Why Not Try This - Effective Preaching: Choosing Illustrations

Illustrations are pictures in books that show what the book tells. They add force to its message. In a sermon, they serve the same goal but the medium has changed. Instead of ink and paper, you have words and the listener's mind. You paint mental scenes with words.

In some cases, you will start from scratch. At other times, you can use an image already etched in their brain - instead of painting it fresh, your words bring it into focus. This works best with familiar scenes. Either way, your goal is to turn ideas into pictures. Some readers will thrive on this notion. But, if you are not good with description, don't worry. Many stories and pictures are strong enough to live without your help. You can also borrow the talent of others, if you give credit. Read More...
NPUC May Evangelistic Meetings

Please pray for the 3 meetings taking place in June in these churches throughout the North Pacific Union:

- Eugene, OR Spanish
- Newberg, OR Spanish
- Central Valley in Toppenish, WA

Changed Lives - Outstretched Arms

by John Kurlinski, Pastor of the Bremerton Seventh-day Adventist Church

Javier was raised in south central Los Angeles. He grew up and lived under the out-stretched arms of Jesus. Not His literal arms but in the neighborhood of the once famous LA mural of a Hispanic Jesus painted by Kent Twitchell on the side of the old Tiger Liquor Store on 11th Street. He was at the dedication in 1984. It marked the northern boundary of SOLOS - the local gang of which Javier joined when he was 10 years old.

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Vets who are now blind or visually impaired may receive a gift of a solar-powered audiobook player, “inSight 4Vets,” as provided by Christian Record Services. inSight contains stories and portions of the Bible, selected to comfort and inspire. You can sponsor an inSight4Vets player and also help identify blinded veterans so more players can be gifted. [MORE](#)

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**Health and Temperance - Facts with Hope**

Facts with Hope are evidence based health messages that may be used in a church bulletin, newsletter, or during the “Health Minute” as part of church service to motivate people to choose a full abundant life. They are published monthly in our Health Unlimited Newsletter.

For more information on Facts with Hope, visit the [website](#), like us on [Facebook](#), or follow us on [Twitter](#). You can also watch Facts with Hope videos on [Youtube](#).

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**Advent Movements - White**

Anthony White stepped into the role of digital media coordinator for the North Pacific Union Conference this week. He fills the gap created when Brent Hardinge left to begin work in a similar role for the General Conference. White has Northwest roots - his parents, Phil and Jan White, worked a number of years for the Washington Conference. He graduated in 2013 from Walla Walla University with a degree in mass communication. He most recently worked as a graphic designer for the It Is Written international television ministry and as digital media director for the 2014 Cathy McMorris Rodgers for congress campaign.
Ministry Partners

Effective Preaching: Choosing Illustrations

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“"A writer for the Washington Post describes the event this way ..." Or, “C. S. Lewis tells the story of ...”

Even so, it is well worth the work to develop your own skills. You may discover a hidden talent or, at least, improve. Whatever you can do to make the story of the text live will increase impact and retention.

Types of Illustrations
Before exploring how to paint good illustrations, we should consider the shapes they take. Most illustrations are stories but stories come in many forms. There are stories from your week, childhood stories, news stories, historical stories, celebrity stories, and others.

There is also common experience to draw from. “We all know what it’s like to say the wrong thing at the wrong time.” Or, “You know that feeling you get when blue lights start flashing in the rear view mirror? That’s the feeling I got when I first read this text.”

Quotes are another way to illustrate, adding authority or color to your message. Finally, other Scripture texts can clarify and reinforce the message of your anchor text.

Illustrations Help You Connect
Illustrating is about connecting. The first rule is, link eyes with your audience. That visual link helps them feel part of the sermon, and it helps you. When you are telling a story to real humans, instead of talking to your notes, social instincts kick in to make it natural.

Illustrations are the easiest part of your sermon to remember, making it easier to tell them without notes. If you would forget the illustration without notes, it’s a poor one. If you can’t remember it, the audience sure won’t. And, it won’t work, either, if they go to sleep while you talk to your notes.

That is harsh. We should not say such things to a preacher. Do not fear, your audience will not sleep if you apply some keys for crafting illustrations that connect.

Four Keys of Storytelling
Since most illustrations are stories, let us focus here on crafting stories. However, keep in
mind that all kinds of illustrations enhance the story of the text, giving these keys universal application.

1. Cut the Static — The first key is to cut the static. Fine-tuning a story is like tuning your radio. You have to remove the “noise” that clutters the mind. How? First, write it down. Then, scratch out all the extra words. Be ruthless. Kill every word that slows speech. Next, scratch out all facts that don’t move the storyline, no matter how interesting. In most cases, you will find that the story won’t suffer. It may lose some of its color but you will see that it moves better, more like a stride and less like an amble.

