

**Trauma-Aware Preaching in the Lenten and Easter Seasons:
A Proposal of the Themes for Lent, Triduum, and Easter Sermons**

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Abstract: *The reality of trauma in the world is a call for the church, as the Christian community, to become a trauma-healing community. Therefore, this article highlights the role of the preaching ministry in the process of fulfilling this call through a trauma-aware preaching approach. This approach is grounded in an in-between theology that embraces suffering, pain, and grief as well as hope, resurrection, and redemption. Thus, the preaching approach uses eschatological hope about suffering and hope as good news. In addition, this article offers a practical application of the trauma-aware preaching approach in sermons during Lent, Triduum, and Easter.*

Introduction: In the Reality of Living with Trauma

I was born an Indonesian with Chinese ethnic blood, although I only accepted my full Chinese Indonesian identity when I was eighteen. Before that age, I knew myself simply as an Indonesian without an added ethnic identity. This was because my parents had indoctrinated me into thinking of myself as Indonesian rather than Chinese Indonesian. When I began researching the history of political conflict in Indonesia, I realized that, as Chinese Indonesian descendants, my parents and family had been through many traumatic experiences. They had concealed their Chinese identity because those of Chinese ethnicity were scapegoated in almost all the conflicts in Indonesia from the time of the Dutch colonial period onwards.¹ My family passed down their trauma to me. My story is not unique. In her art project, *Chinese Whispers*, Rani Pramesti explains that she and the second generation of Chinese Indonesians living in Australia after the May 1998 riots also lost their identity. They didn't know why they felt so insecure when people

¹ Benny G. Setiono, *Tionghoa Dalam Pusaran Politik (Chinese in Politic Whirlpool)* (Jakarta, Indonesia: Penerbit Elkasa, 2003), 203-4. The Dutch colonists targeted the Chinese as scapegoats for economic-political advantage. From the beginning of the Dutch colonization of Indonesia, they classified the population into three groups: the first group, the European/Westerners, included Indo-Europeans (descendants of mixed marriages between Europeans and Asians); the second was the Foreign Orientals, comprising ethnic Chinese, Arabs, and other Asians; the third were the *Inlanders* (the native people) also named *Bumiputera*. Laws and regulations for these groups were written in several different books, and court proceedings and judgments were followed in different courts. Only in matters of commerce were the ethnic Chinese ruled under Dutch Commercial Law. However, if crimes occurred in trade matters, ethnic Chinese were treated as having the *Inlander's* status. If there were problems with competition with Chinese traders, the Dutch would drive the natives to fight ethnic Chinese and spread negative views about them. The massacre of ethnic Chinese in Batavia (or Jakarta) on October 9, 1740, is an example. The Dutch government extinguished several groups of ethnic Chinese by spreading the rumor among the natives that ethnic Chinese would kill them and rape their women and children. The rumor stirred attacks on the ethnic Chinese. More than 10,000 ethnic Chinese were killed. The corpses and blood of the ethnic Chinese scattered along the roads in Batavia led to the naming of *Kali Angke*, meaning *Red River*; and *Tanah Abang*, meaning *Red Land*, to mark these two locations in Jakarta that once turned red from bloodshed in a massacre. These names remain in use today. The political way of controlling people by turning ethnic Chinese into a scapegoat also occurred under the second presidential government of President Soeharto and the army. Indeed, almost all the riots in Indonesia have involved anti-Chinese sentiments.

identified them as Chinese or when they found themselves in the midst of a group of native Indonesians.²

According to Gilad Hirschberger's analysis, these stories result from collective trauma—a form of trauma that stems from a tragedy affecting an entire society because the group retains a collective memory of the event.³ He points out that collective trauma has long-standing effects among second and third-generation survivors and can damage their fundamental sense of security. Such people display individual and collective fear, vulnerable feelings, injured national pride, a crisis-ridden identity, and a predisposition to react with heightened vigilance to new threats.⁴

I believe that my story and my country's story are also other people's stories. Our world faces the reality of discrimination, racism, poverty, and marginalization from people of different faiths, races, ethnicities, economics, and politics. Some people might experience this directly. Some, like me, may experience it indirectly because it has been passed down to them by previous generations.

Collective traumas stem from a variety of events such as natural disasters, pandemic disasters, gun violence, wars, or other brutal events that happen in neighborhoods, societies, and nations. These traumas make the survivors feel unsafe in the place where they belong and cause them to mistrust their neighbors or other people that they knew before.⁵ They begin to live out Kai T. Erikson's description of the effect of collective trauma: "'I' continue to exist, though damaged and maybe even permanently changed. 'You' continue to exist, though distant and hard to relate to. But 'we' no longer exist as a connected pair or as linked cells in a larger communal body."⁶

Besides collective trauma, some people might witness someone they know or who is close to them suffering from individual trauma, perhaps because of the loss of a loved one or injury, illness, relational abuse, domestic violence, or sexual abuse. They discover that the person is no longer the same as she was before. She experiences doubt about others and themselves.⁷ She is haunted by the traumatic events and perhaps even experiences a sense of shame.⁸ She feels abandoned, utterly alone, alienated, and disconnected. According to Judith Herman, when trust is lost, "traumatized people feel that they belong more to the dead than the living."⁹ She loses the words to describe her terrible experience because trauma steals their narrative processes

² Rani Pramesti, *Chinese Whispers*, 2014, Digital Graphic Novel, 2014, <https://thechinesewhispers.com/>.

³ Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (2018): 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441>.

⁴ Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma," 3.

⁵ Kai T. Erikson, "Loss of Communitas at Buffalo Creek," *The American Journal of Psychiatry* 133, no. 3 (March 1976): 303–5, <https://doi.org/10.1176/ajp.133.3.302>. Erikson mentions three behavioral manifestations of bond damage in society because of collective trauma. First is demoralization, which is when the traumatized community has a numb feeling about the future. Second is disorientation, which is when the victims have a sense of dislocation in the community to which they belong. Third is loss of connection, which is when the victims feel separated from other people. They feel as if they live in a strange land where nobody cares, so they keep their distance from others. They are haunted by the traumatic event, which makes them even more isolated.

⁶ Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Deconstruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 1976), 154.

⁷ Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence - From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2015), 53.

⁸ Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Viking, 2014), 13.

⁹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 52.

and incapacitates their language.¹⁰ In Herman's terms, the "*unspeakable*" becomes a new word for the way traumatized people convey the tragic event that remains unspoken.¹¹

All the examples of trauma that I identify here emerge from the widespread trauma that exists in the world. This is the world's reality, a context in which trauma is "suffering that does not go away."¹² This reality affects the lives of individuals as well as whole societies, including Christian communities. According to Diana Langberg, the church belongs in the context of trauma, and this might be the most significant mission field in the twenty-first century.¹³ It is also the reality that reminds the church that traumatized people are all around her. They come to and are members of the church. They attend her services, sit in the pews, and listen to the sermons. They could even be the ministers, the leaders, the seminarians, and the preachers of the churches and seminaries.

My article is a response to this reality of trauma around the readers and a plea to become aware of the readers' calling as a Christian community where they are one body of Christ and belong to the world society. As Kimberly Wagner says, each preacher has an obligation to extend care to those communities deeply impacted by trauma. Thus, we need to have an honest and sincere conversation about that reality.¹⁴

I intentionally focus this paper on a model of preaching that takes into account the traumatic reality and puts that model into preaching practice. Using the preaching trauma healing approach developed by homileticians such as Sarah Travis, Kimberly R. Wagner, and Joni Sancken, this paper provides the theological-homiletical foundations and goal of trauma-aware preaching as a model for preaching amid trauma. In applying this model, I focus on Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons that belong to the two seasons of the church's liturgical calendar, namely Lenten and Easter.¹⁵

Trauma-Aware Preaching Discourse

Preaching amid trauma is difficult since the task involves sharing the gospel in the midst of a complex and complicated discourse. As Shelly Rambo recognizes, "the good news lies in the ability of Christian theology to witness between the death and life, in its ability to forge a new discourse between the two."¹⁶ When preaching in the face of trauma, there is "a pause, a disconnect, between trouble and grace."¹⁷ This means, as Sarah Travis says, "the primary task of Christian preaching is to express good news, but good news in the face of trauma is neither

¹⁰ Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology*, Kindle (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), ch.1, loc. 610.

¹¹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, 1.

¹² Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 15.

¹³ Diane Langberg, *Suffering and the Heart of God: How Trauma Destroys and Christ Restores* (Greensboro, NC: New Growth Press, 2015), 8.

¹⁴ Kimberly R. Wagner, "The Work We Can't Ignore: Preaching and Gun Violence," *Interpretation* 76, no. 3 (July 1, 2022): 242, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643221096132>.

¹⁵ According to the liturgical year of the Christian tradition, the Easter cycle consists of fourteen Sundays - six Sundays of Lent, seven Sundays of Easter, and one Sunday of Pentecost. In addition, there are several other commemorations between these weeks: Ash Wednesday and the Triduum: Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday, which is a journey from Christ's passion and death to his resurrection. See Peter C. Bower, ed., *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2003), 105, 111.

¹⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 8.

