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**Words of Introduction from the Editor, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm
Spring/Summer 2021**

Not having grown up in a religious home but in a loving, first-generation immigrant family committed to their children's education and fluency in English, I know something of the struggle of wrestling with questions of faith and the importance of doing so. During my college years, I was grateful for the sturdy roots I found among radical Anabaptist-Pietists who taught me the vital and necessary connection between spirituality and social justice, loving Jesus and being empowered by Spirit to participate in God's will on earth as in heaven.

But my grandmother Noni's voice still echoes in my heart and mind. With no more than a third-grade education and widowed with two young children at the age of twenty-seven in a country and culture not her own, she had the wisdom of Ruth and fortitude of Esther. "Keep-a you eyes wide open," she advised, and handed me her collection of Robert Frost's poems. One of only a handful of books on her shelf, it was a treasure beyond price as Noni explained that by memorizing Frost's verses she learned the language she taught her children to love.

Keep your eyes wide open. More often than not, Noni's words were meant as a warning to safeguard her beloved granddaughter from impending danger. But I took them as general advice: pay attention. Look and listen. It's something I came to recognize in Jesus's teaching as he called to those with eyes to see and ears to hear.

We who are called to preach, teach, and contribute to the study of preaching, who seek to question and understand God and the world we share, we know that the language of faith speaks many tongues and grows out of many cultures. Ours is a time of significant and rapid change in the practices of preaching and the educational institutions that support our teaching and research. Like the generations before us, we will also continue to discover gospel and its mysteries even as pandemics, wars, ongoing racial violence, injustices, natural and unnatural crises rage among us. And like others before us, if we are wise we know that we cannot proceed alone. We need one another. All of us. From our varied theological perspectives, religious commitments, regions of origin, age, ethnicity, gender identity, sexuality, we listen and look to one another with our eyes wide open, our ears attuned, minds alert, hearts softened, bodies and spirits ready.

With gratitude to my predecessors John McClure and Dale Andrews, to the members of the editorial board (including those who will soon retire, those who will soon join us, and others who continue their service), as well as the managing editor, Aimee Moiso, the section editors who ensure the ready flow of book reviews, and the many members of the Academy of Homiletics who carefully review the books and articles submitted for publication and read one another's publications, I am pleased to begin my service as editor of *Homiletic*. In my inaugural issue, I am privileged to welcome a range of scholarly voices who call us to listen, look, and engage in their questions and insights. I hope that you will consider this and subsequent issues as the academy's call to keep your eyes wide open.

Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm

**Preaching to the Seventh Circle¹:
Retooling Homiletical Approaches in Light of the Crisis of Suicide**

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Abstract: *Military suicides have dramatically increased over the last twenty years. In response, much energy and expense have been focused on suicide prevention, as well as training chaplains and other caregivers. Despite the comprehensive intentions of these efforts, little focus has been placed on the ways in which worship and preaching might contribute to abating the crisis. The purpose of this article is to examine some critical areas for consideration in creating sermons that address the threat of suicide for the Army chapel community. The difficulties of preaching to desperate listeners are examined along with the prevalent myths associated with suicide. The selection of language and presentation of the message are each discussed along with the pitfalls of certain atonement hermeneutics. Suggestions for biblical texts, including use of the psalms, are reviewed. The article concludes with further recommendations for better addressing suicide from the pulpit.*

Save me, O God, for the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no foothold;
I have come into deep waters, and the flood sweeps over me.
I am weary with my crying; my throat is parched.
My eyes grow dim with waiting for my God. (Psalm 69:1–3, NRSV)

The dramatic attacks on New York and Washington, DC on September 11, 2001, brought about a host of radical changes to the United States military. The most consuming of these was the onset of the global war on terrorism, which began with the invasion of Afghanistan on October 24, 2001, and continues to this day with military operations across the Middle East, northern Africa, and other locations. Among the second- and third-order effects these operations provoked was a noted increase in the suicide rate among active duty, National Guard, and Reserve troops of all branches of the US military.² In the most recent year for which analysis of the records is complete, a total of 541 Army soldiers committed suicide—the highest year since record keeping began.³ For the active duty Army, this figure adds up to 21.9 deaths per 100,000, above the age- and gender-adjusted national average.⁴ Suicide is now the second leading cause of death in the military, a distressing reality given that the population is, for the most part, so

¹ In Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, those who have committed violence against themselves are banished to the seventh circle of hell.

² Although the issue of suicide has had dramatic impact across all of the United States Armed Forces (the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard), it has most affected those with sizable ground forces engaged in combat operations; that is, the Army and the Marines. For purposes of this paper, I will focus on my own branch, the Army (although my conclusions have equal relevance to any of the branches).

³ Karin Orbis, *Department of Defense Quarterly Suicide Report for 2018* (Washington, DC: Defense Suicide Prevention Office, 2018).

⁴ The average for all suicides across the United States (considering the age group mirroring the military is 18–30, and predominantly male) is 17.4 per 100,000. Ibid.

young.⁵ One oft-repeated summary of the situation is that more American troops have died by their own hands than by action on all of the battlefields of the current war combined.

To confront this tidal wave, the Army's leadership has responded in a multitude of ways including regular training, resourcing events, research, periodic "stand-downs," in which the entire day is dedicated to suicide prevention efforts, and creative events such as suicide prevention marches, runs, and rodeos. Chaplains, by regulation, play a primary role in the Army's suicide prevention program.⁶ Of all military leaders, chaplains are most often called upon to serve as "first responders" when a soldier or family member is experiencing suicidal ideation, as they are the likeliest to first discover such an issue affecting a soldier.⁷ For this reason, the chaplain must approach almost every interaction with a soldier or family member as an opportunity for suicide prevention.

One of the most powerful intersections of chaplains and soldiers occurs each week in chapel. Soldiers and their families come for worship, for sacrament, and for the word, and in so doing invest tremendous authority in the chaplain him- or herself. Why, then, is suicide so rarely a topic for sermons? The preacher holds the (hopefully) undivided attention of the congregation for twenty minutes or more. The preacher speaks with the authority of the church and from some of the most sacred writings of the faith. If ever there were a subject begging to be covered in a sermon, it would be suicide prevention. This paper will cover several areas crucial to effective preaching on suicide, as well as offer practical suggestions for sermons.

Reaching the Damned in the Pews

Several roadblocks must be removed to reach a suicidal listener. The pain of those suffering from suicidal ideation often prevents them from hearing good news. In his profound book *Reading the Bible with the Damned*, pastor and Bible teacher Bob Ekblad relates his experiences conducting intense Bible studies with various persons often considered to be on the margins of society: prisoners, undocumented immigrants, gang members, and others. These persons, he states, understand themselves as "condemned to permanent exclusion, beyond repair, unable to change, in bondage—in short, 'damned.'"⁸ Persons contemplating self-harm are quite likely to self-identify as members of this group, with hopelessness and depression diminishing their sense of self-worth. This attitude carries over to their perceived value in God's eyes; as Ekblad puts it, "Most people on the margins are not expecting God to show up in their lives in any positive way."⁹ Their self-damnation extends to the way such individuals are viewed within their communities; changing reputations after a suicide attempt is a complex process that includes rebuilding trust and establishing a character in line with general expectations. In this way, people in desperate states are, many times, *less* capable of seeking help on their own and

⁵ Uniformed Services University/Center for Deployment Psychology, "Cognitive Therapy for Suicidal Patients (CT-SP)," <https://deploymentpsych.org/treatments/Cognitive-Therapy-for-Suicidal-Patients-CT-SP>. Accessed March 2021.

⁶ Chaplains are one of the resources in the care system for soldiers and family members; often the basic pastoral counseling that they offer provides the help needed, although with suicidal behaviors the chaplain is tasked with identifying the risk and ensuring the person is linked up with the more comprehensive mental health care provided by trained medical personnel. Department of the Army, *Health Promotion, Risk Reduction, and Suicide Prevention*, DA Pam 600-24 (Washington, DC: Department of the Army, 14 April 2015), para 2-1.

⁷ Chaplains are assigned at a smaller unit level, whereas most other mental health specialists are assigned at either hospitals or much larger formations, taking them away from daily interaction with most "rank and file" troops.

⁸ Bob Ekblad, *Reading the Bible with the Damned* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), xiv.

⁹ *Ibid*, 61.

less likely to be granted the kind of community understanding that might facilitate gaining the help they need. The shame associated with suicide and suicidal thoughts works to separate those in crisis from the greater community, including the chapel community—which is not to say that those with suicidal thoughts do not enter the chapel. Some attend out of habit, some to satisfy a spouse or parent, and some come as a last gesture of hope to escape the doom they feel is consuming them. There could be few surer marks of failure for a preacher than to know that someone who ended their life on a Sunday evening was sitting before them on a Sunday morning.

Despite the military's extensive (and expensive¹⁰) efforts to help, one of the biggest barriers is in the very culture of the military. Service members are taught that self-reliance and personal strength are virtues; military legends retell tales of soldiers caught alone and behind enemy lines, fighting against terrible odds, and overcoming despite the lack of any assistance. This narrative has created a genuine stigma associated with soldiers and even soldiers' families asking for help.¹¹ Most suicide prevention efforts are concerned with addressing and eliminating this stigma, but it is deeply ingrained. This stigma is so prevalent, in fact, that it occasionally surfaces in very public and offensive ways, even among high-ranking leaders who should know better.¹² Destigmatizing the idea of accepting help is a critical sermon concept. No sensible person would think of getting treatment for an illness or a broken bone as a sign of weakness, but that idea does not seem to extend to those who suffer from a missed connection or misfire in the brain.

One approach is to, in essence, "re-brand" associations and perceptions related to mental health.¹³ Language is always important and when dealing with the imprecise terminology associated with many popular ideas about mental health, word choice is all the more critical. Removing from our lexicon words like "crazy," "looney," and other flippant terms for mental conditions is a start, as is ensuring that the feelings associated with traumatic conditions are not cheapened by weak sentiments or easy answers. Preachers should properly educate themselves on issues of suicide to ensure they are not incorporating false and potentially damaging information into sermons (more on this in the next section).

Additionally, medicine has demonstrated more and more that psychiatric developments have physical ramifications on the body. By emphasizing the physical afflictions that come with most mental disconnects, getting help from a professional seems more natural: "Drawing more attention to the *physical* ramifications of mental illnesses might help decrease stigma and lend more legitimacy to psychiatric illnesses in the public perception."¹⁴ This work might include

¹⁰ The initial budget for the Army's Office of Suicide Prevention upon its founding in 2011 was \$20 million, with subsequent funding every year. Dan Spinelli, "The Pentagon spent millions to prevent suicides but the suicide rate went up instead," *Mother Jones*, November 13, 2018, <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2018/11/the-pentagon-spent-millions-to-prevent-suicides-but-the-suicide-rate-went-up-instead/>.

¹¹ Carl Andrew Castro and Sara Kintzle, "Suicides in the Military: The Post-Modern Combat Veteran and the Hemingway Effect," *Military Mental Health* 16 (2014), 460.

¹² For example, Stephen Losey, "Barksdale Commander Admits Calling Suicide a 'chickenshit way to go' Was a Poor Choice of Words," *Air Force Times*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2019/08/05/barksdale-commander-acknowledges-calling-suicide-a-chickenshit-way-to-go-was-a-poor-choice-of-words>.

¹³ Alan Berman, et al., *The Challenge and the Promise: Strengthening the Force, Preventing Suicide and Saving Lives* (Washington DC: Department of Defense, 2010), 88.

¹⁴ Leigh Jennings, MD, "Do Psychiatry and Mental Illness Need Rebranding?" *Psychiatry & Behavioral Health Learning Network*, October 6, 2014, <https://www.psychcongress.com/blog/do-psychiatry-and-mental-illness-need-rebranding>.

references to mental health issues by common corresponding physical impairments, and referring to health care workers as “doctor” and “nurse” instead of “psychiatrist/psychologist” or “therapist.” The preacher who, by regular references to the value of mental health care and the reality that there is no real “normal” when it comes to mental health, normalizes these activities and lays the groundwork for a more open attitude to seeking such care.

The conversation that is the sermon can be leveraged to raise the consciousness of hearers to better appreciate areas of need in their own lives. Well-established theological precepts take for granted our need for spiritual help, leading to our gathering in church to begin with; our human weakness in this regard is generally undebatable in the minds of most. In this same way, most of us are comfortable acknowledging that we all need, from time to time, the mental bolstering of a friend to gripe to, the parent to reassure us, and the spouse to stand firmly behind us in tumultuous times. Our common need for mental care binds us in the human family. Regular reminders of this human condition from the pulpit—along with gratitude for modern advances in understanding the human psyche—can go far toward breaking down barriers to accessing mental health care. The preacher’s personal testimony, when appropriate, of the healing power of treatment, can also serve to instigate helpful conversations. If the goal is to preach sermons that connect to the whole person, including one’s deepest and most sensitive thoughts, then it follows that the preacher would not exclude areas of mental health, even those most extreme and difficult with which to wrestle. While suicide is not an easy subject to broach, it is a critical one for the lives of parishioners and has been ignored for too long.

The Fear (and Importance) of Speaking the Name of the Monster

Suicide has long been a taboo subject of discussion. For many, the very thought provokes feelings of shame, discomfort, and pain. Those who have dealt with the suicide of a loved one will struggle with residual emotions, making open discussion even more awkward. Those who have dealt with their own suicidal ideations will likely also have difficulty coping with their feelings and memories, hiding these experiences and feeling separation from the mainstream of people who (in their eyes) must live much easier lives. For many in the general public, there is a fear associated with suicide: not knowing how to approach it, concern about saying the wrong thing to a suicidal person, and embarrassment over revealing the fate of a suicide in the family. All of this confusion is no doubt felt by those whose lives have been affected by suicide, and it further increases the isolation they know all too well. In this way, the fear itself stands as a significant obstacle to facilitating helpful intervention when and where it is needed the most.

For many clergy, mentioning suicide in a worship context is a scary scenario, even among military chaplains. One reason for this anxiety is the pervasive myth that talking about suicide will lead to or encourage suicidal thoughts, especially in those already considering it. Whenever I preach on suicide, I always mention this myth and note that if it were indeed true, then suicides would spike after I finished my sermon!¹⁵ In fact, talking about suicide not only does not cause people to consider self-harm, but it allows individuals the freedom to speak out about their own stressors and be more open to seeking help, potentially rethinking their opinions in the framework of discussion, and sharing their story with others. By being open and intentional about discussing suicide, the topic becomes more normalized, allowing solid information to be exchanged and opportunities for helpful and healing conversations to be had.

¹⁵ Or, I suppose, after reading this paper!

Dr. Joseph Jeter addresses this topic in his book *Crisis Preaching*, in which he emphasizes the critical importance of “naming the monster” when one is dealing sermonically with a crisis. Doing so is not only a matter of transparency, but also a radical statement that empowers those suffering from such ideas: “To name the crisis that we face can be a touchstone to understanding it and having power to overcome it.”¹⁶ Ancient wisdom held that to know and speak the name of a fearsome enemy granted some control over it. For example, in Genesis 32:29 Jacob wanted to know the name of the mysterious being whom he had wrestled; while the being would not give this name, a blessing was offered. Such a direct approach is especially important with the crisis of suicide; a pastor merely mentioning that this is a topic worthy of discussion can be enough to break down barriers. Solid research backs up this function: “Covering suicide carefully, even briefly, can change public misperceptions and correct myths, which can encourage those who are vulnerable or at risk to seek help.”¹⁷ Simply being bold enough to name the monster from the pulpit robs it of some of its power. In fact, encouraging parishioners to be bold enough to ask someone showing signs very directly whether they are considering suicide is critical and is a powerful act of love that can break the monster’s hold.

Demystifying suicide is an important step in this direction.¹⁸ There is a lot of misinformation about suicide and a preacher should do her best to correct misconceptions. One prevalent myth is that people who think about self-harm give little or no warning and would never admit to being suicidal. In fact, there are several warning signs,¹⁹ and a person intent on suicide will often be very frank about it. Another myth is that people who seem happy (but show some warning signs) cannot be suicidal. In fact, people who have decided to commit suicide often find comfort in having made this dramatic decision and feel happy because they believe they have found a way to eradicate their pain. Yet another myth is that a person who genuinely wants to die is beyond help. Years of clinical work prove this idea to be untrue; many different therapies help those who are so hopeless. Finally, it is commonly believed that providing a hotline is the best and safest way to help. While hotlines are critical, there is no guarantee that a person in distress will call; such a person may, in fact, act on a suicidal ideation if left alone. It is much safer to remain with a person when they call, or even offer to get them to proper help, such as a medical doctor or mental health practitioner.

Lamentations for the Modern Soul

As previously mentioned, one painful part of having suicidal thoughts is how alone with one’s sadness it makes one feel; it is difficult for someone coping with these feelings to believe that anyone else could feel this badly. Part of the problem lies in our “don’t worry, be happy” quick-fix society. At the same time, most of us are acutely aware of how much suffering is in the world today. All of this positivity flies in the face of what we know to be reality, “Shouting, as it were, ‘Peace! Peace!’ where there is no peace.”²⁰ Of course, we all have a bad day from time to time; sadness and pain are, after all, part of life. The biblical authors knew that well; the Bible is

¹⁶ Joseph R. Jeter Jr., *Crisis Preaching* (Nashville TN: Abingdon, 1998), 79.

¹⁷ Defense Suicide Prevention Office, *Talking About Suicide Online* (Washington, DC: Defense Suicide Prevention Office, 2019).

¹⁸ This information is from the Army’s current suicide prevention training model, “ACE-SI” (“Ask-Care-Escort-Suicide Intervention”). Department of the Army G-1, *ACE for Soldiers Facilitator’s Handbook*, (Washington, DC: December 16, 2013), 13.

¹⁹ These include alcohol and substance abuse, talking about self-harm (even in jest), mood changes, giving precious objects away, and withdrawal from family and social activities, among others.

²⁰ Jeter, *Crisis Preaching*, 81.

not short on expressions about the troubles of life. The only regular, intentional homiletical treatment of lament comes in the funeral sermon, and often these moments have become brief, scripted affairs meant to help the faithful “find closure.”²¹ Preachers need to help their congregations recover the ability to lament.

Most of us know instinctively that we have a need to express or vent our painful feelings, but (beyond a good therapist) there are very few ready-made institutions in our world in which to do so. Human language is often insufficient to express the kind of desolate, desperate pain that comes with loss, shame, and hopelessness. For the people of ancient Israel, lament allowed them to express their pain, not as a hopeless cry, but out of hope, to begin the move to healing and restoration.²² Lament offers real potential for healing; and, if a sermon regularly devotes a portion to expressions of sorrow and pain, it might well open the door for suicidal people to find a place for hope. These lamentations would not be lightly dismissed, but legitimized and shared together, “proposing no solution” but providing a “landscape of pain” that goes beyond words.²³ This mode of expression presents a challenge to much of today’s positive, celebration-focused worship, but offers real opportunities for the preacher to address those suffering quietly in their midst.

The book of Psalms has often been used for lament. According to an old Jewish tradition, a person in grief is said to be too heavy with pain to comprehend the law and the prophets; only the psalms may be read because they speak of the most sensitive matters of the heart.²⁴ Over one-third of the psalms concern lament, both communal and personal, and deal with it rather directly, for “the Psalms are littered with questions of suffering and pain directed to God: ‘How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I take counsel in my soul? and have sorrow in my heart all the day?’” (Psalm 13:1–2).²⁵ In this way, they serve as an excellent starting place to explore such emotions as loneliness, grief, and personal loss. The poetic writing, along with the many metaphors it presents, allows them to speak eloquently of some of life’s situations that are too poignant for words. Crying out to God is modeled by the authors of the Psalter and is as old as the oldest writings of the faith.²⁶

A few relevant psalms (included in most lectionaries) useful for preaching lament include the following:

- **Psalm 22:** “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning?” The theme is how distant God can seem when enduring trying circumstances. The profundity of the psalm’s poetry was repeated in the cry of Jesus from the cross, and aptly speaks for many different circumstances of distress. Aside from the mournful expressions, the psalm resolves the cry for God in acknowledgement that God has heard and will provide satisfaction for those who mourn.

²¹ Of course, in many cultures, funerals with much more open and unashamed expressions of anguish are the norm; it is not these congregations that I am addressing. Many mainline churches could take a cue from the way these traditions embrace lament as part of coming together.

²² Walter Brueggemann, *Spirituality of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001). This section is inspired by Brueggemann’s work, one of the more thorough treatments of the psalms as lament literature.

²³ Jeter, quoting Ellen Zetzel Lambert, *Placing Sorrow*, 82.

²⁴ Personal story related to the author by a rabbi friend.

²⁵ Cameron Wood, “Mental Health Today: Depression & the Psalms,” *Mental Health Today* (website), August 16, 2015, <https://mentalhealthtoday.squarespace.com/posts/2018/7/18/depression-the-psalms>.

²⁶ The Book of Job, for example, in which songs of lament are a major theme.

- **Psalm 77:** “In the day of my trouble I seek the Lord; in the night my hand is stretched out without wearying.” The distressed feels as if God is preventing any relief, even from sleep; only the psalmist’s memories of better times provide any measure of comfort. These memories also serve to remind the writer that God does provide better times, and hopes can be fastened there. The power of God is emphasized in reassurance.
- **Psalm 102:** “I lie awake; I am like a lonely bird on the housetop. For I eat ashes like bread, and mingle tears with my drink.” The theme of loneliness emerges in this psalm, along with the sure knowledge that God is ultimately in control and that one may feel secure in the provision of God. The use of sentimental images makes them endearing; the brevity of these readings even offers the potential for the distressed soul to claim them as their own.
- **Psalm 139:** “If I ascend to heaven, you are there: if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” The knowledge that we are known well by God, even in our innermost places, reassures the psalmist, who acknowledges that the future is also secure in God’s grasp. God’s position of dominion over everything, including disaster and distress, is established and provides assurance. That God is everywhere, including the darkest places imaginable, speaks in critical ways to someone feeling so lost as to contemplate suicide.

Preaching from the psalms demonstrates that mental anguish, pain, and sorrow are a part of the life of faith and should be expressed. Particular emphasis should be placed on the productive nature of these expressions—as opposed to dwelling in self-pity and becoming embittered as a result. When we lament, we are not lost or isolated but rather we are in a long tradition of people wrestling with God. At the end, prayers of lament incorporate hope—confidence that God is listening and understands—and leave us with belief in a better future.

Scriptural Quandaries: Bad News in the Atonement for the Suffering and Biblical Suicides

Although Jesus’s death is a principle tenet of the Christian faith, few of those filling the pews can systematically explain its meaning or what it says about the message of the church. That the long-ago suffering and brutal death of a man are a central doctrine of the church can present an obstacle when working with people undergoing suffering. Vague summations from ancient theologians and clichés adorning religious trinkets do little to clarify the complex issues at hand. In recent years, feminist and liberation theologians, among others, have pointed out the insidious possibilities in popular interpretations of the atonement. Misunderstandings relating to the death of Jesus are confusing to the average layperson at best, and at worst have the potential to provoke some dangerous conclusions in the mind of a person suffering from mental trauma.

Jesus’s suffering associated with the atonement is one such problematic issue. Popular films such as *The Passion of the Christ* go so far as to make the suffering of Jesus the primary focus of his life. It is critical that suffering as a part of soteriology is properly contextualized for congregations. Sally Brown delves into this topic in her book *Cross Talk*, which criticizes the narrow understanding of God’s redemptive work as associated only with sin and guilt, associations all too familiar to many of the faithful. This model presents an image of God that is harsh, eager to punish sin, and full of retributive justice, exactly the kind of message that would inspire hopelessness in a person already in distress. One of the results of this emphasis, she opines, is that congregations believe that their suffering is deserved, a part of God’s plan for their salvation. Rather than finding redemption, those suffering “sink into a horrifying dread that they

are being made to pay for something they have done or somehow failed to do,”²⁷ believing that their suffering is not only God’s will but also something that they simply must endure. The remedy, Brown continues, is to expand the possibilities of the cross by embracing a wider range of “metaphors of redemption, read from the concrete place of suffering”²⁸—those that do more than just emphasize release from sinful behavior, but also draw attention to healing, relief from pain, and, ultimately, hope. Preachers should seriously consider widening their discussions to embrace homiletical as well as theological concerns. As Brown notes, “It is indefensible to suggest that suffering is inherently redemptive.”²⁹

Further, some common ideas around atonement might stand in the way of people getting the help they require. Depictions of Jesus as complicit in his own death projects some confusing messages; “Victims [of suffering and oppression] can all be led to believe that quiet passivity is the appropriate ‘Christian’ response.”³⁰ The message that might be easily taken from the death of Jesus is that his willingness to silently undergo suffering is a paramount virtue to be imitated, modeled by no less than the Son of God himself. Moreover, Jesus’s refusal to struggle against those who would kill him—coupled with his acceptance of his death—might be seen as an act of divine suicide. The consequences of such a conclusion would be tragic. Such pictures call for constructive thought in preaching, ensuring that these ideas are placed in their proper cultural and historical circumstances. After all, with the right considerations in mind, “it is possible to develop a model of the atonement that not only avoids the pitfalls but also provides help in addressing the very evils associated with . . . the atonement,”³¹ a doctrine so central to the faith.

The Bible mentions several incidents of suicide,³² all of which are what is commonly termed an “honor suicide,” meant either to atone for a wrongdoing or to evade a death considered dishonorable. If these verses are dealt with homiletically, special care must be taken to point out the great error of thinking from which such a suicide arises; the thought of “dying with honor” might ring all too attractive a note in the ear of a desperate person.

Performance Issues: Modeling Emotion in the Pulpit

Even as humanity is separated by language, cultural conventions, and racial and ethnic identifications, we are bound by the shared experience of emotional responses. Emotions originate in the limbic system, deep within the brain, deeper even than the conscious mind can control. At their base, emotions are the result of evolutionary processes that helped to keep our species alive when our complex thought responses would have been too slow to react effectively. There are good reasons why the use of emotions is critical to influencing others: in the vulnerable spaces of emotion some of the most powerful connections happen.³³ Studies have demonstrated that information absorbed outside of our conscious processes “can have a profound

²⁷ Sally Brown, *Cross Talk* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 72.

²⁸ Ibid, 73.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 174.

³¹ Ibid, 181.

³² Abimelech in Judges 9:54 and Samson in 16:30; Saul and his armor bearer in 1 Samuel 31:4 and 31:5; Ahithophel, Absalom’s counselor, in 2 Samuel 17:23; Zimri, servant of King Asa of Judah, in 1 Kings 16:18; and Judas in Matthew 27:5. Additionally, Paul prevented the Roman guard from killing himself in Acts 16:27–28.

³³ Dr. Lara Fielding, “Listening to Your Authentic Self: The Purpose of Emotions,” *HuffPost*, October 20, 2015, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/finding-your-authentic-pu_b_8342280.

influence on people's subsequent thoughts, feelings, and behaviors."³⁴ In other words, the input received through an emotional reaction can be as or more impactful on our person as the information we learn rationally.

In some worship traditions, a display of appropriate emotion from the pulpit is a typical experience. Emotive expression empowers the message and reinforces the passion with which God engages humanity through sacred worship. However, the majority of traditional religions expect the preacher to remain composed and keep a rein on emotions. In some communities (like those of the military), the preacher has a genuine opportunity to communicate something critical through a display of authentic emotions from the pulpit. But the code of masculinity to which many people (especially in the military) subscribe prevents them from fully feeling and expressing their emotions and thereby dealing with difficult issues. They might feel inadequate for having these feelings or embarrassed about letting others know they have them. For many of these men, this repression prevents them from accepting the mental healthcare they might need.³⁵ The preacher who demonstrates genuine emotion at appropriate times without embarrassment or shame gives the listener permission to expose his own emotions. The preacher who models ownership of his expressions reassures hearers that these emotions are normal and that releasing them opens the door to sharing the underlying issues with others.

Another complicating factor comes from social association with some of the underlying issues related to self-harm; for example, depression is often thought of as a women's disorder. As such, researchers have discovered it is underreported by men.³⁶ In fact, people of all genders can find it difficult to access the complex range of their own emotions—and to have enough trust to confide in others. If the preacher is willing to expose his or her own vulnerabilities by including in the sermon their own experiences with depressive thoughts and emotions along with the healing that has taken place, such honesty can go a long way toward normalizing these experiences in the minds of parishioners. Modeling sympathetic handling of such emotional issues establishes a baseline for how a congregation will approach these concerns in the congregational setting—and gives the listener permission to address their own issues as well.

Sermonic treatment of suicide should focus attention on the many successful stories of recovery after suicidal thoughts or actions. When recounting the actions of a victim of self-harm, sermons should emphasize the unnecessary nature of suicide, highlight the alternatives, and express disappointment that those who died by their own hand did not recognize that help was available and that people who care are only a phone call or an email away. Avoid idealizing the deceased in death; a common tack in funerals, such a presentation may afford a sense of nobility to the choice of suicide.³⁷ One must not inadvertently glamorize suicides by dwelling too much on sympathy for the pain or distress of the deceased; instead, express sadness at the losses suicide creates, especially for those left behind (family, friends, etc.). It is also important to avoid explicit descriptions of deaths as well as detailing the methods of suicide; such imagery could well plant more vivid pictures in the minds of the distressed, adding to any potential ideations.³⁸

³⁴ National Research Council, *Human Behavior in Military Contexts* (Washington, DC: The National Academies Press), 207.

³⁵ Sarah K. McKenzie et al., "Masculinity, Social Connectedness, and Mental Health: Men's Diverse Patterns of Practice," *American Journal of Men's Health*, September 2018, 12.

³⁶ John L. Oliffe et al., "He's More Typically Female Because He's Not Afraid to Cry: Connecting Heterosexual Gender Relations and Men's Depression," *Social Science & Medicine*, Vol. 73, Issue 5, September 2011, 775–782.

³⁷ Defense Suicide Prevention Office, *Leaders Guide to Suicide and Postvention Checklist* (Washington DC: Defense Suicide Prevention Office 2016), 2.

³⁸ Ibid.

Above all, focus should be placed on the fact that suicide is preventable and treatable, and that help is available.

Conclusion

While the context of my research is the military chapel, the strategies here may be equally applied to a civilian congregation. There is a great likelihood that veterans are present in most congregations, and all of them bring different experiences and stressors from their military service; suicide rates among veterans are shockingly high.³⁹ Of course, many occupations in civilian life have duties very similar to those in military service, including first responders, medical and social workers, and other professions with equally high risks of suicide. The onus of suicide hangs over every congregation and affects more lives than perhaps many believe.

It is my own practice to make suicide an annual sermon topic; National Suicide Prevention Week occurs during the month of September, making this an excellent time for such sermons.⁴⁰ Another opportune time for such a sermon is after a high-profile suicide: the media often extensively covers such incidents, glamorizing the action and potentially encouraging at-risk people to copy this action in a desperate bid to secure such respect for themselves. A well-pointed sermon can help mitigate this possibility. Also, the number for a suicide prevention hotline can be featured at the bottom of the weekly worship bulletin; there are several nationwide numbers, and many communities have their own. Such contacts not only serve as a reminder of the issue but also get the information into the hands of those who may need it most.

³⁹ According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 18.2 million veterans are living in the United States, and the number of veteran suicides has grown over the past fifteen years with an average of about 16 *per day*. US Department of Veteran's Affairs, *2019 VA National Veteran Suicide Prevention Annual Report* (Washington, DC: US Department of Veteran's Affairs, 2019), 9.

⁴⁰ The American Association of Suicidology (AAS) sponsors this annual weeklong campaign to inform the general public and to engage health professionals about the importance of suicide prevention efforts.

**When Will We Proclaim Lament from the Pulpit?
Preaching to a Traumatized Society in the Korean Context¹**

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Abstract: *Preaching on nationwide trauma was a less developed theological-homiletical theme of Korean Protestant churches, although Korean society has been traumatized by consecutive national crises during the twentieth century. Despite the fundamental cause of suffering, the unbearable trauma of victims has been interpreted as divine punishment based on early missionary tradition, which is based on an orthodox theodicy. Korean preaching, therefore, revealed its deficiency because it has not only failed its pastoral role to provide a secure haven for victims, but also has not preached a message of justice to the corrupted sociopolitical structures in its prophetic role. This paper suggests the significance of lament as a theological-homiletical strategy that proposes a hermeneutic dynamic of compassion and resistance in response to a national trauma.*

The unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic has been traumatizing and transforming the whole world in various ways for over a year. The society of South Korea (hereafter Korea), has undergone tumultuous moments, particularly in the initial stage of the pandemic (February and March 2020). Mainline preachers from conservative and evangelical churches promptly diagnosed the cause of the crisis as divine punishment from God due to the people's sins—a teaching consistent with conventional theodicy. Thus the church asked its believers for sincere repentance.² The sermons emphasized the personal piety in believers' religious lives as a fundamental way to liberate themselves from suffering, and became one of the reasons that some of the churches underlined in-person worship in the midst of the nationwide outbreak of COVID-19 with the statement, "The Korean church has a martyrdom spirit that responded with unceasing worship during the Japanese colonization era, as well as during the Korean war."³ Thus the "Korean Protestant church" was pointed out as a critical source of infection during the last three COVID-19 waves in Korean society.⁴ As a result, the church turned into an object of hatred in society because it did not present a truthful message of comfort, lamentation, and solidarity in the midst of national trauma.

¹ The main idea of this paper—preaching as lament—is quoted from one of the chapters in my pre-defense dissertation, "Preaching on Social Suffering: Formulating a Homiletical Theology to Preach the Theme of Suffering in the Contemporary Korean Context" (PhD diss., The University of Aberdeen, 2021).

² Sangduk Kim, "COVID-19 The Pandemic, the Public, and the Korean church," *Theology and Praxis* 26 (2021): 197–220.

³ Dongkyu Choi, "Christian Ministry in the Era of the New Normal Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Mission and Theology* 52 (2020): 171–200.

⁴ The first massive outbreak of COVID-19 in Korea was caused by a secretive Christian sect *Shincheonji* Church of Jesus in March 2020. The second incident was initiated by GwangHoon Jeon and his *Sarang Jeil* Church that held a massive Christian rally in August 2020 in the Gwanghwamun square, located in the center of Seoul. And the third wave was ignited by InterCP (a heresy missional parachurch), IM ministry, and Busan *Yeolbang* Church that allowed the in-person gathering and worship, although it violated the government's guidelines for the prevention of epidemics. Ibid.

In fact, during the last century, Korean society has been exposed to multiple nationwide crises: imperialism, ideological conflict, brutal war, dictatorship, poverty, and economic depression. These various traumas were not limited to specific groups; rather these were existential life-and-death traumas experienced by all people. These collectivistic experiences under the sociopolitical structures not only have overwhelmed “the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning,”⁵ but also have created large populations in today’s society who suffer from issues of economic marginalization, psychological anxiety, political and social insecurity, and spiritual emptiness. Yet, the research of trauma within a social context had not significantly developed in both arenas of theology and academia until the 2014 *Sewol* ferry disaster which paralyzed the whole country.⁶ Notably, the Korean Protestant church received severe nationwide criticism due to its controversial sermons populated with questionable theodicy during the post-*Sewol* phase. The Korean preachers, nevertheless, repeatedly delivered similar sermons only a few years later, although the *Sewol* case offered the momentous chance to correct its theological-homiletical oversight. The fundamental and distinctive characteristics of preaching in response to social trauma have been affected not only by the theological-homiletical development of Korean Protestant theology but have also been strongly influenced by the sociopolitical context of modern Korean history.

Social Responses to the National Trauma

Right after the nation’s liberation from Japanese colonial rule (1910–45), which was the first of the national crises that impacted Korean society in the twentieth century, the resultant unstable sociopolitical state of the country was unable to provide a space or time for national grief or to allow closure to the traumatic Japanese experience. Rather, the issue of atrocities during the pitiless imperial regime—including the case of comfort women and forced labor—has turned into a diplomatic matter between Korean and Japanese governments related to the political or economic gain for the state, while the victims’ trauma has not been addressed nor dealt with compassionately and the victims have not received a sincere apology from the Japanese government.⁷ The severe ideological and political polarization that resulted from the period of division—the trusteeship (1945–48) and the Korean War (1950–53)—brought about paranoia among Koreans who became obsessed with discerning, in fear, whether a neighbor was an enemy or ally. This fear and mistrust often resulted in the massacre of innocent civilians.⁸ The government exhibited paranoiac behavior by confining people who expressed critical opinions of governmental authorities and by labeling them “communists.” The victims and bereaved families

⁵ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence — from Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 33.

⁶ After the *Sewol* case, academia has been endeavoring to identify the origins of the issue by studying the series of national traumatic events through the holistic lens of “trauma” and recognizing that distinctive traumatic events have had a cumulative effect on contemporary South Korean society. Representative research studies include: Dongchoon Kim and Myunghye Kim (eds.), *Korea in Terms of Trauma* (Goyang: Critical History, 2014); Sungmin Kim, et al., *The Nine Traumatic Events in Korean History* (Seoul: Paradigms Book, 2016); Sunyoung Yoo, *Colonial Trauma: Finding the Origin of Collective Anxiety in Korean Society* (Seoul: Pure History, 2017).

⁷ In the 1965 Japan–Republic of Korea Normalization Treaty, the Japanese government claimed they completed compensation to Korea regarding their atrocities in the colonial era by proposing huge economic aids. However, the treaty stipulates that the comfort women and the forced labor issues would not have a claim within international law, thus silencing their voices. J. Ward and William D. Lay, “The Comfort Women Controversy: Not Over Yet,” *East Asia* 33 (2016): 259.

