

Homiletical Contexts¹

When doing exegesis in preparation for a sermon, preachers are used to examining carefully the contexts of the scriptural passages upon which the sermon is to be based, especially the literary and the socio-historical contexts. As we turn from the ancient to the contemporary, we must attend as well to contemporary contexts of the sermon, if we are to draw a meaningful analogy between the claim of the biblical text and the claim we wish to make from the pulpit.

The first is the **liturgical context**. Preaching does not occur in a vacuum, but as an embedded liturgical action in the middle of a worship service that includes many other distinct, but hopefully loosely related, liturgical actions. The particularities of the liturgical occasion have significant impact on the way a preacher approaches a text and proclaims the gospel in conversation with the text. For example, preaching the same text on the Second Sunday of Advent and on the Second Sunday of Easter should result in two significantly different sermons.

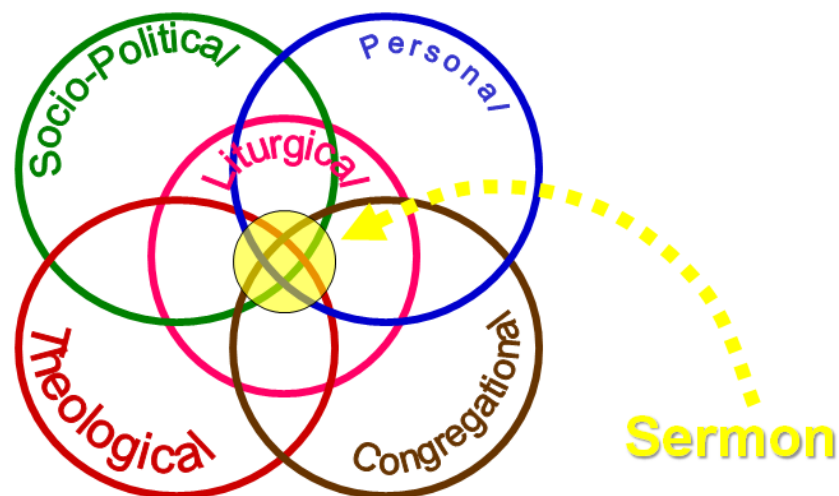
The second homiletical context then is **personal context**. By this I mean preachers must take their own pulses while preparing their sermons and be honest with themselves about where they stand in relation to a biblical text's claim. Exegesis is, after all, a subjective encounter with the text, and preaching is an incarnational act. What is my current spiritual, psychological, and physical state as I engage this text and the congregation to whom I will be speaking? Why am I attending to this potential message in the text versus that one?

¹ For a more in depth discussion of these homiletical contexts, see O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005) 46–49.

Third, preachers need to attend to the **congregational context** in which they are going to preach. The sermon is not going to be preached to some general, unknown group of individuals but to this particular community of faith. How will the message being drawn from the text engage the strengths and weaknesses, the commonality and divisions, the faith and questions of this group of people? How will the current ethos of the congregation affect their ability to hear this message?

Fourth is the **theological context**. By this I mean preachers need to be aware (at least generally) how the message they are drawing from a biblical passage relates to the history of interpretation of the text, historical doctrines of the church, and denominational theological perspectives.

Finally, preachers need to consider how the potential message engages the **socio-political context** in which the sermon will be delivered. God's presence is not found in the church alone but in the whole of creation and human history. Preaching, then, must relate to this wider reality if it is to be relevant. The church cannot impact the world if the preacher never mentions the world.



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