

Location, Location, Location

By Paul Koelpin

The impromptu homiletics lesson was memorable. “What is the key to giving your sermons a certain sense of depth?” a vicar once asked a veteran pastor who was well-known as a “good preacher.” The pastor hesitated briefly, then replied with a smile: “Location, location, location.” He knew that the vicar was not expecting his answer, nor did the vicar immediately understand what he meant. What did a real estate adage have to do with sermonizing? “I’m trying to emphasize the value of context,” explained the pastor. “Real estate agents know that where a property is situated is often more important than the amenities a home might offer. The setting is more significant than some of the specific details. I’ve found that exploring the context of a text—the immediate setting, the wider issues of ‘to whom’ and ‘for what,’ even considering what a text has meant to the church—supplies me with lots of ideas that give the sermon some dimension.”

Too many trees. Not enough forest.

The veteran pastor went on to explain that from his perspective one of the weaknesses of novice preachers was that they often equated text study with word study. The resulting sermon tended to expound on key words and phrases and attempted to apply the concepts to today’s world. The sermons were rather “generic” in terms of explanation and application. “They’re thin,” he asserted. “Too many trees. Not enough forest. The meaning is not developed with enough sense of connection to time and place and usage. I mean, I once heard a sermon on ‘The Rich Man and Lazarus’ that was all about the temptations of wealth. The whole sermon took its structure from the word ‘rich.’ It wasn’t false doctrine, but the sermon didn’t really preach the text. I’ve heard preachers do that with words like ‘mercy’ or ‘grace’ or ‘peace.’ They explain the meaning of the word, then attempt to apply it. Those kinds of sermons turn out a bit vague and general.”

He continued to discourse. Note authorship, when possible, for Psalm texts. If it is David, or Moses, you have the accounts of “life history” to give the prayers or pleading or praise a real-life setting. Many Old Testament texts are so rich with context that the specific law and gospel are almost always indicated by the setting. He said that he had preached recently on Psalm 118. The text study produced connections that supplied structure and depth. The central verse—“The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation”—is a direct quotation from the Song of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15. The psalm was also used after the return from exile as part of the Passover liturgy—and it may have been the “hymn” Jesus sang with his disciples before they left for Gethsemane on Thursday of Holy Week. Psalm 118 was also a favorite of Martin Luther and supplied what some call his motto verse: “I will not die but live, and will proclaim what the LORD has done.” The three levels of “context” provided compelling elements of application. The psalm begins and ends with “give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever,” but “this text was about much more than a table prayer.”

“The epistle letters were written for specific reasons,” he added, changing the focus a bit. “I know that seems too obvious, but it’s a reminder not to remove the instruction too far from its intended meaning.” He found it helpful, for instance, to remember that Peter’s epistles were written to believers who were suffering persecution. These were Christians, perhaps relatively new in the faith, who were struggling not only in the battle with their personal sinful natures, but also with intense external pressures to conform to the world.

Don’t some preachers spend too much time on historical setting and background? “Fair enough—there needs to be some balance. But don’t forget the verse from Ecclesiastes: ‘What has been will be again, what has been done will be done again; there is nothing new under the sun.’ Ancient texts—and ancient contexts—are always relevant.”

Preaching to Young Adults: A Work from Humility and Grace

By Nathan Strobel

*Do not remember the sins of my youth
and my rebellious ways;
according to your love remember me,
for you, LORD, are good. Psalm 25:7*



I usually wince when I read Psalm 25. When will my youth be over? When will I “age out” of certain sins? Some days I think that my youth will not be over until I stand glorified in his presence. The freedom of heaven will be such a delight! In the meantime, my “Romans 7 struggles” seem to serve God’s young adults well as I prepare and preach to them. Reflection on my own youth makes me—perhaps—less judgmental, less outraged, less irritated, more compassionate, more patient as a preacher. Who am I that I should have this *grace* to be God’s shepherd, to preach to his sheep? I begin to see preaching to young adults as a *work from humility and grace*.

The Audience

A trending perception is that the young adults who regularly attend worship are more visual and tech-savvy than previous generations, requiring a different approach to sermon delivery. In my day at the seminary, a similar discussion was occurring regarding the use of props in the pulpit—*verboden* in some minds, an easy “go to” for others. The options for visual communication have expanded, but personally I believe the evaluation is very much the same. If the Scripture text brings to mind an obvious visual just begging to be used, it can work out well and teach without being gimmicky. But, if the preacher believes that he

must use a visual in order to communicate, then a *forced* prop of any nature often falls flat. Repeated use of any delivery method can cause it to lose its effectiveness.

