



Preaching the Text with Attention to the Present Conversation

DIANE JACOBSON

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

So, you need to write a sermon. Sunday looms before you, all those anxious (alright, weary) eyes of the parishioners look expectantly up at you. The assigned text is...whatever. How do you begin to look at this text? How do you begin the process of exegesis?

The metaphor for this task which many of us carry with us, albeit this notion was never explicitly taught us, is that of a miner. I will dig into this text and extract from it sermonic jewels. I will ask the relevant questions—who, what, when, where, why was this text written? I will dig for the historical context, uncover the author in that place, at that time: What forces was he (invariably he) fighting? What influenced his words? What layers can I unravel? I will dig until I discover the author’s intended message. Then I will bring the jewel to the surface, leaving the unnecessary details of the text in the dust; they no longer serve a purpose. I have extracted the valuable stuff, a lesson, an abstract truth—the real meaning of the text.

A similar metaphor is found in the twenty-eighth chapter of Job. This chapter begins with the description of a miner digging into the bowels of the earth for gold and sapphires, finally bringing that which was hidden into the light. But, says Job, such a path is not open to one who searches for wisdom. The earth and the sea do not contain it; it is hid from the eyes of the living and the dead. Wisdom is found only with and by God. So, the chapter concludes, “The fear of the Lord, that is wisdom; and to depart from evil is understanding.”

Let’s switch metaphors. What if the text, once it has been formally introduced, becomes a living, breathing being infused with the Spirit of God? If we dig into it, disembowel it, and discard the unwanted skin and bones, we might have a tasty meal, but the text is dead. Better to converse with the text, that it might live. Better yet, bring it home to meet the family and the community. Together discover its ever changing story, including perhaps some of its history. Its life though begins in the

present, at the moment of encounter. Without the present, the text has no life.

What might our questions look like if we converse with a text made alive in our conversation? To be sure, we’ll ask questions that help us listen very carefully to the text in all its fullness, with all its details. Some of these questions might come to us from techniques of careful reading learned from Robert Alter, Adele Berlin, and a host of others. Who has name, voice, action, and, therefore, power in the text? What does the omnipotent narrator tell us, ask us, want us to hear? What are our expectations based on patterns, repetitions, structures? Where do the surprises lie? A repeated phrase or story, like the twice-repeated story of Hagar and Ishmael,

becomes something other than an accidental duplication or an historical problem to be overcome or explained away. A repetition becomes an invitation to reflect on how the one parallel informs the other, expanding the text and changing it, as in Hebrew poetry where the first line informs the second and then back again.

New questions arise from this close encounter which may lead in turn to further questions which seek help and insight from the classic historical-critical disciplines. For example, we might ask why the structure of the beginning of Genesis emphasizes divine sabbath rest. The study of Babylon's *Enuma Elish* broadens our understandings, as does as a notion of the importance of sacred time in the light of the exilic destruction of sacred space. But the conversation expands in other directions as well.

Our conversation begins and ends in the present theological context. This context's questions define the encounter: Where is God in the text? How is this text the word of God to us, cradling the word of God in the midst of other biblical words of God? Genesis 14 tells of Melchizedek (*king of righteousness*), king of Salem (*peace*, Jerusalem?), priest of God Most High, who blesses Abram and brings out the bread and wine. Abram responds by offering a tenth of everything. We respond by calling into the conversation Psalm 110 and Hebrews 5-7, "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek." We speak of gifts and priests and making peace in the midst of war. Are we discovering together something about the nature of the world, the reality of God? We come to the conversation as Christians filled with other parts of scripture, as well as pieces of our own lives and the lives of our community and our world. Has the text something to say to us? Can we disagree? On what grounds? Are our questions to be personal, communal, ethical, spiritual? Both we and the text set the parameters.

Our faith and our experiences shape our reading, our hearing. Equally true, the text through our conversation helps to shape our lives and our faith. We read not only the text, but together with the text we read ourselves and the world around us. If, when we preach, we find the text does not die and is not explained away, if the text has entered into the lives of the community, if the word of God continues to live and breathe through our proclamation so that we understand ourselves anew, then we've made a good beginning.

