

## Ascension

[John Eaton](#)

### Lectionary 58:

Acts 1:1 – 11

Ps 47: 2 – 3, 6 – 7, 8 – 9

Eph. 1: 17 – 23

Matt 28: 16 – 20

**Preaching Theme 1:** Traumatic events can negatively impact one’s ability to cope with the requirements of everyday life. Sometimes an impetus from the outside is required to nudge one into action. Jesus’ promised gift of the Holy Spirit can assist us in dealing with the vagaries of everyday life.

### **Possible Resources**

- A very well documented yet short report on the challenges and solutions to the presence of Grief in the Workplace
- A brief and accessible outline from the Mayo Clinic on the nature of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)
- From the journal Psychology Today, a very readable overview of executive function and strategies for strengthening it
- A Medical news report on the symptoms, causes and treatment of “Disordered executive function”

**Preaching Theme 2:** Particularly from the Synoptic Gospels, it is clear that Jesus was a master storyteller who used parables to highlight the values of the Kingdom of God and to challenge his listeners’ presuppositions. While there is always a place for theological and philosophical discourse, storytelling continues to be an important tool to “make disciples of all nations.”

### **Possible Resources**

- A narrative explanation by researcher Paul Zak about How Stories Change the Brain
- From the Journal of Leadership Education, an exploration of Teaching Storytelling as a Leadership Practice
- Business professionals believe that one can Use Stories and Symbols to Build a Powerful Culture
- A review of Jonathan Gottschall’s best seller The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human

## Homily outline on the Great Commission as an invitation into the Jesus Story

**All the gospels agree that Jesus was an effective and renowned teacher.**

- At times, the teaching is presented in discourses
  - Matthew's Sermon on the Mount
  - John's discourse during the Last Supper
- Parts of the discourses are easily memorable
  - Beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount
  - "I AM the vine; you are the branches" from the Last Supper discourse

**Besides the lengthy discourses, Jesus' teaching repertory also included parables**

- The essence of the parable is to challenge listeners' preconceptions and highlight the values of the Kingdom of God.
- Some parables like "The Good Samaritan" and "The Prodigal Son" are masterpieces of the storyteller's art.
- While today's Gospel does not contain any explicit parables nor very much of a story
  - When connected with Luke's story telling in the opening reading
  - It could be refreshing and revelatory to think about the Gospel's "Great Commission" as an invitation into the Jesus Story.

**Recently scientists have tried to understand what renders stories so effective.**

- Neuroscientists, psychologists and other scientists are exploring why story telling is such an effective form of communication.
- Brain studies have shown that at a purely physiological level
  - personal and emotionally compelling engage more of the brain
  - and are more memorable than a set of facts
- Also at the physiological level it is proven that effective story telling prompts the brain to release neurotransmitters or chemical messengers
  - such as oxytocin, the so called "love drug"
  - which stimulates people to become more generous, and compassionate,
  - which is why they are effective in fundraising or recruiting for some cause.
- Our own experience teaches us that
  - stories can motivate and inspire
  - but more than that, they can transport the listener into another's world
  - and thus are powerful tools for facilitating shared learning and mutual understanding.
- Effective narratives are less about transmitting information than about communicating values.
  - Stories can consequently be understood as acts of meaning making.
- One scientist considers storytelling a kind of mental simulator
  - Allowing us to experience new and vivid simulations of reality
  - Without all of the danger.

**Catechism or Commission?**

- Many people learned religious truths through Catechisms.
- Some of these were in a question-and-answer format, like the *Baltimore Catechism*.
- Other religious education texts or approaches were similarly focused on communicating "information"
- Human experience and now scientific data remind us that such information is less inspiring than stories of conversion of faith.
- Thus, biblical scholar and literary critic Amos Wilder held

- o That not only was narrative a primary literary mode of the Old Testament and New Testament
- o But that Christian communication itself is ordinarily achieved through story.
- In today's gospel, the apostles are entrusted with the Great Commission to "make disciples of all nations."
- The best storyteller of the New Testament, Luke, shows us how that is done in today's first reading
  - o Luke vividly tells the story of Jesus' Ascension and promise to send the Spirit.
  - o He illustrates that true catechesis is telling the stories.
  - o Furthermore, as an evangelist he gives witness to the importance of living the story.
  - o Luke does not simply write or speak, he lives the Jesus story.

### **Missionary disciples**

- In his powerful apostolic exhortation, the Joy of the Gospel, Pope Francis calls us to be "missionary disciples."
- We do this by our words and our deeds.
- Christians believe themselves heirs to "The Greatest Story Ever Told."
- By living the Jesus story, we give witness to its continued transformative power
  - o and keep the Jesus narrative in all of its beauty and hope alive today.

**Tags:** Catechism, Great Commission, Neuroscience, Storytelling

### **About the Preaching with the Sciences Initiative**

A primary way Roman Catholics explore their faith and nourish their spirituality is by participating in Sunday Mass and actively engaging in the homily. However, few preachers explicitly connect faith or spirituality with science. The Preaching with the Sciences initiative, made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, gathers scientists and leading homileticians to explore the positive contributions science can make to preaching, and consequently contribute to more contemporary modes of believing. Such contributions are grounded in the rich imaginations that scientists bring to their work as well as in scientific discoveries that have a potential for revealing religious truths and even shedding new insight on ancient teachings and beliefs.

With guidance from world-renowned scientists with differing areas of expertise, a select number of homileticians will draft homily outlines for preaching key Sundays and feast days across the 3-year lectionary cycle. Over 100 homily outlines will highlight some of the way's sciences and the contemporary search for religious meaning can interface. These free homiletic resources have the potential to influence thousands of preachers seeking help each week in crafting sermons and helping to shape a scientifically informed religious imagination among future preachers.