilize to meaningfully impact others.

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<sup>11</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 74.

## CHAPTER SIX

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I evaluate the project and responses to the four-part sermon series crafted for the original research for this thesis. Strengths and weaknesses are discussed, as well as surprises and wonderings. Peoples' experiences and opinions might challenge the labels of strengths and weaknesses. I recognize some "strength" and "weakness" labels are subjective. I venture into the subjective labeling and its angst in this evaluative chapter.

#### **Strengths**

All eleven participants answered the main question of this thesis positively. *Does bringing biblical characters to life enhance listeners' ability to encounter the Divine?* All answered: yes. I suspected the answer would be "yes," but I had not anticipated that all participants would be positive in their response. A closer look at the interview questions and the participants' comments could lead to a seventy-two percent agreement. Three participants did not identify with the characters of the sermons, even though all participants found the experience meaningful. With this possible discrepancy in mind, the percentage of seventy-two likely represents a more accurate result. Even with the percentage decreasing from one hundred to seventy-two, the results are strong. Enhancing the biblical witness, by imagining a behavioral style and archetypical fears

and desires, creates the opportunity for the listener to identify with the biblical witnesses of the pericope.

According to the information shared by those interviewed for this thesis project, using the imagination to enhance character development for preaching purposes impacts the listener. As biblical witnesses are reimagined, their struggles and joys become tangible. Their doubts and fears parallel our own. Their responses in faith encourage our hearts to respond to the Divine in similar ways. The listener is enticed to join the character on their journey, interacting with God, as the story is told. This journey together (character, God, and listener) creates the strong potential of leading the hearer to encounter the Divine.

Some congregations, or individuals within the parish, have been conditioned to be concerned with the accuracy of the representation of scripture. Being true to the text is a worthwhile concern. Using the imagination might cause concern of embellishing the pericope and a lack of literal interpretation. As a person's creativity is utilized, it is "admittedly subjective."<sup>1</sup> Augustine provided a criterion for the interpretation of the concepts communicated through preaching. His guide was "love of God and neighbor."<sup>2</sup>

Many of those interviewed for this project voiced delight at the experience of relating to biblical witnesses in an imaginative approach. No one during the interviews expressed any concern that the imaginative story veered away from scripture. Charles Denison wrote concerning the subjective lens of the imagination when interacting with scripture, "Objectivity is scientific, rational, and left-brained. Objectivity is boring.

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<sup>1</sup> Denison, *The Artist's Way of Preaching*, 60.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Lexington: Beloved Publishing, 2014), 32.

Objectivity is by definition impersonal. Give us the personal!”<sup>3</sup> The participants interviewed for this research would adamantly agree with Denison’s appeal, “Give us the personal!”

From my observation, the worldview of our society values the scientific method for understanding life. Empirical data, numbers, and information appear to reign. While this way of creating understanding and knowledge is frequently helpful, scientific methods have been transposed to theology and religion. This methodical approach often starves the spiritual development of some within the congregation. Persons within my congregation have shared that they are hungry for a different style and attitude concerning the spiritual. For those interviewed for this research project, listening to sermons which were crafted in a storytelling fashion with intentionality given to character development, created a meaningful expression of scripture.

A Sunday School teacher from First Baptist Church shared with me, that as an interactive method of teaching the lesson they helped the students imagine performing a television interview with a biblical character. These elementary-age students were fully engaged in their lesson that day. Many adults enjoy utilizing their imaginations, too. Listening to a sermon that has occupied the imagination of the hearer is likely to cause many adults to be fully engaged, as well. One of the interviewees for this research made the point that the preaching style of this thesis project (storytelling homilies with the intentional development of the character) allows teen and adult listeners to experience full engagement with the message.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Denison, *The Artist’s Way of Preaching*, 60.

<sup>4</sup> Research Participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 27, 2017.

For some in the congregation, many of the narratives of the Bible have been heard and read for years. The stories can appear to be simple, child-like tales. When cultural and historical contexts are used in the reimagining of the biblical witnesses, the stories and the characters can become pertinent to the listener's life. Rogness asserts, "When the story is retold well, people catch glimpses of things they never heard before, even in the most familiar stories. Old stories become new again. Unexpected insights flood the mind."<sup>5</sup> One particular interviewee, who has attended church for decades, shared that her experience with these sermons had brought a flood of new and intriguing details for her to ponder. She stated that her mind would wander back to these stories during the week.<sup>6</sup> When new insights engage the listener, even the oldest of saints can experience a freshness with the passage. According to the interviews conducted for this project, when a person encounters a pericope through story and developed characters, it can open a new understanding of scripture that is life-giving and refreshing. The Word of God becomes Living Water to the thirsty and Bread of Life to the hungry.

Utilizing the behavioral styles, known as DISC, and acknowledging a person's fears and desires, consulting the Enneagram guide, has proven beneficial. Implementing the aspects of these tools as specific guidelines resulted in multi-dimensional characters. Most of the listeners were able to identify with these characters. As the biblical witnesses were reimagined, the listeners interviewed experienced an empathic response, and thereby, enabled some in the pews to experience closeness with God.

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<sup>5</sup> Rogness, *Preaching to a TV Generation*, 83.

<sup>6</sup> Research Participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 29, 2017.

Another strength of utilizing behavioral styles, as well as common fears and desires, emerges when the listener finds acceptance for their personhood. Each behavioral style and Enneagram type has particular traits. These characteristics are not good or bad; the traits are neutral. These attributes are merely functional tools for individuals operating within the world.<sup>7</sup> To consider human tendencies without judgment allows the preacher to develop characters with whom the listener can relate.<sup>8</sup> When a person accepts all traits with grace, understanding that each individual is formed differently, and yet the same, there is potential for shame to be minimized. It has been my experience that when this type of acceptance and grace is portrayed in imagining a biblical witness, shame and self-hatred within the listener might be diffused.

A distant relative was asking about my thesis project. Because I knew he was familiar with the DISC assessment, I explained my project to him utilizing the behavioral styles of DISC. I gave the example of overlaying the “C” behavioral style onto my portrayal of Thomas. I pointed out that a “C” behavioral style is cautious and needs lots of information before they can act. I explained that in the sermon I described Thomas’ declaration of needing to see Jesus’ hands and side as Thomas’ need for information. This need for information was not “bad;” he simply needed information he had not yet received, even though the other disciples had earlier been shown this evidence. Christ’s gracious response was to meet Thomas at his point of need. The relative audibly gasped. He, too, is a “C” in the DISC assessment. He then commented, “I’ve never heard it that

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<sup>7</sup> Bonnstetter and Suiter, *The Universal Language DISC*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> McKenzie, *Novel Preaching*, 33.

way before. I've only heard preachers say how bad Thomas was for doubting and how bad we are when we doubt.”<sup>9</sup>

Employing behavioral styles, as well as archetypical fears and desires, for the development of biblical witnesses potentially allows various meanings to unfold. Sermons can move beyond behavior/moral judgments (what to do), as well as proper doctrine (what to think), and thus can impact the listener holistically. Crafting a sermon with characters who experience God gives the opportunity for the listener to encounter the Divine, just like Thomas. Discovering this through interviews (and a chance conversation) is a strength of this thesis project.

### **Surprises**

Analyzing the information garnered from the interviews produced a number of surprises. I suspected that allowing characters to become multi-dimensional people would increase the ability of the listener to identify with the biblical witness. I was surprised at the inclusive nature of the empathic identification. Males and females experienced the ability to relate to the characters regardless of the gender of the biblical witness. The listener empathized with the biblical witness, connecting not with the gender, but with the fears and desires of the biblical character.

I was intrigued by the results of the interviews which showed task-focused persons, as well as people-focused individuals, connected with the reimagined characters. I anticipated more listeners from the people-focused sector would identify with the characters due to their innate propensity toward relating with people. However, both

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<sup>9</sup> Relative, conversation with author, July 27, 2017.



groups equally identified with the characters. Furthermore, I was additionally fascinated by the demographics related to Question 6 in the interview: “Has your experience with God changed since listening to these sermons?” Seven of eleven participants replied “yes.” Five of the seven are task-focused people; two are people-focused. According to the research for this project, more individuals, who are by nature task-focused, identified with the reimagined biblical witness impacting their experience with God. A storytelling sermon that has an intentional focus on character development has a high probability of connecting with a wider range of individuals than I had previously surmised.

### **Weaknesses**

For the scope of this project, there were eleven participants. To determine a more scientific result, a larger group of participants would be necessary. Also, the control group is biased. Six of the participants attend the congregation where this project occurred. Since I preached storytelling style sermons regularly (but with less reimagining of characters until this project), those who did not appreciate or could not relate to that style of sermon no longer attend worship services in our congregation. It is likely that six of the eleven are somewhat partial to a storytelling sermon. The focus of creating multi-dimensional characters was intentionally enhanced, adding to an existing style the listeners from within the congregation may already enjoy. This proclivity, away from didactic sermons and toward storytelling sermons, may have altered the results.

Although this project was designed to be contextual, the contextuality limits the data gathered. Having an opportunity to perform this research in other settings and other cultures may change the results. How would our African-American brothers and sisters in a Black church receive storytelling sermons, crafted with intentional character

development? How would the Chin immigrants (an immigrant group who is connected to American Baptist Churches) respond to this sermon style? Would crafting a sermon with archetypical fears and desires connect with a listener from another culture? Would the preacher need to represent fears and desires in a different way within other people groups? The body language reimagined for the biblical witnesses would likely be different within other cultures. As I contemplate these cultural alternatives, I surmise that the preacher utilizing this style of homily would need to be true to their context. Added challenges would likely be present in attempting communication from one culture to another.

