



the sentence

sermon guide

by Eric D. Barreto

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forward

At Odyssey Impact, we believe in the power of personal story to change perspectives, change attitudes and to change the world. Excellent films often evoke deep emotion. They might inspire us—and also trouble us — as we consider a diversity of viewpoints on difficult civic issues.

The *Sentence* offers particular challenges and opportunities to the preacher who feels moved to share the story of Cindy and her family, in some form, within the context of a sermon. Indeed, bringing the complexities and painful realities of the American incarceration system into the context of preaching will be a transformative step in many settings. It is in that light that we are so pleased to present the enclosed insights from the Rev. Dr. Eric D. Barreto, Associate Professor of New Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary. As a biblical scholar who frequently considers how faith-based communities wrestle theologically with difficult civic issues, Dr. Barreto uplifts the several suggestions for integrating the story of Cindy and her family into your preaching, according to your particular context, and with a pastoral heart.

While we offer this sermon guide as a resource to faith leaders, we also recognize that, across faith traditions, what it means to share a holy word within the context of worship varies quite broadly. “Sermons” and “preaching” usually reference Christian contexts, but doctrines and traditions of preaching vastly differ across various denominations. The pulpit (however defined) is usually a point of power within a worshipping community, with a variety of restrictions around who can speak, and on what topics. In some traditions, a “topical” sermon is acceptable and even usual; in others, preaching is governed by a particular cycle of Scriptural passages. We provide this guide as a model and a starting point, even as we understand the manifold and distinctive needs of every faith community.

And whatever your context, we recognize that speaking a holy and true word is a brave act. May we have the bravery of filmmaker Rudy Valdez and his sister Cindy Shank as we endeavor to act faithfully, and speak truthfully.

In hope,

Rev. Dr. Katie Givens Kime

DIRECTOR OF RELIGION & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

the sentence

introduction

The Sentence is a haunting, intimate, emotional glimpse into one family's struggle to make sense of the American justice system. But, even more, it's a story about a family wrestling with injustice, loss, separation, and eventually a reunion, full of pain and joy, healing and scars alike.

In watching this documentary, I was reminded about the power of stories. There are so many statistics we can share about the shortcomings of our justice system and the prison industrial complex. We can read about the costs of phone calls in prisons. We can learn about the public costs of imprisonment to our communities. We can research the history of mandatory minimum sentence and the devastating effect they have had on so many, especially minoritized communities.

But hearing and watching these stories is a whole different way to encounter these realities. Bearing witness to the story of Cindy Shank, her daughters, her parents, her siblings brings to vivid life the concrete effects of her incarceration.

Stories can enter our hearts in a way numbers cannot. Stories can form us in fundamental ways, teaching us who we are, but also who we might become thanks to God's grace. That is the kind of story we experience in The Sentence.

This guide, therefore, turns to key themes, key texts, and key theological trajectories. First, what themes emerge in this documentary? What ideas does this story elucidate for us? Second, we will turn to stories from Scripture, specifically narratives from the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. In these texts, we find vivid stories that can shape who we are today. They are stories full of emotion. They are stories driven by God's activity in a world full of injustice. They are stories that stick with us if we listen to them carefully. Last, we turn to a handful of theological reflections that might help further inform the work of the preacher and teacher alike.

sermon starters

key themes

1. **Justice:** The *Sentence* revolves around the American justice system, its inadequacies, its complications, but especially those who struggle within it. Thus, the documentary invites us to reflect on the shape of justice. What is just? When someone has broken a law, do we hope for punishment? Restoration? Some mixture of the two? Moreover, how do we think theologically about what Michelle Alexander has identified as “The New Jim Crow,” the disproportional ways that black and brown people are subject to violent interactions with police and long prison sentences? The story of Cindy Shank asks us to think specifically about these questions of justice. In addition, her story prompts us to wonder what advocacy might look like for communities of faith around questions of criminal justice reform.
2. **Witness:** The *Sentence* invites us to be **witnesses** of the gripping story of Cindy and her family. The documentary invites us into the intimate spaces of a family’s life, the private phone conversations between a mother and a daughter, the dissolving of a marriage, the joyful reunion, the ambiguous aftermath. What does faithful witness to these precious stories look like for people of faith? What are our obligations when someone invites us into a story full of vulnerability and pain? How do we hold someone else’s story with love and tenderness and perhaps a bit of prophetic rage?

3. **Grief:** Punctuating *The Sentence* is a great deal of grief. Some of it is vivid and evident, as when Cindy's father cries on the phone, lamenting there is nothing he can do to help her. Or in the tears shared by a family happy to be reunited but mourning so many years lost together. Some of the grief is more subtle as when Cindy's daughters lament their mother's absence in a way that is not always explicit but identifiable nonetheless. How can we share in this grief we are witnessing? How does the grief of *The Sentence* inform our own grieving?