⁸ Jaeseung Lee, “What is Justice in a Violent Society?” in *The Nine Traumatic Events Left in Korean History*, ed. Sungmin Kim (Seoul: Paradigms Book, 2016), 130–31.

had to endure the misrepresentation of their distress as mental problems instead of being provided with the compassionate help they needed to bring closure to their traumatic experience. Instead, according to Judith Herman, they adopted dissociation, voluntary thought suppression, minimization, and outright denial of the experience of suffering.⁹ The voice of the traumatized was utterly silenced and overlooked within their controlled society. The anticommunism frame used state violence as an effective means to maintain the military dictators' regimes during the period of the democracy movement (1961–87). The authorities systematically suppressed and ruthlessly penalized people who voiced their opinions in support of justice and peace. As a result, more than a thousand people were tortured, jailed, disappeared, or even killed after being falsely accused of being North Korean spies.¹⁰ The government allowed a small economic compensation to the victims or their family members under the condition that they would not disclose the brutality and cruelty of the government's action.¹¹ As a result, the sufferers' traumatic experiences were monetized and minimized to be a personal matter, which created the condition known as *han* throughout the community, society, and country.¹²

In the wake of these consecutive national crises, the unbearable trauma of victims has been forced to be seen as an individual matter. The victims did not receive a sincere apology from the perpetrator, their trauma was diagnosed and managed by the governmental authorities, the cruel suffering was translated into terms of economic value, and victims' demand to know the truth of the traumatic event caused them to be labeled an enemy of the state even though the nationwide traumatic events had occurred under sociopolitical structures. In 2014, these characteristic responses to social trauma were repeated again in the case of the "*Sewol* ferry incident"¹³ with no change. That incident—which resulted in over three hundred casualties—was not just a maritime incident; rather it was a national, socially-traumatic event. Although the inexplicable action of key crew members, who instead of rescuing passengers fled from the submerging vessel, was the main cause of this tragic incident, the fundamental cause was the corrupt relationship that existed between government institutions and the ferry company, which led to the approval of an overloaded and insufficiently inspected vessel. The tragedy was also the result of the passive rescue operations of the Coast Guard that had prevailed for a long period in the socio-structural system. Nevertheless, the response of the society during the post-*Sewol* phase reminded us again how Korean society has treated victims of these national traumatic events. Soon after the incident, the government too hastily defined the sunken ferry event as merely a maritime accident. In doing so, it diluted their responsibility and blamed others for the cause of

⁹ Herman, *Trauma*, 87.

¹⁰ Dongchoon Kim, "The Long Road Toward Truth and Reconciliation: Unwavering Attempts to Achieve Justice in South Korea," *Critical Asian Studies* 42(3) (2010): 537

¹¹ With the use of brutal violence, the people were denied their human dignity so that the traumatized victims were treated as less than human. Dongchoon Kim, "The War/State Violence and Traumatic Korean Society," in *Korea in Times of Trauma*, eds. Dongchoon Kim and Myunghee Kim (Goyang: Critical History, 2014), 36.

¹² *Han* is not a single feeling but many feelings condensed together, including resentment, regret, resignation, aggression, anxiety, loneliness, longing, sorrow, and emptiness. These collective emotions of suffering are the characteristics of *han* which has been engraved in the hearts of Koreans by its history of oppression. Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds—Han* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 2.

¹³ The incident occurred on April 16, 2014. The ferry was headed to Jeju island with 476 passengers on board, including more than 300 high school students who were on a field trip. Suddenly the ferry tilted and quickly began to sink. Immediately, the captain and key crew members fled from their submerging vessel to the safety of a rescue boat, even as hundreds of their passengers remained trapped inside, having been told, "Stay put," "Do not move from your location." In the end, while 172 survived, a total of 299 died, and 5 remain missing. Of the 325 high school students on board, only 75 survived.

the tragedy and the failure of the rescue procedure.¹⁴ The conservative media emphasized the need to end the *Sewol* phase of mourning and to return daily lives to normal as soon as possible by using the “accident-compensation” logic proposed by the government. As a result, the victims’ voices that were calling for the truth of the incident were severely minimized. Rather, the unbearable suffering of bereaved families was managed or diagnosed by the governmental institution which specialized in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The medical experts, however, were unable to comprehend the demand from the bereaved families that the only way to treat their psychological state was to uncover and reveal the truth of the incident.¹⁵ Indeed, the symptoms of trauma, such as grief and anger, had not been appropriately evaluated, and their misery became medicalized.¹⁶ As the period for settlement of the incident was extended, the rightwing group fiercely denounced the bereaved families as rebellious because they not only expressed critical opinions of the government but also became an obstructive factor with regard to the economy. Moreover, the conservative media and the intelligence agencies made an effort to isolate the bereaved families and their supportive civil organizations from the rest of society by labeling them “communists” who were a danger to the state.¹⁷

The *Sewol* case revealed that social trauma continues to be dealt with as an individual matter in contemporary society, even when the cause of suffering results from sociopolitical structures. The voice of sufferers, furthermore, has been silenced by the authorities without any proposal for a safe place to relieve their sorrow and agony. Yet the case proposed a significant moment to academia for researching “social trauma” as the people declared that nationwide trauma could no longer be regarded as an individual matter.¹⁸ Further, community and solidarity have been underlined by sociologists and psychologists as an ultimate way to overcome the issues of social trauma in Korean society because of its collectivistic features.

Theological-Homiletical Development on National Trauma in the Korean Protestant Church

Similar to the social response to national traumas by Korean society, the Korean Protestant Church has mainly considered social trauma as a matter of individual belief and responsibility. In particular, it speaks of punishment for sin rather than asking for God’s compassion and justice in society. This attitude strengthened during these consecutive nationwide crises.

In 1885, when the first clerical Protestant missionaries arrived in Korea from North America, the missionaries used consistently vivid approaches to social crisis issues with a dichotomous view such as the strong division between the sacred and secular.¹⁹ At the dawn of

¹⁴ Park Sojin, “Rethinking Violence and Neoliberalism by Examining the Case of the Sewolho Disaster,” *Culture and Society* 23(3) (2018): 149.

¹⁵ Myunghee Kim, “Medicalization of Misery: Critical Realistic Consideration of the Sewol Trauma,” *Health and Social Science* 38 (2015): 232–35.

¹⁶ Arthur Kleinman, Veena Das and Margaret Lock (eds.), *Social Suffering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 20.

¹⁷ For instance, the government deployed more than one thousand (accumulated figure) police officers in the city of *Ansan*, which was the residence of the majority of the victims, in order to monitor the bereaved families. Sunmin Lee and Sanggil Lee, “The *Sewolho*, State, and the Media: Critical Discursive Analysis of ‘The Imagination of the State’ Represented in the Opinion Articles of <Chosun-ilbo> and <Hankyoreh>,” *Media and Society* 23(4) (2015): 55–58.

¹⁸ Hyeon Jung Lee, “Social Suffering after the Sewol Ferry Sinking: On Representation, Experience and Intervention,” *Health and Social Science*, 43 (2016): 63–83.

¹⁹ The non-political stands of early North American missionaries in Korea made a significant contribution to the Presbyterian Council of Missions’ statement of the “Relationship between Church and State,” published in *the*

Japanese colonization, the Korean church initiated the Great Revival Movement in 1907. The movement, however, focused on personal piety by which believers publicly repented of their sin with the help of the Holy Spirit and promised to return to the original faith of the New Testament. The movement established *Tong-Sung Kido* (pray aloud),²⁰ a unique prayer of the Korean church, as a form of lamentation in the midst of crises.²¹ The highlighting of the traditional doctrines in the movement led to sermons filled with eschatology and were preached by missionaries during the period of Japanese colonial rule (1910–1945). As a result, these factors were intentionally designed to discourage political involvement following the policy of missionaries not to take political stands but instead to adopt a neutral demeanor toward national issues impacting the Korean peninsula.²² Yet in contrast to the missionaries, the Korean preachers proclaimed justice and liberation in their sermons, as well as having led the independence movement since the emergence of the native church leaders in the 1910s. The representative case was the March First Movement in 1919, which awakened an independence-oriented Korean nationalism. Sixteen out of the thirty-three leaders who signed the Independence Declaration on March 1 were Christians.²³ The rationale for the movement was well projected in *Sermons by One Hundred Pastors and Teachers*, the first book of collected sermons by native Korean Christian leaders.²⁴ The preachers proclaimed that the citizens of heaven must be social beings who also contribute to the world.

However, the failure of the nationwide March First Movement in 1919 created radical discord between faith and reality. Therefore, in their preaching, the “premillennial eschatology,” which was one of the missionary traditions, was underscored as the theological way to interpret the traumatic era.²⁵ The second coming of Christ and the afterlife were popularly used as topics by prominent preachers, such as Ikdoon Kim and Sunju Kil. Moreover, *Lectures on Homiletics*, the first homiletic textbook of the Korean church—published by Charles A. Clark in 1925 and the only one used until the late 1970s—strongly influenced the native preachers to have the following homiletical perspective with regard to the national crisis: “The primary purpose of preaching is not social reform and cultivating knowledge, but leading the people to heaven by

Christ Press (October 3, 1901), the report of Arthur J. Brown, a secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions of the PCUSA, *Report of a Visitation of the Korea Mission of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A.* (1902), and Charles A. Clark’s letter titled *the Korean Information Papers* (1907) to the Mission Board in New York.

²⁰ *Tong-Sung Kido* is introduced in *The United Methodist Book of Worship* as follows: “In Korean congregations, among others, Tong-Sung Kido is a popular and an important part of prayer life. Usually, the congregation is given a specific time period with a common theme of petition or supplication. Then all pray aloud at the same time. The voices of others will not bother them when they concentrate on their own earnest prayers, longing for the empowerment of the Holy Spirit.” United Methodist Church, *The United Methodist Book of Worship* (Nashville: United Methodist Pub. House, 1992), 446.

²¹ Myungsil Kim, “Tong-Sung Kido as a Communal Lament Prayer,” *Theology and Praxis* 24(1) (2010): 299–335.

²² Kyungbae Min, “The Presbyterian Church in Korean History,” in *Korean American Ministry: A Resource Book*, eds. Sang Hyun Lee and John V. Moor (Louisville: General Assembly Council, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 1993), 7–8; Eunsik Cho, “The Great Revival of 1907 in Korea: Its Cause and Effect,” *Missiology: An International Review* 26(3) (1998): 291.

²³ Insu Kim, *The History of the Christian Church in Korea* (Seoul: Presbyterian Theological Seminary Press, 1997), 412.

²⁴ Ikhwon Yang, ed., *Sermons by One Hundred Pastors and Teachers, Vol. 1* (Seoul: Pakmoon Seokwan, 1920).

²⁵ Arthur J. Brown, *The Mastery of the Far East: The Story of Korea’s Transformation and Japan’s Rise to Supremacy in the Orient* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1919), 540.

redeeming them from sin and death.”²⁶ This approach encouraged preachers to thoroughly criticize sin and repeatedly call for repentance. Notably, the consecutive traumatic experiences after the liberation—the trusteeship (1945–48) and the Korean War (1950–53)—were understood by preachers as divine punishments that were the result of the Shinto shrine worship by believers during the colonial era, and the severe theological conflict between liberals and conservatives. In this period the primary focus of sermons was repentance. The representative figure was Hyungryong Park, a Calvinist theologian and preacher. In the midst of the war, he consistently declared that the cause of the national crisis was individual and national sin. Park called on refugees to show their repentance to God, and he considered their suffering as providing an opportunity to strengthen the people’s relationship with God.²⁷ Therefore, the homiletical contents of suffering are filled with otherworldly discourses that underscore the practice of personal piety, which was considered the ultimate way to solve the national traumatic experience just as it did during the colonial period.

Korean society faced two significant transitions after the post-war rehabilitation, which strongly affected the emergence of two theological streams—the prosperity gospel and the *minjung* theology—in the period of the democracy movement (1961–1987). Firstly, as industrialization and modernization emerged as the highest priority of the country, material success became identified as one of the ways to achieve liberation from nationwide trauma. These sociological factors resulted in highlighting the proclamation of a personal relationship with God to achieve individual success and blessings—which refers to the prosperity gospel—which subsequently flourished among the mainline churches (conservative and evangelical). The representative preacher was David Yonggi Cho. He claimed that salvation is not limited to the soul but also has effects on reality as a “wider salvation,” which means prosperity in all things and a healthy life. In this sense, he established his own theological discourse, which is called the fivefold gospel and threefold blessing.²⁸ Most of the growing churches’ sermons were filled with the prosperity gospel, and the concept of blessing became understood in terms of personal and material goods rather than social justice or ethical living.²⁹ Eventually, this phenomenon led the Korean church and believers to disregard the sociopolitical and socio-structural issues at that time.

Secondly, the military dictator regime emerged, which took precedence over social values such as civic ethics and human rights. These political factors paved the way for the emergence of *minjung* (the masses or people) theology. Byung-Mu Ahn, one of the founders, has developed an indigenous biblical hermeneutic for *minjung* by discovering the *of ὄχλος* (ochlos)

²⁶ Charles A. Clark, *Lectures on Homiletics* (Seoul: The Christian Literature Society of Korea, 1925; revised edition 1997), 13–41.

²⁷ Hyungryong Park, *A Sermon Collection: Our Refugee* (Seoul: Eunhwa Press, 1953).

²⁸ The fivefold Gospel is the Gospel of regeneration, being filled with the Holy Spirit, healing, blessing, and Christ’s return. The threefold blessing is the blessing of the soul’s wellbeing which is redeeming one’s soul and becoming filled with the Holy Spirit, the blessing of prosperity which is represented by material success, and the blessing of health which is represented by healing, based on 3 John 2. David Yonggi Cho, *Fivefold Gospel and Threefold Blessings* (Seoul: Seoul Malssum-Sa, 1998), 262–264.

²⁹ Eunjo Mary Kim points out the problem of the Korean church during the 1970s–80s as follows: 1) emphasis on a personal relationship with God; 2) emphasis on God’s blessing as the fruit of personal devotion and faithful commitment to church activities; 3) emphasis on faith that leads to positive results. Many Korean preachers understand the Christian faith to be the key to gaining positive results; 4) emphasis on the church-growth model of evangelism. Eunjo Mary Kim, “A Korean American Perspective: Sing a New Song in a Strange Land,” in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine M. Smith (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 101–106.

in the Gospel of Mark, which indicates the masses following Jesus.³⁰ He proposes an alternative understanding of sin. The root of sin is the structural evil of society that brings suffering upon the *minjung*, so that sin is not located in human disobedience to God but in covetousness and power by which humans become subordinate to sociopolitical structures.³¹ Nam-Dong Suh, another founder, concentrates on the phenomenological factor of *han*, which is the driving force to establish solidarity within the common traumatic experience and to raise people's voices. He suggests that the role of the preacher is the priesthood of *han* to heal the *minjungs'* wounds, and to relieve and comfort their *han* in the sociopolitical context.³² Thus, liberation-type theology made pronounced efforts to proclaim justice and humanization for accomplishing the kingdom of God, while it also solidified the voices of sufferers who were traumatized under political oppression and socio-structural issues. The theological-homiletical strategy in this period underwent a significant transformation in which the response to national trauma was turned into worldly blessing and humanization—away from the otherworldly. Yet many of the traumatized people in this era chose the mainline church, which underscored prosperity as their spiritual refuge, rather than the liberal church (*minjung* theology). The novelty of the alternative theology, the sociopolitical context at that time, and the naïve attitude about *han* had made the people hesitant to choose the liberation type of theology,³³ while the identity of churches corresponded well with the integral request of the sufferers for emotional rest, healing, and physical aid.

The liberal church proposed the prophetic role for sermons that identified unjust sociopolitical issues that existed in reality as the fundamental causes of trauma, but it has not successfully provided a spiritually secure haven or created a pastoral role that embraces the sufferers. Even though the mainline church corresponded well with the request of the spiritual and emotional comfort of the sufferers, their messages took on a de-political and de-historical attitude. Then, their preaching disregarded the resistance, which is the prophetic role of the sermon as displayed in previous periods.³⁴ Thus, the theological-homiletical strategy to respond to nationwide traumatic events has led to a deficiency of two factors—compassion and

³⁰ Ahn argues that the *ochlos* are contrasted with the ruling hierarchy from Jerusalem, and they were clearly on the side of Jesus: they were the *minjung* from Galilee and they were an object of consternation for the authorities and the ruling class. Byung-Mu Ahn, "Jesus and Ochlos in the Context of His Galilean Ministry," in *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium*, ed. Paul S. Chung (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2007), 43–47; Byung-Mu Ahn, "The Gospel of Mark," in *Reading Minjung Theology in the Twenty-First Century*, eds. Yung Suk Kim and Jin-Ho Kim (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 69–70.

³¹ Byung-Mu Ahn, *The Story of Minjung Theology* (Seoul: Korea Theological Study Institute, 1991), 92.

³² Nam-Dong Suh, *Study on Minjung Theology* (Seoul: HangilSa, 1983), 43.

³³ Korean society, in the post-Korean War era, was paranoid about communism, so that embracing liberation theology that emphasizes praxis, a concept from the Marxist tradition, was impossible. Indeed, the alternative approaches of *minjung* theology such as the image of God, Christology, and biblical hermeneutics elicited uncertainty and anxiety on the part of the *minjung*. Koo D. Yun, "Minjung and Asian Pentecostals," in *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium: A Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation*, eds. Paul S. Chung, Veli-Matti Karkkainen, and Kyoung-Jae Kim (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2007), 93. The wounds of *han* made the connection with the Other an attractive factor while forming solidarity, but the resistance voice of this group also led to the acceptance and eruption of violence. Therefore, violence as an agonized form of love is not a fundamental solution in the process of liberation of the Other from social trauma. Jae Hoon Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds—Han* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 155–58; Wonhee Anne Joh, *Heart of the Cross: A Postcolonial Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 26.

³⁴ A similar phenomenon has been discovered in the Black church community in the United States. Black practical theologian Dale P. Andrews analyzes the situation as establishing "a big chasm" between church and theology. Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 43.

resistance—in each preaching group over the last four decades. Finally, the Korean Protestant church encountered the *Sewol* ferry incident without having a chance to integrate its perspectives.

After the incident, society anticipated that Korean Protestants, as a dominant religious group of Koreans, would demonstrate a compassionate response and provide a hopeful message to meet the needs of the grieving society. However, their theological-homiletical strategy on social trauma was unprepared. Therefore, many preachers mimicked the traditional perspective as the church proposed during previous events.³⁵ The dominant interpretation of the incident was divine punishment as a result of individual or communal sin, although the preachers agreed that the fundamental cause of the event was the corrupt socio-structural system. Preachers insisted that the incident was God's sign or warning to demand our repentance or the incident provided a good opportunity to restore one's relationship with God. The prominent preachers, finally, raised the questionable interpretation that the victims, in particular high school students, had been used as a scapegoat for urging society's repentance to God. The sermon of Samhwan Kim presents a representative case. He claimed "God did not sink the ferry without a reason. It is because God is about to sink this nation. However, instead, God has chosen these young students to give this nation one more chance."³⁶ As Thomas Long claims, these sermons that apply a theological interpretation—which is based on conventional theodicy—to the context of traumatic suffering cruelly mocked the bereaved families instead of offering comfort.³⁷ Thus, the sermons of dominant Protestant leaders caused national outrage while the Korean church ranked as the most untrustworthy group in society, and resulted in the exodus from the church of 80 percent of the victims and bereaved families, who were left with ineradicable scars.³⁸ Although the consecutive national traumas presented an obstacle to the development of the theological-homiletical perspective of the Korean preaching on social trauma, they have still not been utterly liberated from the early missionary point of view on social trauma, which emphasized personal piety within its dogmatic discourse. As the theological-homiletical interpretation of social trauma has been limited to being an individual matter of faith, Korean preaching lost its voice of compassion for the sufferers and of resistance to the unjust society. Nevertheless, the Korean preachers once again repeated their same perspective on social trauma in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Preaching as Lament

Lament is found throughout the Old Testament, principally in the Psalms, and these are cited in the New Testament.³⁹ The petitioner of the laments submits a variety of complaints and

³⁵ The sermon analysis was conducted with the use of twenty-nine sermon samples—delivered in the specific period from April 20 to June 1, 2014—which were preached by nineteen preachers and distributed by one organization.

³⁶ Samhwan Kim, "The three requisites of the faith (1 Thess. 5:15–23)," Myungsung Presbyterian Church, May 11, 2014. Other prominent preachers delivered similar messages such as, "If we don't consider their sacrifice to be the steppingstone to make this a better world, there will be no way to atone for our sin"; "The children have become a sacrifice and they have died instead of us"; and, "I believe the students and other victims were used as missionaries to restore our country."

³⁷ Thomas G. Long, *What Shall We Say?: Evil, Suffering, and the Crisis of Faith* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 44–45.

³⁸ Hyunmo Pyo, "Do you know why victims' families left the church?" *Kidok Kongbo*, April 14, 2015.

³⁹ The Book of Psalms contains sixty laments which is 40 percent of all psalms. The lament psalms commonly consist of five elements—an address to God, complaints, requests, motivation (why God should act), and confidence in God. Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 65.

requests that God not only regard the individual's physical and psychological stability but also social justice and shalom. In spite of its vital importance, lament has seldom been practiced in the contemporary Western church or in the Korean church.⁴⁰ Preaching that lacks lament in the face of societal trauma reinforces the misinterpretation that suffering is a punishment from God who is sadistic and without compassion. Further, it fails to support the social and political dynamics in this world that calls us to justice. Lament, therefore, simultaneously proposes the voice of compassion and resistance to preachers who are encountering the theological-homiletical question of social trauma.

Preaching as lament provides a secure haven in which to break the silence of suffering by proposing an opportunity to encounter the compassionate God who suffers with the sufferer. When people encounter a traumatic experience, the initial response is silence. The unexpected suffering causes silent "psychic numbing"⁴¹ and it imposes isolation on the victim who is cut off from society, even destroying the memory of where the victim belongs. Preachers, in this situation, often have a theological reaction and stick to the domain of theodicy, as shown in the Korean preaching during the national crises; nevertheless, "the painstaking task of reconstructive theology may well come later; the more immediate task for the sermon is lamentation."⁴² The lament enables the sufferers to speak, and allows them to express their emotions while it breaks the silence. Further, the language of poetry in the lament "allows for ambiguity and openness, both putting experience into words,"⁴³ despite the fact that ordinary language is inadequate for the articulation of pain and agony. Dorothee Sölle notes that the first language out of suffering is psalmic, which enables us to find a language that leads out of the incomprehensible suffering that makes one mute.⁴⁴ The lament, therefore, allows preachers to interrogate the root causes of suffering and to ask searching questions about God's attitude toward suffering.⁴⁵

Further, lament invites the sufferers to bring out one's sorrow and rage before God and also awakens them to the awareness that God always listens and can be trusted to help in the midst of the horrible experiences. Preaching as lament, therefore, makes space for the experience of the compassionate God who is crucified as divine and fully human. Andrew Purves notes that "God's compassion requires us to understand God now in terms of God's vulnerability and willingness to suffer with us,"⁴⁶ like the original meaning of compassion in Latin, which is "to suffer alongside someone."⁴⁷ The ultimate compassion of Jesus is revealed on the cross as a victim of violence, a seemingly weak and ineffective figure, who was unable to protect himself

⁴⁰ Denise Hopkins, *Journey Through the Psalms* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 5–6; Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World Through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene: Pickwick Publication, 2008), 11; Glenn Pemberton, *Hurting with God: Learning to Lament with the Psalms* (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 131, 441–45; Soong-Chan Rah, *Prophetic Lament: A Call for Justice in Troubled Times* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015), 22.

⁴¹ Robert J. Lifton, *The Life of the Self: Toward a New Psychology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 27.

⁴² Joseph R. Jeter, Jr., *Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 28; Similarly, LeRoy H. Aden and Robert G. Hughes note "giving voice to human lament" as the first step in pastoral preaching on suffering. LeRoy H. Aden and Robert G. Hughes, *Preaching God's Compassion: Comforting Those Who Suffer* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 51.

⁴³ Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth: Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008), 27.

⁴⁴ Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 70.

⁴⁵ Sally A. Brown, "When Lament Shapes the Sermon," in *Lament: Reclaiming Practices in Pulpit, Pew, and Public Square*, eds. Sally A. Brown and Patrick D. Miller (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29.

⁴⁶ Andrew Purves, *The Search for Compassion: Spirituality and Ministry* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989), 16.

⁴⁷ Alister McGrath, *Suffering* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992), 68.

from suffering. His lament on the cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” rejected a pious attitude toward God and stands as testimony that sufferers today are not the first to have felt abandoned by God.⁴⁸ It also delivers the message of solidarity with the others: “It’s okay to feel this way; God remains with you and for you despite what you are experiencing at this moment.”⁴⁹ Preaching as lament, as a result, discloses “not a disappearance of scars, or an absence of tears, but rather their acknowledgment in the presence and purposes of God and wiping away of tears that have really been cried.”⁵⁰ Further, the preaching moves the sufferer out from narcissistic ground then enables people to experience a compassionate God who walks along with them in the midst of suffering.⁵¹ Therefore, preaching about social trauma is not only intended to perform the rhetoric of lament while publicly proposing a pastoral refuge for sufferers, but is also intended to participate in and proclaim the compassionate God within their reality. At that moment, the preaching that was imbued with God’s compassion—sympathy with the divine pathos—evokes prophetic speech about how God weeps over our plight as we seek God’s justice and peace in this world.⁵²

Preaching as lament represents a resistant voice that is a profound expression of people’s desire for God’s justice and liberation. In the public arena, the lament not only brings individuals and communities into a closer view of the reality of the society to which they belong but also proposes an alternative consciousness, one in which people can see their history in the light of God’s justice. Many laments in the Psalms implicitly or explicitly rejected the idea that suffering is caused by sin; rather they recognized that it is often caused by the socio-structural context.⁵³ Furthermore, Jeremiah is a representative figure who proclaimed the resistant voice against unjust political-religious institutions which sinned against the covenant with God. In fact, his lament was not merely an expression of mourning for the loss of the covenant and its effects, but it also embodied social critique.⁵⁴ Jeremiah, therefore, described how fundamental evil resulted in society’s hurt and pain in the form of social suffering—injustice, corruption, violence, abuse of the vulnerable—but also how it restores the hope of a new orientation with God. Frank Crüsemann, in this respect, underlines the social aspects of the laments in ancient Israel; it was not only an individual’s creation, but it occurred in public environments as a praxis so that the right to lament and the protections of the law functioned as the two central pillars in the maintenance of social justice in ancient society.⁵⁵ Lament, therefore, proposes a new definition of the situation in light of the reality of suffering. The lament also encourages hope in the midst of the social situation, which becomes a significant factor that makes believers who are suffering

⁴⁸ Nancy J. Duff, “Recovering Lamentation as a Practice in the Church,” in *Lament*, 10.

⁴⁹ John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), 101.

⁵⁰ David Schnasa Jacobsen, “Promise and Cross: Homiletical Theology, the Vocative Word Extra Nos, and the Task of a Revisionist Eschatology,” in *Homiletical Theology in Action: The Unfinished Theological Task of Preaching* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2015), 123.

⁵¹ Luke A. Powery, “Lament: Homiletical Groans in the Spirit,” *Homiletic* 34(1) (2009): 33.

⁵² Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Pub, 2008), 136–37.

⁵³ Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel’s Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007), 29.

⁵⁴ Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament: The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2017), 155.

⁵⁵ Frank Crüsemann, “Das Alte Testament als Grundlage der Diakonie,” quoted in Eva Harasta and Brian Brock (eds.), *Evoking Lament: A Theological Discussion* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), 169–73.

behave differently than society expects.⁵⁶ In these respects, preaching as lament is not only the individual voice of mourning, but also the public voice of resistance. As an agency of hope, lament acts within the world of suffering, it invites people into deeper sociopolitical engagement, while at the same time it reframes and reconstitutes the nature and meaning of the social structural system that longs for the justice of God.⁵⁷ Thus, preaching as lament is not only cathartic, it is also social, because its expression and sharing of painful emotion intensifies personal ties and even enhances communal solidarity. Stanley Hauerwas states we do not have an exact “solution” to the problems of evil and suffering in society, but solidarity in the community makes it possible “to absorb the destructive terror of evil that constantly threatens to destroy all human relations.”⁵⁸ Genuine solidarity has formed in the compassionate God who laments on the cross. When Jesus cried out in the midst of suffering, it revealed “God’s solidarity with the sufferer, not in unrealistic platitudes or false expectations, but in total identification and solidarity.”⁵⁹ Thus, preaching as lament establishes the hermeneutic dynamic of compassion and resistance within its praxis: the worth and value of the sufferers are not invalidated by the compassionate God, but the divine experience leads them to act with courage and claim justice in God’s fierce resistance to the evil and suffering in their reality.⁶⁰ Therefore, in preaching, the sufferer’s solidarity—which is established upon the experience of a compassionate God—has not been limited to the personal level as a charity, but it discloses a more radical love which offers resistance through the power to break the silence of evil in an unjust society.

Research on lament, despite its simultaneous nature, has been divided into pastoral and prophetic roles by mainline and liberal groups respectively, and is reflected in dealing with the national traumas by the Korean Protestant church. Since the late 1990s, lament has emerged as a significant theme in biblical theology and homiletics.⁶¹ Approaches on lament, however, reveal stark differences depending on theological stands. Firstly, the mainline group personally underscored the pastoral character of lament that is a personal petition to God. In such petitions, sufferers ask for God’s intervention in the midst of their suffering that is the result of sin which violated their covenant relationship with God.⁶² Therefore, sincere repentance to God who hears the petitioners’ agony is stressed as a homiletical strategy to liberate them from suffering. This was clearly represented in the sermons that responded to the *Sewol* ferry incident. This orientation is the reason why their preaching did not seem to have practical implications for the

⁵⁶ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 109; Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 95.

⁵⁷ Katongole, *Born from Lament*, 261.

⁵⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, *God, Medicine, and Suffering* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 53.

⁵⁹ Swinton, *Raging with Compassion*, 101.

⁶⁰ Wendy Farley, *Tragic Vision and Divine Compassion: A Contemporary Theodicy* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 111–12.

⁶¹ Tae-Kyung Kim, “The Psalms research in current Study since the 1990’s,” *Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 20(3) (2014): 325–56.

⁶² Jungwoo Kim and Yoomi Park, “Preaching with Pastoral Counseling according to the Psalms,” *Hermeneia Today* 43 (2008): 85–101; Sa-Ya Lee, “Literary and Theological features in the Book of Lamentations,” *Theological Forum* 55 (2009): 7–33; Changhoon Kim, “Preaching from the Psalms,” *Journal of Evangelical Practical Theology* 24 (2011): 71–102; Taehoon Lee, “Exegesis and Preaching Guide on Lamentations,” *Hermeneia Today* 52 (2011): 155–168; Daehyeok Kim, “A Methodological Suggestion for Genre-Sensitive Preaching: Focused on the Lament Psalms,” *Journal of Evangelical Practical Theology* 30 (2014): 42–88; Daewoong Kim, “The Theology of Lamentations in the Light of the Oracles of Jeremiah,” *Bible and Theology* 82 (2017): 29–61; Sang-Ki Moon, “The Practice of Preaching in Consideration Literary Characteristics of the Psalms of the Old Testament,” *Gospel and Praxis* 64(1) (2019): 181–213.

victims and bereaved families despite the fact that the preachers highlighted lament: the specific feature of lament that was highlighted was the consequence of divine punishment, and that approach did not allow sufferers to experience genuine compassion from others in their reality. Further, the preaching did not build up the solidarity of the victims and bereaved families as a voice of resistance. Conversely, the liberal group publicly emphasized the prophetic character of lament as an expression of communal grief raised to God by those who suffer under sociopolitical or socio-structural violence and oppression.⁶³ In this way, lament was a voice of resistance against unjust realities while longing for God's justice and shalom. Yet, it presents a similar problem with preaching that too often concentrates exclusively on the prophetic. Those who preached from this more liberal orientation have adapted the solidarity of sufferers that resulted from their shared experience of sociopolitical oppression. Although the voice of resistance publicly revealed social issues and the existence of the others who are marginalized in society, ironically it caused the exodus of some of the sufferers from the liberal tradition. The wounds of sufferers made their connection with the others an attractive factor in the formation of solidarity but the resistance of this group also led to the acceptance and eruption of violence in its praxis.⁶⁴ Moreover, in this orientation to preaching, the identity of individuals who need physical and spiritual care is sometimes overlooked.

Preaching as lament, however, is neither a personally focused pastoral task addressed to sufferers while underscoring their "trauma," nor is it the publicly emphasized prophetic task to address social injustice and violence while highlighting "national" matters. These are not independent projects of preaching on national traumas and therefore should not be divided into two separate tasks. Instead, preaching as lament provides a pastoral voice to sufferers, liberating them from their silenced reality by articulating God's compassion. Speaking compassionately then has led to presenting the prophetic voice as a way to establish the genuine solidarity of resistance against evil and unjust socio-structural context by proclaiming God's justice and peace.

Korean society has been traumatized by multiple national crises. But the consecutive cruel events failed to provide physical and psychological space to recover from the unbearable trauma of those who sufferer. Rather, the voices of sufferers have been silenced and forgotten while the social trauma is regarded as an individual matter. Indeed, the Korean Protestant church's theological-homiletical point of view with regard to nationwide trauma—which is based on orthodox theodicy and a dichotomous view of the world—enforced the idea that the sufferers deserved divine punishment due to their sin. As a result, the church abandoned its role for providing compassion to the suffers and for raising a voice of resistance to evil and unjust social structures which produce various forms of social suffering. These days, however, social

⁶³ Young-Il Kim asserts that lament proposes a public voice to resist unjust reality that is a homiletical strategy of the prophetic role. Young-Il Kim, "Interpreting the Psalms," *Theological Studies* 30 (1989): 203–214; Sehoon Son notes that lament discloses the people who are oppressed and who suffer under socio-economic power and authoritarian political power in contemporary society. Sehoon Son, "Comprehending Lament in the Psalms," *Korean Journal of Old Testament Studies* 15 (2003): 65–94; Jong-Gil Kim claims that lament is the communal voice of *minjung* who suffer under sociopolitical oppression. Jong-Gil Kim, "The Counter Speech of Minjung in Psalms 9–10," *Theological Thought* 137 (2007): 40–66; Tae Kyung Kim proposes that the economic theological theme of researching lament focuses on concept of the poor and needy who are under sociopolitical oppression. Tae Kyung Kim, "Economic theology and economic ethics in the Psalms," *Korean Journal of Christian Studies* 82(1) (2012): 75–98.

⁶⁴ Lee, *The Exploration of the Inner Wounds*, 155–58.

trauma pervades our lives in various forms due to the rapid transformation of society within its multinational and multicultural contexts. Therefore, encountering people who are suffering from diverse social issues becomes the inevitable task of preachers every Sunday. The task is not limited to Korean society, but the mission of preachers all around the world where people are facing traumatic experiences due to the COVID-19 pandemic, racism, political conflict, and military coups. Now is the time to preach lament from the pulpit in places where God's compassion and God's justice are needed.

Invisibility of Whiteness: A Homiletical Interrogation

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Abstract: *This article examines the invisibility of whiteness in homiletics which operates in and beyond homiletics. One example is that white authors still rarely self-locate in their academic writing. White scholars' lack of self-location is juxtaposed with BIPOC¹ scholars' pressure to self-declare. Another example is that the work done by racialized scholars is parceled out as specialized, resulting in further marginalization, while white scholars' work is universalized and centralized. A further issue that teachers of homiletics must be conscious of is how we select (i.e., choose and omit) readings for students as well as how to arrange the chosen readings beyond white normative ways. Once the reality of whiteness in the field of homiletics is made visible, preaching practices and consideration of environments including preaching place and worship space are examined. The article argues how influential the preaching place is. In a similar vein, it interrogates the use of art in worship and the location of the pulpit as it conveys whiteness. The article further probes the symbolism of color that is embedded not only in visible art but in language, especially within the text of the Bible. Two stories in the Bible from the book of Ruth and Genesis will be discussed as a homiletical interpretive task of making whiteness visible.*

Invisibility of Whiteness in Writing, Publishing, and Selecting Readings

I begin with an assumption: it is not a matter of asking if the scholarship of homiletics embeds whiteness, but it is a matter of revealing how it does so. With that assumption, I self-critically examine how we as scholars write, how we publish, and how we select course readings.

Lack of Self-Locating

While I am aware of the danger of generalizing here, I contend that many Anglo male homileticians of European descent who belong to the so-called SWAM—Straight, White, American (US) Male as Joseph Jeter Jr. called it, or others referring to Straight, White, Able-Bodied Male²—have not taken sufficient time to self-identify in their scholarly writings. They do not (need to) consciously name their particular identities, but due to their positions in power their claims and their views are considered universal. However, postmodern thought has taught us any universal and normative view should be questioned and deconstructed. To embody postmodern is to be “uncomfortable with and suspicious of words like ‘truth,’ ‘reality,’ ‘objectivity,’ ... ‘universality,’ and ‘absoluteness,’” Ronald Allen writes.³

According to Tema Okun, one of the signs of white supremacist culture is objectivity and neutrality. In white supremacy culture, there is the “belief that there is such a thing as being objective or ‘neutral’” and that “emotions are inherently destructive, irrational, and should not

¹ Here the acronym “BIPOC” refers to “Black, Indigenous, People Of Color.” I will use BIPOC and racialized interchangeably.

² Joseph Jeter, “Bipolar Preaching,” in *Patterns of Preaching: A Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald Allen (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998), 52. The Canadian Centre for Diversity and Inclusion identifies SWAM as Straight, White, Able-bodied, Male.

³ Ronald J. Allen, *Preaching and the Other: Studies of Postmodern Insights* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2009), 15.

play a role in decision-making or group process.”⁴ From the persistent work of feminists we know that emotions are equally valid, integral to wholeness and scholarly work. We also know such universal and logic-centered claims are power-laden. A good historical example of a universal claim embedded in language is the universal use of the word “men” to represent all humans when it really only reflects male normative dominance in the world.

Homileticians who study the intertwined relationship between Christianity and culture know that culture in general and white Anglo male culture in particular are far from objective or neutral, let alone beneficial to all. Thus, those of us who benefit from the racial and cultural hierarchy must recognize that we hold dominant power in society and that our experiences are regarded as normative. As Christine Smith noted, homileticians with racial, ethnic, gender, sexual orientation privileges find it difficult to describe their social location, whereas those who are marginalized and minoritized are usually better able to articulate and “take responsibility for the limited, prejudicial, and often oppressive dimensions of one’s human identity in relation to the rest of humanity.”⁵ I would like to nuance her argument on marginalized or the minoritized homileticians’ abilities to better articulate their identities. It is not because they have a special ability or a special gift to take on this responsibility of self-awareness but because they often are forced to locate themselves. For marginalized communities, self-locating is not a voluntary choice but is often an involuntary imposition forced by the normalized gaze of colleagues, demanding that they legitimize their existence. “In the act of seeing,” as Miguel A De La Torre puts it, people in power “create that which legitimizes and justifies their position, vis-à-vis the colonized and disenfranchised.”⁶ This position of gazing creates normativity. It is normal or acceptable for SWAM scholars not to self-identify. This normativity masks their whiteness. As a structure of power, whiteness produces the normative culture that continues to benefit people that belong to SWAM and others in power with privilege.

