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What Preachers Can Learn from Filmmakers Part 4 (of 4): Medium and Close-Up Editing

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The previous blog in this series focused on “long shot” (“big picture”) editing, specifically, revision tasks related to changing scenes and cutting. This final blog in the series zooms in to “medium-shot” and “close-up” editing. I realize that not all preachers have time to focus on revisions every week. While I cannot offer extra time, I can offer recommendations from filmmakers to preachers who have only 30 or 45 minutes to revise their sermon prior to Sunday morning.

Medium-Shot Revisions

Choose one major move/section of the sermon and focus on setting the scene with vivid language that sparks a variety of senses. The preacher does this by first visualizing the scene and providing a “thick description.” Filmmakers can be helpful guides since they make hundreds of choices in order to provide scenes that create the desired impact on the viewers. Looking carefully at their craft can hone the preacher’s skills for description.

Try this exercise:

Choose a scene from a favorite film. Press pause and write your responses to the following questions.

1. Where is the scene? How do you know?
2. What objects appear in the scene?
3. What details give you clues about the characters in the scene?
4. What is the major color scheme in the scene? What mood does it create?
5. What do you think happened just prior to this scene and what is likely to happen after?
6. What in the scene involves your hearing? your sense of smell?

Now go back to the major move in the sermon and describe your scene using the same prompts. This process helps you visualize the scene so that you can describe it in a way that helps your hearers visualize it . . . without a screen. Writer Janet Burroway summarizes this well: “The first requisite of effective setting is to know it fully, to experience it mentally; and the second is to create it through significant detail.”[1]

One caveat: refrain from getting carried away with details that don’t actually advance the main trajectory of the sermon. In other words, not everything from the exercise will appear in the sermon. Keep only those descriptors that move you to the next section.

Close-Up Revisions

We now zoom in on individual phrases and words. The art of choosing just the right word is not lost on the preacher. In fact, sometimes we agonize over just the right word. I would like to recommend that preachers spend time on the particular phrases that serve as transitions from one major move (section) to the other. Once again, films can assist. Take a segment of the film you engaged above and watch the film until you’ve identified two to three scene changes. Once you’ve done that, take a closer look at the transitions themselves. How does the filmmaker guide us from one scene to the next? Are there hints in the previous scene that we will be moving to a new scene? Or, is the scene change abrupt? If so, why? What effect does an abrupt scene change have on a viewer?

Once you’ve engaged the transitions in the film, return to your sermon draft to analyze its transitions using similar questions. The first step is to make sure that there are transitions. Second, identify the roles the transitions play. In his book, *The Witness of Preaching*, homiletician Tom Long suggests that connectors (his word for transitions) accomplish four communication tasks:

1. provide closure for previous segment
2. indicate how upcoming section is related to previous
3. anticipate the content of the next section
4. helps listeners adopt a stance

Finally, be creative and not clichéd. There are common transitions that belong specifically to the genre of sermons, for example, “In today’s gospel reading . . .” You’ve heard it. You’ve said it. But why not be more creative, especially since when you begin to talk about Peter, we know you are referring to the section of scripture that was just read. Instead, if you are transitioning from a contemporary story to something that happened with Jesus and disciples, try this: “We weren’t the first to be in awe of Jesus’ capacity to calm the treacherous seas of life. The disciples saw it first-hand . . .”

Again, while I cannot gift preachers extra time, I hope these recommendations, gleaned from the wisdom of filmmakers and their work on the screen, might at least offer some editing possibilities if and when preachers find they have extra moments once they’ve got their “rough cut” on the page.

[1] Janet Burroway, *Imaginative Writing: The Elements of Craft* (147).

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