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PREACHING SUBVERSIVELY:
THE BOOK OF ESTHER AS A HOMILETICAL MODEL

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Introduction

Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* is famous for the nonappearance of the play's primary character. The play unfolds as two friends, Estragon and Vladimir, pass the time waiting for the appearance of the illusive Godot. While Godot is central to the play and his anticipated introduction to the action drives the unfolding plot, he never appears on stage. In biblical literature, the book of Esther speaks of God's people in exile and the dramatic events that threaten their very existence and delineate their deliverance. Yet God is never mentioned. While it can be argued that God is the central character of the book and the driving force behind the unfolding plot, just like Godot in Beckett's play, he never makes an appearance in the story.

If a play can be driven by a character that never appears, and a biblical book can be canonized without ever mentioning God, can we preach a sermon about God without actually mentioning the word (or name) "God"? Asked in the context of homiletics, this is a provocative question. Are there any models, outside of narrative theory, that may suggest a positive response to this question? Certainly the aforementioned Old Testament book of Esther is a candidate for such a model.

This article will examine the story of Esther and seek to accomplish two things: first, to analyze how Esther functions as a narrative designed to encourage and instruct Israel during their exile; second, to examine how such a narrative approach could be suggestive as a contemporary homiletical method. It is well

known that the book of Esther does not mention the divine name. Thus, the focus of this article is on the question, *how can a sermon speak about God without ever mentioning God?* It is undeniable that Esther functions as Holy Scripture without explicit mention of God in its pages. Perhaps, in a similar way, Esther provides an example of how a narrative sermon can speak powerfully about God without ever mentioning his name.

1. Narrative as a Theological and Homiletical Tool

Before proceeding with the question at hand, perhaps a brief review of the Esther story would be helpful. Esther is an orphaned Jewish girl raised by her cousin Mordecai. Esther is identified early as a beautiful young woman, and when the King of Persia is looking for a new wife, Esther ends up in the beauty contest whose winner will be named queen. As the contest transpires, Esther is the contestant who most pleases the king with her beauty and various other charms and is thus crowned the new queen of Persia. Throughout the process, at the urging of Mordecai, she conceals her Jewish identity. Shortly after her appointment as queen, a royal official named Haman talks the king into issuing an edict that will have the entire Jewish population of Persia exterminated. Hearing of the plot, Mordecai urges Esther to use her influence as queen to intervene on behalf of her people. Despite great personal risk, and through a series of remarkable coincidences and plot reversals, Esther manages to demonstrate to the king that Haman is a man of questionable character, and she is able to secure deliverance for her people. Her cousin Mordecai is elevated to be vice-regent of Persia and many Persian people convert to Judaism as a result of Esther's actions.

Esther, set as it is in Judah's exile,¹ was, or came to be understood as, a story that informed the exilic experience of

1. Technically the Persian period is usually known as the "post-exilic" period. While this term is traditionally used in Old Testament scholarship there is a clear sense in which Jews living under Persian rule were still exiled in that they did not have political autonomy even in their own land. For those who

Israel. It became a story that somehow depicted the lived experience of a diasporic people and created the potential for them to see their lives through the lens of an orphan girl who became a queen.

Over time, this book found its way into the Hebrew canon because it was deemed to be a “sacred story,” not because it talked about God, but because it helped a nation understand its own story.² Narratives can function in this way in the life of a community, shaping its theological identity and guiding its behavior, even when they are not overtly theological.

This is the constitutive power of narrative. A story can reshape and define the world for us as we see ourselves in the characters, and sense our understanding of the world being described or reframed. Educators throughout history have understood the power of stories to both equip students with knowledge that they will need for later, and shape them into the kind of human beings we hope that they will become.³

Sermons are foundational avenues for shaping the theological and ethical life of a church. Thus, narrative forms of sermons can provide a lens through which people can see themselves, and offer possibilities for construing their lives both within the faith community and outside of it. By telling a congregation stories, a preacher can form the collective life of the church and the individual lives that compose it. Author Robert Fulford reflects on the power of story and reminds us that “Children grow into adults by learning stories, and so do nations and communities.”⁴

Employing narrative as a form of preaching is not a new idea. It is at the heart of the “new homiletic” and has been well championed by many contemporary preachers. Stanley Hauwerwas states, “My contention is that the narrative mode is neither incidental nor accidental to Christian belief. There is no more

remained outside the land, like the characters in Esther, exile may still be an apt description of the life setting.

2. For insight on the concept of sacred story, see Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” 70.

3. Jackson, “On the Place of Narrative in Teaching,” 4.

4. Fulford, *Triumph of Narrative*, 33.

fundamental way to talk of God than in a story.”⁵ Thus, human stories explain, extend, and contextualize the story of God in fresh, new ways. The question under consideration in this study is whether this can be done in any meaningful sense without mentioning God in the story. To examine this question let us turn our attention to the Bible and the book of Esther.

