



# Exegesis for Textual Preaching

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DEPENDING ON THE DAY AND THE HOUR, PREACHING PREPARATION SEEMS often to be a more or less frenzied scavenger hunt through the appointed texts in search of an idea. After the idea appears, the texts often disappear from the preacher's line of vision. Imagine, for example, that the Gospel for Sunday is Luke 12:13-21. The dispute between brothers over an inheritance along with the parable of the rich fool is, in the scavenger-hunt method, determined by one preacher to be about knowing "when to say when." This preacher's exegesis leads to the conclusion that the message of the text for late-twentieth-century, suburban, American Christians is that the accumulation of wealth is a bad thing. The rich man's problem, as this sermon describes it, is not that he wanted barns, and certainly not that he was going to, well, *die* (the sermon never mentions this), but that he wanted bigger barns. For him and for us, seeking to amass wealth is the problem, and in response to this problem, the sermon declares, "It is a good thing to share." The preacher delivers his well-organized, followable sermon with confidence and with pastoral sensitivity to what he perceives to be his hearers' intemperate love of

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*Exegesis aimed at extracting essential ideas from a text and offering them in updated language to a contemporary audience produces preaching that is neither textual nor true to the gospel. Instead, exegesis should aim at a sermon that places hearers in the long story of God's work to fulfill the promises God has made.*

worldly goods. There is just one problem: the one thing that the man in the crowd wanted from Jesus—and the one thing that Jesus refused to do—was to tell the brother to share his inheritance.

Is the example above a textual sermon? What is the difference between a sermon that takes its shape from the text and one that uses the text as a launching pad into other orbits? How do we know when we are doing one and not the other? A particular occasion or a topical preaching plan may call for a preacher to proclaim a word that is not directly connected to one biblical text. Textual preaching is not the only viable type of preaching. Yet if we are aiming to preach a particular text, how do we get there?

It is common for teachers of biblical studies as well as homileticians to advise that the way to a textual sermon is through a multi-step exegetical process.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, there are more and less fruitful ways of going about exegesis that is focused on sermon preparation. If we think of textual preaching as the work of gleaning a general idea from a biblical text and recasting it into hearers' modern idiom, our exegesis may result in sermons that are about good ideas, but not necessarily about the Bible. It *is* a good thing to share, but we do not need Luke's Gospel to know that. When we understand preaching as the translation of the ideas of the Bible for modern hearers, we may drift toward proclaiming what has been called "recycled common sense" rather than the word of God.<sup>2</sup>

What if we thought of the movement in the other direction? The editors of the Abingdon Press series, *Interpreting Biblical Texts*, comment in the foreword to each volume that "biblical texts create worlds of meaning, and invite readers to enter them."<sup>3</sup> Borrowing this understanding of how a written text works, we could imagine textual preaching in this way: the textual sermon aims to incorporate hearers into the world created by a scriptural text rather than to translate the scripture into the new language of hearers who have long since left the biblical world to take up residence in a far country. When preaching is thought of as incorporation rather than translation, exegesis for preaching no longer aims to boil the text down to an idea that has currency across cultures and centuries. Instead, exegesis for preaching aims to map the contours of the world created by the text. Preaching itself then ushers hearers into that world and invites them to recognize it as their true home.

<sup>1</sup>Most introductory homiletics textbooks include chapters describing exegetical method. See, for example, Thomas G. Long, "Biblical Exegesis for Preaching," in *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 60-77, and Fred B. Craddock, "Interpretation: The Text," in *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985) 99-124. For a helpful shorter treatment of the topic, see Richard B. Hays, "Exegesis," in *Concise Encyclopedia of Preaching*, ed. William H. Willimon and Richard A. Lischer (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995) 122-128.

<sup>2</sup>Richard B. Hays, "Exegesis," 122.

<sup>3</sup>This quotation from the series foreword appears in each volume. See, for example, Charles B. Cousar, *The Letters of Paul* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996) 11.