The theme of the 2019 Academy of Homiletics, “Unmasking Homiletical Whiteness,” uses a good metaphor. The verb “unmask” conjures the image of revealing someone’s hidden face. The mask of whiteness exists. It conceals a hidden reality, like air. Whiteness in homiletics is invisible but breathes deeply in the cultural norm of whiteness in academia and preaching practice. Thus, an interrogation of the invisibility of whiteness in homiletics as a self-critical discipline is to declare our social location, naming biases and privileges when we write. This declaration is not an exercise in political correctness but a theological act of confession with humility and honesty. The homiletical task of self-locating requires humility and honesty because it involves vulnerability, exposing the preacher’s own limits and weaknesses. Barbara Blaisdell puts it this way: “We must be honest about our own doubts, questions, and experiences as we prepare to write. This part of preaching is confessional. The final sermon need not be autobiographical, but it must reflect the real issues and struggles of a person of faith.”⁷ Confession is an integral part of the preaching act.⁸ Anna Carter Florence further develops the

⁴ Tema Okun, “White Supremacy Culture,” *DRWORKSBOOK* (website), 2001.

<http://www.dismantlingracism.org/white-supremacy-culture.html>

⁵ Christine Smith, ed., *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 3.

⁶ Miguel A De La Torre, “Identity Cross-Dressing While Teaching in a Global Context,” in *Teaching Global Theologies: Power and Praxis*, ed. Kwok Pui-lan (Grand Rapids: Baylor University Press, 2015), 76.

⁷ Ronald J. Allen, Barbara S. Blaisdell, and Scott Black Johnson, *Theology for Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 182.

⁸ Christine Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Encountering Handicapism, Ageism, Heterosexism, Sexism, White Racism, Classism* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992).

theological dimension of preaching in a confessional sense by framing it as testimony. She calls for the preaching act to be that of narrating one's life, a life that is inevitably shaped by colonialism, migration, and other difficult realities.⁹

Invisibility of Whiteness (Whitewash) of the Publication Industry

The lack of self-locating as it takes place in the publication industry is an example of the invisibility of whiteness in academia. The impact of whiteness is felt personally but its nature is structural. As elsewhere argued, whiteness is a structural power and its presence is most prevalent in its invisibility.¹⁰ Courtney Goto examines the edited volume as an example of the hidden structural problem of whiteness in practical theology. She interrogates *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*,¹¹ a volume edited by two white scholars who asked her to contribute to "the Asian American chapter." She noticed two other racialized scholars were also asked to write their chapters (African American and Latino), while none of the white scholars were asked to write their own ethnic and racial chapters. Instead, they were invited to address approaches that are central (meaning foundational or well-studied) in the field. After Goto vocally raised the concern of the racial parceling out of volumes and subject matter, a chapter entitled "White Practical Theology" was added. Yet, the whole structure of the book (15 chapters total), Goto notes, "assumes that the field is divisible into broad approaches that are seemingly untouched by race, while the work of addressing issues of race is assigned to isolated chapters coded as such."¹² She also points out that this practice is pursued in other theological disciplines as well.¹³ It is hard to deny that academic publishing culture breeds white invisible normativity. The well-intentioned effort of including non-white scholarships ends up further ghettoizing and tokenizing their voices. That is why the late homiletician Dale Andrews, who was asked to write an African American chapter in the same volume, writes, "We have not escaped the marginalization of studying the marginalized."¹⁴

In this regard, it is worth highlighting one book that attempted to escape the marginalization involved in studying the marginalized. Ruth Duck's introduction to Christian worship put white worship as "a" particular pattern along with African American, Korean, and Latina/Latino worship patterns. Her intention to structure the book this way was to make whiteness visible. White worship tradition has "much to commend it," she explained, "just as it has much to learn from other traditions, as it takes its place in the rainbow—but not as the norm—of Christian worship in North America."¹⁵ Compared to Duck's textbook, the late James White's *Introduction to Christian Worship*¹⁶—notwithstanding its excellent research, comprehensive historical view, and encyclopedic knowledge of the classical patterns of Western

⁹ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), xviiiiff.

¹⁰ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "The Emperor Has No Clothes!: Exposing Whiteness as Explicit, Implicit, and Null Curricula," *Religious Education* 114:3 (2019): 239–251.

¹¹ Kathleen A. Cahalan and Gordon S. Mikoski, eds., *Opening the Field of Practical Theology* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2014).

¹² Courtney T. Goto, "Writing in Compliance with the Racialized 'Zoo' of Practical Theology," in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, eds. Joyce Ann Mercer and Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Boston: Brill, 2016), 112.

¹³ Serene Jones and Paul Lakeland, eds., *Constructive Theology: A Contemporary Approach to Classical Themes* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), cited in Ibid.

¹⁴ Dale P. Andrews, "African American Practical Theology," in *Opening the Field of Practical Theology*, 27.

¹⁵ Ruth Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 51.

¹⁶ James White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3rd edition (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000).

worship traditions—is obviously an example of embedded whiteness. While it only presents the European and white North American measure of liturgy, its whiteness is masked by the lack of recognition as such. Unfortunately, however, this book is one of the most-well used textbooks for introductory worship courses in Protestant traditions not only in North America but in other parts of the world (translated into many different languages). The fact that the third edition was printed in 2000 underscores its importance and the widespread and uncritical acceptance of the whiteness of Christian worship education and its textbook industry around the world.

Turning to textbooks in homiletics, I wonder if there are any books that decenter whiteness by making whiteness visible. If we cannot locate such books on our homiletics bookshelf, the absence suggests that whiteness is still powerfully at work in homiletics as well. To repeat, whiteness is most powerful when it is invisible. It breeds well in its absence. Andrew Wymer notes that the fact that white homiletical discourse in journal articles and books is silent about whiteness is evidence that whiteness is pervasive.¹⁷ The reality is dire when one looks at the late Haddon Robinson's *Biblical Preaching* as an example, which has been the most sold textbook (over 300,000 copies) in homiletics in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in North America.¹⁸ Robinson's book has been republished (in its eighth printing as of 2007), and has been translated into many languages for use in different parts of the world. Yet, it too mainly reflects and represents the European and white North American experiences and understandings of homiletics. Few of the authors Robinson cites are BIPOC; thus their contribution is almost nil. The absence of their voices and contributions in Robinson's book is an indication that white voices, in terms of their experiences and perspectives, have become normalized and dominantly represented in unexamined ways.

Those of us who belong to the Academy of Homiletics rather than the Evangelical Homiletics Society may pat ourselves on our shoulders thinking that we have done a better job than those who belong to the latter group. However, before we congratulate ourselves let us engage self-scrutiny by posing such self-critical questions as the following: Is the homiletical theology in any preaching textbook informed by critical theories of race, including critical race theory and postcolonial theory? Or are we making an assumption that an engagement of such critical theories is not really homiletics, merely categorizing them as “ethics” and not essential to homiletical theology?¹⁹

Selecting and Arranging Course Reading Materials

As instructors who choose books and journal articles for courses on preaching, we need to be careful and intentional about how we choose (or omit) reading materials for students. This is an important consideration, especially when we take into account the changing demographics of our student bodies, knowing their diverse identities and multiple social locations. As teachers we must include readings that reflect students' lived experiences and their marginalized (and privileged) identities. We also need to include readings that help our students grow in terms of broadening their limited views and challenging their unexamined prejudices. Barbara Lundblad invites us to consider the following questions when we select readings: “Are there readings by

¹⁷ Andrew Wymer, “Knee-Deep Preaching: A Homiletical Engagement of White Bullshit,” *Practical Matters* (July 2018): 7. See <http://practicalmattersjournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Wymer-KneeDeep-Preaching.pdf> (accessed May 8, 2021).

¹⁸ Haddon W. Robinson, *Biblical Preaching: The Development and Delivery of Expository Messages*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

¹⁹ I am thankful for John McClure who gave me this helpful feedback.

women as well as men? Will the voices of different cultures and traditions be heard? Are theological perspectives from the worldwide, ecumenical church present? Are there readings that are grounded in our particular location, as well as those that help us see communities that are very different from our own?”²⁰ When the academy as a space of whiteness functions as a status quo, it is easy to cite white authors exclusively without consciously and explicitly recognizing them as white.²¹ Furthermore, we need to go beyond simply “including” non-white voices, mainly and merely satisfying the diversity checklist of curriculum review. Since the majority of scholars who have written substantive amounts of material in homiletics are still Straight, White, American, Able-bodied Male (SWAAM), BIPOC authors’ work is still viewed as a token. Thus a more diligent scrutiny and a more nuanced inclusion of other voices need to take place when teachers of preaching look for reading materials for courses. For example, it is worth including materials written by a SWAAM who positions his arguments and ideas in critical conversation with documented arguments and ideas made by BIPOC scholars in generous and respectful ways. By critical conversation I mean including honest questions about how African American homiletics and Korean American homiletics are less than conversant with women and the GLBTQIA community. Simply including African or Korean American readings may end up being entirely uncritical. Engaging critical conversation also includes the other within the other, acknowledging that there are ethnic and racial as well as gendered hierarchies within BIPOC scholarship just as there are within SWAAM scholarship. Thus, it is prudent to ask where womanist and queer resources are within Black homiletical scholarly writings, while searching for self-critical writings of Korean or Korean American homileticians within Asian homiletics in a nuanced and intersectional way.

Given that the existing power of scholarship is asymmetrical, it is imperative to include materials written by non-SWAAM scholars as assigned core and additional readings. Yet, the challenge continues. Despite the growing numbers of racialized scholars and their thought-provoking contributions, many of them have not written books that are considered encyclopedic or comprehensive. We just do not have enough selections to choose from among racialized BIPOC scholars’ textbooks in terms of content, length, and scope. Thus what often happens is that most introductory-level homiletics courses still have a textbook almost exclusively written by SWAAMs as “the main reading” and provide “side readings” in “Black homiletics,” “GLBTQ homiletics,” “feminist homiletics,” “Korean (or Asian) American homiletics,” or “Latinx homiletics.”

It is time to make a personal confession. That is my syllabus. I am complicit in this way of arranging course readings. It is challenging not to have a single textbook but to organize a syllabus with multiple readings and chapters from various books. There is also an additional challenge in finding accessible and cutting-edge publications written by BIPOC scholars that are suitable for introductory preaching course readings. And we normally cannot impose on our students more than 50 pages of weekly reading.

Again, simply including non-white scholars’ work even if treating them as core readings is not enough to unmask whiteness in homiletics. The further question to be probed is in terms of how these readings are arranged. One must ask which texts are read first and granted normative

²⁰ Barbara K. Lundblad, “Designing the Introductory Course in Preaching,” in *Teaching Preaching as a Christian Practice: A New Approach to Homiletical Pedagogy*, eds. Thomas Long and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 211.

²¹ Tom Beaudoin and Katherine Turpin, “White Practical Theology,” in *Opening Field of Practical Theology*, 258.

status? In the linear order of things, this in itself is a colonial mindset as white authors' readings come first; how these readings are organized embeds how whiteness is implicitly operative.

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, for example, disturbing but not surprising realities are being unmasked. Majorities of those who are affected by COVID-19 are non-white, poor, women, and elderly, especially those who are living in nursing homes and assisted living facilities. Black people are dying of COVID-19 at alarming rates in the United States. One data source shows that although just 14 percent of the population of Michigan is Black, 33 percent of coronavirus cases and 41 percent of deaths were in the Black community. In Chicago, 23 percent of the residents are Black but account for 58 percent of COVID-19 related deaths. In Milwaukee, African Americans make up half of coronavirus cases but 81 percent of the deaths.²² The list goes on. The situation elsewhere is not much different from that in the United States. The irony of the COVID-19 virus is that it is so dangerous because we cannot see it. The invisibility of the virus puts all of us at risk. Yet, this invisible virus vividly exposes the social inequality and racial hierarchy hidden among us. COVID-19 unveiled the communities that have been unknown to many of us who are beneficiaries of systemic injustice. One such community is the cleaners and janitors. They are invisible to most of us most of the time because they work at night when we all go home to our comfortable places to rest after work. These invisible workers are predominantly women, and many of them are recent immigrants, and most of them are from Asia. Some are undocumented workers without any social net or protection by society. Ironically, however, these most vulnerable members of our society are looking after us. They are the ones who protect the health of the public. They are the ones who sanitize places so that we can safely commute, shop, work, and get medical help in this scary COVID-infected world. The preaching task in the era of COVID-19 urgently requires the serious engagement of critical theories. In the world ignited by the anti-Black racism protests across ethnic, racial, and national lines as a just outcry against George Floyd's murder by Derek Chauvin, unmasking the invisibility of whiteness in preaching is no longer just the work of one particular group but must be owned by all of us as scholars and students of preaching.

Thus far, I have examined issues that matter to scholars of homiletics as authors and teachers. We must learn to name our social location as the basic but necessary first step of unmasking whiteness, making our privilege and marginalization visible in scholarly writing. Conversely, as authors who work with different authors in edited volumes, we must be vigilant about how BIPOC authors may be singled out racially, and targeted or tokenized for work to satisfy a racial point of view. As teachers who have power to choose readings for courses, we must also be responsible for decentering whiteness by including diverse voices and marginalized perspectives in our readings in ways that are genuine and generous rather than tokenizing. In addition to race considerations, we may add class, age, ability, sexual orientation and gender identity to the list of different voices and perspectives needed. What is required is an intersectional approach to race in unmasking whiteness because its face is multifaceted and not simply black and white, so to speak. Next, we turn our attention to preaching and the preaching environment as we continue our unmasking of whiteness.

²² Nina Misuraca Ignaczak and Michael Hobbes, "Black People Are Dying Of COVID-19 At Alarming Rates. Here's Why," *HuffPost Canada* April 8, 2020, https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/black-people-are-dying-of-covid-19-at-alarming-rates-heres-why_n_5e8cdb76c5b62459a930512a?ri18n=true (accessed June 13, 2020).

Unmasking the Invisibility of Whiteness in Preaching Practices: Preacher-Congregation Communication and Dynamics

What is preaching? How does one know that a sermon is a sermon? Can it include physical gestures, visual representations, and even silence? What constitutes the act of preaching? There are many answers to these fundamental homiletical questions but one assumption may be that preaching happens in a congregation as a publicly gathered assembly. Preaching assumes that there is a body that came to a particular place to encounter the holy, revealed in but not limited to scripture. This question assumes that preaching is a distinct act that some are called to do. I do not want to exclude the notion that not all preaching is pulpit preaching. Some preaching has happened and should happen outside the pulpit.²³ I do not promote a solo preaching idea, either. As a matter of fact, I applaud the steady critique that preaching is not the monopoly of one person in a congregation but must be shared work of the congregation.²⁴ Germane to the topic of whiteness, I highlight that such an individualistic attitude of the solo preaching is one of the symptoms of the white culture, for white culture privileges a focus on individuals and not groups.²⁵

However, while advocating for the importance of the centrality of communication and interaction in the preaching event, I want to establish the difference between the preacher and the congregation without assuming that there is one single privileged person in a congregation. An effective and faithful preacher needs to know what the congregation's needs are. Meeting the needs of the congregation is challenging when it comes to the issue of whiteness in a predominantly white congregation. While whiteness culminates in the problem of racism, it embodies other issues, including gender. In fact, problems related to race and gender often intersect rather than exist in isolation; thus it may be fruitful to raise the issues of sexism and racism together in the examination of whiteness in the pulpit. Again, a recognition of intersectionality is key to interrogating the invisibility of whiteness in preaching because other forms of oppression are operative in interlocking ways (for example, poverty and disability are often recognizably correlated with racism).

According to The Faith Communities Today 2010 national survey, only 12 percent of 11,000 congregations in the US have a female as their senior or sole ordained preacher, and that number drops to 9 percent in evangelical congregations.²⁶ This data do not specify any ethnicity. However, it rings true to many Black women who preach. The pulpit is generally the venue of men in Black churches as it imitates, Teresa Fry Brown writes, "the exclusivity of the white churches" that came from the colonial slavery era of the eighteenth century. Yet she does not blame this sexist practice solely on the white church, but holds the Black church accountable. She unearths how the propaganda of the Black church community as the "cradle of freedom"

²³ Charles Campbell and Stanley P. Saunders, *The Word on the Street: Performing the Scriptures in the Urban Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000).

²⁴ E. g., in chronological order: Reuel Howe, *Partners in Preaching: Clergy and Laity in Dialogue* (New York: Seabury, 1967), Fred Craddock, *As One Without Authority* (St. Louis: Chalice, 1971), John McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), Leonora Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), Lucy Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), Lucy Hogan and Robert Reid, *Connecting with the Congregation: Rhetoric and the Art of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), Joseph Jeter and Ronald Allen, *One Gospel, Many Ears: Preaching for Different Listeners in the Congregation* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2002).

²⁵ Okun, *White Supremacy Culture*, 2001.

²⁶ As quoted on *The Hartford Institute for Religious Research* website, http://hirr.hartsem.edu/research/quick_question3.html (accessed June 25 2019).

combatting racism and dismantling white supremacy masks the denial of the access to the pulpit for Black women.²⁷ That is why another African American scholar, Katie Cannon, also worked to debunk and disentangle the messages in African American rhetoric when these messages of justice and liberation veil the injustice of keeping Black women from preaching.²⁸ Brown's and Cannon's self-critical views of their own Black churches find a kindred spirit in Eunjoo Mary Kim, who is self-critical of her own Korean churches in terms of sexist and individual blessing-oriented preaching practices, while also critiquing the negative influence of white cultural imperialism in Korean American preaching.²⁹

The pulpit as a gendered and sexist preaching place is an age-old problem in churches. One may claim that heterosexist patriarchy is one of the oldest forms of oppression in human society.³⁰ The challenge today is that the change is slow and may actually be going backward. Statistics tell us that sexual and domestic violence imbued with homophobia and racism have escalated in recent years. In the era of the "Me Too movement," a term coined by activist Tarana Burke in 2006,³¹ it is shocking but not surprising to find that sexual abuse, harassment, and assaults of men against women, especially racialized women, and heterosexist men against members of the LGBTQ community, take place almost ubiquitously at home, at work, and in church and politics. In this alarming situation, Barbara Patterson asks, "How many sermons have we heard that have no shared experiences with real women who suffered violence?"³² The lack of homiletical references to gender-based violence is related to the male-centered pulpit: the majority of preachers are still very white and very male, as well as very heterosexist. Again we must ask, what are the assumptions of the pulpit regarding power for/with/over people concerning how it is located and used to persuade and teach?

When the congregation is white, middle class, sexist, and heterosexist, it is difficult even if preachers want to engage in exposing whiteness. This becomes extremely troubling when preachers belong to minorities (race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, and language) whose identities are the opposite of the majority of the congregation. Yet preaching as a communicative event cannot take place without the congregation. Lenora Tubbs Tisdale writes that preachers are called to be both prophet and pastor; and yet to balance between these seemingly opposite poles in preaching is hard. She makes several diagnoses about why there is resistance to prophetic preaching among preachers. I recognize that three of those fears directly point to the preacher's fear of challenging the congregation in addressing the normativity of whiteness: 1. fear of conflict, 2. fear of dividing congregations, 3. fear of being disliked or even fired. The preacher is reluctant to tackle whiteness any of these three fears might be realized.³³ These layered fears

²⁷ Teresa Fry Brown, "An African American Woman's Perspective: Renovating Sorrow's Kitchen," in *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine Smith (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 44–45.

²⁸ Katie G. Cannon, "The Wounds of Jesus: Justification of Goodness in the Face of Manifold Evil," in *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995), 112.

²⁹ Eunjoo Mary Kim, "A Korean American Perspective: Singing a New Song in a Strange Land," *Preaching Justice: Ethnic and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Christine Smith (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1998), 99–112.

³⁰ Emily Askew and O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Beyond Heterosexism in the Pulpit* (Eugene: Cascade, 2015), 16–20.

³¹ Eleven years later on October 5, 2017, the Me Too movement went viral when *The New York Times* and *New Yorker's* investigations went into and revealed the sexual misdeeds of Harvey Weinstein. The #MeToo movement is now spreading to the entire globe and entering into a courageous fury over the ways women are mistreated.

³² Barbara Patterson, "Preaching as Nonviolent Resistance," in *Telling the Truth: Preaching about Sexual and Domestic Violence*, eds. John McClure and Nancy Ramsay (Cleveland: Chalice, 1998), 105.

³³ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 2010), 10–20.

become excruciatingly painful when the preacher is not white and is preaching to a predominantly white congregation. The racialized preacher's position and role is extremely vulnerable.

Whiteness in Architecture, Art, and Authority in the Worship Space

Since preaching normally happens in worship, the worship space is essential to preaching. Philosopher Susanne Langer speculates that human perceptions are affected by physical forms. She argues that architecture serves more than a functional purpose because it shapes a space of "human relations and activities."³⁴ In this regard, the pulpit, as architecture in worship space, shapes relationships in the preaching event. This shaping is subtle, but powerfully and intuitively communicates a certain message in affective and often effective ways. If a pulpit is built as a big, wide, and elegant structure, it may communicate the majestic authority of the preaching and the preacher but it may also communicate something domineering, too. The elevation of the pulpit is an important aspect of its architecture as well. A suitably elevated pulpit maximizes visibility and audibility. But too great an elevation may overemphasize the authority of the preacher.

Yet discourse related to the pulpit, its location, and its use is never simple.³⁵ The location of the pulpit is more than utilitarian, it is also symbolic. It creates the environment for a theological encounter. James White puts it this way: the location of the pulpit is important "not because of the place itself but because what God does for humans in that place."³⁶ In my qualitative research on the BIPOC women preachers in the United Church of Canada, interviewees were divided over the use of an elevated pulpit while preaching.³⁷ Those women who preferred to use the pulpit for preaching argued that the pulpit is a symbol of preaching authority and that using it compensates for the marginal identities of their non-white female bodies. They also pointed out that for many churches, the pulpit is still a man's space and a white space, so it is important to claim it as women's space as well as a racialized space by preaching from that very location. However, the voices of those who opposed using the pulpit argued that the elevated pulpit sets the preacher above and apart from the congregation, symbolizing a colonial theology that overvalues the authority of the preacher.³⁸

Since preaching is a part of liturgy, we as preachers must also investigate how whiteness is manifested in the symbols and art related to the liturgical season, especially the ways in which the symbols of light and darkness are employed in liturgy.³⁹ For example, the color white is associated with manifestation of the Divine presence, the *theophany*. The story of the transfiguration, for example, appearing in the liturgical season of Epiphany, describes Jesus "transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling

³⁴ Susanne Langer, "Feeling and Form," in *Art and Its Significance*, ed. Stephen Davis Ross (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), 235.

³⁵ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Probing the pulpit: Postcolonial feminist perspectives," *Liturgy* 34:2 (2019): 22–25.

³⁶ White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 81.

³⁷ HyeRan Kim-Cragg, "Sharing the Feast and Hearing Complex Calling: A Study of Racialized Ordained Women Ministers of The United Church of Canada," report submitted to the McGeachy Senior Scholarship Committee, 2011, <https://unitedchurchfoundation.ca/wp-content/uploads/Sharing-the-Feast-and-Hearing-Complex-Calling-HyeRan-Kim-Cragg.pdf> (accessed June 15 2019)

³⁸ Roxanne, Mountford, *The Gendered Pulpit: Preaching in American Protestant Spaces* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

³⁹ Michael N. Jagessar and Stephen Burns, *Christian Worship: Postcolonial Perspectives* (Oakville: Equinox, 2011), 37–50.

white” (Matthew 17:2, NRSV). In this Gospel text, the use of white as a sign of the divine presence is obvious. It is hard to preach against this obvious sign revealed in scripture. It is like rowing a boat against a powerful current. Christmas and Easter also use the color white. Here, white communicates the meaning of goodness, joy, new life, and holiness in western liturgical symbolism and culture. However, white does not mean the same thing in other cultures. White clothes in western culture is associated with joyful celebrations (the wedding dress, for example) whereas the wearing of black is common when one is mourning.

But in other cultures (Korean, for example), people wear white during funerals and red or multi-colors during joyful celebrations such as birthdays and weddings. The color white signifies death and sadness in Korean and other East Asian cultures. The color white may not be necessarily negative, but it certainly communicates solemnity rather than joy and happiness. One may also point out that black does not have negative connotations in western culture all the time. “Black tie,” for example, denotes formality and is usually associated with happy, special events such as weddings. Judges and academics have worn black gowns, including the Geneva gown (called “the preacher’s gown”), to emphasize their authority, signifying something that is honored and respected. However, it should be noted that dark colors, including black, are often negatively associated in many cultures. The ubiquity of the color black as negative poses a serious problem. In the worst case, the color black is associated with sinful, dirty, and dangerous meanings and is used to stigmatize Black people and other racialized populations. Exposing this association in preaching with a more sustained examination of the symbolism of these colors is necessary because it takes us more deeply into the assumed associations that we bring with us to art, and that also pervade our interpretation and translation of scripture texts.

Whiteness in the Interpretation of Scripture

Last but not least, preaching involves reading and interpreting sacred texts. The Bible has often been used to propagate the idea that it is “the transcendental text which all people in all cultures at all times in all circumstances should obey.”⁴⁰ To say that the Bible serves as a tool of oppression is not to deny the importance of the Bible as a tool to resist and liberate. Without question, readers and communities of faith who have suffered oppression have also found the Bible to be a source of freedom and hope. The Bible readily lends itself to transcultural readings even as it is often used to repress affirmations of difference.⁴¹ Being aware of biblical authority in its various guises and their impact, let us approach two issues: the use of the symbolism of color, and racial bias contained in scripture texts. We may do so using two biblical stories, one from the book of Ruth and the other concerning Noah’s son in the book of Genesis.

As pointed out previously, the greatest danger in the use of color symbolism is to have a color associated in a negative way with a particular racialized group. The *Inclusive-Language Lectionary* has the following to say:

The New Testament imagery of light versus darkness is often used to contrast good with evil. The equation of darkness with evil, or that which is done in secret and out of the light, has unfortunately led some persons and groups to condemn and reject anything that

⁴⁰ Mary Ann Tolbert, “A New Teaching with Authority: A Re-evaluation of the Authority of the Bible,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 176.

⁴¹ Kathleen O’Connor, “Crossing Borders: Biblical Studies in a Trans-cultural World,” in *Teaching the Bible: The Discourses and Politics of Biblical Pedagogy*, eds. Fernando F. Segovia and Mary Ann Tolbert (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), 328.

is black or any dark-hued person as evil or somehow condemned by God.... While the biblical context may be free from racial intent, the too-easy misconception that dark people are also condemned and to be avoided has led to the use in this lectionary of terminology other than 'dark and white' as metaphors for what is either condemned or loved by God.⁴²

Such a dichotomy is pervasive in the cultural and visible representations of the Bible.

One vivid example of such an interpretation is found in a famous visual depiction of Ruth and Orpah by William Blake, a white British man who lived during the nineteenth century colonial era. His depiction is called "Naomi Entreating Ruth and Orpah to Return to the Land of Moab" (1795).⁴³ In this painting, Ruth, who is interpreted to have been faithful by clinging to Naomi, the woman from Judah, is portrayed as lighter in complexion and with blonde hair. On the other hand, Orpah is painted with black hair and wearing a darker color dress, turning away from Naomi. It is fair to assume that both being Moabite, Ruth and Orpah would have shared the same ethnic and racial identity. But Blake's visual interpretation of the Bible suggests otherwise.

As teachers of preaching, we need to equip our students to learn to question why Blake painted that way, investigating what is behind his interpretation and who and what influenced his reading of this text. The invitation to question is a part of preaching, in line with a hermeneutics of suspicion. This kind of preaching involves challenging the traditionally dominant and conventional readings of the Bible that reinforce racist and ethnocentric patterns of thought. Orpah has been cast by many Jewish and Christian scholars in a negative light, accusing her without textual evidence of being irresponsible and betraying her mother-in-law. Some even go so far as to accuse her of being an enemy of Israel and cursed by God while praising Ruth for choosing the God of Israel because "Israel is the inheritor of the One Universal Creator."⁴⁴ Native American biblical scholar Laura Donaldson's reading of Orpah is more helpful for preachers who would appreciate Orpah's dilemma from a different perspective.⁴⁵ Donaldson instead lifts her up as one who made a decision to go back to her mother's house. She does this reading from her Cherokee perspective. Her social location shapes her biblical interpretation, enabling her to illuminate Orpah in a less biased way. Donaldson debunks the traditional interpretation of Ruth as choosing to leave a childish life of savagery and clinging to the promise of civilization and true religion, and becoming an ancestor of Jesus: Ruth as "winner takes it all"! Instead, Donaldson turns Orpah's negative value into a positive one, resurrecting her as the woman who took a courageous step of self and communal affirmation: "the choosing of the indigenous mother's house over that of the alien Israelite Father."⁴⁶

Another example from the Hebrew Bible that we need to look at to unmask whiteness and its practices is the story of Noah's son Ham in Genesis (9:18–27). It is an important text to interrogate because it has been used to justify the slavery of Black people. An interpretation of this text identifies Ham as the progenitor of those with black skin because Noah had cursed him.

⁴² *An Inclusive-Language Lectionary: Readings for Year C*, revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox; New York: Pilgrim, Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 262.

⁴³ William Blake, "Naomi entreating Ruth and Orpah to return to the land of Moab," 1795 painting, *Bible Odyssey* website, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org/en/tools/image-gallery/r-ruth-william-blake> (accessed July 15 2019).

⁴⁴ Cynthia Ozick, "Ruth," in *Reading Ruth: Contemporary Women Reclaim a Sacred Story*, eds., Judith A. Kates and Gail Twersky Reimer (New York: Ballentine, 1994), 222.

⁴⁵ Laura E. Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah: Reading Ruth through Native Eyes," in *The Postcolonial Biblical Reader*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 159–170.

⁴⁶ Donaldson, "The Sign of Orpah," 168.

Thus he is said to be the ancestor of Africans traced back to Canaan. David M. Goldenberg has investigated every reference to Blacks in Jewish literature up to the seventh century and discovered a misreading of Hebrew and other Semitic languages that led to the translation of the word “Ham” as “dark, black or heat.” He also argues that there was no anti-Black sentiment in ancient Greece, Rome, or Arabia.⁴⁷ One may wonder, then, how such an interpretation of the Ham story in Genesis justified the enslavement of Black people in the modern era. It has to do with the colonial conquest of the transatlantic slave trade that began in the sixteenth century. By the nineteenth century, when slavery was the established norm in the United States, pro-slavery Southerners were drawn to the story of Ham because it helped endorse this politically sanctioned practice.⁴⁸

Thus, unmasking whiteness in homiletical reading practices and interpretations of the Bible must incorporate critical and complex understandings of literary studies, colonialism, and cultural studies.

Conclusion

We as preachers and teachers of preachers are called to proclaim the Good News that ultimately leads to life abundant. Some of our fellow citizens’ lives have been suffocated by the toxic air of whiteness. To breathe anew the wind of the Spirit among us, we are called to repent by learning to self-locate and to constantly scan our own biases and prejudices when we preach, write, teach, and research. An interrogation of the invisibility of whiteness in preaching is a regular practice that engages us on multiple, critical levels as we wrestle with where to preach, how to preach, and how to do biblical exegesis involving various modes of interpretation as well as the location and the identity of the preacher and sermon listeners.

Proclamation goes hand in hand with confessing the mask of whiteness as structural sin. This proclamation includes denouncing the assumed supremacy of whiteness as it is sustained by the systems, institutions, and environments that support it (e.g., cultural, spatial, habitual practices of these places). This prophetic act requires both exposing the hidden face of our own complicity in whiteness and exercising our commitment to dismantling it.

⁴⁷ David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005).

⁴⁸ Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

**Considering the Social Action within Preaching:
Reading 1 Samuel 3 through the Lens of G. H. Mead and H. R. Niebuhr**

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Abstract: *This essay proposes a method to both analyze and create social action within the sermon and examines the process through the narrative example of Samuel's calling in 1 Samuel 3. The method derives from George H. Mead's sociological development theory regarding the self's emergence within a social context, in conjunction with the qualities of radical monotheistic faith outlined by H. Richard Niebuhr. In using their scholarship, we discover how the social action occurring between Samuel, Eli, and God solidifies, shifts, deconstructs, or creates categories of understanding. When preachers pay attention to these realities, they are not only equipped to study the logistics of their sermons but are challenged to strive for an ecological interconnectivity that moves beyond the discursive into the transformative.*

Several years ago, Colgate ran an ad that featured a running tap. It began inconspicuously enough as someone approached a bathroom sink to brush their teeth, but after they turned on the tap full blast to rinse their brush, the camera did not leave the tight frame of the faucet. The water poured out to the sound of scrubbing teeth. Soon a hand appeared holding a dirty pear under the cascade to rinse it clean. Next, a second set of hands held out a bowl to fill. Finally, a young girl in a frayed shirt approached the sink, her chin barely clearing the bowl's edge. She reached out with cupped hands under the stream to ultimately bring a drink of water to her mouth. The tagline: every drop counts. Years later I don't remember the data about the average American pouring four gallons of water down the drain while they brush their teeth, or that this is more clean water than many people have access to each week.¹ I remember that girl reaching out for a drink whenever I brush my teeth and forget to shut off the water. I see those little hands under my own faucet before I remember to slam my own down to stop the stream. I will never brush my teeth the same way again.

Preachers long to have this kind of effect within their sermons, communicating macro truths in a way that impacts the micro faith realities of the listener. I contend that one way to both evaluate and approach building these connections is through the lens of social development, specifically the development theory of American sociologist George Herbert Mead. Mead asserts that the self forms in symbiotic relationship to a social world through social acts. We can only learn about ourselves as we learn about others, creating categories of understanding which affect both our personal being and overall environment. In considering the impact of the commercial above, a Meadian approach reasons that a new relationship formed between my individual self, who has regular access to a seemingly infinite supply of clean water, and an *other* who does not. While I had known about communities with a paucity of clean, accessible water, this commercial created a new paradigm of knowledge by forming a more direct and concrete relationship between myself and those communities. Now, the act of brushing my teeth carries additional layers of social significance as I perceive my action through the eyes of another. This new

¹ Colgate US, "Colgate #EveryDrop Counts." *YouTube* video, 0:30. January 22, 2016
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5Ar0eCp6uE>. Accessed September 14, 2020.

connection fundamentally shifted my category of understanding around water and impacted how I engaged with it in my own daily, lived experience.

In this essay I will demonstrate how looking at preaching through the lens of social development can reveal relational connections between categories of understanding. By analyzing the social action of sermons, we will see how the preacher reaffirms, corrects, dismantles, or creates new relationships between these categories, not simply to methodically look at structures but to empower the preacher to create transformational moments for the listener. The story of Samuel's calling in 1 Samuel 3 offers a helpful example through which to examine this method by looking at each of the three actors involved. Mead's insight into self-development through social action becomes apparent in Samuel as the listener. Samuel cannot participate in the social action initiated by God. He must first go to Eli, who empowers him to make new connections, enabling Samuel to respond to the voice of God. Alongside Mead, I will also bring in the scholarship of theologian H. Richard Niebuhr. Niebuhr bridges the gap between a sociological approach and the phenomenological realities of faith in preaching. Here we can examine how God participates in this narrative transcendentally beyond Samuel's reality, while also moving through it to reach him. In the final section of this paper I will focus on Eli's role as "preacher." Eli's preaching action appears throughout all portions of the narrative but the power of his social action requires particular attention. Joshua Daniel, a religious philosopher, offers a way to navigate this power through an *ecological conscience* found in the connectivity between Mead and Niebuhr's scholarship. By focusing on the four characteristics of an ecological interconnectivity, preaching moves beyond description into transformation. In God's calling of Samuel, we see connectivity flourish between God who reaches through social reality to connect with humanity and empowers humanity to reach out to others.

Samuel, the Listener, Within a Holy Social Action

The primary foundation of Mead's sociological work is his theory of role-taking, which contends that selfhood develops by holding the positionality of another subject within its imaginary. As the fully developed self takes on the role of another, it imagines the position of the other, remains differentiated from the other, but is affected by seeing itself through the eyes of the other, both particular and generalized. The concept of this process weaves throughout most of Mead's work but is emphasized in *Mind, Self, and Society*. Other theological scholars have brought Mead's sociological work into questions about practical theology, including faith development,² liturgical formation,³ and intercessory prayer.⁴ For the purposes of this paper, however, I will focus on one aspect of this role-taking process, the role of the other, and how we, when drawing from categories of understanding about the other, may communicate effectively with the other.

Mead argues that in the process of role-taking we develop our selfhood through the gaze of others. While this includes particular others, the self typically relies on a general consolidation

² Larry G Day, "The Development of the God Concept: A Symbolic Interaction Approach," *Journal of Psychology & Theology* 3, no. 3 (1975): 172–78.

³ E. Byron Anderson, *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003).

⁴ Donald Capps, "The Psychology of Petitionary Prayer," *Theology Today* 39, no. 2 (July 1982): 130–41; John S. McClure, *Speaking Together and with God: Liturgy and Communicative Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

of data that it has categorized to represent the attitude of a group.⁵ A young child may learn to say “cat” in connection to the household pet from a particular other, like their mother, but their subsequent use of this word does not continue to refer back to their mother. English speakers do not use the word “cat” because a particular other taught us this. Rather, its use belongs to a generalized other: all who communicate using the English language. Mead demonstrates the complexities of this occurrence in child development through the difference between play and game. When a young child plays, they take on the role of a particular other. They deliberately try to imitate a mother, a teacher, a firefighter by drawing from specific, limited categories of knowledge to take on the role of a single other. This contrasts with gameplay as children must be able to take on the attitudes of all who participate in the game in order to be successful in their role. After hitting a baseball, a player takes on the generalized attitudes of the others who expect him to run to first base rather than third.⁶ The baseball team forms a community with social rules and expectations, which the individual takes into the self and uses to be able to participate within that community. Whereas play is serial and occurs in order, game requires an intertwining of multiple roles, creating an interconnected mentality.⁷

The self creates the generalized other by amalgamating information about the other until it crystalizes into general categories of understanding.⁸ This developmental stage allows the self to expand into new worldviews and navigate wider systems with greater ease because it can encounter and hold more people within its imaginary. However, it would be a mistake to consider the self’s engagement of the generalized other as a more developed version of its connection with the particular other. Feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan suggests that in comparing the types of relationships presented through game, Mead’s generalized other is most apparent in games typically preferred by boys, which promote abstract human relationships. She compares this with girls, who typically prefer smaller, more relational patterns of play, developing “empathy and sensitivity necessary for taking the role of ‘the particular other.’”⁹ This type of game action invests in knowing others, contributing to the differentiation and development of self through a different but equally effective type of social action. Gilligan’s inclusion of the particular other in consideration of higher developed game play expands Mead’s theory and impacts our consideration of communication with regard to the other. Including the particular other alongside the generalized other creates balance by reducing the possibility of harmful or fixed generalized categories of understanding because it forces the self to recognize a complexity in others that cannot be flattened into shallow, general understandings. The self needs to create the generalized other in order to navigate multiple and varied systems of communal belonging. Engagement with the particular other keeps the self grounded in multifaceted relationship, refusing to let the other dissolve into abstraction.

