

Preaching in the Midst of a Global Pandemic
Joni S. Sancken
Words that Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls (Abingdon, 2019)

In the days, weeks, and months following the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, churches saw an unprecedented influx of people seeking comfort, peace, community, hope, and transformation. The gospel, the treasure of the church is the source of these gifts and more. Christians hold that the gospel is key to life itself. When news of death and fear of death loom around us with the spread of the novel corona virus and the illness Covid 19, the church must share this most vital gift.

I started seminary a few days after the September 11 attacks. The seriousness of the calling of the church in that time infused our studies, relationships, sense of calling, and preaching. In the midst of a global pandemic, the church is again experiencing what can be seen as an “Esther moment.” At the end of chapter 4 of the book of Esther, Mordecai sends a message encouraging Esther to act to help save the Jewish people, “Who knows? Maybe it was for a moment like this that you came to be part of the royal family.”¹ Or to rephrase it, “Maybe it was for a moment like this that you were called to ministry.”

But every aspect of ministry has become complicated in the midst of a global pandemic. With mandatory social distancing the work of ministry as with all other work is profoundly different from providing pastoral care, conducting the business of a congregation, gathering and sharing resources, to worship and preaching. The distance is one challenge, the experience of trauma is another. Trauma refers to circumstances in which one’s own life or the life of a loved one is under threat, where one loses a loved one suddenly, and when the ability to process the experience is exceeded by the magnitude of the experience itself. *This definition could apply to*

¹ Esther 4: 14.

everyone in the world right now. We, along with others in our communities and congregations, will deal with this trauma in varying ways and with diverse levels of resilience. Resilience refers to the ability to withstand, adapt, and in a qualified sense bounce back following an experience of trauma.

What can we say in the midst of this current unfolding trauma, when even experts are scrambling? Churches can support healing when they step into the space where others retreat. The incarnate Christ who continually casts his lot with broken humanity draws us toward each other by creating spaces where we can show ourselves, wounds and all.

The following are suggestions for trauma-aware preaching that can build resilience in our congregations and communities:

- 1) Embrace flexibility and imperfection.

During this season where many are working at home and families are dealing with competing pressures in tight spaces, preachers need to release their grip on attaining homiletical perfection. *If you need permission to do this, here it is.* Being relevant and present is more important than a great sermon structure, a fabulous story, thorough exegesis, or sparkling insights. The time for these finer aspects of the craft of preaching will return.

When freed from the tyranny of trying to keep up business as usual, preachers may find more imaginative ways to engage with congregations. Instead of broadcasting a live feed of you wearing a robe and preaching in the pulpit in your empty sanctuary, consider preaching in a more relaxed context somewhere in your home—or even in your car if you can't find a quiet place in your home. Trying to do worship and preaching “as usual” is impossible because these are not “usual” circumstances. It may be best to embrace something completely different. Some usual activities can be comforting but seeing one's pastor alone in the sanctuary is probably not.

My own toddler wept upon seeing our pastors alone in the sanctuary because he was reminded that we couldn't be there.

Rather than posting one long sermon, preachers can consider posting a couple of shorter sermons (under 15 minutes) during the week, or several sermons that are even shorter. Stressed listeners do not have their typical attention span and may benefit from more contact and shorter messages. Preachers can create a YouTube channel for their congregation and post links on social media and the church website.

Imperfect posts show the warmth and humanity of the preacher. Hopeful but imperfect examples in our sermons offer grace to listeners in the midst of trauma and help us find God in our imperfect lives.

2) Acknowledge the current crisis.

This may go without saying, but this is not a time for escapist theology or dancing around the edges of the truth. Exposing our fears to the light of Christ curtails their power. Telling the truth in the pulpit about difficult parts of life creates a sense of trustworthiness for the preacher and deepens the relevance of preaching. When survivors hear their truth spoken from the pulpit, it legitimizes their experiences, humanizes them, and highlights their worth to God and the church. When the preacher admits that life is not perfect, it deepens our sense of need before God.

Trauma specialists group a number of behaviors and actions under the umbrella term *acknowledgment*.² Allowing space for mourning and grief over what has been lost in the midst of the pandemic can help release pent-up physical, emotional, and spiritual energy. The need to

² *STAR Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience: Level 1 Participant Manual*, The Center for Justice and Peacebuilding, Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, VA, February 2018, 122.

name grief cuts across generations. All of us are mourning losses. Grief can be named and normalized in the sermon. Preachers can be upfront about their own grief as well as grief present in the biblical text. The Psalms offer examples of deep grief; so too do numerous biblical narratives. The sermon can remember and name what is lost.

We are physically distanced from each other but still embodied. The pandemic reminds us of the fragility of our bodies. Preachers can invite listeners to be more than spectators of the sermon. During a live feed, preachers can invite listeners to name losses directly and immediately as part of the feed. Rituals can help listeners process loss. Encourage listeners to do something physical at home such as lighting a candle or gathering items that represent loss. Doing a real or symbolic action with intention towards the locus of brokenness can bring a sense of purpose amidst crisis. A simple way that listeners can help is to donate money to organizations and groups who are caring for the most vulnerable. Consider posting a list of trustworthy charities. Name these actions as acts of witness to the gospel.

3) Remember All Listeners and Physical Signs of Trauma.

