

# Attention and Retention:

## How Ancient and Modern Literary Techniques Inform Modern Preaching

Here we are again, just after noon on a beautiful Sunday, once more in the dining room, just like last Sunday, good little Lutheran soldiers, shoulder to shoulder, stiff backs, seated in our fifties style green vinyl covered kitchen chairs, sibling to the right, sibling to the left, each stomach growling it's own sound of protest, the aroma of roast beef hanging in the air. "What was the sermon about," father says. Silence to the right. Silence to the left. To the eldest, "What was the sermon about?" and then on down the line to the youngest, "What was the sermon about?"

Fifty years later, in retrospect, you have to wonder if that particular line of questioning eventually bore fruit, perhaps in the form of jogged memories, and you also have to wonder what if nobody could ever come up with something that had been said that morning. Would we have sat there for an eternity? Apparently not. Most likely, at some point the food was getting cold, this was unpleasant for everybody involved, and we'll try harder next week. I *do* know that none of us starved or was in the end worse for the wear, and we probably *did* try harder next week to listen to the sermon.

That's one way to do it, but I'm not sure that it's the most effective way to get children to listen to the sermon, and to pay attention to all the other things going on during Divine Service. And I wonder what would happen if the children sat the adults down in chairs in dining rooms and asked them, "What was the sermon about?" if the adult, as well as the children would be mostly stumped. That's one way to do it, but there may be a different way to make it more likely that the children, and the adults, and the teens, and the old folks, and everybody will listen to what we're saying from the pulpit.

This different way is one directed not at uncomprehending young or old lambs, but it is instead a way that is directed at their Shepherds under Christ. It's a way of speaking that has been tried before by the likes of Aristotle and the Ancient Rhetoricians, a way that has been given new life by a developing writing style known as New Journalism, a way that works for pastors, teachers, and other public speakers, a way that makes people, including the children *want* to listen. Best of all, it's a way of communicating that can be used by any speaker, teacher or writer to become a better writer, teacher or speaker. Oh, and one more thing; it's the way that God talks to us in the Bible.

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This paper will briefly examine the writing and speaking style of Ancient Rhetoricians, particularly of the pagan Philosopher Aristotle, who lived in fifth century Greece, the New Journalists: like Truman Capote, David Halberstam, Erik Larson, G. Wayne Miller, and others, who write non-fiction that reads like a story, and a good one at that, and that passes the Anderson Rule of Twos; if you don't have me in the first two pages of a book, or in the first two minutes of an audio book (oxymoron alert), then you don't have me. It

will also examine the writings of God, who is eternal and who speaks to us in the Bible, with a particular emphasis not on the *what*, but on the *how* God talks to us.

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## **New Journalism**

It has been twenty years since my first encounter with the writing of David Halberstam. The first book of his that first drew me to him is called *The Fifties*, and I was drawn in by several factors; by the simplicity of the title, and I was in the middle of my now passed “fifties phase,” and in fewer than two pages, I was hooked. In the years since, I have been slowly but surely working my way through the rest of his work. The subject matter from him is quite varied, and his writing is often about things written about by others, but I read him for the same reason I read Grisham and Follet; because I know that it’s going to be a good read.

Shortly after we moved to Kansas in 1990, I sat down with *In Cold Blood*, Truman Capote’s chilling telling of the true story of the 1959 Clutter family murders in western Kansas, and I could not put it down. I had never heard of Erik Larson until I picked up *The Devil in the White City*, set in Chicago at the time of the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair, and now whenever a new book written by him is published, I check it out, and so far he has not disappointed.

I checked out *King of Hearts: The True Story of the Maverick Who Pioneered Open Heart Surgery* by G. Wayne Miller, because I’m interested in open-heart surgery, and I was delighted to find that it’s also a good read, and I’ve read it (on CD) twice. Miller is not a doctor, and he talks about how, when he went to research the book, he found that most of what had been written on this subject had been written by doctors, and they read like doctors often talk. His book is a good read, and what he says is easily understood even by a non-doctor.

What is it that makes non-fiction books written in the style of New Journalism a good read? The first thing is that those books from those authors read like a story, and we all like a story, and we all like a good story, and we all like a good story-teller. What we like most of all is a good story well-told by a good storyteller. The second thing is that these writers all possess and employ a vast arsenal of figures of speech, putting words together in a way that is easy on the ear, stimulating to the brain, and that make us feel. You can say something, or you can say the same thing in a better way. The New Journalists and the Ancients say it in a better way. So does God.