Preaching participates in these interconnective dynamics. Sermon communication relies on collective categories of understanding shared by listeners, while at the same time recognizing the presence of particular multiplicity. Sermons create action by drawing on scriptural,

⁵ George H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society: The Definitive Edition*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1934), 154.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 150–156.

⁷ Joshua Daniel, “Conscience as Ecological Participation and the Maintenance of Moral Perplexity,” in *The Timeliness of George Herbert Mead*, ed. Hans Joas and Daniel R. Huebner (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 279–280.

⁸ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 90.

⁹ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, [1982] 2003), 11.

theological, semantic, and cultural coding that resonates in the listener's ear.¹⁰ For the listener to participate in the social action of the sermon, the preacher needs to offer communicative elements accessible to the listener, both individually and collectively. The listener does not limit the preacher but any moves or adjustments the preacher makes requires recognition in the listener, a connection to something known. Emergence of anything new, Mead argues, requires reorganization of what was already there.¹¹ Novelty is possible, but must begin in what is known to the listener for them to be able to understand. Preaching not only communicates with others, but its social action draws on categories of understanding about others to do so.

I suggest that when we preach, the social action of the sermon does one of four things. First, preaching can reify existing structures of understanding. Here the preacher taps into the existing categories of understanding of the listener to reinforce that belief. This action solidifies the category of the generalized other. Second, preaching can shift the structure of an existing category. Here the preacher works within an already accepted category, like the first. Unlike the first, however, the preacher attempts to soften, not solidify, the boundaries of that category, aiming to adjust what is already known. This is a disruption, not a dismantling, which prevents boundaries from becoming rigid. Third, some social action in sermons intentionally deconstructs categories of understanding. Here the preacher notes a category of belief held by listeners and works to undo or break it. This can be done in many ways, from a large sweep—by introducing a paradox, which reveals the impossibility of that category—to a small introduction of a particular other, which breaks categorization. Fourth, preaching can create something new by rearranging what is known in connection to something unknown. As suggested before, anything new requires some connection to an existing structure, but through reorganization something novel emerges. These four actions do not occur exclusively from one another, and listeners may not necessarily have a unified response to the social action offered by the preacher. The preacher may present an idea that solidifies a category for one listener but deconstructs a category for another. The difference resides in the collective assent of the listeners to a particular category of understanding. The more unified the listening community is within a category, the more unified the response.

When looking at the social action occurring in 1 Samuel 3, we see a rearrangement of what is known to create something new in connection to something unknown. The story begins by telling us, "The word of the LORD was rare in those days; visions were not widespread" (1 Sam 3:1). This clue offers insight into the categories of understanding about God from which Samuel draws. When he hears a voice calling his name, Samuel does not expect the voice to belong to God. He automatically assumes that Eli is calling. Samuel repeats this error three times, despite constantly being told otherwise by the priest. He displays an inability to draw a different conclusion based on the information to which he has access. Samuel grew up in a space dedicated to God, but he never considers to whom the voice might belong, other than Eli. As a result, Eli needs to intercede in a social action of his own. Eli knows the history of God's people and knows that God can speak directly to a person. He accesses his category of understanding to help Samuel build a new framework. He gives Samuel a phrase to respond to the voice he hears, challenging Samuel to understand that he can hear God's voice as clearly as he can hear Eli's, and respond similarly. Eli equips Samuel with new knowledge about the Other so that he can

¹⁰For detailed analysis and classification of these sermon codes see: John S. McClure, *The Four Codes of Preaching: Rhetorical Strategies* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

¹¹ Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, 198.

respond when God calls out the fourth time. Samuel can finally join God in the social act God offers and find a profound new dimension in his relationship with the Holy Other.

Preaching creates the kind of social action we see occurring between Eli and Samuel. Sermons offer a social act between preacher and listener, creating a ripple effect for future social actions of the listener. For Eli, Samuel presents the other approach with inquiry. Eli considers Samuel's experience and confusion before choosing how to help him reframe categories of understanding; in this case, the creation of something new. As a result, Samuel's following social action is directly impacted, now equipped to respond to God. Preachers obviously differ from Eli's example here—congregations of many compared to Eli's audience of one. Yet the process is similar. Mead contends that any social reconstruction "presupposes a basis of common social interests shared by all the individual members of the given human society in which that reconstruction occurs; shared, that is, by all the individuals whose minds must participate in, or whose minds bring about, that reconstruction."¹² Preachers draw on categories of understanding that undergird the listening community's mind. At the least, we utilize a shared language; at the most, we draw on theologies and symbols that uniquely mark our communities. Any new preacher in a body of believers recognizes the learning curve required to learn the patterns unique to that particular body of believers. These patterns are rooted in a group consciousness of agreed-upon understandings that may be unvoiced but are nonetheless collectively held.

Sociological analysis enables preachers to see the presumed categories they ascribe to their listeners as well as how they navigate them. This can occur on macro levels by examining the social action occurring at a high level, such as the activity occurring in what Tom Long calls the *focus* and *function* of sermons.¹³ Preachers can look for patterns emerging in the trajectory of social action occurring in sermons over a period of time. Are sermon series built toward shoring up existing categories of theological identity? Does the preacher hope to create a change in behavior by upending categories in paradoxes for the season of Lent? Is there a challenge to remember forgotten characteristics of a certain category, reversing the rigidity that has settled into its boundaries? This type of analysis is also helpful on a micro level as well. A preacher can assess individual moves in their sermon to see both the general motion of the sermon as well as consider the effectiveness of those moves. Samuel approaches Eli twice before Eli finally creates a successful connection for Samuel, resulting in a different follow-up action. When an intended social action is not successful or does not carry the expected impact, the preacher should begin by looking at the presumed categories of knowledge they are working with. Does the preacher expect the listener to know something they do not? Is the preacher overestimating the value or assent the listener has to the category they are drawing upon? When the preacher examines the social action of their sermons, they not only learn about their expectations of the listener, they can also work to improve the intentionality and efficacy of their communication.

The Phenomenological Reality of God as a Social Actor

The danger of using a sociological method for analyzing the action in sermons resides in the potential to fall into a constructivist position that potentially minimizes or overlooks the transcendent nature of God. When we rely on the social recognition of patterns and categories in our faith, we might cynically wonder if the truth of God is nothing but a social construction itself. Scholars have often set up the constructivist position as a polarity opposite to the idea of

¹² Ibid., 308.

¹³ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Third Edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 113–136.

transcendence, suggesting all experience, including potential God experience, is accessed and processed through human-created social structures and thus cannot be separated from them.¹⁴ However, when we examine H. Richard Niebuhr's writing on radical monotheistic faith, we can find a way to layer social reality with the possibility of transcendence beyond it.

Niebuhr acknowledges the self as a relational being formed from and within a social community. The self finds connection with others that goes deeper than simply adhering to the mores and laws of society. He contends, "To be able to say that I am I is...the acknowledgment of my existence as the counterpart of another self."¹⁵ He engages Mead's ideas of the self, as well as Martin Buber's existentialist "I-Thou" to examine how moral intuition comes about in individuals, arguing that we judge our actions in either approval or disapproval when we transcend ourselves to know ourselves through others.¹⁶ Niebuhr's scholarship reflects Mead's claims about the self developing within an interdependent social community. Yet Niebuhr takes this a step further by examining the transcendence required to participate in these relationships. When the self participates in social action, two elements appear: the interconnected dynamics and expectations of the current situation as well as transcendence as the self connects to something larger and independent of the moment. These two elements meet in social action where the immediate structures require a certain type of participation but also require the self to transcend these structures in order to reflect upon them and how they interact with the larger value centers of their identity.

When looking specifically at the church, Niebuhr considers this function within a collective rather than the individual. He illustrates how social action occurs between members to form a certain type of religious community, marked by use of particular theologies, symbols, metaphors, and more. However, the social action of the members also indicates a transcendent presence, as their faithfulness to a common cause points beyond themselves to a Creator as the source of their cause.¹⁷ The commitment of a disparate group of people to a single identity discloses a transcendent element beyond the social structures they have created. In this way, Niebuhr makes room for both the social and the phenomenological. While social structures form the self, the socially formed self or society can never fully represent God. God is not fully represented by one person, one community, one metaphor, one idea, or one theology. However, the diverse multiplicity of these elements finds a common trajectory among them, hinting at the transcendent reality of God, the ultimate Being from whom all being derives. Niebuhr describes this as *radical monotheistic faith*:

[This radical faith is] neither closed society nor the principle of such a society but the principle of being itself; its reference is to no one reality among the many but to One beyond all the many, whence all the many derive their being, and by participation in which they exist. As faith, it is reliance on the source of all being for the significance of the self and of all that exists. It is the assurance that because I am, I am valued, and

¹⁴ James M. Nelson, *Psychology, Religion, and Spirituality* (New York, NY: Springer, 2009), 129–133.

¹⁵ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 71.

¹⁶ Ibid., 72–76.

¹⁷ Ibid., 86–87.

because you are, you are beloved, and because whatever is has being, therefor it is worthy of love.¹⁸

Radical monotheism emerges in relationship with God, an independent actor who is beyond our social mechanisms and yet meets us through them.¹⁹ Radical faith exists beyond our social constructs but reveals itself through them. God meets us in our social connection, chooses to disclose Themselves. We see this in the incarnation of Christ, in the Holy Spirit whisper. God meets us in our social limitations but is not contained by them. This type of perspective prevents us from a constructivist position because it demands that we acknowledge a transcendent reality not confined to our social action, but apparent through it. We reach this transcendence through our fallible human constructs, recognizing that none can truly capture the truth and thus must be deemed temporary and partial. We need categories of understanding about God to hear God, and yet we cannot presume that God is identifiable with any one category of being.

Several things emerge for consideration when looking at the story of Samuel within this context. First, God appears as independent actor who stoops into humanity to participate in a social act with Samuel. Samuel's confusion reveals that he is not constructing that voice within his own existing structures. God reaches through the wider social structure of language even if Samuel does not have the capacity to fully join in the action that God initiates. The voice comes to Samuel again and again until Samuel is equipped to respond. The phenomenological reality of God is not limited by the social structures of Samuel's worldview, but God chooses to engage Samuel through that social reality. As a result, Samuel experiences different elements of relationship with the Holy Other, and through social constructs he begins to exhibit new dimensions of a radical faith, again pointing to God as a transcendent other.

Second, God invites Eli's participation into this story. In other stories throughout scripture, God has shown up in unusual and surprising ways, unknown to the receiver of the theophany. However, God overcomes the gap of categorical ignorance to make connections with humanity Themselves. This story reveals something different as God patiently approaches Samuel in repeated attempts. God does not do the work of making new connections in this instance but waits for Eli's intervention. Samuel builds something new with God through his relationship to Eli. In this way, God empowers and entrusts Eli to reconfigure categories to help Samuel make new connections. God similarly empowers preachers to play with paradigms of understanding, ultimately inviting the listener to participate in a radical monotheistic faith.

Samuel's response reveals the final aspect of encountering transcendence within this story. Eli tells Samuel to respond to the voice by saying "Speak, for your servant is listening" (1 Sam 3:10). Samuel joins God in the social act but listens without predetermined ideas of how God may continue to engage. God chooses to meet Samuel through the language and conversational tone that Samuel expects from Eli, but Samuel's response acknowledges the Holy Other that exists beyond the social framework with a posture of willing openness to hear and experience the unknown. The radical faith that Niebuhr describes disappears when humanity attempts to identify it with a closed social construct. For radical faith to exist, it needs to be open to a wild, uncontrollable God, a Holy One who cannot be identified by what we create within our social world.

¹⁸ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture: With Supplementary Essays* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, [1960] 1993), 32.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 48.

God's relational connection with Samuel reflects the dynamics of Niebuhr's radical monotheistic faith while also adhering to the social realities of categorical understanding in Mead's social act. It shows that we do not have to choose one or the other but that they can indeed occur together. We divide the world into various domains: political, scientific, aesthetic, economic, religious, etc. But Niebuhr argues that radical faith existed before this type of life sphere containment. "Israel's great prophets were legal reformers, ethical seers, purifiers of religious cults, theological critics, political advisers, poets, perhaps originators of a new literary style or even exponents of new types of aesthetic sensibility."²⁰ Radical monotheistic faith comes through social action. God participates with us in our world but is not limited by it. As Eli demonstrates, preachers create social connections for listeners, inviting them to participate in and reflect a transcendental relationship with a Holy Other.

Eli "Preaches" into Ecological Relationship

This essay has already touched on Eli's preaching posture in this narrative. In considering Samuel as the listener, we see Eli preach as he uses social action to create a new paradigm for his listener to enable greater connectivity with God. He works within his own categories of understanding to discern to whom the voice might belong, and effectively helps Samuel generate a new category of his own. Eli reflects the preacher by appropriately orienting Samuel toward the voice of God and helping Samuel build a framework to participate in God's initiating social action. It would be easy to focus on the connection between God and Samuel in this narrative. However, God works through the social framework, requiring the involvement of a wider community of relationships, namely Eli. While this type of revelatory social action is not limited to the act of preaching, it does show the type of social action occurring in the sermon. Preaching searches for connectivity points within our social scope through which radical faith and relationship with the Holy Other make an appearance.

The interaction between these three actors also reveals a power dynamic at play. By withholding further direct revelation from Samuel, God empowers Eli to offer an initial shape to their following interaction. Eli discerns who the voice might be. Eli tells Samuel what to do and say next. Eli offers a reorganization of Samuel's existing knowledge to create a new avenue through which Samuel can now participate in a holy social act. Preachers are granted this powerful opportunity to solidify, reshape, deconstruct, and create categories of understanding in connection to both others and the Holy Other. This then begs the question that developmental psychologist Patricia Miller raises, "Who decides what forms of knowledge are important and which ways of thinking are valid?"²¹ These questions resonate throughout both sociological and theological scholarship. They demand that we consider the power dynamics at play in the utilizing, shaping, and reshaping of shared categories of understanding. The mainline consciousness of most communities has a continued history of marginalizing the experience of members who do not fit the majority.

Feminist developmental psychology attempts to remedy this through a foundational epistemology of interconnectivity. This concept does not disagree with Mead or Niebuhr's sociological claims, but feminist scholars stress the importance of interaction that moves beyond cognitive knowledge to relational social bonds.²² Melissa Welch-Ross echoes Miller's

²⁰ Ibid., 39.

²¹ Patricia H. Miller, "The Development of Interconnected Thinking," in *Toward a Feminist Developmental Psychology*, ed. Patricia H. Miller and Ellin Kofsky Scholnick (New York: Routledge, 2000), 45.

²² Ibid., 54.

sentiments but adds a linguistic layer that contributes to the epistemological difference between traditional developmental and feminist theory models. For traditional modes, language is used to express or describe the phenomenon, while feminist theories recognize the power of language to actually shape the self's lived experience.²³ This resonates with theologian Rebecca Chopp's scholarship. She similarly argues about the power of language to shape and transform experience. Language participates in the foundations of our faith. "The medium of theology, after all, is words, and words about God as well as words about words need careful attention in the present era."²⁴ She continues on to suggest that our language is not simply descriptive but transformative. To speak freedom is not a hollow, descriptive claim, but has the power to effect emancipation.

Language has the power to create embodied change as humans imagine new ways to speak and thus new ways to relate and to live. This reality challenges us to go beyond a tactical methodology that simply analyzes social action. Our analysis must respect the power dynamics at play as the preacher engages the social reality of the listener. We cannot be purely descriptive in our analysis of how preaching solidifies, shifts, deconstructs, or creates because this type of engagement is automatically connected to transformation and to relational aspects of our listeners. To respect the power of this kind of transformation, we must also emphasize an epistemology of interconnectivity.

To make this move within a social development model of analysis, we must include a framework to set parameters within the social action of sermons. Joshua Daniel offers a possibility for this type of interconnective framework. He engages both Mead and Niebuhr, showing how the connectivity between them reveals a tension among multiple dimensions of social belonging. An *ecological conscience* emerges from this tension, bringing the self's patterns of a particular role in relationship to God into the multiple social dimensions in which the self participates. The religious dimension does not override the social dimension but re-ecologizes social roles, moving through the self's multiple ecologies to bring the primary patterns found in relationship with God through them. This forces the self out of isolating knowledge of God and others to bring the self into participation of relational being with God and with others who are also beloved by God. The self necessarily must participate in a vast "network of interconnections with past and present, remote and immediate social forces and relations, that constitute God's realm."²⁵ Daniel argues that this type of ecological interconnectivity has four characteristics: a holistic experience, a negotiation of multiplicity, the recognition of fallibility, and the work of enduring tragedy. By bringing these characteristics into sermon analysis, we can move beyond simple descriptions into transformation that empowers interconnected relationship.

The first characteristic of ecological interconnectivity, a holistic perspective, moves beyond purely discursive elements into a fully embodied reality. This does not discount the significance of language which undergirds Niebuhr and is at the apex of symbolic gesture for Mead. However, it recognizes that the social act requires full-bodied participation and language

²³ Melissa K. Welch-Ross, "A Feminist Perspective on the Development of Self-Knowledge," in *Toward a Feminist Developmental Psychology*, ed. Patricia H. Miller and Ellin Kofsky Scholnick (New York: Routledge, 2000), 112–113.

²⁴ Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1989), 10.

²⁵ Joshua Daniel, "H. Richard Niebuhr's Reading of George Herbert Mead: Correcting, Completing, and Looking Ahead," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 44, no. 1 (2016): 111, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jore.12133>.

affects the embodied experience. Bringing this into context for the preacher, it requires them to think about how their presence interacts with the categories of understanding that belong to the community. As a woman within a conservative tradition, I have frequently been the first or near-first female preacher in multiple pulpits, a space designated male for the entire memory of the community. My embodied presence as a female automatically creates a shift in categorical understanding for the listener, if not deconstruction or rejection. This holistic experience must also take the listener's fully embodied experience into consideration. The Sunday after the Charleston church shootings in 2015, I attended worship at a primarily white Protestant church in northeastern Indiana. No one addressed the tragedy outside a brief moment of sorrow for the loss of life in a congregational prayer. The social action in reference to a profound event, or lack thereof, further reified categories of white supremacy. A preacher engaged with a holistic perspective would understand that a primarily white community normally carrying on in worship after the hateful massacre of Black Christians embodies and solidifies the division between Black and white Christians, alongside a dismissal of racist structures that empower that division. The listeners' holistic embodiment contributes to social action.

Preaching with an ecological conscience anticipates how words affect the listener's embodied reality. Particular events or external realities contribute to a preacher's understanding of the listeners but preachers also often sense a general attitude, describing congregations as *tired*, or *excited*, or *sad*. These descriptors hint at an understanding of the embodied reality of the generalized other. The preacher must explore these avenues of embodied reality and then decide how to speak transformation into those experiences. However, preaching holistically does not require the preacher to go-with-the-embodied-flow. Preaching forgiveness, for example, in a congregation struggling with deep tension due to a harmful incident in its midst, might bring comfort to the generalized other, allowing them to move beyond the incident. But the quick move to resolution for the majority likely comes at the cost of a minority of particular others. Preaching forgiveness to those ears puts pressure on the victims or the marginalized to do emotional work for the larger group in order to maintain a status quo and perpetuate their embodied experience of violence. Transformative preaching in this case would consider both the general and the particular other and lean into the tension, requiring the generalized other to face their embodied reality in a different and perhaps more challenging way. Preachers must navigate the interconnective framework of their listeners with a careful ear and a discerning heart. This is difficult and preachers can miss the mark, but with intentional and careful engagement of the listeners' embodied reality, sermons can speak a transforming word which reverberates into their lived reality.

The second characteristic of ecological interconnectivity is the ability to negotiate multiple communities in an attempt to find balance. Both Mead and Niebuhr contend that the self participates in multiple communities. These communities range in size and purpose. They include abstract communities (like college graduates, surfers, or North Americans) to concrete communities (like employees of a particular company, Girl Scout troops, or Detroit Tigers fans). They range in size from country populations to the nuclear family. This requires preaching to move beyond the particular categories of one idealized community, especially because Niebuhr argues that it cannot exist alongside a radical monotheistic faith. The church rejects radical faith the moment it becomes a closed society because God becomes associated with the particular principles and beliefs of that religious group rather than the other way around.²⁶ To prevent this

²⁶ Niebuhr, *Radical Monotheism and Western Culture*, 28.

type of closure, the preacher must bring multiple social communities to bear in the sermon, both to acknowledge the holistic perspective of the listener and also to recognize that God's action is not limited to their singular sphere. The initial move into multiplicity is easy for many preachers as they themselves participate in different communities. However, navigating these spheres effectively to create balance requires much more intent and comes with increased difficulty. Preachers need to consider the multiplicity beyond themselves and the social communities represented in the listening body. Ecological interconnectivity requires recognition and interaction with the world beyond the walls of the church.

Several years ago, I attended a white Protestant church that had a partner church in Guatemala. One particular worship service focused on the trials that their partner was currently enduring, unable to access basic resources due to civil unrest. After the service I heard some people happily talking about the potential border wall that undergirded their candidate's election campaign. I was shocked at the disconnect between what had just occurred in worship and this conversation only moments afterward. Reflecting back, I now realize that multiple communities were present within worship, and they were entirely disconnected. Despite the relatively similar venue and peer group, these congregants acted within two different social communities: a religious one where the people of Guatemala had significant need, and a political one where the people of Guatemala become part of a faceless enemy amassing at the United States' border. Here the multiple worldviews of these particular listeners did not overlap; they were drawing from two different categories of understanding for the same group of people based on their current social action. Preaching occurs in spaces like this, where multiple communities overlap both for the listener and for others viewed by the listener.

Preaching with ecological interconnectivity must begin with honest assessment about the communities represented (physically and verbally) in our midst, and those that are not, through intent and oversight. Who we choose to engage and how we choose to represent them says something about our own community and our preaching. Consider: How do my sermons talk about other groups of people? Do I primarily draw from the same type of illustrations for examples in preaching? With whom do I expect my listener to primarily empathize? Do I ever use stereotypes or easy tropes about groups of people? Do I hear people talk about others outside of worship differently than we talk about them inside of worship? These are just a few questions a preacher can use to begin to navigate the multiplicity of communities in their preaching, to reflect on potential deficiencies, and to heighten awareness of community engagement. This reflection should indicate next steps for preachers to take toward increased interconnectivity. Here the preacher must consider where they might need to create new connections, shift others, or deconstruct harmful patterns. These steps come with difficulty because both preachers and communities fall into categorical habits. But the work of navigating communities toward ecological interconnectivity is worthwhile as the sermon curiously spirals out from the local listening community to explore new patterns of God's holy action throughout all of creation.

The third characteristic connects to the second as preachers must presume fallibility in categorization. We rely on categories of understanding to interact with our world in often automatic and subconscious ways. To understand the generalized other of a baseball team, we pull from categorical concepts like game rules, competition, and team markers. Sermons similarly draw from categories the preacher shares with the listener to communicate something about God, about ourselves, and about others. An illustration which bemoans paying taxes presumes that every listener categorically understands taxes as a bad thing and that every listener actually pays taxes. Problems arise when categorical boundaries become rigid to the point of

limitation through exact identification. I recently preached at a church where I used the formula “In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who is the Mother of us all.” For some of my listeners, this brought about a deeply negative reaction. Although this church does not theologically teach that God is gendered male, it remains a firm category tacitly agreed upon. My use of the term “Mother” to describe God was a social act, deconstructing a fixed gender category about God, that some listeners could not join me in completing. These congregants could not see God as mother despite clear examples of heavenly Motherhood in biblical imagery. Although theologically incorrect, the gender category for God had become firm for many of my listeners. This offers an obvious example of how social realities create fixed but fallible categories of understanding.

Navigating diverse communities will also help the preacher develop this aspect of their ecological preaching because multiplicity softens categorical boundaries. By creating multiple access points through a multi-community perspective, preachers not only offer wider access to the listener, they also demonstrate relational action that moves beyond a closed community. This enables preachers to break categorical strongholds. The easiest way to locate a starting point for such work is to consider where the taboo, the forbidden, the never-spoken in your community reside. These topics may exist because the community has created a fixed category which precludes another. What might it mean for a congregation that relies heavily on war imagery to hear more nonviolent aspects of God’s character in the sermon? How would a congregation that values right behavior hear a sermon that explores God’s honoring of deceptive acts like those committed by Jacob and Tamar? Which categories are we protecting by avoiding others like addiction, excessive personal debt, and sexual assault? Swaths of embodied realities in different communities are often ignored because fixed categorization limits the preacher. Depending on the strength of the prescribing categories, multiple examples over time may be needed for transformation to occur, even if a perfect balance will never be found. Yet the presumption of fallibility frees the preacher from trying to achieve a perfect goal and instead challenges them to continually seek new ways to navigate multiplicity. Working to create flexible categorization, the preacher speaks a transformational word that empowers the listener to break out of limited, partial understanding and dive into multifaceted possibility.

The fourth and final characteristic of ecological interconnectivity acknowledges the tragedy involved in negotiating multiple social worlds. The complexity of life results in communities ultimately at odds with one another, forcing some type of choice. Preachers who recognize layers of multiple social worlds in the lives of their listeners also know the significance of their choices between these worlds when crafting a sermon. I have often heard about good sermons leaving much of the exegetical work on the cutting room floor in order to focus on one part by choosing to leave out another. This does not indicate a lack of worth in the material left out of the sermon but reflects a choice that the preacher must make and loss in what remains unused. Any social action in preaching involves choice. Deconstructing categories obviously involves some sort of loss, but it is not absent from the others. Even reifying a category involves using words to add strength to one instead of another. Reaction to loss will vary depending on what is being left out or behind. At times loss can bring about joy and hope when the category is toxic, at other times loss can generate fear as a fixed category has proven less stable than believed. The preacher needs to assess the type of loss and respond appropriately in order to edify the listener, especially if the loss involved prevents the listener from joining in the social act. Transformation requires payment in the currency of loss. Ecological

interconnectivity acknowledges and integrates this type of work by presuming that we must learn how to endure tragedy.

Understanding the fourth characteristic of tragic dynamics prepares the preacher to take the necessary risk involved in the first three elements of an ecological conscience, holistically navigating multiple communities with honesty, intentionality, and a willingness to break categorical strongholds. No preacher can do this perfectly, especially because the presumed fallibility of our understanding removes goals which provide markers of success. Paradoxically, the tragic element of loss enables the preacher to take these risks because in presuming its existence the preacher learns how to negotiate transformative action with it. The preacher presumes the grief associated with transformation but moves forward with curiosity and hope for how the sermon might resonate throughout the life of the congregation. Who might find new freedom in broken categorical strongholds? Who might understand a new facet of God's holy being through the incorporation of a new voice, a new community? The preacher learns to preach more boldly as they learn to navigate tragedy because the fear of choices, consequence, and transformation itself recedes due to new competence that begets new confidence. Preaching that embraces the tragic element is marked by humility, curiosity, and a willingness to proclaim boldly. It speaks words of transformation, having wrestled with the choice of what to leave behind and a determination to navigate the consequences of those choices.

The transformational aim of ecological interconnective preaching seems like a daunting task, a juggling act as more and more balls of community, categories, and multiplicity get added to the mix. Yet the methodology of analyzing how sermons solidify, shift, deconstruct, or create categories of understanding within social action can offer the preacher both clarity and a way forward. It enables them to clearly see the tools they are using as well as gaps they are overlooking. With this kind of examination, the preacher can move beyond simple description to offering transformational social acts: the kinds of social acts that empower a listener to relationally connect with small hands reaching out to the running faucet right before she remembers to shut it off.

**You Can't Say *THAT* in a Sermon:
Social Issues, Preaching, and Dialogue During a Time of Societal Upheaval**

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Abstract: *This paper explores the challenges of preaching in the midst of societal upheaval and how deliberative practices can assist preachers with addressing social issues. The research is based on a study of ten mid-central U.S. congregations in the Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) denomination. As part of the quantitative research, congregational questionnaires in 2019 and 2020 tested whether certain terms were perceived as “too political” when heard in sermons. Respondents also indicated which topics they wanted their pastors to address and which ones to avoid. The data offers a rare “before-and-after” picture when it comes to the attitudes, concerns, and opinions of parishioners about sermons and social issues in the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods. This study suggests that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process can help congregations be more willing to address controversial social issues. The author makes the case that further empirical research is needed to help preachers devise strategies for prophetic preaching in their contexts.*

Introduction

The Listening to Listeners Project, a Lilly Foundation-funded research project led by Ronald J. Allen from 2001–2002, focused on how parishioners listen to sermons. The research team interviewed 263 sermon listeners in 28 churches of various denominations, sizes, locations, and socioeconomic/racial compositions.² In the nearly two decades since this ethnographic research project, the church—and preaching—has undergone incredible changes, shifts, and challenges. The years of the Trump era saw the erosion of societal norms around civility, perceptions of reality, and even the veracity of facts. In particular, 2020–21 caused incredible stress on congregations and preachers alike with converging crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, rising racial injustice and protests, and accelerating environmental devastation due to climate change, as well as the unraveling of American democracy and descent into extreme polarization and political violence. Thus, listening to listeners in this time of societal trauma is critical for preachers and parishioners navigating this unprecedented time.

This paper will explore these societal contours through a study of ten congregations who participated in a grant I directed at Lexington Theological Seminary (LTS) in 2019–20 called “Dialogue in the ‘Purple Zone’: Pedagogies for Civil Discourse in Online and On-site Settings.” Methods of both quantitative and qualitative research were used in the form of surveys and interviews of congregants and clergy. One question in the congregational survey tested whether certain terms are perceived as “too political” when heard in sermons. Another part of the survey asked parishioners to indicate which topics they wanted their pastors to address and which ones

¹ I am indebted to the Rev. Dr. Amanda Wilson Harper, Tarleton State University, for her assistance in designing the research instruments for this project as well as consulting with me on the analysis of the data. Two other researchers also contributed to designing the surveys: the Rev. Dr. Katie Day, United Lutheran Seminary (emerita), and Dr. Wayne Thompson, Carthage College.

² See: *Believing in Preaching: What Listeners Hear in Sermons* by Mary Alice Mulligan, Diane Turner-Sharass, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, and Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005).

they wanted them to avoid. Because these surveys were conducted twice—in the fall of 2019 and again in the fall of 2020—the data offers a rare “before-and-after” picture when it comes to the attitudes, concerns, and opinions of parishioners about preaching and social issues in the pre- and post-COVID-19 periods. The study provides insights and raises questions for congregations, clergy, and homileticians about preaching during a time of societal upheaval.

Explanation of the project

The Purple Zone project was funded by the Wabash Center for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion under a grant program entitled Pedagogies for Social Justice and Civic Engagement. The purpose of this project was to explore the use of preaching and deliberative dialogue as a tool for facilitating difficult conversations and encouraging civic engagement in online, on-site, and congregational settings within theological education. One aspect of this project included bringing a cohort of ten clergy and one lay leader each from their congregations (twenty participants in all) to our campus at LTS to teach them the “sermon-dialogue-sermon” (SDS) process to use in their congregations, and then to follow this cohort for a year to track the results.³ The pastors were all MDiv graduates of LTS who had at least three years of ministry experience.

The SDS method is a longitudinal approach to preaching about social issues that includes an introductory sermon followed by a deliberative dialogue, and concluding with a second sermon. Developed by the Kettering Foundation, deliberative dialogue (DD) is a form of civil discourse characterized by individuals’ explicit engagement with multiple perspectives on an issue using a nonpartisan issue guide developed by the National Issues Forum Institute.⁴ The dialogue is moderated by a facilitator who models and encourages consideration of and listening to others’ views while also demonstrating receptiveness to movement in one’s own thinking. DD enables citizens from diverse backgrounds and political orientations to constructively talk with each other, support community building, and strengthen the democratic process. In a DD, participants engage in respectful discourse to weigh pros and cons of three different approaches to an issue, discern together the common values they share in the midst of their different standpoints, and determine next steps for social action as a community.

In the SDS process, the dialogue is bookended by two sermons. First, the “prophetic invitation to dialogue” introduces a social issue by framing it within biblical and theological perspectives and inviting congregants to participate in the DD. The second sermon follows the DD and is called the “communal prophetic proclamation.” In this sermon, the preacher addresses the same issue, but this time incorporates the insights and wisdom that arose from the DD. As with the first sermon, the issue is framed within biblical and theological perspectives, but for this second sermon, the preacher emphasizes how the participants discerned the Holy Spirit moving among them in the midst of the dialogue, helping them to find common ground and identify next steps for moving forward on the issue. This second sermon draws on the model of preaching proposed by John McClure in *The Roundtable Pulpit* in which the preacher engages parishioners around the study of biblical texts for an upcoming sermon and then weaves their perspectives

³ The sermon-dialogue-sermon process is developed and explained in *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*, Leah D. Schade (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019).

⁴ See: <https://www.kettering.org/>. For a full description of deliberative dialogue, visit The National Issues Forum Institute: <https://www.nifi.org/en/deliberation>. The NIFI site has more than 40 issue guides for facilitating deliberative dialogue: <https://www.nifi.org/en/issue-guides/issue-guides>.

and insights into the sermon.⁵ In the communal prophetic proclamation sermon, however, the discussion focuses on a *social issue* examined from a faith perspective. In the consequent sermon, the preacher brings a biblical text into conversation with the issue as well as the group's engagement with it.

For this project, ten clergy and ten lay leaders participated in a two-day training at LTS to learn the SDS method.⁶ Key to the training was building in sufficient political diversity among the participants in order to bridge the “red-blue divide.”⁷ Therefore, I asked the pastors (whose political stances ranged from moderate to left-leaning) to invite a lay leader who was of a different political orientation than they were. As a result, the political spectrum of the lay leaders ranged from far right to moderate to far left. The training event consisted of the cohort participating in a DD, receiving training in moderating a DD, clergy being trained in the SDS process, and lay leaders engaging in conversation about how to be an “ambassador” of DD to invite fellow congregants to participate.

Following the training event in September 2019, the clergy-laity pairs were to carry out the SDS process in their congregations once before the end of the year and a second time before June of 2020. All ten pairs were able to do the first SDS process.⁸ However, because of the COVID-19 pandemic that caused church buildings to close for several months, only two were able to complete the second round. Also, one pastor left her congregation at the end of the year, so that church discontinued their participation in the project. Nevertheless, we were able to collect data via surveys and interviews with the clergy, lay leaders, and church members both before and one year after the training which has yielded a significant amount of data. For the purposes of this paper, I will share the data about responses to certain “political” terms in preaching, as well as topics that parishioners indicated they wanted their pastors to address—and avoid—in sermons.

General survey statistics

The ten Disciples of Christ (Christian Church) congregations were located within the mid-central United States of America in the states of Kentucky, Ohio, and West Virginia. One

⁵ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership & Preaching Meet* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995).

⁶ In addition to myself, the training team consisted of the Rev. Dr. Gregg Kaufman, retired ELCA pastor and Kettering Foundation research associate; Dr. Ronald Allen, homiletics professor emeritus at Christian Theological Seminary; the Rev. Dr. Amanda Wilson Harper, assistant professor of social work at Tarleton State University; Dr. Emily Askew, associate professor of theology at Lexington Theological Seminary; and Dr. Jerry Sumney, professor of biblical studies at Lexington Theological Seminary.

⁷ The Kettering Foundation has identified three groups of people who are generally suspicious of deliberative dialogue and hesitant to engage in this type of civil discourse, one of which is conservative folks. Generally, they suspect that the underlying motivation of dialogue is to shame them for their political position or to sway their opinions toward a liberal agenda. They need assurance that their opinions are valued and that there is no hidden agenda. A second group are those in historically marginalized demographics, such as LGBTQIA or immigrants, for example, who may be vulnerable in such public forums or have experienced being targeted, dismissed, or attacked through microaggression in past dialogues. They require assurance that the ground rules for discussion will be enforced and that the moderator is both trustworthy and skilled in shutting down hostility. The third group are those in communities of color who have been invited to dialogue in the past (for example, about how to improve their neighborhoods) but little accountability or follow-up results. For this group, dialogue is dismissed as “all talk, no action.” They require assurance that there are people dedicated to ensuring that there is follow through on next steps and that concrete, substantive change will result.

⁸ Five of the pairs addressed the issue of food and hunger, three addressed the issue of the church's role in a divided society, one addressed the opioid crisis, and one addressed Social Security.

congregation was in a rural area, six were in small or midsize towns, and three were located within a suburb of a metropolitan area with a population over 100,000. The aggregate racial make-up of the congregations was 97 percent white.⁹

The age range of the respondents in the congregational survey tended to skew older (70 percent of respondents were age 55 and up), and female (68 percent). The majority of respondents (64 percent) were members of their church for more than ten years. In 2019, more than 70 percent of respondents reported attending church nearly weekly. But in 2020, we noted that respondents' reported weekly worship attendance (either remotely or in person) after COVID-19 dropped to 60 percent.

In terms of political views, the respondents represented a wide range of stances. Those identifying as "very conservative" to "moderate, lean conservative" made up 35 percent, while "very liberal/progressive" to "moderate, lean liberal/progressive" made up 50 percent. Fifteen percent identified as "independent/mixed." In contrast, almost all of the pastors in the project identified as moderate left-leaning to very progressive/liberal.

The size of the worshipping congregations ranged from small (under 50) to midsize (50–250) to large (more than 250).¹⁰ In the 2019 survey, the estimated number of worship attendance of all churches combined was 1035. Four hundred thirty-five parishioners responded to the 2019 survey, resulting in a response rate of 42 percent. The response rate was lower for the second survey (25 percent), which we attributed primarily to the factor of "screen fatigue" on the part of parishioners in the age of COVID-19.¹¹

Testing politically volatile terms in preaching

During our initial interviews with the lay leaders in August 2019, we discovered that the right-leaning participants had a negative reaction to a particular term we used in the first lay leader survey: social justice. We used this term because we were testing for the ways in which the participants conceived of, reacted to, and engaged in social justice issues. This was also the term that Wabash used in their grant program (Pedagogies for *Social Justice* and Civic Engagement). To these participants, however, the term was viewed as having "liberal bias" which they interpreted as skewing not just the survey but the entire project altogether. We assured them that the project was not intended to cast aspersions on their political convictions or convert them to a progressive stance, but instead was geared toward deep listening and the discernment of common values, which helped to allay their concerns. It was not until they experienced the deliberative dialogue process and received training and practice in moderating a dialogue, however, that they were convinced of its efficacy. Interestingly, by the end of the training the more conservative lay leaders became the most vocal proponents of DD and expressed eagerness to invite their fellow congregants to participate.

