

*Preaching in Context: The Context of Our Own Lives and Bodies*

When thinking about how context matters in preaching, the most obvious context that is often overlooked is the context of the preacher's own life, the preacher's own body, the preacher's own story. In a phrase: "You" are your body, your story, your life. There is no "you" separate from how you look and feel.

A reminder from biblical Hebrew: your "soul" is your bodily self. The word *nephesh*—so often mistranslated as "soul"—has as its root concept the "windpipe." That breathing-and-humming bodily organ that is literally the center of your body. Your "self" is your body. We tend to conceive of preaching as about "The Word." As if the Word can exist without a body to speak it or hear it, write it or read it. We tend to imagine preaching as an experience of "The Mind." As if any thought you've ever had didn't occur in your body, within your story. Preachers need to be aware of the "self context" of their own lives and bodies—and how aspects of self context shape the preached word.

In spite of this reality, we do not often reflect on our selves when we think about our contemporary context. Karl Barth famously remarked that preachers should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other—meaning an awareness of our contemporary context. Maybe we could update Barth's maxim to our time and add an awareness of "self context": preachers should preach with the Bible in one hand, the internet open on their browsers, and a recent selfie on their mobile device.

By way of example, let me toss out one matter regarding my own "self context." I have a physical disability. As a teen, I lost both of my legs to cancer. Well, I didn't actually lose them, they were amputated to save my life. Which means that since 1982, every

thought, every idea, every concept that I have had has taken place in a body with no legs. Over time, the realities of my body have deeply shaped the type of ideas I entertain. Over time, the realities of my body have deeply shaped the ideas themselves. Hospitality, worship, love, relationship, space, justice, the sanctity of life. How I conceive of all these ideas is deeply shaped by my body. Furthermore, almost every person who has listened to me preach or teach over the last twenty years has been aware of my disability—and this awareness has undoubtedly shaped how they receive my preaching.

So do a little reflecting on your self. Reflect on how your body—male or female, ethnic and racial in your own unique way, tall or short, old or young, fat or thin, bald or grey or long-maned, bearded or smooth, dapper or not-so-much, disabled or able-bodied, and so on—reflect on how your body has shaped your own understanding of The Word. And reflect on how your body is shaping the way your listeners hear your preaching.

*Rolf Jacobson, Associate Professor of Old Testament*

*Luther Seminary*

March 4, 2015