

Biblical Exegesis for Preaching

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Exegesis is a dialogue between us and the text in which we ask questions and listen for answers or new questions. Our questions come from several directions: the liturgical/pastoral occasion, our own experience, our theological tradition, and situations facing our congregation and world.

I. Open Yourself to God Through Prayer

This is always our first step in sermon preparation. More broadly, it is a spiritual posture that permeates the preaching life.

II. First Impressions: Initial Reading

III.

Read the text allowing emotions, thoughts and images to surface freely. Jot down key words as things come to you. Be attentive to the following: Emotions the text sparks in you; Your emotions about the text; Images from text/life; Experiences; Memories; Stories; Questions; Intuitions about where the sermon might go.

Jot down key words and images. Don't evaluate at this stage. Just accumulate, (see Allen *IG*, 122-123)

III. Get Introduced to the Text

1) **Basic Understanding:** Read the text for basic understanding.

2) **Whole-Book Context:** Place the text in its larger context in the book in which it is located. (Consult an outline of the entire book in a commentary or introduction to the Old or New Testaments). Note what comes directly before and after. What does the text's placement suggest about its purpose and theme?

3) **Note differences among several translations:** Make your own translation if you can. Or compare several good modern translations, and note important differences in wording that are more than merely stylistic.

You'll check these out when you go to the commentaries in step VI.

IV. Listen to the Text

V.

As you ask the text the following questions, keep a running list of your insights and further questions. For now, it is crucial that you refrain from checking things out in the commentaries. That will come in step V.

***Crucial Questions:** Ron Allen recommends that we make a list of everything we need to know about the text to preach on it. (Allen, *IG*, 124) These could be questions having to do with author and original setting, the meanings of key words, concepts and images, and/or the relationship of the passage to

another in the canon, etc. They could also concern contemporary understanding of an issue to which you believe the text speaks. You may need to consult secondary sources to gain knowledge from the fields of psychological, sociology, or the physical sciences in step V. (Allen, pp.140-143) Unless the answer to the question is so crucial that you can't go on until you answer it, (for example, the meaning of a pivotal word in the text) wait until step VI to go to the commentaries and secondary sources for answers.

***Striking Details** - Does something pique your curiosity or not seem to fit? Is there anything about the structure or style, use of distinctive words or phrases that jumps out at you? Is there an image that is compelling to you?

***Character Identification** (if the text is a narrative) How would it feel to be each of the characters? List adjectives and brief phrases. With whom do you identify most closely? How about your congregation?

***Conflict:** What is the main conflict here? What caused it? Remember that conflict can occur both in and behind a biblical text.

***Power** - Who has power and who doesn't?

*** Center of Gravity** - At this point in your reflections, can you identify a main theme around which others cluster? This could also be an image, a question, or a problem.

***Congregational Identification:**

1. What would be challenging to your congregation? What would be comforting?
2. How would the passage speak differently to different people? (Think about variables like gender, race, economics, occupation, and generation. Think about specific people you know.)
3. Does the text speak to something that is going on right now in your own life? Does it speak to something that is going on in the life of your congregation and community?

***Freewheeling Imagination:**

Here are some questions to ponder and sentences to complete to spark your imagination. Pick and choose.

The thing that really bothers me about this text is.. .What I really like about it.....

What I wish I could add to/take away from this text is...

The voice(s) that seems absent from this text is...

Think of this text as a scene from a play. You are in charge of props. What props would you need to have on hand?

Be attentive to all the details. What do you hear, smell, taste, and/or see?

Ask what if? What if Peter had walked on the water all the way to Jesus?

What if God had answered Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane?

Ask why? Why are there 2 different Ascension stories in Luke?

If this text were a piece of music it would sound like...

V. Clarify the Historical, Literary and Theological Identity of the Text

(Consult an introduction to the Old or New Testament or the opening section of a commentary)

Author: What can you find out about the author of this text and book? Why was it written? What was the author(s) theological agenda?

Audience and Purpose: For whom was it written? What effect was intended?

Genre: What is the genre of the text? Is it a parable, proverb, genealogy, oracle, healing story, etc.? What are the traits and purpose of this genre?

Canonical Connections: Does this text have connections? Does something about this text, perhaps a theme, plotline, image, or keyword, remind you of another text(s) you have met elsewhere in the canon? If so, what and where? Does this text have a twin, a parallel version somewhere else in scripture? Note your impressions to test in step 4.

***Function:** In light of what you've learned about the historical and literary identity of the text, what do you think this text is trying to do? Think of the text as someone's attempt to reflect on the

answer to some important question. Then try to discern what that question could be.

Theological Questions: What challenging theological question(s) occur to you as you read this text? Record anything troubling or thought-provoking. (Allen, [chp. 7](#)) Appropriate to the Gospel? Intelligible? Morally Plausible?

Theological Affirmations: What central theological affirmation(s) arise as you read this text? Remember that a given text often surfaces several theological insights. Your denominational tradition, pastoral concerns, and the liturgical occasion all influence what makes its way into your sermon. For now, note any that seem important to you. The rest of the process will help you narrow the field for the sermon.

Explore the Theological Witness of the Church and your denomination on this text or theological theme. What can you challenge or affirm? (Allen, pp. 134-140)

Liturgical/Pastoral Themes

Does the season/week of the Christian Year and/or the pastoral occasion direct you toward a particular theme that runs through the text that might shape your sermon?

VI. Converse with the Commentaries*

It's time to go to the commentaries to place the insights and questions you have accumulated so far in dialogue with the scholarly experts.

Dialogue with the Commentaries Place your insights and questions in conversation with the commentary authors. Let them help you in five different ways:

1. answer questions of information
2. confirm some of your initial hunches
3. eliminate others
4. spark new insights.
5. Gradually shape and sharpen the direction of the sermon.

*In a sermon in which you relate a text to a contemporary issue, you will also need to consult relevant secondary sources that deal with that issue.

VII. Formulate a One-Sentence Summary of the Direction of the Sermon

(Allen pp. 148-150)

Bibliography:

Ronald J. Allen, **Interpreting the Gospel**, (St. Louis, Chalice Press. 1998)

