PREACHING GOD'S STORY IN PSALMS: THE IMPORTANCE OF SEEING THE TAPESTRY IN THE THREADS

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to answer: "What homiletical strategies can help pastors preach the Psalms in a way that reinforces the hermeneutic that all of Scripture is a unified story of God's love for people?" The paper is split into three major sections following an introduction that demonstrates how Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation—is a unified story of salvation for mankind. The first section covers a brief look at the Psalms and examines several reasons that preaching them is sometimes neglected, why we should preach them, and how to preach Christ from them, as we do from all of Scripture. The second section of the paper covers how we see "the Tapestry" of God's story in "the threads" of Scripture when approaching the Psalms by thinking of it in terms of Story. This section also examines why "Story" speaks to people on an intrinsic level and why being aware of that matters when writing a sermon. The final section examines three different homiletical strategies and shows how they help with thinking of Psalms in terms of Story: Eugene Lowry's "The Lowry Loop," Paul Scott Wilson's "Four Pages of the Sermon," and Walter Brueggemann's "Orientation/Disorientation/New Orientation Rubric."

THE UNIFIED STORY OF GOD'S LOVE FOR PEOPLE

Take that old book off your shelf. You know the one—that book with faded, yellowed pages and broken spine. Open it to the first page and read the words long written down. *"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth* (Gen 1:1 NIV)*."*

Thus begins *the* Story as told by the Master Storyteller—the Creator himself. The Story that began with the words, "Let there be light," and there was. Follow that Story through the pages of Scripture as the narrative unfolds. Watch as the Creator takes the dust of the ground and shapes it into the form of a man like a potter gives shape to clay, and then breaths the breath of *life* into the man's nostrils—Adam.

See the Creator take one of the man's ribs because it was no good for the man to be alone, and from that bone of man's bone, and flesh of his flesh, God fashioned a woman—Eve. He brought the two together and placed them in a Garden, to work it and care for it. Everything in it was for them—with one exception. From the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the man and the woman were never to eat, for if they did, they would surely die.

You know the Story. You know how it goes. Watch as the Serpent descends and deceives the man and woman with the greatest lie ever told: *God doesn't love you. If he did, he would let you eat from any tree in the Garden. He's holding out on you. God knows that when you eat of the fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing both good and evil.*

As helpless onlookers, witness the most tragic event ever recorded: *"When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it* (Gen 3:6)*."*

Witness the moment of mankind's fall. Witness the moment in history where evil was introduced, where sin entered the world and brought with it—among other curses—*death*. God's good and perfect creation—no longer good, and perfect no more. Its beauty marred and broken beyond repair like pottery dashed against the craggy rocks. The man and woman knew that, of course they did. Their eyes had been opened.

Exposed to the source of their shame, they tried to hide from the face of the Almighty God when he called out to them as he walked in the Garden in the cool of the day. The tension builds as the man and woman realize—they cannot hide from the Almighty God. He already knows what they have done. He knows all.

Instead of begging for forgiveness, accusations fly, and the blame is passed around from man to woman to serpent, because the devil's terrible lie had taken root in their fear-filled hearts—the lie that God did not love them. And why should he? They had disobeyed him. They had rebelled against him.

And this, the moment where that terrible, erroneous lie is first addressed in the pages of Scripture: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and his. He will crush your head, and you will strike his heel* (Gen 3:15)*."*

Everything from that point on in all of human history builds toward the definitive moment in time, when that promise would be fulfilled. Turn through the pages of Scripture. Walk alongside the patriarchs, holding onto the promise in those lands far from home. Whisper

the promise along with the children of Israel, enslaved in Egypt and exiled in Babylon. *"How long, O Lord? How long before you keep your promise to your people?"*

You know the answer. You know it. That moment, some several millennia ago, when a man—who was not just a man but true God in human flesh—was hung on a tree. See him there on that dark and lonely hill, crucified while onlookers jeer and his mother weeps. There he bled and there he died. But not before crying out in a victorious shout, "It is finished!" through cracked and bloodied lips with lungs that burned to take in just one more agonizing breath. But he had to, because the world needed to know the truth. That truth would set them free from the bondage of their sins and the delusions of the lie they had been led to believe—the lie that God did not love them.

Listen as God says otherwise. Listen as the Creator tells his once-perfect, now-flawed creation: "Oh my dear children—*nothing* could be further from the truth. I love you so much. This is what I have done to show you that. I sent my Son Jesus to die *for you*, and that by believing in him, you may have life! Eternal life that will never pass away, and joy that will never fade."

But the Story does not end at the bloodied cross any more than it ends at the empty tomb. Make no mistake—our God is a God who keeps all of his promises. He promised Adam and Eve that he would do something to save them—and us—from sin. He did just that in sending Jesus to live, die, and rise victorious from the grave.

Nearly two millennia have passed since that day on which God himself died for the sins of the whole world—including yours and mine—that day on which the greatest injustice was ever done, the day on which the only righteous man ever to walk the earth died for the unrighteous, that day we call "good."

Sin, death, and the devil have all been crushed. And yet, they are still here… and so are we. We still struggle with sin and the consequences of living in a sin-broken world. We are overwhelmed by the heartache that comes with the death of loved ones.

And we know that the devil may be beaten, he may have been bested, but the devil knows that too. He knows he has been beaten—and that makes him dangerous. Like a wounded animal backed into a corner with his teeth bared, he has got nothing left to lose. His fate is already sealed—judgment pronounced when he was hurled from the highest heavens to the earth below. But if he is going to hell, he wants to make sure that he and all his evil angels are not the only ones. And tragically, they are not.

No, the Story is not over. It cannot be—will not be—until the One seated on the throne pronounces to his creation, "I am making everything new!" We long for that day, that day promised by our God, that day on which there will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away. We long for the day when there will no longer be any curse. We long for the day when the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city and we will serve our God. We will see his face and his name will be on our foreheads. There will be no more night. We will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord will give us light. And we will reign forever and ever.[1] We will finally, at long last, be home. Paradise lost will be paradise restored once more.

That is the promise we are holding onto as we walk through this life. Sometimes we are running—joyfully shouting praises to our amazing God; we feel like we can run alongside the deer on the mountain heights, overflowing with uncontainable joy. Other times, we are

1. Loosely paraphrased from Rev 22:3–5.

staggering, taking one painful, faltering step at a time with tears of raw and heart-wrenching anguish streaming down our cheeks. We feel like we are trapped in a dark place—a pit into which we have fallen—a cold and lightless place from whence we can never return.

In those moments of turmoil and chaos and destruction, as we look at the mess of our lives, standing in the wreckage caused by sin and try to make sense of it all, we hear the fragmented whispers of that old, terrible lie first uttered long ago. *God does not love you*. Perhaps we even whisper the question ourselves. *God—do you really love me? Sometimes it does not look like you do.*

And we know—we *know*—that this just is not true. Because in his Word, our God has said otherwise. He has shown us his nail-marked hands and spear-pierced side. Nothing could be further from the truth. He loves us so much. We know that. And yet, we still wrestle with the truth of what we know by faith—especially since so much of what we see and experience in the world around us seems to suggest otherwise.

What does that make us? Weak of faith? Doubting God and the promises he has made to us? At times, perhaps. We are sinful people, after all. Sinful people who struggle in our lives of faith, and will continue to do so until the day our God calls us home to struggle no more and finally be at peace. But we are not—as the devil would have us believe—alone in such thoughts. We alone have not asked such soul-searching questions.

Take that old book off your shelf once more. You know the one—that book with the faded, yellowed pages and broken spine. Open it to somewhere near the middle and read the words long written down. *Listen*. Hear the voices of Christians from ages past. They may surprise you. Some of what they say might even shock you. And some of them might make you

realize—you are not alone in your thoughts. Because other Christians—just like you—have thought them too.

The words are beautiful and breath-taking. They are raw and vivid and *visceral*. They sing the praises of God and his amazing grace and power and love that cause the believer's heart to swell. They lament the bitter struggles and sorrows of life in a sin-darkened existence that cause the believer's heart to plummet. You know them. They are the Psalms. And in them, we are invited to listen to the inner thoughts and struggles of believers pouring out their hearts to the God who has promised them again and again—I love you. I love you. I love you.