2. Make it Live — The second key is to make it live. Put some color back in the story. Take a mental trip to the place it happened. Stand there and look around until it seems real. Notice the carpet and lampshades or mud floors and oil lamps. Only when you experience the story can you create that experience for others.

By cutting the static, you have stripped the story to its bones. Now, put some flesh back on it but don’t put back the static. Add only what keeps the story at a stride. Build its muscle but don’t make it fat. Anything that slows it down hinders the story and its power to illustrate.

One way to keep it moving is choosing colorful verbs and nouns instead of adjectives and adverbs. Take an example: “The little bird flew quickly past the window.” There is nothing wrong with the sentence but it lags. Say it aloud. It doesn’t roll off the tongue right, does it? We can do better.

Cutting the adjective, “little,” and the adverb, “quickly,” speeds it up. We get, “The bird flew past the window.” Try the tongue test again. Smoother? Yes, but we lose some color. This is where colorful verbs and nouns can help. Replace “bird” with “finch” and “flew” with “shot” and you get, “The finch shot past the window.” Much better. (These examples originated with Derek Morris, senior pastor at Forest Lake Church near Orlando, Florida, and adjunct professor of preaching at the Andrews University seminary.)

3. Sharpen It — The third key is to sharpen it. Identify the point of comparison between the idea you wish to illustrate and the illustration. Then, cut the facts that distract from it. It is OK if the story changes, as long as you are still telling the truth. Stories are only a snapshot of real life. By changing the story, you are just cropping the shot. To preserve the story of the text, you may have to sacrifice some elements of the illustrating stories, (like funny side notes, for example). That’s OK. Illuminating the text is what counts.

4. Aim for the Heart — The fourth key is to aim for the heart. Illustrations float best in a pool of tears — whether happy or sad. If facts were enough, you would need few illustrations. It is true that some illustrations clarify but most add heart to the sermon. Even macho men run on emotion. It might not be sappy emotion, but a rousing call to heroics or duty or indignation is also emotional. People decide with their hearts. We could debate the merits of this fact but it remains fact. Your sermon is powerless without a heart appeal. This was true even for Christ’s apostles (Acts 2:37).

The Four Keys Applied
We will “illustrate” each of these four keys with an old story. The story of Abraham Lincoln is complex but always told simply. Questions still swirl about his motives in fighting the Civil War. He made tactical blunders when the war started, but his story is told without this static so the true strength of his vision can emerge.

The best tellers of Lincoln’s story are Civil War historians and battlefield curators because they have “lived” in Lincoln’s world enough to make him live in ours, complete with hat and boots. The years of telling and retelling his story have sharpened it to such a point that every student knows his imprint on America.
But the reason for telling it is that it stirs the heart — to duty, to sacrifice, to love for something bigger than self. Well-told stories shape the world. However, story is not enough. In fact, “good illustrations” do not exist alone. They are only “good” if they illustrate your text well. (This formulation of thought belongs to Derek Morris.)

**Illustrate with Purpose**

Here is the story of a young mother who suddenly went blind. For twenty-six years, she suffered. She missed the change in each child’s maturing face. She never saw her grandchildren. Such tragedy; then came more tragedy.

Medics rushed her to the hospital with a heart attack. Her organs were failing. She was lifeless. But, after hours of work, the doctors, with God’s help, brought her back. And, wonder of wonders, after twenty-six years, her sight was back too. It was a medical miracle! This is the kind of story that, when you happen upon it, you want it for a sermon, but you must be cautious.

A story this powerful can actually destroy the sermon, if misapplied. It is dynamite but you don’t want dynamite in the wrong place. If you wish to illustrate the point of James 3:1-12, “Wash the heart, not the mouth,” this story will hurt the sermon.

Everyone will retain the story but miss the point of the text. A story about someone who overcame cursing through prayer may not be as dramatic but serves the sermon much better. Save the mother’s story in a file until you find its fit. (It wasn’t long before I found a place to use it. I was preparing to explain the book of Habakkuk to high school students when something clicked. In his book, Habakkuk asks two questions. Seeing how the innocent suffer at the hands of evil men, Habakkuk cries out to God, “Why do you tolerate wrong?” (Habakkuk 1:3). This is the same question that blind woman must have asked for twenty-six years; “Why do I suffer and God does nothing?”)

God answers Habakkuk with a promise to send Babylonian armies and punish Israel (1:6). That gives rise to a second question. How can God use worse people to correct Israel? (1:13). It’s not fair. But God doesn’t answer the fairness question. He just says it will work out (2:1-20). The book ends with Habakkuk’s confession of faith.