¹⁷ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

straightforward nor easily expressed.”¹⁸ Nevertheless, we must consider preaching in the face of trauma as challenging rather than impossible. It is an opportunity for seminaries and congregations to become healing communities of God’s grace in a world that is suffering greatly from trauma. Healing in the context of trauma means, in the case of individual trauma, the survivors reconnect with their community and the world.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in the case of collective trauma, the traumatized community offers a safe place to share their wounds.²⁰

If we are to treat preaching as a challenging opportunity to share the gospel, then preaching in the face of trauma needs to be based on a trauma theology located in a position between the life and death of traumatized people and survivors. Rambo calls this an “in-between” position because the reality of trauma means the witness will be speaking in the difficult space between death and life, past and present, and absence and presence.²¹ Travis argues that this position is “a space between trouble and grace, a space in which trouble and grace intermingle.”²² She explains, “We are invited to live between trouble and grace, despair and hope, death and resurrection. This is a liminal space that is not one thing or the other—it is a third space between death and resurrection. We are invited to dwell in this space.”²³

Moreover, Rambo points to an “in-between” theology of trauma in the liturgical Christian calendar, located between the cross and the resurrection, i.e., on Holy Saturday, when Jesus descended into hell. Traumatized people suffer as if they were living in hell: “There is extreme loneliness, forsaken, and abandonment in hell, and they are completely cut off from all forms of relationship.”²⁴ However, Holy Saturday uncovers another dimension of God’s love, for it is “a testimony to the persistence of love in utter forsakenness and abandonment.”²⁵ The Holy Saturday events are marked by chaos and emptiness and, simultaneously, by “the unidentifiable ‘fruit’ coming out of this wound.”²⁶ She continues by saying that bringing the “in-between” of Holy Saturday into preaching means preaching the reality of hopelessness through the death of God, yet also the reality of a new beginning.²⁷

When interpreting Rambo’s “in-between” trauma healing preaching, Joni S. Sancken suggests such preaching takes place when the preacher resists preaching “tidy” grace or giving easy answers.²⁸ Following Sancken on the preaching of “tidy” grace, Travis locates preaching in-between in a time of waiting between the trauma and the resurrection, a time when few words can be said.²⁹ She writes:

We tell two stories at the same time: one of a resurrection that has overcome death and one that testifies to the ongoingness of death even in the face of the resurrection.

¹⁸ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

¹⁹ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence*, 3.

²⁰ Kai T. Erikson, “Notes on Trauma and Community,” in *Trauma Exploration in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1995), 186-7.

²¹ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 3.

²² Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

²³ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 252.

²⁴ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 49.

²⁵ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 53.

²⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 57.

²⁷ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 73.

²⁸ Joni S. Sancken, *Words That Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls*, The Artistry of Preaching Series (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 22.

²⁹ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc.1341.

Sometimes, our stories end raggedly without being wrapped up with a smart and tidy bow.³⁰

In other words, preaching in-between admits the messiness of the stories of the traumatized and makes room for irregularities that result from trauma. Sometimes, there is no clear conclusion to a disorderly and incoherent story shared in the sermon. Wagner provides a clear example of preaching in a liminal place:

Such preaching takes seriously the experience of narrative fracture, acknowledging and even welcoming the fragments of people's experience. It welcomes the hurt, pain, questions, unknowability, confusion, and frustration. Such preaching does not shy away from hard emotions, grief, or lament but embraces and even models these hard truths in the preaching event. At the same time, this preaching does not resist the longing for hope or the promises of God that, though not always sensed at the moment, are already present and coming toward us. Such preaching lives in the tension between brokenness and hope, between death and resurrection, between loss and redemption.³¹

Hence, Wagner proposes trauma-aware preaching as a healing approach to trauma. She defines trauma-aware preaching as "preaching that takes seriously and is attentive to the traumatic realities that may be knowingly or unknowingly present in communities every day.... It is preaching that does not divorce experience of trauma or the ongoing reality of trauma events from holy spaces of worship and proclamation."³² By this definition, trauma-aware preaching provides a safe space for traumatized individuals and communities to reconstruct narratives, foster individual and community resilience, and reconnect with the community.³³ Therefore, Wagner concludes that trauma-aware preaching consistently performs one of the steps of trauma healing: "establishing safety."³⁴

The challenge in preaching trauma healing is putting this homiletical model into practice. Then, how do preachers and congregations incorporate this theology into their worship and preaching ministries? Since the ministry of preaching is part of practical theology, it is an *activity* of believers in sustaining their reflective faith in daily life and also *a method* or way of bringing theology into practice.³⁵ For this reason, in the next part of this article, I will discuss the model and the theme of trauma-aware preaching for Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons.

Trauma-Aware Preaching for Lent, Triduum, and Easter Sermons

To instill preaching in-between into preaching practice, especially during the Lenten and Easter seasons, preachers must be attentive to the preaching process. What is advantageous in preaching amid trauma during the Lent and Easter seasons is that trauma theology is based upon the story of Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection, which is, of course, also the central theme

³⁰ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 2, loc. 1350.

³¹ Kimberly R. Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, Kindle (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 96.

³² Wagner, "The Work We Can't Ignore," 244.

³³ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 30, 49; Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch.1, loc. 746.

³⁴ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 49.

³⁵ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, "Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 5.

of these seasons of the liturgical year. Moreover, this theme sounds of sadness, mourning, death, and resistance, which is the lamentation form of traumatized people and communities. Therefore, I suggest that preachers consider the theme and form as they begin their preaching trauma healing process for Lent, Triduum, and Easter.