4. **Separation:** One of the most persistent feelings in *The Sentence* is the tangibility of separation, the grief of distance, the deep sadness we feel when we cannot see and be with those we love. How might this film help us name and notice the separations we and our neighbors alike experience? How might we develop more empathy for the separations our neighbors suffer, sometimes in secret shame?

key texts

Several texts from the Gospel of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles illustrate how preachers, teachers, and lay leaders alike might draw together the biblical texts and insights from *The Sentence* to proclaim the gospel in their communities. These are but a few examples of how these texts might draw us into rich conversations. Take these short insights into these few texts as a launching pad for your own preaching and teaching.

1. **Luke 1:38, 67-79; 2:19, 33-35, 51:** These verses point to Mary's responses to her extraordinary son in the earliest chapters of the Gospel. First, she must become like a prophet and embrace this difficult, even dangerous call to bear the son of God; she has to say, "Yes!" to the angel's call. Next, she sings a song about a world turned upside down, a song about God's transformative justice. Third, she receives the shepherds' words and "pondered them in her heart." Sometimes, readers assume that this "pondering" is meek and gentle; I encourage you to see it also as coming from a deep place of conviction and courage. Next, she receives a troubling word from Simeon in 2:35: "...and a sword will pierce your own soul too." That is, Mary knows full well the pain that she will have to endure in order for Jesus to follow the path God laid before him. Last, Mary again "treasured all these things in her heart" in 2:51. As Luke's story begins, Mary is a powerful witness, a mother who will experience loss, a prophet who dreams of a better world. I see aspects of Mary's prophetic call in Rudy's persistence to advocate for his sister, of Mary's grief in both of Cindy's parents, of Mary's witness in Cindy's hope to be free once again.
2. **Luke 4:16-19:** We can read these verses as Jesus' mission statement. Wherever he walks, he brings justice and liberation in his wake. A viewing of *The Sentence* highlights two promises here. Jesus points to the ancient prophecy that God "... has sent me to proclaim release to the captives" and "... to let the oppressed go free." How do these promises Jesus makes at the very beginning of his ministry come to life in the story of Cindy and her family?

3. **Luke 7:11-17:** A widow who has lost her son is the central character of this story even as she does not speak. She does not ask for Jesus' help perhaps because her grief has grown beyond hope. He sees her grief (v. 13) and gives her son back to her. I think the widow here exhibits a deep, painful faithfulness even in the midst of her grief. I think Jesus sees her faithfulness in the midst of growing hopelessness. A sermon could help us see the various ways "faith" shows up in Luke and The Sentence alike; from certainty to doubt, Jesus walks with us and sees our faithfulness.

4. **Luke 15:** If Luke only had one chapter to write, he might have shared with us the three vivid stories about separation, loss, and God's relentless search for us in Luke 15. The stories of a woman who loses a coin, a shepherd who searches for a sheep, a father who yearns for the return of his son are powerful because of their deceptive simplicity. Preachers and teachers can draw on these stories to engage our imaginations about how it feels to be lost, how it feels to be found. But the stories do one more thing too. They remind us what it means to be the older brother on the outside of the celebration wondering why in the world someone so undeserving, so obviously guilty is at the center of a feast we wish were being thrown for us, not "them."

5. **Luke 21:1-4:** The Widow's Mite is a story about systems that cost the poor and oppressed more than it does the wealthy and powerful. Instead of a story of a faithful giver, the widow who gives her last few pennies is an example of the "devouring of widow's houses" Jesus criticizes in 20:47. We might be able to bring this story to the current moment by comparing the widow to Cindy's father collecting metal to pay the exorbitant costs of her phone calls. We might think about the costs associated with visiting Cindy, especially when she is jailed far away from her family. At the same time, we can hold up the deep faithfulness of the widow who gives out of a sense of faithfulness while also declaring unjust a system that takes what little she has while demanding very little from those swimming in abundance.