In essence, he says, “It doesn’t make sense but I trust you” (3:17-18). The blind woman certainly would not have asked for a heart attack — it wouldn’t make sense — but it gave back her sight after 26 years. The woman’s story strengthens the point that, though life seems unfair, God is trustworthy. That’s Habakkuk in a nutshell.

**Match Strength to Strength**

Your strongest illustration should reinforce your main point. Listeners remember good stories. Make sure the one they remember best is the one that drives home your main point, either the biblical answer or life application.

This does not mean you will only tell one story or use one illustration for each sermon. Just make the others less fantastic. They should be short and just enough to nail down one scene in the text before moving to the next. Make the force and length of each illustration equal to the weight of the point it serves.

**When to Illustrate**

By this time, you have enough information to build good illustrations. Now it’s time you think of where to use them. Every good sermon starts in the listener’s world, making a true-life story one of the best ways to raise the life question.

One creative option is that, with just the right story, you can tell it in two parts. To introduce the sermon, tell the perplexing part, the part that sparks the question. Then, when you have shared the biblical answer, tell the part that shows how this truth helped the main character. Or, use two separate stories to serve the same goals.

Use your strongest illustration for your sermon’s conclusion and the second strongest for the introduction (except, of
course, with a two-part story). The introduction is where you prove your sermon worth hearing and your conclusion is where you drive in its point. For both, you must capture the heart.

Other types of illustrations, like factoids, anecdotes, comparisons, statistics, and the like, may also capture the heart. But, most of these have less impact and work best for illustrating scenes in the text flow. Don’t illustrate points smaller than the major scenes, or sermon movements. A good sermon will have at least one and no more than six illustrations.

In summary, there are three spots for illustrations: to introduce the life question, to encapsulate the building blocks that lead to the biblical answer, and to drive the main point through the heart.

Avoid Leaky Illustrations
The most important rule to remember is that illustrations are a communication device, a medium through which we funnel a message. Their ability to funnel the message is their one test of value.

Children sometimes communicate secret messages with cans and string. The tension in the string carries the vibrations of their voices from one can to the other.

Older children, if they live in a house with the right kind of construction, may find an improved channel of communication by speaking into the heater vents at opposite ends of the house. The heating ducts carry their voices without the bother of wind or broken strings.

There is one problem. If they send covert, after bedtime voice messages from one end of the house to the other, those words escape to the vents in other rooms, including the ones with parents in them. So much for stealth . . .

Although cans with string is a lesser device than heater vents, the vents allow the message to leak out and defeats the purpose. Remember the lesson of the heater vents when choosing your illustrations. Don’t look for the best story but the best illustration of the biblical point. Keep your purpose in mind.

Illustrating James 3:1-12
As an example, let us illustrate James 3:1-12. This text carries its own illustrations, in the form of metaphors (ships, fire, et cetera). They encapsulate the scenes of the story but they are far from the listener’s world. Although understandable in today’s world, most listeners don’t live with ships or forest fires. We can use them for clarity but we must start and end in the listener’s world with stories close to their heart.

The life question is, “How can I clean up my speech?” The best illustration to raise this question is the most direct. Find a story about someone who struggled to stop cursing others. Better yet, tell on yourself. No doubt you have stumbled in speech.

The biblical answer is, “Cleanse the heart, not the mouth.” The best illustration for this concept is a story of someone’s changed heart that changed their speech. If you can’t dig up a story that direct, find one that shows how a changed heart kicked another habit. The real point is that you can’t change yourself; God must change you. If you illustrate this concept, you can explain how it applies to speech.

How to Find Illustrations
We have learned why, how, and where to use illustrations. One task remains — finding them — a task that intimidates every new preacher. There’s good news: illustrations are everywhere. Having good ones comes from seeing them more than finding them.

1. Look for Them in Life — You can learn to see illustrations with a simple practice. Carry a palm-sized notepad,
index cards, or a small recorder. Whenever something interesting happens to you, think of what it illustrates and record it. Do the same with interesting news stories, quotes, movie scenes, memories, or whatever you experience in life. Some preachers will tell you that their best illustrations come from childhood memories or the news. It might seem hard at first but you will soon have more illustrations than you can use. Organize them into file folders on your computer (or the old fashioned way) so you have them when you need them.

2. Look for Them in Scripture — Illustrating your text with other Bible texts is more complex. It is still wise to keep track of insights you find through personal study (like you would daily experiences) but there is more. First, only use illustrating texts that you have studied. Misused texts weaken your message. Second, don’t use more than six illustrating texts. Too many will splinter the sermon’s punch. You can find the right texts with a concordance, through cross-references in your Bible, or with software.