First, consider the theme of preaching trauma healing. Trauma-preaching homileticians agree on using preaching “in-between” as an approach in which the sermon functions as a means of trauma healing. As I stated above, preaching in-between shows that God’s grace allows suffering, loneliness, and hurt to coexist with the hope of healing. Preaching in-between stands in the tension between death and resurrection. Specifically, Wagner proposes “eschatological hope” as the good news communicated in preaching. A message about Christ’s resurrection as a form of God’s mercy and grace offers future hope, redemption, and comfort to all creation.³⁶ She argues that “eschatological hope” is based on the cross of Christ, which shows that God takes upon Godself the path of suffering and abandonment and then transforms it into new life. The crucifixion and resurrection of Christ show the redeeming and life-giving character of God, who “does not ignore or erase pain and suffering.” He instead takes that suffering, redeems it, overcomes it, and transforms it.³⁷

Hence, preaching in-between is about preachers committing to holding an eschatological tension that takes seriously “both the horrid reality of the traumatic experience and the promise of God.”³⁸ In fact, there is a tendency to preach more about hope and God’s promises and ignore the pain, hurt, disorientation, and suffering. The fear of re-traumatizing listeners by mentioning traumatic events can undermine the tension of eschatological hope, with sermons offering instead cheap grace. Preaching only hope can create an unsafe space for traumatized people.³⁹ At the other extreme, there is a tendency to glorify pain and suffering in preaching. Fearful of giving false assurance and cheap grace, preachers ignore the message of redemption that God has effected and, as a result, allow trauma to steal the message of hope and anticipation of the future.⁴⁰ The solution is preaching in tension: “holding the reality of brokenness, pain, and traumatic loss on one side and hope, resurrection, and redemption on the other.”⁴¹

This does not mean preaching 50/50 or always holding to the middle of the two extremes, as “preachers may find themselves preaching [more] to one side or the other.”⁴² Wagner suggests that even if preachers find during their preparations that the theological position of the sermon is leaning more strongly to one side, they should still try to hold the tension on the other side. In fact, when preaching after a traumatic event, preachers need to be intentional about naming and acknowledging the reality of brokenness and pain while proclaiming hope and God’s promises as the good news in the sermon.⁴³

Second, ponder the lament content and form for preaching trauma healing. Preaching in-between thus encourages preachers to find a form that can hold this tension between brokenness and pain and hope in God. Both Wagner and Travis point to “lament as a language of faith” that addresses this tension.⁴⁴ As a language of faith, lament reveals the paradoxical reality of

³⁶ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 62.

³⁷ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 63.

³⁸ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 65.

³⁹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 66-7.

⁴⁰ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 68.

⁴¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 68.

⁴² Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 70.

⁴³ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 70.

⁴⁴ Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 238; Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 5, loc. 1311.

brokenness and hope that is part of life. In the Bible, the genre of lament shows the fragility of human beings, their response to suffering, and their courage to bring that suffering to God.⁴⁵ Moreover, Wagner explains “lament as a generative act” that has various functions: lament gives voice to those who are voiceless because of trauma, provides healing when individuals and communities of laments have space to bring their plea, becomes a form of protest against injustice that is brought before God and the public, and presents people’s faith to a God who can heal the world in its broken condition.⁴⁶ In addition to human lament, Eliana Ah-Rum Ku mentions divine lament, which appears in the crucifixion story, as God’s way of responding to and expressing God’s solidarity with human suffering and God’s great compassion. Through divine lament, “human beings can embrace hope and express a lament that is transformed in the reality of suffering.”⁴⁷

Lament addresses the relationship between the laments, others, God, and the community. When sin and systemic evil cause the breakdown of relationships, lament functions to bring about social change through community reconciliation. Lamenters crying out against those who have oppressed them is what Sancken calls “constructive anger” because it offers a radical critique of injustice, a call for change, and the desire to transform reality. In addition, preaching lament demonstrates solidarity between the preacher, the audience, and the wounded community. As Sancken points out, “Lament in Preaching uses ‘we’ language to include the preacher in solidarity with the suffering and to acknowledge our own complicity in the cause of lament.”⁴⁸ The ‘we’ in lament suggests an inseparable relationship between preachers and the wounded community, who share the same experience of violence and bear witness to the suffering caused. Therefore, the community of faith, the place where the sermon is preached, “contributes to promoting healing by respecting and listening to the life experiences of all, including those who are marginalized, giving them the assurance that the voices of suffering will be heard and accepted.”⁴⁹ Ku adds that lament sermons open up healing spaces for wounded communities to embrace “difference” through invitations to preachers, listeners, and other communities to engage in broader dialog about traumatic events.⁵⁰

Given the advantages and richness of the lament content and form for preaching trauma healing, I suggest that Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermon texts be modeled on the lament genre. Preachers who preach in congregations that use the lectionary tradition should choose the Psalms as their preaching texts.

Themes of the Lent, the Triduum, and Easter Sermons

For the suggestion of the themes, I am in debt to Wagner when I am using her “five essential characteristics of trauma-aware preaching:”

⁴⁵ Joni S. Sancken, *All Our Grievs to Bear: Responding with Resilience after Collective Trauma* (Harrisonburg, VA: Herald Press, 2022), 60.

