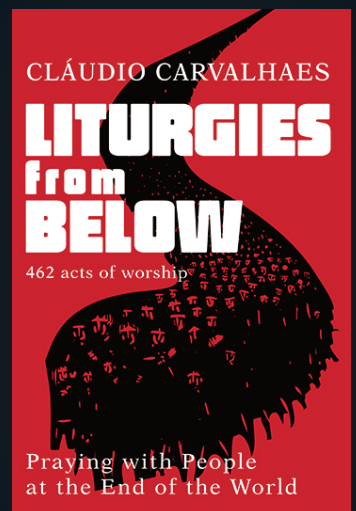
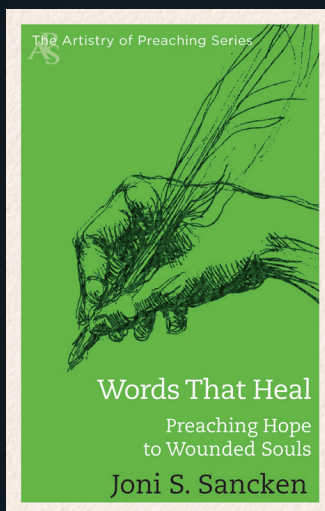
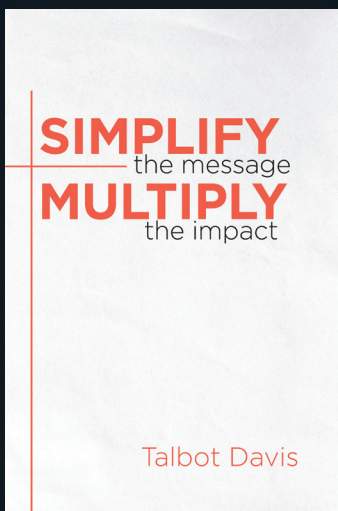
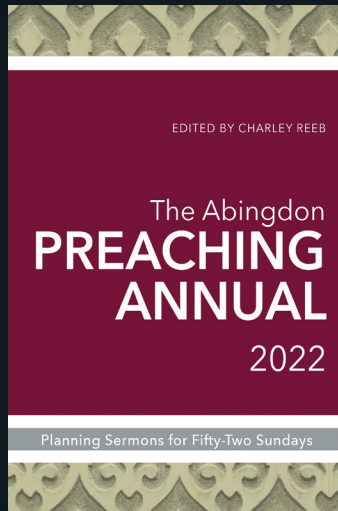
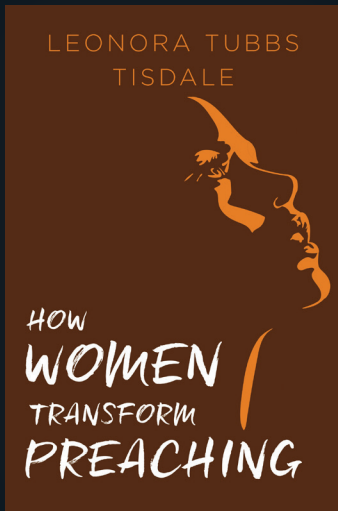


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How Women Transform Preaching

Leonora Tubbs Tisdale

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*This book is dedicated,
with deep and abiding gratitude,
to the many women preachers, scholars, and theological students
who have courageously and boldly
lived into their callings to preach and to teach preaching,
and by so doing
have transformed our lives,
our understandings of preaching,
and our visions of God and the world*

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Chapter One

Women Preachers in the USA: A Sixty-Year Retrospective

What the Statistics Tell Us

Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair Lummis, and Patricia Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*

Thirty years ago Barbara Brown Zikmund (then President of Hartford Seminary), her colleague in sociology Adair Lummis, and research associate Patricia Chang undertook what was at the time the most extensive survey of clergywomen from predominantly white Protestant denominations ever undertaken. Their research, published in the book *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*, summarized the findings from nearly five thousand surveys provided by ordained women and men in fifteen Protestant denominations, including the major “mainline” traditions as well as Southern Baptist, Unitarian-Universalist, and Assemblies of God denominations. These researchers did not include historically black Protestant denominations in their study since they were at the time being surveyed in another study undertaken by Delores Carpenter of Howard University—about which I will say more shortly.