This article first appeared in the iFollow discipleship resource. Reprinted with permission from the North American Division
Javier was raised in south central Los Angeles. He grew up and lived under the out-stretched arms of Jesus. Not His literal arms but in the neighborhood of the once famous LA mural of a Hispanic Jesus painted by Kent Twitchell on the side of the old Tiger Liquor Store on 11th Street. He was at the dedication in 1984. It marked the northern boundary of SOLOS — the local gang of which Javier joined when he was 10 years old.

One of the regular “events” were funerals. Every couple of years they would bury a family member, mostly gang-related. His father left the family while he was a toddler. To say that life was difficult is a huge understatement.

Many times between his 10th and 15th birthday Javier ran away, or tried to run away from home. He lived with various “homeboys” in abandoned houses that were scattered through the neighborhood. He was in and out of juvenile detention centers. Life in the gang was a life of drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, and lots of violence. Javier said there were about 20-30 fights a year —many with other gang members who strayed into the territory, though there were many with members of SOLOS, establishing the “pecking order.” Anger was the fuel for the violence and the drug abuse that attempted to quench the troubled heart.

Though his grandmother tried to take the children to church —church was just a place to meet girls and sell drugs after the services, It was also the meeting place of gang members when they were incarcerated in both the juvenile detention centers and later in prison.

A month before his 15th birthday, he was released from one of the many stays in juvenile detention. 62 days later his life, at the age of 15 would take a dramatic turn.

The Fourth of July holiday was notorious for violence because the many fireworks masked the numerous small arms fire of rival gang drive-by shootings. It was near the mural of Jesus, on 111th and Vermont that Javier was shot on July 3rd in a drive-by. A .22 caliber bullet pierced his lung and lodged in his spine. Though he didn’t realize it for several weeks because of hospitalization he was now a paraplegic.

Life, paralyzed from the bottom of the rib cage down was a struggle. It takes him one to one and a half hours each morning to just get dressed. And he is too proud and independent to have or seek help —which was, in the gang mentality, a sign of weakness.

Often tragedy has a way of softening a heart, causing people to reassess their life, looking for answers and meaning that were neglected in the years of poverty and abuse. But this was not the case for Javier. He became angrier and even more violent —picking on people even larger than himself, teasing mercilessly those more paralyzed than himself. Even a 5 year stint in prison for gun-running and other firearm violations had no effect for the good. It would take another yearly “family tragedy” to startle and shake Javier’s hard heart.

When he was about 30, that summer, two uncles died one week apart. And less than a month later his younger brother, also a gang member, was killed in a drive-by shooting. At the funeral many had gathered. There was family and gang members —and even some neighbors who came to pay their respects. One was crying and Javier
thought to himself —“why are you crying fool” you don’t even know him. But Javier’s own lack of tears shook him up —“Why don’t I even cry?’

Instead of mocking the many and various street preachers and literature people who also roamed the streets during the day —Javier began his quest for truth, meaning and purpose. Gang life as a paraplegic was no picnic. He eventually decided to leave LA for the Pacific Northwest to escape the violence. He also wanted to get established and try to get a few of the younger cousins out of LA, as well. The drug culture still had a grip on his life —mostly medicinally, since he used marijuana to help him sleep at night.

Whenever Jehovah’s Witnesses or Mormons came to the door he would ask them questions about God, the Bible, life. Though he was often left more confused, he genuinely wanted to know. Then he ran into a Seventh-day Adventist church member passing out toiletries while attending a homeless/low-income dinner.

The member handed him a handbill to some upcoming meeting on prophecy —especially the book of Daniel. Javier came and interest grew —after follow-up Bible studies, Javier gave his heart to Jesus and joined the church. When grace flooded his heart, when he experienced the forgiveness of God for a life of violence and debauchery, the anger melted away. He found that placing yourself in the “arms” of Jesus —melts the anger and banishes the hate.

The only regret Javier has is it took him so long to come to Jesus —even though Jesus’ arms were stretched out to him almost all his life. Now he serves the homeless and those who suffer a multitude of pain, addiction and loss. He has a winsome personality and makes friends easily. Many are willing to try to help him —so what he does is solicits rides to church for worship and for the upcoming Revelation Seminar. Since they are willing to take him, they often sit with him and several are now becoming more frequent attenders —not just because Javier asked them for help.

All marvel at the love and power of God to take someone from such poverty, trials and tribulations, full of violence and hatred —to become meek and loving like Jesus. Javier would say, when you see Jesus’ outstretched arms —run to Him, not away. He has found a “home” and a new family who loves him because of Jesus.
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Free Relational Small Group Study Guides

By Milton Adams

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Leadership Resources for Relational Bible Study

Milton Adams is Director of the Simple Church Global Network