Having a different person conduct the interview or having an anonymous survey may have increased the integrity of the interviews. People guard against making negative comments in a face-to-face conversation with the one they are critiquing (perhaps especially their pastor). The participants were very gracious in their responses. While I received an occasional comment that expressed room for improvement, the interviewee seemed reluctant to mention this aspect of the series preached. Some of the participants also appeared to be concerned about being judged for their response. In the interview, Question 8 asked the participants if they had discussed the sermons with anyone who had not heard them. Those who answered “no” were sheepish in their facial expression and verbal tone. This response may be connected to their sense of what it means to be a witness, which they may have experienced from past sermons or other preachers’ expectations. This style of response may also imply that they thought the preacher, and in this case, the one doing the interviews, had expectations for the participants’ behavior. If a different individual was conducting the interviews, the participants who did not speak

of these sermons to someone who had not shared the experience might have given a reason for not verbally sharing. Inquiring about the reason, regardless of having answered “yes” or “no” to this question, would have added insight. The interview question did not pursue additional information on this question.

During an interview that was a requirement for “Core Three: Preaching as The Word of God in Context,” a class for the completion of the D. Min. degree, a congregation member voiced some concern about the imaginative storytelling sermons. The concern was about those who don’t know the biblical account very well, how will they know what part is scriptural and what part is imaginative? This concern may be valid. While the pericope is read before the sermon, it is probable that a listener will not hear all the detail that does or does not reside within the passage. Yet, the concern for the detail being meticulously accurate does not appear to be a concern for the authors of the various Gospels, since their accounts contain variations. I wonder if the concern for accuracy might need to be redirected. Could it be that as the homiletician is concerned with accuracy within their portrayal of cultural and historical context, the hearer may possibly garner a more fitting perspective of the biblical story?

### **A Mixed Bag**

Some strengths and weaknesses are entangled. What one person considers a strength may be considered a weakness by another. Beyond the simple differences of opinion or experience, which leads to the “strength” or “weakness” labels, there is the complication that strengths conceivably possess weaknesses.

Giving biblical information and weaving theological truths into a storytelling sermon informs a listener of historical, cultural, and biblical context. Some listeners find

the detail of the context unimportant and dry when stated in a didactic style. However, in a storytelling sermon with a multi-dimensional character who interacts with the historical culture, the geography, and the social presuppositions, the listener has the possibility of learning information in an engaging way. Some who were interviewed shared that this knowledge was meaningful to them.

Following this same pattern, sharing the biblical themes which are woven through scripture, the homiletician communicates theological concepts. Allowing these truths to have an impact on the biblical witness in the story creates an opportunity to influence the listener, as well. I have included scriptural references in the example below, which is taken from the Thomas sermon (Appendix 6).

The religious leaders had threatened to kill Jesus (John 7:1), probably because they felt threatened by him. They were concerned that Jesus was teaching a different way of knowing God (7:14-24). They knew God through keeping the law (1:17) but Jesus taught that God, as Creator (1:1-3), wanted relationship with the people God had created (3:5-8). But the religious leaders had a system...and it had worked for them for centuries (6:31). It had been passed down to them through the years. Who was this man that he taught that God wanted something different (10:33)? Who was he to say that God wanted to be in relationship with people instead of insisting on a moral code (15:9-15)?

While the sermons for this series did not mention chapter and verse, the message contained theological truths and biblical context. Intertwining the authorial themes of a Gospel (in this project the specified Gospel is John) into the biblical characters actions and thoughts provides scriptural information for the listener.

However, this subtle weaving of historical culture, geography, and world-view, as well as the theological truths and scriptural references, can cause the concepts to be missed by some who would recognize it when it is shared in a didactic manner. Using an imaginative, character-developing, storytelling sermon style, a listener might have a

broad understanding of the context and scriptural references without recognizing what they have learned. A listener who anticipates explicit information may overlook the implicit knowledge communicated in the story.

### **Wonderings**

For this thesis project, I preached a four-part sermon series and interviewed eleven listeners who had previously agreed to participate in the research. The Action/Reflection model offered the participants and the preacher the opportunity to engage in conversation about the sermons. Other classes required for the D.Min. in Biblical Preaching program also necessitated interviewing congregation members concerning the sermonizing efforts of the homiletician. Members of the Parish/Response Group have graciously given feedback, as well. An atmosphere of open-communication concerning the proclamation of the Word has developed. While this certainly has merit, I wonder how the process of asking congregational members to evaluate sermons affects them. Do they develop a critiquing approach to the homilies? Is an unfair expectation for change fostered? When they mention their desire for change in the sermon style, do they anticipate that “correction” will occur? And for the preacher: will the sense of being evaluated hinder proclamation? How does the preacher handle the conflicting desires of their listeners? Does the preacher’s enthusiasm wane from so much assessment? Richard Ward reminds the preacher,

The reason we work at our preaching is to more faithfully and authentically give our best understanding of who Jesus Christ is, how our relationship with Him can be deepened and expanded, and how that relationship is grounded in a history of God’s dealings with a people with whom God has established a covenant.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 41.

Some participants of this project commented that scripture came alive for them while listening to these sermons. I wonder how the historical and cultural context, woven into the message, influences the listeners when they study scripture on a personal level. Are they able to engage in imagining the story for themselves? Can they grasp the cultural components which contribute to the power of a passage? Do they wonder about the fears and desires of the biblical witnesses? Do the characters of scripture come to life for the listener when they read their Bibles at home?

### **Suggestions**

The scope of this project has been an intentional pursuit of development of characters with the goal of the listener relating to the biblical witnesses leading to an encounter with the Divine. However, the research has caused me to wonder how effective didactic sermon styles are for the listeners within my congregation. Do they engage with the Holy through instructive homilies? What is the experience of listeners with “what to do” and “what to think” sermons? Are they able to encounter the Divine through these sermon styles? It might have been beneficial to the results of this project to conduct a survey concerning a teaching, cerebral style of sermon.

In designing the interview portion of this project, the participants were given the questions before the project commenced. They were informed that it was their choice of whether or not to read the questions before listening to the sermons or wait to interact with the questions after the sermon series was complete. In hindsight, it would have been intriguing for the participants to answer the questions before and after the sermon series in order to observe any change in their answers.

The scope of Question Seven was too narrow. *Does God seem “more real” and/or closer to your daily life than prior to listening to these sermons?* The question did not leave room for the individual to consider their relationship with God as a relationship that was already “real” and/or “close.” The conversation style interview created space for more information to be given; however, an open-ended question would have been constructive.

### Evaluation

In working with this style of preaching, and listening to those who agreed to participate in the research, as well as engaging with those outside the eleven project participants who wanted to share, my evaluation is this: Crafting and delivering a sermon that focuses on intentional character development is a worthwhile endeavor. The imaginative storytelling sermon that aims at the heart may not be a personal preference of all listeners and some hearers may have different expectations of sermon styles. Using didactic sermons has its place in the pulpit. The sermon that reimagines the biblical witnesses of a pericope also has its place in reaching the listener. Richard Ward states:

The good news is that one’s experience of God is more than anyone can express in any given form of human speech. Scott Black Johnston points out that people of faith have developed many different forms of speech to speak of God: ‘The Bible itself—with its songs, laws, poems, dreams, prayers, and letters—demonstrates that humans have found an abundance of faithful ways to record their experience of God.’ Why should we be restricted . . . (in speaking) of the Holy in the midst of such abundance?<sup>11</sup>

Some who focus on the literal interpretation of scripture will find the imaginative biblical style disconcerting, claiming the need to be true to the text. While being true to

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<sup>11</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 98.

the text is paramount, this may be accomplished more fully by being thoughtful and attentive to the historical, cultural, and biblical context woven into the story. Utilizing the DISC and Enneagram adds to the written word of scripture. Which style of preaching does not? Didactic preaching, aiming at the intellect of the listener, also supplements the written word. Reimagining characters with fears, desires, and behavioral styles enhances the listeners' ability to connect with these biblical witnesses providing an opportunity for those in the pew to encounter the Divine.

I agree with Thomas Long's warning. "If the preacher does not read the text diligently before writing and listen to the text attentively before speaking, creativity becomes mere cleverness . . . ." <sup>12</sup> With this storytelling style of preaching in mind, any creative aspects added to the sermon must be for the purpose of the listener encountering the Divine by that listener being able to identify with the biblical witnesses and their connection with God.

This style of preaching may involve some added time for the homiletician during preparation. More than that, it requires emotional energy. Reimagining a character with believable fears and desires is likely, at times, to cause the preacher to have an emotional response or compassionate reaction while preparing the sermon. Delving into the character's inner life may tap into pain or anger the preacher has experienced in the past. Nevertheless, this suggested sermon preparation and preaching style is an invitation for the sermonizer to encounter the Divine with their own personal pain. Being faithful in pursuing one's own emotional health will benefit the minister and their congregation. (As the minister experiences healing of their past emotional pain, they will be better able to

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas Long, *Preaching and the Literary Forms of the Bible*, 134.



walk with their parishioners through the emotional pain and grief of life.) When this sermon style is properly delivered, it is likely to create an empathetic response within the preacher. Stepping into another's sentiments and reactions can be exhausting.

For greater effectiveness in the delivery of these sermons, I have been diligent in conveying them with minimal notes. This requires full mental attention and clear thinking. The mind may need other thoughts and concerns to be set aside at the time of presentation. In my experience, this is true regardless of the sermon style. However, using minimal notes removes the safety net. The memory required, and the anxiety of possibly forgetting something, can be taxing on the brain.

The preacher gives a great deal of emotional and intellectual energy when using this sermon style. After listening to those who were interviewed and hearing of their ability to connect with the Divine, I have concluded that the extra time, emotional energy, and mental capacity required of the preacher, are worthy sacrifices.