Social location and prior experiences affect our experiences with trauma and capacity for resilience. When preparing sermons, remember those who have already experienced loss, and those who were already dealing with challenges. Those who experience oppression and lack of resources are more at risk both from the pandemic itself and from traumatic responses. Seek out information about the physical signs of trauma. Trauma causes stress to our bodies, which may make us more susceptible to illness. Trauma causes stress responses that limit our ability to solve problems and think imaginatively. We respond instinctively. Trauma can cause isolation and spiritual crisis.

Physical movement can help release traumatic stress. Shaking out your arms and legs or moving your hands (clapping, kneading play dough, or a squeezing stress ball) can help. Consider posting a video where you lead your church members through a guided meditation that involves some body movement that can be adapted for physical ability. Encourage movement while people listen to your sermon—in the freedom of their homes they need not feel self-conscious.

4) Use Images, Vary Vocal Cadence

Sermons that incorporate experiential elements to connect to emotions may speak more deeply to trauma survivors. Brain scans of trauma survivors show that these experiences shut down the parts of the brain that impact speech and light up parts of the brain that register images.³

Preachers can help by using varied vocal cadence and moderating their vocal tone so that they communicate the good news in higher, more playful cadences.⁴ Preachers may want to consider singing as part of the preaching event, you don't have to have a perfect voice. Remember imperfection shows your own vulnerability and humanity, which can be a gift to isolated listeners.

Even if using images is not a normal practice, preachers may want to try using a static projected image without words and not talking while the image is displayed allows the image to communicate. Visuals work better when preachers don't compete with them by preaching "over" them. Preachers can also use video clips or memes, just remember to give space for listeners to absorb before expecting them to change modes to listen again.

³ Van der Kolk, *Body Keeps the Score*, 43–44.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 88.

5) Make Typological Connections to the Life of Jesus

Preaching through the life of Jesus, perhaps using the Apostles' Creed for structure can generate language and theology that may help rebuild and restore the identity of listeners experiencing trauma. Oppressed and marginalized people have long drawn strength and hope from typological association.⁵ Typology was used by exiles who recorded or redacted the stories of Abraham and Moses as a means of processing their experiences and naming God's provision and care in the midst of suffering. In America, enslaved Africans drew on the Exodus experience of Israel being freed from Egypt, while Puritan colonists who were seeking religious freedom connected to Israel being brought into the Promised Land.⁶ Use of these key biblical images helped shape identity in ways that preserved and nurtured identity and calling in these groups. Typological association with Christ invites survivors to move beyond seeing themselves as "bystanders in a scene that also involves Christ" in order to nurture their Christian identity and "see in their own lives the stages that mark the history of Christ's ministry."⁷

A key stage in Christ's journey that may be especially important as we move through Lent to Holy week in this season of social distancing is to mark Holy Saturday. Holy Saturday passes quietly in many traditions, but this time between Christ's death and resurrection where Jesus "harrows hell" may serve as a theological holding space for trauma survivors who may

⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁶ Ibid. See also Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Foundations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 55.

⁷ Bridgers, "Resurrected Life," 43.

also feel caught in the middle between the past and the future, between life and death.⁸ Those suffering from Covid 19 or experiencing the suffering of family members may see their own journeys as a kind of descent into hell—a place of torment where others cannot reach and from where there is no return. Part of Jesus’s redeeming act is to reach into hell—to reach beyond where humans can reach and return. Jesus is not limited, even in his death. Jesus is Lord of the dead and the living.⁹ Preaching the descent into hell may take the form of pure lament, directed to a God who is present and listening, like in the tradition of the Psalms. Early commentators on the Apostles’ Creed describe Jesus’s actions in hell as involving proclamation and liberation where the good news is preached and the damned are set free from the chains and prisons that have held them.¹⁰ Thus the first taste of resurrection is offered to those who are dead and enslaved. Christ’s descent into hell is the transitional move from cross to resurrection.¹¹ This is profound good news for any who currently find themselves in “hell.”

Marking Christ’s descent into hell and the “middle time” of Holy Saturday acknowledges that the move from death to new life may be slow and painful. We may feel “stuck “this year in ways we have not in the past. Christ’s descent into hell offers assurance that Christ’s power extends beyond the earthly and heavenly realms to those who are unable to respond and seem beyond reach and beyond hope.¹²

⁸ Shelly Rambo, “Saturday in New Orleans: Rethinking the Holy Spirit in the Aftermath of Trauma,” *Sage Journals* 105, no. 2 (May 1, 2008): 231–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003463730810500206>.

⁹ See also James F. Kay, “He Descended into Hell,” *Word & World* 31, no. 1 (Winter 2011): 23; Rom 14:9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Kay cites Rufinus, *A Commentary on the Apostles’ Creed*, trans. and ed. J. N. D. Kelly (New York: Newman, 1978), 51–52, 61.

¹¹ Kay, “He Descended,” 23.

¹² See also Kay, “He Descended,” 23–24.

6) Care for Yourself

Unlike some traumatic experiences when a pastor is called to respond, this global health crisis is affecting all of us. Pastors need to care for themselves physically, spiritually, mentally, and emotionally. Preachers, be gentle to yourself and lower your expectations of yourself and others. Find a life-giving spiritual discipline such as setting aside time for prayer or fasting, consider reading scripture with your family if you are home with spouse and children. Get enough sleep and physical activity to keep your own energy up. Connect with other pastors and leaders through social media or video conferencing. You are not alone.

Counter to all appearances, there is generative possibility for preaching in the midst of a time such as this. The Holy Spirit, is already interceding for us when we are at a loss for words, which gives us assurance and power to also dare to speak words that grow hope and nurture resilience and even healing in the midst of and in the aftermath of this pandemic.