



Raquel A. St. Clair is the Executive Minister of St. James AME Church in Newark, NJ, as well as an author and lecturer in the fields of Biblical Studies and Homiletics.

Her article “Interpreting Scripture for the Purpose of Writing a Sermon,” is taken from *The African American Pulpit* (Summer 2004). It provides a brief overview of exegetical steps to take when preparing a sermon.

### **Interpreting Scripture for the Purpose of Writing a Sermon**

*“Biblical preaching has almost nothing to do with how many times the Bible is quoted in a sermon and everything to do with how faithfully the Bible is interpreted in relation to contemporary experience.”<sup>1</sup>*

I begin this article with the basic premise that there is no sermon apart from the scriptures. A sermon is proclamation that is “informed by the Scriptures.”<sup>2</sup> The preacher may structure the sermon in a variety of ways. The sermon may be expository in that it primarily explains the passage from which it comes. It may follow a Biblical theme (e.g. the grace of God) without centering on any one text or begin with current events or a particular situation and work its way towards the text. In any case, the preacher must contend with the Bible. The scriptures must be properly interpreted or the sermon will be *misinformed* and ill suited for its main purpose—proclamation.

There are a few steps that will aid the preacher in interpreting the passage from which the sermon will come. These steps provide a context for the reading and interpretation of the passage. The goal is to facilitate investigation of the text. We seek to arrive at an understanding of the scriptures so that we can suggest ways to apply it. The steps outlined are intended to make the text both unfamiliar and familiar at the same time. It is necessary for the text to maintain a level of unfamiliarity in order for us not to stop at what we believe it means without allowing it to speak for itself. By acknowledging that we do not know everything there is to know about ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman culture, history and society; their conventions of speech and writing; and for many, the original languages, we render ourselves “teachable” again.

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989), 48.

<sup>2</sup> William D. Watley, “Sir We Wish to See Jesus: The Text”, lecture given on June 2, 2001 at St. James AME Church, Newark, New Jersey for the Ministerial Staff Training Session.

To this end, I suggest that an investigation of the Biblical text begin with a first hand encounter with the text rather than a secondary source such as a commentary. This will give the interpreter an opportunity to encounter the text without the preconceived notions of another commentator. We often miss important insights because we are looking at the scriptures through the lens of someone else. Their perspective hinders us from looking beyond their conclusions to discover some new ones of our own. Therefore, we begin this process by choosing a modern<sup>3</sup> translation<sup>4</sup> of the Bible, such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), The Revised Standard Version (RSV) or the New American Bible (NAB)<sup>5</sup>, to serve as the primary text from which we will do our exegesis.

Now that we have an appropriate translation, let us begin the investigation. While there is no exact formula for exegesis, there are some important things to consider. Do not take a minimalist approach to exegesis. The purpose is to gather information and investigate the text. At this point, nothing is too insignificant or elementary. Once we complete the investigation, we can begin the process of elimination. It is only after we move through the following steps that we will actually know what to get rid of and what to keep. So, let us proceed through the following steps with an eye to detail.

**Consider where the passage begins and ends.** The divisions in your Bible are *interpretive* decisions. Chapters and verses are arbitrary designations in that the original text does not have either. Moreover, just because a new chapter or verse begins does not mean there is a new thought. Read before and after the assigned passage to see if we agree with the limits given.

**Read the letter or book in which the passage is found (or as much as possible) to establish context.** Ask yourself, “Why is the passage located here? What is going on before and after it that gives clues about the passage?” Often, we read the passage in isolation from the rest of the book, letter or chapter in which is found as if it is unrelated to its surroundings. The passage is there for a reason. We must refrain from treating the

---

<sup>3</sup> By “modern”, I mean any version of the Bible that uses modern English rather than the old English of the King James Version (KJV). Remember, the KJV was written to put the Bible in the vernacular or common language of the people. To use the KJV in this day actually defeats its original purpose, as we no longer speak in old English. Moreover, many older and more reliable manuscripts have been found since the KJV was written and many advancements in biblical scholarship and linguistics have been made since 1611, when the KJV was written. The New King James Version, although written in modern English, is not recommended for our purposes since it still relies on the same manuscripts as the original KJV.

<sup>4</sup> Next, be sure to use a *translation* rather than a *paraphrase*. A translation starts with the original text in the original language and expresses its meaning in another language. A paraphrase, on the other hand, is two steps removed from the original text. A paraphrase puts someone else’s translation in his or her own words. For example, the KJV is a translation of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek manuscripts of the scriptures. The Living Bible is an interpretation of the KJV. The people who wrote the Living Bible *never* studied the original manuscripts.

<sup>5</sup> For an in depth discussion of the criteria used to make these recommendations, see Michael J. Gorman, Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002) 40- 57.