⁴⁶ Kimberly R. Wagner, “What Do We Preach? Trauma, Lament, and Social Action,” *Call to Worship* 52, no. 3 (2018):12, <https://www.preachingandtrauma.com/post/what-do-we-preach-trauma-lament-and-social-action>; Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, 53, 180-1.

⁴⁷ Eliana Ah Rum Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching: Proclaiming Hope amid Suffering* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2024), 178.

⁴⁸ Sancken, *All Our Grievs to Bear*, 67.

⁴⁹ Eliana Ah Rum Ku, “A Call for Practicing Hospitality Based on Lament in Preaching for a Wounded Community,” *Homiletic* 47, no. 2 (November 30, 2022): 20, <https://www.homiletic.net/index.php/homiletic/article/view/5368>.

⁵⁰ Ku, “A Call for Practicing Hospitality Based on Lament in Preaching for a Wounded Community,” 22.

First, this “preaching invites bold truth-telling. Preachers must be honest about what has happened and what has been lost or broken.”⁵¹ Even though telling the truth runs the risk of shaking the community’s belief, preachers must be honest about the effect of traumatic events on individuals and communities.⁵² Thus, in a case of gun violence, for example, the preacher might name gun violence directly as part of a sermon illustration and application.⁵³

Second, preaching that is attentive to a “traumatic narrative fracture” acknowledges and names the complex emotions of the community.⁵⁴ Wagner believes that “naming grief, guilt, and gratitude (among other feelings) invites people to bring what they are carrying into the preaching space before God and one another.”⁵⁵ Travis says the same, suggesting, “Perhaps preaching is also an opportunity to give a name to the nameless, unspeakable reality of trauma.”⁵⁶ When a preacher names events or tragedies as trauma, sermons give language or vocabulary to the very real emotions and experiences that shape the individual and community’s lives.⁵⁷

Third, preaching allows traumatized individuals and the community to pose their confused questions. Preachers are invited to be wise in suggesting answers and acknowledging people’s unanswered questions without rushing too quickly to present solutions.⁵⁸ Wagner suggests the lament model in the Bible is a relevant example of trauma-aware preaching. Those who lament ask hard questions that reveal their confusion about various tragedies. They plead with God to intervene in their suffering. Preachers who preach the lament model apply their pastoral and priestly gifts because, in so doing, they “embody the work of faithful questioning as well as call out to God with and on behalf of the community.”⁵⁹

Fourth, when the effect of trauma has broken the bonds of a community, trauma-aware preaching calls on Christians “to prepare the ground for communal reconstruction and reimagination, not merely a return to some impossible-to-recover past.”⁶⁰ Through their sermons, preachers invite people in the community to give and receive care among themselves in order to heal the damage caused by trauma.⁶¹ Wagner emphasizes that the sermon is “an invitation to participate in broader dialogue... It invites people to respond honestly and makes space for communal wrestling and dialogue.”⁶²

Fifth, trauma-aware preaching summons preachers to be aware of and be honest about “the existence and nature of the sin and evil” that cause violence, injustice, hate, destruction, loss, and hurt in the world. In such a sermon, preachers seek to identify sin and evil mindfully, invite the community to practice confession, and tell them about God’s grace and love, thus making it possible to defeat evil in the world. Hence, this sort of preaching creates a safe place for people to bring their brokenness, as well as to promote justice and peace.⁶³

To apply these characteristics of trauma-aware preaching, I propose the following themes for Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons.

⁵¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 56.

⁵² Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 244.

⁵³ Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 244.

⁵⁴ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 57.

⁵⁵ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 57.

⁵⁶ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 3, loc. 1674.

⁵⁷ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 3, loc. 1674.

⁵⁸ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 58.

⁵⁹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 59-60.

⁶⁰ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 60.

⁶¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 61.

⁶² Wagner, “The Work We Can’t Ignore,” 245.

⁶³ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 61.