This paper seeks to answer: "What homiletical strategies can help pastors preach the Psalms in a way that reinforces the hermeneutic that all of Scripture is a unified story of God's love for people?" The paper is split into three major sections. The first section covers a brief look at the Psalms and examines several reasons that preaching them is sometimes neglected, why we should preach them, and how to preach Christ from them, as we do from all of Scripture. The second section of the paper covers how we see "the Tapestry" of God's story in "the threads" of Scripture when approaching the Psalms by thinking of it in terms of Story. This section also examines why "Story" speaks to people on an intrinsic level, and why being aware of that matters when writing a sermon. The final section examines three different homiletical strategies and shows how they help with thinking of Psalms in terms of Story: Eugene Lowry's "The Lowry Loop," Paul Scott Wilson's "Four Pages of the Sermon," and Walter Brueggemann's "Orientation/Disorientation/New Orientation Rubric."

THE BEAUTY OF THE PSALMS

The Psalms have long been looked to, upheld, and cherished in the lives of believers throughout the ages. "Over the centuries, faithful believers have treasured the psalms, often whispering their words in the last moments of life on earth before they voiced new and glorious songs of praise in glory."[2]

Listen as the words of the Psalms are shared in nursing homes and around hospital beds; shared with the sick, the dying, and the bereaved. Watch as fears are quieted, faith is strengthened, and faces are uplifted. Tears diminish, replaced by comfort and joy and peace.

There are many comforting passages our God has given us throughout the pages of Scripture, and those are to be shared as well—make no mistake—but it is no question that the Psalms hold a special place in believers' hearts. Why? Perhaps the reason is this:

> The Psalms flow from the deep faith of the ancient authors and touch the faith of modern readers. The poetry is distilled from the anguish humans feel when confronting danger, opposition, fear, sin, and death. They are also songs of great joy erupting from the hearts that treasure the grace of God and his marvelous care of his people. They therefore have value to all believers of all times. It is not surprising that God's people treasure them.[3]

What *is* surprising, then, is the fact that sermons are not often preached from pulpits on the Psalms. At least, certainly not proportionally in relation to the sermons preached from elsewhere

2. John A. Braun, ed. *Sermon Studies on Selected Psalms* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2002), 7.

3. Braun, *Sermon Studies*, 7.

in Scripture. Why not? As Paul wrote in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." The Psalms are undoubtedly included under the phrase "All Scripture." Why do we not hear more sermons on the Psalms?[4]

The reasons are numerous—some of them personal—and since the question is not the main focus of this paper, they will not all be explored. Some possible reasons are as follows.

An Argument for Not Preaching on the Psalms

In his book, *Preaching Christ from the Psalms*, Sidney Greidanus referenced that "Claus Westerman, an expert on Psalms, held that it is improper to preach Psalms: they can be prayed, they can be sung—but most of them should not be preached."[5]

Greidanus also referenced that Donald Gowan, author of *Reclaiming the Old Testament for the Christian Pulpit*, omits reclaiming the Psalms for the Christian pulpit for this reason:

> Most of the psalms were used in worship; they are human language addressed to God. … That suggests that the integrity of the psalmists' words addressed to God in praise and lamentation ought to be preserved and that ordinarily they ought not to be considered as texts to be expounded to a congregation. We ought to use them, certainly, but in their appropriate place. We ought to pray them and sing them rather than preach them.[6]

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4. To my recollection, I can count on one hand the number of sermons I've heard on the Psalms. One being Professor Bradley Wordell's sermon for the Vicar Call service in May 2021 on Psalm 45, and another being Pastor Alex Groth preaching on a series of Psalms at Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, Cincinnati, OH for an Advent service in 2021. Both were masterfully done. To be fair, I've heard many devotions on the Psalms—and Psalm 23 is a commonly used funeral text. However, I have not heard many sermons on the Psalms for a regular worship service.

5. Sidney Greidanus. *Preaching Christ from Psalms: Foundations for Expository Sermons in the Christian Year* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 2.

6. Greidanus, *Preaching Christ from Psalms,* 2.

Indeed, using the Psalms for prayer and song are good and proper. That is the reason for which they were first penned. For example, consider Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*.

The Book of Psalms is also, as Professor John Brug called it, "the hymnbook of the Bible, a hymnbook given by inspiration of God. More than any other book, Psalms teaches us how to sing with gratitude in our hearts to God."[7] That is how the Psalms have been used throughout the ages—even our Lord on the night he was betrayed sang Psalms with his disciples.[8]

But are those the only ways we should appreciate these beautiful gems from Scripture? I think not. Much would be lost if we did. While Westerman and Gowan's concerns are valid, there is nothing to say that both cannot be done. We can—and should—pray and sing the Psalms, but we can—and should—also preach from them.

An Argument for Preaching on the Psalms

What a unique blessing preachers would have in preaching the Psalms from the liturgy as followed in the pericope! Not only would the congregation get the opportunity to sing the Psalm as a part of the worship service, in the hearing of the sermon, they would be able to meditate further on the truths of Scripture that they just sang minutes beforehand.

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7. John F. Brug. *Psalms: Volume I* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1999), 2.

8. Mark 14:26; Matt 26:30. Consider NIV 1984 Concordia Study Bible's footnote: "The Passover fellowship was concluded with the second half of the Hallel Psalms—115-118."

Roger E. Van Harn, one of the editors for the book *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary*, validates that position. He argues:

> The assumption behind excluding the Psalms from consideration as preaching texts was correct but misapplied: the Psalms are to be read or sung in the liturgy. Preachers and worship leaders need not choose between preaching the Psalms and praying the Psalms. Reading, chanting, or singing the psalm for the day need not preclude its use as a preaching text or vice-versa. Moreover, exegetical insight into the psalm or canticle may facilitate its proper and optimal use, even and especially if it is not the text chosen for the homily.[9]

Again, we return to Paul's words in 2 Timothy. If all of Scripture is useful—and it is—and if all of Scripture includes the Psalms—and it does—then we can and should make use of it for the teaching done from the pulpit. What would we, as well as God's people sitting in the pews, be missing out on if we did not?

Martin Luther answers that in his *Preface to the Old Testament* (LW: 35):

> [The Psalter] presents to us not the simple, ordinary speech of the saints, but the best of their language, that which they used when they talked with God himself in great earnestness and on the most important matters. Thus the Psalter lays before us not only their words instead of their deeds, but their very hearts and the inmost treasure of their souls, so we can look down to the foundation and source of their words and deeds. We can look into their hearts and see what kind of thoughts they had, how their hearts were disposed, and how they acted in all kinds of situations, in danger, and in need…[10]

This is the beauty of having the words, actions, and even the thoughts of believers from long ago preserved in the pages of Scripture for us to read, learn, and take to heart by our God.

Dr. Mark Paustian wrote about this topic of study in his doctoral thesis, *The Beauty with the Veil*. He says, "Indirect communication has a power all its own. This is a power we all have

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9. Roger E. Van Harn and Brent A. Strawn., eds. *Psalms for Preaching and Worship: A Lectionary Commentary* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), *XX*.

10. Martin Luther. *Luther's Works: Volume 35, Word and Sacrament I* (Philadelphia: Concordia Publishing House and Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 254-255.

experienced, in fact, every time we study the Scriptures. Most of it was addressed in the first instance to someone else. We are overhearing God speak to his prophets, to ancient Israel, or to the Romans. We are listening in as the psalmists pour out their hearts to their God."[11]

What does that "listening in" accomplish? It works on our hearts in ways similar to how stories move us. We listen to the anguish of the psalmist's lament and gasp with tears brimming in our own eyes as we realize—that same pain is echoed in our hearts as well. Our hearts can soar alongside the psalmist too, with boundless joy. As we hear the psalmist, we realize—we are not alone with our thoughts and emotions and experiences. And suddenly, a connection is made between us and a Christian who lived long ago, whose experiences in this sin-darkened world we can relate to because they are similar to our own.

Further Challenges to Preaching on the Psalms

Luther said:

> What is the greatest thing in the Psalter but this earnest speaking amid these storm winds of every kind? Where does one find finer words of joy than in the psalms of praise and thanksgiving? … On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the psalms of lamentation? There again you look into the hearts of all the saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How gloomy and dark it is there, with all kinds of troubled forebodings about the wrath of God! So, too, when they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for you fear or hope, and no Cicero or other orator so portray them.[12]

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11. Mark Paustian, "*The Beauty with the Veil: Validating the Strategies of Kierkegaardian Indirect Communication Through a Close Christological Reading of the Hebrew Old Testament*." (Doctoral Thesis, Regent University School of Communication and the Arts, 2016), 55.