2. *Esther: A Theological Narrative without Divine Reference*

a. *Esther as exilic literature*

The book of Esther is clearly set in the Persian period, when King Ahasuerus (Xerxes I) was ruler (486–465 BCE). The majority of scholars agree that a precise date for the book is hard to determine.⁶ It is generally assumed, however, that the final Hebrew form of Esther is of late Persian or early Hellenistic origin.⁷ From a purely literary perspective it seems obvious that the Esther scroll, which is foundational to the Jewish celebration of Purim, was written to demonstrate the potential of exilic life for those still trapped in such an existence.⁸ While the writer never explicitly states the purpose for writing, the predominant theories all surround the idea that the writer desires to communicate something about life in exile.

For the community to thrive in exile, it would take more than just going back to former practices. A fresh interpretation of faith would be necessary, not only to sustain it but to meet the challenges of a new life setting. Walter Brueggemann articulates

5. Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom*. Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1983, 24–25, as cited in Jackson, “On the Place of Narrative in Teaching,” 9.

6. For a concise but thorough discussion see Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 39–41.

7. *Ibid.* Also see also, Bechtel, *Esther*, 3. Bechtel reflects the breadth of opinion as well as the “agreement” among scholars that Esther is to be dated somewhere between 400 and 200 BCE.

8. This said, Berg, *Book of Esther*, 15, points out the difficulty of determining an author’s intention when it is not explicitly stated, as is the case with the author of Esther.

how exile prompted the people of Israel to respond with creative expressions of theological thought:

Exile did not lead Jews in the Old Testament to abandon faith or to settle for abdicating despair, nor to retreat to privatistic religion. On the contrary, exile evoked the most brilliant literature and the most daring theological articulation in the Old Testament.⁹

This was a theological imperative for the people of Israel now seeking to understand themselves and their God in fresh ways as a result of the new circumstances of exilic life. One of the ways the community found to express its theology of exile was through narratives designed to embody, in the characters, a diasporic lifestyle that demonstrated wisdom for exilic living. These “advice tales” feature heroes and heroines who offer a “lived out” theology of exile. These stories are theological novellas, whose purpose is to creatively engender in the people of Israel a vision for how to live successfully as a displaced people.

b. *Esther as a “Diasporic Advice Story”*

In the days of diasporic existence, narratives concerning the lives of exiles were a common form of didactic literature. These narratives depict Jewish men or women living in exilic situations who are able to thrive in their displaced context and even rise to significant places of influence. These characters appear in diasporic novellas that illustrate how these clever, pious heroes overcome much more powerful members of the dominant ethnic group and gain favor from the king.¹⁰ These diasporic advice stories are presented throughout Scripture and stand as wisdom stories for the Israelite community to draw upon for diasporic living.

These tales, many of which probably emanate from the post-exilic period, inform the lives of a people whose land and fate is not fully their own. They include the stories of Esther, Mordecai,

9. Bruggemann, *Cadences of Home*, 3.

10. Smith, *Religion of the Landless*, 203.

Daniel, Joseph, Jonah, and Ruth.¹¹ Daniel Smith-Christopher offers that these stories are designed to reflect the Jews' rise to power and influence in the world, not through the use of reason or human ability, but through their excellence of character and faith in God.¹²

Such stories are typical of displaced peoples. It is often the narratives of a people that most vividly depict their understanding of life as it really is and express their beliefs about the best way forward. Roger Bromley, in his work on contemporary diasporic cultural fictions, notes that the stories of displaced peoples

can be seen as participating in new cultural strategies . . . The essence of this work is the cultural analysis to go beyond the boundaries and exceed the limits of racialised, colonized and national identities. They are not simply narratives about contestation and difference, but achieve their very textualisation through constructions of difference and contestation.¹³

The authors of Scripture understood this power of narrative for forming a people's theology and vision for life in exile. The book of Esther clearly reflects characteristics that make it an advice tale for exiled Israel.

c. Esther as advice to a diasporic people

Many competing theories that have been offered to capture the exact genre of Esther.¹⁴ Each one, however, acknowledges that there is a didactic nature to the book and most agree that it has a theological agenda as well.¹⁵ In the current study I will adopt the

11. Variations of these stories can be seen in Ezra and Nehemiah. Jonah, while quite different, may also be viewed as a diasporic advice story, as it deals with God's interaction with foreign peoples and informs the post-exilic community as they seek to develop a theology of engagement with a wicked enemy nation. See Smith-Christopher, *Biblical Theology of Exile*, 130–37.