## I. SEARCHING FOR A SERMON IDEA

In the modern era, various attempts have been made to separate the ideas, principles, or theology of biblical materials from their time-bound and culturally conditioned presentation. For those who believed that such a separation was possible and desirable, at the center of the scriptures lay the gospel, a kernel of essential and timeless truth, which the biblical theologian could distinguish and release from the husk of its ancient scriptural medium.<sup>4</sup> According to this way of thinking, textual preaching meant preaching the essence of a biblical text. A sermon that proclaimed the plain sense of a text rather than its author's essential idea would run the risk of effectively silencing the living proclamation of the scriptures in the church. Such a sermon might make the mistake of focusing on some bit of culturally conditioned material, such as a miraculous physical healing, or an injunction to slaves to obey their earthly masters, with the result that hearers would indeed be scandalized, but not by the gospel so much as by the implication that they would have to suspend belief in natural law or accept the institution of slavery in order to believe in Jesus.<sup>5</sup> Scholars meant to avoid such mishearing of the scriptures by devising ways to differentiate what a biblical text seemed to be saying from the essential idea that its author was in fact trying to communicate.

However, this understanding of the scriptures and of preaching has largely fallen out of favor, not least because the sharp distinction it draws between timeless truth of biblical ideas and their time-bound presentation cannot be sustained. Each succeeding generation of exegetes has ably pointed out how time-bound were its predecessors' conceptions of timeless truth. Moreover, even when a biblical author's ideas can be more or less persuasively separated from their scriptural setting, it is not always clear that those ideas proclaim the gospel. When Paul advised slaves and others to remain "in whatever condition you were called," at least part of what he meant was simply that slaves should remain slaves, not seeking to be freed (see 1 Cor 7:21-24). That is arguably the idea behind his words. Yet, even after allowing for the fact that Greco-Roman slavery was a substantively different institution than American slavery, it is not clear in what respect the idea that slaves should remain slaves may be said to be *true*, that is, faithful to the gospel. Understanding what the author meant—and preparing a sermon based on that meaning—is no guarantee that the gospel will be proclaimed. Preachers know this, of course, and most preachers would not argue on behalf of slavery if required to preach a sermon on 1 Cor 7:21-24. The point is that exegesis aimed at extracting ideas—even the biblical author's ideas—from a text and offering them in updated language may not result in preaching that is at the same time textual and true to the gospel.

<sup>4</sup>Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity* (1900), trans. Thomas Bailey Saunders (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), employs kernel and husk imagery throughout his lectures on "The Essence of Christianity."

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Krister Stendahl, "Biblical Theology, Contemporary," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 430f., for his recommendation of "a sharp distinction between what the texts meant in their original setting and what they mean in the present" and implications of that distinction for how to preach the resurrection.

## II. MAPPING THE TEXTUAL WORLD

The gospel is not a kernel to be extracted from the biblical text but a story that the text itself tells. The story includes identifiable characters, not cardboard cutouts who merely personify certain ideals. It is not that Abraham stands for faithfulness when he believes God in Gen 12:1-4, or for doubt when he voices his concern to God in Gen 15:2. Abraham is not a “type.” He is a human being, bound like the rest of us by time and space, and someone through whom God promises to bless all the nations of the earth. A story is unfolding in Genesis, the point of which is not extractable from its characters and its plot. The writers of the New Testament know this story, and they locate Jesus and his followers in it.

How can modern preachers do the same? How do we continue to locate those who would follow Jesus in the biblical story? If a textual sermon is one that places hearers in the long and continuing story of God’s work to fulfill the promises God has made, what exegetical practices make that placement possible? I suggest three categories of questions to address to a text whose world a preacher is trying to map. The questions have to do with (1) noticing the movement within the text, (2) orienting oneself to time, place, and person within the text’s world, and (3) trying to understand the text in terms of the larger traditions of which it is a part, including the overarching story of God’s faithfulness to Israel and to the church.

### *1. Movement within the Text*

What is going on in the text? If the text to be preached is a narrative, how does it move from beginning, to middle, to end? Can it be divided into scenes? Is there conflict? Is the conflict resolved? Using Luke 12:13-21 as an example, tracing the narrative’s movement means noticing a story within a story. Jesus tells the parable of the barns in response to an encounter with someone in the crowd. A preacher who is puzzling out the question of what is happening in the world created by the text will have to make some judgments about how the story Jesus tells is related to the story of the man’s request. After the preacher notices that neither plot line is resolved with an injunction to share, it is harder to proceed from the text to a sermon on the virtue of sharing.