Having said all of that, it is necessary to hear Paul Scott Wilson's words. "A sermon is not our own but belongs to God. Concerns about how well we will do are appropriate only with regard to the faithfulness and worthiness of our offering. Glory for God is what we seek, not for ourselves."<sup>13</sup>

### **Summary**

The results of this research project were strongly positive with all of the participants having a meaningful experience. While the project and the sermon style had positive outcomes, there are limitations in the scope of participants for this research. A

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, 35.

broader, more diverse group is necessary for a more thorough understanding of the benefits of this sermon style. It would have been beneficial to ask those who agreed to be interviewed to answer the interview questions before and after listening to this sermon series. Qualitative data could have been gleaned in the sense of possible movement for the participants.

I also wrestle with the aspects of this style and project where the strengths are entangled with concerns. Being true to the text is paramount in my view and I am aware that utilizing the imagination can be worrisome for those who expect a literal reading of scripture. The homiletician must submit to the text even when shaping a sermon with intentional character development.

The responsibility for the preacher is immense. Being a powerful communicator, staying true to the text, holding the attention of the listener, honoring various congregational desires, and preaching a faithful message can create a formula for being overwhelmed. And yet, God has called and the church has ordained the one who preaches. Mark Allen Powell encourages the preacher with these words.

Ultimately, the task of the preacher is simply to turn the Word of God loose. We don't just talk about the Word of God—we turn it loose. The Word of God creates, heals, judges, redeems. It is not just a message. A sermon is not a message either. It is a release. We turn the Word of God loose to do what the Word of God does.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Powell, *What Do They Hear?*, 107.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I reflect upon the value of this project for my preaching style, the spiritual growth of those who listen to my sermons in the congregation I serve as pastor, and the possibility for its impact on the larger church community concerning the field of homiletics. I discuss the need for preaching that aims at more than intellectual assent. I also consider future research suggestions and other resources with which to engage in order to continue growing in my skillset of developing characters. Therefore, personal growth is also discussed in this chapter.

#### **Value of this Project**

Preaching is important to me. I suspect that anyone who pursues a doctorate in the field of preaching could make the same claim. However, different people have various reasons to enhance their skill as a preacher. As a preacher, I desire to aid those in the pew in connecting with the Divine since life-transformation takes place when a person has an encounter with God. I believe the biblical narrative invites the listener and reader into the Divine presence. For the homiletician who is determined to be true to scripture, sermonizing cannot abandon story in favor of concepts. It is in the story of God as told through scripture that people, then as now, are invited into The Story, to interact with a loving God who woos humanity into relationship. The preaching style of this project is designed for a holistic impact on the listener. It aims beyond intellectual assent to

scripture and doctrine, intending to make an imprint on the heart, indeed the entire being of the hearer. Even though this particular storytelling style seeks to connect with the listeners' heart, some of those interviewed for this project shared that they also gleaned information from their experience with these sermons. Each biblical story was told in the historical, cultural, and biblical context, adding benefit to those who expected to gain knowledge from the sermon. When crafting a sermon, aiming at the heart holds the probability of going beyond the heart and influencing the head.

This project holds value in that it strongly suggests that preaching with the intention of reimagining the biblical witnesses, allowing them to have a behavioral style and archetypical fears and desires, influences the listener. Many of the participants in this thesis project stated that they considered the experience of listening to the sermon series to have strengthened their connection with the Divine. All the participants in this project voiced they had a meaningful experience listening to these four sermons. According to the results of this research project, the style of preaching proposed in this thesis impacts the majority of the listeners, crossing multiple demographic categories. It impacted males and females, and ages thirty and older, per the research of this project. (Many of those interviewed, without any solicitation from me, claimed teens and young adults would easily be able to connect with this style.) This preaching style also made an impact on those who are task-focused in their behavioral style, as well as those who are people-focused.

Christian Smith claims humans live according to the narrative they believe. The narrative of society helps people “make sense of (the) world and the purpose of our lives

in it.”<sup>1</sup> Believing this to be true magnifies the necessity for the biblical narrative to be a story we speak and share so that it can shape lives. The story of a God who cares and desires a relationship with humanity, real humans with behavioral styles, desires, and fears, must be spoken in today’s culture. Smith also points out, not only do we create narratives by which we understand our world and our purpose within it, but we are also “made by our stories. We tell and retell narratives that themselves come fundamentally to constitute and direct our lives.”<sup>2</sup> Since human beings are impacted by the stories they believe, it is paramount for the preacher to tell the story of biblical witnesses, who are flesh and blood, who have fears and desires, and who interact according to their behavioral style or personality traits. Then the listener has the hope, indeed the real possibility of identifying with the character, and thus possibly encountering the Divine in life-changing ways.

Since ministry is about people and the universal need for the Divine, this project holds value by following the words of Jesus, “Come and see” (John 1:39).<sup>3</sup> Preaching in a storytelling style with the intentionality of breathing life into the biblical characters creates the opportunity for the listener to identify with these biblical witnesses and journey with them, “even if only for the moment.”<sup>4</sup> The listener may then experience the story and move from “seeing” as comprehension, experience, and observation to a deeper

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<sup>1</sup> Christian Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals: Human Personhood and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2003), 64.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>3</sup> *Holy Bible*, New Living Translation (Carol Stream: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., Carol Stream, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Research participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 31, 2017.

“seeing” as knowing and being known, the experience of life “to the full” with Jesus Christ (John 10:10), as well as the expressed intention of belief as stated by the author of the Gospel of John (John 20:31).<sup>5</sup>

### **Value for the Wider Church**

Week in and week out, the preacher steps in front of God’s people to speak the Word of God. Methodologies will come and go; some will be embraced, while others will be tossed aside. Within the small scope of this thesis, preaching in storytelling form, with intentionality in reimagining the biblical witnesses, is another methodology which some find valuable. Allowing the characters to have fears, desires, and behavioral patterns increases the possibility of the listener identifying with the biblical witnesses. Those interviewed for this project shared that the experience with this sermon style enhanced their ability to encounter the Divine. This methodology and research may be helpful to the field of homiletics, contributing to the ongoing conversation concerning compelling preaching, whether in workshops, conferences, or the seminary. One of the interviewees of this project stated, “I wish every priest, every minister would use this tool to varying degrees. It enhances the spiritual understanding and experience.”<sup>6</sup>

Preachers, especially those involved in weekly proclamation, can become weary. Their spiritual lives can become dry. They long to give meaningful sermons to their beloved congregations, but the rigor of parish ministry can cause exhaustion. Exploring a preaching style such as the one outlined in this project might have personal value for the

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<sup>5</sup> John 20:31 (TNIV) “But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.”

<sup>6</sup> Research participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 28, 2017.

homiletician. Imagining themselves within the story of scripture, listening to hear what Christ may say to the parish pastor, can be life-giving and a method of drinking the Living Water on a personal level. This imaginative style is intertwined with the ancient practice of *lectio*. Norvene Vest states, “. . . *lectio* is *not* primarily a process of knowledge acquisition (though it thrives on a growing body of careful study about scripture); it is not about mastery of truth. Instead, *lectio* is primarily a process of encounter; it is about surrender to Truth.”<sup>7</sup> All preachers, I believe, need an encounter with the Divine. Using this imaginative style might enhance their personal life with God.

### **Further Research**

It would be beneficial for this project to be expanded in its scope. Including more participants in the future would give a broader understanding of the impact of the preaching style used in this project. I intend to craft more sermons in this way and will intentionally collect feedback from those who experienced the sermon event.

While working on this thesis, I attended, as a visitor, a worship service at a Missionary Baptist Church, a part of the American Baptist Churches. My curiosity was piqued. I found myself wondering how would our African-American brothers and sisters receive this sermon style? The Enneagram’s fears and desires cross all cultures, but how are they expressed? The original research, being intentionally contextual, is limited to a Euro-American congregation. Exploring other cultures’ response to this type of sermonizing would add depth to this study.

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<sup>7</sup> Norvene Vest, *Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1996), 13.

Further study into this field will include wrestling with subtext. Ballon states, “Subtext is the emotional feeling beneath the words.”<sup>8</sup> Ballon explains that humans seldom communicate their deep emotions and often say something other than what they feel. Ballon coaches her students, saying, “It’s important for you to use as much subtext in your character’s dialogue or their actions. This allows your audience to bring their own feelings into play and enables them to identify with your characters.”<sup>9</sup> I intend to experiment with Ballon’s suggestion by intentionally including subtext within the characters dialogue and action in future sermons.

Recently in a conversation, an English teacher informed me of some information developed by PIXAR.<sup>10</sup> This information is being used to help students create a story. PIXAR states there are five components to a well-developed character. The fifth one on the list grabbed my attention: “Stakes.” What is at “stake” for the character? Considering the “stakes” for the character, I discovered, will add depth to their fears and desires. I want to become intentional in considering “stakes” when envisioning biblical characters. Contemplating what is at stake for the scriptural witness may provide another opportunity for the listener to identify with the character of the pericope.

Continued interaction with this preaching style will possibly include imagining the voice of God. To date, I have imagined the facial expressions, the body language, and the voice of Jesus because, in the past, I have used this style predominately within the New Testament. While being interviewed, one of the participants wondered aloud what a

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<sup>8</sup> Ballon, *Blueprint for Screenwriting*, 117.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>10</sup>“Pixar in a Box: The Art of Storytelling,” Khan Academy, accessed December 2, 2017, <https://www.khanacademy.org/partner-content/pixar/storytelling/character/v/stakes>.



sermon might be like that included “more of God in the story.”<sup>11</sup> In his writing, Richard Ward includes the idea of God’s voice. In reference to Jesus’ baptism in the Gospel of Mark, Ward asks, “*How will God sound?* Since the only character in the story who will hear God is Jesus, will God whisper? Or since Mark wants to fully disclose Jesus’ identity to the reader/auditor, will the words of God sound like an announcement?”<sup>12</sup> I have not yet been bold enough to include the voice of God within my imaginative preaching. This may be a future challenge.