12. Smith-Christopher. *Biblical Theology of Exile*, 185.

13. Bromley, *Narratives for a New Belonging*, 3.

14. See Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 141–52.

15. See, for example, the influential work of Humphries, "A Life-style for Diaspora," 214. Humphries points out the delightfully entertaining nature of the Esther tale and acknowledges that this alone may "be reason enough" for its

position that Esther is a “Diaspora Advice Story.” This label can encompass several of the potential genres often proposed to capture the essence of the scroll (such as “diaspora novella,” “wisdom tale,” and even “historical fiction”). Its diasporic nature is obvious; the term “advice story” is accurate because it rises above simply being a “good story.” While it is indeed a fast-paced and suspenseful tale, its didactic purposes cannot be ignored. It is meant to teach Jews how to live a productive life in the Diaspora.¹⁶

Both Esther and Mordecai become characters in an “applied” theological narrative demonstrating to subsequent generations of Jews (and others) how the wisdom of God, through his prophetic word, informs life for a minority people in a culture governed by powers and laws different from and even contradictory to their own. Donn Morgan points out that while these writings may not be a direct response to the Torah and the Prophets, they do depict a dialogue between the interpretive communities and these writings.¹⁷ Rooted in this dialogue/response to the Law and Prophets. Morgan sees that:

The behavior of the characters provides paradigmatic actions and situations, which the reader or hearer is to ponder. The success of this behavior may provide an impetus for similar behavior in analogous situations or may simply testify to the value of faithfulness and allegiance to God and Judaism.¹⁸

d. *Dilemma: Where is God in Esther?*

Esther is well known as the only book in the Bible that does not mention the name of God. This omission has brought about more

existence. However, he goes on to demonstrate that the author has much more in mind than just this. See also Bechtel, *Esther*, 4.

16. White, “Esther a Feminine Model,” 164. White also notes, “This sort of tale enjoyed great popularity in the post-exilic period” (164). For further reflection of scholarly consensus on this issue, see Talmon, “Wisdom in the Book of Esther.” He states, “The point of the narrative is to portray ‘applied’ wisdom, that is, how a wise man [*sic*] may lead a successful life in the world” (441).

17. Morgan, *Between Text and Community*, 51.

18. *Ibid.*, 52.

than its share of speculation. Some modern scholars have asserted that Esther is a “secular” book in which God plays no role.¹⁹ While it is true that the absence of God’s name is a curious feature, as we will see, it in no way indicates the absence of God in the story.

The nonappearance of God’s name has been explained by numerous theories, including the idea that it was an intentional deletion to avoid the Name’s profanation during the highly festive celebration of Purim. It has been asserted that the festival, known for its heavy drinking, was no time to pronounce the sacred name.²⁰ Other commentators see the book accentuating the human element of the story. The author wants to stress the role of human beings in shaping the course of history and their need to take individual responsibility.²¹ Andre LaCocque avers that the author avoids any mention of the deity in a Persian setting because there is “a theology for the land of Israel and another for the Dispersion.”²² These along with other attempts to explain God’s “hiddenness” in the story rarely deny that the book has a religious tone to it.²³ At the very least, as Michael V. Fox offers, there is the possibility that the author is seeking to convey “uncertainty about God’s role in history.”²⁴ The author is seeking to reflect that “there can be no definitive knowledge of the working of God’s hand in history.”²⁵ While Fox’s exploration of religious doubt being reflected in the Esther document is a highly thoughtful and provocative approach to the issue of God’s hiddenness in the text, it fails to convince because of all

19. See Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 235, for a synopsis.

20. Paton, *Esther*, 239.

21. Berg, “After the Exile.”

22. LaCocque, *The Feminine Unconventional*, 62.

23. Fox, *Character and Ideology*, 237–47, explores various theories concisely but informatively.

24. *Ibid.*, 247. This perspective is reflective of that of Walter Brueggemann’s overall view of Old Testament Theology. Brueggemann says, “the rhetoric of the Old Testament is characteristically *ambiguous and open* . . . So much is left unsaid that the reader is left uncertain.” (Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 110 [emphasis original]).

25. *Ibid.*

the evidence in the book that genuinely seems to point to God's real presence in the events of which it speaks.

e. *Clues to God's whereabouts*

i. *A veiled reference to divine sovereignty in 4:14?* There are allusions to God's presence in a number of places, most notably Esth 4:14 where Mordecai asserts that deliverance for the Jews will come from "another place" if not from Esther. While it might be debatable that he is referring to a divine initiative, such a position is highly tenable. The idea of God's presence with Israel in their exile reaches back to the exilic prophets themselves. This is a decisive theological perspective for the community. What comes into play at this point in their life is a return to the concept that Israel is a people not a place. This is a foundational perspective for the nation, going back to its Patriarchs, whom God constituted as a people long before they were established in a land. This most ancient of theological paradigms is what needs renewal in exilic life. The thought of the author of Mordecai's veiled reference to deliverance is rooted in a theological perspective that understands that God has a covenant with his people and he will not break it. This covenant transcends land. It is rooted in relationship, and thus Mordecai is sure that deliverance will come because Israel is a people in relationship with a trustworthy and sovereign God.²⁶

ii. *The call to fasting:* We can further see the place of the divine presence in Esther's own plea for her people to set aside three days and nights for fasting on her behalf as she prepares to visit her husband the king and make her case for the salvation of the Jewish people (4:16). While the nature of the fast is not made explicitly religious in the text, there is ample evidence to demonstrate that fasting in the later Jewish tradition is a religious act.²⁷ Indeed, the tenor of the request is saturated with humility. Esther