The aims of the research by this team were several-fold:

- to compare statistically the numbers of clergywomen in the mid-1990s with the numbers evidenced in another study undertaken in 1977,
- to explore the ways in which various denominational procedures and practices influenced the experience of clergywomen within them, and
- to assess how successfully denominations and congregations were handling the rising numbers of clergywomen.¹

At the time of their survey, Zikmund and her team found that United Methodists reported the largest number of ordained women overall (around three thousand²), followed by the United Church of Christ (around eighteen hundred) and the Assemblies of God (around sixteen hundred). However, when they looked at the percentages of clergywomen within various denominations they found that the Unitarian-Universalists had the highest percentage of women (30 percent), the UCC the second highest (25 percent), followed by the Disciples of Christ, which had 18 percent. The Southern Baptist Convention, which had formally adopted resolutions against the ordination of women, and the Free Methodist Church had the smallest percentages (fewer than 1 percent). Their study did not include Roman Catholic or Orthodox denominations who were not ordaining women at all.

Their study also showed that clergywomen were significantly underpaid relative to men (earning 9 percent less than their male counterparts in similar jobs), and that women had more difficulty finding jobs than their male counterparts—in part because denominational leadership deployment procedures consistently placed women at a disadvantage. “Clergy

1. Barbara Brown Zikmund, Adair T. Loomis, and Patricia Mei Yin Chang, *Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998). Much of the research cited in this section is summarized in “*Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*, an abstract of the study” written by the authors and found online at the Hartford Institute for Religion Research website, http://hrr.hartsem.edu/bookshelf/clergywomen_abstract.html, 2.

2. I have rounded off the statistics to the nearest hundred.

women,” they wrote, “are unwittingly ‘tracked’ onto positions with less occupational status and promise.”³ They also found that women were far more likely than men to become part-time pastors, to opt for employment in specialized ministries such as chaplaincy or nonprofit work, or to leave parish ministry altogether.

These researchers subtitled their book about clergywomen “an uphill calling” because they predicted that women would continue to battle practices and prejudices on the part of their denominations and congregations that would make the way forward a difficult one for them.

Delores C. Carpenter, *A Time for Honor: A Portrait of African American Clergywomen*

In 1999, Delores Carpenter, Associate Professor of Religious Education at Howard University, published her study of clergywomen from historically Black Protestant denominations. Her findings were recorded in her book *A Time for Honor: A Portrait of African American Clergywomen*. If Zikmund’s study showed that white women faced an uphill climb, Carpenter’s study showed that African American clergywomen were trying to scale mountain faces.

The pay gap between clergywomen and clergymen was 15 percent in the higher ranges,⁴ clergywomen’s acceptance in historically Black denominations was problematic (often with female congregants and male senior pastors being the most non-accepting), and their opportunities for serving as pastors of churches or for pastoral advancement were slim (given that congregations preferred younger male clergy as their senior pastors). Only one-fifth (21 percent) of the ordained clergywomen actually found employment as full-time pastors versus one-half (49 percent) of the male clergy.⁵ Given the reality that over half of the clergywomen were single—two-thirds of them being single mothers with children—the challenges they faced providing for themselves and their families were enormous. The

3. Zikmund et al, “*Clergy Women: An Uphill Calling*, an abstract,” 2–3.

4. Delores C. Carpenter, *A Time for Honor: A Portrait of African American Clergywomen* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 151–52.

5. Carpenter, *A Time for Honor*, 150.

majority said they acquired their primary salaries from secular jobs and worked either for free or for little pay in the church.⁶

These clergywomen also entered seminary later in life than their male counterparts (median age at admission being forty). Forty-five percent said they had switched denominations at some point, with over half of those (24 percent) saying that the desire for ordination was a major issue in doing so.⁷

These statistics give testimony to the ways in which women's experiences of call are complicated by gender formation and delayed awareness of their own gifts and abilities. When women grow up in an environment that discourages them from recognizing their God-given gifts and callings, or that openly forbids them from taking up the mantle of preacher, it takes tremendous courage, perseverance, and time for them to pursue that calling. When you add to the emotional and psychological pressures women endure—the grim realities of trying to provide for their families when jobs are scarce, salaries are poor, and positive support from parishioners is lacking—it is a wonder these women pursued their callings at all.