My ongoing work with this preaching style will also include a thorough reading of *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* written by Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert.<sup>13</sup> Because of Richard W. Swanson’s storytelling emphasis, I intend to add to my library his commentary series *Provoking the Gospel*.<sup>14</sup>

### **Personal Growth**

Reading and researching the written material available on the topic of character development, as well as performing the original research for this project, helped me develop an effective skill set for envisioning the character. Having preached using the storytelling sermon in the past, I desired intentional guidelines to breathe life into the characters of scripture. This project gave me the opportunity to design the parameters for which I had searched. Hearing from those who experienced the sermon series expanded

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<sup>11</sup> Research participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 28, 2017.

<sup>12</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 81.

<sup>13</sup> Richard Rohr and Andreas Ebert, *The Enneagram: A Christian Perspective* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Richard W. Swanson, *Provoking the Gospel: A Storyteller’s Commentary Series* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010).

my understanding of the importance of reimagining characters with the intention of helping the listener identify with the biblical witness within the sermon.

Through the years, I knew on a personal level that encountering the scriptures through the imagination impacted my spiritual journey. I have wondered if that could be other people's experience, too. By implementing this research and the interviews, I have answered my own question: Does this type of sermon move beyond simply holding the attention of the listener? Does it move toward encountering the Divine? The strong positive response from the interviews has assuaged my concern. The imaginative, storytelling, character developing sermon creates an opportunity for the listener to encounter God. My desire for those in the pew to have a heart experience with the Divine intensified as I listened to those who shared in the interviews.

In Paul Scott Wilson's class, *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, he repeatedly encouraged the preaching students to describe what can be seen in the biblical text.<sup>15</sup> I have increasingly worked to incorporate this skill into my sermons. Participants, who were interviewed for this thesis project, as well as members of the Parish Response Group, shared, with no prompting from me, that they can see the story "like a movie" in their mind. Being able to "see" the sermon in a person's mind is likely to impact the visual learner, as well as those who have an auditory learning style. Connecting with both learning styles broadens the effectiveness of the homily.

Hearing the responses of those who were interviewed for this project encouraged me. Through listening to professors, cohort members, and those in the congregation, as

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Scott Wilson, "The Four Pages of the Sermon," classroom lecture, (St. Paul: Luther Seminary, June 15-19, 2015).

well as undertaking the work of this project, I have a deeper confidence when I step into the pulpit. A lack of self-confidence can become a barrier between speaker and listener, drawing attention to itself. However, a personal sense of confidence must always serve as a means of allowing the Divine to be revealed. Karl Barth locates the impetus with the Divine.

(The) . . . point is that God himself wills to reveal himself. He himself wills to attest his revelation. He himself—not we—has done this and wills to do it. Preaching, then, takes place in the listening to the self-revealing will of God. Preachers are drawn into this event.<sup>16</sup>

This project also created a refined focus of my purpose for preaching. Preachers each have their own calling for proclaiming the Word. My unique call is to enrich peoples' encounters with God. I believe the Holy Spirit is the one who does the work of heart transformation. It is my job to remove barriers and create space for an encounter with the Divine. Interacting in an imaginative method with the scripture, aligning the historical, cultural, and biblical contexts, can provide these opportunities for the listener.

Eugene Peterson writes,

The Bible includes us, always. Our lives are implicitly involved in everything said and done in this book. In order to realize this we must enter the story imaginatively. We must let our conversations and experiences and thoughts be brought into the story so that we can observe what happens to us in this context, through this story line, rubbing shoulders with these characters.<sup>17</sup>

Creatively sharing scripture so that those in the pew may identify with the biblical witnesses, and thereby, possibly encounter the Divine is my objective in preaching.

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<sup>16</sup> Karl Barth, *Homiletics*, 50.

<sup>17</sup> Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society*, Second Edition (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 204-205.

Above I describe noticeable personal growth. However, experience has taught me that some growth isn't recognizable until time has passed. The passing of time allows for additional experiences and more opportunity to expand my thinking on this topic. I am confident that I will continue to discover areas of growth within me which are fully connected to this experience.

### Summary

Christian Smith writes, "Narrative is a form of communication that arranges human actions and events into organized wholes in a way that bestows meaning on the actions and events by specifying their interactive or cause-and-effect relations to the whole."<sup>18</sup> With this in mind, the preacher is challenged to tell the stories of scripture, as well as the faith-journey narratives of various people of the past two millennia, and God's continued faithfulness throughout every account, over and over again. Since our lives are story, Ward reminds us,

Preaching is but one means by which a preacher weaves together her or his story, the story of the listeners, and the stories received from the tradition about God's reconciling action through Jesus Christ. We bear witness to the stories of Christ-with-us because these stories empower and lend coherence to our efforts to 'work out [our] own salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil. 2:12b).<sup>19</sup>

The homiletician has the opportunity to partner with the storyline of scripture.<sup>20</sup>

Pasquarello, making reference to Augustine, claims that the biblical narratives reveal that

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<sup>18</sup> Smith, *Moral, Believing Animals*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> Ward, *Speaking of the Holy*, 97.

<sup>20</sup> Those who find the approach of this thesis intriguing and fruitful will find the D.Min. thesis submitted to Luther Seminary in 2018 by Elisabeth Jones titled *Recovering a Midrashic Biblical Imagination for the Progressive-Liberal Christian Community* helpful and insightful.

we do not place the activity of the Divine within our personal story but recognize that our story belongs within the ongoing story of God.<sup>21</sup>

As a result of this project, I am convinced that it is worth the heightened emotional energy and brainpower required for this sermon style. One of the participants I interviewed for this project stated they experienced an increased desire to be more “open to God.”<sup>22</sup> Another interviewee voiced a tremendous sense of God’s comfort washing over them.<sup>23</sup> Rogness says it well. “Retelling the story well takes effort, but it is well worth it to make the Bible come alive.”<sup>24</sup>

In commenting on today’s society, Christian Smith declares, “We have no more dispensed with grand narratives than with the need for lungs to breath with. We cannot live without stories, big stories finally, to tell us what is real and significant, to know who we are, where we are, what we are doing, and why.”<sup>25</sup>

Preaching the Gospel story, with the intentionality of allowing the biblical witnesses to come to life, having behavioral traits, fears, and desires, impacts our own story by enhancing our ability to encounter the Divine.

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<sup>21</sup> Pasquarello, III, *Narrative Reading*, 186.

<sup>22</sup> Research participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 29, 2017.

<sup>23</sup> Research participant, interview by author, Owatonna, MN, March 28, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> Rogness, *Preaching To A TV Generation*, 83.

<sup>25</sup> Smith, *Moral Believing Animals*, 67.

## APPENDIX A

### ENVISIONING THE BLIND MAN: JOHN 9

S in DISC: Relational

Enneagram: #9 - Peacemaker:

Basic Fear - Separation;  
Avoiding self-assertion

- Young man / early 20's
- Lives with parents
- Clean & presentable
  - Mom helps him be ready for the day
    - Sits along the road
    - The dust from the road clings to him
      - Especially as the temp increases because he sweats
- Sense of isolation:
  - People don't look at beggars,
    - Avoid eye contact because their presence makes occasional/visiting passers-by feel uncomfortable;
  - Others who travel the road every day, the beggars have been in those places every day, all day, that they are invisible, part of the landscape.
  - People acted as though he couldn't hear them

Blind guy:

- Liked mornings best
  - Quieter
  - Sun wasn't as hot
  - Downside: not as many people passed by
    - Loose change tossed his way sparse
- Feels isolated because he is isolated
  - Even in a big crowd, no one includes him
  - Deep sense of being alone
  - Know this makes him vulnerable
    - At risk to anyone wanting to steal from him or harm him
  - Subject to ridicule which always stings
  - His desire to belong, to be included
  - Ignored his isolation otherwise grief would wash over him
    - He was already desperate enough
- Learned to go with the flow
- Try to find silver lining

- Spend time daydreaming
- Resigned himself to his lot in life
  - No point trying to change things
  - Cause stress
  - Probably never accomplish anything

## APPENDIX B

### MANUSCRIPT

John 9.1-38 (Read John 9.1-7)  
March 5, 2017  
D.Min. Research Sermon  
FBC, Owatonna, MN  
“And when he found him...”

The day began like most days. He awoke in the dark, dressed in the dark and proceeded carefully to where he would eat his breakfast.

His mother clicked her tongue, like all mothers do, and smoothed his clothes. There was no reason to not look presentable. He appreciated the care even though it didn't matter. Within the next few hours he would be filthy, the dust of the road sticking to his skin and his garments. That was just the way it was for those who begged along the roadside. He ate his breakfast and was grateful for a good meal. It would be a long day before he had a solid meal again.

He walked along the road, tapping his stick in front of him, carefully taking each step. He wanted to find the right spot for begging. There were several things to consider in choosing a spot. He wanted to be on a road that led to the Temple because the foot traffic would be heavier today. But he needed to be far enough away from the other beggars. Beggars were territorial. Sharing might mean less for each one. He understood but he hated the long hours of... Hmm, he tried to find the right word... “ISOLATION.”\* That was it. Sitting all those hours by himself. A sense of loneliness washed over him just thinking about it.

Being blind already made him different, different from all those who could see. And being different often leads to being left out. In his culture that was certainly true. His society kept “those people” on the outside, in the margins. Why, even his faith tradition didn’t permit his kind to enter the Temple.

He arranged his mat in the perfect place, set his large mouthed box in front of him, hoping he wouldn’t miss any of the coins people might toss his direction. He chuckled to himself. Just listen to him being so philosophical this early in the day. He shook his head to remove the web of depression and loneliness that was developing.



He liked mornings best. They were less chaotic and the sun wasn't as hot. But the downside to mornings was that fewer people passed by which meant fewer coins would be tossed his direction.

He heard a family approaching. Oh, how he would have loved to have a family someday\*. There was a male voice, a female voice and lots of youthful chatter. He sighed. How could he ever have a family when he couldn't even support himself?