26. Laniak, "Esther's Volkcentrism," 82.

27. See White, "Esther a Feminine Model," 162. She refers to the work of Wilhelm Vischer, *Esther*. Munich: C. Kaiser, 1937, 15.

recognizes that her hope of convincing the king to overturn Haman's plot is not in her hands alone; she needs the support of her people, and her God.

iii. *Coincidences and reversals*: Further, one may discern the presence of God in this story by the numerous "coincidences" that occur throughout it. First is the whole series of events that leads to Esther's being chosen as queen. Then in ch. 6 the king's insomnia leads to his discovery of Mordecai's unrewarded loyalty. Further instances are Haman's entrance in the court just as Ahasuerus is trying to think of a way to reward Mordecai (6:4); the king's return from the garden at the precise moment that Haman literally throws himself on Esther's mercy (7:8); Mordecai's elevation to vice-regent while Haman takes his place on the gallows that he had built especially for Mordecai (7:9–8:2); and most explicitly in 9:1 where matters were "turned around for the Jews." While the reluctance of the author to attribute any of these "coincidences" directly to God remains a mystery, as David Clines notes, taken together these chance occurrences have a cumulative effect. They demonstrate the guiding hand of God. Clines offers the opinion that divine control of the events is not hidden at all. It is stated indirectly but clearly by means of the many coincidences in the story.²⁸

iv. *Mass "conversions" of Persians to Judaism*: The effects of Esther's actions seem to find their full expression in the eighth chapter when Mordecai is elevated to vice-regent and we are told that many people of "other nationalities" become Jews (8:17). This is a dramatic expression of the overall impact of Esther's actions. The fact that the people who "converted" did so as a result of "fear" of the Jews can be understood as a reflection of the expected response to a display of God's power (Deut 2:25; 11:25).²⁹

28. Clines, *Esther Scroll*, 153.

29. *Ibid.*, 89.

v. *God's absence as literary device and teaching technique*: The absence of God in Esther is a message in itself. The non-mention of the divine name acts as a literary device. It tells the readers that God is absent in a very overt way. It expresses the hiddenness of God in the midst of diasporic existence but recognizes that God is somehow still present even in his confusing absence. This is the fulcrum of hope for those in exile. God is never fully absent. Yahweh is "experienced" in his absence. His activity, or lack thereof, in the events of exile is still a part of his presence with the community of faith. Even if he is not near in immediate experience he is always in the background and his presence is experienced in less obvious, though still discernable, ways.³⁰

f. *Canonization as a key interpretive clue*

Scholars and readers of Esther through the centuries have argued over Esther's place in the Hebrew and Christian canon. These disputes have been based on both the historical and religious viability of the book.³¹ The problem has been exacerbated by the variations in the text of Esther itself.³² When Esther was definitively accepted into the Hebrew canon is not easy to determine, although it certainly began receiving acceptance in the second century BCE and found a secure place at some point in the first four centuries CE. Similarly, following much debate, its entrenchment in all Christian canons has been secure since at least the fifth century CE.³³

Despite its tumultuous journey to canonicity, Esther is now safely ensconced among the books deemed to constitute Holy Scripture and for this reason must be read as such. This

30. For brief discussions on the concept of presence in absence see Terrien, *Elusive Presence*, 321–24, and Brueggemann, *Deep Memory, Exuberant Hope*, 82–83. Brueggemann sees the logic of the position but denies that it fully captures what is going on in the speech expressions of exilic texts.

31. For a helpful overview of this issue see Chapter One in Berg, *Book of Esther*.

32. Investigation into the development of the Esther scrolls is outside the purview of this article. For a solid overview of these issues see Baldwin, *Esther*, 42–48.

33. For a detailed discussion see Bush, *Ruth, Esther*, 273–77.

locatedness of Esther in the biblical canon leads us to look for God in the text. Our interpretation of the book is, and should be, informed by the kind of literature that it is—biblical literature. Left outside of the canon it could well represent a secular vision for Jews in diaspora. However, as a part of Scripture it must be given a theological reading. It is this canonical location that calls us to read Esther as a sacred story and is the most vital reason for us to look for God in it. Just as those who made decisions regarding canonicity saw the theological value in the scroll so should modern readers approach the text with an eye for where God may be found in the text.