Experience suggests that a well-painted picture with words almost always has a greater impact than any visual—especially when those words contain and portray the very words and heart of the Savior God. “*The mills of God grind s-l-o-w-l-y, but they grind exceedingly fine*” is a sermon theme from 35 years ago that still sticks out in my mind from one of the finest sermons I have ever heard. And that preacher used nothing but the inflection of his voice and the repetition of the phrase to imprint a picture of God’s justice in our minds—right to Calvary’s cross. With the sermons I have preached to college students over 16 years, the most appreciated style of sermon seems to be those that contain “visual commercials with words.” In this writer’s opinion, communicating to young millennials is less about the tangible image and more about whatever captures the mind’s eye and leaves an image on the memory.

It is most important that we remember and assume that the young adults sitting in front of us are young *Christians*, young *believers* in Jesus Christ their Savior. Our job is to share the whole counsel of God. These young adults are not so unlike other believers in the Kingdom. They love their Lord and want to serve him, yet their sinful natures crave the opposite of God’s will. We must not assume that we know exactly where they stand in their walk with the Savior. Are some young adults sorely tempted to “test” underage drinking? Are some young adults intensely tempted to be sexually active outside of marriage? Are some young adults being persuaded to question the faith as they have come to learn it from parents and teachers? Most definitely. They are at an impressionable age. They are learning to be independent. And independence appears to mean breaking free of the “bondage” represented by parental rules. Nonetheless, what we know for sure about those sitting in front of us in church is that their attendance would seem to be a fruit of faith. That is what I know, that is how I preach. I am preaching to redeemed sons and daughters of the King—who happen to be struggling with a unique stage in life. And this is a stage to which many in church—me included—can relate.

Young adults are in the process of maturing, and culture has a “huge” (their word) influence on them. Our culture portrays the God of the Bible as the restrictor of “rights” and as an “idea” that has not kept up with the times. Our culture portrays the God of the Bible as “exclusive” and “narrow” (oh, the half-truths!) and therefore unloving. Our culture offers a god who is malleable in our own minds and adaptable to human self-expression. You and I understand that every sin is a “First Commandment sin.” And we too are subject to sin—a fact which assists us in preaching authentically and honestly to young adults as together we grow spiritually in a world of sin.

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What about this changing world? Does the preacher need to keep up with the culture to be relevant to his hearers? That depends on what is meant by keep up. Smart phones and social media can be a good touch point to young adult culture. So can sports and movies. Yet in rubbing elbows with the culture, be careful. “Wise as serpents, innocent as doves” would seem to play well here.

The Approach

So, is there a difference in preaching to young adults compared to other age groups in the Kingdom of God? Not really. The spiritual needs are similar. One of my mentors always reminds young preachers, “Just take us to Jesus.” The approach with the Word is the same. But the *applications* must fit the audience.

Have we taken note of how the apostles of our Lord approached their hearers? They generally adopted the pattern of Grace-Law-Grace. St. Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians is a classic example. Knowing that he was about to take the Corinthians to task for factions in their ranks, aiding and abetting coarse sin, squabbles leading to lawsuits, abuse of the Lord’s Supper, petty jealousy over the gifts of the Spirit, and false teaching regarding the resurrection of the dead, Paul still starts his letter with these words: “Grace and peace to you. . . I always *thank* my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. . . . therefore I appeal to you”

Grace-Law-Grace.

And how did our Savior himself approach preaching and teaching when not facing hardened unbelief? His Sermon on the Mount begins with beatitudes—descriptions of how grace affects the attitudes of believers. Then Jesus preaches law (“unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees”) and gospel (“I have come . . . to fulfill”) in both broad and specific ways.

Grace-Law-Grace.

Jesus and his preachers adopt a “posture of love” to lead sinners to repentance. Love young adults as Jesus loved the confused and questioning rich young ruler (Mark 10). Jesus led with grace but did not shy away from the tough topics, the tough questions—nor did he shy away from pointed words. He was not afraid to share the will *and the heart* of his Father. “Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing,” still amazes me. The patience of my God!

Young adults are works in progress. They have questions about life—challenging, even uncomfortable, questions. Are we ready to answer? Do we address these questions? We need to invite them to ask, even if we don’t deal with them in the course of a sermon. Not to have the godly conversations about difficult issues leaves the door open for Satan to walk in with his counsel to the peril of souls.

The Humility

Where our young adults are, we once were. True enough! But can we truly relate?