Some beggars would call out trying to get people's attention and get more coins. But he hated calling out. He didn't want people's attention\* but being invisible was something completely different.

He could tell if those who passed by used this road often. They ignored the beggars and kept right on talking as if the beggars didn't exist. But those who didn't use this road often, well, they typically got real quiet when they passed by. It was such a conundrum. He hated being invisible but for those who did see him, well, his very presence made them uncomfortable.

He heard another group approaching. There were lots of voices. And as they neared, he heard the question: "Rabbi, who sinned? This man or his parents that he was born blind?"

The blind man cringed. He wanted to shout, "I can hear you! I'm blind, not deaf!!" but he bit his tongue. He was accustomed to people acting as though he wasn't there.

He hated how people acted. Sometimes their words were so cruel. His parents were good people; yet, they had been judged harshly...as if, (pause) as if having a child born blind was a punishment from God due to some sin they had committed. "What sin? What sin? What sin?" He hated how people gossiped. And what sin could he have done before he was born?? People could be so cruel.

He didn't know if he even wanted to hear the answer that would be given by the Rabbi. But still he listened.

"Neither this man nor his parents have sinned. This has happened to reveal the work of God."

What?? The blind man had never heard a response like that. No judgment? No shame? The answer placed value on him...He would reveal the work of God?!?

Then someone was touching him. He started to pull back but then realized that this touch was different. So he paused...and the man put mud on his eyes.

Mud? Really? The man couldn't come up with something else?

Then the Rabbi said, "Go, Wash in the pool of Siloam."

Well, he had to get that mud off of his eyes somehow. Besides, there was something within him that compelled him to act on the instructions.

So he did. He went to the Pool and washed his eyes. He could see!

He blinked many times trying to get his vision to come into focus. And wow, was it bright. No wonder the sun was so warm. It was significantly bright!

By using his other senses that he had relied on all those years, he quickly understood what he was seeing. And he headed home.

The neighbors were shocked to see him and they asked each other, "Was this the man who was born blind?"

With great excitement, he said, "It's me! I can see!!"

He started to get even more excited. Could it be? Would he be able to have friends and not be an outcast?\* Could he actually go to the Temple and join in with the Temple Festivals?

Neighbors asked him, "How did this happen? What happened that you can see?"

He told them his story. "A man named Jesus put mud on my eyes and told me to wash in the pool of Siloam and I did. And now I can see!"

"Hmmm. Really??" They weren't convinced. "Where's this man now?"

The man shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know."

The neighbors weren't satisfied with the answer the man gave them, so they took him to the religious authorities and told them about it. The religious authorities started asking him questions. He told them the same story.

"A man named Jesus put mud on my eyes and told me to wash in the pool of Siloam and I did. And now I can see!"

They kept asking him and he kept giving the same answer. Then they asked, "Who do you think this man is?"

The man who used to be blind said, "Hmm. I think he's a prophet."

This answer didn't sit well with the religious authorities and they insisted that the parents of the man who used to be blind be called in. This was getting out of hand and turning into a three-ring circus.

His parents came in to be questioned. They answered the best they could. “Yes,” this was their son. “Yes,” he had been born blind. Their fear was creeping up within their core. They knew if someone said that Jesus was the Messiah, that he came from God, they would be ostracized. So when asked about their son being able to see, they said that their son was of age, they could ask him.

The man who used to be blind felt as though he had been thrown to the wolves. But he couldn’t blame his parents. They had been through enough with the gossiping and people’s insistence that there was, “Some sin...There’s some sin.” Being excommunicated would be too much.

And that was when he realized that all his hopes of fitting in, of belonging, of being on the inside, of no longer being an outcast...well, that probably wasn’t going to happen.

The religious leaders kept asking him questions and he kept giving them the same answers. One thing led to another and the religious leaders began hurling insults and accusations at him. Finally, it ended with the religious leaders telling the man who used to be blind, “Get up and get out! And don’t come back.”

So he did as they said and he left. As he walked away, he decided to turn off onto a side street where it was quieter. He closed his eyes to shut out the world and retreat to a darkness that was familiar. He didn’t know which was worse...To be invisible and ignored or to be rejected and scorned.

Then he heard a familiar voice. “I’ve been looking for you.”

The man opened his eyes and for the first time, he looked into the face of Jesus.

Jesus continued, “I heard they kicked you out.”

The man nodded.

Jesus continued, “Do you want to come with me? Do you want to be one of my followers, one of my friends? You’re more than welcome.”

The man closed his eyes again. This time it wasn’t to hide but instead to try to keep the tears from flowing down his face. This man was offering him a friendship, a group to belong to, to no longer be isolated.

Then he opened his eye. He looked into the face of Jesus and he knew that Jesus was from God.

And the man said, “Yes.”

(Pause)

We've all had experiences when we know we don't fit in. We get that it happens in junior high and high school but we've lived long enough to know it goes beyond those years. We've known what it's like to be on the outside, to be in the dark, to feel lonely.

There's a phrase in the end of this chapter, chapter 9 in the Gospel of John, where this story is from. John 9:35 says "Jesus heard that they had thrown him out, and when he found him..." And when he found him. Jesus went looking for him and he looked until he found him.

In the times of our lives when the isolation and rejection, the loneliness and the darkness seem as though they will overwhelm us, I want to remind you that we are not alone. The Spirit of God has already found us. God knows. God cares. And God is with us.

God's presence is always with us. God is a God who is continually reaching and inviting and finding us. Will we say YES?

Amen.

\*References to Enneagram # 9--Peacemaker & an "S" in DISC.

## APPENDIX C

### ENVISIONING MARY MAGDALENE: JOHN 20:11-18

D in DISC, Task focused, going to get things done, tell it to you straight  
Enneagram: #8 Challenger:

Basic Fear-Being harmed;  
Self-sufficient;  
Self-protection;  
Sense of security- becomes a helper;  
Best selves- use their strength to improve others' lives,  
Inspiring;  
Holy idea- truth.

- Early 30's
- Long dark hair
- Dark eyes
- Wealth of some kind
- Unmarried
- Found Jesus' mother to be a good friend,
  - Mentor
- Sense of courage... (Jewish Leaders said a person who follows Jesus will be excommunicated from the Temple) ...or she has nothing to lose

Personal note: I found this envisioning to be difficult. Mary's age and marital status and economic status are not slightly supported by scripture; legend, yes. Scripture, no. More difficult than that is making up the "reason" for any of those pieces without contradicting legend... without giving plausible reason for such things according to culture. I find myself resistant to the legend (that she was a prostitute) since it paints women in such a negative way, resorting to narrow definitions of women, i.e. Madonna or whore, etc.

## APPENDIX D

### MANUSCRIPT

John 20.11-18  
March 12, 2017  
D. Min. Research Sermon  
FBC, Owat.  
“He Knows My Name”

Mary Magdalene grabbed knees and gasped for breath. She was struggling to get enough oxygen in her lungs. Between the crying and the running, her lungs couldn't keep up. How could this be happening? The garden which was a peaceful place typically... it had become a place of panic and anxiety. First, Jesus was arrested there by a group of soldiers; and now this!!

She started running again, holding her side as she ran. She had to tell Peter and John. Her determination\* refused to give in to her side ache, so she pressed on.

The nightmare that she had been living continued. She had been at Mary's side, watching Jesus' twisted body gasping for air. Her own grief was unbearable\*...but that didn't stop her awareness\* of the deep grief her friend was experiencing as she watched her son's execution.

For many of them, their dreams of a new regime, a less oppressive government, were destroyed when Jesus died. Their expectations that He would set things right, the way they should be had been, demolished!

Mary's heart was pounding and her lungs were burning by the time she reached the place John & Peter were staying. She knocked on the outer door quietly. She didn't want the neighbors to hear. The sun was just beginning to lighten the sky. It was too early to make too much noise. She certainly didn't want to draw unnecessary attention to herself or Jesus' closest friends. At this point, she didn't know who was friend or foe. After all it was one of Jesus' own friends who had betrayed him.

Peter opened the door a crack and saw Mary Magdalene. He motioned for her to come inside. Once inside, she looked around to see who was there. The glow from the solitary lamp allowed her to make out the shape of John.

Between gasps, she spoke in a shouting whisper, “They’ve taken the Lord out of the tomb and we don’t know where they put him!”

Peter & John exchanged looks and bolted for the door. Mary assumed they were headed to the garden where Jesus' tomb was. She sank to the floor, drained from the adrenaline rush and expending all that energy. Her head throbbed.

After only a minute, she rose to her feet and headed to the door. As she started down the path to the garden, she walked this time.

Typically she was one who got things done\*. She actually prided herself in being a "can-do" person. But now, she felt helpless and vulnerable\*. It scared her to feel this way. She clenched her jaw in determination.\* She had to find Jesus' body.

She picked up the pace...and so did her tears. Spending time with Jesus had changed her life. It had softened her harsh edges and her sharp tongue\*. Knowing that Jesus loved her and accepted her had turned her heart toward loving and serving others. Losing him... to death and now, losing his body! Well, it was more than she could bear.

When she reached the opened tomb, for the first time she looked inside. Odd. There were two men sitting where Jesus' body had been. Were they friend or foe? It didn't matter. She had to find Jesus' body.\* She would ask them. But before she could form her question, one of the men posed a question to her. "Why are you crying?"

She didn't want to accuse anyone...just yet. She needed to tread carefully if she had any hope of gaining the information she longed for. She carefully answered, "They have taken my Lord away. I don't know where they put him."

She turned around and saw another man standing there. He asked her the same question. "Why are you crying?" and he added, "Who are you looking for?"

Determination to find Jesus' body intensified within her. Certainly, this man who was the gardener, would know. She squared her shoulders, and boldly said, "Sir, if you have carried him away, please, tell me where you have put him and I will get him."

She didn't know how she would carry his body, but she would somehow do it...no matter what it would take.\*

And then he said, "Mary."

