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# Thinking in story: preaching in a post-literate age

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in naming her anxieties before God. And that is a faithful echo of the type of praying found in the Psalms. But her sentence "I couldn't live without him", is troublesome. It could be just an exaggeration to express the deep feelings of loss she would have. But nevertheless it hints at an unhealthy dependence that is not good modelling for others. That sentence raises some disturbing theological questions about the meaning and purpose of her life. Would that meaning and purpose disappear if she were to lose her husband? An answer in the affirmative is not consistent with the rest of her book. The best path out of this dilemma would be to rework the offending sentence and to express her sense of loss in another way.

This book provides a helpful pattern for making the connections between faith and life experiences. But there is some danger in the book becoming a cozy experience of God. If it is to be an authentic "spiritjourney" there needs to be movement out of self and into the world. Esway talks a little about this in her meditation about her friend who speaks out against injustice and who joins peace marches and sit-ins. She acknowledges that these social justice concerns are a growing edge for her faith. Perhaps in a second volume Esway can use her talent to create meditations for this necessary part of the spiritual journey.

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## **Thinking In Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age**

Richard A. Jensen

Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Co., Inc., 1993

145 pp.

Richard Jensen is a systematic theologian (Wartburg Theological Seminary, 1971–1981) who has become a radio preacher (Lutheran Vespers) and a TV producer (communication department of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). His earlier and justly famous book, *Telling the Story* (Augsburg, 1980)—an analysis of the theological, cultural, and communicational forces behind the emergence of narrative preaching—proposed "proclamatory" and "story" preaching as alternatives to "didactic" preaching; the latter, he argued, derives from a "print" or "literate" culture and is inadequate in a "media" or "electronic" culture.

The present volume is an enthusiastic endorsement of this shift to story, an enthusiasm engendered and informed by some ten years of media work. "How shall we preach to a people," he asks, "whose lives are mightily shaped by the sounds and visual images that impact their lives with unrelenting power?" (8) He answers: by learning to think in story. Accepting the

common thesis that the world is into the third communication era (oral, print, electronic), he writes, "... the preacher in an oral culture thinks in stories while the preacher in a literate culture thinks in ideas" (9). Jensen's conviction is that the third era is a "secondarily oral" era (Ong's phrase), and therefore preachers must not only use stories but in fact *think* in story. His practical purpose is to help preachers do that.

Chapter One explores how preaching is shaped by the communication culture in which it lives: an oral-aural culture shapes a narrative homiletic; a literate culture shapes a didactic homiletic. Chapter Two explores the homiletic shaped by a post-literate or electronic culture which is "secondarily oral" because it "massages" both eye and ear. Chapter Four details the first phase of learning to think in story by identifying possible sources of stories (Bible pre-eminently, autobiography, people and communities of faith, and the arts), while Chapter Five lays out the second phase, namely, ways of constructing sermons when we think in story.

Besides his blunt call for a paradigm shift in homiletics—from thinking in ideas to thinking in story—Jensen's greatest contribution in these chapters is the summarizing of some of the important communicational and homiletical writings in the development of "narrative preaching" over the last ten years: Walter Ong, Marshall McLuhan, Pierre Babin; Paul Scott Wilson, Mark Ellingsen, Richard Thulin, Thomas Troeger, and Eugene Lowry. His theologians of choice are Luther and Paul Tillich. This is to say that Jensen does not break new ground, nor does he argue with people like David Buttrick and Richard Lischer who have reservations about narrative preaching. His concern is to demonstrate that the present shift from print to electronics calls for a concomitant revolution in preaching. His evangelistic zeal for "thinking in story" becomes a bit irritating at times, and he is forced to balance this zeal with admissions that the literate culture is by no means dead yet, and therefore a didactic homiletic continues to have a place—not only when dealing with epistle texts but even in the various designs for thinking-in-story-sermons. This also becomes apparent in the several sermons (his own) which Jensen intersperses (a highly appreciated feature!).

Chapter Three, "Toward a Theology of Preaching", is a disappointment to this reviewer. I suppose I expected an "electronic systematician" (oxymorons notwithstanding) to break new ground here if anywhere. Instead, Jensen simply reiterates the traditional Lutheran discussions of Law and Gospel, then rehearses Brueggemann's case for preaching as "a poetic construal of an alternative world" (*Finally Comes the Poet*), and then returns to his own plea for thinking in story. What is needed at least is a creative synthesis of these elements; for example, I have attempted this by focusing on metaphor à la Ricoeur (*Imaginative Shock*, Trinity Press, 1990). Jensen might do this by seriously examining the implications of Luther's advice to "pause [upon hearing the Scripture] and let [Christ] do you good" (72), i.e., what it means to become truly participant in the text (an ultimately metaphoric process).

I commend the book especially to preachers and seminary students. Here is an adept summation of the challenge faced by preachers who are deep into the transition zone of a major cultural and communicational shift; here is also solid and practical help in re-designing an appropriate homiletic.

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## **The Lectionary Series from the Revised Common Lectionary**

Cycle B, NRSV

Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., Inc., 1993

145 pp.

CSS has provided here the complete lections—First Lesson, Second Lesson, Gospel, and Psalm—for Cycle B of the Revised Common Lectionary. Lections for a “Liturgy of the Palms” are included following those of Passion/Palm Sunday. The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible is used. It is an indispensable tool for worship leaders, lectors, and preachers.

Lectionaries, of course, predate Christianity, and so it is not at all surprising that Christians continued the practice. In the fourth century, for example, the *Apostolic Constitutions* report a lectionary with five lessons: Law, Prophets, Epistles, Acts, and Gospels. Lectionaries, in Christianity as well as in Judaism, no doubt began when appropriate scriptural texts were sought for festivals: what shall be read at Passover? What at Good Friday- Easter?

The Revised Common Lectionary began when in 1983 a group of “non-liturgical” Protestant churches (among them the Presbyterian, United Methodist, and United Church of Christ) adopted a “Common Lectionary” which had been prepared by the Consultation on Common Texts, an ecumenical forum for consultation on matters of worship renewal, especially of English language liturgical texts. The Revised Common Lectionary of 1992 represents intense evaluation and study by some 19 denominations; it is expected that Lutherans and Episcopalians will proceed also to adopt it. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada is currently “field testing” it. I certainly encourage its adoption, for at least three reasons. (1) It presents a much more sequential and coherent use of the Old Testament, especially in the “Pentecost” season, providing a sequence from the Moses tradition in Year A, from David in Year B, and from major prophets in Year C; (2) it goes a long way to remedying the notable absence of biblical women by including narratives about Sarah, Hagar, Rebekah, Leah, Miriam, Deborah, Lydia, the woman with the issue of blood, the Syrophenician woman, the woman of Proverbs 31, and Hannah (See Carol Schlueter’s “The Gender