TRAUMA-AWARE PREACHING ON LENT, TRIDUUM, AND EASTER SERMONS

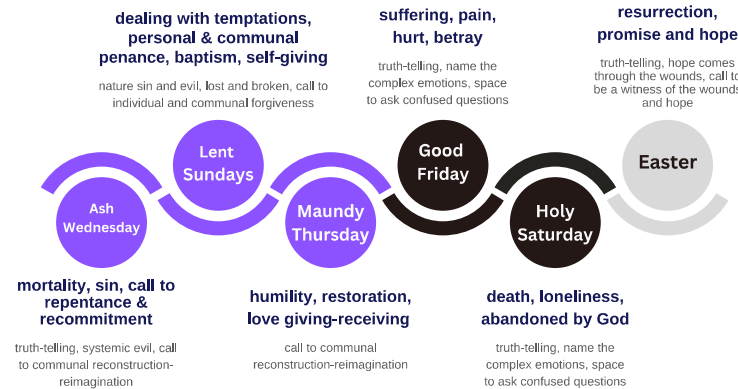


Figure 1: Trauma-Aware Preaching on Lent, Triduum, and Easter Sermons

Ash Wednesday

Ash Wednesday is the start of Lent, which is itself the beginning of the story of Christ's passion, death, and resurrection. The first step in the journey to new life in Christ calls the congregation to recognize and face the human mortality and the community fragility that brings her to the edge of death.⁶⁴ This reality invites the congregation to remember her fragility, sins, and the call to return to God. Therefore, Ash Wednesday calls for repentance and recommitment.⁶⁵ In the liturgy, the symbolic action of ashes placed on the forehead with the sign of the cross indicates that we are fragile—*memento mori*: “You are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:1)—while the grace of Christ has returned to the God who created human beings.

For this event, I recommend that sermons cover various events in this world that cause trauma because of sin and evil. Preachers might mention violent events or disasters occurring in the context of this world (truth-telling). While there are disasters for which we cannot find the cause, many humanitarian tragedies occur because of original sin and systemic evil, which then lead to civil and social death. Original sin is the sin that “we inherit it by virtue of being born in a society that is marred by sin; we inherit it because we live in a society whose institution has been corrupted and the corruption has been perpetuated.”⁶⁶ This systemic evil, which legalizes unequal power and privilege, causes violence and suffering in human life. It dehumanizes, corrupts, and kills people by restricting their access to the necessities of life.⁶⁷ The result is civil death. Here, a person or community is still part of society, and they seem to live normally, like other people. They live in the same neighborhoods as other people and are free to think, talk, and

⁶⁴ Bower, *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, 109.

⁶⁵ Anna B. Olson, “Ash Wednesday: 2 Corinthians 5:20b-6:10 Commentary 2,” in *Connections: A Lectionary Commentary for Preaching and Worship: Year C, Volume 2, Lent through Pentecost*, ed. Joel B. Green et al. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 12.

⁶⁶ Eliazar Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human: Theological Anthropology in the Response to Systemic Evil* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2003), 67.

⁶⁷ Fernandez, *Reimagining the Human*, 72.

do anything. However, their civil rights are limited. For example, they may lack the right to own property, to vote, or to bring a legal case to court.⁶⁸

This Ash Wednesday event is an invitation to recognize the congregation's fragile state due to original sin and systemic evil. The sermon calls the congregation to do personal and collective repentance, as well as issue an invitation to the Christian community to fight against sin and systemic evil. As part of society, the congregation can build networks with communities outside the church, with non-Christians, interfaith groups, and even the government, to fight for equality, justice, and peace.

Lent

Lent is the forty-day period during which the Church prepares for Easter and which is characterized by the discipline of fasting. This discipline is connected to the story of Jesus, who fasted for forty days and forty nights in the desert, where he was tempted by the devil before beginning his ministry in the world. This temptation of Jesus, according to Abbot Prosper Guéranger, is the reason why the Christians commemorate Lent with fasting because they are dealing with the three temptations that come from "the devil, the flesh, and the world."⁶⁹ Therefore, Lent has a theme of repentance, both personal and communal. In this case, "not only do the individual and his conduct, attitudes, and values need changing, but so also do societal structures, attitudes, values, and procedures."⁷⁰ This change of life marks another Lenten theme, that of rebirth, marked by the event of baptism.

The themes of Lent are largely the same as those of Ash Wednesday, namely, truth-telling, original sin, systemic evil, and repentance. Affirming the suffering of this world from the traumatic events that devalue human life and eliminate community is an early step in preaching trauma healing during Lent. Through the sermon, the congregation is reminded that the suffering in this world occurs because, as individuals and communities, she falls into the three temptations of life mentioned above. In response, she can be a bystander, allowing violence and oppression to occur in society. She can be a community that does not provide space for victims to speak out. She can allow the community to be complicit in systemic evil and do nothing to confront it.

There are several suggestions for trauma healing through Lenten sermons. Personal and community repentance remains the preaching call of the season. Learning from Christ's self-giving, such repentance should be followed by personal and communal acts of proclamation, such as asking for apologies to victims and forgiveness for perpetrators. In *Risky Hospitality*, Septemmy E. Lakawa suggests that, as a part of the hospitality practice, communities in conflict create spaces for sharing everyday experiences of violence, making meaning of them, and connecting them to the suffering context of this world.⁷¹ She believes that the process of trauma healing is to share people's unspoken wounds and link their wounds with the wounds of the other community.⁷² Therefore, in this season, the call to be a community of forgiveness and to work on

⁶⁸ Lisa Guenther, *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minneapolis Press, 2013), xviii, xx.

⁶⁹ Abbot Prosper Guéranger, *The Liturgical Year: Lent*, trans. Dom Laurence Shepherd, Jubilee Year 2000, vol. The Liturgical Year 15, 5 vols. (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2000), 22.