According to Wikipedia, a good starting point for basic, agreed-upon information about just about any subject under the sun, the style of writing known as New Journalism is characterized by these four things: telling the story using *shifting scenes* rather than historical narrative as much as possible, using *conversational dialogue* in full, telling the story from several different *points of view*, and recording a great deal of *detail*.

Writing non-fiction in this manner communicates information, but it does it in a way that is more interesting, and more likely to get and to keep the attention of the reader for longer, and the reader is more likely to retain the information longer and more accurately. We can do those same things in preaching and achieve the same results; non-fiction that sounds like a story, and we all like a good story, and we have good material to work with.

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## **Elements of Story**

What makes for a good story? That's a question that we do not often ponder, but we know when we're listening to a good story well-told, and we know when we are not. Think of that conversation, the one where the person to whom you were talking was telling a story, and it took every last ounce of your Christian patience and self-control not to turn and run out of the room screaming. What made that a bad story? Now think of the last good story you heard, the one where you did not have to force yourself to listen because you wanted to listen. What made it a good story?

Some of the components of a good story include: a theme, a clear setting, a discernable plot line, structure, perhaps elements of suspense or surprise, good characters, perhaps humor or levity, a climax, and a good ending. Not all stories will contain all the elements of a good story, but generally speaking, the more elements contained in the story, the better the story will be. This means that there are actual, objective things that can actually be done when writing a story or a sermon to make it better, more listenable.

The New journalists write well, and their books are popular, yet you probably have never heard of them or the term used to identify their style. I find it interesting that some writers whose style would be, and have been identified as New Journalism – the term was first used in a *New York Times* article in the 70s – who clearly understand the concept, don't seem to be familiar with the term, nor was I able to locate any classes on New Journalism in a fairly thorough Internet search of Universities that would be expected to teach it, but who apparently don't.

I recently ran into and talked to a younger Journalism major and asked her if she knew about New Journalism, and she had never heard of the term. To be sure, English students are at some point being taught – how much probably depends on the school and the teacher – the elements of story, but I wonder if those two great American artistic achievements, the short story and sitcoms, two things that the first generation of New Journalists would have first grown up with, have been the real teachers of this particular style of writing. I know that those two things have influenced my writing.

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In addition to the New Journalists, we look to two other, slightly older, likewise distinctly American literary inventions, the short story and the sitcom, for ample examples of how to tell a good story well in about twenty-two minutes. The good sermon is much like a

sitcom or a short story in several ways; it can be read, watched, or listened to in one sitting, a sitting that lasts about twenty-two minutes, there is a single, very discernable plot, and there is little time for sub-plots, there is little time for character development, and the story covers a relatively short period of time.

Both the sitcom and the short story must be tight and compact with no wasted words; you get in, you tell the story, and then you get out, and we're done, and we're left with a moving, memorable reading, watching, or listening experience. A sermon should be like that. It may or may not contain stories, or "illustrations," but the entire sermon should sound like a story from the pulpit. People like to listen to a good story, well-told.

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### **Figures of Speech**

A good story is made better by using figures of speech. Figures engage the mind, and they engage our emotions, catching and keeping our attention and making it a pleasure to read or hear what is being written or said. In *King of Hearts*, Miller does his research, knows his subject, and then he tells the story, using the writing style of the New Journalists. He also constantly uses a variety of figures of speech.

When describing a family whose small child had not made it through an operation, but had died, a common occurrence early on, Miller later says of that family that when the boy had died, they had "taken their great grief home in that small coffin," a metonymy. When describing how another small child looked as he lay dying, he says that the boy had "lips like rain clouds," a simile.

When telling us about one surgeon who could not take the deaths – a necessary accompaniment of this sort of work - of so many of the children, and he quit, he says that the doctor never said why he quit. The author offers several possible explanations as to exactly why that doctor quit, and then he says that, "maybe he didn't want to be Columbus sailing without a compass through a sea of blood," a metaphor.

He talks about how the doctors, lacking proper lights, strapped flashlights to their heads to get light onto the open chest, so that they could see what they were doing, and has Dr. Walt Lillehei, the main character of the story – who could also apparently turn a phrase – saying, "beggars can't be choosers," an idiom. I don't know where the Doctor learned that particular idiom, but I learned it from my mom.