She recognized that voice. She would recognize it anywhere. She tried to focus, blinking tears away. Her eyes widened.

"Rabboni!" Her special name for Jesus. She was the only one who called him that. It was her Lord, her Soul's friend.

She threw her arms around his neck. The tears flowed. He was alive!! She couldn't believe she had any more tears. But these were no longer tears of grief. Instead they were

tears of release. Her sense of being vulnerable and working so hard toward protection for herself and those she loved, melted away.\* Unbelievable calm and contentment washed over her. Jesus held her. His mere presence calmed her soul.

As she became quiet, Jesus had a job for her. He chuckled as he said, “Mary, You’re gonna have to let go of me. I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go, tell the guys, ‘I am ascending to my father and your father, my God and your God.’”

Mary Magdalene did just that. She went and told Jesus’ friends what he had said...and she added some of her own words. She declared, “I have seen the Lord!”

Pause

In scripture, there’s another story of a garden, the Garden of Eden, and the Divine Creator came to that garden and called Adam by name. Here in the Gospel of John, the author places the Divine, this time it’s Jesus, once again in a garden and he, too, called someone by name. This time it was Mary Magdalene. There seems to be a pattern of the Divine showing up and calling a person’s name. It seems to be characteristic of the heart of God.

We all have experienced times of loss in life. There are times when events beyond our control steal from us in ways that seem unbearable. Other times life is simply unraveling around us. Whether we are grieving the loss of someone we loved or it is a dream that died, we experience grief. Our hopes and desires can be destroyed. Relationships fall apart and we can feel betrayed and find ourselves living with a suspicious frame of mind.

The author of John conveyed to the first-century Christ-followers and to us... God knows your name. When grief overwhelms you, God lovingly whispers your name, knowing your situation and being fully present to you at all times. When we don’t know which way to turn, God lovingly whispers our name, knowing our situation and being fully present to us at all times. When life is unraveling and our determination and “can-do” spirit is shrinking in the shadows, God lovingly whispers our name, knowing our despair and grief and is fully present to us at all times.

The Spirit of God invites each one of us into the Divine presence and encourages us to listen to the heart of God as God whispers our name.

Amen.

\*References to Enneagram #8--Challenger & “D” in the DISC



## APPENDIX E

### ENVISIONING THOMAS: JOHN 20:24-29

Envisioning Thomas

“C” in DISC

Enneagram: #6--Loyalist

Fear: Being without guidance and support

Loyalist & “C” both share the characteristics of worry and indecision.

Worry-er

Need information to make decisions

Suspicious

Cautious

Responsible

Task -focused, less need for being relational

Courageous

Young--early 20's

## APPENDIX F

### MANUSCRIPT

John 20:24-29

March 19, 2017

D. Min. Research Sermon

“Even Though, Even Then, Even Now”

FBC, Owat.

Thomas rolled over and adjusted the blanket that covered him. It was another restless night. He was tired of being tired and tired of not being able to sleep. Maybe if he could figure out\* which part of this situation was making it so difficult... maybe then he could get a new perspective and possibly then he could rest.

Grief? Was it grief? Of course, he was grieving. Jesus had been murdered. And Jesus was his dear friend, his Rabbi, the one on whom he had pinned all of his hopes for political change. All of that died on that day. Thomas had plenty of reason to grieve. He knew this was going to happen. He had been worried about it for months.\*

The religious leaders had threatened to kill Jesus, probably because they felt threatened by Jesus. They were concerned that Jesus was teaching a different way of knowing God. They knew God through keeping the law but Jesus taught that God, as Creator, wanted relationship with the people God had created. But the religious leaders had a system...and it had worked for them for centuries. It had been passed down to them through the years. Who was *this man* that he taught that God wanted something different? Who was *he* to say that God wanted to be in relationship with people instead of insisting on a moral code?

Thomas threw off the blanket. He might as well get up. He'd go to the outer room. At least there he could pace back and forth. He had to do something with this energy within his body.

He had been so worried that Jesus would be killed. Why, even Jesus knew that was going to happen. He tried to teach his disciples, his closest friends, that the Spirit of God would be with them to strengthen them and comfort them when the inevitable happened. Jesus tried to make it sound positive but to Thomas it just sounded confusing.

Thomas had to admit that lots of Jesus' teachings sounded confusing. Jesus was a great teacher and he would use a physical concept to teach a spiritual concept. Sometimes Thomas understood and sometimes he didn't.

Thomas remembered being by the well when Jesus had talked to the Samaritan woman. Using the picture of water and thirst, Jesus took the concept of being thirsty and said that people are spiritually thirsty...and that for each thing for which they were thirsty, Jesus was Living Water. Whatever they thirsted for, Jesus said, "I am."

And then there was the time that Jesus had fed the 5,000. There were so many people, as far as one could see and Jesus kept breaking bread and fed them all. Then he turned to those close by and said that he was the Bread of Life. That whatever people hungered for, Jesus said, "I am."

And what about the time they walked passed a vineyard? Jesus used that time to say that he was the vine and his friends were the branches, that they couldn't produce good fruit unless they were attached to the vine...which was him, Jesus.

Thomas remembered this next one in a special way. Jesus had said that he was the good shepherd, that he knew his sheep...and when a stranger can't tell the difference between the sheep, Jesus knew them well. And they were the sheep, his friends. Thomas sighed at the thought of Jesus being his good shepherd and taking good care of his sheep. That included him.

Thomas kept pacing back and forth as his soul wrestled within him. Spending time with Jesus had changed him. He, Thomas, was such a cautious guy\*, cautious by nature, really. But when he was with Jesus, he felt courageous. He had peace and somehow knew that no matter what happened, God would be with him, that it would be ok because of God's presence. He had even had enough courage to lay down his life for his friend. Jesus had said that he would do that and Thomas had agreed that he, too, would lay down his life for his friend. He was willing to die with Jesus.

Thomas stopped pacing and stared at the floor in the dimly lit room. He shook his head. It hadn't happened that way. Instead Thomas was left to live with all this. The destroyed hopes. The grieving heart. The mess that was left behind. Everything had changed...and Thomas hated change!\*

Change? Was that what had him so upset? No!! It was the foolishness\* of his friends! Thomas was more pragmatic than that. He was a realist.\* He needed evidence and information.\* Beside, he just wanted what the others had experienced. They said they saw Christ and the marks from the nails in his hands. He wanted to see that too. They wanted him to move on like they had. It wasn't that he didn't want to. He just needed some evidence.\* His friends acted as though they were "in the know." Thomas hated it, he hated not being in the know\* and he hated being left out.

The sun was beginning to give light to the day. Thomas could see it through the cracks. He sank down onto the mat on the floor. He was exhausted. Nothing was solved for him. But one more night had passed.

Well, tonight he was getting together with his friends.\*\* He hadn't made the decision to follow Jesus lightly.\*\* He wasn't going to stop now. And his friends, well, they were his friends, even though they didn't agree right now.\*\* That's just the kind of guy Thomas was. He would stay in relationship with them even though they didn't agree.\*\*

The day passed quickly filled with work, family, and friends. That evening they were together. It was good to be together even though they didn't agree.\*\* It was good to be together even though his heart ached. It was good to be together even though expectations of each other weren't being met.\*\* They had been through a lot together. That's what friends do.\*\*

Then while they were visiting, Jesus stood among them. And he said what he often said, "Peace be with you!" Thomas stared in amazement. Then Jesus turned to face Thomas, "See. Do you see my hands, the marks of the nails? Do you want to touch them? I'll let you. Stay in relationship with me."

And without really know how it happened, Thomas was on his knees at Jesus' feet saying "My Lord and My God!" And everything had changed.

Jesus smiled at him and said, "Because you've seen me, you believe; blessed are those who haven't seen and yet believe."

#### PAUSE

The way the author of John writes this Gospel, he continues to weave certain themes throughout the writing. One of those is "believing." Believing shows up repeatedly throughout the Gospel of John. But "believing" is not an intellectual agreement in the Gospel of John. It is not about what we know in our minds. Of course, we want our minds engaged but in the Gospel of John, "believing" is a heart believing, about relationship, about staying in relationship.

I think Thomas has gotten a bad wrap through the years. You all know his name, don't you? "Doubting Thomas." Thomas just wanted the same thing the others had experienced. He wanted it for himself.

Sometimes we act as though doubting is incredibly negative. I want to point out the difference between "certainty" and "faith." We don't need to exercise our "faith" when we are certain of something. Faith is utilized when we are uncertain, when we are not sure.

I recently heard a definition of faith as, "Committing to a certain action even in the face of uncertainty." We commit to staying in relationship with God, being in relationship with this Divine being, accepting love from this Christ... even though there are times it doesn't look like it matters. Even though the night gets dark. Even though pieces in our lives are falling apart. That's faith. That's the believing that John talks about. Staying in relationship even though...

I think we get so enamored with Thomas and focus on “Doubting Thomas” because that’s our piece in the equation. Is our part to have enough faith? Is our part to be so certain that we never doubt? Is our part to make our minds believe something when we might be questioning? In the story of Thomas we get focused on our part and we forget to look at God’s part.

God’s part is the “even then.” For our part it’s “even though” but when it comes to God’s part it’s “even then.” Even when the night is dark and we’re not sure, **even then** God is present for us. When life is falling apart and we want to wonder whether or not God is good, **even then** God is the Living Water for us, the Bread of Life for us, the Good Shepherd, the Vine. When we feel that life is treating us unfairly and we wonder “How could God let that happen?”, **even then** God holds us in the divine love, God comforts us, God walks with us.

And that brings us to **even now**. It’s **even now** that Christ continues to show up and say “Peace be with you.”