⁷⁰ Eduard Richard Riegert, "Lent-Easter Cycle," *Lutheran Quarterly* 26, no. 1 (February 1974): 12–23, <http://www.lutheranquarterly.com>, 19.

⁷¹ Septemmy Eucharistia Lakawa, "Risky Hospitality: Mission in The Aftermath of Religious Communal Violence in Indonesia" (ThD diss, Boston, Massachusetts, Boston University School of Theology, 2011), 5–6.

⁷² Lakawa, "Risky Hospitality," 455.

trauma healing in collaboration with communities outside the church or beyond is a powerful theme for preaching trauma healing.

Maundy Thursday

The meaning of Maundy Thursday calls the congregation to restore their lives through penitential acts and the declaration of pardon. Peter Bower recognizes that “the act of foot-washing connotes humility and intimacy, and the celebration of the Lord’s Supper embodies the mystery of Christ’s enduring redemptive presence.”⁷³ This event is a call to imitate and remember the humility, intimacy, and love of Christ through the ritual of foot washing and the Lord’s Supper. When a church engages in this tradition, he explains, it finds itself transformed in loving others and the world as it joins with other Christians in caring for all creation.⁷⁴

Emphasizing the act of imitating Christ’s love for the world, the proposed sermon theme for this event is a call to communal reconstruction and imagination. In this theme, the sermon focuses on inviting the congregation to work on healing trauma by engaging her members, churchgoers, and other communities outside the church. Involving the congregation’s members and churchgoers in preaching trauma healing means that they are open to a process of dialogue about the traumatic event and the trauma that remains in their community. If the trauma was caused by conflict within the congregation, then the Maundy Thursday sermon is an opportunity to reconcile the conflict. The willingness to ask for and give forgiveness is a concrete example of learning to be Christlike in humility.

Meanwhile, Maundy Thursday sermons are an invitation to foster resilience in society by engaging the broader community in trauma healing. By talking about trauma and consistently preaching a theology of the tension between death and resurrection, preachers build a theology of resilience for a society under the weight of trauma. In addition to equipping congregations to survive, such preaching opens opportunities for them to care for one another as a community of recovery and to form communal support systems.⁷⁵ When traumatic events occur in the future, the congregation and society will become better at surviving and supporting each other.

Good Friday

On Good Friday, the church commemorates Christ’s journey of suffering on the cross. For C. S. Song, a Taiwanese theologian, the theology of the cross has two symbolic meanings. First is the pain-love of God, which means that God suffers and experiences the same suffering as human beings in order to save the world from sin. Therefore, the cross speaks of the suffering, pain, hurt, betrayal, violence, sacrifice, and survival experienced by human beings and also by Jesus as God in solidarity.⁷⁶ Second, the cross is a symbol of redemption, where Christ’s suffering defeats the oppressive, destructive, deadly power of the oppressors.⁷⁷

The theme of the cross reveals violence, oppression, and abuse of power and thus becomes a preaching language of truth-telling that also applies to cases of trauma in everyday life. In addition, the cross represents God’s compassion towards human suffering, both physical and emotional. This perspective, according to Ku, leads each individual and community to see

⁷³ Bower, *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, 114.

⁷⁴ Bower, *The Companion to the Book of Common Worship*, 114.

⁷⁵ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 136.

⁷⁶ Choan-Seng Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 89.

⁷⁷ Song, *Third-Eye Theology*, 188.

the suffering of others as part of the communal self. That means suffering is not silenced or hidden but is brought into the public sphere. This perspective has implications for the themes and content of trauma-healing preaching. The reality of the suffering of others becomes the communal self, and lament becomes the way in which the incarnation of Jesus is present in the restorative community.⁷⁸

Therefore, the sermon provides space for the listeners to express emotions arising from their own or others' experiences of trauma. This can also become a corporate lament. Questions about suffering, power, and theodicy that are not easily answered may also be addressed in Good Friday sermons for trauma healing. In addition, such sermons can offer small examples of what congregations can do to restore suffering people by proclaiming Christ's solidarity. The congregation can be invited to join with others in public mourning, for example, and accept the suffering of others as their own in a way that promotes healing.⁷⁹

Moreover, the symbol of redemption in the cross of Christ in the Good Friday sermon is applicable in its content about injustice, crime, poverty, and suffering in this world caused by the nature of sin and systemic evil. The good news of Christ's redemption on the cross in the trauma preaching healing invites the congregation to participate in efforts to fight injustice and strive for peace and prosperity in the context of society and the world.