12. Luther, *Word and Sacrament*, 255-256.

That is perhaps another reason for the hesitancy to preach the Psalms from the pulpit. Read through the psalms of writers inspired by the Holy Spirit, skilled with the way words work, and the beauty with which they weave together the varied songs of Scripture. Read them slowly and read them out loud. Better yet, sing them. Then ask yourself, *"How can I possibly say this in such a way that the original beauty of the masterpiece that is this song isn't marred? Can it even be done? Do I have the audacity to claim that I—of all people—can?"*[13]

Jeffrey D. Arthurs gives voice to those concerns and questions in his book, *Preaching with Variety: How to Re-Create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres*. He said this:

> The psalms were accompanied by music. Are we supposed to sing our sermons?[14] The psalms are personal. But how can we turn subjective experience into public address? The psalms are lyrical—full of emotion and image. How, though, can we translate highly artistic language into vernacular? You can see why some preachers avoid the psalms. Their intuition tells them that we murder when we dissect. … "Translating" poetry can be equally tricky. Translating epistles into sermons is relatively easy because both use direct address, argument, and illustration. Translating narratives is more challenging but still doable because all of us grew up telling, hearing, and watching stories. But poetry! How do you preach poetry?[15]

That question is also on our hearts as Evangelical Lutheran pastors. What shall we do? "Preach the text!" The encouragement echoes in our minds, and we cry out in response, "Yes, but *how*?"

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13. It should be noted that this question can be asked for other sections of Scripture as well—not just the Psalms. It undoubtedly is asked as preachers approach their craft, regardless of their age or their text.

14. He actually makes that argument later on in his book—that we should give it a try, but I would strongly advise against this practice from a pulpit in fellowship with the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

15. Jeffrey D. Arthurs, *Preaching With Variety: How to Re-create the Dynamics of Biblical Genres* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2007), 39.

This paper seeks to provide a possible answer to that problem. It is not the only answer. As the old adage goes, "There are many different ways to skin a cat."[16] There are just as many—if not more—ways to preach any given text from Scripture. We seek to do that faithfully, to the best of our abilities, to the glory of God. As a rule of thumb, preaching the text means that we also seek to preserve the language of the text, to form and fashion our sermons similarly. In other words, if the text is a narrative, it would be wise for us to preach the narrative that already exists in the text itself. If a text reads as poetry, it would be wise for us to bring that out in some way, shape, or form. That is easier said than done, however.

Though not a homiletician, C.S. Lewis spoke of this challenge in his *Reflections on the Psalms*:

> The Bible, since it is after all literature, cannot be properly read except as literature; and the different parts of it as the different sorts of literature they are. Most emphatically, the Psalms must be read as poems; as lyrics, with all the licenses and all the formalities, the hyperboles, the emotional rather than logical connections, which are proper to lyric poetry. They must be read as poems if they are to be understood; no less than French must be read as French or English as English. Otherwise we shall miss what is in them and think we see what is not.[17]

Lewis, however, would take this a step further than we would like and claim that this all means we should not sermonize the Psalms, since they were meant to be sung. We would be wise

16. Though, why anyone would do such a thing is beyond me.

17. C.S. Lewis. *The Inspirational Writings of C.S. Lewis: Surprised by Joy, Reflections on the Psalms, The Four Loves, and The Business of Heaven* (New York: Inspirational Press, 1987), 134.

homileticians to recognize the unique beauty contained in the verses of the Psalms. We would be foolish—not to mention *arrogant*—homileticians to recognize the unique beauty contained in the verses of the Psalms and fail to employ the breath-taking language and vivid metaphors that they oh-so-helpfully provide in our sermons.

In his article, Professor Paul Wendland commented:

> It really is a shame to see the way so much of a text's rich metaphorical material gets consigned to the preacher's cutting floor. It would be an even worse shame were I to suppose it had never been noticed in the first place. Instead, the sermon is filled with the preacher's own precious illustrations and various ruminations about the vagaries of life. Reflect and recapture the rich variety of ways our God speaks of how he rescued us. We lose the richness and the power of the Scriptures if we don't.[18]

That brings us to the second important consideration. We not only preach the text; we preach *Christ* from the text. We preach the gospel!

18. Paul O. Wendland, "Preaching Today" (Paper presented at the 52nd Annual Bjarne Wollan Teigen Reformation Lectures, Mankato, MN, 2019), 16-17.

PREACH CHRIST FROM THE PSALMS

In his book *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism*, Timothy Keller said it thusly: "The key to preaching the gospel every time is to preach Christ every time, and the key to that is to find how your particular text fits into the full canonical context and participates as a chapter in the great narrative arc of the Bible, which is how God saves us and renews the world through the salvation by free grace in his Son, Jesus Christ."[19]

How can we go about doing that in our preaching from the Psalms—and doing so in a way that is faithful to the text? The Psalms obviously predate Christ. And yet, we know that all of Scripture testifies about Christ, as he himself asserted in John 5:39. All of Scripture, therefore, is *Christocentric*. Everything from Genesis to the birth of Christ builds toward him stepping into the narrative. That includes the Psalms.

Aside from preserving the thoughts and words of believers pouring out their hearts to God, the Psalms play another important role in the grand story of God's love for humanity.

19. Timothy, Keller. *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 70.

Martin Luther put it this way:

> The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ's death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his Kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It really is a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book.[20]

How do the Psalms do as Luther suggests and promise Christ's death and resurrection? Professor John Brug answers that question:

> Before the psalms were written, Old Testament believers apparently had been provided with few details about the work of the coming Savior. … Believers knew of and believed in the Messiah before the writing of the psalms, but they knew few details about him. The writing of the psalms was a major step forward in the unfolding of Messianic prophecy. The prophet Nathan had revealed to David that the Messianic king would be his descendant. In the psalms David was privileged to reveal many things about his great descendant. The Messiah, though he was David's descendant, would also be true God. His rule would be eternal and it would include the whole world. As true man he would obtain the complete dominion over the earth which Adam lost through sin. However, the Messiah would also come to suffer for sin. This suffering is most fully described in Psalms 22 and 69. He would be rejected by the leaders of Israel, and mocked during his suffering. The Messiah would be betrayed by a friend. His hands and feet would be pierced during his suffering. He would be given vinegar to drink. His clothing would be divided by lot. Though he suffered the anguish of being forsaken by God, he would also be exalted. He would rise from the dead, and he will reign forever as priest and king.[21]

Even the structure and form of the writing of the psalms themselves pointed ahead to Christ's coming and redemptive work.

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20. Luther, *Word and Sacrament,* 254.

21. Brug, *Psalms*, 10-11.

Jeffrey D. Arthurs credits Robert Alter with this insight: "A particular poetics may encourage or reinforce a particular orientation toward reality… What this means is that poetry of the Bible is concerned above all with dynamic process moving toward some culmination."[22]

Arthurs furthered that by saying:

> The Hebrews were exposed to poetry with this structure day after day, year after year, and through it their perceptions of God, self, events, and history were likely shaped. In the Hebrew mind, then, history is going somewhere, it has purpose, and although we are in distress, God has acted and will act again, so we can rest secure, for the long and winding road leads home.[23]

We would wholeheartedly agree. Not just applied to the Psalms alone, we would argue that this hermeneutic is true for understanding the narrative flow of the entirety of Scripture—from Genesis to Revelation. Indeed, this is vital for understanding the larger narrative of God's Story—the Story that began with the words, "Let there be," and has continued up throughout the ages to this very day. This is the Story that our God invites us into through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, and it changes… *everything*.

We know—history is going somewhere. The story of our own lives is going somewhere, and it has purpose. Although we are at times in distress, we are comforted with the assurance that God has acted on our behalf in the past, is actively working on our behalf even now, and will continue to do so our whole lives through. Therefore, no matter the storms of life, we can rest secure, because we know what our God has promised us. *"I am the Way and the Truth and the Life"* (John 14:6).

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22. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 45.

23. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 45.

Yes, the journey is arduous. The road is long and winding, and we cannot see what is just around the bend, beyond our limited sight. But we know where the road leads. It leads us home. And that changes everything for us.

We know that wholistically, the Psalms point us to Christ and his redemptive work on the cross. But the odds of someone preaching on the entirety of the Psalms in one sitting, or more realistically—but perhaps still unadvisable—through the course of a lengthy series of sermons on the Psalms, is unlikely at best. A sermon will only be preached on one of the Psalms at a time—or if it is a larger psalm, only part of one.

So, how do we apply what we know about the entirety of Scripture and the "little Bible" within the Bible to the individual psalms themselves? In other words, how do we go about seeing "the Tapestry," the unified story of God's love for people, in the smaller threads of the narrative? That is the question this paper seeks to answer.

PREACH THE PSALMS AS "STORY"

My proposed answer is this: When going about the text study and initial writing process which leads to the formation of the sermon itself, think of the psalm—whatever sort of psalm it is—in terms of Story. Note that I did not write "a story," or even "stories," but *Story*.