These figures all occurred within a few pages of the book. It's not like there is an occasional figure of speech. It's more like figures of speech are part and parcel of him and his writing, tools that he uses all the time to make good non-fiction better. The Ancients knew how to use figures of speech.

In *The Iliad*, written several hundreds of years before Aristotle, Homer has King Agamemnon speaking to the Greek troops before a battle that actually happened, and he's using quite a bit of the very familiar figure known as hyperbole.

“Now let us eat and prepare ourselves for battle. Sharpen your spears, adjust your shields, see that your horses are fed, check your chariots and be ready to battle it out grimly all day. There will be no respite, not for a moment, till night comes and separates the forces. The strap of a man's shield will be soaked with the sweat from his chest; his hand will weary on his spear; his horses pulling at his polished chariot will be covered in lather. And as for anyone I see who prefers to loiter by the beaked ships far from battle, nothing can save him: he is for the dogs and birds.”

A little further on in *The Iliad*, the writer uses a series of similes to describe what we would call the overwhelming firepower of the Greek warriors.

As destructive fire ravages a great forest...Like the many flocks of birds – geese, cranes or long-necked swans – that gather in the Asian meadow by the streams of Cayster and wheel around here and there...Like the many groups of busy flies that swarm around the sheepfold in spring, when the milk splashes the pails, so many long-haired Greeks were drawn up on the plain against the Trojans, determined to smash through them.”

He could have said, “There were a lot of Greek soldiers.” That sentence would have been accurate and correct, but would have been lacking in the ability to cause pathos. You can say something, or you can say something in a better way. You can just give me the information, or you can give me the same information in a way that is easy on the ears, making it more likely that I will listen to and retain the information that is being given.

The Ancient Greeks seem to have a certain propensity to use figures that involve comparison; simile and metaphor. Two of perhaps the best-known works that come down to us, *Aesop's Fables* and Plato's Cave Allegory, both of which communicate by metaphor, serve as examples of this. The fables are about animals, but they are about people. An allegory is story that is actually an extended metaphor, and the story about the cave teaches men about what they know and about what they don't know.

### **Modes of Persuasion**

But the greatest contribution of the ancients to better communication is Aristotle's Modes of Persuasion (known by several other names). This brilliant pagan, who contributed so much to the ancient world, taught that in order to persuade people that what you are saying is true – and all speaking is trying to persuade people that what you are saying is true – the speaker has to have ethos, use logos, and create pathos in the hearer.

What Aristotle calls “ethos,” we would call credibility. The pastor who wants to persuade people that what he says is true, must have ethos. He should be known as one

who knows what he's talking about – at least when it comes to theology – and his words and acts outside of the pulpit should add to, not detract from his ethos. In the LCMS, most of the time most pastors are given the initial benefit of the doubt when it comes to ethos, and his ethos will be enhanced or detracted from later on based on the reality or the perceptions of things that are said and done by him later on.

The second mode of persuasion is “logos,” from which comes our word “logic,” and it speaks to the way that we think. People are built to think, and we will think, and two of the fundamental questions of human thought are; do we think correctly or incorrectly, and about what do we think, especially on Sunday morning. There is a way of thinking that is incorrect and fraught with logical fallacy, and there is a correct way to think, and that way is by using logic or reason, the brains that God has created for us, and He must have given them to us because He wants us to think.

Logic is the science of correct thinking, and the good speaker will not only proclaim truths, but he will proclaim truths in such a way that the hearer better understands that truth. The good speaker will also sometimes take one truth and add to it another truth to come up with yet a third truth; the classic syllogism. The good speaker will engage the brain of the hearer, and if a person comes out of church and says “you made me think,” that's a good thing, as is “I learned something today.”

On Sunday morning we want people's brains engaged, we want them to be thinking, and we want them to be thinking about God. Because of who we are, we are going to think. How often do we think? We think constantly. We never *stop* thinking. On Sunday morning, the people in the pews will be thinking about something, and we want them to be thinking about God, and they generally want to be thinking about God, and generally you know that they want to think about God because they are here, not at home. Engage their brains so that they will think about God and our religion.