Holy Saturday

Ku notes that Holy Saturday represents a "dark night for the soul" and a "full descent" with no hope of recovery. It is a time to face the death of Jesus and the silence of God. Jesus showed his strongest solidarity with people when he was abandoned by God in death. "Jesus responds to sufferers with his soul and life, actively and passionately staying with people at the end of suffering."⁸⁰ She calls this moment God's solidarity with "our God-abandonment."⁸¹ His solidarity is also seen when He gives space to the suffering and the traumatized to express all the expressions of grief, anger, pain, hurt, and death itself. The process of healing occurs because this space for lament processes negative emotions into a journey toward hope.⁸²

Preaching about God's solidarity through the metaphor of God's silence can be interpreted as God being present because, in his silence, he listens to those who suffer. He offers "a space of waiting, of embracing death, pain and life."⁸³ Therefore, the themes of Holy Saturday relate to the wounds and suffering of trauma; the condition of traumatized people, such as being in death (truth-telling); providing space for the expression of complex emotions, such as anger, disappointment, hurt, and confusion; and providing opportunities for lament in the sermon, as well as space to ask perplexing questions about the traumatic event and God's presence and role therein. Holy Saturday sermons are thus also open to moments of silence and not necessarily filled with the words of preachers but with art forms such as dance, poetry, song, and images.

Easter

The Christian community celebrates Christ's victory over death through the resurrection. This event signifies redemption from sin, victory over evil and death, and new life. In the context

⁷⁸ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*.

⁷⁹ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 304.

⁸⁰ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 157-9.

⁸¹ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 157-9.

⁸² Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 199.

⁸³ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 270-1.

of trauma, the resurrection is the hope of restoration. Because Christ is with sufferers in death, he gives them redemption by accepting the wounds, pain, and suffering of traumatic events. At the same time, Christ invites individuals and communities to be witnesses to traumatic events and witnesses for change and to work for justice, peace, and love.

The call to be witnesses of the resurrection is a powerful message for Christian people and communities. It is consistent with the process of trauma healing in which victims, survivors, families, perpetrators, and even the process of recovery itself become witnesses to the trauma experienced by individuals and communities. Since preaching, by definition, also means a testimony to God's work for humanity and all of creation, it plays an important role as a space where trauma is named and remembered. Therefore, the theme options for preaching trauma healing on Easter Day are telling the truth, hope coming through the wounds, and the call to be a witness of the wounds.

According to Rambo, in his Gospel, John gives the resurrection a sense of trauma when the testimony of the risen Christ comes from the witnesses' struggle to understand life after death.⁸⁴ As a traumatized witness to the resurrection, Mary Magdalene gives a unique testimony: she remains in a state of mourning, she weeps (John 20:11-14), she is not immediately able to see and recognize the risen Christ (John 20:15-16), and she is not immediately able to touch Jesus (John 20:17).⁸⁵ Here, a witness to trauma does not negate her grief but encounters the absence and the presence of Jesus at the same time.⁸⁶ Another resurrection story is Jesus' encounter with Thomas Didymus (John 20:24-29). The process of trauma healing occurs when Jesus invites Thomas to see and touch his wounds. Seeing and touching Jesus' wounds is part of a journey toward truth and truth-telling. People such as war veterans who do not recognize their wounds caused by moral injury are invited to recognize them through the wounds of Christ.⁸⁷

Conclusion

When the reality of trauma and its effects on society and the world is inescapable, the call of the Christian community is to be a healing community. This means that all ministries of the community are directed toward the process of healing from trauma, both individually and collectively. One aspect of ministry that can provide a restorative space is preaching. Trauma-aware preaching calls the congregation to proclaim the good news of God, who is with those who are suffering, hurting, and grieving from trauma. The good news of the tension between suffering and liberation, grief and hope, and death and resurrection becomes the gospel in trauma-aware preaching.

Trauma-aware preaching emerges from a theology of Christ's suffering and resurrection that accepts the reality of pain, grief, and suffering, as well as offers hope for trauma healing. In fact, this theology, which is the cornerstone of the faith, is celebrated by Christians every year during the Lenten and Easter seasons. Through each event of the seasons, the themes of the sermons show that the hope of trauma healing is growing—albeit slowly and gradually, and not superficially and prematurely—in the hearts of every suffering person and community.⁸⁸ Therefore, the themes of Lent, Triduum, and Easter sermons are truth-telling, naming complex

⁸⁴ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 81.

⁸⁵ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 89.

⁸⁶ Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma*, 89-90.

⁸⁷ Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 136-7.

⁸⁸ Ku, *Lament-Driven Preaching*, 289.

emotions, asking difficult questions, calling for community rebuilding and reimagining, and showing the reality of the nature of sin and systemic evil.

Given that talking about trauma is so complex, preachers must recognize that trauma-aware preaching runs the risk of triggering and exacerbating trauma. Wagner reminds preachers that in trauma-sensitive preaching, preachers need to be mindful of stories, images, and words in the Bible and in their sermons that might trigger trauma. She suggests that preachers preface their sermons with a content warning and an invitation to self-care, either in the bulletin or the order of service.⁸⁹ In fact, Travis suggests that preachers give listeners permission to leave the sanctuary without risk of censure if the sermon disturbs them.⁹⁰ The most important thing to remember is that preaching is a church ministry that does not stand alone and is pastoral in nature. This means that preachers, if they are pastors, continue their pastoral work for listeners who are traumatized after the sermon.

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⁸⁹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 134.

⁹⁰ Travis, *Unspeakable*, ch. 3, loc. 1921.

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