This paper does not seek to advocate for the telling of stories within a sermon—though, telling stories can also be a useful tool to utilize when done well. Other, numerous studies have been done on that homiletical aide.[24]

Instead, what this paper does is advocate for viewing the framework of the sermon—the structure of it—as *Story*. That may seem like a slight distinction, but an important one nonetheless. Like certain words have different meanings, the lack of an article here changes everything. What is meant by that? We turn to Eugene Lowry and Fred Craddock for an answer. In *The Homiletical Plot*, Eugene Lowry explained it thusly:

> In short there is a difference between story and a story and between narrative and a narrative. Typically speaking, those who advocate story preaching have in mind the adaptation, elaboration, or creation of a story or stories. Those who advocate narrative preaching typically intend a process involving a plot—whether or not any particular story or narrative is utilized.[25]

24. What I mean by that is this: Love may cover over a multitude of sins, but stories do not cover over bad homiletics as some might suggest. Contrary to popular opinion, the addition of stories do not make sermons better. Sometimes, they make them worse.

25. Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 124.

Fred Craddock, the "father of narrative preaching," explained it similarly:

> Finally, by narrative structure, I am not proposing that the lecture or sermon be a long story or a series of stories or illustrations. While such may actually be the form used for a given message, it is not necessary in order to be narrative. Communication may be narrative-like and yet contain a rich variety of materials: poetry, polemic, anecdote, humor, exegetical analysis, commentary.[26]

Approaching the psalm—and preaching on it—as Story can help pastors preach the Psalms in a way that reinforces the hermeneutic that all of Scripture is a unified story of God's love for people. Several different ways of approaching this will be explored in the third major division of this paper.

Why "Story?"

But first, why *Story*? That question is an important one to ask and answer before proposing different homiletical strategies for preaching on the Psalms. As aforementioned, there are numerous ways to go about preaching a text from Scripture. The options are nearly endless. That does not mean they are all necessarily good—or even effective—ways of doing so.

The preacher's task is prayerfully considering how best they can faithfully and accurately convey God's truths from Scripture to God's people. Not only that, but they are to do so in such a way that the words they say—and the way that they say them—are not a stumbling block for their listeners.[27]

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26. Lowry, *Homiletical Plot,* 124-125.

27. As the 20th century author Jack London so aptly put it, "It ain't watcha say, it's the way atcha say it."

So, why *Story*? It is no secret that stories have great meaning to humanity. We live in stories and stories live in us. They are deeply rooted in us through and through.

In his paper, "A Paradigm for 21st Century Lutheran Preachers," Pastor Phillip Sievert said this:

> [The postmodern world] is also a STORIED culture shaped by constant communication through texting, Twitter, and Facebook. Cable TV and satellite offer 200 channels of picture-perfect shows at any moment of any day. Many of those shows invite us to experience real stories in real time. … Twenty-first century America is shaped by visual stories and that means that this is a time of opportunity for the Lutheran preacher. People are ripe to hear, to experience, and to discover THE story and to come to the knowledge of the truth.[28]

Sievert later back up that statement with a quote from the article "Talking to Generation X" by Sarah Hinlicky, in which she said:

> We are story people. We know narratives, not ideas. Our surrogate parents were the TV and the VCR, and we can spew out entertainment trivia at the drop of a hat. We treat our ennui with stories, more and more stories, because they're the only things that make sense; when the external stories fail, we make a story of our own lives. You wonder why we're so self-destructive, but we're looking for the one story with staying power, the destruction and redemption of our lives. That's to your advantage: you have the best redemptive story on the market. … A story needs a story teller, and it is the church alone that tells the story of salvation. Here in the church is where the cities of Man and God meet, and that is why all the real spiritual battles, the most exciting adventure stories, begin here. We know that death will continue to break our hearts and our bodies, but it's not the end of the story. Because of all the stories competing for our attention, the story of the City of God is the only one worth living and dying for.[29]

One need not look too far or too extensively for quotes from authors, philosophers, and others who all highlight the importance of stories in our lives—what they mean to us, how they can help us understand things about ourselves and the world around us, how they help us build empathy and compassion toward others, et cetera.

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28. Phillip Sievert, "A Paradigm for 21st Century Lutheran Preachers" (Paper presented at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary's Symposium on Preaching, Mequon, WI, 2014), 16.

29. Sievert, "A Paradigm," 16, quoting Sarah Hinlicky, "Talking to Generation X," *First Things* (February 1999), 11.

For the purpose of this paper, what is most interesting in Hinlicky's article was this: "We are story people. We know narratives, not ideas… they [stories] are the only things that make sense; when the external stories fail, we make a story of our own lives."[30] We, as people, regardless of age, gender, or culture, do not just appreciate a good story. The relationship goes deeper than that. Stories are deeply rooted within us—perhaps more so than we are always cognizant. We *think* in terms of stories. It is how we see the world and make sense of what is happening all around us.

Whether they are in written or spoken or visual form, stories speak to us on a deeply intrinsic level that supersedes age, gender, and culture. We understand stories. I would advocate that the reason for this is because that was how our Creator designed us.

In his article, "Wagging the Tale of God: The Preacher's Vocation in Story," John Stahl-Wert wrote this:

> We are always telling our story, even when we are speaking theologically. We always speak in the presence of other stories, and in the presence of other persons who occupy different story positions in this world. We live in a tension between the truths of our own story and the truths of the other. This tension may be comfortable or uncomfortable. We may be privileged within our story, or unprivileged. Our story, told in the presence of other stories may feel secure or threatened or lost. We write our theology and our poetry—we tell our stories—as an effort in part to manage these things; to justify them, to deny them, to celebrate them, to lament them. And all of this is true whether we are conscious of it or not.[31]

30. Hinlicky, *"Talking,"* 11.

31. John Stahl-Wert, "Wagging the Tale of God: The Preacher's Vocation in Story," *The Conrad Grebel Review* (1994): 203-204.

Stahl-Wert and other like-minded theologians are not alone in this line of thought. Many secular writers have picked up on this truth as well. Though, they do not all approach it in light of Scripture, nor give reason to it in the same way that we do, knowing that we have a Creator.[32]

What is meant by all of this? What does it mean to think in terms of Story? Chances are, you do not wake up in the morning and think to yourself, *"Today is a new chapter and these morning moments are just like the first few words on the page…"* Nor is it likely that you think of your whole life in terms of the five stages of a plot's structure.[33] *"Okay, my birth—that is clearly the "Background". There is "Conflict" throughout my whole life. "Rising Action" is probably my younger childhood years, through my teens to young adulthood. "Climax" is probably once I've "peaked" so to speak—whenever that is—and everything after that is downhill until the inevitable "Resolution"—death."*

That is not what is meant by thinking in terms of *Story*. Rather, what is meant by thinking in terms of *Story* is thinking in terms of movement. Like the shape of a story has movement and progression, so, too, does Life. So, too, do our own lives. They are going somewhere.

There is also a broad, overarching "plot" to our lives, if we can call it that, and numerous "sub-plots" in each and every moment of our lives. What is "plot" but that age-old definition learned in grade school Literature class: a character in a certain setting encounters a certain problem, and we—the readers—watch as the drama unfolds. Only, in our lives, we are not

32. Fantasy author Patrick Rothfuss captured this thought as well: "It's like everyone tells a story about themselves inside their own head. Always. All the time. That story makes you what you are. We build ourselves out of that story."

33. Such as you might expect to find in a story: (1) Background, (2) Conflict, (3) Rising Action, (4) Climax, (5) Resolution.

passive observers or disinterested onlookers. These events and problems and experiences are our own.

Jeffrey D. Arthurs attributed Aristotle with the quote that "the plot is the 'soul' of story." Arthurs went on to write this about plot: "[Plot] is the first among equals because stories cannot exist without action. A tale could be told, at least theoretically, with no details of setting or character, but plot is the soul of the story. The action can be subtle and internal, but conflict drives the events."[34]

This structure can also be explained in terms of "equilibrium", "disequilibrium", and "resolution." As Arthurs showed, that is how plots naturally move.[35] "Equilibrium"—the setting before conflict is introduced. "Disequilibrium"—the state after which conflict is introduced, turning the character's worldview upside-down, and everything involved with that experience—the struggles of trying to make sense out of what happened—until the "Resolution"—whether that is a return to the way things were beforehand, or coming to terms with the way things have or have not been resolved.