Because of the feedback from the lay leaders about the term "social justice," we removed it from the congregational survey we were about to launch and used simply "social issues" so as

⁹ Our intention was to include more clergy and congregations of color in this study. Unfortunately, the clergy of color whom we invited already had significant church projects underway or were not available for the training. While the congregations in this study were racially homogeneous, the data does give us insight into the attitudes of white DOC congregations in middle America at this particular time in American history.

¹⁰ We asked for typical Sunday worship attendance, not the number of members on the rolls.

¹¹ As noted, at the end of 2019, one of the pastors left the congregation to take a new position and the congregation discontinued their participation in the program. Thus, the survey population reduced to 960 in the 2020 survey. 2019 Congregational Survey overall confidence level = 95%; overall margin of error = 3.7%. 2020 Congregation survey overall confidence level = 90%; overall margin of error = 4.7%.

to avoid inadvertently creating a hostile response from right-leaning respondents. However, this incident pointed to another possible research question regarding politically volatile terms in sermons. Might preachers undermine their sermons by using particular words that “turn off” certain listeners? As O. Wesley Allen has noted:

(I)t’s important to remember that it is not the preacher’s job simply to preach the gospel; it is the preacher’s job to get the gospel heard, then believed, and then lived. This not only takes time and repetition. It takes approaching difficult subjects in a hospitable manner—inviting hearers into sermons as honored guests to converse about the topic instead of using the topic as a weapon against them (or against Trump) in the fashion of a take-it-or-leave-it-debate.¹²

Applied to this study, we wondered: might preachers be putting up obstacles to “getting the gospel heard” by inadvertently using terms that repel some listeners and shut down engagement? This was a question I began formulating some years earlier based on my research about clergy in my 2017 survey of mainline Protestant pastors, “Preaching about Controversial Justice Issues.” Clergy indicated that just mentioning certain words in a sermon can elicit negative pushback from some parishioners.¹³ So in the 2019 congregational survey, we decided to give the respondents a list of 19 terms and ask them to indicate whether hearing these in a sermon would be “too political” or “okay.” The terms were listed alphabetically: Advocacy and/or Activism, Capitalism, Climate change, Community, Corporations, Dialogue, Economy, Environment, Equality, Gender, God’s Creation, Government, Guns, Immigration/refugees, Injustice, Privilege, Race/racism, Rights, and Sexuality. In the September 2020 survey, we asked the same question, but added two additional terms: Black Lives Matter and COVID-19, coronavirus. Table 1 compares the volatility of these terms in 2019 and 2020, listed in descending order according to their weighted average.

Table 1. Comparing parishioners’ perceptions about the volatility of terms heard in sermons, 2019 v. 2020. The “hotter” terms are at the top; the “cooler” terms at the bottom. Stars indicate terms added for the 2020 survey.

¹² O. Wesley Allen, *Preaching in the Era of Trump* (St. Louis, MI: Chalice Press, 2017), 20.

¹³ See chapter 1 in *Preaching in the Purple Zone* for details about the 2017 survey.

Which the following terms are “too political” to hear in a sermon?

	2019			2020	
	TERM	Weighted Average		TERM	Weighted Average
1	Capitalism	4.44	1	Capitalism	4.7
2	Guns	4.28	2	Guns	4.59
3	Government	4.1	3	Government	4.4
4	Corporations	3.89	4	Corporations	4.02
5	Advocacy and/or activism	3.41	★ 5	Black Lives Matter	4.02
6	Sexuality	3.32		Advocacy and/or activism	3.5
7	Immigration/refugees	3.13	6	Privilege	3.38
8	Privilege	3.11	7	Sexuality	3.3
9	Climate change	3.07	8	Economy	3.21
10	Economy	3.02	9	Climate change	3.13
11	Gender	2.67	10	Immigration/refugees	3.06
12	Race/racism	2.37	11	Race/racism	2.68
13	Rights	2.35	12	Injustice	2.57
14	Injustice	2.3	13	Gender	2.5
15	Environment	2.13	14	Rights	2.5
16	Dialogue	1.92	15	Environment	2.44
17	Equality	1.78	★ 17	Covid-19, coronavirus	2.01
18	Community	1.43	16	Equality	1.89
19	God's Creation	1.28	18	Dialogue	1.77
			19	Community	1.46
			20	God's Creation	1.33
			21		

Analysis of Table 1: Tensions around terms raise questions for preaching

In comparing the results of the 2019 and 2020 surveys, it is worth noting that the “hottest” term for both years is Capitalism, surpassing even Guns. A related term, Corporations, is also within the top five that congregants consider “too political” for a sermon. Even in the midst of COVID-19, social unrest, and racial protests in 2020, Capitalism and Corporations top the list. This raises a question regarding what this might say about the “idols” whose names we dare not speak, let alone critique, in preaching. Especially when scripture contains countless passages about money, wealth, possessions, and oppressive economic systems, how can a preacher bring a prophetic critique to our current economic systems when just mentioning the words “economy,” “capitalism,” and “corporations,” is so politically charged?

Also worth noting is that of the two terms added in the 2020 survey, the term Black Lives Matter is ranked in the top five of most volatile terms, while the term COVID-19 was among the lowest in volatility. At the same time, the term Race/racism registers much lower on the scale. And when we look at Table 2, which shows us the subjects congregants want to hear addressed in sermons, congregants in 2020 indicated that they wanted to hear sermons that address racism. And yet, apparently the term Black Lives Matter is perceived as “too political.”

Similarly, Climate change is within the top 10 of volatile words in both surveys. Yet the term God's Creation registers at the very bottom of both lists, indicating that it is the least political of the terms. These data points raise a number of questions. Should preachers address social issues without mentioning certain volatile terms by name? Might preachers be required to

practice a kind of rhetorical “code-switching” to avoid turning off certain listeners?¹⁴ Or would this “homiletical correctness” violate the authenticity and integrity of the minister’s call to preach prophetically?¹⁵ These are questions that can guide conversations in both seminary classrooms and churches as homiletics, preachers, and congregants consider the implications of language and rhetoric during a time of social upheaval.

Topics parishioners most want their preachers to address

In addition to testing the volatility of simple words and terms, we also gave parishioners a list of topics (17 in 2019, 20 in 2020) and asked them to pick the top three they wanted their pastor to address in a sermon. Listed in alphabetical order, the topics in 2019 were: Abortion/Reproductive health, Crime/Victims’ rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment, Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying, Economic issues (debt/poverty, inequality/homelessness), Education issues, Environment/Climate change/Pollution, Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues, Gun rights and/or Gun violence, Healthcare, Human trafficking/Slavery, Immigration, Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance, Mental health and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention, Physical disabilities, Race/Racism/White privilege/supremacy, Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis, and War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues. In 2020 three additional topics were added: Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 pandemic response, and Fiscal responsibility.¹⁶ Table 2 shows how the two years compare.

Table 2. Topics parishioners MOST WANT their pastors to address in sermons, 2019 v. 2020. Topics in light grey moved higher in 2020, while the topics in dark grey moved lower. The starred topics were added for the 2020 survey.

¹⁴ “Code-switching” is the “process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting” (“Code-switching,” by Carlos D. Morrison, Britannica.com, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/code-switching>, nd., accessed Sept. 21, 2020). Originally studied in the context of second-language acquisition among Spanish-speakers switching to English and vice versa, and among African Americans who shifted between standard English and African American English, the term has come to refer to any instance whereby one customizes their style of speech to a particular audience or group being addressed.

¹⁵ In his essay, “Code-switching and Preaching: When ‘preacher voice’ means leaving our selves and God behind,” the Rev. Mike Angell notes: “If we don’t bring our full selves, if we don’t represent the realities of our community, we are making a statement by our omission.” (Angellmike.com, Feb. 14, 2015, <https://angellmike.com/2015/02/14/code-switching-in-the-pulpit-when-preacher-voice-means-leaving-our-selves-and-god-behind/>, accessed Sept. 21, 2020).

¹⁶ The topic Fiscal responsibility was added at the urging of several respondents in the 2019 survey as well as the conservative lay leaders in the cohort who suggested this be included to “balance” the topic of Economic issues (debt/poverty, inequality/homelessness).

2019

Rank	Topic	Percentage
1	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	31%
2	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	26%
3	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	26%
4	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	24%
5	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	21%
6	Economic issues (debt/poverty/inequality/homelessness)	21%
7	Immigration	17%
8	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	15%
9	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	12%
10	None of the above	11%
11	Education issues	10%
12	Human trafficking/Slavery	9%
13	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	9%
14	Healthcare	7%
15	Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	7%
16	Abortion/Reproductive health	3%
17	Physical disabilities	3%
18	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	3%

2020

Rank	Topic	Percentage
1	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	33%
2	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	26%
3	Economic issues (debt/poverty/inequality/homelessness)	25%
4	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	24%
5	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	19%
6	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	16%
7	Black Lives Matter	13%
8	Immigration	12%
9	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	12%
10	Education issues	11%
11	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	10%
12	Covid-19 pandemic response	10%
13	None of the above	10%
14	Human trafficking/Slavery	9%
15	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	9%
16	Healthcare	8%
17	Fiscal responsibility	6%
18	Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	5%
19	Abortion/Reproductive health	3%
20	Physical disabilities	1%
21	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	1%

Analysis of Table 2: Shifting priorities

In both years, the number one issue parishioners picked as the topic they most want to hear in sermons is Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance. We surmised that this choice may have been due to concern about recent attacks on other-than-Christian houses of worship, such as synagogues, temples, and mosques, as well as concern about the general attitude of intolerance among some Christians toward people of other religions.

Another point of interest are the two topics that saw significant jumps in their rankings: Race and Economic issues. Race/Racism/White privilege/supremacy rose from eighth place with 15 percent to second place with 22 percent. Keeping in mind that these are predominantly white congregations (97 percent), the fact that Race was in the top 10 in 2019 and rose to #2 in 2020 is worth noting. This is undoubtedly due to the murder of George Floyd and the ongoing media coverage of police brutality and murder of unarmed Black men and women. Yet, the term Black Lives Matter (BLM) ranks significantly lower than Race. In fact, as seen in Table 3, it is ranked #2 as the topic parishioners *least* want to hear in a sermon. And as noted above regarding the politically-volatile terms, BLM is “hotter” than that of Race. We may surmise that the news around the BLM protests, together with the portrayal by some commentators of BLM protesters as lawless “thugs” who destroy property, businesses, and government buildings, may help explain why the term BLM is so controversial.¹⁷

Coming in just below Race in 2020 was Economic issues (debt/poverty, inequality/homelessness) which ranked sixth in 2019 at 21 percent and rose to third with 25

¹⁷ The questions around Race and Black Lives Matter will also be addressed with the training cohort at the September 2020 symposium.

percent. Meanwhile, two topics were in the top five in both years: Mental health and Environment, indicating that these issues remain important to the parishioners in this study. While Domestic violence, Immigration, and Substance abuse remained in the top 10, all three dropped in percentage points: 5 percent, 5 percent, and 12 percent, respectively. All of these changes indicate the shifting priorities of parishioners in these congregations over a twelve-month period.

Topics parishioners *least* want their preachers to address

In the 2019 and 2020 surveys, the exact same list of topics was presented in a separate question asking respondents to pick three that they *would not* want to hear addressed in a sermon. As with the previous question, the topics of Black Lives Matter, COVID-19 pandemic response, and Fiscal Responsibility were added to the 2020 list. Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3. Topics parishioners *LEAST WANT* their pastors to address in sermons, 2019 v. 2020.

Pick 3 topics you LEAST WANT addressed in sermons.					
2019			2020		
1	Abortion/Reproductive health	33%	1	Abortion/Reproductive health	31%
2	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	22%	★ 2	Black Lives Matter	22%
3	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	22%	3	Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues	20%
4	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	15%	4	Gun rights and/or Gun violence	16%
5	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	9%	5	Race/Racism/White privilege/White supremacy	13%
6	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	9%	6	War/Terrorism/Militarization/Veterans issues	9%
7	Immigration	7%	7	Environment/Climate change/Pollution	8%
8	Healthcare	5%	8	Immigration	4%
9	Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	3%	9	Crime/Victims' rights/Incarceration/Capital punishment	4%
10	Economic issues (debt/poverty//inequality/homelessness)	3%	10	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	4%
11	Substance abuse/Addictions/Opioid crisis	3%	★ 11	Fiscal responsibility	4%
12	Human trafficking/Slavery	3%	12	Human trafficking/Slavery	3%
13	Education issues	2%	★ 13	Covid-19 pandemic response	3%
14	Physical disabilities	2%	14	Physical disabilities	3%
15	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	1%	15	Education issues	2%
16	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	1%	16	Economic issues (debt/poverty//inequality/homelessness)	1%
17	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	1%	17	Interfaith relations/Hate crimes/Intolerance	1%
18	No problem with any of these	41%	18	Mental and/or Emotional health/Suicide prevention	1%
			19	Domestic abuse or violence/Bullying	1%
			20	Healthcare	0%
			21	No problem with any of these issues	39%

Analysis of Table 3

We must note that the results of this question are not an inverse of the previous question about what social issues parishioners *do* want to hear in sermons. For example, Abortion/Reproductive health tops the list as the sermon topic least desired, but it ranks third from the bottom of topics that parishioners *want* their pastors to address. In other words, there are some parishioners who would like to hear their pastor speak to this topic in a sermon. But when set amongst other topics that congregations want to see avoided in the pulpit, Abortion/Reproductive health ranks highest.

As previously noted, the subject of Black Lives Matter, new in 2020, came in at #2, displacing Gun rights/Gun violence, which dropped 6 percentage points from the previous year. This “cooling” of the topic of guns as a controversial topic may reflect either a growing awareness of the need to address this issue, or the fact that mass shootings decreased as COVID-19 sent the country into quarantine, thus reducing its prevalence in the news compared to 2019.¹⁸

Gender/Sexuality/Sexual identity/LGBTQIA issues occupied the #3 position in both years, which may be surprising for some given that the DOC is perceived to be fairly progressive and welcoming denomination. However, we learned in interviews with the lay leaders of these congregations that issues around homosexuality caused a great deal of conflict in many of their churches in recent years. A desire to avoid further controversy on this issue may be the reason for this topic registering so high.

Two issues saw a notable drop in percentage points: Immigration and Health care. While Immigration remained in the top ten of topics parishioners least want addressed in sermons, it dropped three percentage points from 7 percent to 4 percent. It may be the case that BLM and racial issues absorbed some of the lightning-rod energy that was focused on immigration just two years ago.¹⁹

Remarkably, Healthcare was not chosen as a controversial topic by a single person in the 2020 survey, whereas in 2019 it was in the top ten with 5 percentage points. This change is likely due to the stark realities that have been revealed about the need for a just and comprehensive healthcare system in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, the subject of COVID-19 itself registered at 3 percent, indicating that there are some parishioners who are, perhaps, weary of hearing about the topic. More likely is the possibility that the politicizing of masks, whether or not to have in-building worship, and the controversy around social distancing for churches had become a source of contention in many congregations. In fact, according to nearly all of the pastors we interviewed in September 2020, issues around COVID-19 threatened the unity of their congregations in ways they had never before experienced.

The case for dialogue and preaching

It is notable that in Table 1 nearly all the “hot topics” in 2019 got “hotter” in 2020 (i.e., the weighted averages increased). I believe the case can be made that such a change indicates the heightened level of sensitivity that congregations are experiencing around controversial issues in light of the ongoing and intersecting societal upheaval mentioned in the introduction. Like a damaged or infected tooth that needs repair, just touching the area elicits a painful reaction unless it is first desensitized with an analgesic.

For this reason, it is encouraging to see that the term Dialogue registered “cooler” in 2020 than it did in 2019. Granted, it was not a “hot topic” the previous year. But the fact that the weighted average dropped when many other terms saw an increase may indicate that exposing congregations to the SDS method and participation in DD may have helped parishioners be more open to civil discourse. We may posit, then, that continued exposure to DD or other forms of intentional civil discourse may help congregations be more willing to address controversial social issues in the future.

¹⁸ It must be noted, however, that while mass shootings decreased in 2020, overall gun-related deaths jumped 25 percent from the previous year, with more than 19,000 people dying due to gun-inflicted wounds.

¹⁹ When training students in the sermon-dialogue-sermon method in courses I taught in 2017–2018, immigration was the most popular choice among the preachers to address. This is reflected in Chapter 9 of *Preaching in the Purple Zone* which featured case studies from numerous preachers addressing the topic of immigration.

Other data points from the surveys indicate that an intentional integration of preaching and dialogue may be an effective tool for helping congregations navigate difficult social issues. For instance, an important thing to notice about Tables 2 and 3 is not the topics themselves but the comparison between those who think *no* social topics should be addressed and those who have *no problem* with any of the listed topics being discussed in a sermon. In both 2019 and 2020 there was virtually no change in the numbers, with those who think no social topics should be addressed registering only around 10 percent compared those who had no problem with any of the topics registering at about 40 percent. In other words, the pushback that a pastor may receive for preaching about social issues likely comes from a small minority within the membership. Unfortunately, some of these members may also be the most vocal and/or have the strongest influence over church finances and they may exercise their power using coercive or bullying tactics. Nevertheless, the fact that 4 in 10 parishioners are open to hearing sermons on such a wide range of topics should be heartening to preachers in these congregations weighing whether or not to speak to contemporary issues in their sermons.

In fact, the surveys indicated that in both years, 60–65 percent of respondents agreed that they look to their congregation to “think biblically and/or theologically about social issues.” And nearly half (47–49 percent) indicated that they see their congregation as a place to “talk about social issues in a healthy and constructive way.” In other words, the majority of parishioners in these churches saw their churches as a resource for dialogue and biblical/theological reflection about contemporary issues that affect their lives and the lives of their friends, families, and communities.

Further encouraging data from the survey was the response to a question about whether or not the church should “help members discuss social issues and host community dialogues.” The number who agreed or strongly agreed in both years remained strong at 86–87 percent. Even more heartening was the increase in percentage of those who agreed or strongly agreed that their church should “work to make changes in community and society.” In 2019, that number was 87 percent. In 2020, the number rose to 92 percent. While correlation cannot be confused with causation, it may very well be the case that the sermon-dialogue-sermon process conducted in these congregations contributed to this increase.

Conclusion

As the Listening to Listeners researchers noted nearly twenty years ago, the need for empirical research in the field of homiletics is ongoing. The Purple Zone research project sought to contribute to that body of knowledge through generating both quantitative and qualitative data to aid in the study of preaching. Surveys such as these can be used to quantify attitudes, opinions, and behaviors of parishioners who listen to sermons. The data may also help identify ongoing or emerging patterns in social issues as they manifest in congregations which can guide preachers as they are considering sermon topics. Finally, surveys of parishioners may be conducted in the future to aid in the task of helping homiletics professors, students, and practicing clergy devise strategies for prophetic preaching within their particular contexts.

Servant Song Sermons: Second Isaiah as Preacher and Homiletical Guide

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Abstract: *This paper explores a homiletical reading of Isaiah's Servant Songs. Surveying rhetorical analysis of Isaiah 40–55, it explores the degree to which Second Isaiah's genre can be understood as a form of preaching. It then examines Isaiah 42:1–9 as a homiletical test case that provides a different (i.e., rhetorical) frame for open exegetical questions, highlights alternative models for preaching older testament texts, and unmasks the preacher's response to contexts of domination. Each of these insights offer guidance for interpreting the text and for OT preaching today.*

In “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast,” Susanne Scholz argues that too often our hermeneutics ignore the biblical text's connection to contemporary suffering.¹ Violence, she says,

...is aided and abetted by the biblical hermeneutics dominantly practiced in the United States. Mainstream Bible scholarship does not make connections to internal US-American violence; it is silent about it, sometimes even endorsing it. In fact, it is grounded in exegetical methods and reading strategies that distance biblical meanings from the various forms of violence plaguing the country.²

Consider the interpretation of Isaiah's Servant Songs.³ These texts—perhaps more than others—bear the imprint of traditional biblical hermeneutics. Until recently, historical criticism marked them as separate from their literary context and relegated reflection on suffering to Babylonian and Persian periods of domination. Christological readings of the Songs also ignore the surrounding Isaian context while focusing reflection on suffering to the experience of Jesus. The problem here is not with historical examination and theological reflection, per se.⁴ The

¹ Susanne Scholz, “How to Read the Bible in the Belly of the Beast: About the Politics of Biblical Hermeneutics within the United States of America,” in *La Violencia and the Hebrew Bible: The Politics and Histories of Biblical Hermeneutics on the American Continent*. Susanne Scholz and Pablo Andinach, eds. Semia Studies No. 82 (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 139.

² Ibid. 139.

³ Unless otherwise specified, “Songs” is not a generic assessment. Rather “Songs” or “Servant Songs” refer to the well-known passages marked off by Bernhard Duhm from Isaiah 42:1–4 (5–9), 49:1–6, 50:4–7, and 52:13–53:12. I agree with John Goldingay's and David Payne's assessment of Isaiah 49:1–6, which may be extended to all of the “Songs”: such a passage “might be described as a poem and/or autobiographical narrative and/or a testimony. It is not a song.” John Goldingay and David Payne, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Isaiah 40–55*, Volume II (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 155.

⁴ Of course, interpreting the Songs as sermons does not eschew hermeneutics that engage historical and theological scholarship. Still, historical critical analysis has delivered new insights into the workings of Isaiah while also (paradoxically) obscuring the workings of Isaiah—especially when it comes to the Servant's identity. Thus, Patricia Tull asserts: “The relationship between Israel and the servant was obscured for decades by Bernhard Duhm's theory of four servant songs in chapters 42, 49, 50, and 53, [that were] discontinuous with their contexts.” “Isaiah,” 255–266, in *Women's Bible Commentary*, Third Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 263. So too, the impact of Christian messianism on these passages is striking. In the Revised Common Lectionary, Isaiah 42 is read

problem is that such endeavors alone have not enabled the Church to think critically and speak clearly about the suffering of people in the contemporary world. Indeed, too frequently our historical and theological study enables suffering and domination.

Scholz calls for an open and honest critique of the impact of our preaching and interpretation of scripture.⁵ On the one hand, we might label this approach a feminist post-colonial hermeneutic. But Scholz's call also evokes the work that a good preacher might do; exegeting a text, analyzing something of its history of interpretation, appreciating the ways in which the text's language and voice(s) come in contact with voices and language today, and looking for theological/political/ideological implications for a contemporary audience. In this way, Scholz is calling for a homiletical hermeneutic.

Dale Andrews argues something similar when he asserts that preachers need to learn to preach more like Second Isaiah.⁶ Andrews speaks specifically here of Second Isaiah as a "hearer-response" type of preaching that reimagines older texts in light of contemporary experiences of suffering. This homiletical hermeneutic seeks to discern how texts speak to congregations then and now. Such an approach highlights Second Isaiah's preaching⁷ in the "Belly of the Beast" and may contribute to unmasking contemporary hermeneutical bias by offering an alternative to traditional historical and theological approaches to Second Isaiah.

This paper asks: What if preachers read scripture, and specifically Isaiah's Servant Songs, with a homiletical lens? What new insights open up when these Songs are understood as some form of preaching?⁸ What preaching possibilities arise for proclaiming the OT when the Servant

on the Baptism of the Lord, Epiphany, Year A. Isaiah 49 is read a week later, also in Year A. Isaiah 50 is read in the Liturgy of the Passion and on Wednesday of Holy Week in all three years. And, Isaiah 52–53 is read on Good Friday every year. Such a reading practice in the Church creates the impression that the Songs, and Isaiah as a whole, are primarily focused on Jesus. Thus scholars like James Luther Mays can opine about Isaiah in ways that point as much to (later) christology as to textual evidence within Isaiah: "Simply put, Adonai is sovereign; there is a city of God; and there is a son of God." James Luther Mays, "Isaiah's Royal Theology and the Messiah," in *Reading and Preaching the Book of Isaiah*, Christopher Seitz, ed. (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1988), 39–40.

⁵ She proposes a hermeneutic that "fosters analysis of the various interpretation histories of biblical literature," highlights "the historical, theological, political, and ideological implications of biblical exegesis in the world," "exposes interpretations...as ideological constructs," and seeks to foster an "appreciation for textual fluidity, multiplicity, and 'creolization.'" Scholz, "How to Read the Bible," 156–7.

⁶ Dale Andrews, *Practical Theology in the Black Church: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) 124.

⁷ A precise definition of preaching is elusive and should remain so. Homileticians continue to wrestle constructively with articulating the components of preaching and its borders as a genre, which are always shifting. For the purposes of this paper, I am thinking of preaching in Second Isaiah in several ways. These texts show evidence of a "sent witness," who speaks about God's claim about life to all peoples in ways that demand speech and action from hearers. See Tom Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, Second Edition (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 46. Second Isaiah also engages the six characteristics of African American preaching that Frank Thomas enumerates: these texts show the *centrality* of other scriptures in the language, imagery, and narrative arch of a proclamation that engages the senses, responds to human need, seeks the voice of God to speak through one's words, celebrates good news, and fosters an embodied response in preacher and hearer alike. Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praise God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1997), 2–3. Finally, Jerusha Neal's wrestling with the definition of preaching helps us see that like all preachers, Second Isaiah is "negotiating a morass of uneasy borders between text and exegete, manuscript and performance, communal role and personal identity—not to mention the uneasy borders of a hurting world" as they seek to make present the absent person of God. Jerusha Matsen Neal, *The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, The Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020).

⁸ Understood homiletically, the Servant in Second Isaiah's Songs can be seen to experience systemic injustice, economic depression, cultural disgrace, and theological abuse. In response, the Servant figure delivers "The word

Songs become our homiletical guide? Since space does not allow full engagement with all four of the traditionally demarcated Songs, this paper examines the first Servant Song (Isa 42:1–4 [5–9]) as a homiletical test case. Here, reading the Song as a sermon provides a different (i.e., rhetorical) frame for open exegetical questions, highlights models for preaching older testament texts, and unmasks the preacher’s response to contexts of domination. Each of these insights can provide helpful guides for OT preaching today.

Second Isaiah as Preaching

While I claim only that the Servant Songs in Second Isaiah *can be* read homiletically as words responding to various forms of domination, it should be noted that Second Isaiah’s prologue begins with a call for multiple voices (plural imperative) to “cry out” or “preach” (*qara* in Hebrew). This call is followed by a voice crying out in the wilderness (*qara* 40:3–5), a discussion about what to cry out (*qara* 40:6–8), and a call for a feminine herald⁹ to declare good news (*mevasheret*) from the mountaintop (40:9–11).

Perhaps guided by this homiletically-centered prologue, many biblical scholars have begun to reflect on Second Isaiah as participating in a form of preaching. For instance, in her summary of developments within the history of Isaiah scholarship, Patricia Tull notes that Second Isaiah has been treated as a collection of voices describing God,¹⁰ that recontextualizes older texts,¹¹ seeks to expand meaning,¹² engages in conversation and debate,¹³ learns from tradition,¹⁴ and speaks “a word in season.”¹⁵ Indeed, many scholars see in Second Isaiah marks of homiletic work.¹⁶ Claus Westermann speaks of “Deutero-Isaiah’s preaching” of “his gospel”

not heard in the street” (Isa 42:2b), has “A mouth like a sharp sword” (Isa 49:2a), speaks with the “Tongue of a teacher” (Isa 50:4a), and becomes “The startler of many nations” (Isa 52:15a). These passages offer a word in response to imperial domination. Further, homiletical reflection upon them can help uncover forces of domination within our own hermeneutics.

⁹ At least grammatically feminine.

¹⁰ Patricia Tull, “One Book, Many Voices: Conceiving of Isaiah’s Polyphonic Message,” in *As Those Who Are Taught: The Interpretation of Isaiah from the LXX to the SBL*, Claire Mathews McGinnis and Patricia K. Tull, eds. (Society of Biblical Literature, 2006), 279–314. Specifically, Tull notes that the scholars of the Isaiah Seminar at the Society of Biblical Literature agreed broadly that the book of Isaiah is a sustained effort “to describe God’s dealings with Jerusalem over the course of several centuries.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 290 (emphasis added).

¹¹ The book of Isaiah grew and took its final form as a result of “*Reinterpretation and recontextualization* of the prophet’s words for generations beyond his horizon.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 291 (emphasis added).

¹² “Rabbinic Bibles presenting the Scriptures in the center of the page surrounded by commentary declare visually this expansion around the text that began with Isaiah’s transmitters.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 294.

¹³ Here Tull notes that scholars like Benjamin Sommer portray Isaiah as “*a record of debate, of conversation, of revision within tradition.*” Others, like Claire Matthews, assert that Isaiah is “*the product of a multiplicity of voices adding, generation by generation, to an original body of ‘authentic’ Isaianic prophecy, as that prophecy was reactualized, supplemented, and reinterpreted ... a kind of prophetic chorus—and sometimes cacophony.*” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 312 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ Tull’s own view on Second Isaiah, and especially Isaiah 49–55, is that the prophet engages traditions from Jeremiah, Lamentations, Nahum, several Zion psalms, and First Isaiah. Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 304–5.

¹⁵ For Tull, Second Isaiah and its interpreters exemplify “the ongoing rhythm described by the prophet, of hearing and teaching, of listening in order to speak a word in season.” Tull, “One Book, Many Voices,” 314.

¹⁶ This understanding of Isaiah as preacher likely began in the NT period. In his study of Paul’s use of Isaiah in Romans 9–11, Ross Wagner demonstrates that Isaiah’s insights and images shape Paul’s rhetoric. Even for something as important as Jewish and Christian relation to God, Paul will turn to the branches and roots of Isaiah’s tree imagery (Rom 11:16b–24). These observations lead Wagner to conclude that “Paul finds in Isaiah a fellow preacher of the gospel... a veiled prefiguration of his own mission to proclaim the good news.” Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul <In Concert> in the Letter to the Romans* (London: Brill, 2002), 356.

and “proclaiming God’s word.”¹⁷ R.F. Melugin argues that Isaiah 40–55 “is a collection of originally independent units, but the arrangement is kerygmatic.”¹⁸ Klaus Baltzer reflects on Deutero-Isaiah as “liturgical drama” set within “the act of worship.”¹⁹

Shalom Paul’s description of Isaiah’s rhetoric also sounds like a description of preaching. He observes “the repetition of words for emphatic purpose,”²⁰ the use of “rhetorical questions,”²¹ “the employment of triads for the purposes of accentuation” and “insertion of quotations” often as dialogue.²² He describes further elements of proclamation, including multiple examples of assonance and alliteration,²³ the use of leitmotifs, and “the repetition of words and expressions.”²⁴ He finds poetic articulations of synonymous phrases and parallelisms and the engagement with many different literary genres, including: hymns, polemics, poems, words of consolation, rebuke, mock court scenes, eschatological tropes, and Servant Songs among others.²⁵ For all these reasons, Paul argues that the witnesses in Isaiah 40–66 demonstrate “a proclivity for words, expressions, and phrases.”²⁶

Joseph Blenkinsopp argues this point even further. He asserts, “One could find in these chapters [Isa 40–55] examples of practically all of the numerous types [of rhetoric] catalogued in books 8 and 9 of Quintilian’s classic *Institutio Oratoria*.”²⁷ Far from merely acknowledging good rhetoric employed within a written manuscript, Blenkinsopp offers a generic assessment of his findings. He holds that Isaiah 40–55 “stood at the oral end of the orality-literacy continuum.”²⁸ These chapters point to an orator, trained in public speaking.²⁹ They participate in a homiletic tradition that arises following the fall of Jerusalem and continued through the early years of Persian rule.³⁰ Their peers include a group of “public speakers, or preachers”³¹ whose proclamation is documented in parts of Deuteronomy, the Deuteronomistic strand in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and parts of Zechariah.³² Blenkinsopp asserts further that the context of Isaiah 40–55 should be understood as a place of preaching, “perhaps an inchoate synagogue network of some kind—in which this activity was going on.”³³ He points to similar preaching settings for

¹⁷ Claus Westermann, *Isaiah 40–66*. The Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1969), 14, 21.

¹⁸ R.F. Melugin, *The Formation of Isaiah 40–55*, BZAW 141 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1976), 175, cited in Jacob Stromberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 32.

¹⁹ Klaus Baltzer, *Deutero-Isaiah*, Hermenia, translated by Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 22. John Wilks is not convinced of Second Isaiah’s focus on liturgical drama. He argues that the textual evidence suggests, at best, that Second Isaiah was an “incompetent dramatist.” However, Wilks finds ample evidence of Second Isaiah was a poet. John Wilks, “The Prophet as Incompetent Dramatist,” *Vetus Testamentum* Vol 53 no. 4 (2003): 530–543, 542.

²⁰ Shalom Paul, *Isaiah 40–66: Translation and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 24.

²¹ Ibid. 25.

²² Ibid. 26.

²³ Ibid. 27.

²⁴ Ibid. 30.

²⁵ Ibid. 31.

²⁶ Ibid. 27.

²⁷ Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, Anchor Bible, Vol. 19a (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 63–4.

²⁸ Ibid. 64.

²⁹ “...there is enough prosodic indeterminacy in these chapters to justify speaking of their author as orator rather than poet... The orator, trained in an elevated, declamatory style of public speaking, makes use of as wide a range of linguistic resources as the poet.” Blenkinsopp, 68.

³⁰ Ibid. 53.

³¹ Ibid. 66.

³² Ibid. 53.

³³ Ibid. 53.

correlative works.³⁴ Taken together, these observations about Second Isaiah's rhetoric, form, peers, and context lead Blenkinsopp to conclude: "The core of 40–55 may then properly be described as a rhetorical composition and its author as an orator or preacher."³⁵

All these observations do not prove that Second Isaiah is a form of preaching. Definitive evidence of oral communication from a marginalized group in the late Babylonian/early Persian period may always remain elusive. Nevertheless, these rhetorical studies show that there is enough support for reading Second Isaiah homiletically. The question then remains, How does a homiletical lens affect the interpretation of these chapters?

Importantly, if Isaiah 40–55 can be understood as preaching, then the Servant Songs become not just influential texts within Jewish and Christian traditions, but snapshots of exemplary preaching moments that are worthy of further homiletic reflection.³⁶ These Songs preach and can shape the way we think about preaching the older testament in contexts of domination today.

Preaching in Isaiah 42:1–4 (5–9)

Reading the first Servant Song homiletically affects the interpretation of the text in at least three ways.

First, it offers a different perspective on many of the exegetical issues with which interpreters often wrestle. Rather than seeking to solve the text, a homiletical approach looks for what might be the impact of the text's open-ended rhetoric. This Song's poetic, flexible, and imaginative language refuses to be pinned down.³⁷ This polyvalence is not mere ornamentation, but, when framed as a preacher's work with a congregation, becomes a strategy for engaging multiple listeners and perspectives. To capture this dynamic we might ask, Who is the servant in Isaiah 42:1?³⁸ On the one hand, historical approaches might argue that the servant was just described in Isaiah 41:8–9 as the people of Israel.³⁹ Or, as many commentators hold, the servant

³⁴ Here he proposes a context for Isaiah 40–55 like "the elders gathering in Ezekiel's house (Ezek 8:1; 14:1; 20:1) and the religious center at Casiphia in southern Mesopotamia (Ezra 8:15–20)...a kind of clergy training center...where religious learning and training went on." Blenkinsopp, 64–5.

³⁵ Blenkinsopp, 69.

³⁶ For more on the homiletic nature of the Songs see Leonora Tubbs Tisdale and Carolyn Sharp, "The Prophets and Homiletics" in *The Oxford Handbook of the Prophets*, Carolyn Sharp, ed. (New York: Oxford, 2016), 627–651, and Arvid Kapelrud, who expounds upon the idea that Second Isaiah "preached at the end of the Exile." See Kapelrud, "The Main Concern of Second Isaiah," *Vetus Testamentum* 32, 1 (1982): 50–58, 50.

³⁷ Of course, poetic-prophetic preaching is not a new homiletical insight, for instance see Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989) and Cleo LaRue, *I Believe I'll Testify* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), especially LaRue's chapters "Imagination and the Exegetical Exercise" and "Why Black Preachers Still Love Artful Language." Also, Paul Scott Wilson, *Preaching as Poetry: Beauty Goodness, and Truth in Every Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2014); Zachary Guiliano and Cameron E. Partridge, eds., *Preaching and the Theological Imagination*, Studies in Episcopal and Anglican Theology 9 (New York: Peter Lang, 2015); Kate Bruce, *Igniting the Heart: Preaching and Imagination*, (London: SCM Press, 2015); Linda Clader, *Voicing the Vision: Imagination and Prophetic Preaching*, (Harrisburg: Morehouse, 2003); and Mary Catherine Hilkert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 1997). Still, its application as an interpretative lens in Second Isaiah opens up new possibilities, namely that the author may intend to hold open their proclamation as a homiletic strategy for navigating domination and engaging a broad range of listeners and perspectives.

³⁸ "Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations" (Isa 42:1).

³⁹ Jacob Stromberg notes that other linguistic connections between these two passages suggest that Isaiah 42:1–4 developed with an awareness of the servant material in Isaiah 41. He writes, "42.1–4 (which was considered

language here could refer to Cyrus and may evoke language from royal inscriptions about ancient kings.⁴⁰ Of course, the Church has also read this passage christologically as prophecy of Jesus.

However, reading Isaiah 42:1 with a homiletic hermeneutic presents this passage as an address to an audience that could identify themselves with the servant.⁴¹ Homiletically, the preacher in Isaiah 42 intentionally leaves the referent open to the hearer's interpretation. For example, Cyrus and his supporters might hear affirmation of his rule, thus protecting the preacher/people. At the same time, exiled Israel, as an oppressed people, might hear this word as a royal panegyric spoken over them, thus inverting the expected hierarchy.⁴² The effect of a homiletic interpretation is that the hearer is invited to join in God's work of justice and in the work of returning from exile.⁴³

What this brief example illustrates is that shoehorning Isaiah 42:1–9 into one meaning sacrifices the depth of this Song's rhetoric and the breadth of its impact upon an audience. Forcing one take above all others flattens out the preacher's words and saps them of their poetic potency as a resource for reflection and response. At the same time, this brief look at Isaiah 42 shows that polyvalent poetic-prophetic preaching is not the same as rambling, unfocused proclamation.⁴⁴ What the preacher does in this Song is lead the hearer to reflect on what it means to be a part of God's work in subverting systemic injustice.

secondary) is clearly related to 41.8–10 (which was not). In both, one finds reference made to the 'servant' and 'chosen one' whom God will 'uphold' (*tmk*)—a verb occurring only one further time in the book where the connection is quite different. (33.15)." Jacob Stromberg, *An Introduction to the Study of Isaiah* (New York: T&T Clark, 2011), 33.