How many of them come from less-than-healthy home environments? Is their “culture-speak” harder to ignore because social media preaches such a strong sermon? What about their Bible literacy? Are their temptations so much more “high-def” that the new man in them has a greater struggle than we ever did?

Is it different for them? Perhaps, but the “sins of youth” have a certain similarity across generations. We know sin. We know temptation. And so we love grace! We’ve been humbled by God’s grace; let us preach accordingly.



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God’s Treasure . . . From a Clay Jar

“Has Ascension somehow lost its luster?” puzzled a colleague several years ago. What do you think? Perhaps it is difficult to schedule Thursday worship, but this great event in Christ’s exaltation deserves supreme celebration. The “alleluias” are fervent, decisive proclamation that Jesus is “preparing a place for us” to live eternally in the perfection of paradise.

<p>Sermon Excerpt – (ILCW-Series A, Ascension) Acts 1:1-11 Theme: Why Do You Look to the Sky?</p>	<p>Comment</p>
<p>Christ’s ascension brought his mission full circle. He returned to the full glory that was his from eternity. The full and complete work of Jesus—from paradise to paradise—is at the heart of all that we teach as Christians. And this is critical—because Christ’s life is our life by faith. Believers have a place in paradise.</p>	<p><i>Ascension helps us to consider the course of salvation history from Christ’s perspective.</i></p>

<p>But we have not reached heaven yet. So we want to explore the curious question which the two angels addressed to the disciples as Christ ascended to heaven. “Men of Galilee, why do you stand here looking into the sky?” Why were the disciples so intently straining to see where Jesus was going? Why were they so awestruck?</p>	<p><i>“Looking to the sky” stands as a metaphor for worry and anxiety—emotions associated with loss and fear and doubt—the weakness of our human perspective.</i></p>
<p>Consider the rollercoaster of emotions the disciples had experienced during the months before the ascension. Christ’s royal entry into Jerusalem turned into trial and torture. Crucifixion and burial were followed by resurrection. What joy and relief! But the forty glorious days spent with the risen Lord would not last. Jesus departed into heaven. Why couldn’t things stay the same?</p>	<p><i>The gospel review helps to emphasize that faith is greater than emotion. This does not mean that faith is unemotional, but reliance on feelings may often lead us astray.</i></p>
<p>Do you relate to the feelings of these disciples? Changes in life have come so quickly and drastically and you catch yourself “looking to the sky.” Looking for answers. Wondering what to do. Questioning the wisdom and power of God. Some even literally “look to the sky” searching for answers in signs and charts and astrological tables. And many trust the horoscope even though the presumed predictions have absolutely no basis in fact.</p>	<p><i>Appearance to the contrary, the ascension did not create distance between God and mankind. Distance, rather, is the product of sin.</i></p>
<p>Why do you look to the sky? Empty, longing attitudes and actions actually reveal a lack of direction and trust. These are selfish feelings that need to change in order for Christian discipleship to continue. It takes the Word of God to set minds and attitudes straight. Sometimes it takes a “why” to bring us back to reality. So often we become caught up in living in this world that we forget that the goal of life is eternity. That statement may be entirely too obvious, but it is a challenge to live daily life in this world with eyes of faith that see farther than the here and now. This is the message of Ascension.</p>	<p><i>Doubt and worry are sin. The question “why” leads to repentance.</i></p> <p><i>Insert your own illustrations here of “living by faith and not by sight.”</i></p>
<p>Hope did not go away when Jesus ascended. Jesus did not retire from working hard to win souls for paradise. This was not the end of his work. This was proof that the gospel had been accomplished. There was absolutely nothing more for Jesus to do visibly on earth to seal complete forgiveness which he won for the world. St. Paul reminded the congregation at Ephesus that Christ’s ascension was evidence of his power and authority—cf. Ephesians 1:18-23.</p>	<p><i>Jesus did not remain only visibly present—in glory he is present everywhere.</i></p> <p><i>The Ephesians 1 section deserves a full read—it highlights the important lessons of the ascension.</i></p>
<p>Christ is not gone forever; he has promised to come back. In the meantime, there is plenty of work to be done. Jesus had said to his disciples: “Be my witnesses.” We too are daily witnesses to the fact that Christ accomplished salvation and will return to judge the earth. Do not let sinful selfishness get the best of you—walking around without direction or hope. Paradise Lost is Paradise Regained by the power of Christ. Look around you and see what the Lord is doing—and rejoice that you are part of his kingdom.</p>	<p><i>Ascension comes with a call to discipleship.</i></p>