Our lives are made up of those patterns of movement—thousands upon thousands of them—whether we realize it or not. There are moments of equilibrium, disequilibrium, and resolution, then the cycle starts all over again. Some cycles are larger and more noticeable than others. They even overlap each other in concentric circles. Sometimes, the conflict is external, and other times, it is internal. Sometimes, the cycles repeat themselves—or are very similar to cycles past.

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34. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 68.

35. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 72.

The Psalms have an incredible way of highlighting these truths in a way that is inherently unique to their design. In his article, *Preaching the Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann said this:

> There is of course no tight, all-comprehensive plot in the Book of Psalms, just as there is no tight, all-comprehensive plot for any of our lives. It is nonetheless useful to trace out in a rough way a coherent plot-line in the Book of Psalms that may roughly correspond to the plot-line of our lives. … Readers who are familiar with my own work may recognize that way of rendering that recurring narrative is under the rubric of "orientation/disorientation/new orientation."[36] … The practice of Israel in the Psalms is to tell that entire tale. … This is the truth of all parts of our life, personal, interpersonal, in the larger community, and in the public life of the world. It is the plot-line we live out in various ways, a plot-line already scripted and given stylized expression in these poems… of course, the full narrative exposition does not occur in all of the Psalms or even in most of them. … What the Psalms do, rather, is tell this paradigmatic story of trouble and rescue in bits and pieces, just as most of us sense the move of our lives not in a grand sweep, but in bits and pieces over time.[37]

Another argument that highlights the importance of *Story* in our lives as humans comes from David Schmitt in his article, *Telling God's Story*. There, he offers additional thoughts on Stephen Crites's article, *The Narrative Quality of Experience*:

> At the juncture of time and memory is the birth of narrative. Because we are creatures in time, we experience a flow of experiences. Because we have memory, we are able to remember past experiences and to project from that memory into possible future experiences. This juncture of time that passes and memory that holds such passing moments together creates a quality that Crites argues is fundamental to human experience: narrative. Crites argues that because we experience the passage of time and because we have memory, we live in stories.[38]

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36. This rubric is akin to equilibrium, disequilibrium, and resolution language, and will be explored in-depth later on in this paper.

37. Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching the Psalms," *Journal for Preachers* (2014): 12-13.

38. David Schmitt, "Telling God's Story," *Concordia Journal* (2014): 104.

The Connection Between "Story" and the Psalms

How does this all relate to preaching on the Psalms? Well, if the evidence points to the fact that people think in terms of *Story*—whether they realize it or not—it is not much of a leap to suggest that we as Evangelical Lutheran pastors might at least want to consider how to formulate the sermon in terms of *Story* as well.

I would argue that the Book of Psalms is uniquely designed to bring this about quite effectively. Not because the Psalms are "narratively structured" per se, though some definitely are, but rather because they are moments in which we are listening in as fellow believers from long ago pour their hearts out to our loving God. Moments of varied emotion—some elation; some despair. Some Psalms are, as Brueggemann defined them, moments of orientation, others disorientation, new orientation, and still others a cyclical mixture of the first two ending with a new orientation.

These are moments of *movement*—moments of *Story*. The psalmists' stories, yes, but stories still told within the overarching metanarrative of God's Story. What this enables us to do is incredibly impactful. It helps us see that, (1) Our own personal stories have movement as well—we are headed home to heaven, and (2) we are not going there alone.

As David Schmitt put it, recognizing the larger *Story* at work in our lives and the world around us enables us to see that:

> [We] are part of a much larger people who live in a much longer history. [We] worship the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who called forth a people, Israel, and through that people brought forth his Son, Jesus Christ, through whom he blesses all nations. This God was there at the creation of the world and he will be there on that final day, bringing about a new creation, and gathering all nations before the throne.[39]

39. Schmitt, "Telling God's Story," 108.

What we see—or at least what would be good for us to see—in the Psalms are a reflection of our own stories, as in a mirror. They are not the same—for no story is ever the same as another—but they *are* similar. Not only that, the Psalms speak to the entirety of a Christian's life, no matter the circumstance or situation. Different Psalms speak more loudly at certain times—certain moments—in our lives, just like other parts of Scripture do the same. Not only in our lives, but for the whole body of believers as well.

So, what are some homiletical strategies available to pastors to help them preach from the Psalms in a way that reinforces the hermeneutic that all of Scripture is a unified story of God's love for people?

In the third part of this paper, we will examine three different homiletical strategies: Eugene Lowry's "The Homiletical Plot" (perhaps the most well-known strategy for preaching *Story*), also known as the "Lowry Loop", Paul Scott Wilson's "Four Pages of the Sermon" (a broader understanding of this approach would be "Problem-Resolution" preaching), and Walter Brueggemann's "Orientation/Disorientation/New Orientation" rubric.

While I would argue that most—if not all—of these homiletical strategies can be applied to any of the Psalms for the purposes of such preaching (not only that but to all of Scripture), going about proving that is simply not able to be contained within the confines of this paper. Therefore, after providing a brief summary of each strategy, the next logical step is to connect that strategy to how it can be used to preach from the Psalms in such a way that reinforces the hermeneutic that all of Scripture is a unified story of God's love for people.

EUGENE LOWRY'S "THE LOWRY LOOP"

First, the "Lowry Loop." In his book, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, Eugene Lowry makes the proposition that as preachers go about forming their sermon—regardless of the text—they "begin by regarding the sermon as a homiletical plot, a narrative art form, a sacred story."[40]

Quoting Robert Roth, Lowry made the connection between stories and sermons: they both have plot. "Plot! This is the key term for a reshaped image of the sermon. Preaching is Storytelling. A sermon is a narrative art form."[41]

Lowry went on to form the basis for his book and approach:

> Because a sermon is an event-in-time—existing in time, not space—a process and not a collection of parts, it is helpful to think of sequence rather than structure. I propose five basic sequential stages to a typical sermonic process. … the stages are: 1) upsetting the equilibrium, 2) analyzing the discrepancy, 3) disclosing the clue to resolution, 4) experiencing the gospel, and 5) anticipating the consequences. … The sermonic plot is time oriented—an event in history with a beginning and an end.[42]

40. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* xxi.

41. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* 12.

42. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* 26.

Upsetting the Equilibrium

The first part of the sermon, "Upsetting the Equilibrium," is designed to be jarring. It is meant to take a common-held belief, or conception, and flip it on its head. In other words, it is meant to introduce *conflict*. And, as Lowry quotes from Robert Roth: "Conflict is the very stuff of which stories are made. So also with life and the world. We are carried on by the suspense. We long to know the outcome."[43]

When applied to the Psalms, the conflict might not be apparent right from the start. But it becomes apparent as the psalm goes on. Psalm 51:8 says, "Let the bones you [God] have crushed rejoice…" *Whoa*. That does not sound like the God we know. It is as if the preacher were saying, *"Let us dive a little deeper into the text to find out what is going on here…"* Or, turn to the psalms of lament that sound as close to accusations against God that one can get without crossing the line.

Renowned author Stephen King is reputed to have once said, "An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this."[44] That is really the goal of Lowry's first sequence when applied to the sermon. Many of the psalms lend themselves to this first sequence very naturally. We read them and ask ourselves, "Wait—*that* is in the Bible? The psalmist actually said that? What is going on here?" *Come closer, dear Christian, and let me explain…*

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43. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 30.

[44] Joe Fassler, "Why Stephen King Spends 'Months and Even Years' Writing Opening Sentences". *The Atlantic* (2013). https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/07/why-stephen-king-spends-months-and-even-years-writing-opening-sentences/278043/.

Analyzing the Discrepancy

The second part of the sermon according to the "Lowry Loop" is "Analyzing the Discrepancy." This sequence dives into the "why" of it all. Why are things the way that they are? Why is this being said—*what is the problem?*

As Lowry put it:

> The sermonic process of analysis as *presented* moves the listeners through numerous dead-end routes until the decisive clue is disclosed. By commencing with superficial "common sense" answers of why people behave as they do, and then continue to press the analysis ever more deeply, the preacher engages the congregation at the level of popularly held views which then may be abandoned together in favor of more thoughtful analysis until at last the decisive clue to resolution is revealed. For the clue to resolution (stage three) to be existentially real, and for the gospel to be experienced (stage four), the context must be prepared by the ambiguity explicit in the analysis of the discrepancy. The purpose, then, for stage two is not simply for a resolution to be reached but also for a *readiness for resolution* to be developed.[45]

In other words, as the problem is introduced in "Upsetting the Equilibrium" part of the sermon, part two then looks at all the false, man-made reasons for the problem before finally leading listeners to the true reason for the problem. This invariably, inevitably leads listeners to the realization that we need to look elsewhere for a solution—away from ourselves—to *God*.