Throughout the Gospel of John, the author continues to refer to seeing as believing. I wonder if the Spirit of God is inviting us to look around our world, our lives. Where is it that we see God’s kindness? Where is it that we see God’s gentleness and compassion? Where is it that we see things being set right? And is there ever a moment when we see Christ saying “Peace be with you.”?

\* “C” in DISC

\*\* #6 Loyalist in Enneagram

## APPENDIX G

### ENVISIONING PETER: JOHN 21:15-19

“I” in the DISC

Enneagram: #2 Helper

Fear: Being unloved

Young man

Married

Fisherman by trade

Leader among the disciples

Outspoken

Talkative

Enjoys being with people

Zealous

Loyal

Enthusiastic

Impulsive

Overly confident (about his willingness to die with Christ)

Something to ponder: How does the fear of being unloved fit together with Peter’s denial of Christ...and Jesus’ question, 3 times over, “Do you love me?”

## APPENDIX H

### MANUSCRIPT

John 21.15-19  
March 26, 2017  
D. Min. Research Sermon  
FBC, Owat.  
“Do you love me?”

Peter walked along with his group of friends. The seven of them filled the entire road as they wandered. They were wandering down the road and through life. Peter had known what his life would look like. He was a follower of Jesus. Jesus would overthrow the current government and reinstate the right government, putting power back in the hands of the right people. He had hitched his wagon to Jesus. He was going to help Jesus rule.

But it didn't happen like that. Jesus had been executed. The one who was supposed to overthrow the government was murdered by the current regime. Nothing was going to happen like he had thought. And now there was something else new to consider. Jesus had been resurrected. There was new life, a new way of understanding death, a new way of knowing God, and a new way of living with purpose.

It takes time to adjust to new ways. And right now, he didn't know where to go or what to do. He wanted a day that was “normal.” Just something that was “normal.”

Peter knew fishing. He had grown up fishing. He knew the boat and the equipment. He could fish without thinking about it. Besides, he felt at home on the water. And he could feel small on the vast water. Yes, that's what he needed--normalcy and a sense of smallness. He was going to go fishing.

He turned to his friends and said, “I'm going fishing.”

The friends exchanged looks and one by one began nodding their heads. It was a good idea. “We'll go with you.”

So the seven of them loaded the gear into the boat and pushed off, heading for deeper waters. The waves lapped against the boat rocking it gently. The rhythm made it easy for them to relax and let their shoulders drop. They sat engulfed in the darkness, each one in their own silence.

The hours passed slowly. Hour by hour. The fishing was terrible. They weren't catching anything.

The sun was barely poking up on the horizon. Peter and his friends noticed a silhouette on the shore. He called out, "Friends, are you catching any fish?"

With discouragement, they answered in unison, "No."

The man on shore gave some advice. "Throw your net on the right side of the boat and you'll find some fish."

Peter and his friends knew that the man on shore couldn't see into the waves. Besides, the lake was pretty calm. But they shrugged and decided they might as well give it a try. They threw the net into the water like they had done all night. Then they began to pull it back into the boat like they had done all night--except they couldn't. The net was filled with fish.

That's when John realized who was standing on the shore. He turned to Peter and said, "It's the Lord."

Peter looked at John, grabbed his wrap, wrapped it around himself and impulsively\* jumped into the lake. Whew! It was colder than he had thought. He began swimming to shore. Right arm. Left arm. Turn his head to take a breath. Right arm. Left arm. Turn his head to take a breath. It was farther to shore than he had realized. He continued swimming. The guys in the boat brought the boat to shore dragging the net that was filled with fish.

When they reached shore, Jesus had coals burning with fish cooking for their breakfast. It was ironic. They couldn't catch any fish and Jesus already had fish cooking for breakfast. Peter missed the irony because as he reached the shore, he smelled the coals burning. The smell reminded him of another time.

It was only a couple of weeks ago that Peter had stood beside burning coals trying to stay warm. It was the dreadful night of watching Jesus, his leader, be lead away to be executed. He had been asked 3 times if he was a disciple of Christ...and 3 times he had said no. How could he have done such a terrible thing??

The memory and guilt of that night washed over him. His stomach twisted with shame. How could he have behaved like that? How could Jesus ever love him now?\*\*\* He had always wanted to be loved.\*\* But his behavior...well, now he wasn't sure he would ever be loved... maybe, he was just unlovable.\*\*

Peter climbed aboard the boat and began unloading the huge bounty of fish. He couldn't bare to look at Jesus so he turned his back to avoid eye contact.

He quickly took up the task of dealing with the fish. There were just so many!! How could Jesus give them so much? Even if they divided the load, there was such abundance. It was so much more than he deserved. The tears flowed.



Jesus called the men to come and have breakfast. They hurried to get off of the boat. Peter waited and got off last with his head down and his shoulders slumped.

They gathered around the fire and Jesus took the bread and he broke it and gave some to each of them. When he handed some to Peter, Peter averted his gaze and looked at the ground.\*

The group chatted while they ate, telling stories of their week and their long night of fishing. Peter was thankful for the chatter. He hoped somehow what he had done could just be ignored. He just wanted things to go back to “normal.”

When they finished eating, Jesus turned to Peter. “Simon, son of John.”

Peter lifted his eyes but not his head. The group held their collective breath. Jesus was using Peter’s formal name.

“Do you love me more than these?”

Peter didn’t know if Jesus meant the fish or his friends, but it didn’t matter. The answer was the same either way. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

The group watched Jesus as he looked at Peter. Peter stared at the ground. Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Before anyone could make a comment, Jesus spoke again, “Simon, son of John.” Again Peter lifted his eyes but not his head.

“Do you love me?”

Peter wished he could stop his lip from trembling. “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

Peter knew Jesus taught that he, Jesus, was the Good Shepherd and that people everywhere were his sheep. Was Jesus giving him some kind of job? Why would Jesus trust him with any kind of responsibility? Hadn’t he already proven that he was a screw-up, a mess?

The group watched as they sat there perfectly still.

Jesus spoke again, “Simon, son of John.” Peter lifted his head and looked Jesus straight in the eye.

“Do you love me?”

Tears flowed down Peter's cheeks. Did Jesus not believe him?

Peter bit his lip, took a deep breath and said, "Lord, you know all things: you know that I love you."

Then Jesus said, "Feed my sheep. No matter what life brings, no matter what life brings, stay in relationship with me."

PAUSE

Peter found himself in a place where he wondered if he had done something so terrible that Jesus could never love him again. After all, Peter had denied being a disciple of Christ three times.

Jesus didn't disown him. Jesus didn't refuse to let him participate in the big picture of God's plan. Instead, he asked him three times, "Do you love me?" allowing him to declare his love three times. And then Jesus gave Peter responsibility.

Throughout the Gospel of John, the author continues to share that Jesus was focused on relationship, the relationship between God and humanity. Jesus said, "If you love me, you'll keep my commandments." The focus was on the loving.

But we often get that turned around. We act as though God wants our good behavior, that God is concerned with our obedience...but God is concerned with our love. We can obey without loving. Let me repeat that. We can obey without loving...but we cannot love without obeying. It's the love that matters.

We spend all kinds of energy and time worrying about the obedience when God is concerned with the love. We attempt to make ourselves obedient, instead of working to grow our love for God.

Just like in any relationship, our love grows by spending time together and by focusing on the good in the relationship. The same is true with God. So we pray and we spend time with the Divine. And we also get to focus on the good gifts God gives us. The tulips that bloom. The beautifully painted sky as the sun sets. Laughter with a friend. These are gifts to us.

We are invited to focus on God. Spend time thinking about God. Talking to God. Enjoying life with God. God. The one who is life. The one who loves. The one who cares. The one who forgives. The one who is the light in our darkness. The one who satisfies. The one who is always with us.

As we stare into that face, as we gaze into the eyes of the Divine, we can't help but love God because we see a God who loves us.

There comes a time when the question is no longer “Does God love me?” “Does God forgive me?” There comes a time in all of our lives when God does the asking. “Do you love me?” When things don’t go the ways we want them to go. “Do you love me?” When prayers appear to go unanswered. “Do you love me?” When difficult circumstances come our way. “Do you love me?”

There comes a time when we commit to staying in relationship with God...no matter what. Because we are loved. Because we are forgiven. Because of Who God is for us.

I don’t know what’s going on in each of your lives or in each of your hearts. I don’t know what tomorrow will bring for any of us. But I wonder, is the Spirit of God asking, “Do you love me?”

\* “I” in DISC

\*\* #2 Helper in Enneagram

The entire passage appears to bend toward a person’s need to be loved.

## APPENDIX I

### INTERVIEWS: QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

FBC = First Baptist Church congregation member or regular attendee

OC = Owatonna Community member who is NOT a regular attendee of FBC

The sermon-series in question was preached March 5, 12, 19, 26, 2017. The interviews were conducted March 27-30, 2017.

1. Did you attend/listen to all four sermons?

7 meet the required amount

6 attend all services

1 attended 3 services and listened to 1 online

3 listened/attended 2 & 2

1 listened to all 4.

Answers from the 7 who fit the attendance criteria:

2. What is the expectation that you have for any given sermon? Instructive? Uplifting? Corrective? Thought-provoking? Appeal to the head or heart? Other?

Retired/FBC: no expectation. Dreaded sermon time, “sleep time,” “Don't like them...just not a sermon person”

Retired/FBC: Previous pastors taught about the Bible but it wasn't real.

50s-60s/FBC: Encourage and build up.

50s-60s/FBC: “Draws me to Christ, Causes self-evaluating of Christian walk, Tells/Shows me Christ's love for me, Encourages my personal relationship with Christ, Appeals to both head & heart.”

50s-60s/OC: Translate scripture from history to modern times, instruct.

50s-60s/OC: None, past sermons have been un-relatable.

30s-40s/OC: Thought-provoking, Relatable, Appeals to heart and mind, and Applicable.

3. In what ways did you see yourself in the characters of the sermons? Examples:

Retired/FBC: could sense the characters feelings / emotions.