3. The Sermon: Esther as a Homiletical Model

Can Esther serve as a model for contemporary homiletics? If so, the question to be asked about the nature of the text is not “Why is God not mentioned in Esther?” but rather, “What is the author trying to do by not mentioning the name of God in Esther?”

Of course we will never be sure of the answer to this question; however, could it be a narrative device? Is it a way to communicate the sense of God’s absence in exilic life? Has the author chosen to craft the narrative in a way that teaches both the absence and presence of God simultaneously? If so, can preachers do the same with the form of sermon they choose? Wisely applied, could a sermon that did not mention the name of God have a spiritually significant message that leaves a lasting impact on its hearers just as Esther has had on its readers for centuries now?

In order to answer this question in the affirmative several things need to be considered.

a. Foundations for Esther as a homiletical model

While Esther constitutes the only whole book in the Bible where the divine name is not mentioned, there are certainly other places in Scripture where a speaker engages in an act of proclamation intending to move people toward God or help them understand the nature of God, and yet does not mention the name of God. This is the case in Nathan’s famous address to David in

2 Samuel 12. Nathan uses a parable to get the king's attention and demonstrate the unrighteousness of David's adultery with Bathsheba and his subsequent murder of her husband Uriah. The story of a rich man's misappropriation of a poor man's beloved sheep evoked from David the reaction, "As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this must die!" (2 Sam 12:5 TNIV) The prophet's story, without mentioning the name of God, provoked a highly theological response. Further, it brought David to the realization of his own sin and drove him to genuine repentance. This story reminds us that a narrative without direct reference to the divine can still draw out divine responses.

In a similar way, the teaching of Jesus is marked, in his parables, by occasions where divine lessons are given in speech that decidedly lacks explicit reference to the name of God. Stories like the Parable of the Sower (Matt 13:3–9), the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37), and the Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, and Lost Son (Luke 15) all lack any overt reference to God. This of course in no way denies that they contain lessons intended to teach people about God and fidelity to his ways; it is to recognize, however, that Jesus employed stories that referred to "secular" themes and not to the divine name in order to convey a message of divine consequence.³⁴

Homileticians like Fred Craddock and Eugene Lowry have noted that Jesus' use of the narrative style, particularly in his use of parables, is a highly suggestive model for communicating the gospel in our day.³⁵ This leads us to recognize that Scripture

34. It is worth noting that several of Jesus' parables only mention God in a concluding phrase. See, for example, the parable of the shrewd manager (Luke 16:13). Other parables only mention God in the introductory phrase "the kingdom of God is like" (in Matthew it is "The Kingdom of heaven is like"): see, for example, the parables of the Growing Seed and the Mustard Seed (Mark 4:26–32). It is quite accurate to say that most of Jesus' parables have no, or very limited, overt reference to the divine person.

35. See Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, 28, 68–69; and Craddock, *Overhearing the Gospel*, 26.

itself uses stories that call the listener/reader to consider the ways of God without actually mentioning his name.³⁶

b. *“Preaching subversively” as an effective approach*

Utilizing a form of sermon that makes little or no direct reference to the name of God is an attempt to preach subversively. It tries to sneak up on the listeners and impart a lesson about God in an indirect way. It tries to help people experience the text rather than just understand it, to enter into the narrative and be captured by it, rather than stand outside of it as one trying to analyze it or “figure it out.” This is not to diminish the need for people to understand the text; it is however to recognize that in today’s postmodern, post-Christian culture, the need to experience a text often comes before the need and the ability to understand it. For those who have little or no understanding of the Christian faith, a story that refers directly to aspects of life that they are familiar with may provide a way to draw them into the story of the gospel without asking them to be conversant with the church’s encoded language, which at times can keep people away from the gospel. For those who have heard the message a multitude of times it offers a fresh hearing of the message. Charles Campbell summarizes Fred Craddock when he writes, “more information is not what is necessary; what is needed is something else: an experience of information we already possess.”³⁷ Indeed, an experience of the gospel is exactly what is needed by many hearers in these postmodern times. Lowry comments on Jesus’ ability to use stories to answer individuals’

36. It can be argued that Jesus’ parables are not as indirect as the story of Esther since they use very stock images (king, shepherd, banquet, etc.) in their narrative. These images had overt religious connotations, which made their function in the parable more easily recognizable. While this may be true, it certainly does not deny the effectiveness of Esther as a didactic narrative. In fact, in a culture that is increasingly biblically and religiously illiterate there are fewer and fewer terms that can be considered “stock” language. Thus, the indirectness of Esther may typify postmodern preaching of this sort even more clearly than Jesus’ parables do.

37. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 127.

questions so that they were transformed by the experience without realizing what was taking place. He writes,

When asked a question, often right out of the vested interest of the questioner, he did not say: “Perhaps you should ask that another way” or “Here’s the question you should have asked.” He simply proceeded to tell a story—one that may or may not have appeared related to the question. The questioner could not get defensive, yet could not argue. One had to wait and see—and then it was too late!³⁸

As Jesus’ questioners were drawn into the experience of the story, they were left with an altered perspective, one that left them seeing the situation differently. As we have already noted, Jesus often did this by using stories that did not even mention the name of God. For this reason, an approach that draws the audience into a narrative and subversively seeks to inculcate the values and perspectives of God’s kingdom so that the congregation is effectively engaged into God’s story is a viable approach, even if it does not include the divine name.

c. A scripturally generated approach to narrative

A criticism of narrative preaching has been that it is rooted in a liberal theological method that emphasizes experience at the heart of homiletics.³⁹ While it is clear that this is a well-founded criticism, it has often been based upon the charge that narrative preaching tends to be rooted in various narrative theories more than in the church’s Scripture or particular biblical narratives.⁴⁰ The approach being suggested here stands in opposition to such charges and seeks to find narrative structures that are fully employed by the Scriptures themselves. As we will explore in the next major section, there are narrative practices that the author of Esther employs to accomplish the intended purpose. Similarly, a study of Jesus’ parables can yield insight into what

38. Lowry, *Doing Time in the Pulpit*, 68–69.

39. Campbell, *Preaching Jesus*, 165.

40. *Ibid.*, 167.

can rightly be called a scripturally-generated approach to narrative.⁴¹

Such an approach can begin with either a life experience or a biblical text. It may emanate from the preacher's desire to address an issue related to the current experience of her congregation. A text is chosen and a narrative is developed that faithfully communicates the theology of that text. At another time, the preacher may decide that an appropriate way to proclaim a given text is through a narrative that is exegetically sensitive and highly applicable to the congregation, yet accomplishes both these tasks in a highly subversive way, without invoking the divine name in the sermon. In both cases a narrative is constructed that seeks to intermingle human experience with biblical perspectives on that experience, ultimately seeking to interpret and shape that experience in a way that absorbs people's experience into the biblical view of the world. This is what the author of Esther seeks to do and it is also what Jesus does in his parables. The reality of life in this world generated the questions and issues to which the book of Esther spoke. The response of the main characters to their situations provided wise guidance as to how the original readers could respond to their ongoing diaspora, and offered clues as to where God was in the midst of what felt like his complete abandoning. Jesus spoke parables that began with questions posed directly out of a person's experience of life in this world.⁴² He also spoke parables that came out of his own intention to declare the kingdom of God.⁴³

In this way the genesis for a narrative that does not refer to God but still teaches about God can be either human experience or a biblical text. In each case its ultimate aim is to offer a theologically reflective approach to homiletics that speaks

41. An investigation of the narrative structure of parables is well outside the scope of this article, although Lowry, *How to Preach a Parable*, has certainly addressed the issue.

42. See, for example, the context for the three parables in Luke 15.

43. See, for example, the context for the parables in Matthew 13.

obviously and directly to human experience from a biblical perspective.

d. *Essential practices for using Esther as a homiletical model*

In order to maximize Esther as a homiletical model it is imperative that we understand some of the mechanisms present in and around the text that made it a powerful spiritual narrative for Israel. The following points seek to identify the things that were essential for the Esther narrative to find resonance with its original audience, and will also be essential to preaching in a way that is useful to contemporary audiences. I will also give examples from a sermon that I preached using this approach.

i. *Locatedness*: The sermon must have a narrative that is identifiable in its context; it must speak of things that the audience can readily identify with. This means that it either speaks concretely of life in this world as the audience knows it, or uses symbols and conventions familiar to them.

Esther was set in a place that had resonance with its readers: Susa was a real place, Xerxes was a king, and the Persians were their subjugators. These realities evoked the exilic experience and called out from the readers memories connected to identifiable people and places. If a narrative is inaccessible to people, any potential meaning it may have will be lost. A narrative sermon must serve its context by setting a scenario that is readily identifiable to its audience, either because it speaks about people and places they know or uses story-telling conventions that they understand. Further, they must be able to see themselves in the story and see how the narrative speaks to their situation in order for the message to have maximum effect.

I employed this technique in a sermon on the power of the Holy Spirit to enable Christians to live sanctified lives. I used a story of a beautiful, young, but physically unimposing princess, who was forced to go on a journey through dangerous, unfriendly territory on a mission to bring deliverance to her people. She was divinely enabled for the journey by a special gift given to her by an angel. This made her capable for the mission, although she had to venture out in faith and trust that what was

put within her by the angel would be sufficient for the challenges she would face. This story employed conventional story-telling themes like a princess, a perilous journey, overwhelming odds, and a “secret” weapon that made the journey possible. These are devices that most people can readily identify and make connections with.