Lowry said it like this:

> The overarching purpose of the process of analysis (step two) is finally to arrive at an explanatory *why,* first for the preacher in the study and then for the congregation in the sermonic event itself. … Stage two of the sermon presentation process moves with increasingly felt "necessity" toward some kind of release, toward the revealing of the missing link. Once disclosed, matters are seen in a different light.[46]

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45. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* 30.

46. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* 53.

Disclosing the Clue to Resolution

This all leads naturally to stage three: "Disclosing the Clue to Resolution." The clue to resolution is what Lowry calls the "principle of reversal." He says that, "It is often the case that the clue making understandable the issue at stake comes as a surprise. It is not quite what one had expected, and "arrives" from where you were not looking. And *it turns things upside down*."[47]

For a Scriptural reference to this phenomenon, consider the words and works of our God. He is *constantly* working for our good in ways that are the complete opposite of how we would expect that our God should act toward us. He is *constantly* speaking to us in ways that are the complete opposite of how we would expect that our God should speak toward us.

Consider further Jesus's ministry here on earth. Throughout the Gospel accounts, Jesus does not do anything the way human reason might expect. His parables are masterpieces of the principle of reversal and cause upheaval to his culture's worldview.

Consider, for example, the Parable of The Good Samaritan. Delivered to its original recipients in answer to the question, "And who *is* my neighbor?", Jesus meant for this parable to be a dramatic reversal of everything his hearers expected. The story did not go like they thought it would. Not only did a priest and a Levite pass an injured man by, we see a *Samaritan*—of all people—showing love to a Jewish stranger. Was this parable shocking? Undoubtedly so. Did it have its intended effect? I think our Savior got his point across in answer to the question he was asked.

47. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* 54.

Our God is the master of the principle of reversal in his interactions with his fallen creation—bringing us from death to life, from guilt to blamelessness, unrighteousness to righteousness, from hated enemies to dearly loved children—all because of Jesus.

The application of the principle of reversal to the sermonic event is an important one for us to note. "We know the sudden shift will come, of course," Lowry says, "but we do not know when or how. This sudden reversal in preaching comes as the clue to the resolution and reverses the train of diagnostic thought."[48] He would go on to say that "Unfortunately, the more we know about a subject, the more apt we are to stay locked into our assumptions, and hence to become blind to alternative perspectives."[49]

What do we know will be addressed in a sermon? Or at least, if the message is faithfully preached, what will that look like? There is going to be Law—the malady which lurks in the text and in the hearts of those hearing the sermon will be exposed. There is also going to be Gospel—the cure to the malady revealed in the person of Christ Jesus.

Lowry's stage three is just that—revealing Christ and how he deals with the malady present in the text and in our hearts. The challenge for preachers is doing so in a way that the hearers do not see it coming right from the sermon's start. The devil and our sinful flesh are already working hard to distract us from the Word of God. As Lowry said, we come to the sermon already knowing what will most likely be addressed.

The preacher's task, therefore, is to lead believers to Christ, but first to lead them through the false assumptions that need to be ripped away or turned upside-down by God's Word. Take

48. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* 56-57.

49. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot,* 61.

them to all the dead-ends of human solutions and then lead them to *The* Way, *The* Truth, and *The* Life—the only solution, the only source of salvation given to mankind.

Experiencing the Gospel

That brings us to stage four: "Experiencing the Gospel."

This is indeed the "Gospel" section of the sermon, the cure revealed for the malady, found in Jesus Christ. "Experiencing the Gospel" does not mean inserting a line in the sermon such as, "You know, Jesus died on the cross to take away the particular sin that this particular text addresses." While that is true, we want to go deeper than that. We need to go deeper than that.

Otherwise, at the risk of sounding flippant, every sermon simply becomes rigid and formulaic: "Here is the sin in the text, Jesus died to take away that sin, here is an application to your lives as Christians. Amen." Far be it from us who handle the Word of God to fall into such a trap of trivializing the Gospel message—or make it seem rote and overtold—that we get to proclaim to God's people each and every week.

Lowry said: "Once again, it should be noted that the actual content of the proclamation of the good news must be consistent with the diagnosis which precedes it… the cure must always match the disease."[50] In other words, specific law is addressed with specific gospel. "With the

50. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 77.

gospel proclaimed, the homilist is then ready to ask: What consequences can now be anticipated as a result of this intersection of gospel and human predicament?"[51]

Anticipating the Consequences

This leads us to stage five: "Anticipating the Consequences." "Consequences" might better be understood as "outcomes." In terms of plot, think of this stage of the sermon as the "Falling Action/Resolution."

In relation to Story, Lowry explained it thusly:

> Most literary plots find their climax in the moment of resolution sometime before the ending. It is the resolution which releases the tension, and then a brief time is spent in setting matters in place as a result of that resolution. This "setting matters in place" is the equivalent to the sermonic "asking". It anticipates how life can now be lived.[52]

In other words, this is the "application" section of the sermon—How, then, shall we live in the light of the gospel message, with joy overflowing in our hearts from everything our God has done for us?

Lowry rightly noted that "the focus of our preaching is upon the decisive activity of God, not upon us, and hence the climax of any sermon must be stage four—the experiencing of the gospel. Human response is subsequent to that experience—and consequent of it."[53]

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51. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 79.

52. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 82-83.

53. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot*, 83.

The "Lowry Loop" Applied to the Psalms

With all five stages of the homiletical plot present and accounted for, the sermon has moved from beginning to end—much like a narrative. In a similar fashion, each of the Psalms follow a pattern of movement, verse by verse, from beginning to end. In structure, the Psalms are well-suited to be preached in the form of the "Lowry Loop"—especially connected to the fact that the Psalms are, in essence, snapshots of stories in which we listen to the psalmist converse with God above about their varied life circumstances.

Consider Psalm 143. This psalm of David is very much a conversation—albeit one-sided—with God. The equilibrium has already been upset, right from the start. David is being pursued by "the enemy", perhaps purposely kept ambiguous, and is crying out for aid from God because his "spirit grows faint" and his "heart within him is dismayed."

Analyzing the discrepancy, one could ask all sorts of questions for the reason for David's distress, for the enemy that hounds him, and for solutions to David's problem—as well as our own. These are the false paths that must be taken and then dismissed.

The only solution, the Gospel Experience, can be found as David recounts it: "I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done. I spread out my hands to you; my soul thirst for you like a parched land… Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you…" Deliverance can *only* come from the Lord, and David knows that. Deliverance for us can only come from the LORD—from Jesus!

Anticipating the consequences—how then shall we live life—can be seen in how David responds to the overwhelming comfort of the LORD's unfailing love: "Show me the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul." And again: "Teach me to do your will, for you are my

God; may your good Spirit lead me on level ground…" Living in the light of the Gospel, David—and us—can confidently say, "Lord, my life is yours. Lead me in the path you want me to go, for I am your servant."

Timothy Keller explains one of the reasons for the "narrative" sermon structure and what it can accomplish in this way:

> This is why the sermon, if it moves like a narrative with a thickening plot and little hope—can at this point produce what [J.R.R.] Tolkien calls "the turn" that is present in all good stories. There is a reversal, an upending of normal expectations, and a sudden plot resolution that is counterintuitive and satisfying. This is where the gospel and the person and work of Christ are brought to bear on the problem, and he is proclaimed as the unique solution to this issue, unlike anything the world has to give. … Another way to look at the underlying movement of the sermon [is] to give it a gospel shape, a fall-redemption-restoration plotline. … Here are the assumptions behind this deep pattern. One is that the Bible addresses heart issues that are true for all human beings everywhere in every century. So the heart issues of the original readers will overlap with those of the preacher's listeners.[54]

Keller's last point—that there are time-transcending truths in Scripture—is one that we would well note. It is true for all of Scripture; it is true for the Psalms as well. This concept also serves as a good bridge to the next homiletical strategy we will observe: Paul Scott Wilson's "Four Pages of the Sermon."

54. Keller, *Preaching*, 230-231.

PAUL SCOTT WILSON'S "FOUR PAGES OF THE SERMON"

David R. Schmitt explained Wilson's homiletical strategy thusly:

> This structure approaches the sermon as four rhetorical units (pages) that are sequenced in the sermon. Two of those rhetorical units are focused upon an experience of the law proclamation (trouble) and two of those rhetorical units are focused upon an experience of the gospel proclamation (grace). The sermon, thus, has four rhetorical units: (1) trouble in the text, (2) trouble in the world, (3) grace in the text, and (4) grace in the world.[55]

It should also be noted that, while these four should be present in each and every sermon, the order and the length of the four may vary. In other words, each sermon should have a proclamation of law (trouble) applied to what happens in the original context and also to what happens in the context of the hearers' world. Trouble then, and trouble now. We have all got it; there is nothing new under the sun when it comes to sin… Each sermon should also have a proclamation of gospel (grace) spoken in the original context and to the context of the hearers' world. We all need to hear it, there is not a person who has ever lived under the sun who has not needed God's grace when it comes to our sin. Here is what God did for his people then, and here is what God does now for you and me.