Retired/FBC: The sermons made the characters real people. “These characters could live across the street.” Thinks about the sermons later.

50s-60s/FBC: I don't know if I saw myself.

50s-60s/FBC: The characters represented the human struggle to understand God.

50s-60s/OC: Identified with **all** the characters.

50s-60s/OC: “They came to life! I connected with **all** the characters.”

30s-40s/OC: Feelings and emotions were conveyed in the sermons. Loneliness (Thomas)/Loss of hope (Mary Magdalene)/Lack of faith (Thomas)/Will God love me? (Peter). "I related to the emotions."

4. Was there one particular character with whom you identified? Example:

Retired/FBC: **Mary Magdalene**, Identified with the depression of loss. Could "almost see" see her excitement at seeing Jesus.

Retired/FBC: **Mary Magdalene, Thomas** - connect to the "doubt"

50s-60s/FBC: Parts of each one: **Blind man**-being judged. **Thomas**-everyone has doubts. Faith comes into play when we are uncertain. **Peter** – thought he didn't deserve much. Thankful for Jesus' love even when he's a screw-up. Identified the least with Mary Magdalene.

50s-60s/FBC: **Thomas** – wanting to see concrete evidence of God working in my life, meeting needs, etc., **Peter** - That God loves me with my imperfections. **Blind man** – the struggle to fit in once change has happened. How God welcomes us to himself. Really connected with Jesus' response to us.

50s-60s/OC: **Blind man** – feeling they could identify with how he felt. The story placed them on the scene offering them new insights.

50s-60s/OC: **Thomas** – sees themselves as a doubter wanting proof. **Peter** – Shows God's love to others by caring for them like a shepherd.

30s-40s/OC: **Thomas** – And especially **Peter**, Will God really forgive me?

5. Was this sermon series a meaningful experience? If so, in what way?

Retired/FBC: Yes. Appreciated using "today's language." Occasionally, maybe in the Peter story, the description of emotion went too far. Felt "a bit lost."

Overall series: "feels like you could almost be that person."

Retired/FBC: Yes.

50s-60s/FBC: Yes, definitely. Always enriched.

50s-60s/FBC: Yes. It reminded me of God's patience with humanity & his love towards our inadequate thinking about life. He loves so openly without judgment. I had never before thought of Mary Magdalene as a strong woman.

50s-60s/OC: Yes! Really helped to open their heart for more reflection.

50s-60s/OC: "I was blown away!" "The characters jumped off the page...and there was no judgment." "POWERFUL!"

30s-40s/OC: Very meaningful, "caused me to reflect more about God and my relationship with God," challenged them and caused them to think. "These sermons helped me to open up to God more." The sermons shifted their perspectives of these passages.

6. Has your experience with God changed since listening to these sermons? If so, in what way?

Retired/FBC: Yes, helps us see what Jesus was like. Connects our feelings with their feelings. We get to see how they experienced Jesus. Feels like they

get “to know the characters a lot better.” “They stick with me” occasionally re-surfacing in their thoughts throughout the week.

Retired/FBC: “The people are more real, we can see in the story that God is leading them.”

50s-60s/FBC: Likes the story style, it connects with them.

50s-60s/FBC: “Listening to your story style of preaching has caused me to try to see people and situations from God’s perspective and ask questions around it and not be so dogmatic.”

50s-60s/OC: “Scripture came alive. It encouraged me to put myself into the (scriptures).”

50s-60s/OC: “It made God so real.”

30s-40s/OC: “It was re-assuring that the great characters of scripture had struggles I could identify with.” “The sermons made me think more about my part in relating to God.”

7. Does God seem “more real” and/or closer to your daily life than prior to listening to these sermons?

Retired/FBC: “Yes, the combination of sermons and the Wednesday night Bible Study.”

Retired/FBC: “Yes, God is present. It shows that God cares. It has an impact on you.”

50s-60s/FBC: “I like the story-telling style. I was always enriched. Hopefully, I’m always growing spiritually. These sermons are just one part of that.”

50s-60s/FBC: Yes, all the stories of scripture are more possible.

50s-60s/OC: “Yes, God comes alive in the sermon.” “We form a picture in our minds and then it becomes real.” Make the point more often.

50s-60s/OC: “These sermons were totally relatable with real language. It was just so real!!”

30s-40s/OC: “Yes, it felt more real to me.” “The sermons helped me to grasp that God relates to us on our own level.”

8. Did you discuss any of these sermons with someone who didn’t hear the sermon?

Retired/FBC: very little with spouse

Retired/FBC: Yes, daughter

50s-60s/FBC: Yes, a little with my son-in-law

50s-60s/FBC: A little.

50s-60s/OC: No

50s-60s/OC: Yes! Told friend and spouse. (Both friend and spouse began accompanying this participant to services.)

30s-40s/OC: Yes, parents, daughters, co-worker.

9. The Thesis Question is: “Does bringing biblical characters to life enhance listeners’ ability to encounter God?”

a) How would you answer that question?

Retired/FBC: yes, makes you think ‘where’s God at in this situation?’ “I see God (and God’s activity) in more (everyday occurrences) than I used to.”

Retired/FBC: Of course!! It makes it so much easier to believe and connect with the characters

50s-60s/FBC: Yes, it’s an easy style to listen to. It’s easier to get something out of the story. Everybody can relate to the characters.

50s-60s/FBC: Yes.

50s-60s/OC: 100%!! It is a critical tool. It fits young, old...all people.

50s-60s/OC: Yes, the characters jump off the page. This experience has been so good for me.

30s-40s/OC: “Yes, it definitely did for me.” “It made scripture more meaningful. I could identify and connect with the characters better and that led me to ask how can I apply this in my life.”

b) What does it mean for you to “encounter God”?

Retired/FBC: Through love of others and through nature. “I see God in more stuff than I used to.”

Retired/FBC: A sense of God being “personally present.”

50s-60s/FBC: Encountering God is a part of my daily life.

50s-60s/FBC: I’ve been sensing God telling me to inhale these (sermons, readings, etc.) and breathe them into my life, saying, yes-Lord.

50s-60s/OC: More pause and ponder. How does this apply to me?

50s-60s/OC: They have a connection with God but can’t put it into words.

30s-40s/OC: Turning to God since God is relating to me. We can encounter God through all things when we are open.

Answers from the 4 who attended and listened online:

2. What is the expectation that you have for any given sermon?

30s-40s/FBC: Knowledge (theology, history, culture) likes to think for themselves.

30s-40s/FBC: No expectations, maybe gain instruction.

30s-40s/OC: Likes to learn what the passage is about.

50s-60s/OC: Wants grace & forgiveness spoken

3. In what ways did you see yourself in the characters of the sermons? Examples:

30s-40s/FBC: Each sermon provided some way to identify with the character.

30s-40s/FBC: More of an observer of the story.

30s-40s/OC: No. But really liked the use of imagination.

50s-60s/OC: “I could feel their pain, especially Mary (Magdalene) and Thomas.”

4. Was there one particular character with whom you identified? Example:

30s-40s/FBC: Probably the **Blind Man**

30s-40s/FBC: No, they stayed in the role of observer. Appreciated the attention to detail, it was easy to see the story in their mind.

30s-40s/OC: **Blind man** – personal connection with feeling like an outcast and not fitting in.

50s-60s/OC: **Thomas** – feel his deep emotion.

5. Was this sermon series a meaningful experience? If so, in what way?

30s-40s/FBC: Yes. “The sermon series title could have been: *It didn’t go like I thought.*”

30s-40s/FBC: Yes. Seeing the story from different perspectives.

30s-40s/OC: Yes. Very powerful. “Listening to these sermons helped eliminate stress and made my day better.”

50s-60s/OC: Yes, without a doubt! “I felt closer to each of the characters and helped me understand.” “I could see them in my mind.”

6. Has your experience with God changed since listening to these sermons? If so, in what way?

30s-40s/FBC: Yes. God’s more real in my life.

30s-40s/FBC: Not noticeably.

30s-40s/OC: No, already have a close, longstanding relationship.

50s-60s/OC: Not really but “it was nice to be drawn back (to a spiritual awareness).”

7. Does God seem “more real” and/or closer to your daily life than prior to listening to these sermons?

30s-40s/FBC: Yes. Seeing God reveal himself with the characters.

30s-40s/FBC: No dramatic shift.

30s-40s/OC: Already experience God being real but these sermons could impact others.

50s-60s/OC: Yes, “more real in the sense that the stories must have been quite an experience for those in scripture.”

8. Did you discuss any of these sermons with someone who didn’t hear the sermon?

30s-40s/FBC: A bit with their children.

30s-40s/FBC: No.

30s-40s/OC: Yes, son.

50s-60s/OC: No.

9. The Thesis Question is: “Does bringing biblical characters to life enhance listeners’ ability to encounter God?”

a) How would you answer that question?

30s-40s/FBC: Yes. It’s nice to hear the story because it enhances the passage.

30s-40s/FBC: Yes. Humans like stories. They “see things they haven’t seen before.”

30s-40s/OC: Yes! The sermons made it possible for “seeing it like it really did happen.”

50s-60s/OC: Yes, even if it’s only for the moment.



b) What does it mean for you to “encounter God”?

30s-40s/FBC: To step outside myself

30s-40s/FBC: Peace/tranquility/joy. Multiple sense are involved, not just the mind.

30s-40s/OC: God is their best friend and Father, who spoils them.

50s-60s/OC: see a kindness to another, nature

Additional comments:

“I wish every minister/priest would use this sermon style to varying degrees. It enhances the spiritual understanding and experience.”

“This experience was so very comfortable! People are drawn into the sermon.”

“I found this sermon series to be very powerful as they (the characters) were examples of how others related to God. Experiencing the last four Sundays has helped me to turn toward God more.”

“You made me get into the story like it was a movie. Take this online. So many people would love to listen.”

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