Preaching the Text with Attention to the Historical Context

JAMES LIMBURG

Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary, St. Paul, Minnesota

"Would you write an essay," asked one of the editors of this journal, "about the role of history in interpreting the Bible? About why preachers and teachers should be interested in the historical contexts for biblical texts?"

Aware of a debt I owe my teachers I agreed, and offer here some modest reflections on the theme.

1. *The Fall of the House of Albright?* When I began studies at Luther Seminary in 1957, I was quickly introduced to those slim gray volumes in the *Studies in Biblical Theology* series and, through the teaching of John Victor Halvorson, to the "Albright School" of Old Testament studies.

Biblical theology and the Albright approach were combined in the writings of two more students of Albright: G. Ernest Wright's *God Who Acts* (1952) and *The Book of the Acts of God* (1957) and John Bright's *The Kingdom of God* (1953) and *A History of Israel* (1959) all provided a powerful synthesis of the biblical education I had received at home, in Sunday School and church, and in college.

But the situation today has changed. The biblical theology movement is no more. And the house that Albright built, according to William Dever anyway, has collapsed, with only traces of the foundations remaining.¹ Given this state of affairs, what's a preacher or teacher to do?

2. *An Example: Reading Isaiah.* The book of Isaiah begins:

The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

If we are going to get at the Isaiah book on its own terms, we ought to take this title seriously. Luther writes in the preface to Isaiah in his German Bible:

¹William G. Dever, "What Remains of the House That Albright Built?" *Biblical Archaeologist* 56/1 (1993) 25-35.

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If anyone would read the holy prophet Isaiah with profit and understand him better, let him not ignore this advice and instruction of mine, unless he has better advice or is himself better informed. In the first place, let him not skip the title...but learn to understand it as thoroughly as possible, in order that he may not imagine he understands Isaiah very well, and then have someone charge him with never having even understood the title and the first line....For this title is to be regarded really as a gloss and light upon the whole book....For if one would understand the prophecies, it is necessary that one know how things were in the land, how matters lay, what was in the mind of the people—what plans they had with respect to their neighbors, friends, and enemies—and especially what attitude they took in their country toward God and toward the prophet, whether they held to his word and worship or to idolatry.²

If anyone is going to read Isaiah, insists Luther, that person ought to begin by paying attention to Isaiah 1:1.

3. *Watch Out for the Fire!* So how should we go about our task of interpreting the prophet? In a couple of weeks I'll be teaching Isaiah 1-39 once again. I'll begin with 1:1, read that quote from Luther, and suggest that the students learn what they can about the time of those kings from 2 Kings and 2 Chronicles and from Hosea, Amos, and Micah. We'll go through Bright's treatment of the period in his *History*. This would appear to be no special "method," but simply a picking up of interpretive clues provided in the title of the book itself.

Not all recent interpreters, however, have a concern for these historical matters. Edgar Conrad's "close reading," for example, offers helpful literary observations, but shows no interest

in “the real world external to the text.” When he writes, “My reading of the book does not assume the book’s referentiality to history”; or, “To attempt to read deliverance from Babylonian captivity as having a historical referent is to fail to appreciate the symbolism of the book,” one can only suggest further reflection on Isa 1:1.³

Then, against this background, we’ll listen to the text as carefully as we can, noting rhetorical and literary features and utilizing a number of excellent recent commentaries and studies.⁴

One of the New Testament apocryphal works, in an effort to exalt Jesus, reports that when he walked in the sand, he left no footprints.⁵ This docetic view did not take seriously the humanity of Jesus. Studies such as that of Conrad have that same docetic flavor. When one reads of the Babylonian captivity as “symbolic” one is reminded of contemporary efforts to deny the reality of the Holocaust.

Finally, in our Isaiah course, we’ll ask about the significance of these texts for our own preaching and teaching. And by that time, that old text will have caught fire and will be preaching and teaching itself.

²“Preface to the Prophet Isaiah,” in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960) 273-4.

³Edgar Conrad, *Reading Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 63, 81; see also 31.

⁴Note the comments of Christopher Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville: John Knox, 1993) 3-4; also his *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1988). See also Ronald Clements, *Isaiah 1-39* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980); Hans Wildberger, *Isaiah 1-12* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1991).

⁵“The Acts of John,” in E. Hennecke-W. Schneemelcher, *New Testament Apocrypha*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1964) 227.