This structure could be used with great impact when applied to preaching on the Psalms—especially since we are cognizant of the fact that this is a structure *already present* in the Psalms without needing to restructure them.

55. David R. Schmitt, "The Tapestry of Preaching: A Four-Fold Message of Sermon Preparation" (course notes for PRA 511, Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, MO, 2020), 421.

Consider, for example, Psalm 77. The Psalmist is crying out to God for help; for deliverance in his time of trouble. How often have we felt the same as the Psalmist, crying out to the Lord for help in our distress, refusing to comforted by anyone or anything but him alone?

The Psalmist wrestles with the reason for God's silence—for not immediately answering him in the way that he expects. He even goes so far as to ask the burning questions, "Will the Lord reject forever? Will he never show his favor again? Has his unfailing love vanished forever? Has his promise failed for all time? Has God forgotten to be merciful? Has he in anger withheld his compassion?"[56]

These are the questions we ask as well. Trouble in the text…and trouble in the world. But where does the Psalmist go next after asking those burning questions? *He turns to what he knows of God.* He says, "To this I will appeal: the years of the right hand of the Most High. I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider your mighty deeds…"

The Psalmist launches into beautiful verse recounting the various ways that God was there; present in times of suffering and trouble that his children experienced. And you can read as the Psalmist thinks aloud to himself: "If God was there, then, leading his people through the mighty waters—though his footprints were not seen—I know, *I know,* that he is here with me now. He delivered his people, he will deliver me now, too."

This is grace in the text, and then applied to us, grace in the world! God shows his love to his people by delivering them—he has shown that same love to us as well in sending his Son Jesus to rescue his chosen people, his royal priesthood, dearly loved by our God.

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56. Psalm 77, selected verses.

Remember, according to Jeffrey D. Arthurs, because of the Psalms, "In the Hebrew mind, then, history is going somewhere, it has purpose, and although we are in distress, God has acted and will act again, so we can rest secure, for the long and winding road leads home."[57]

There are two different ways that reordering the structure of the "Four Pages" could occur, according to Wilson: either in a comprehensive or recurrent experience of trouble and grace.

The Comprehensive Movement

"In the comprehensive movement from trouble to grace, the sermon begins by presenting trouble in the text and trouble in the world and then proclaims grace in the text and grace in the world. This structure works well when approaching a sin that is difficult to speak about in the congregation as it allows the text to begin conversation leading to a confession of that sin."[58]

As an aside, this structure follows a truth of *Story* as well—*Story* has a way of lowering our defenses and the walls we build up around our hearts without us ever realizing it is happening. Think of David being drawn into Nathan's story of the rich man and the poor man. We know why the story is being told. David does not. By the time he hears the words "You are the man," the Story has done its work; the Law has been preached.

This can be done with the Psalms, too. We listen as the psalmist pours out their frustration and grief—and even *anger*—to God, and then before we fully realize it, we are

57. Arthurs, *Preaching with Variety*, 45.

58. Schmitt, "Tapestry," 421.

showed that we, too, experience those same emotions and have similar experiences to the psalmist's. We are right there with them. Then, we hear how God answered the psalmist, and we hear how God answers us now. In both cases, he is the same God then and now.

Consider the agonized words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, *why*… why have you forsaken me?" We know these words, and we know them well. Our Savior cried them out from the cross, all so that our God can answer us thusly when we ask them: *"My dearly loved child… I have not forsaken, nor will I ever. I will never forsake you because I forsook my Son Jesus instead."*[59]

> The other way the comprehensive movement can be shown is in this way:
>
> The sermon begins by presenting trouble in the world and trouble in the text and then proclaims grace in the text and grace in the world. This structure works well when a particular sin is widely known and experienced in a congregation and the preacher desires to help the congregation see how they, in this way, are very similar to people in the biblical text. Preserving the placement of grace in the text as the major turn of the sermon allows the preacher to highlight God's gracious intervention as recorded in Scripture as the source of our present trust and hope.[60]

Again, this structure is incredibly beneficial when applied to the Psalms. What is one of the many lies that the devil has at his disposal that he employs with vicious satisfaction and devastating results? The lie that *we are all alone.* The lie that we alone have committed this sort of grievous atrocity against the LORD—how could God ever forgive us? For that matter, how could he ever *love* us?

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59. Of course, if you read farther in the psalm, verse two says that "you [God] do not answer…", thus forcing the psalmist to reflect on all the works of the LORD—the love shown to his people. Sometimes, silence is the answer. It makes us think about what our God has done. And, when Christ fulfilled these words, God needed to be silent, because Christ *was* forsaken for our sakes. Thanks be to God, what grace; what love!

60. Schmitt, "Tapestry," 422.

This structure, applied to Scripture—and specifically to the Psalms—takes that lie and promptly crushes it. Dear Christian, *you are not alone*. You are not the only one in all of human history who has felt this way, experienced this terrible thing or done this sinful action. Far from it. Look at the psalmist—a fellow sinner-saint same as you, with all the struggles and failures that accompany living in a sin-darkened world. See the amazing love—the grace—that their Father in heaven poured out on them—the same Father in heaven who loves you.

Psalm 23 beautifully captures this picture with its final two verses: "You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life, and I will dwell in the house of the LORD forever."

My cup overflows… This love that the Father has lavished on us is completely underserved. He does not just fill our cups with blessings upon blessings and grace upon grace—it overflows. God does not settle when it comes to showing love for us. He goes above and beyond, to give us assurance beyond a shadow of a doubt that we can confidently say, "The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want."[61]

We want for nothing, because God has given us everything!

61. Or, in the New International Version 2011 edition: "The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing." *Nothing!* What comfort! There is a sermon there in that single verse: Malady, Cure, and Virtue all in one.

The Recurrent Movement

The other structure that can be brought out with this "Four Pages" homiletical strategy is the "recurrent movement." Schmitt explains it thusly:

> In the recurrent movement from trouble to grace, the sermon has two movements of turning from law to gospel: one situated in the text and one situated in the world. For example, the sermon begins with trouble in the text and then moves to grace in the text. Then the sermon continues by exploring trouble in the world only to move to proclaiming grace in the world. By dividing the sermon between an encounter with the text and then an examination of the world, the sermon mirrors the flow of the text-application structure.[62]

This approach would also serve another beneficial purpose—especially when preaching a psalm with flow and movement: it allows the psalm as narrative to be told in its entirety without disruption. Such an interruption from the narrative flow can be jarring for listeners as they are disposed from the text to their context, back to the text, and finally, dizzyingly returned to their own context. Keeping the two separate allows the psalm to progress without interruption, from beginning to end, and only after it is done to go back and follow up with the "so what?", namely, how does this story apply to our story in the context of the larger metanarrative of God's love for his people?

Certain structures lend themselves to certain psalms, and vice-versa. Like any other homiletical strategy, these are not—and should not be—the only tools in the homiletician's preaching toolbox.

That brings us to the third and final homiletical strategy that this paper will examine in relation to preaching on the Psalms: Walter Brueggemann's "Orientation/Disorientation/New Orientation" rubric.

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62. Schmitt, "Tapestry," 422.

BRUEGGEMANN'S "ORIENTATION/DISORIENTATION/NEW ORIENTATION"

While Brueggemann admittedly uses this approach primarily to *classify* the Psalms, the rubric can also be useful in structuring the movement of preaching a particular psalm itself. Brueggemann explained the entirety of the Psalms and their usefulness in the lives of Christians:

> What the Psalms do, rather, is tell this paradigmatic story of trouble and rescue in bits and pieces, just as most of us sense the move of our lives not in a grand sweep, but in bits and pieces. But the community has discerned that the bits concerning gifts and pieces concerning wounds amount to a coherent tale of our life in the world with God. Thus, I propose that, without forcing matters, it is of great heuristic value to treat each Psalm as though it were a part of the larger story that must be performed over and over.[63]

Brueggemann's rubric of "Orientation/Disorientation/New Orientation" is a helpful taxonomy to view not only the Psalms with, but also the pattern of our own lives. Brueggemann suggests that "some of us can maintain a status of well-being over time, but soon or late, we find ourselves moving into and sometimes out of disorientation."[64]

Since there is such great overlap between the Psalms and the progressive movement of our own lives, this connection is important and helpful to note. Either we are living in a state of "Orientation," which is simply living in a state of peace and contentment with the way things are going, "Disorientation," as the world around us gets turned upside-down due to some experience

63. Brueggemann, "Preaching the Psalms," 13.

64. Brueggemann, "Preaching the Psalms," 13.

or other, or "New Orientation," as we come out of the state of "Disorientation," moving past it to experience the joy of the gospel message all over again.

