

*Context: Fortress Press Preaching Discussion*

John declares to us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us,” (Jn 1:1, 14a). How have we come to know God? We have come to know God in and through the Word/man who walked this earth. He was able to recognize the smell of approaching rain. He loved the taste of his mother’s favorite dish. He felt the agony of the thorns pressed into that flesh. All of these are context. Jesus lived in a particular place at a particular time. He was a man and not a woman. He was not Roman or Greek. He was a Jew. That is the “scandal of particularity.”

Context is just that: particular. Context is from the Latin for weaving together. Woven together in context are time, place, smells, sounds, attitudes, and experiences. We know that it is different to be at the Arctic Circle than it is to be at the Equator. We know that it is different to be five than fifty. We know that it is different to be a black male than an Asian female.

Jesus knew that we live in a context. When he spoke to men on the shore of the Sea of Galilee, he spoke about fishing. He called them to follow him and learn to catch for people. When he spoke to a gathering of women in his mother’s home, he taught them that God would turn her house upside down to find them the way they searched for coins that were lost. When he spoke to shepherds in the hills, he reminded them that God searched for them the same way they searched for their wandering sheep.

The challenge for preachers is that we have to weave together many contexts. We weave into our preaching the ancient/original context. While we may know about searching for lost coins, we may not be so familiar with fishing or herding sheep. Nevertheless, we must learn about those historical/cultural contexts.

Each week, as we prepare our sermons, we must also ground our reading of the text in our own context. Our listeners and we come to the reading with new experiences, new challenges, new questions. We are not the same people we were when we last heard the text. What crises are happening in our world? This summer as we read of the beheading of John, we will think of all of those who have been beheaded by ISIS. That has been woven into our context.

And we try to weave into our sermon the very particular contexts of our listeners. The black males in our congregations will be wrestling with the question of whether or not they matter. The Asian woman, the fifty-year-old man, the five year old girl, each come with their own questions, joys, concerns. And each asks if God has a word for them. God does have a word for us all, and as preachers we help all to hear that.

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