Part of the effectiveness of this approach comes from including the audience in the process of making meaning from a narrative. The audience become legitimate participants in the sermon process. They hear a story that speaks of things familiar to them, they understand that there is meaning in this story, and they begin to put the pieces together in their minds, constructing meaning from the story for their lives. Again, we have Jesus’ teaching as an example of this approach. He constantly drew on common events, places, and experiences to construct a story and make his point, often trusting that his audience would get the religious meaning of a story without there being much, if any, reference to God. Craddock notes:

The effectiveness of much of Jesus’ preaching depended not simply on the revelatory power of his parables but also upon the perceptive power of those who attended to them. “Let anyone with ears to hear listen.”⁴⁴

Craddock points out that giving an audience “room to respond” marks a good drama. It is entirely appropriate to expect the audience to fill in the story and take responsibility for giving it part of its meaning.⁴⁵ This seems to be exactly what the author of Esther did by offering the community a narrative that affirmed both their role and God’s in diasporic life without speaking directly about God or about how Israel was supposed to respond to the story. They were invited to enter the story and find God there. They were invited to take the wisdom provided by Esther and figure out how to embody it in their current diaspora.

This is possible because Esther speaks to its audience in concrete ways, using familiar terms and experiences, and then

44. Craddock, *As One without Authority*, 54.

45. *Ibid.*

invites them to see God in the story and discern how he may also be present in their lives.

ii. *Clues*: In aiding the audience to discern meaning and see God in a narrative devoid of his name, it is crucial to use clues that lead the hearer to deduce that seeing God in the narrative is the best explanation for it. For example, the use of actions and words that have religious overtones points to the activity of God in a narrative even if the name of God is never mentioned. Words, symbols, actions, “coincidences,” and unexpected plot reversals all can point to a divine hand at work and are necessary narrative devices that lead the hearer to discern God in the story. As noted above, the writer of Esther employs such things liberally throughout the narrative.

Ronald Thiemann points out that the Gospels employ a strategy not unlike the one suggested here. In the Gospels, God’s direct involvement in the action is rarely depicted. Instead Jesus takes center stage and readers are invited to see the mighty work of God through the activities and words of this man.

God’s hiddenness is an essential part of the New Testament message, because the cumulative depiction of Jesus’ identity brings an increasing convergence between the activity of Jesus and that of the hidden God of Israel. The connection between God’s intention and Jesus’ mission is announced explicitly in the baptism and transfiguration stories, but is established more subtly in the narrative sequence itself.⁴⁶

Reading the Gospels through the lens of twenty centuries of history leads us to approach the text with many assumptions, both good and bad. However, for the original readers, the presence of God in the Gospels was largely to be discerned by reading (or hearing) the narrative and coming to conclusions based on what they found in the story of Jesus.

As a story offers its listeners (or readers) clues to guide them on their journey of deduction, the attentive audience member will discern what is going on in the story and begin making

46. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology*, 89.

connections between the narrative and the hidden presence of God within it.⁴⁷

In my sermon containing the story of the princess, I used many clear “coincidences” and occurrences that could only be explained by some kind of divine intervention. I also employed an angel as a character to further lead people to consider that the success of the princess’s journey was clearly coming from forces outside of herself. In order to further help the audience make connections I portrayed the princess as very human: she experienced fear, doubt, and confusion while on her journey, just as we do on our faith journey as Christians. Further, her experiences bore resemblance to those we all face: temptation, intimidation, and trials.

iii. *The exemplary behavior of the main characters*: The story of Esther has didactic potency because the main characters, Esther and Mordecai, demonstrate the potential for Jewish life in exilic circumstances. Their behavior points to their faith and allegiance to the community and, one can assume, the God who formed the community. As Carol Bechtel points out in her commentary on Esther, one of the clear themes of the book is the distinction of Esther and Mordecai against King Ahasuerus and Haman. The extravagant and unwise lives of the latter are contrasted with the propriety of the former, and it becomes clear that Jewish piety wins out over Persian disproportion every time.⁴⁸

In the same way, a narrative sermon that features characters who exemplify clear Christian attitudes and behavior over and against characters who exemplify distinctly non-Christian ones will point the audience toward the didactic nature of the sermon and help them to identify who the “heros” are, and, in turn, whom it is being suggested that they should seek to emulate.

Just as it is really not hard to distinguish in Esther who the “good guys” are, so a sermon that follows a similar narrative

47. See Hauwerwas and Burrell, “From System to Story,” 179. The authors discuss the way the use of language and character can lead the audience to conclusions without “any need for philosophical reminders.”

