

I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that I've preached a sermon before; the bad news is that that was nearly 50 years ago. It was at Bethel Baptist here in Ellison Bay when I was a last minute replacement for my dad who had come down with laryngitis. 50 years is a long time to wait for a second chance, and I've got lots to say. But not to fear, Mother Barb has been lending her sage advice along the way.

Let me begin by asking a question of all you who have ever visited a foreign country? Why would you ever spend the money and time to do that? I imagine most of us would say similar things—we want to see how other peoples live, to sample their foods, understand the culture, be able to compare and contrast our life with others—and thereby enrich our own lives.

I remember thinking, having just returned from a college choir European tour in 1968, "I could never marry a woman who hadn't been to Europe." That, plus the other criteria made it a long search!

Mark Twain said, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of people and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

Well, reading the Bible is like going to a foreign country to learn about that culture, and then using that experience to gain perspective on our own lives, our attitudes and our values. When reading the Bible, or engaging with these scripture lessons for today, not only must we visit a foreign land; we must go back in time.

To understand this foreign land we call scripture, there are three key ideas I'd like us to keep in mind.

1. Context is everything
2. Context includes many things
3. It takes a lifetime to fully appreciate context

First, context is everything My good friend, Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, has written a book on interpreting scripture, entitled **READING THE GOOD BOOK WELL**. In it, he tells a story regarding his father, who was a scoutmaster.

"One day my mother received a note in the mail from one of the other scoutmasters, Jim Cook. It seems that my father was going to be given an award for his work, and that the award was going to be a surprise during the annual awards banquet. The presenter would say, "The recipient of this year's Breakthrough to Youth award was born in a small town in the Midwest. . . and then they would tell his life story. The fact that the recipient was my father would gradually dawn on him as the announcement unfolded. Mr. Cook wanted to know when he could meet with my mother to learn my father's story. My mother wrote back a note suggesting a time to meet and put the note in the outgoing mail, but my father, who had a suspicious nature, found it and decided to open it. It said, **'Dear Jim—Come over on Thursday afternoon. Harry will still be at work, the children will be at school, we'll have the whole afternoon to ourselves uninterrupted. —Kathleen.'** When my father read it, he supplied all the wrong background information. That's the snowball that eventually avalanched into my parents' divorce."

Context is everything—the true meaning of something said or done only happens if we correctly understand the context. So—we may ask, “What’s the big picture regarding biblical context?” Well, first, let’s talk about what it’s not: Contrary to what we might assume, the Bible is not primarily a book of rules and prescriptions. But, of course, we all know how it’s so easy for implicit rules and expectations to creep into our way of thinking.

Question: Can one attend a Packer game without wearing Packer green?
Answer: Only if you’re wearing a cheesehead instead.

Just as with Packer fans, many of the rules found especially in the Old Testament served to demonstrate one’s Jewish identity. So—the laws are there but, that’s not what Bible is primarily about. Rather, it’s an extended story about what it means to be in community and maintain a sense of identity.

Let me illustrate it this way: Supposing that we set about to write the story of our irascible but ultimately loveable, spinster Aunt Bea. What might come first to mind is how strict she was, how she posted those house rules on the refrigerator door when we came to visit. But there would be more—we might write about some of the clever things that Aunt Bea used to say like, **“A good habit is the practice of correcting your bad habits”** or **“Some people express an idea; others send it by slow freight.”** And we would be tempted to include the recipe for Aunt Bea’s delicious cherry pie, whose crust could only be rivaled by Koepsels. But in the end, what we’ll want to try capture is the richness of the experience of spending time with Aunt Bea, and the importance of her impact on us.

Similarly—the Bible, by telling about Abraham, Joseph, Ruth, David and a host of others, is an amalgam of stories about the Aunt Beas and Queen Bees who shaped Hebrew life; it’s a multi-faceted story about how to live in community and maintain a sense of identity that’s all about being chosen by God.

Contemporary author Marilyn McEntyre offers this astute comment: **One of the many purposes of reading Scripture is to wander among its stories of human confusion, loss, discovery, and triumph and see in all of them how the Spirit of God broods over the waters, how God speaks in dreams, calls the unlikeliest people, and sends angels in disguise. It seems to me that one of the primary purposes of these sacred texts is to offer us stories to live by, not only to provide moral guidance but to complicate our oversimplified notions about success and failure, holiness and sinfulness, virtue and vice.**

But context also includes many things. Allow me a couple of examples that will help us to understand our lectionary passages for today.