At this point we recognize that the main problem with our religion today stems from rejecting revelation (the Bible) and replacing it with reason (philosophy). We further note that when it comes to things beyond or even contrary to human reason, the Bible trumps the brain. Contrary to a common opinion, Christianity does not propose that we check our brains at the door, but in fact wants us to use them to better understand God, realizing that God would not be God if we understood Him completely. We don't.

The final mode of persuasion is “pathos,” using words to cause a physical change in the hearer, an emotion. This mode is probably the most difficult for Lutheran pastors to get their heads around, and some of them will say that one of the problems in preaching is that we have too much pathos being created. But too much pathos is not the problem. Rather, the problem is that the wrong *kind* of pathos is being created, the “feel good” emotion that has little, if anything to do with theology, and yet the people come, and they come because when they come, they feel, and we like to feel. That also is who we are.

God gave us emotions, and the preacher should use those emotions to persuade the hearer that what is being said by him – and it is God's Word, not his word – is true. On a very

fundamental level, the Law should make people feel bad, and the Gospel should make people feel good. Talk of hell should cause feelings of fear and consternation, and talk of heaven should cause feelings of relief and anticipation. Beyond that, make the hearer feel like the father of the demoniac boy felt, and what Mary felt when she found out that she was with child, what Joseph felt when he heard the news, what it means for Jesus to feel “compassion” of the sheep without a shepherd, and “love” for the rich young ruler.

Aristotle would have us appeal to these kinds of things to create pathos in the hearer: deeply held values, self-interest, sense of identity, and felt needs. When the preacher talks about a deeply-held value like honesty, for example, he created pathos in the honest hearer, and what could be more in one’s self-interest than avoiding hell and getting to heaven. If you are talking about the group that includes me, then I’m more interested than if you are talking about a group that does not include me. And then we have the appeal to felt needs, which manifestly must work, because all the “successful” preachers are doing it.

If your felt needs are to get advice on raising your family, then you are probably not going to get a whole lot about that from one of my sermons, but Dr. Dobson knows a lot more than I do about those things, and he’s on the radio and Internet, and he has written some very good books. And if you want to know about finances, then Larry Burkette and Bruce Williams are a better bet than me. Dr. Oz and others, like your own doctor, can help you to achieve better health. The felt need that the preacher addresses is the need to be forgiven and saved.

Most of our people come to church understanding the sin problem, and maybe to a lesser extent the salvation solution. The preacher should, on Sunday morning, preach the Law in such a way that the hearer feels the need to deal with his own sin, and then should preach the Gospel, the only thing that can deal in a lasting and meaningful way with that felt need. It’s the kind of sermon that Peter preached on Pentecost. The preacher should, as time goes on, do that in a more creative way.

At this point, we note that the New Journalists and Ancients have in common – more or less – that when they communicate they tell a story and they use figures of speech. What may or may not cause the New Journalists to be surprised – I don’t think they know this about themselves – is that they are using the modes of persuasion articulated by Aristotle in their work. If they are not credible, we will not even bother to give them a look. Their writing is understandable and reasonable, and the conclusions they come to make sense.

Finally, they cause pathos, they move us to emotion, a physical change, like when Miller talks about little Patty Anderson, whose family we have come to know, bleeding out on the operating table, or Halberstam, in *The Coldest War* describes what it was like for American soldiers who were running the gauntlet in northern Korea in the fifty degree below zero winter of 1950, or Capote describing the calculating and cold-blooded manner in which Herb Clutter and his family were executed one by one.

We get an entirely different feeling when Miller describes the later successes, people whose lives are saved by his work, and when Halberstam talks of the warm and well-fed commanders living safely in a trailer, eating steak and drinking champagne while their men run “the gauntlet,” and when the rope is placed around the necks of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith and they hang by the neck until they die.

### **The Way that God Talks to Us**

Contrary to the assumption of most modern “Bible Scholars,” who in varying degrees suppose that the Bible was written by men with some, or maybe a little, or maybe absolutely no input from God, my assumption throughout is that God, through men, wrote the entire Bible, and that the men who wrote served as something of a conduit for His speaking. The way in which the Bible is written, the *speaking or writing style* used in it, is therefore a style chosen by God, not by men, and who should better know how to talk to man so that he listens better than the creator of man, his ears, his brain, and his emotions.

