

When we neglect the context of the biblical text, it is easier to (mis)use the text. Interpretations of ancient texts without regard for context are likely to reinforce simple presuppositions and hand-me-down, irrelevant, false, and/or harmful theologies. To “take a text” apart from its context increases the likelihood of its use as an object of manipulation. Contextualizing texts does not guarantee flawless interpretations; it can, however, make me more cognizant of my own uncertainties as a human being who dares to “take a text” to exegete and preach. Context, of text and audience, affirms the humanity and particularity of the human witnesses I preach from and to. The acknowledgment of and engagement with context reaffirms God’s entrance into human affairs, into historical contexts. Without context, we detach ourselves from the existential reality of those who address us from the text and from our contemporary preaching audiences. When we decontextualize the biblical witness and the contemporary human witnesses, we orphanize them, rendering them “homeless.” Context affirms the historical situatedness of the biblical characters and their testimonies and of our contemporary human audience. Without context, we are more likely to view biblical characters and their testimonies as perfect and to impose their pseudo-perfection on ourselves and others. Context affirms attachment to the world and its messiness and God’s interaction in it. By disregarding context, we are more likely to molest the text and abuse the audience, serving up a “fast-food” theology that is light on spiritual nutrition, heavy on empty calories. Without context, meaning escapes us and/or is distorted. We take the lazy way out when we fail to do our due diligence of situating text and audience. To be concerned with context is to understand the value of knowing what time it is with regard to the text and to the world we inhabit, especially regarding “the most marginalized” among us. Something is always lost in translation, but the loss is greater

when we neglect context. In my preaching, I am most concerned with the audience's context and the text in its ancient context. I love narrative preaching. I preach from the biblical stories—a Scripture passage in context can tell many stories. I generally choose a narrative based on how it might lend itself, contextually, to addressing the human predicament of my audience, primarily those who find themselves, as Howard Thurman stated, “with their backs against the wall”—the poor and disenfranchised. I might also select a text and preach it through the lens of a contemporary social justice issue like violence against women, but in doing so I never ignore the ancient context. I develop a dialogue between the text in its ancient socio-historical and literary contexts and my audience's context(s). Even during text selection I engage in dialogue/interrogation between text in context and audience in context. I ask how they can speak to each other and about their commonalities and differences—the distance and proximity, among other things. Somewhere in the dialogue/interrogation I hope a relevant, hopeful word(s) emerge about/from God for the people in their contemporary contexts.

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