⁴⁰ Paul asserts that there may be a parallel in Isaiah 42:1 with Akkadian royal inscriptions that single out the king as the god's "beloved one" and "favored one" (Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 185). In this light, a third appellation, the one "in whom my soul delights," could also be seen as evoking the Akkadian trope of divine favor for a leader. Such connections would put the servant in the place of a king. For this reason, Joseph Blenkinsopp suggests that "servant" here is a reference to Cyrus (compare 45:1), though he admits, "Much of what is said in these verses could also be said of Israel" (Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 211).

⁴¹ To this point, see also the use of second person, direct address throughout Second Isaiah and inclusive references to "Jacob, my servant" (e.g., 41:8; 44:1; 45:4) and "my servant, Israel" (e.g., 41:8; 49:3).

⁴² David Reimer points to Norman Gottwald's work highlighting how Cyrus's policy of return was a "colonial situation" wherein a "ruling elite" were " beholden to the empire whose expectation was that the colony would be 'politically pacified and economically profitable'" (Reimer, "Isaiah and Politics," in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, David Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 101.

⁴³ A similar polyvalent, poetic dynamic lies behind other questions we might ask of this text: Is it YHWH's covenant in Isaiah 42:6 that is enacted by Cyrus, Cyrus's covenant that aligns with YHWH's, or perhaps YHWH's covenant that the people will help enact more fully? Is justice in Isaiah 42:1, 3 a Persian policy change or is it liberation from Babylonian and Persian control? Is the spirit's work in Isaiah 42:1, 5 creative, destructive, or liberative? Is the problem with idols in Isaiah 42:8 a reference to Nabonidus's reforms, to Cyrus's restoration of the gods, or to the power idols are granted in general? Is the preacher's audience a group of Jewish exiles, an individual prophet, or representatives of Cyrus? With all of these questions, there is good homiletic reason for a preacher to hold the answer open to multiple points of engagement.

⁴⁴ I write as a United Methodist teaching in an Episcopal context. Often preaching in these mainline traditions avoids a flattened, over-simplified resolution of the text and can even push beyond christological readings. At the same time, my tradition's poetic preaching can be so open-ended and unfocused that it offers little guidance for how hearers might respond to scripture and to the Word of God proclaimed in concrete ways. This is precisely Henry Mitchell's critique of white protestants. See *Black Preaching: The Recovery of a Powerful Art* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1990), 104. Second Isaiah helpfully models a poetic-prophetic proclamation that draws hearers into concrete action for justice and return from exile.

Second, reading this Song homiletically offers a distinct model for preaching Old Testament texts. In chapter 42, the preacher engages the older parts of her scriptural tradition.⁴⁵ This engagement with the “older testament” notably does not participate in many of the ways that Christians have preached the Old Testament. The preacher here does not simplify texts down to a sermon theme or concept. There is no allegorizing or typology that entirely ignores the context of older texts. The preacher does not develop a promise and fulfillment schema that speaks to the present by denigrating a shadowy past. The older testament does not become a source of proof-texting for arguing a point. Also, the preacher’s look at the history of salvation is neither linear nor developing from lesser to greater. Instead, the preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of scripture as that which *continues* to speak into the present moment. Here, the preacher has God preach words of scripture to the congregation:

Here is my servant, whom I uphold,
my chosen...he will bring forth justice to the nations.
Thus says God, the LORD, who created the heavens...
I am the LORD, I have called you in righteousness...
I have given you as a covenant to the people...
I am the LORD, that is my name;
my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols. (Isa 42:1, 5, 6, 8).

The preaching references YHWH three times in five verses (5, 6, 8) while twice employing the expression first introduced in Exodus: “I am YHWH” (6, 8). There are clear connections of YHWH’s name with covenant, liberation, torah, and return. Further, the verb “to bring forth” (*ys’*), which describes the task of the servant three times (42:1, 3, 7), is also the verb “used to describe the deliverance from Egypt.”⁴⁶ Along with these connections with the book of Exodus, the preaching of Second Isaiah develops subtle exodus nuances around the phrase, “I am YHWH.”⁴⁷ Taken together, these exodus connections remind Jewish exiles that their liberator was not Pharaoh and it will not be Cyrus. God’s “I,” which appears eight times in this sermon,

⁴⁵ Though if John Van Seters is correct, much of the biblical material that Isaiah cites is a newer version of older material: “the Yahwist and Second Isaiah were contemporaries, living among the exiles in Babylonia and very likely in very close contact with each other. . . . When the two works are read in tandem, with the Yahwist providing the ‘biblical’ text as a basis for much of the prophet’s message, this gives us remarkable insight into the new world of the diaspora community in Babylonia and the radical reshaping of their religion within a wider world view. Under the influence of the Babylonian universalistic religion of Marduk, the creator deity, or Nabonidus’s supreme deity, the god Sîn, both Second Isaiah and the Yahwist present their deity YHWH not just as a national god but as creator of heaven and earth and the God of all humanity. Such a religion is not under the control of a priesthood or temple in a particular place, and neither author makes any mention of priests or the Jerusalem Temple 40. The form of worship of YHWH used by the patriarchs may be practiced in any place and is open to all without restriction.” See John Van Seters, “Dating the Yahwist’s History: Principles and Perspectives,” *Biblica* 96.1 (2015): 1–25, 24.

⁴⁶ S. D. Snyman, “A Structural-Historical Exegesis of Isaiah 1–9,” in *Interpreting Isaiah: Issues and Approaches*, David Firth and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. (Downer’s Grove: IVP Academic, 2009), 258.

⁴⁷ Within Second Isaiah, the phrase “I am YHWH” is connected with calling generations (41:4), offering help (41:13), providing water to those who are parched (41:17), making covenant (42:6), claiming glory over idols and others (42:8), giving Egypt as a ransom (43:3), being the creator and king of Israel (43:15), providing treasures/riches (45:3), establishing the supremacy of God (45:5–7), raining down righteousness (45:8), speaking truth (45:18–19), recognizing a righteous, savior God (45:21), redeeming that leads Israel in the way it should go (48:17), and, problematically, to kings and queens being made to bow to Israel (49:23) and to oppressors consuming their own flesh and blood (49:26).

allows there to be focus on only one liberator.⁴⁸ Ultimately, it is God who will overthrow oppressors, end domination systems, renew covenant, and lead God's people to freedom and abundance.

As a part of the effort to have scriptural language speak today, the Isaian preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. The God of the exodus says repeatedly to the congregation, "I am YHWH." Here the God of the older testament is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the one who gave breath, gives breath. The one who liberated slaves, liberates exiles. In the preaching of Isaiah 42:1–9, God's nature and work are consistent—they do not change. What God has done in the past, God is doing now, and God will do more fully in the future. And the preacher leads the congregation to hear and to speak this reality of God's nature.⁴⁹

Finally, reading this Song homiletically highlights how the Old Testament is a resource for resistance to domination and for the alleviation of suffering. On the one hand, this Song preaches a public transcript to its overlords.⁵⁰ If Josephus's report is to be believed, Cyrus even read over some of these chapters and found them to be speaking affirmatively of him.⁵¹ At the same time, the prophet proclaims to hearers-in-the-know a subtle, hidden transcript that builds energy for liberation efforts.⁵² Thus, references to creation here can sound like a parroting of the flattering self-image of imperial elites.⁵³ At the same time, however, a Jewish exile would hear phrases like "created the heavens" (v. 5), "breath to the people" (v. 5), and light given to those in darkness (vv. 6–7) and be drawn to the creation accounts in Genesis. These references to the creator God of Genesis highlight One who is more ancient and more powerful than any current divine or human overlord. It is this Creator God—and not any earthly leader—who "calls," "takes," "keeps," and "gives" to the servant Israel (42:6). Thomas Mann calls this approach a

⁴⁸ Joan Cook also sees here an emphasis on the one-ness of God. Joan Cook, "Everyone Called By My Name: Second Isaiah's Use of the Creation Theme," in *Earth, Wind and Fire: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Creation*, Carol J. Dempsey and Mary Margaret Pazdan, eds. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2004), 42.

⁴⁹ For more on cultural-linguistic approaches to preaching (Jesus), see Charles Campbell, *Preaching Jesus: The New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1997) and David Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁵⁰ James C. Scott describes the public transcript as the open way in which subordinates communicate to hide subversive messages in the presence of those who dominate (51). Examples of the public transcript include donning "the flattering self-image of elites" (18–9), engaging in rituals of subordination (35), "playing dumb" (133), and concealing "anger, revenge, and self-assertion" (55). James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Yale Press: 1990).

⁵¹ Josephus, *Antiquities* 11.5–7. Joseph Blenkinsopp, among others, is skeptical about the accuracy of Josephus's report—especially the notion that Cyrus's reading of Isaiah 44:28–44:1 inspired him to liberate Jews from captivity and seek to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40–55*, 81.

⁵² The hidden transcript employs a "politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors." Scott, *Domination*, 18–9).

⁵³ Creation references in verses 5 and 6 contain two different echoes of Mesopotamian texts. As Shalom Paul observes, the phrases "stretched out [the heavens]" and "spread out the earth" have an echo in *Ludlul bēl nēmeqi*: "Wherever the earth is established (*saknat*), and the heavens spread out (*ritpašu*)." Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 188, citing *BWL*, 58-9, line 37. So also, Isaiah's line, "grasped you by the hand" has a parallel in the Cyrus Cylinder wherein Marduk "reached for a righteous king whom he would support [lit. 'grasp by the hand']." Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 188, citing M. Cogan, COS 2:315. These connections might lead Babylonian and Persian overhearers to receive the words of this Jewish, exilic preacher as supportive of their agenda.

“theology of creative redemption” that is akin to liberation theology.⁵⁴ Brueggemann adds that the servant’s preaching here is meant to ensure that Israel is “well protected and irresistibly energized.”⁵⁵ The message to the exiles is that their fate depends not on Cyrus’s political calculations but on the one who made them and who gives them breath. Their liberation is not the work of any overlord but of the “lord of history” who is about to “create new things.”⁵⁶

So too, references to Exodus may reflect Akkadian language and logic.⁵⁷ Yet they remind hearers-in-the-know that it is God—not foreign superpowers—who has called, taken, kept, and given the people a covenant to bring justice, to bring out prisoners, and to shine light unto the nations (Isa 42:6–7). These resonances with the exodus narrative make clear that God will respond to rectify the abuse: “See, the former things have come to pass [i.e. the exodus], and new things I now declare” (42:9).

However, it is not only the material from the older testament that is a resource for resistance. Isaiah 42:1–9 itself has become a text for resisting oppressive regimes through preaching. For instance, an early rabbinic interpretation of Isaiah 42:1–9 sees it as license to challenge Caesar’s domination and divine claim.⁵⁸ In the United States, this passage was used by

⁵⁴ Thomas Mann, “Stars, Sprouts, and Streams: The Creative Redeemer of Second Isaiah” 135–151 in *God Who Creates: Essays in Honor of W. Sibley Towner*, William Brown and S. Dean McBride, Jr., eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 150.

⁵⁵ Brueggemann, *Isaiah 40–66*, 43.

⁵⁶ Frederik Poulsen, *God, His Servant, and the Nations in Isaiah 42:1–9: Biblical and Theological Reflections after Brevard S. Childs and Hans Hübner* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 107.

⁵⁷ Paul, op.cit., finds echoes of Akkadian language in verse 7, specifically with regard to references about showing light and setting free (190). Paul also asserts that the logic in 5–9 echoes the logic of the goddess Ishtar’s promise to King Esarhaddon: “Could you not rely on the precious utterance which I spoke to you? Now you can rely on this latter one too.” Paul, *Isaiah 40–66*, 191, citing Parpola, *Assyrian Prophecies*, p. 10, lines 7–12. More importantly, however, because of earlier allusions to Marduk and Cyrus, verse eight’s prohibition against idols sounds differently in Babylonian and Persian ears. It may sound like a rejection of Nabonidus and his favored moon-god, Sin. As Nilsen narrates: “In the background of the [Cyrus] Cylinder stands Nabonidus, the last Babylonian king (ruling 556–539 B.C.E.). Nabonidus claimed to restore the forgotten cult of the moon-god Sin; according to his critics, though, it was not a restoration, but a new invention. Be that as it may; the situation led to a neglect of the cult of other gods, including that of Marduk, who was Babylon’s city-god, and the highest god of the pantheon. Supposedly even the *akitu* (New Year) festival, thought to be vital for ensuring peace and fertility for both land and people, was abolished by Nabonidus” See Tina Dykestee Nilsen, “Creation in Collision? Isaiah 40–48 and Zoroastrianism, Babylonian Religion and Genesis 1,” *Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*. Vol 13, Article 8, (2013):1–19. In fact, if the Cyrus Cylinder is to be trusted, the priests of Marduk are the ones who opened the gates to Cyrus’s army, whereupon Cyrus destroyed all relics for worshipping the moon god and reestablished the gods Nabonidus had removed. Such connections may help slightly conceal elements of the preacher’s anger, revenge, and self-assertion that are expressed in the line: “I am the LORD, that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to idols” (42:8). For an exiled Jew hearing these words in the context of creation, covenant, and exodus, this verse is most clearly the rejection of all idols and those leaders who support them. Thus, it is not simply that “the text is criticizing the people who expect everything from ‘Cyrus,’” as Baltzer claims (135). Rather, the text criticizes Cyrus, the Persian rule, and Babylonian culture as committing idolatrous usurpation of God’s glory.

⁵⁸ In the story, emperor Hadrian seeks to be declared God. Three philosophers advise him, the last of which presents to Hadrian a problem of a stalled ship at sea. The emperor says that he will send ships to rescue it but the philosopher asks, “Sire, why trouble your legions and ships to go there? Dispatch a bit of wind there, and thus you will rescue it.” When Caesar admits that he is not able to create a wind, the philosopher states, “You cannot create a wind? How then can you make yourself God, in whose name it is said, ‘Thus saith the Lord, He that created the heavens, and stretched them forth, He that spread forth the earth and that which cometh out of it, He that giveth breath unto the people upon it, and spirit to them that walk therein (Isa 42:5)?’” (Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds. *The Book of Legends: Sefer Ha-Aggadah: Legends from the Talmud and Midrash* (New York: Schocken, 1992) 509–510:52.

the Rev. James R. L. Diggs to describe his work with Marcus Garvey to resist white nationalism in the South.⁵⁹ Most notably, in Latin America Oscar Romero preached on Isaiah 42:1–7 in response to the oppression of Salvadorans and the defamation of clergy by the government.⁶⁰ In his sermon, Romero eschews strictly historical or christological referents for the Servant's identity. Instead, he invites each member of the congregation to understand themselves, through Christ, as the Servant, working with God and challenging oppressive regimes. Romero's preaching of Isaiah 42 makes clear that it is in the interest of oppressive regimes for preachers to interpret the text with solely historical or christological connections. These moves keep the message of the scriptural witness at a safe distance and they limit its liberating agenda to one figurehead. To counter this dominating approach, Romero preaches with Isaiah 42: the God of the great deliverances of old is present here, speaking here, offering here an open call for all those who would resist oppression and co-labor with God in bringing justice to the world.

Concluding Reflections

What is suggested by examining Isaiah 42:1–9 can also be seen with regard to the other three Servant Songs:

1. *Reading these texts homiletically aids interpretation of the biblical text.* When Isaiah 42 is read as a sermon to people who knew traumatic experiences of exile and marginalization, the preacher's rhetoric sounds intentionally bi-vocal. Thus, the Cyrus/Israel debate is reframed. So also, understanding Isaiah 49 through the lens of testimonial preaching can help navigate the exegetical debate about servant Israel preaching to Israel about Israel: the preacher's voice becomes a witness that invites Israel's reimagined witness. Further, a homiletical reading of Isaiah 50 speaks into the debate about how this passage relates to its context. The sermon here can be seen as contributing to extended imaginative reinterpretations of the book of Lamentations. Finally, reading Isaiah 53 as dialogical preaching helps navigate the exegetical challenges of interpreting Isaiah 53 by showing that the sermon has a focus and function that seek to evoke a clear response and to provoke a directed reflection about suffering, domination, and hope in a wider range of hearers. This dialogue reframes the debate about the servant's biography or the (potential) use of vicarious suffering.
2. *Reading these texts homiletically provides a model for preaching older texts in new contexts.* The preacher in Isaiah 42 focuses on the language of scripture, especially Exodus, as that which speaks into the present moment. The God of Exodus is neither historically distant nor substantively reimagined. Rather, the preacher depicts the God of the older testament in present, active ways. So also, the preacher in Isaiah 49 invites the congregation to imagine life through the perspective of Jacob, Moses, and Jeremiah. In this way, the preacher uses older texts to build a bridge for the congregation to envision a

⁵⁹ See Alan Callahan, *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible* (New Haven: Yale, 2006), 171, citing Amy Jacques Garvey, *Garvey and Garveyism* (Kingston, Jamaica: United Printers, 1963), 104.

⁶⁰ Romero, "BAPTISM, EPIPHANY OF THE MESSIAH," Second Sunday of Ordinary Time, The Baptism of the Lord, January 14, 1979. <http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/homilies-and-writings/homilies/baptism-epiphany-messiah> Accessed March 12, 2019. See the same sermon in "Baptism as the Epiphany of Messianic Reality," in *A Prophetic Bishop Speaks to His People: The Complete Homilies of Archbishop Oscar Arnulfo Romero*, Volume 4, trans. Joseph Owens (Miami: Convivium, 2015), 165–183.

different future for themselves and the world. Isaiah 50 opens up the congregation's imagination to what the preacher perceives to be the most helpful word from Lamentations for the congregation in the moment. Other lines from Lamentations lie dormant. Here the preaching does not seek simply to repeat the older text nor argue against it. Rather, the preaching endeavors to read the older biblical text through the lens of contemporary marginality and suffering. Isaiah 53 places Jeremiah and Leviticus in dialogue with each other and the congregation. Here the preacher reads scripture backwards (from the present, through Jeremiah, and to Leviticus) and forwards (from Leviticus, through Jeremiah, and to the present) in a way that does not allow the ancient past, the recent past, nor the present to dominate the conversation.

3. *Reading these texts homiletically helps preachers engage the contextual and hermeneutical influence of domination.* The preacher in the first Servant Song can be seen drawing from Exodus and Genesis to offer resources for resistance to systemic injustice. So also, Isaiah 49 responds to economic depression caused by imperial neglect by calling for the congregation to take action materially as they “*bring Jacob back to YHWH,*” “*gather Israel,*” “*raise up the tribes of Jacob,*” and “*restore the survivors.*” In Isaiah 50, the Servant must navigate assumptions linked to suffering brought about by Babylonian culture and interpreted within a Jewish sub-culture that had accommodated itself to life in Babylonia. This leads the preacher to a radical reimagining of Lamentations as a source for identifying God's presence in suffering and as a guide to resistance. Isaiah 53 responds to theological domination about the nature of the servant's suffering. The preacher seeks to foster dialogue and emphasize the voice of numerous perspectives (both rhetorically and exegetically) in an effort to build unity but not uniformity within the exilic community around hope, resistance to injustice, and return from exile. By recognizing in each of these cases that Second Isaiah unmasks and responds to domination, the preacher can be better equipped to respond to the suffering and marginalization of people in the contemporary world with thoughtful interpretations of scriptural narrative, image, and turn of phrase.

Thus, reading the Servant Songs with a homiletical lens invites us to do more than apply the tools of historical critical method or christological focus to Old Testament texts. As these Songs preach, they invite preachers to listen for the ways scripture, and especially the Old Testament, speaks to ancient and contemporary suffering, offers a poetic-prophetic word, builds community, and proclaims a God of liberating possibility.

**The Word Digitalized:
A Techno-Theological Reflection on Online Preaching and Its Types**

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Abstract: *Upon the unexpected arrival of COVID-19, preachers have been forced to preach online. Among many problems and challenges in performing online preaching, a grave one has been the lack of theological consideration given to these new practices: to date, not a single publication can be found in the market that is dedicated to online preaching. Given the paucity of theological reflection related to this emerging genre, this article develops a theology of online preaching—epitomized as the Word digitalized—that encompasses yet goes beyond the homiletical scope of the conventional Barthian threefold perception of the Word (i.e., incarnated, written, and proclaimed). In the theology of online preaching developed here, eight representative types of online preaching currently practiced by preachers are examined, each demonstrating the Word digitalized in creative and effective ways.*

I. Introduction

In the time of the COVID-19 crisis, online preaching has become a new norm for the pulpit worldwide.¹ This new norm requires a novel theological conception of preaching and eventually a fresh homiletic-strategical consideration of online sermon delivery. In other words, we need a theology of online preaching even as we develop new ways of practicing preaching. The rationale is simple. Online preaching is different from conventional preaching, especially as practiced by mainline Christians. As we shall see in detail below, online preaching has its own techno-theological reasoning and unique ways of social communication. Without a critical comprehension of these, the practice of online preaching would find itself standing on shaky theoretical ground with no concrete performative strategy. Truth be told, this actually happened. When the pandemic began to hit the U.S. in early 2020, most churches, not to mention preachers, were not really ready for the novelty of online preaching. Even worse, there was not enough time to develop theological questioning and necessary homiletical resources. All that the preacher could do was “just do it” online, which has generated many stories of unfortunate results. To be sure, some preachers have experienced hidden potentials in online preaching and presented stories of their innovations. But for many, a concrete theology of online preaching, as well as applicable homiletic strategies, are greatly needed.

The purpose of this essay is twofold: to provide a theology of online preaching and an introduction of various types or homiletic strategies of online preaching already being practiced by early innovators. I will begin with Karl Barth’s threefold definition of God’s Word in order to show one conventional theological understanding of preaching and then proceed to explore a

¹ For this essay, I define online preaching as a digital livestream form of preaching that is performed with no face-to-face congregation in front of the preacher even when the preacher delivers her message either in the church or somewhere else such as her own home office. Thus, online preaching is mainly for online listeners (or online watchers). As a side note, a big difference between televangelism and online preaching is that the former is typically performed by “celebrity” preachers with the presence of their congregations in physical church buildings; they broadcast their sermons with extensive technological support. Nowadays, any local preacher can practice online preaching with minimal technological settings that nevertheless provide relatively high-quality livestreaming.

fourth emerging digital dimension of God's Word and its theological and homiletical implications. Barth is a personal yet strategic choice for a homiletical dialogue, thanks to the author's Reformed background and Barth's homiletical significance in that particular tradition. Yet, I hope that preachers and homileticians from other traditions may recognize common ground in his homiletical theology and thus applicability of it to their practices of preaching. For the purposes of this paper, when I use the descriptive word "conventional" (as in "conventional preaching"), it is intended to connote Reformed-conventional. Another notable limitation of this article, due to its primary concern with the practice of online preaching, is the lack of extensive consideration of online liturgical contexts, though the latter is inseparable from the former and implied throughout. Focused consideration of online liturgy would be an important follow-up project to this essay.

II. Karl Barth's Threefold Definition of God's Word

Barth's threefold definition of God's Word provides one of the most compelling affirmations of the importance and practice of preaching that the preacher can carry in the Reformed liturgical context and beyond. For Barth, a prominent theological figure from the pre-online print culture,² the Word of God exists and presents itself in the following threefold form: the written Word of God (scripture), the revealed Word of God (Christ), and the proclaimed Word of God (preaching).³ He explains that scripture itself is not the Word of God until it is preached in the church's proclamation, and that we can know the revealed Word only from scripture adopted by the church's preaching. Finally, preaching is only possible when it is rooted in the written Word and the revealed Word.⁴ Accordingly, the three forms of God's Word never exist apart from each other, and without the other two one form loses its fullest authenticity as God's Word. For Barth, this concrete unity of scripture, Christ, and proclamation is analogous to

² In a sense, Barth is a beneficiary of his own era's technoculture—namely print culture, along with the emerging radio, TV, and film industries of his time, as Walter Ong would argue (see below). This statement seems quite right when we consider the church's heavy reliance on print—one of the most advanced technologies of the Reformation era with its dual purposes of knowledge dissemination and spiritual formation. Barth obviously took great advantage of print technology for similar purposes in generating multiple publications, including the little book, *Homiletics*. This implies at least three things. Pre-online print culture should not be considered an era of no technological advancement (that is, we should not have a condescending posture toward print culture; truth be told, we still heavily rely on print for social discourse). Second, Christian knowledge dissemination and formation is still bound to a great extent to print culture in the current era of digital revolution, although print's historical significance is gradually diminishing. This article by no means implies that print culture has no relevance in today's world, but only that the digital revolution is swiftly taking over the role of print culture and therefore necessitates novel ways of knowledge production and personal formation. Third, Barth's homiletical argument based on print culture (i.e., the written Bible) presents its own limitations as the Bible itself has a strong oral/aural basis. Yet, Barth upheld the Bible as the most reliable source for God's revelation due in part to the unavailability of the oral tradition which preceded and contributed to it. Karl Barth, *Homiletics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 75–80. Walter Ong, a major literary critique and cultural historian of the twentieth century, recognizes "writing" as "a technology." With the dawn of writing technology, he contends, "hearing-dominance" has yielded to "sight-dominance." From this perspective, it would not be wrong to state that online digital preaching further promotes, if not maximizes, sight-dominance as people now *watch* (and listen to) preaching through the digital screen, rather than being mere listeners of the sermon in the conventional homiletic-communicational model. More will be discussed later regarding this matter. Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 80–81, 115–120.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The Doctrine of the Word of God, Volume I, Part I*, trans. G. W. Bromiley, ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (New York: T&T Clark, 2004), 110.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 120–21.

the doctrine of the Trinity. In his own words, the Trinity is “only one analogy to this doctrine of the [threefold] Word of God.”⁵

What this threefold formula of God’s Word generates in terms of theological and homiletical significance of each form of the Word is as follows. First, the written Word of God obtains the status of reliability and immutability or eternity. The written Word is reliable as it is the trustworthy source of the revealed Word and the preached Word flows from it. The written Word is immutable or eternal in the sense that no more written Word will be provided (that is, the canon is “set”) and the canon will stay as it is for good, although other invaluable written words of faith will continue to emerge. Second, the revealed Word, as it represents the historical reality of the Word, generates two of the Word’s core characteristics, namely proximity and presence. Christ is always close to this world and ever-present in the proclaimed Word. Third and finally, the preached Word, as it rises from the eternal Word and the historically revealed Word, is given an unmistakable authority due to its presumed transformational power (i.e., transformation of humankind; both individually and communally) and an assurance as the reliable Word of God. To summarize, Barth’s idea of the threefold form of God’s Word engenders these theological and homiletical traits of each Word:

- The Word of God written: immutability, reliability
- The Word of God incarnated: proximity (reality), presence
- The Word of God preached: transformativity, assurance

Many homileticians of past and recent years, across different cultural contexts and embracing different theological foci, build their homiletic discourses and practices upon these traits of the Word (though not necessarily relying on Barth).⁶ The Word is deemed reliable and eternal, always realistic and present in human history, and assuredly transformational. For them, therefore, preaching this six-trait Word is self-sufficient and enough for “success” for effective preaching in most—if not all—contexts. Anything more than these does not seem to be needed among those who, especially among Reformed traditions (including the Presbyterian homiletician and preacher Thomas G. Long), adopt some form of this “perfect” Trinitarian formula of the Word and its six eminent traits.⁷ When the pandemic suddenly hit, it shook the

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Homileticians may not give equal emphasis to all six traits. Instead, it is likely to have a more nuanced focus on one or two of the six, depending on the specific homiletical topics or contexts considered, while still having all six in mind. For instance, Lucy A. Rose focuses on dialogical proximity and presence of the incarnated Word in her roundtable homiletic proposal, Justo L. González and Pablo A. Jiménez on postcolonial transformativity and assurance of the preached Word, and Luke A. Powery on the written Word’s reliability in terms of its pneumatological nature of lament and celebration. See Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997); Justo L. González and Pablo A. Jiménez, *Pulpito: An Introduction to Hispanic Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2005); Luke A. Powery, *Spirit Speech: Lament and Celebration in Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009).

⁷ Long acknowledges biblical preaching as “the normative form of Christian preaching.” For him, the Bible is the precious and most authoritative conveyor of God’s revelation recorded and cherished by the faith community throughout history. The written Bible, Long continues, is eminently Christ-centered (meaning that we are encountered by Christ in it), assuring of Christian faith, spirit-transformative, reliable for life’s guidance, and counter-imaginative vis-à-vis “the consumerist, militaristic, death-obsessed imagination of the culture.” For Long, preaching must therefore arise from this unique and canonical christological document. It seems that, in other words, Long believes in and affirms confidently the six traits of conventional Barthian preaching as the core nature of

theological ground of our homiletic theology and practices. A new fourth dimension of the Word has arisen and it has great significance, namely; *the Word digitalized*. A seismic change and challenge has followed with its rise, including the swift emergence of online preaching.

III. The Fourth Techno-Dimension of the Word: The Threefold Word *Digitalized*

It is presumptuous to state that the crisis of the 2020 pandemic spawned the fourth dimension of the Word—the Word digitalized as online preaching. Years before the pandemic, the Word has been digitalized and many around the nation practiced online preaching. Yet, what the pandemic has contributed to is the digitalized Word’s vital and superior role in the ministry of the church as a whole, and particularly in the practice of preaching. For instance, online preaching is no longer a secondary option for worship but has become a primary method of sharing sermons with others.

A little more clarification on the definition of the Word digitalized may help here. Like the threefold nature of God’s Word in Barth’s formula, the Word digitalized is also threefold in its nature. In a nutshell, the Word digitalized includes the written Word, the revealed Word, and the preached Word; *all three digitalized*. Each Word deserves more detailed description.

A. The Written Word *Digitalized*

The written Word *digitalized* means, first and foremost, the paper *Bible digitalized* and available for free online.⁸ This simple fact has had numerous digital and interpretive ramifications in recent history. To begin, the free online Bible has resulted in the common person’s ability to readily compare different translations of the Bible. Further, with some basic or even no knowledge of biblical Hebrew and Greek, people can now delve into the ancient meanings of biblical passages thanks to the availability of interlinear Bibles. Also, with various free online commentaries associated with online Bibles, people’s interpretive skills and imagination can be enhanced without formal theological education. In addition, free resources of ancient non-canonical writings (e.g., the Gospel of Mary) broadens, if not challenges, one’s view of the biblical horizon. Finally, for Smartphone users, the Bible can be near at hand at all times as a theological and spiritual resource when raising and answering questions. All these phenomena significantly challenge the two core traits of the written Word as previously discussed: immutability and reliability. It is not that mutability of the Bible arises as if one may now alter—e.g., add or delete—the given content of the Bible. Nor does it mean that the Bible is no longer reliable as a canonical authority. It means that the interpretive and hermeneutical horizon of the written Word is wide open: *de facto*, “beyond horizon.” Any novel meaning of the written Word can be mined and applied to one’s life, for good or ill. Again, the written Word itself may not be mutated at all; however, one’s pursuit of its meanings is now boundless. Thus, the former traits of immutability and reliability give way to other traits of *fluidity* and *usability*. It is true that immutability and reliability still stay, yet fluidity (of biblical interpretation or meanings) and usability (of the biblical content) take priority over the former two and are much more important in most people’s minds.

biblical preaching. Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 59, 60–62.

⁸ For more articulation of the term digital or digitalized, see C. The Preached Word *Digitalized* section, below.

B. The Revealed Word *Digitalized*

The revealed Word *digitalized* denotes *Christ's image digitalized*, and more importantly, we can now encounter and enjoy a wide variety of digital images of Christ coming from different situations and cultures. A fine example is found in the painting of South African artist Maxwell Lawton, titled "Man of Sorrows."⁹ In the painting, Jesus appears not as a typical mighty or pastoral Caucasian, blue-eye figure, but as an AIDS patient who is in severe agony. The painting's message was not the suffering of AIDS itself, but Christ's empathetic "healing touch" over AIDS patients, as depicted by Lawton. Another example comes from Chinese Christian artist He Qi.¹⁰ Qi effectively wipes away the western image and tone in his biblical paintings around the life of Jesus. Instead, Jesus and his followers appear as Asians with Asian apparel and other cultural expressions. The paintings bring the life of Jesus home to the very core of Asian psychology by representing Jesus no longer as a foreign stranger (who happens to be the savior "for" Asians from the west) but as an Asian ancestor who walked among Asians and whose whole life is given to Asians and others. Similarly, Korean Jesus portraits painted by Ki-Chang Kim generate a similar intercultural impact.¹¹

One more unmistakable example is the digitally recreated face of Jesus published in 2002 in the magazine of *Popular Mechanics*.¹² A British team of forensic anthropologists in collaboration with Israeli archaeologists "re-created what they believe is the most accurate image of the most famous face in human history."¹³ What they present to the world as "the most accurate image" of Jesus is the dark and swarthy Middle Eastern man represented as a darker-skinned Semite. As Alison Galloway, a professor of anthropology at the University of California in Santa Cruz, puts it, this digital image of Jesus is "probably a lot closer to the truth than the work of many great [Western] masters."¹⁴

What all these digitalized images of Jesus imply is the weight of intercultural omnipresence or cross-cultural ubiquity of the revealed Word in the world. This newly recovered trait of the Word adds powerful specification to the two conventional traits of proximity and presence of the revealed Word. The digitalized Word is not simply proximal to the world in an abstract sense or in a mono-cultural sense (e.g., the predominant white western image of Jesus), but enables each different culture to see and adopt Jesus as its own in a very meaningful way. Thus, it is now better to state that Jesus is *in and of* each wonderful culture than that (the mono-cultural) Jesus is present in different cultures.

Besides the newly added trait of cross-cultural ubiquity, the revealed Word *digitalized* is embedded with connectivity. This connectivity is possible thanks to 1) the images themselves connected by hyperlinks and 2) people's responses and reactions to the images now connected

⁹ The image is available in one of his interviewed articles found in Joriel Foltz, "VCU Without Borders," *Shafer Court Connections*, spring 2006, 9 (also the image is available on his own website, http://www.maxwelllawton.com/images/Lawton%20VCU%20Article_v1.pdf, accessed October 10, 2020).

¹⁰ Many of his Asian images of Christ, along with portraits of other biblical stories, are available at <https://www.heqiart.com/> (accessed October 10, 2020).

¹¹ Several images are available on a Korean newspaper webpage, http://m.daejonilbo.com/mnews.asp?pk_no=1090321. For more scholarly discussions of the Asianness of Jesus, see Rasia S. Sugirtharajah, ed., *Asian Faces of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 2013), esp., chapter 5, "Jesus Christ in Popular Piety in the Philippines," by Salvador T. Martinez.

¹² Mike Fillon, "The Real Face of Jesus," *Popular Mechanics*, April 10 2020 (republished), <https://www.popularmechanics.com/science/health/a234/1282186/> (accessed October 10, 2020).

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

online. For instance, when a reader of this article clicks digital links found in footnote 9 through 12, she is instantly directed or connected to the original sources of Jesus's images. If those sources have their own embedded links, the reader can move on to another set of sources. The pattern may continue nearly indefinitely. Through all of these links, people's responses and interactions with one another, readers may encounter both amateur or professional comments.

In short, with the dawn of the revealed Word digitalized, the traits of proximity and presence absorb, if not give way to, whole new meanings of *ubiquity* and *connectivity* of the Word. These new traits generate easier and more familiar accessibility to the Word and many more—almost endless—possibilities for expressing the Word in fresh ways.

C. The Preached Word *Digitalized*

More than anything else, the preached word *digitalized* indicates preaching that is performed for or through online spaces. Unlike the written and revealed Word digitalized, however, the preached Word digitalized is in most cases accompanied and accomplished by the human body and voice, just like conventional in-church preaching. Yet the distinctive feature remains the same in that the preached Word digitalized (i.e., online preaching) is accomplished through *digital spaces*. In other words, between the online preacher and the online listener there is a digital medium through which communication is possible. This factor truly distinguishes the preached Word *digitalized* from conventional ways of preaching.

Two critical interlocking questions arise from this: "Does this medium or space help or hinder the listener's hearing?" and "If it is helping (or hindering), how can we use this medium most effectively?" Given that most churches in the U.S. today are using online spaces as their only or primary communicative tool, it is desirable and fruitful to discuss its effectiveness and how to use online preaching wisely. To do so, it is important to further understand what digital space represents.

Principally and plainly, digital space is what is displayed on the screen of a digital device (e.g., laptops, desktops, TV screens, tablets, Smartphones). Initially—that is, before the online revolution—this space existed mainly for the purpose of unilateral information transfer. For instance, a person could send a digitalized message or information through a hard disk memory device to another person who would receive and play it on the digital screen. Then the receiver may send back his or her information to the one who initiated contact in a similar way. Obviously, there was always significant delay in communication between the two parties. Into the late 20th century, online digital space revolutionized this "delayed" transaction. Information now flows instantly between two parties back and forth (e.g., Facebook Messenger). Further, information can now flow between more than two parties, even thousands or tens of thousands of parties, in less than a second. Thus, a true bilateral and even multilateral communication via digitalized screens has been achieved.

As we live through the 21st century, digital space is not only used for information transfer but also for social transaction or *social interaction*. In addition to various types of Social Network Services (SNS) like Instagram or Twitter, digital space provides nearly unlimited forms of social interaction. Two good examples are college education and worship services through Zoom. On Zoom, students enjoy live discussions with their peers, and many churches livestream their services. Again, what is remarkable about this digital social transaction is its ability for *multilateral spontaneous communication*; numerous people from many different places and time

zones can participate in communication at the same time.¹⁵ In addition, online communication and interaction is instantly shareable with anyone around the world. In today's digital online industry, most successful companies design their products and contents in ways that allow them to be easily shared and distributed around the nation or the world with only one click or touch. *Spontaneity*, *accessibility*, and *shareability* greatly matter in the digital space.

Last but not least, one of the most critical dimensions of digital space is its highly artistic-holistic nature in communication. The digital space is artistic or aesthetically malleable as it takes advantage of a limitless number of calligraphic fonts, colorful images, object or human movements, various geometrical or mathematical figures, cartoon drawings, filmed natural scenes, photos, videos, music, lines, graphs, emoticons, etc.¹⁶ This space is also holistic as it utilizes at least three of the five human senses: seeing, hearing, and touching (including screen touch and typing). Even the digital space can be said to employ the other two senses of tasting and smelling as the clear and real-life images on the screen provide the brain with indirect experiences of the two remaining senses. In fact, when online bread and cup communion is practiced today, the two senses partake in the digital spiritual interaction.¹⁷ In these ways, the availability of real-time video speaking in the digital space may be said to promote the space's holistic artistry.