Eileen Campbell-Reed, "State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.: A Statistical Update October 2018"

The latest study of clergywomen was undertaken in 2018 by Eileen Campbell-Reed, a Baptist clergywoman who describes herself as an "academic entrepreneur." When she realized that no major studies had been made of clergywomen in the past two decades, she and her research assistant sought to correct that oversight by conducting their own study in conversation with a number of denominational staff and the statistics they provided her.⁸ She has published some of her most significant findings in an online article, while she works on a full-length book.

Here are some of the major findings:

6. Carpenter, *A Time for Honor*, 151–54.

7. Carpenter, *A Time for Honor*, 139–40.

8. Eileen Campbell-Reed, "State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.: A Statistical Update October 2018." The report is posted on Campbell-Reed's blogsite at eileencampbellreed.org. She reports that a book project on clergywomen in the US is currently underway.

- In 1960, the US census reported women represented 2.3 percent of all US clergy. In 2016 census reports, women represented 20.7 percent of all professional clergy.⁹
- In a number of the “mainline” denominations, the percentage of clergywomen has doubled or tripled since 1994. For example, numbers have tripled in the Episcopal Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church, and Assemblies of God.¹⁰ Numbers of clergywomen in the United Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and Church of the Brethren have doubled, while Presbyterians (USA) grew from 19 percent to 29 percent.¹¹ American Baptist numbers have remained relatively unchanged the past twenty years with only 13 percent of the clergy being women.¹² On the other end of the spectrum, Unitarian Universalist and United Church of Christ clergywomen *have actually reached numerical equity with clergymen*.¹³
- In addition, their research showed that numbers were also growing in other Protestant, Pentecostal, and Peace churches. Women currently represent 30 percent of Mennonite clergy, 25 percent of Church of God clergy, and 37 percent of Four-square clergy.¹⁴ The statistics for Southern Baptist women are harder to track since that denomination still denies ordination to women. However, the progressive Alliance of Baptists that broke off from the Southern Baptist Convention in 1987 has women pastoring 40 percent of its congregations (it is a small denomination with only 143 congregations), and women are pastoring 7 percent of congregations in the more moderate Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Notably, however, this study

9. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 2.

10. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 6.

11. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 7.

12. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.”

13. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.” Italics added for emphasis.

14. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.”

claims that “*none of the 47,000 Southern Baptist congregations in the U.S. reportedly have female pastors.*”¹⁵

- While the Roman Catholic Church still denies women’s ordination to the offices of priest and deacon, this study notes that since 2015, lay ministers outnumber priests as designated leaders in parish ministry in the US, and 80 percent of those lay ecclesial ministers are women.¹⁶

Campbell-Reed also notes that “in historically Black denominations, women continue to push up a very steep hill to follow God’s call into professional ministry. For example, in Black Baptist churches women represent 50-75% of church members, but less than 10% of church leadership, and perhaps 1% of pastors.”¹⁷ The African Methodist Episcopal Church offers more hopeful statistics in that a 2017 annual report on women in ministry identified thirty-two hundred women being ordained for pastoral office, and around twelve hundred serving appointments as congregational pastors.¹⁸ Since 2000, the AME Church has also elected four women to the office of Bishop.¹⁹

Campbell-Reed also observed that during the past twenty years one of the biggest changes in church leadership has been the increasing acceptance of LGBTQ+ folk as ordained ministers and even, in some cases, as bishops. However, she also says that in many places, “they continue to struggle uphill in their vocations to serve churches that remain ambivalent or outright hostile to them.”²⁰

15. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 7–8. Italics added for emphasis.

16. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 7. These statistics come from CARA, Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

17. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 8.

18. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.” While Campbell-Reed does not indicate what percentage of the whole these female pastors constitute, she does cite a 2016 report that estimates that women constituted more than one-fourth of congregational pastors (26 percent) in AME churches.

19. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 8.

20. Campbell-Reed, “State of the Clergywomen in the U.S.,” 9.

Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word: Women's Ordination in Modern America*

Finally, a book on women's ordination in America, published in 2018 by two political scientists, Benjamin Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, cites several additional statistics worthy of our consideration:

- A 2015 National Congregations Survey showed that while three out of five congregations in the US (around 60 percent) allow women to serve as the head clergy person, only 11 percent of the congregations actually have women serving as the “senior or solo” pastoral leader.²¹ There is a huge gap, then, between what denominations allow and what congregations actually do.
- While Zikmund and Williams found in 1990 that clergywomen made between 9 percent and 15 percent less than clergymen in comparable jobs, a 2016 study found that clergywomen made, on average, only seventy-six cents for every dollar that male clergy made (25 percent less).²² Evidently the pay gap between male and female clergy colleagues is increasing, not decreasing.