Bible as a “cut and paste book.” This will safeguard the text from us imposing interpretations that do not fit.

**Read the passage over and over (and over) again to familiarize yourself with its content.** Exegesis requires close and careful reading. Do not assume you already know what is being talked about or what is going on. Ask yourself the simple “who”, “what”, “when”, “where”, “why”, “how” questions. Ask the *obvious* questions because sometimes the answers are not as obvious as we may believe. We will miss the subtle nuances, *misread* and therefore *misinterpret* the passage by not *reading* the text. Simply reading the passage carefully will go a very long way in correcting our assumptions.

Next, note words that you do not know so you can look them up in a Bible dictionary. Jot down questions that come to mind no matter how trivial they may seem on the surface. These questions often lead to interesting and fruitful areas of exploration. You will eventually need to answer some and others you will eliminate as irrelevant. *Listen* to the text to hear what the text is saying. Try writing the passage in your own words to see if you really do understand what is being communicated. Did your paraphrase miss any points or details in the passage? If so, these may be elements that you are overlooking in your investigation.

**Read the passage in a variety of translations.** Now is the time to bring out other versions of the Bible. Compare them to your primary translation (NRSV, RSV or NAB). Note the similarities and differences. Do they clue you in to different ways to think about the passage or additional questions to ask the text and investigate? This step helps to generate thought about the passage and allows you to consider things that perhaps you did not see earlier.

**Ask the literary questions.** What is the genre of this writing—is it a narrative or story, a letter, a poem, a speech, etc? This is very important because we read different types of literature differently. For example, poetry contains figurative and metaphoric speech. Therefore, the reader should not take every thing literally. It would be a mistake to assert that God is a stone or stone building because the Psalmist calls God “a rock and a fortress” (Ps. 91:2).

Next, examine the characters in the passage. Do they show up anywhere else in the book, letter, poem or Bible? Examine the plot—what is happening in the passage? Finally ask, “How does the passage function?” Is it meant to correct, instruct, inspire or inform? However, we interpret the passage it should maintain its original function.

**Ask the historical questions.** When was this written? By whom? For whom? What was going on at the time of the writing? If geographic locations are mentioned, check them out.

**Do word study.** The repetition of words is very important. Repetition is used to emphasize main points or themes. Are there key words that are repeated? How are they being used? Examine how the author uses a word rather than imposing a Webster’s

Dictionary definition. The author's use may express subtle nuances in his/her understanding of a particular topic. The author may also be using the word in a specialized way. An air conditioner technician and a teenager use the word "cool" in two very distinct ways. Finally, examine how key words illumine the passage?

**Ask the theological questions.** What are the major theological themes e.g. grace, salvation, justice, covenant, promise, love? What is being said about God and our relationship to God?

**Develop a thesis.** Based on the information gathered, what is the point of this passage? Try to articulate it in one sentence. Granted, there are still some questions that are unanswered. We will use some secondary sources to help us with them. But at this point, you should have a sense of what the passage is saying. Begin to organize your information around your main point or points that comprise your thesis.

**Check the secondary sources.** There are three primary sources every library should have: a commentary, a Bible dictionary and a concordance. One can begin with a good one-volume commentary that covers both the Old and New Testaments such as Harper's Bible Commentary. The commentary will provide historical information as well as the author's interpretation of the passage in question. Use the commentary to augment and correct your interpretation. At points you may disagree with the commentator. If your investigation produces reliable and complete information that refutes the commentator's interpretation, then go for it. Remember the commentary is simply someone's interpretation. If your work does not substantiate your contrary findings, concede to the commentator. It is better to be wrong in private than wrong in public.

The Bible dictionary (I recommend Harper's Bible Dictionary) also defines words we do not know or for which we need a more exhaustive definition. We should not hesitate to look up words that we already know. There may be meanings we are missing because the word had a different meaning or nuance in its ancient setting. A good example of this is the use of the word "dog" in Mark 7: 27. We all know what a dog is, but in this passage the word is an ethnic slur.

The concordance is an excellent tool for word studies. By looking up key words in the concordance, we can see how often the word is used. We can also check additional passages that contain the word to help us understand how the author is using that particular word.

Having checked with the "experts", organize your material around your main points. You should have a clear understanding of what (you believe) the passage means. Your next task is to communicate your findings in an appropriate form. If the final product is to be a sermon, eliminate the information that is not necessary for making your point(s). A sermon should not contain every interesting detail you discovered or else the congregation will get lost in details and miss the main points. Also remember, that some of the background information served to help *you* understand and delve deeper into the text. Therefore, include background information on a "need to know basis." You are not

obligated to preach everything you discover in one sermon. Remember, exegesis has a great payoff-- if you take the time to do in depth investigations of the text, you can mine enough material for *series* not just one sermon.