When the preached Word is delivered in online space, the Word digitalized is exposing itself to these new digital online traits: multilateral instant communication, holistic artistry, and shareability. In effect, these three new traits enable the preached Word's traditional traits of transformativity and assurance to be possible in the digital space. In other words, when these new traits are absent or when they are not conscientiously developed, online preaching has a slim chance of wielding its spiritual magic of transformativity and assurance. People simply would not get it if the Word preached in digital spaces did not adopt the new space's core traits. Frankly, the sudden onset of the pandemic did not allow enough time for preachers to adopt these new required traits of the digitalized Word, which in many cases has led to the ineffectiveness of the online pulpit.

D. Toward Effective Online Preaching

Six previous traits of the threefold Word are still strongly evident in the (online) pulpit because the preached Word still rises from the study of the written Word in the Spirit of the revealed Word. Yet, the new seven traits of the threefold Word *now digitalized* have emerged and taken on greater significance over the former six, or at least have added new meanings to them. Among other reasons, the difficulties of online preaching mainly stem from the

¹⁵ On social media, as Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess point out, the user (the listener in the case of online preaching) "is now increasingly the producer or author of much of the content posted in these venues." Stine Lomborg and Charles Ess, "Keeping the Line Open and Warm": An Activist Danish Church and Its Presence on Facebook," in Pauline Hope Cheong, *Digital Religion, Social Media and Culture: Perspectives, Practices and Futures* (New York: Peter Lang, 2012), 169. As will be discussed later with reference to the Zoom/Chat Style of preaching, online listeners can now actively contribute to the final content of the sermon as the authentic "producer" or "author" of the sermon.

¹⁶ See Robert S. Fortner, *Communication, Media, and Identity: A Christian of Communication* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), esp. chapter 6, "Communication as Art." Fortner provides a comprehensive articulation of how and why (digital) communication is art or artistic (having aesthetic dimensions).

¹⁷ For online communion, people typically prepare their own elements at home and consume them when the pastor or priest blesses all of the elements at different places, including in his or her church where the online worship and preaching occurs during livestreaming.

unfortunate clash between the previous six and new seventh trait or from a lack of integrating a new configuration of all seven.

The Threefold Word	Reformed/Conventional Preaching Traits	Online Preaching Traits
The Word, Written	Immutability, reliability	Fluidity, usability
The Word, Revealed	Proximity (Reality), presence	Cross-cultural ubiquity, connectivity
The Word, Preached	Transformativity, assurance	Instant communication, holistic artistry, shareability

The most challenging conflict is between immutability/reliability and fluidity/usability. The conventional authority of preaching rooted in immutability and reliability of the Word no longer remains its highest consideration. Rather, wide-open fluidity and pragmatist usability of the Word are crucial for people's engagement with preaching and thus preaching's communicative effectiveness. In other words, fluidity and usability have become hugely important contributing factors for preaching's authority and reliability.

The second most notable clash occurs between assurance and instant communication alongside shareability. In online spaces, the preached Word digitalized is itself a form of digital information, and this information travels very quickly, in less than a second. The margin to measure the assurance of the preached Word becomes very narrow. However, there is no reason to utterly despair. People's sharing activity of the preached Word itself (i.e., the global spreading of the good news preached from a local preacher) helps obtain a digital form of assurance. Simply put, the fact that people can and do share the preached Word widely, instantly, and voluntarily is a positive sign that the Word's assurance is being retained.

The above two examples of apparent clashes between the conventional six traits and the emerging seven traits of the Word are not nearly as consequential as their potential for compatibility and collaboration. The previous six are in great need of self-transformation while the emerging seven heavily rely on the six for mutual enhancement. In this sense, effective online preaching would be wise to combine the "old" six traits with the new seven traits in a new configuration of homiletical theory and practice. Certainly, this is tough work for any preacher today: it requires a lot of critical reasoning and strategizing, as well as better digital infrastructures in local churches. Yet it is undeniable that this tough work is demanded of the church as well as society at this point in time. Preachers are called to walk along this challenging digital road. We must respond to needs and requests from the "digital pews" (that is, any and everywhere people now worship online) as pastorally as possible.

The following section outlines eight types of online preaching that strive to adopt and creatively adapt the six and seven traits into their practice of preaching today. The first five are more popular and widely practiced than the last three. Yet, the last three types have also recently garnered wide attention and are gradually being employed by more and more preachers; for this reason, it is important to know more about them, also. These eight are not chosen because they are deemed to generate the most effective forms of homiletical communication but they appear to be the most widely available and reliable options at this point for the preached Word digitalized.

IV. Eight Types of Online Preaching

As the shock of the pandemic set in, some preachers have been wise and swift enough to develop creative communicative strategies for online preaching. It is not clear whether these online preachers were well aware of the seven traits of online preaching as discussed above. However, what is obvious is that the eight types of online preaching described below illustrate different combinations of the six and seven traits of the threefold Word digitalized. This section briefly discusses each of the eight, exploring how each adopts and adapts the seven traits of the Word digitalized in its practice.

A. The Lecture Style¹⁸



Figure 1

- **General Description:** This is the most familiar, if not most popular, style. Preaching is livestreamed from the pulpit of the brick-and-mortar church so that this style of online preaching is not really distinguishable from conventional preaching. However, a notable difference is the absence of a physical congregation in the church. Typically, all the pews are entirely empty. People are invisible, present only in the digital space. They can see the preacher but the preacher cannot see them, which in most cases makes the preacher uncomfortable. The preacher should look into the camera's lens all the

time since there are no people in the pews. Even the lecture-style preacher who uses a platform and moves around while preaching (rather than standing frozen in place, attached to a fixed pulpit), should look into the camera (or better yet, multiple cameras set at different angles). Almost everything is the same as conventional preaching except that the preacher now speaks to the camera.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** While all eight types of online preaching can adapt the seven traits in unique ways, each style will show certain traits to their advantage more than others. For example, the lecture style of online preaching can maximize the effect of the trait of ubiquity; in particular, christological-spatial ubiquity. This christological ubiquity happens when the online preacher speaks from the conventional church's pulpit or platform which carries with it a sense of sacredness, encouraging association with Christ's presence in the digital space. Metaphorically interpreted, the preacher's church-space is connected (the trait of connectivity) with that of the listener, which "transforms" the latter into a sacred one as well. It is observable that holistic artistry of the Word might be lacking to some extent in this style since the camera angle is mostly fixed on the lecture style preacher, yet its strong trait of ubiquity conveys the possibility of inviting the symbolic feel of the church's artistic nature (e.g., the aesthetic pulpit area design) into the listener's digital screen space.

¹⁸ For example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8s70HIv10U&feature=youtu.be> (accessed October 10, 2020). All rights are reserved by Sunggu Yang for all minimalist illustration figures throughout the article.

B. The Conversation Style¹⁹



Figure 2

- **General Description:** The preacher typically sits behind the table, looking at the camera on the same plane/level. The background and the surrounding environment feel comfortable and friendly, perhaps including a plant or vase of flowers in view. Most importantly, the preacher's presence appears highly pastoral, and her vocal tone and style of speaking is very conversational. With the preacher on the same visual plane/level as the camera, listeners feel like they are sitting across the table from the preacher. As the preacher knows that

she is now “conversing” with individuals behind the camera lens, the preacher often offers rhetorical questions to aid the listeners’ perceived or imagined participation in the sermonic event. Rather than using a manuscript, preaching with short notes often works better in this style as the preacher is expected to keep constant eye contact with the camera (that is, the listeners).

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** Fluidity and usability are the two hallmark traits of the Word digitalized in this style. As the preacher creates a conversation with the listeners akin to the Roundtable Pulpit model proposed by John S. McClure,²⁰ the preached or conversed Word will welcome many different interpretations of scripture. That is, the preacher’s interpretation and application of scripture in this style is generally wide open as she invites the listeners’ own fluid explorations and applications of it in their unique *sitz im leben*. In this way, the listeners become virtual contributors to the preaching event.

C. The Reporter Style²¹



Figure 3

- **General Description:** The preacher stands without the pulpit and the conventional altar in the background, and does not have a full manuscript.²² The virtual background can be made of real-life still-cuts, moving images, or church images. All of this contributes to the creation of highly situational preaching. The key homiletical strategy is the production of the sacred event that seems to be happening *here and now* in the world, which the preacher “reports” from her vantage point. As a result, preaching in this style sounds like fact-based, “live” reporting. Usually, other liturgical elements will accompany preaching (e.g., prayers, candle lighting) before, during, or after the sermon as well as real-life pictures or news photos, recorded music, interviews, and other performances such as sacred dancing. Sophisticated technological support is needed to ensure high definition, visual quality, and smooth transitions between various liturgical elements.

¹⁹ For example, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=psICh2IP2-E&feature=youtu.be> (accessed October 10, 2020).

²⁰ John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

²¹ For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo44NzWjp0A&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

²² Some preachers use the teleprompter invisible to the sermons listeners.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** Holistic artistry is visible to a great extent in this style. Above all, the preacher uses hand gestures, facial expressions, and intonation to effect a holistic performance. In addition, the artistic background, other aesthetic artifacts, and the careful use of technological elements (e.g., digital sound effects) all promote the beauty and liveliness of the preached Word digitalized. The high visibility of the preaching event can enhance cross-cultural ubiquity of the Word by adoption of images, music, dancing, and other elements from different cultures and contexts.

D. The Interview Style²³



Figure 4

- **General Description:** This is probably the friendliest style of online preaching (along with the Zoom/Chat style explored below). In most cases, the preacher finds herself in an environment that is absent of any religious symbols or references. The preacher may sit in the living room of her own house or in the flowery backyard of the church grounds. More often than not, a very calm atmosphere is favored as an “interview” is being held. This style creates the feeling of participation in an interview between the preacher and viewers.

The conversation proceeds in a dialogical manner with the preacher providing answers to presumed questions from sermon listeners, much like a pastoral mentor in their midst. To promote this effect, the sermon often utilizes actual questions and answers with moments of expressed humility when the preacher may say, “I don’t actually have an answer for that,” or “I may need more time to think about what you’ve said so that I can provide better answers for you.” Last but not least, in order to create a real interview feel, two or three cameras focus on the preacher from different angles throughout the sermon (similar to CNN’s former *Larry King Live* interview show).

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** The pastoral and interview feel of preaching comes with the traits of usability and connectivity of the Word digitalized. Scripture becomes a fine hermeneutical catalyst for the deeper homiletical interview process (thus good usability of scripture is demonstrated), and listeners as invisible yet influential interviewers may experience a close connection with the pastoral dialogue partner. Holistic artistry may also be experienced in this style by matching the surrounding environment with the key theme of the sermon or scripture. The preacher’s body posture and clothing may also match the sermon’s theme and similarly reflect the holistic artistry of this style.

²³ Here is an online preaching example for this style, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=3464&v=OBGNTys_Qsk&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

E. The Drama Style²⁴



Figure 5

- **General Description:** Many preachers in children's or youth ministry practice this style for the Word's physio-holistic encounter with listeners (i.e., utilizing more than verbal communication). In this style, preachers may perform a scriptural drama with necessary props in front of the digital camera that broadcasts the scene to its target audience. Because the audience's attention span is relatively short, the performance should be highly riveting to retain attention. However, the drama sermon does not have to be overexaggerated because preaching is not a place for cinematic spectacles (which are reserved for movie

theaters). The impactful content of the gospel is still most important for the given audience. As the paraphrased words of Paul reminds us, "For the kingdom of God depends not on [spectacles] but on power" (1 Cor 4:20). It should also be noted that the drama style is not exclusively for younger generations. A well-planned scriptural drama with sophisticated props or a pre-filmed dramatic sermon will serve adults as well as younger audiences. As people of all ages are now living through an image-driven era,²⁵ these dramatic styles of preaching may well appeal to a range of listeners, especially through their creation of aesthetic online spaces.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** The trait of holistic artistry prevails in the drama style. The whole personality of the preacher embodies the scriptural story, which is further magnified by various arts that accompany it. The trait of fluidity also works well in this style as the performed drama interprets the scriptural story from a fresh hermeneutical perspective (e.g., in the way of reader-response interpretation).²⁶ Cross-cultural ubiquity also shows itself to great potential as many different artistic images of biblical figures and symbols of Christ from various cultures may be easily adopted in this style.

F. The Zoom/Chat Style²⁷



Figure 6

- **General Description:** This is a highly informal style of online preaching—at least in delivery, if not also in content. The preacher may even live Zoom-stream the message from her own study or a quiet corner of a shopping mall. The key is making the preaching environment as friendly and approachable as possible for listeners. Compared to the Lecture style (as a polar opposite), this style presents the preacher as a Christian on equal footing with the listener as they share their religious

²⁴ For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=shBTDpNGPec&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

²⁵ See Mitchell Stephens, *The Rise of the Image, the Fall of the Word* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²⁶ Gerry Brenner argues for the performed text as a source of a fresh interpretation from the reader's vintage point of view. See his work, *Performative Criticism: Experiments in Reader Response* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

²⁷ For example, see <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1sN57LIyaLaC8MqR-mrQRdeMfPdil0W8M/view?usp=sharing> (accessed October 10, 2020).

authority. The preacher “chats” with listeners as a good friend and hopes to address the concerns of daily life with great sympathy. This style is gaining popularity among preachers thanks to its easy, low-tech usability for both the preacher and listeners. A great strength of this style is its ability to allow the preacher and listeners to have instant bilateral communication either via the chat room or direct dialogue (see below for further explanation). Some churches now practice communion in this style as well because its technology allows people to simultaneously see each person’s consumption of the elements.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** As already noted, the two traits of instant communication and shareability are prominent in this style. With regard to instant communication before, during, and after sermon delivery, listeners or viewers²⁸ can initiate questions or comments about the sermon. For instance, during the sermon, a viewer may post a question in the chat room about a theological concept introduced by the preacher to elicit further conversation. Then the preacher, noticing the instant question feed, may choose to immediately engage the question. The reverse may also happen. During the sermon, the preacher may ask a question of viewers and they may immediately post their answers in the chat room or answer the question through live talking. Whereas we may have thought that “preaching is fulfilled in the hearing of the listener,” this style of preaching in the present digital age suggests that “preaching is fulfilled in the midst of the sermonic dialogue.” Another great communicative advantage of the Zoom/Chat style is its hyper-shareability with other social media outlets like YouTube and Facebook. The live sermon occurring on Zoom can be also simultaneously broadcasted on YouTube and Facebook. This helps the sermon to be shared virtually worldwide only by a simple click on a hyperlink. As a result, a very high level of connectivity of the revealed Word is achievable. Especially during times of virtual communion, people can be connected with each other in the same body of Christ in one virtual place, wherever they may reside physically, be it Africa, Asia, Europe, South America, etc.

G. The Rock Concert Style²⁹



Figure 7

- **General Description:** The preacher of this style often roams around the worship “stage.” He may begin the sermon from the podium with the Bible, then as the sermon develops to its climax, may engage the listeners more assertively by physically approaching them or by an embodied performance of the preached Word. At times, especially when using dramatic shouts or high pitches, the praise band will accompany the sermon for a synergetic effect, generating the feel of a live rock concert. Listeners or “worship-goers” (like concert-goers)

participate in the sermonic concert by shouting back, humming, laughing out loud, or clapping. They actively respond to the preaching event, even to the point of “completing” the

²⁸ With regard to online preaching, the traditional designation of “listener” does not seem to reflect the online communicative reality. Rather, the concept of “viewer” may better serve as listeners now hear and watch *through the screen*, like film watching, not only the preacher but also other holistic artistic elements.

²⁹ For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dMpzv4yhB8&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

sermon by their contributions. Indeed, without their contributions, the preacher's performance and delivery would fail in its effectiveness.

In figure 7, active worship participants are still portrayed (as in time prior to the pandemic) even though in actual online preaching they are not present.³⁰ This portrayal is intentional because the preacher of this style still strives to create a concert-like feel for online preaching while having only a minimal, yet fully operative, worship staff. A smaller music band will accompany the preacher while a minimum number of church staff—safely distanced—will play the role of worship-goers.

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** As in the Drama style, the two traits of fluidity and holistic artistry thrive in this style. The (musically) performed Word by the preacher opens the way for creative interpretations of the Word; that is, the same Word can be performed differently as an interpretive act both by the preacher and worship participants at different times (as noted above, in this style worshipers also participate in the sermon event by their own “actions”). Strictly speaking, no two performances acted out at different times are ever the same. That being the case, the performed Word often opens the positive floodgate for unbounded or fluid hermeneutical possibilities of the Word proclaimed. After all, the performed Word is holistic-artistic. Since no piece of art invites just one fixed interpretation of itself, it invites ongoing interpretation.

H. The Film Style (The Vidpod Style)³¹

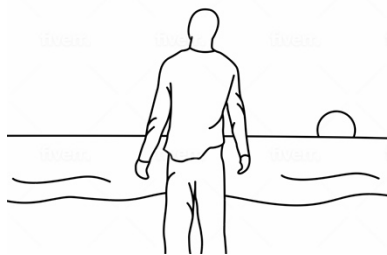


Figure 8

- **General Description:** This Film style,³² a most cutting-edge sermonic production of the digital media age, is rapidly emerging as an avant-garde alternative to conventional preaching. It is unconventional in several ways: preaching does not happen in a church building (filmed shots of the sermon can happen anywhere around the world); the preacher does not actually appear in the sermonic film, but sermon viewers only listen to her voice; music—including various songs or a variety of instrumental music—often accompanies the sermon from beginning to end; several preachers can preach a sermon

together by their coordinated narrations or each preacher can take turns on different Sundays; finally, the preacher does not have to live near the church or her congregation but can be located anywhere just like the viewers. Thus, the man standing in figure 8 is not actually the preacher. He is an actor in this sermonic film whose performance relates to the scripture

³⁰ See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW916Mcl1Ow&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

³¹ In his recent Facebook feed, John S. McClure at Vanderbilt Divinity School calls this style the Vidpod sermon, a neologism created by combining video and iPod. The communicative technique is almost the same with the Film style. The Vidpod sermon overlays the preacher's sermonic narration with a variety of relevant images and video clips. Like the Film style, the preacher does not necessarily show up in the sermonic Vidpod, except for the preacher's voice. A notable difference between the Film style and the Vidpod style is that the Film style tends to create a short sermonic film that has a coherent narrative structure, while the Vidpod style adopts disparate images and clips that can align with the sermon points. His sermon is available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UHgVi86S7c&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR1vS1d710MUyqjrWvw1soLSpmw8UqwBtlM1INwSDQWhPj4HIe8QQ0UG53s> (accessed October 21, 2020).

³² For example, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_09CDqhMCJI&feature=emb_title (accessed October 10, 2020).

reading and the sermon content. In fact, the sermon film moves from scene to scene and changes its actors in accordance with the sub-thematic movements of the sermon. Music will also constantly change to match these movements. By the end, we have the impression that the preacher appears to be *filming a scriptural message*, which nearly elevates the film's visual authority to that of scripture itself (although scripture still holds the higher status of revelation for most preachers of this style).

- **Select Adoption of the Seven Traits:** Shareability is a key to the sermon communication of this style. The listeners or viewers have neither a church building nor a designated online space where they gather together. They can be at any place, physically or virtually (e.g., on YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Tweeter, Tumblr, etc.), where the pre-recorded digital sermon is playable on any digital device. Easy access to the sermon content and simple shareability of it on any online video platform is a prerequisite for this style's effective communication.

Ironically, without the preacher's bodily presence during the sermon, this style achieves (indeed, requires) a high level of holistic artistry. Music, acting, images, symbols, and various filming skills (e.g., close-up, time-lapse) all contribute to the artistry of the sermon. The trait of artistry has good potential to promote the cross-cultural ubiquity of the sermon. Thanks to the image-driven nature of the sermon, various images of the human race, culture, Jesus, and creation around the world can be easily incorporated into the sermon. Over a shorter or longer period of time, cross-cultural ubiquity may also be achieved by a series of sermons adopting various images of the written or incarnated Word. The possibilities for cross-cultural ubiquity are nearly unlimited.

In sum, all the seven traits of the Word *digitalized* can be naturally or intentionally embedded in all eight types of online preaching described above. Also, there is homiletical overlap among the eight in terms of the utilization of the seven traits; that is, different types share several traits. It should also be noted that each type is best developed when maximizing a select set of traits. Finally, this categorization of the eight styles can help preachers be aware of various strategies that are available for adaptation when faced with many different online contexts and audiences.

It is recommended that online preachers continue to study social and online communicative dynamics. Digital platforms of communication and message content change constantly and faster than we may even notice. This means that there is a good chance that other types of online preaching beyond the above eight may emerge sooner rather than later. Preachers may want to seize, rather than chase after, the pace and move ahead in creating their own operative online preaching theory and practice.

By the time this article is published (mid-summer of 2021), COVID-19 may have been addressed in ways that allow worshipers to return to their church pews and preachers to their pulpits. However, given the likelihood that new viruses and hybrid versions of COVID may still threaten us, it is entirely possible that preachers will need to continue to develop their online

ministries of preaching the Word digitalized for a long time to come.³³ To be sure, it is unlikely that many congregations will meet exclusively “in person” and very likely that they will be utilizing online platforms for worship and preaching in the foreseeable future. In either case, this article is intended to help preachers to consider the options for the Word digitalized, including the opportunities and challenges that different styles invite. At the very least, we should continue to develop homiletical tools that are communicatively effective and theologically sound for the digital, online era. Even in times of non-pandemic crisis, we can further diversify our modes and styles of preaching to fit situations that favor an online approach (e.g., providing a message of hope for those who are isolated or may find a worship community online while living in remote places or experiencing natural catastrophes). Whatever our circumstances may be, learning and further developing a theology of online preaching and its types (along with accompanying digital skills) is of great importance for preachers today—both for seasoned and emerging ones. We hope to see more educational, theological, and critical resources related to online preaching in the near future.

³³ In 2018, the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) already predicted that different kinds of pandemic could happen again in the future. The coronavirus of 2020 is only one of them. See the CDC’s article, “The 1918 Flu Pandemic: Why It Matters 100 Years Later,” on its website, <https://blogs.cdc.gov/publichealthmatters/2018/05/1918-flu/> (accessed on October 10, 2020). Also, see CNN’s “Discover ‘Disease X’: In the Congo Rainforest, the Doctor Who Discovered Ebola Warns of Deadly Viruses Yet to Come,” <https://www.cnn.com/2020/12/22/africa/drc-forest-new-virus-intl/index.html> (accessed on December 22, 2020).

Lisa Cressman. *The Gospel People Don't Want to Hear: Preaching Challenging Messages*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020. 160 pages. \$17.

In *The Gospel People Don't Want to Hear: Preaching Challenging Messages*, Lisa Cressman argues that the aim of the preacher is to present challenging messages so that they are “taken in, considered, and wrestled with” (43). The task of preachers, asserts Cressman, “is to make saying yes to the pain of change and conversion sound irresistible” (64). The monograph offers a framework and tools for preachers to consider as they prepare and preach challenging messages that cause listeners’ “sky to fall.”

Cressman defines preaching as “the art of communicating the Spirit’s desire to persuade listeners that they are loved and forgiven more than they realize. It is the art of persuading listeners to believe something they didn’t believe before; and then they are converted” (73). In chapter 1, “Letting the Sky Fall,” Cressman invites the reader to explore how the sky falls and changes our identity, roles, systems, livelihoods, wellbeing, and relationships. A challenging sermon is not so much about the actual subject as it is about the “relationships listeners have to their skies” (26). In chapter 2, “Building Mutual Trust,” Cressman argues that preachers have to be intentional in building trust before preaching challenging messages. Three overlapping practices that build trust with the congregation are: *diagnose*, *experiment*, and *appraise* (34). “We are only willing to build the reign of God to the extent we trust God and each other,” concludes Cressman (43). In chapter 3 she attempts to reclaim President Roosevelt’s *bully pulpit* for today’s preacher. The aim for contemporary preachers is “to present a challenging message in such a way it receives a fair hearing; that it’s taken in, considered, and wrestled with,” as opposed to bullying people into believing and behaving in ways the preacher believes are right (45).

In chapter 4, “The Preacher as Trusted Guide,” Cressman focuses on the preachers’ responsibility to make saying yes to change the most desired path forward. Here Cressman delves into the complicatedness of white fear, as it relates to white privilege and power. She suggests ways in which preachers might offer challenging sermons that can be heard for those that benefit from white privilege—as they deal with their “sky falling.” By naming her particular identities—white, woman, preacher, Episcopalian, Cressman reminds readers that preaching is shaped by the social locations and experiences of the preacher and listeners. This is particularly important when considering the skies that may fall for differing listeners. In chapter 5 Cressman offers eleven approaches to apply the tools of words to craft challenging sermons (73). Some of the tools include creating a sermon arc; making the invitation to transformation an actual invitation, not an agenda; and teaching people the power of lament. In the final chapter, “How to Offer Challenging Messages,” Cressman shares practices for preaching challenging sermons so that people hear them. Noting the emotional toll for preachers, Cressman also offers self-care practices to sustain the preacher.

This timely writing draws readers to thoughtfully engage the topic of preaching challenging sermons. Cressman provides tools for preachers to consider what a challenging sermon might be in their context and how they might build their relational capacity with listeners. The goal is to craft sermons that do what the sermon is intended to do—transform the lives of the hearers. Aside from the practical tools, the reflection questions at the end of each chapter may be helpful for independent and group reflection. Although written with working preachers in mind, *The Gospel People Don't Want to Hear* is a great resource for all clergy and

laypersons committed to crafting challenging and transformative messages that may reach the hearts and minds of listeners.

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Brent A. Strawn. *Lies My Preacher Told Me: An Honest Look at the Old Testament*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021. 116 pages. \$16.

Playing off of James Loewen's book, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (1995), Strawn proposes a study that seeks to set the record straight about the history and interpretation of the Old Testament with the hope of fostering a renewed love of these scriptures. On its face, Strawn's project echoes other key scholarly treatments of the Old Testament by encouraging delight (e.g., Davis, *Wondrous Depth* (2005) and offering corrective information (e.g., Brueggemann, *Preaching from the Old Testament* (2019)). However, Strawn's work is even more accessible to non-academic readers. I like to think of this book as his own pastoral response to his earlier work, *The Old Testament is Dying* (2017).

The book's simplicity in language while discussing biblical studies, its clarity of thought, and its included discussion questions would work well as a book study or a Sunday school class. Strawn's helpful clarification statements, though sometimes not as pithy as this preacher would like, are helpful tools for enlivening Old Testament usage within the church.

At the same time, because the ten lies that Strawn addresses remain pervasive and pernicious in the church's preaching, I could see this book as a helpful resource for training lay preachers and working with students in alternative clergy licensing programs. He states early on that he finds it more constructive to think of these lies as mistruths. A mistruth evinces an "insidious" and "intractable" lack of care about truth that harms not only the Old Testament but any society that is swayed by them (2). Mistruths that Strawn confronts include: The Old Testament is boring, written for someone else, and rendered obsolete by the New Testament. The Old Testament God is mean and hyper-violent. The Old Testament is not relevant or spiritually enriching. The Old Testament Law is a burden and what really matters is Jesus.

For most of the ten mistruths, Strawn also highlights harmful preaching examples. For instance, he calls out Andy Stanley for treating the Old Testament as not also written for Christians, and he labels Marcion an anti-Jewish preacher. More often, Strawn points to preaching that promotes mistruths from a place of privilege. For instance, a cartoonist reducing the Old Testament to violence in order to win a laugh; preachers seeking political influence by making scripture hyper-relevant; and rich preachers refusing to listen to the poor and marginalized, are indicative of preaching practices against which Strawn writes.

As alternatives to this harmful preaching, Strawn highlights corrective preaching examples. He cites Ellen Davis, Abraham Heschel, rabbis in the Talmud, African American preachers (though he never names a preacher), Bernard of Clairvaux, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the prophets, Jesus, and Paul. In many instances, he analyzes how the homiletical strategy of a particular exemplar confronts a mistruth and offers a different way of preaching today. These are helpful homiletical guides, though they'd be more helpful if the author included more contemporary examples and had a few more pages in this slim volume to reflect on preaching.

Nevertheless, what I find most intriguing and innovative about this book is the way the author reflects on the root cause of preaching mistruths. Returning to Loewen, Strawn observes that false history is a weapon historically used to oppress people (105). In the church, Strawn asserts, there has always been a close connection between mistruths about the Old Testament and anti-Semitism. Furthermore, oppressive and violent uses of mistruths continue into the present through white supremacy and totalitarian regimes that employ a thin, censored, and intentionally misinformed reading of the Bible to "reap the worst harvests imaginable" (106).

Here Strawn helpfully names that the modern church's problem with the Old Testament is deeper than what can be fixed with a little insight from a gifted biblical scholar. In the end, Strawn argues that the lies preachers tell are mistruths in service to anti-Semitism and white supremacy. These mistruths can only be confronted by the liberating, justice-seeking God and gospel. Unfortunately, Strawn only offers readers four pages of this truth-telling, good news preaching. While the connection between power and misuse of the Old Testament could be more developed, the argument is so important and so rarely said that I would commend this book to any who want to think more deeply about Old Testament hermeneutics and homiletics.

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J. Dwayne Howell and Charles L. Aaron Jr., ed. *Preaching in/and the Borderlands*. Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2020. 167 pages. \$24.

God gave the law unto the Israelites through Moses, saying, “You shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God” (Leviticus 19:34b). The way in which we treat strangers should be shaped not only by our memory of God’s liberation of the oppressed, but also our understanding of the identity of God: God is the God who listens to the cries of the disinherited and defends their causes in God’s justice and mercy. Today, however, we witness migrant children being separated from their parents and locked up in cages, migrant families being chased away with tear gas, and the building of border walls. Therefore, in *Preaching in/and the Borderlands*, the two editors, J. Dwayne Howell and Charles L. Aaron, ask a poignant question: “What is to be the Church’s response to the immigrant?” (xi). Various contributors attempt to answer this question biblically, ethically, theologically, and homiletically.

The book consists of four sections. The first section considers the ethical and legal dimensions of immigration. Cláudio Carvalhaes points out to the reader the current inhumane treatment of immigrants at the border and emphasizes the importance of standing in solidarity in the fight against injustice. Miguel A. De La Torre argues that liberals often regard the current crisis around immigration as a matter of hospitality. However, he believes that migration is a question of justice caused by the US, which has exploited the “cheap labor and natural resources of its neighboring countries” (20). Gerald C. Liu explores how the expansion of US territory was often justified by Protestant hegemony, as seen in the Philippines. Sarah Ellen Eads Adkins gives an overview of various types of immigration, as well as a definition of the term “undocumented.”

The second section discusses immigration as found in the Old and New Testaments. Howell notices that the stories of both Abraham and Exodus indicate the importance of hospitality in the ancient Near East where hospitality was “a matter of life and death” for those who traversed dangerous paths. As God reminded the Israelites that they were once “immigrants in the land of Egypt,” Howell argues that these biblical narratives imply a moral directive for today. Melanie A. Howard explores how Jesus’s command to love our enemies, as in Matthew 5:38–48, could sound like a “text of terror” that could victimize undocumented immigrants by forcing them to forgive their victimizers. Thus, a more sensitive reading of the scripture may be required to determine its application.

The third section presents homiletic insights for preaching about immigration, as well as sermons. Owen K. Ross provides homiletical advice on how to guide the conversation regarding immigration, such as trusting that the Bible has something to say about immigration rather than focusing on “personal opinions on immigration or politicians and political parties in the presentation” (99). In addition, special Sundays, such as Labor Day, Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany, provide excellent opportunities to hear God’s view on immigration more directly in our contemporary context. Lis Valle discusses a border-crossing homiletic, informed by Judith L. Herman’s theory of healing from trauma. Border-crossing preaching allows the survivors to feel safe, empowers them to remember and lament, and restores them to reconnect with their community. This section ends with sermons by Rebecca David Hensley, Michael W. Waters, and Heidi Neumark.

The final section shares stories of integrating ministries with immigrant communities into local churches. Rhonda Thompson shares her work with the Nehemiah Center, which has come to serve Mixtec, an indigenous people of Mexico (139). In realizing that their relationship with

their gods is based on fear, anger, and harassment, Thompson witnesses to a God who is “all powerful, kind, loving, a sacrificial giver, who calls us to love” (143). Her cross-cultural wisdom, gained from serving Mixtec families, is that one should meet people where they are, listen to them, and learn from them. Jason Crosby reflects on what it takes for a church to be multicultural in working with Karen refugees. He concludes that forming a multicultural congregation is not easy and requires active listening. Further, he calls on those with power to give up their privilege and share their resources.

As this book is a compilation of contributions from authors with different academic backgrounds, expertise, and work experiences, it presents diverse yet fragmented voices. Nonetheless, the book is a useful resource for both homileticians and preachers, since immigration is not just a question of social justice, but also a fundamental aspect of the identity of all Christians who journey in this world as sojourners: God calls us to leave our homes and go to the place God has prepared for us. Preaching itself is a border-crossing event in which we encounter God who has crossed the walls to proclaim good news to the poor, the captives, the blind, and oppressed (Luke 4:18). While many preachers find themselves standing in front of politically divided congregations today, they are likely to consider it unbiblical not to speak of immigration, as immigrants are sent by none other than our God (148).

Songbok Bob Jon, Living Faith United Methodist Church, Putnam, CT

Christopher Peyton Miller. *Pixilated Practices: Media, Ritual, and Identity*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2020. 104 pages. \$17.

In this short but densely-packed book, Miller illustrates how media has come to replace ritual within our society. Ritual transforms, offers meaning, and identifies the particularity of the people who participate in it. Media has coopted these ritualistic markers in postmodern life, causing a loss in personal and corporate identity. Miller sets parameters around the term media, differentiating it from popular mainstream usage in social and political arenas, defining it as any pixelized presentation of consumable material. Devices like television screens, smartphones, and gaming devices replace ritual by entrapping individuals in a process “whereby a person’s subjective experience is influenced heavily, violated, and ultimately stolen by experience with media” (79). Miller defines this process as fusion and uses his book to explain and explore its physical and psychological effects. He argues that through fusion, the body is overwritten by media, reducing the individual’s identity and their ability to experience what is real.

Miller situates his argument with those observing the postmodern condition, particularly engaging Jacques Lacan, Jean Baudrillard, and Gilles Deleuze. He packs an existential punch through twelve brief chapters, which seem to fall into four distinct parts. The first two chapters focus on how humanity generates meaning as Miller introduces his concept of fusion in detail. He illustrates how media works “in such a way as to fuse a person or population to a meaning-making apparatus known as the screen” (4). Chapters 3 and 4 examine the results of fusion: our loss of humanity. Miller argues that we lose our subjectivity when merging with media because the subject becomes identical with the media it consumes. This causes the dialectical process to disappear and the identity to form in the context of the univocal presented in the virtual. Chapters 5 through 10 suggest the fallout effects of fusion on both the psyche and the embodied aspects of a person: violence, isolation, loss of independent thought, and fractured identity. Miller’s writing becomes increasingly hopeless as he explores media’s vicious cycle that creates voids within the subject, which it then fills with more media to perpetuate and increase its toxic effects. Identity and body eventually become another social construct mirroring the product it consumes. The final two chapters specifically examine media as ritual within postmodern humanity. Here he suggests the inescapable nature of fusion, as the line separating us from the media we consume has become blurred. The last few pages of this book offer a small word of hope in the conclusion. The antidote for this disease must be a force that displaces media and breaks fusion. Miller proposes that the force can be found in the rituals of the church and its sacraments, specifically the Eucharist, where the body of Christ can give us a new understanding of our own embodied experience.

Miller intentionally creates existential dread throughout his book, implicating media in horrific crimes against our humanity. His strong voice contributes to the academic conversation of media’s role within our lives and provides insight through his stark depictions. The reader may not agree with his conclusions. However, in pushing at the boundary of our humanness, he raises a challenge to contend with the media’s considerable influence. In reading this book, several questions come to mind. Is media as deterministic as he suggests, especially in light of a relatively simple solution which coexists with media consumption? Humanity has always navigated the social influences of its time in the process of building self and identity. His focus on ritual as the sole source of meaning-making and media’s acquisition of this process creates a binary of ritual and media which obscures the other elements which influence one’s identity.

This leads to another question: How might media's *off* button affect the fusion process he describes? The pixilated presence in our lives is undeniable but not all-encompassing, as screens turn off in favor of embodied experiences, including ritual. These questions aside, Miller's work provokes important thoughts that consider media's ritualistic role in society. He reveals how media has undermined ritualistic attributes to substitute the Christian identity for a homogenous consumer who disappears into a crowd of anonymity. The cure? An intentional turn to traditional rituals found in the sacraments and an embrace of our own embodiment alongside Christ.

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Leah D. Schade and Jerry. L. Sumney. *Apocalypse When? A Guide to Interpreting and Preaching Apocalyptic Texts*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020. 194 pages. \$25.

Given the tribulations of our twenty-first century context, it seems appropriate and helpful to think anew about preaching the apocalyptic texts of the Bible. This book, co-written by biblical scholar Jerry Sumney and homiletician Leah Schade, offers preachers and students of preaching a way to connect these seemingly radical texts with our contemporary situation. The purpose of the book, as stated in the preface, is to “help the church understand and proclaim the powerful messages that the Bible’s apocalyptic texts contain” (6). The book helps us understand how and why people in crisis still proclaim a message of hope and liberation.

The first chapter, written by Sumney, introduces the genre of apocalyptic texts, writings which come from groups of people experiencing a crisis. Sumney states, “These writings are all seeking ways to make sense of their belief in a good, powerful, and just God given their experience of the world as a place ruled by evil” (20). Sumney provides the preacher with an understanding of the original contexts of the biblical authors and what the writers might have thought regarding the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the ethical considerations of the time. This provides a strong foundation for the more detailed exegesis found in chapters 4 through 12.

The second chapter, written by Schade, unpacks the challenges and opportunities of preaching apocalyptic texts. Schade wants to help preachers find hope in these sometimes troubling texts. She also notes that these texts have sometimes been used in harmful ways. The goal of the contemporary preacher can be to reverse that harm and redeem these texts in ethical and loving ways. A good apocalyptic sermon will 1.) honor the value of creation, 2.) prophetically call out and critique the dilemmas in which we find ourselves today, and 3.) look for the hope, restoration, and community found in Christ (34).