That may be part of the reason why not many people who talk about preaching give much consideration to the methodology, or the way of communicating used in the Bible. The shelves at Christian bookstores and seminary libraries contain a lot of books about preaching, as do the virtual bookshelves at amazon.com, and those books talk about a lot of things, but few of them talk about that, and not many of them talk about things that will actually help actual preachers to actually improve their actual preaching.

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If you are talking to graduates of Concordia Theological Seminar, Ft. Wayne, IN, circa 1980s, and you mention “The Blue Sheets,” many will know exactly what you are talking about. Entitled *Figures of Speech in the Bible*, the blue sheets were a staple of any class taught by Walter A. Maier, and they contained a fairly extensive listing of several different kinds of figures, with a few biblical examples of each.

In addition to that, we were required to read *Biblical Hermeneutics* by Milton S. Terry, which includes a lot of information on figures of speech in the Bible, as does *The Principles of Biblical Interpretation* by Raymond Surburg (he’s dead now). The granddaddy of them all has to be Bullinger’s *Figures of Speech in the Bible*, an immense undertaking of over one thousand pages in which the author talks *about* figures of speech, but in which he much more quotes actual figures of speech that are actually contained in the Bible.

Like the New Journalists, and the Ancients, and other great writers throughout history, God uses a lot of figures of speech when He talks to us in the Bible. And yet I don’t ever recall being taught at seminary that in preaching we should use figures of speech, like God does. Maybe from God, Who created the human brain, Who created emotion, Who ought to know better than anybody how to talk to us, we can learn to talk to people in a

way that is better, one that gets and keeps attention, one that causes them to better retain what they hear, one that moves them to feel the right things.

Nor do I remember being taught that the sermon should sound like a story. I do recall one class where the telling of stories during the sermon was very much encouraged, and the teacher told stories from the pulpit, and we wondered why he was telling stories that had nothing to do with anything. Stories within a sermon can be helpful, but that's different from preaching a sermon that sounds like a story. And yet what is most of the Bible than a collection of stories, non-fiction stories that are true in every way. And what are the parables of Jesus but stories, "earthly stories with a heavenly meaning."

When it comes to using the modes of persuasion – and this is where the LCMS parts company with many of the rest – we believe the Bible, from start to finish, to be an extremely credible book, able to be believed in every way, like the bumper sticker says, "God said it, I believe it, that settles it."

One of the wonderful, and fun to say, truths that we learned at Seminary, was the truth of "the perspicuity of Scripture," that the Bible and its teachings are understandable and able to be comprehended. I would even make the case that miracles are both comprehensible and understandable because God is doing them. While there will always be places when talking about God that we cannot go – because of our inability to understand – what the Book teaches about our religion is able to be understood even by the very young.

While neither the New Journalists nor seem to have made a conscious attempt to make what they say understandable even to the young, God has done just that. The parables can be understood by the very young, and the words of Jesus are often simple, uncomplicated words that can be understood by, and are sometimes spoken to the young. For example, when He talks about how it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a sewing needle than for a rich powerful young man to get to heaven, He is using concepts – a needle and a camel – known even to children.

Jesus does not preach a children's sermon. He just preaches sermons that can easily be understood by children. The same can be said for the true stories found in the rest of the Bible, many of which have elements that are especially interesting and appealing to the young, both boys and girls. It's why most of us have retained those stories learned in Sunday School well into adulthood; because they were stories, and we could understand them, and nobody had to tell us that we had to listen.

People do not have to be taught how to listen. People do need to learn how to speak so that people will *want* to listen, without even thinking about it. People do not have to be taught how to listen. If the speaker is a good speaker, then the hearer will become a listener. Writing and speaking skills are tools that are very much taught, very little caught. There is little genetically that makes one better at writing and speaking than another, but very much what one does with the gifts he has been given. To become a better preacher – and if we don't all *want* to be better, then we *should* – we simply need to do those things that make for good writing and speaking.

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My father knew what was going on in that pulpit, that the pastor was preaching God's Word, and for that reason he wanted his children to listen to the sermon, and when he discerned that they were not, he had two options to try to make it better; he could talk to the pastor about his preaching, or he could talk to the children about their listening. No man of my father's generation was going to talk to the pastor about his preaching, at least not in the 1960s. He did the best that he could and tried to teach his children to listen.

We can do better than that. People do not have to be taught how to listen. People do need to learn how to talk so that other people will want to listen.

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