Questions about movement can also be put to non-narrative texts. What is the flow of logic in an excerpt from one of Paul’s letters? Where does he start his argument, and where does it end? Does he move from presuppositions that he shares with his readers to a conclusion that is new to them? If so, what are the different points along his line of argument, and how does he connect them? The psalms and other hymnic material also offer clues to their thought world by the way they move, sometimes from verse to refrain, other times from one statement to its parallel in the next line. Even those preachers who regard themselves to be the most incompetent of poetry readers can tell that something is going on with the structure and movement of Psalm 136, for example. The psalm moves through the story of how God created the heavens and the earth, then recounts God’s work to liberate the Is-

raelites from Egypt and bring them through the wilderness into the promised land, noting at the end that God even “gives food to all flesh.” The recitation of God’s mighty deeds is punctuated in every verse by the refrain, “for his steadfast love endures forever.” The world created by this psalm is one in which all of God’s actions flow from God’s steadfast love and are accounted for on the basis of that love.

## *2. Orientation to the Text’s World*

Most people whose work includes hospital visitation have overheard a nurse trying to determine whether a patient is oriented to his or her surroundings. “Mrs. Johnson, do you know what day it is? Do you know where you are? Do you know that fellow standing next to your window?” The nurse is finding out whether Mrs. Johnson is oriented to time, place, and person. Does she know she is in the hospital? Is she imagining herself somewhere else, or is she not sure where she is? Does she have a sense of the movement of time, that today is different from yesterday? Does she recognize her family? The questions aim to discover the extent to which Mrs. Johnson is inhabiting the same world as the nurse and the other people who are around her.

Analogous questions can help preachers map the contours of the world created by a biblical text. In both the Old and New Testaments, God acts in history, which means within time, in particular places, in the lives of specific people. To be oriented to a text’s understanding of time is to consider what are the memories, experiences, and hopes of those who inhabit the world created by the text. For example, in the parable of the barns, the rich man is told, “This very night your life is being required of you.” The rest of the chapter includes the injunction not to worry (Luke 12:22) as well as the news that “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour” (Luke 12:40). To orient oneself to time in this textual world is to ponder what it would be like to live with the end quickly coming, in a way that cannot be anticipated, but which is not supposed to provoke anxiety. To orient oneself to time in Rom 5:1-11 is to be placed between justification and salvation, presently experiencing peace. “We have been justified,” Paul writes, “...we will be saved.” Understanding the apostle’s orientation within time can help make sense of the other things Paul has to say in these verses about suffering and hope.

Orientation to place means, “Where—in the world of the text—are we?” This is a different question from, “Where was this gospel written?” If our goal is to map the world created by the text and invite hearers into it, then it is useful to recognize, for instance, that various scenes take place on a mountaintop in Matthew’s Gospel and to consider, as part of the exegetical task, what those scenes might have to do with each other and with mountaintop experiences in the Old Testament. Orientation to place in this context means orientation within the narrative. Of course, orientation within the narrative and within history are not always different from each other. Orienting oneself to place when reading Philippians requires the preacher to take into account that Paul is in prison when he writes (even though we do not know precisely where that imprisonment occurred). Exegesis means considering what difference it makes that Paul writes from prison. How do the words, “Rejoice

in the Lord always,” ring differently when they are heard echoing off the cold, damp walls of a place Paul was not free to leave?

The world of a biblical text introduces preachers and their hearers to many who have preceded us. Orienting oneself to the people in the text means getting to know one’s neighbors. Who are the people in the world depicted by the text? Who are the women in Matthew’s genealogy, and what does it mean that they are among the forebears of Jesus? Who is Nicodemus, and what is significant about the combination of times and places he shows up in John’s gospel? Does the appearance of other rich men in the Gospel of Luke add anything to our understanding of the one who appears in the parable of the barns? Preachers aiming to evoke the world of the text for hearers will acquaint themselves with the people on the pages of scripture just as they acquaint themselves with the people whose pictures are in their congregational directory. Who are these people? To whom are they related? What are they afraid of? What do they hope for? What makes them tick?