Each subsequent chapter covers sections of apocalyptic literature found in the Revised Common Lectionary. These chapters are divided into three sections. The first is an exegesis of a biblical passage. The second section provides suggestions for preaching. The third is an example of a sermon. One thing I think preachers and students will find appealing is having good examples of the way good exegesis can inform and be incorporated in the sermon. The connections between the three sections of the chapter (the exegesis, suggestions for preaching, and sermon) are clear without being heavy-handed. The sermons seem to accomplish what Schade sets before the preacher in chapter 2.

The book achieves its stated purpose, guiding pastors and students to preach the good news within the apocalyptic texts of the Bible. This book will appeal to preachers, though it provides helpful insights for seminary students as well. It is clear how the sermons and the homiletic suggestions connect to the exegetical work of Sumney. This book demonstrates well the way biblical exegesis can inform sermon content and form as Schade’s commentary and sermons draw from the biblical expertise of Sumney. Preachers may find inspiration in the chapters of this book, and seminary students will benefit from seeing the connection between exegesis and the final sermon product.

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Willie James Jennings. *After Whiteness: An Education in Belonging*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020. x + 165 pages. \$19.99.

Willie James Jennings's *After Whiteness*, the first volume in Eerdmans' new "Theological Education between the Times" series, is bracing, convicting, and inspiring. It is essential reading for contemporary theological educators. Jennings expertly weaves together vignettes from his 30-year career in the theological academy, moving original poetry, and astute and penetrating evaluations of texts, persons, communities, institutions, histories, and buildings to diagnose the maladies of theological education and to imagine new possibilities for the formation of communities of hospitality and service that pulse with the fullness of life instead of dealing death.

Jennings argues, and convincingly shows, that contemporary theological education is characterized by pedagogies for the formation of the finished, cultured (white) man. "Whiteness" in the title names not a skin tone, but a tested, chosen, and socially received approach to human formation of domination and mastery that insidiously and ubiquitously colors the institutions and social arrangements of twenty-first century theological education. To the extent that theological education reproduces such ideals and desires, it is a project of malformation. In contrast, Jennings argues, "theological education must capture its central work—to form us in the art of cultivating belonging" (10).

Any theological educator must ask the question: What is the purpose of what I do? The answer most of us have received is that a theological educator must master, control, and articulate intellectual materials, texts, histories, concepts, etc.; the successful theological educator, who reproduces his success in his charges (ministers and other religious leaders), is the one who has made the grade, who can locate himself or herself, intellectually and socially, not relative to community/communities but to languages, conceptualities, and non-local histories. He (or even she) does not merely locate himself, though; such classification locates institutions, cultures, and even persons hierarchically relative to one another. Within the ideal of "whiteness," the theological educator can explain, quite impressively, an overarching account of reality where everything and everyone is in its "right" place. Such an approach reproduces the orders or logics of colonialism and the plantation. *After Whiteness* thus builds upon Jennings' brilliant analyses of those histories in his justly celebrated *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University, 2010). Theological educators will not be able to hear the word "mastery" in conversations about pedagogy in a neutral way after reading this book.

So what is the solution? Theological educators must take responsibility for reimagining theological education in a way that cultivates belonging instead of mastery. Jennings states that such reimagining involves the joining of the fragments. While the ideal of "whiteness" promotes the mastery of intellectual fragments, Jennings insists that such fragments must be joined to the cultural fragments of the diverse populations participating in theological formation. The fragments of histories, languages, and concepts can thus be "aligned with the work of loving and learning together" (39). The approach to theological education Jennings describes thus requires attention to design that "opens toward more intense listening and learning from one another" (67).

Since creatures build by nature, Jennings argues, the building of theological education must find its place within the building that the Creator is doing. We can either build towards death, the effect of the ideals of colonialism and plantation, or towards life. Building towards life entails that all participants in an institution are empowered to share in the gifts of building and

creation. Such building requires that we reject the calculus of engaging persons, or ignoring them, on the basis of what we can get from them (think of the malformed dynamics of “social” events at conferences, where folks move from person to person surreptitiously staring at nametags and not faces). We need instead a “productive inwardness, one in which introspection and introversion are life giving and communion gesturing” (122). In addition, Jennings argues that theological education has as its “fundamental resource erotic power” (151). Such power is the originary power of “God who has ended hostility and has drawn all of creation into a reconciliation that we do not control” (152).

Jennings has written movingly and beautifully in *After Whiteness*, inviting his readers into an arresting and compelling future for theological education. It remains to see what institutions and persons will bravely, in the grace of God, commit to the vision he describes. My hope and prayer is that his words, alongside other likeminded contributions, will serve as a means of such a revolution.

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Grace Ji-Sun Kim. *Reimagining Spirit: Wind, Breath, and Vibration*. Eugene: Cascade Books, 2019. 141 pages. \$16.91.

Reimagining Spirit, the second work of Grace Ji-Sun Kim about Spirit, follows *The Holy Spirit, Chi, and the Other* (2011). Kim proposed cross-cultural approaches to pneumatology in the previous book; in this current book she suggests how to reimage the Spirit in our globalized context. Kim begins with the limitation of the conventional understanding of the Spirit in Christianity that was based upon Euro/patriarchal/white male-centered theology. The Christians' "naïve and ignorant" attitude toward the Spirit has been confined to Its free and boundless nature, and the Spirit has been considered an exclusive, "pure" property of the Christian tradition (3). Kim, instead, endeavors to reimage the Spirit as the movement of "light, wind/breath, and vibration" based on her creative biblical, historical, theological, and cultural approaches within this contemporary socio-religious context.

In chapter 1, as a foundational section, Kim invites readers to the site of socio-structural suffering, including racism, sexism, and climate change within today's globalized context, while she explains these issues as *han* of the world by using a familiar Korean concept. Then she raises the argument again that the conventional theology of the Spirit has not successfully approached the resolution of these forms of *han* in terms of the historical development of Trinitarian theology, which concentrates on the logical and philosophical factors of the Spirit. In chapter 2, she initiates the reimagining of the Spirit as light, which is its life-giving essence as found in multiple biblical references. Kim notes "God is the Creator of light as well as the giver of spiritual light...we can see the truth [through the light]" (39). After the Spirit as light vividly identifies untruth in the issues of social injustice, It empowers us to address these issues in the presence of God. In chapter 3, Kim illustrates the Spirit as wind and breath, as the biblical approach to the Spirit includes the words *rauch* and *pneuma*. This chapter depends heavily on the traditional metaphors of the Spirit, but Kim acknowledges these images of the Spirit can be similarly recognized and experienced with different language, such as *chi* in the Asian context. In chapter 4, as the last reimagining, Kim proposes the Spirit as vibration. This creative approach is based on the scientific studies of vibration that "all matter is vibrating, creating waves of energy...nothing escapes vibration" (85). The vibration of the Spirit, Kim claims, energizes and prompts progressive change to unjust realities. In chapter 5, as the final constructive section, Kim again argues that her approach to the Spirit cannot be presented through traditional theology, but rather it should be developed through one's cultural image of the Spirit, namely "New Pneumatology" (111). As an example, she proposes *chi* as a lens to view the Spirit in the Asian context because it has similarities with biblical images. Kim argues that the reimagined Spirit-*chi* enables the people to release and heal the socio-structural *han* in contemporary society. Thus, she realizes, when we are open to a different perspective on the Spirit that liberates us from Euro/patriarchal/white male-centered theology, eventually we can meet the Spirit of freedom as light, wind/breath, and vibration in this world.

Although an innovative reimagination of the Spirit, her indigenous approach to the Spirit—in particular, the relationship of *chi-han* and pneumatology—was partially developed by Korean pioneer figures who proposed this image three decades ago already. Byung-Mu Ahn, one of the founders of *minjung* theology, presented similar approaches in his articles "Breath" (1990) and "Christianity and Life" (1997). Further, West-East hybrid pneumatology for sufferers was performed by Hyun-Kyung Chung in the international assembly of the World Council of Churches in 1991. Nevertheless, this book draws attention to the nature of the Spirit that has

been ignored for a long time. Furthermore, the book not only insists on the necessity of the indigenous approach to the Spirit, but also provides valuable perspectives on the Spirit to practical theologians and preachers who are encountering various forms of socio-structural suffering these days.

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Chloe T. Sun. *Attempt Great Things for God: Theological Education in Diaspora*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2020. v + 142 pages. \$17.

Chloe T. Sun explores an ethnic seminary and its role in the current decline of Western churches and seminaries in North America. Particularly, her focus is Logos Evangelical Seminary, a Chinese-language theological school located in California. The school uses Mandarin as its primary instructional language to serve immigrant Chinese churches. Some might think Sun's book is useful only for Chinese immigrant groups, not for Western seminaries and their churches. But the book is not limited to a specific ethnic group's Christianity. By focusing on another voice in United States' theological education, which is usually polarized in terms of white and Black, the book reminds us of the need for diversity to actualize the vision of the kingdom of God in the world.

The book begins with the life of the founder of the Chinese seminary, a Taiwanese immigrant named Felix Liu. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on how different characteristics of the Asian seminary challenge the dominant Western theological education and its systems. According to Sun, the kingdom of God, which is envisioned in the Book of Revelation by St. John, is "no one dominant nation, empire, or group, but people of every nation, tribe, people group, and tongue" (98). This is the book's central lesson on diversity—realizing that the reign of God in the world does *not* mean building a new kingdom by unifying every nation, people, and ethnic group's own particularities as one system.

As a Chinese Old Testament theologian, Sun articulates the importance of diversity by comparing the story of Babel in Genesis 11:1–9 to the ancient history of China's Qin dynasty, which tried to establish a centralized and powerful empire through unified language and script. Unlike the Qin dynasty, those who used a single language in the story of Babel failed to build their tower and were then scattered by God to many regions and many languages. But Sun says that the incident of Babel was not a curse or judgment by God. Rather, it was positive momentum to extend the kingdom of God. Referring to Genesis 9:1 and Genesis 1:28, she notes that "The spreading of the people in the land was part of God's charge" to God's people and their descendants (84).

That is why she pays attention to an ethnic seminary that uses Mandarin as the instructional language and claims that it is not just for Chinese immigrants. Instead, the seminary should be understood as an instrument to "attempt great things for God," to realize the vision of the kingdom of God by training those who will serve the diaspora of Chinese Christians scattered around the world.

Of course, Sun does not overlook the limitations of Mandarin as an instructional language, in that it is not the main academic language in current theological education. Furthermore, for Chinese Americans who are born in the United States, English is often the preferred language to express their beliefs and to learn theological knowledge. Nonetheless, Sun makes the case that we should consider the importance of diversity in the vision of the kingdom of God, and not ignore the existence of ethnic seminaries that use their own languages such as Mandarin, Korean, and Spanish. "At the eschatological table of God," says Sun, "people from all tribes and nations will speak in their own languages and sit together as God's people" (127). The final chapter of this book deals with similarities and differences between the Chinese seminary and existing Western theological education to consider the importance of both the particularity and universality of Christianity.

For this reason, the book would be valuable for those who want to contribute to theological education in the future, which should focus on forming and nurturing Christian believers as God's people in the midst of a globalized and pluralized world.

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Sally A. Brown. *Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. 193 pages. \$19.99.

Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness is a welcomed homiletical treatise that argues for courageous witness in the daily spaces of those who listen to Sunday sermons. Guaranteed to prove beneficial in addressing the social crises and spiritual fragmentation facing communities and congregations, seminarians and senior pastors alike will find Sally A. Brown's work stimulating. Brown, professor of preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary and director of the annual Engle Institute of Preaching, calls the reader to go beyond the customary and expected "we ought-to's" in sermon application to become "agents of redemptive interruption" (54). The acts of public witness Brown encourages our preaching to inspire involve "destabilizing fixed systems" (55), "calling policy makers and public service system to account" (108), and the "pragmatic performance of God's radical mercy, inclusive love, and restorative justice" (61). Launching her argument from such a challenging call, Brown puts forth a convincing discourse on true biblical discipleship.

Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World combines theology, hermeneutics, and homiletical theory that produces radical prophetic proclamation. Brown offers a rhetoric of redemption and hope grounded in biblical and historical witness with contemporary readiness. Boldly, she reveals how Christians might join the Spirit's redemptive workings outside the church and among the common places we inhabit. In a world fraught with Christian nationalists, racial injustice, and environmental catastrophe, Brown's book is both timely and necessary. Brown confers with numerous partners to give shape to this discipleship-forming preaching method, including social theorists, theologians, homileticians, jazz musicians, missiologists, and ethnologists. Together, they help inform homiletical theory and practices for carrying out ministry amidst social disruption across denominational spheres and ethnic lines.

Brown divides the book in two parts. In part one, she lays a foundation for daring individual and collective witness in public, everyday spaces by exploring missional theology to confront the anachronistic method of a *centripetal* theology of missions with a *centrifugal* concept of the *missio Dei*. A *centrifugal* concept of missions is directly aligned with the New Testament model as the church "being sent" into the world, rather than the Old Testament *centripetal* pattern where Israel is the center to which the nations come. To be the church, argues Brown, is "to be sent and therefore to participate, by the power of the Spirit, in God's redemptive mission (the *mission Dei*) in the world" (11).

In part two, Brown explores specific preaching strategies that will aid the listener with incorporating the idea of improvisational witness she envisions. Such strategies include preaching that leads the listener to employ their own imagination by adopting what she calls a hermeneutic of "promise-grounded hope" (95). This practical and powerful hermeneutic is necessary for agents of redemptive interruption to use "as they seek to bear faithfully improvisational witness to God's love and justice, especially in situations where they have limited power and leverage" (72). Brown rightly argues that the promise-grounded hope interpretative lens testifies to the unity and consistency not only in both the Old and New Testaments, but also to the God who makes and keeps promises in both. So, according to Brown, this hermeneutic "creates arcs of hope and deep-running strands of coherence within each testament" (74).

This interpretive reading of scripture ultimately leads the congregation to engage in inclusive love, radical mercy, and restorative justice as redemptive actions in our daily living

(125, 193). Brown also advises preaching the Christian practices of baptism and the Lord's Supper as a means of reclaiming these sacred practices from being viewed as dry theological teachings that we feel obligated to expound upon periodically from our pulpits. In contrast, she encourages preaching about the sacraments in ways that helps congregations to view these practices as relevant, Christian identity-forming points of engagement where we meet God through the "life-giving action of the Spirit" (113). In the book's final chapter, she draws from and expands the scholarship of Paul Ricoeur to revisit the uses of metaphor by explaining how they serve to paint creative possibilities for the listeners' use in their everyday redemptive activities.

Brown writes with theological acumen to challenge seasoned scholars, but also with digestible clarity and rhythm to keep pastors and seminarians engaged. She moves the reader from theory to practice by way of several sample sermons in chapters 4 and 5. These sermons from a diverse roster of preachers show us how to employ rhetorical strategies, imagination, hermeneutical integrity, and congregational engagement in our preaching. We hear and learn from them all how to be agents of redemptive interruption in our manifold and multifaceted Monday's world.

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HyeRan Kim-Cragg. *Postcolonial Preaching: Creating a Ripple Effect*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021. 160 pages. \$95.

HyeRan Kim-Cragg is perfectly positioned to introduce a methodology for postcolonial preaching. As a Korean female teaching homiletics in a Canadian city on unceded indigenous land, she has direct experience with the intersections of culture, immigration, language, misogyny, and racial/ethnic stereotyping. She has integrated these perspectives into a postcolonial homiletic method that will help preaching instructors, students, and clergy alike to deconstruct oppressive colonialist hegemony while crafting multilayered sermons that preach a liberative and hope-filled gospel truth.

The central metaphor of the book is the ripple effect that moves in waves to disrupt the dominant narratives of the white, Western, patriarchal, Christian paradigm that has biblically and theologically justified the invasion, extraction, domination, enslavement, and erasure of those it deems “other.” RIPPLE is also the acronym that cleverly positions the principles and movements of Kim-Cragg’s postcolonial homiletic method. The order of *rehearsal*, *imagination*, *place*, *pattern*, *language*, and *exegesis* is less a linear movement of how to construct a postcolonial sermon than an arrangement of concentric circles of a postcolonial approach to preaching that overlap, co-inform, and reinforce each other. Each chapter takes the six principles in turn, explaining their undergirding values and norms by drawing on a vast array of postcolonial scholarship in the areas of biblical studies, theology, rhetoric, cultural studies, philosophy, and homiletics. This in itself models for preachers what it looks like to engage scholars who are often sidelined by the white colonial structures of academia, and center them for the wisdom they bring.

This centering of the colonial experience is especially necessary when reading the Bible itself. As Kim-Cragg notes, “every book of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation contains colonial experiences” (106). She a *contrapuntal reading strategy* suggested by Palestinian literary critic Edward Said that “makes visible that which is invisible,” namely the ones who are colonized “behind, between, and before” the biblical text (111, 112). Preachers can use the contrapuntal reading method, as well as the other RIPPLE principles, to hear those who have been silenced, see and value the cultural and linguistic differences among colonized peoples, uncover the power differential between the colonized and colonizers, and, ideally, craft creative sermons that proclaim the good news that liberates both the oppressed and oppressor.

Each chapter concludes with a sermon to illustrate the concepts that make up each RIPPLE principle, and they are excellent models of postcolonial preaching. For example, in the chapter on language, Kim-Cragg’s sermon lifts up the nuances of the word “family” as it is depicted in both Chinese letters (“all will be well when family is well”) and ascribed meaning in the Cree language (“all my relations,” including Earth-kin). She then brings these linguistic variations into conversation with Jesus’s promise in John 14:15–21 not to orphan his followers but to send the Spirit who will connect them to each other, to himself, and to God. In this way, the sermon demonstrates how to center and validate the culture and language of colonized people who offer profound insights about Jesus’s concern for individual and communal wellbeing.

White, Western preachers and congregants who have no experience being part of a colonized people may naturally wonder if this book is relevant for their contexts. The answer is a definitive yes: “What I contend,” Kim-Cragg announces, “is that every preacher who mounts the pulpit, or faces a congregation, or seeks to share in any venue the Word of God in the twenty-first century, needs to be a postcolonial preacher” (106). This is because “the church has too

often been complicit with colonialism and its more recent manifestation, neoliberal transnational capitalism” (118). Thus, “postcolonial preachers have a distinctive role to play in terms of faithfully interrogating and scrutinizing the text as a way of challenging the status quo” (118).

The goal of the book is to “get preachers thinking about how to live out their vocation in the current neocolonial context” (125). The reality is that as climate change, social unrest, economic hardship, war, political violence, and weather catastrophes push more and more people from their countries of origin, all preachers, no matter their language or culture, will need tools to navigate these constantly changing dynamics in communities and congregations. The book’s last chapter includes a postcolonial preaching checklist with questions to spark the preacher’s sermon preparation and accountability to the RIPPLE principles. Altogether, these principles and standards are a welcome and necessary approach to preaching that both applies a critical postcolonial lens to homiletics and generates new and creative energy for preaching.

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George Buttrick and Charles N. Davidson, ed. *George Buttrick's Guide to Preaching the Gospel*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2020. 221 pages. \$15.97.

Thanks to the committed editorial work of Charles Davidson we now have in published form George Buttrick's hitherto unpublished lectures on preaching. Those unfamiliar with George Buttrick should know he was a giant among the princes of the pulpit in the mid-twentieth century. Those familiar with the more recent work of his son David Buttrick will see the legacy he carried forward from his father, not just for his prodigious writing, but even for his stunning syntax and style and the way he did theology in the pulpit. Charles Davidson in his introduction and general editing is to be commended not just for capturing George Buttrick's living voice but for his careful footnotes that place this vaunted prince of the pulpit in his context and in a way that captures his cultural and intellectual range.

The book is structured in three parts that together are telling for how George Buttrick understood the preaching task. Part I is called "Reassessment," and in four quick chapters helps the reader to understand Buttrick's conception of the gospel as four-fold event: the life of Christ, the cross of Christ, the resurrection of Christ, and the Spirit of (Christ's) presence. Buttrick, writing toward this end of his life in the 1970s is even now aware that preaching is changing and heralds the work of the language of sermon event in what is for him the "new homiletics" (44). That said, his view of the four-fold event of the gospel gives a deeper theological cast to anything "new" in homiletics: for George Buttrick the event of Christ's life, death, and resurrection confirm each other, but the key event is the Spirit's presence who aims to render the four-fold event as far more than just past tense. Part II is called "Practicalities." Its six brief chapters comprise the kinds of things found in most preaching texts, especially from George Buttrick's time: background, text and context, illustrations, delivery, etc. This section loses some of the depth and energy of the first part, but still has sections that shine through. The chapter on outlining is spritely. The advice for conclusions in this chapter still holds energy for today's reader. Part III, "Preaching in this Time," becomes Buttrick's opportunity to deal with the competing ways of viewing the world as a matter of ongoing theological and homiletical work. By now, some of the repeated phrases from earlier sections begin to wear thin. That said, there is a doggedness to Buttrick's treatment of matters of social and personal sin, dialectically and bravely rethinking eschatology that remains worthy of any contemporary preacher's reflection.

To be sure, readers today will also struggle with George Buttrick's important legacy in these pages. Buttrick's style of writing, updated modestly by Davidson, is undoubtedly brisk, engaged, and still shines even now. The cultural stance it takes, however, often presupposes a confidence in Christian faith relative to culture that now feels a little bracing and sits at best uncomfortably in those places where vigorous difference is embraced both ecumenically and interreligiously.

What remains, however, is a powerful, life-giving frame of gospel in which George Buttrick situates his lectures and the practice of preaching itself. We may still need to articulate gospel differently, but its centrality to his lectures, and to his teaching of preaching, remains a living legacy even now.

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Serene Jones. *Call it Grace: Finding Meaning in a Fractured World*. New York: Penguin Publishing Group, 2020 (reprint edition). 336 pages. \$18.

Call it Grace is the candid life story of the author, woven with theology. It is a memoir of life and a memoir of how Serene Jones' theology developed throughout her life. Jones engages the reader with evocative memories—personal and those received from family—as well as theological conundrums. Often, these are traumatic, or reflect a fractured world. The book is a journey, often a struggle, to see grace in life and the world. It is challenging in its honesty; yet the general lack of honesty surrounding trauma and abuse is indicative of the *need* for this work. Jones's candor is brave and avoids platitudinal theology. Preachers can take note of the content of the book and the author's methodology of weaving life and theology together.

Jones, the current president of Union Theological Seminary, is the daughter of a theology professor, and was raised in the Disciples of Christ tradition. The book is divided into four sections, which are referred to as stations. These stations move through time, following Jones's life, and the stations also tell about her theological development. The first station is sin and grace. She discusses her early "prairie theology" developed from the plains of Oklahoma. Jones writes about racist, sexist, and abusive memories and events that took place in her life and in her family's complex heritage. At the same time, a family copy of Calvin's *Institutes*, passed down through generations, led her to claim the often underdeveloped grace and love aspects of Calvin's theology. Through Calvin, she holds up the contemporaneous realities of sin and grace as a mystery. Intergenerational trauma and abuse reflect the theological assertion that all are saints and sinners. The second station is destiny and freedom. This section especially explores memories related to race and class. The skillful development of these memories shows how the past impacts the present, sometimes in haunting ways. She tells how people can be caught in sin they did not choose, and yet they are still responsible for the sin. Her father's work with Barth and Niebuhr, as well as her discovery of Latin American liberation theology, form significant theological partners for this section.

Station three explores hatred and forgiveness. It begins by recounting a near-death experience caused by sickness in India. It was during this near-death experience that Jones identified with the everyday existence of suffering people around the world. The hatred side of the station is developed through personal and family experiences surrounding the Oklahoma bombing. The aftermath of the bombing led to a perceived abandonment of theology and belief. Jones struggled with what she held to be true during this time, and whether forgiveness was possible. Forgiveness was also discussed in connection to her divorce. All the while, Baldwin, Thurman, and Cone became theological interlocutors in the struggle for meaning. The final station is redeeming life and death. Here, she names the four pillars of her theology as breath, justice, mercy, and love. She continues to connect her rich theological thinking with stories, especially as she narrates the loss of her mother amid her mother's sickness and confession of an affair. Jones writes explicitly about the interconnectedness of life and theology in this section with Irigaray.

Call it Grace is a moving and powerful book. It challenges the reader to see fractured broken sin and grace as ongoing realities. Preachers can learn from Jones' honest theology and willingness to speak truthfully about trauma and abuse. She models how to think theologically about difficult topics in ways that are real to life. Jones does not hold racism, classism, sexism, and theological elitism at a distance. She confesses her human limitations and her desire to be an agent of good in the world. Jones offers a mode of theological storytelling and theological

meaning-making that can be employed in pulpits and congregations. Beliefs are held in conversation with life in a way that traumatic events, doubts, and limitations inform faith. She maintains that the theological imagination can help us re-imagine much-needed grace and hope.

Readers familiar with Jones's past publications will come to greater understandings of her works, even as *Call it Grace* is accessible to new readers. The work could be read in church settings or academic institutions. Throughout the book, Jones names redeeming grace as the present love of God in the world today. One significant memory that she recounts is the story of her grandmother finding grace in a cool jug of water. *Call is Grace* is itself a work of grace. The book is itself a cool jug of water.

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Jerusha Matsen Neal. *The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, the Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. 267 pages. \$35.

In an age that demands profound attention to bodies, preachers may feel underequipped. The preacher's mainstays of textual analysis and rhetoric have bumped against their limits, while the bodies that surround the preacher beckon something more. In *The Overshadowed Preacher*, Jerusha Neal offers a robust and thoroughgoing theology of preaching that aims to reclaim what she calls a "fully human homiletic," by affirming the presence of the risen Christ when the Word is preached (19). Neal constructs this homiletical theology by employing the Spirit-empowered pregnancy and labor of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as an instructive metaphor for preachers. Neal sets forth a bold claim that the body in the pulpit is neither accidental nor incidental, but essential for bearing witness to the presence of Christ. Further, it is the Spirit who overshadows the preacher that makes the relation between the preacher's body and the body of Christ possible and recognizable.

Neal begins with the precarious task of defining key terms relating to preaching, bodies, and Spirit. These definitions carry considerable freight when Neal opens upon her use of Mary's pregnancy as a presiding metaphor for a theology of preaching. When emphasizing the "overshadowing" of the Spirit in Luke's account of Mary's pregnancy, Neal asks her reader, "What would it mean to move out from the shadow of false ideals and be overshadowed by the Spirit instead?" (19). In the following chapter, Neal goes on to explore how "inadequate theologies of performance and revelation have led to less than fully human pulpit practices, practices that can cause the preacher to disappear, become disillusioned, or become dangerous" (27). It is in this chapter that Neal demonstrates a sharp intuition about current pressures and challenges faced by preachers today, particularly those preachers whose bodies have been idealized or ignored to the point of erasure.

Subsequently, Neal traces a pneumatological thread from the nativity of Luke to the ministry of the disciples in Acts to draw a connection between the Spirit's empowering of Mary's pregnancy and early gospel preaching. She argues that the preachers of Acts bear witness to a real and present Christ, even as they bear witness to his absence. She writes, "In the world of Acts, preachers are not sorcerers or ciphers. They are signs—witnessing to an embodied Presence that is real if unseen. Preachers' performances bear traces of this embodied Person because preachers have bodies themselves" (65).

Once Neal has developed a strong link between the Spirit's overshadowing of Mary and the Spirit that overshadows gospel proclamation, she focuses on deepening the Marian metaphor. In a chapter entitled, "The Spirit-Filled Handmaid," Neal navigates the fraught history of Christian traditions of Mary's body. While she seeks to employ Mary's pregnancy as a metaphor, she is also concerned with dismantling oppressive narratives of ideal womanhood that so often accompany Marian traditions. While metaphors are not inherently free from oppressive readings, and can certainly function to reify essentialized depictions of womanhood, Neal's concerted effort to name the problem of essentialized womanhood yields confidence in her choice of metaphor.

After returning her attention to the concept of "fully human preaching," in which she connects the dots from previous chapters with a sacramental view of preaching, Neal drives home a crucial aspect of her project: "If human bodies marginalize other bodies, they marginalize Christ" (136). Therefore, preachers must begin with bodies—namely, the body of the risen Christ. Neal concludes her project by drawing upon three verbs from Mary's pregnancy

and labor to inform “the fully human, sacramental labor” of preaching: conceive, bear, and name (144). These verbs direct preachers toward practices of hospitality, dependency, and discernment, and in the context of Neal’s project, present a practical turn for preachers who have traveled the distance of theological rigor in the preceding chapters.

As a book that emerged from Neal’s dissertation, this is an expansive project, taking the reader through winding corridors of academic theory and interdisciplinarity. Neal’s thesis is bold and risky, and therefore requires a formidable network of theory and theology. And yet, if readers permit Neal to guide them through this network, they may very well arrive at the conclusion that perhaps bodies in all of their particularity, permeability, and provisionality, are essential for preaching that bears witness to the risen Christ.¹ And to bear witness to the particular, permeable, provisional body of Christ in our midst is to affirm the real bodies of those who preach.

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¹ Neal defines “real bodies” as possessing three characteristics: (1) real bodies are particular, (2) real bodies are permeable, and (3) real bodies are provisional. *The Overshadowed Preacher* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 11–12.

Kimberly Hope Belcher. *Eucharist and Receptive Ecumenism: From Thanksgiving to Communion*. New York, NY: Cambridge UP, 2019. \$84.03.

In *Eucharist and Receptive Ecumenism: From Thanksgiving to Communion*, Kimberly Hope Belcher constructs a eucharistic theology that takes flight by engaging the wings of ecumenism and eschatology. She guides the reader through “three essential problems in contemporary Catholic eucharistic theology” that have fragmented sacramental practice and piety to this day: 1.) eucharistic conversion and conversion of real life, 2.) real presence and sacrifice, 3.) sacrifice of the cross and sacrifice of the Eucharist. Problem 1 regards how “the ontological change of the eucharistic elements (*conversio*) effects a spiritual change in the participants.” Think here of a doctrine such as transubstantiation and its imbalanced attention to the transformation of the elements over the transformed spirituality of the communicant. Understanding how the “ontological change of the elements” transforms the “spirituality” of the receiving assembly as “the ultimate purpose” of the rite, Belcher asserts that there must be recalibrated thought regarding how the Eucharist shapes the faith of the communicant (3). Problem 2 concerns how understanding the meal as an offering of sacrifice from God becomes blurred within a constellation of eucharistic developments such as the production of liturgical manuals, evolving understandings of the priesthood, receding lay leadership of the rite, and philosophical and theological emphases upon the “somatic real presence of Christ in the Eucharist” (3–4). Problem 3 mirrors Problem 2. How does the sacrifice of the cross inform the sacrifice of the Eucharist? Belcher sees it as “perhaps the most important theological problem of the Reformation: it sparked the debate on justification, for example” (4). For Belcher, Luther “very reasonably objected” to the belief that the priest offered the body and blood of Christ as atonement to the Father (*Ibid.*). Such belief associated human presiding with what only God could do, and stood in the way of communicants grasping the atoning sacrifice of the cross (4–5).

How Belcher navigates her way to new horizons of promise in eucharistic theology as the book gets underway are best left unspoiled here. As a preview, she provides a historical tour of selective figures such as Chrysostom, Calvin, Ignatius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, St. Gregory, Thomas Aquinas, and Augustine to map out for the reader a sacramental terrain whose peaks and valleys provide views of eucharistic thought and practice over time. Belcher’s trail of intellectual thought then leads to where she sees frontiers for advancing ecumenical and eschatological interpretations of table worship. Notably, comparisons between the seventh-century Roman Canon and Ambrose’s homily *De sacramentis* and an analysis of Augustine’s *Sermon 272* provide intricate engagement of classical homiletical and liturgical artifacts from Western Christian eucharistic proclamation and ritual to delineate how consecration and offering belong together. Her analysis also shows how the eucharistic performs an eschatological vision of God’s future for the receiving assembly (99–107, 130; 117–118, 133–134). For those interested in theology and the arts, Belcher also includes a brief interlude based upon the work of Robin Jensen about how mosaics at San Vitale display how divine generosity participates in human offering (138–140). Indeed, though Belcher’s own project responds to a set of three problems, her dialogue with historical figures intends to steer readers away from merely understanding the development of table theology as growing out of debates. Rather, her program of contemporary eucharistic theology relies upon complementary and multilinear strands of argumentation that see eucharistic practices as lived soteriological theology emboldening communion with Christ and neighbor (53).

A phenomenological commitment indebted to Jean-Luc Marion propels Belcher's historical rigor toward concluding remarks about how Pope John Paul II's offering of communion to the Protestant and Reformed monk, Brother Roger Schutz of Taizé, provides just enough of a glimpse as to how ecumenical practice of the Eucharist can be capaciously Catholic in terms of tradition and ecumenical welcome. Belcher also names twelve "ritual-praxical modes," such as reciprocal recognition of baptism, sharing altars, and communion among ecumenical episcopates, that give more shape to what she means by rich ecumenical and eschatological eucharistic celebration. The book ends with an extended discussion of "real presence," by which Belcher emphasizes again the need to balance eucharistic theological thinking with attention to sacramental and devotional action—what happens ritually and congregationally. The discussion exceeds the scope of the current review. Yet one definition of presence shines in particular, "'presence' refers to laying open the center of history to the work of Christ" (203).

The historical center for Belcher includes special attention to the mundane (Ibid). Yet where is the place for everyday traditions that see communion as "ordinance"? What do we make of celebrations of communion around the world where prayer barely frames the celebration except for repeating choruses of praise music, and where the fraction is reduced to leaving the elements upon bar tables for the sake of accessibility and to "keep things real"? What do we make of eucharistic violence as detailed in Cecilia M. Gaposchkin's *Invisible Weapons: Liturgy and the Making of Crusade Ideology* (Cornell, 2017) and Lauren Winner's *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin* (Yale, 2018), which demythologize assertions such as William T. Cavanaugh's in *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Wiley, 1998) that the Eucharist can resolve social upheaval and usher in unprecedented unity or itself represent revelatory unity? What do we make of the hundreds of presiding priests accused of sexual sin? These kinds of questions and more require responses for a comprehensive ecumenical and eschatological eucharistic theology.

Graduate teachers and students of liturgy and worship will find in *Eucharist and Receptive Ecumenism* a formidable modern Catholic eucharistic theology that is true to the Roman tradition, panoramic in its phenomenological hopes for ecumenical celebration of table worship, and sincere in its eschatology.

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Gerald C. Liu and Khalia J. Williams. *A Worship Workbook: A Practical Guide for Extraordinary Liturgy*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2021. 194 pages. \$26.99.

As many churches implement or consider a post-pandemic reentry into the collective worship space, a number of pastors and worship leaders are re-thinking the value of both in-person and virtual worship. For this reason, *A Worship Workbook: A Practical Guide for Extraordinary Liturgy* by Gerald C. Liu and Khalia J. Williams is an especially timely resource that provides a thoughtful framework for examining liturgical theology and praxis. The volume was created as a liturgically-focused companion to the homiletically-focused, *A Sermon Workbook: Exercises in the Art & Craft of Preaching* by Thomas Troeger and Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, and aims to help readers “think, write, and act like a worship leader” (1).

Divided into two parts—“Widening the Worship Imagination” and “Deepening the Work of the People”—the large format paperback workbook is an assembly of brief topical chapters with accompanying questions, exercises, and practices that prompt inward and outward-focused reflections for those seeking a more creative and informed imagination for the worship space. An ambitious project, this work addresses 39 different topics and represents a distillation of a range of scholarship, including liturgical studies, ritual studies, cultural studies, and other areas of academic inquiry related to worship. The material is deep and wide enough to provoke serious reflection on a spectrum of liturgy-related matters, but it is also brief and approachable enough to not intimidate worship leaders who may not be particularly academically inclined. The workbook’s arrangement lends itself both to personal study or group study situations, and is designed such that each chapter is a self-contained unit, so readers can read chapters out of order according to their primary interests or concerns.

In addition to chapters by Liu and Williams, guest contributors address topics in their areas of expertise, such as Ecology and Worship (Leah Schade); Worship, Gender, and Sexuality (Stephanie Budwey); Latinx Wisdom for Wholistic Worship (Lis Valle-Ruiz); Worship and Whiteness (Andrew Wymer); Intercultural Worship (Safwat Marzouk); Chaplaincy: Reimagining Hospital Rituals in the Context of COVID-19 (Emily Lueder); and How Then Shall We Gather? Pastoral Reflections on Virtual Worship (Chris Jorgensen). Other chapter topics include elements of good worship, Jewish roots of worship, liturgical time, tradition, two-pattern worship, scripture and other sacred texts, the sacraments, occasional services, and sacred space, as well as embodied worship, African American and Asian American worship, intergenerational worship, liturgical awe, congregational resistance, the arts, music, relevance, virtual worship, and more.

The challenge of covering such a gamut of liturgical topics in 194 pages is the necessity of brevity, which requires a focused approach to each topic—thus, those who are seeking a more polyvalent or exhaustive exploration of the various topics may want to supplement with additional reading. However, Liu and Williams provide an ample number of resources arranged topically at the end of the book, so anyone seeking further study will have an array of helpful options for their inquiries.

The workbook covers progressive territory and provides challenges that will be refreshing for those who desire to change “liturgy as usual,” who want to reset their “default” worship settings, and who want to engage the pressing social and cultural issues of human existence that affect communal worship. The questions offer in-depth opportunities for leaders to consider their own contexts while thinking through, for example, how gendered language is used in liturgy or hymnody, or what kinds of liturgical rituals that might be incorporated for

responding to racial violence in our communities, or which alternative expressions of eucharistic ritual practice might be lifegiving for their congregations. These kinds of questions will likely be a holy breath of fresh air for some, and an uncomfortable challenge to existing liturgical boundaries for others. Regardless of where leaders and their congregations fall on the conservative-progressive spectrum, the workbook invites them into a space for growth and exploration that can be tailored for worship in particular congregations.

If liturgy is the “work” of the people, Liu and Williams have certainly created the liturgical “workbook” of the people. This book connects worship anamnistically with its roots in Christian history, while also urging it forward toward progressive, imaginative, and creative thinking. This workbook delivers on its promise to challenge and enrich worship leaders to think more broadly and deeply about liturgical space and time, enabling them to minister more intentionally to congregations. It is an important and engaging resource for both novice and seasoned liturgical leaders—whether solo pastors planning their church’s liturgy, or church leaders with full worship ministry teams—seeking a faithful, sacred imagination in theology and practice for their worship.

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