48. Bechtel, *Esther*, 7–10.

pattern can also clearly present ideal Christian behavior, faith, and patterns of living without mentioning the name of the divine One who establishes those patterns. Just as Esther functioned as a model for Jews who were untangling the complexities of living in a marginalized (or exilic) situation, so too does the church need (post) modern narratives that offer us exemplars of Christian life in the post-Christian context of contemporary society. A narrative sermon that offers a depiction of such characters can offer subversive wisdom for Christian living in a marginalized context.

In the sermon in which I used the princess story, the main character exhibited great faith in the idea that she had been divinely empowered for her journey. She trusted in the angel's word even though there was no physical evidence that she was different. This connects with our own challenge to trust the filling of God's Spirit despite any lack of obvious outward manifestation. She also exhibited noble character in that she accepted the mission given to her on behalf of her people who, without her help, would have been in great peril. This invites listeners to consider how they will respond to God's invitation to courageously engage their world in faith that the Spirit will enable them. These are ideal traits that invite listeners to consider how they will respond to the biblical text that the story is explicating.

iv. *The sermon as key interpretive clue*: Ultimately, it is Esther's place in the biblical canon that provokes us to look for God's presence in the story. As we have noted, the absence of the divine name has made Esther's place among the books of the Bible suspect for a justifiable reason. No one denies that Esther is a wonderful story that can entertain and enrich audiences of all ages, however, if it is taken out of its context within the biblical canon, its power as a theological story changes. The key to its theological viability is its place in the canon. Ultimately its location in the canon becomes its interpretive key.

In the same way, a narrative sermon that speaks about God without direct reference to God is highly dependent upon its locatedness as a message delivered from a Christian pulpit. Outside of the canon, Esther is easily understood as a secular story.

Within the canon, one can perceive God all through it. A story told at the local pub is just a good story; located in a Christian pulpit it is interpreted in a completely different way.

A message can, even should, be augmented by other elements in a church worship service. A biblical text that relates to and gives exegetical substance to the message may be read prior to the sermon; songs may be sung both before and after the message that relate to the theme of the message; prayers may be prayed that prepare the congregation for the message and lead them in a response to it.

These devices, added to the fact that the message is being proclaimed in a church, can provide the necessary context for a sermon that does not include the name of God to be understood as a message about God, just as Esther's place in the canon provides the key interpretive clue for it as a book that reveals the activity of a hidden God.

In the sermon I preached using the princess, the order of service before and after the sermon clearly pointed to a theme that related to the Holy Spirit and his empowering presence in our lives. Songs were chosen, the theme was described creatively near the beginning of the service, and prayers were crafted so as to point to the theme prior to the sermon. Also the text, Rom 8:1–13, was read right before the sermon was preached. After the sermon, a song focused on the Spirit that clearly invited a response to the sermon was sung, and a brief concluding statement that was both invitational and also covered over some of the rough theological edges potentially left unclarified by the story was offered before the final benediction drew the sermon and theme of the service together in a clear way.

Conclusion

An approach such as the one proposed here is a homiletical tool for a preacher to employ. Just as carpenters need various tools in their tool belts for specific jobs, so, too, preachers need various homiletical methods in order to preach creatively and with freshness over the long haul. This is especially true when one is preaching to the same congregation week after week. Preaching

narrative sermons that do not mention God's name is not intended as the only method for a preacher to use, nor is it here suggested that it is the best model for any particular genre of Scripture. It is my proposal, however, that, when done properly, such a sermon can have enlightening effects on listeners in just the same way that Esther has provoked millions of readers over the centuries.

In these postmodern days, such an approach to preaching invites the congregants to be participators in the meaning-making of the message, and allows hearers to enter into the experience of the sermon by trusting them to "have ears to hear." It can provide a powerfully subversive approach to preaching in much the same way as Jesus' parables did (do). The point comes at the audience like a "sneak punch," or as entering through the "back door." The payoff is sometimes surprising and unexpected. Jesus obviously thought this could be a highly effective way to communicate as did the author of Esther.

For veteran church goers, familiar with the stories and doctrines of the Bible, the method provides a fresh hearing of Scripture, one that asks something of them rather than just reworks a familiar theme in a way similar to what has been done in the past. For those unfamiliar with the language of the Bible, it can open up the vistas of possibility and provide a precursor to further engagement with the gospel.

Above all, it provides the opportunity for the listener to experience the text. Stories, after all, are not about theories or themes, but what it is like to fall in love, go on a great adventure, or think that you have met God in one of life's circumstances.⁴⁹

Preaching should provide listeners with opportunities to experience a text in surprising, even mystical, ways and when used effectively, even narratives that do not mention God's name can lead people into an experience of the divine.

49. See Hanson, *A Stay against Confusion*, 33.

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