### *3. Reading the Text in Literary and Evangelical Context*

Preachers are commonly encouraged to pay attention to the literary context of the text they intend to preach, asking questions about what precedes and follows the verses chosen for the lectionary. Does vocabulary in the text appear elsewhere in the book or letter from which the reading comes? If so, how do other occurrences of the same words (or other appearances of the same people) elsewhere in the scriptures help define the world created by the text? In practice, much of what it means to pay attention to a text’s literary context can be inferred from the remarks above about orienting oneself within the world of the text. One finds out who Nicodemus is by reading one passage of John’s Gospel in the context of others. One finds out that the letter writer who said, “Rejoice in the Lord always,” was a prisoner by reading more of Philippians than would be required if one only attended to the lectionary passage that includes the words. As obvious as it may be to many preachers, it is worth mentioning that sermons have a better chance of being textual when they are prepared with more of the biblical text in mind than only those verses that are reproduced on the scripture insert for the Sunday bulletin.

Alongside consideration of a text’s immediate literary context lies an equally important broader concern. How does the world of meaning created by a particular text fit within or conform to the world of meaning created by the biblical story as a whole? We said above that the gospel is not merely an idea or a proposition extractable from the text of scripture, but is instead the story that the scriptures themselves tell. It is the news of God’s faithfulness to Israel and God’s work to reconcile the whole creation to himself through Jesus. This word is bigger than any single lectionary selection or any one biblical author’s work. It is not that preachers can or should try to rehearse the entire history of God’s dealing with God’s people in each sermon, but preachers should be clear about how each sermon fits within that history. If the message does not have a place within that history, then it is likely not textual, and it is certainly not evangelical. The preacher who uses the second

lesson for All Saints' Day, from Revelation 21 and 22, to preach against the practice of "trick or treat" (a real-life example) has failed to discern where and how the last chapters of Revelation fit into the end of the story, offering a vision of the work God is doing to make all things new.

### III. CONCLUSION: THE TEXTUAL WORLD AND THE REAL WORLD

George Lindbeck has written, "To become religious involves becoming skilled in the language, the symbol system of a given religion. To become a Christian involves learning the story of Israel and of Jesus well enough to interpret and experience oneself and one's world in its terms."<sup>6</sup> The aim of exegesis as it has been described here is to help preachers discover enough about the world evoked by biblical texts that they can interpret and experience themselves and their hearers in terms of that world and the events that occur in it.

One objection to the exegetical method outlined here requires comment. Is not this preoccupation with "the world of the text" simply an exercise in make-believe? What is the connection between the world of meaning created by the biblical text and the world in which we actually live? The preaching commended here, preaching that is oriented to the text's understanding of time, that finds neighbors among the text's characters, that imagines its audience in proximity to, rather than distant from, places and problems described in the text, and that regards the God of Israel as the principal actor in human history and Jesus as the principal agent of God's action in history—Is this preaching relevant in today's world? Is it true? Or is it only a game to be played in more or less sophisticated ways, depending on the cleverness of the preacher?

The question of whether preaching that evokes the biblical world is true is very much like the question of whether the Bible is true. Theologian William Placher has suggested that the claims that Christians make for the truth of their witness can be best understood in terms of an emerging pattern. (One is reminded of St. Paul's observation that "we see in a mirror dimly") The shape of that emerging pattern is clearest in the story of Jesus, yet the pattern itself is repeated in our lives. "The story of Christ, which furnished a key to other stories in scripture, seems to make sense of my story too."<sup>7</sup> Part of what it means to call oneself a Christian is to confess that the patterns found in scripture exist not just "in the world of the text," but also, *truly*, though not always clearly, in the world of MTV, collapsing world economies, and global warming. The people, places, and events in the world of the text provide us and our hearers with a hermeneutical key for reading and understanding what God is doing here and now. We preach textual sermons not in an attempt to take imaginative flight from the "real world" but to show our hearers how the patterns of God's faithfulness, patterns which we know from the textual world, are also being traced in their lives and in our own. ⊕

<sup>6</sup>George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1984) 34.

<sup>7</sup>William C. Placher, *Unapologetic Theology* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1989) 127.