1st example: The Hebrew culture was an oral culture, not literate. Imagine yourself in that situation: No dictionaries to look something up; no libraries, much less the internet, to find how-to manuals, no books about other cultures. History writing, itself, hadn’t even been invented.

Your encyclopedia set would consist of the stories, traditions and proverbs passed down from generation to generation—and which you would pass down when you became one of the elders—if you lived that long. What we refer to as the Bible was the Hebrew version an oral encyclopedia. Only later were these traditions written down and reshaped into what we call the Bible.

2nd example: The economic growth rate during the biblical era was 1% growth every 100 years. Think of that! It meant that, if you were living in that period, your life was going to be about the same as your father and mother's life—and your children's children. Your worldview would be shaped by the perception of limited goods and a static economic environment.

Imagine a Feed My People storeroom with groceries and two hundred families needing to share that limited supply for the month. If one family takes more they actually need, another family might suffer. In biblical times, you would be living in a society whose perception is that of perpetually limited goods. One person's gain was another person's loss, and you, like most of your neighbors, would be a subsistence farmer and/or herder—there was little margin for error; everyone needed to pull together.

Those factors together contributed to reinforcing the experience of a group identity; you would be part of the nested functioning units of family, clan and tribe; it would be hard for you to conceive of a life outside your local community.

So, this is the foreign land you're visiting each time you read the scriptures: no advanced theories of how to grow GDP or whether to adjust the federal funds rate, no appealing to the government for disaster relief—just people needing to hang on to each other for dear life.

Here's the tricky part: It takes a lifetime to fully appreciate contexts. Let me say it differently, using a question. What do you know now that you didn't know 10, 20, or 40 years ago? As we mature, we bring a different perspective to scripture passages because we've changed, hopefully bringing greater insight.

I want to focus today on one example—found in all four of our lectionary texts—to illustrate this point, and that is the dynamic of accountability.

First, though, think for a moment about the people who have had the most impact on your life. Who comes to mind? My hunch is that who comes to mind are those people with whom you've had a relationship of accountability—either they were exercising some legitimate authority, such as a parent or teacher, or they were sharing a mutual accountability with you, someone like a spouse. Truth is, we're shaped by those who hold us accountable.

My second hunch is that you know the value of being accountable better now at this age than you've ever known—because the necessity of being accountable turned out to be an important spur prodding you to become a better person. In other words, our values become more defined as we get older. Our values, such as those honed by being accountable, serve as lenses through which we view the biblical stories.

Our lectionary texts speak to this kind of accountability.

God says to Ezekiel, "If you don't warn the wicked, they'll die in their iniquity, and that will be on you; however, if you do warn them, they're the ones responsible. Ezekiel is not responsible for the wicked, but he's responsible to them.

The Psalmist seeks God's help in holding himself accountable—"Give me understanding, and then I can keep your law; I shall keep it with all my heart."

Matthew records Jesus giving instructions about how to confront others in the community; confronting not when they've said something you don't particularly like, but when they've sinned against you.

Paul writes to the Romans that they owe it to one another to love each other, to live honorably, to "put on" the Lord Jesus Christ."

The underlying context for each of these passages was a limited goods community which could thrive only when each person fulfilled their role. Each passage gives us a unique angle on accountability.

Although we might think of accountability as something of a negative, let's consider this updated, more mature definition: "A personal choice to rise above one's circumstances and demonstrate the ownership necessary for the community's success—to See It, Own It, Solve It, and Do It." This definition includes a mindset or attitude of continually asking, "How might I enable others in my community to become all that God has created us to be?"

I'd say it takes a lifetime of learning for us to fully appreciate these lectionary texts regarding accountability, but that's what makes St. Luke's a great ongoing community in which to belong. We're learning together.

Here are a few questions to kick around with friends at the coffee hour: What have you learned from your life experiences about accountability? If context is everything, is St. Luke's the right context for accountability? How does one go about holding someone accountable in ways that are going to be well-received and constructive?

I'll finish with these extra credit questions to contemplate this afternoon, say around 3:30—Packer time.

Can you imagine Aaron Rodgers saying to his receivers, "run whatever route you feel like, and I'll try to adapt to whatever effort you want to make"?

Could you imagine Mike McCarthy and staff being content with someone practicing whenever they get around to doing it?

Or can you imagine Packer teammates not trying to help each other out to improve their game--or players not willing to make a significant individual effort to develop?

It's a challenge as humans to "put on" Christ; could we perhaps move in that direction by emulating the accountability shown by the Packers? Could St. Luke's be a team like the Packers?

Go Team!