6. **Luke 23:44-49:** In Luke, the cross is a tragedy. Luke emphasizes Jesus' innocence throughout the passion narratives (e.g., 22:51-53; 23:4, 9, 14-15, 41, 47). Jesus had done nothing to merit this cruel, public execution. He was innocent of all charges according to Luke. The cross is a display of imperial arrogance and incompetence. As Jesus is passed from ruler to ruler, the frailty and cruelty of Roman power is laid bare. This is not a system of justice but a broken exercise of power that treads upon the weak and the powerless. In this way, Luke's Jesus is not alone. He is accompanied by many other anonymous victims of Rome's imperial violence. In this way too, Jesus becomes a sibling of others unjustly imprisoned or executed by the powerful. Notice that the first reactions to Jesus' death are grief and sorrow among those who had gathered to watch a "spectacle" (23:48). Like crowds gathered to watch a lynching in their Sunday best, these neighbors of Jesus had looked to the spectacle of empire for some relief or diversion or a violent display of the security a certain kind of empire can provide. Instead, they found a mirror in the cross of Jesus, a mirror that reminds us all that we too can easily become the victims of such vicious, indiscriminate state violence and that we too can join a crowd demanding the death of the innocent or at least join a crowd looking for a "spectacle." In Luke, the cross is a tragedy, one that echoes throughout time and space, crossing the boundaries of eras and nations. Jesus' cross, in this way, is not unique. Jesus' cross was borne by many others, is borne by many others. In Luke, the cross is a tragedy, a real tragedy, but it is also prologue to good news
7. **Acts 1:4-8:** Last, we turn to the opening verses of Acts. As Matthew L. Skinner notices in **Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel**, one of the first instructions Jesus give his followers in Acts is to wait. Before heading to the ends of the earth, they are told to wait for the Spirit to descend upon them. Waiting can feel endless sometimes. Waiting can feel so cruel, so pointless. Here, waiting is a prelude to the gift of the Spirit. In addition, Jesus calls his disciples to be witnesses of what they have seen, to share what they have experienced so that the world might be transformed. And last, Jesus promises to return. What does it feel like to wait for the promises God has made?

8. **Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21:** Revelation closes with a litany of short summaries. They appear, at first glimpse, to be aphoristic thoughts linked together with little structure. However, taken together, they encapsulate the theological convictions underwriting the visionary journey through which Revelation has just led us. First, God's promises are sure. God is faithful and just. Second, God's justice is graceful, and God's grace is just. Without justice, God cannot be graceful. Without grace, God's justice is empty. Revelation does not avert its eyes from the evils that populate the world and the ways those evils inflict the powerless. God's grace requires the just rejection of such forces of death and destruction. Last, God is a God we can trust. To imagine that there is any power beyond the Roman Empire is bold, requiring a huge leap of faith. To imagine that the pain and suffering that characterized the lives of so many in antiquity would be wiped away in the arms of a loving God is bold, requiring a huge leap of faith. To confess that God would not swerve from God's promises is bold faith. It is precisely this faith in God that brings us to the end of this book. It is precisely faith in Jesus' return that draws these Christians into a promised future. Now, it is our turn. Can we trust in God and God's promises? Can we look forward to Jesus' return in hope and expectation, not trepidation? In short, can we have faith today? What does trust in God look like when we bear the scars of injustice in our bodies, communities, and relationships?

key theological trajectories

- 1. The Cross is an Act of Imperial Injustice:** Luke's account of the cross is a critical contribution to our understanding of atonement. The cross is a mirror that reveals the depths of our injustice, the complicity that binds us to injustice, our thrall to imperial systems we trust to protect and save us. When Jesus dies as an enemy of empire, as a prisoner, as a disturber of the "peace," he dies alongside generations of imprisoned and executed folks up to this very day. What if we saw the face of Jesus in those we imprison and execute unjustly? Perhaps we would see the depths of our inhumanity. Perhaps we would see a different future revolving around resurrection, restoration, and repair rather than hopelessness, fear, and revenge.
- 2. Salvation is Embodied and Communal:** At one point, Cindy's family share that her incarceration is theirs too. "We are locked up too." That is, imprisonment does not just affect the individual but a whole community. We might add that the communal effect of discriminatory policing and the prison industrial complex is a communal harm as well. Sin is personal and structural, individual and communal. Perhaps *The Sentence* can help us remember that salvation too is communal; God's grace and salvation transforms whole communities and sets them on the path toward reconciliation and repair. Moreover, salvation is embodied. God saves not just our souls; God saves our very bodies in tangible and transformative ways.
- 3. God's Grace and Justice are Interwoven:** God's grace and justice are not opposites. In some churches, God's justice is primary in preaching and teach. God is a righteous judge whose wrath must be appeased. In other churches, God's grace is primary. God is a generous deliverer. Both are critical facets of our theology, for a God who is graceful but not just cannot repair a fractured world, and a God who judges but is not graceful cannot heal us. We all need a second chance. We all need the world to be set right.
- 4. God's Salvation Restores and Repairs:** Precisely because salvation is embodied and communal, God's salvation is restorative and reparative. That is, when God saves, God stitches communities back together. When God saves, what we have broken is repaired. God breaks systems of oppression. God sets a broken world right.

conclusion

Christians sometimes turn to the Bible as a rule book for life, a ready guide for the complications we face in our lives. However, my encouragement here as you imagine how *The Sentence* and your preaching and teaching might come together is to think about the narratives of the Bible, those powerful stories to which we keep returning because these stories are not done with us. Let the haunting stories of *The Sentence* bring a complex of emotions and hopes to your preaching. And may your preaching and teaching thus inspire communities seeking God's justice with every step they take.

author bio

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the sentence

SHE WENT TO PRISON. THEY DID THE TIME.