Sometimes these three stages are experienced in rapid, short order—perhaps in the course of a day, or even more briefly. Some psalms follow this pattern too. They begin in "Orientation," move to "Disorientation," and end with "New Orientation." More often, though, the three stages occur over long periods of time, and we find ourselves experiencing only one—or what seems to be only one. That is true for the Psalms as well.

Consider the bitterness of Psalm 137, sung with strained and shaky voices by those Israelites who sat by the rivers of Babylon and *wept* while their captors tormented them with calls for happy songs from the lands they were dragged off from: *"How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?"* This is a song and prayer of disoriented, broken individuals, reeling—trying to make sense of their present circumstances, and it never gets resolved by the psalm's end.[65] Sometimes, that bitterness is the state we find ourselves in as we sit in the ashes of the sinful world we live in, while the world around us jeers: *"Be happy! You Christians are supposed to be happy, are you not?"* We reel—searching for answers to how we feel, and those answers can only—*only*—be found in God and the promises he has made us in his Word.

As Brueggemann put it:

> Sometimes we get only *orientation*, the Psalms we most love. Sometimes we get only *disorientation*, the Psalms the church tends to neglect in its denial. Sometimes we get only *new orientation*, when we are taken by surprise, as in the ultimate surprise of Easter.[66]

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65. In fact, the ending is one of the most graphic imprecatory prayers we find in Scripture: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us—he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks."

66. Brueggemann, "Preaching the Psalms," 13.

I would argue that the stage we are most familiar with is "Disorientation." We live in a sinful world that constantly afflicts us with trouble and hardships—and even if the world did not, we have no trouble creating it for ourselves. "Disorientation" heavy Psalms, therefore, are far easier for us to preach from, in the same way that it is easier for us to preach the Law than it is the Gospel. We understand when the psalmist cries out of the depths to God because that is often where we find ourselves.[67]

More difficult texts to wrestle with, are Psalms that are primarily of "Orientation" and "New Orientation." "Orientation" is what Brueggemann describes as "the stasis of well-being," and "New Orientation" is being "newly surprised by joy."[68] And here is the dilemma that presents itself to preachers considering the Psalms for their sermon text.

What does a preacher do with a psalm that is purely "Orientation" or "New Orientation?" Moreover, how do they take a psalm of praise and not butcher its message by bringing in Law where there is no Law? Far be it from us to take a psalm such as Psalm 117:

> *Praise the LORD, all you nations; extol him, all you peoples. For great is his love toward us, and the faithfulness of the LORD endures forever. Praise the LORD.*[69]

And from that psalm craft a sermon theme such as this: Praise the LORD. Part I: We do not. Not Always. Part II: Jesus did. Always—for you! (And if you want a Part III: Since Jesus did, now we can too!)

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67. I have not researched this, but I would be willing to bet that heavily "Disorientation" themed psalms are preached on more than "Orientation" and "New Orientation" themed psalms, simply due to the nature of the psalm itself. Think of Psalm 51. Now think of a psalm like Psalm 150. Which has more "Law/Gospel" content to craft a fifteen-to-twenty-minute sermon out of?

68. Brueggemann, "Preaching the Psalms," 14.

69. New International Version, 1984.

That is a hyperbolic example, but certainly not outside the realm of possibility. Especially *since those are true things*. We do not always praise the LORD. Jesus always praised the LORD, giving him the proper honor and glory that is his alone for all the times that we do not do that. Because of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection for all of us, God does not see all the times we fail to praise him. He sees only the perfect praise of his Son, Jesus.

However, to do that with Psalm 117 would not be preaching the text—even though they are all true, theologically-sound statements. Psalm 117 is a psalm of praise! It is not focused on all the times we do not praise God. That is not the message—implied or otherwise. To take the malady of the text from that joyful exhortation of praise would be to rob the psalm—the heart of the text—of its jubilation.

So, how does one preach a psalm of "Orientation/New Orientation" according to Brueggemann's rubric—or according to any of the other homiletical strategies for that matter? The larger, broader context of Scripture needs to be brought in, as demonstrated in previous sections of this paper.[70]

All of Scripture is God's unified story of love for people. In a psalm of pure praise, we do not need to look for "the problem" where there is no problem. We look to the cross, where our true problem was nailed, where that problem was done away with. We bring out the *reason* for that jubilant exhortation, "Praise the LORD"—everybody. Why? Because of the LORD's faithfulness and love—the love that endures… how long? *Forever*.

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70. The question, then, might be: How do we select a psalm or section of a psalm to preach on? This is where the lectionary comes into play, providing us with the work of gifted individuals who have gone before us. There are resources available, it is good to make use of them! My suggestion if you are considering preaching on the Psalms, or a section of a psalm, would be to look at the assigned psalm for the upcoming Sunday. It will pair in some way with the rest of the selected readings. There is no need to reinvent the wheel when it comes to preaching on the Psalms.

Yes, through the course of the sermon, a preacher might bring out the fact that we as sinful people do not always praise the LORD, but that should not be the main malady curse cured by the gospel message of Jesus. What reason do we have to praise the LORD? Sin's curse has been crushed and done away with by our ever-faithful, always-loving God! Let that exuberant tone be the main flavor of the sermon, just as it is for the psalm.

The other comment Brueggemann made on the Psalms was encouraging the congregation to see that "the Psalms provide a script for a gospel exposition that honors specificity along with the discovery that we, as a community, have been here with wound or this gift or this stasis before. We are a part of the procession of story-tellers and story-performers."[71]

We, as Christians, are a part of a larger community—the invisible Church that transcends all peoples of all time. How many, only God himself knows. For all of us, with our varied lives and experiences in life, the commonality that we share is that the story of our lives have been forever changed by our God—who has shared with us the Story of his great love for us. In that Story, we see fellow believers experience both joys and sorrows, and we experience similar joys and sorrows right there alongside them.

But the true comfort in preaching on the Psalms is not in the fact that other believers—other Christians—have experienced similar joys and sorrows to our own. We are not a "misery-loves-company-mindset" community. The true comfort comes from knowing that we are not alone. The God to whom the psalmist cries out with tearstained cheeks, the God to whom the psalmist lifts their heart in thankful praise, is the same God to whom we pour out our own hearts as well. He is the God who has promised: "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you. You

71. Brueggemann, "Preaching the Psalms," 14.

are mine. Because of my Son, Jesus, there is a home in heaven waiting for you—purchased and won by his blood. And I cannot wait until you are home. Until you get there, until I welcome you home with a warm embrace, know this: no matter what happens to you, no matter what trials or hardships you face in this life, I AM right here with you. And I am not going anywhere. I am with you. Every step of the way. I love you. I love you. I love you."

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, these three homiletical strategies are useful ways that a preacher could go about preaching on the Psalms in such a way that highlights the hermeneutic that all of Scripture is God's unified story of love for people. But they are not the only ways that this can be done. There are many different ways that the old, old story can be told. Since there are so many different ways, the strategies proposed in this paper may or may not be beneficial to a particular pastor. That is perhaps the greatest limitation and weakness of this study. At the very least, I hope that it has helped the reader think of the Psalms—and the entirety of Scripture—a little differently than they did before.

A possible future study related to the Psalms and homiletical strategies for preaching on them would be to examine Walter Brueggemann's "Image-Based Sermon Structures" and how the Psalms are uniquely suited for such a homiletical strategy, with the vast store of beautiful imagery used throughout.

Finally, however God's Word is preached, however God's Story is told, at the heart of the Story is Jesus, who stepped into this sin-darkened world; into the pages of history to experience the joys and sorrows of life alongside his fallen creation. He is the focus of every sermon we preach. He is the focus for each and every moment of our lives here on earth below. He lived, bled, died, and rose again so that we can live forever with him. And one day, we will. There is no better ending than that.

Although, it is not an ending. Not really. In the same way that death is not the end, when Jesus returns to make all things new, the Story of God's love for people does not end. How can

it? It goes on forever and ever into eternity without end—as will the Church of All Time's praise to our God. Now and always to God and God alone be praise, and thanks, and honor, and glory for all of his faithful love to us.

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