When taken together these statistics tell a mixed tale. In some denominations, the numbers of women clergy are rapidly expanding and even reaching numerical parity with clergymen, while in other traditions they are not growing much at all and seem to have stalled.²³ Furthermore,

21. See Mark Chaves and Alison Eagle, “National Congregations Study” (2015), http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSIII_report_final.pdf (May 3, 2016), as quoted in Benjamin R. Knoll and Cammie Jo Bolin, *She Preached the Word: Women's Ordination in Modern America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 10.

22. Tobin Grant, “Gender Pay Gap Among Clergy Worse Than National Average—a First Look at the New National Data,” Religion News Service. <https://religionnews.com/2016/01/12/gender-pay-gap-among-clergy-worse-than-national-average-a-first-look-at-the-new-national-data/> (May 3, 2016), as cited in Knoll and Bolin, *She Preached the Word*, 29.

23. A study by Knoll and Bolin, based on census data, claims that overall the percentage of clergywomen in the US has stalled at around 15 percent since the mid-1990s. See *She Preached the Word*, pp. 9–10. This finding, however, is at odds with the findings of Eileen Campbell-Reed regarding the rapid growth of women clergy in some denominations and her claim that women clergy now comprise 20 percent of the US clergy population.

while the numbers overall are growing, it is still the case that women are the senior or solo pastoral leader in only 11 percent of US congregations. And in the two largest church bodies in the US—the Southern Baptist Convention and the Roman Catholic church—it is still not possible for women to be ordained to ministry at all. Clergywomen are still being underpaid compared to their male counterparts. They still have difficulty getting calls as senior pastors in larger parishes, and they tend to spend longer periods of time in rural parishes or as assistant pastors than they do as solo pastors or senior pastors.

These realities are what the statistics reveal to us. But what do the women themselves tell us about becoming a preaching woman in the US during the past sixty years?

The Stories of the Homiletical Foremothers

As indicated in the introduction to this volume, as a part of my research for this book I interviewed sixteen women who not only have been preachers themselves but also, for the most part, have pursued careers in homiletical scholarship and teaching. I wanted to hear from them—in their own voices—how this preaching journey has unfolded for them, where they have faced challenges and triumphs in ministry, and how they perceive the preaching scene for women today. My own interview sample was admittedly narrow—comprised primarily of women who have been trailblazers in the field of homiletics in the US²⁴—so I certainly do not claim that these women speak for clergywomen as a whole. But their responses to the questions I asked all of them do help flesh out and amplify some of the statistics I have cited here—as well as chronicling the often-difficult life experiences that have gone on behind the scenes as these women responded to their own calls to preach. I can well imagine

24. For a complete listing of the homiletical foremothers I interviewed and the questions I asked them, see appendixes A and B.

that many seminarians and clergywomen will find places of identification within their stories.

Hearing a Woman Preach for the First Time

The very first questions I asked all of the women I interviewed were: *When was the first time you heard a woman preach? And what was the effect of that experience on you?* For nearly all the white Protestant clergywomen I interviewed, the answer to the first question was very much akin to my own experience (see the introduction). These women did not hear a woman preach from a pulpit until they were young adults, often after they had entered seminary. Sometimes they couldn't even remember the first woman preacher they heard; they just knew that they had been in churches pastored by men their entire lives until adulthood.

In terms of the effect this experience had on them, Carol Norén, who is ordained in The United Methodist Church and who taught for many years at North Park Theological Seminary in Illinois, recounts that she was twenty-four years old and engaging in a seminary internship in Manchester, England, when she heard Sister Mabel Sykes, a Methodist deaconess, lead the Sunday evening service at one of the two churches she was serving. Norén says, "As she preached, I had the sensation of someone holding up a mirror, that is, 'Oh! *This* is how it looks and sounds when a woman is preaching. I wonder if that's the way I look and sound.'" She adds, "I hadn't given . . . much thought to gender and preaching before that."²⁵

Lucy Lind Hogan, a recently retired professor of preaching and worship at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, DC, and an ordained Episcopal priest, recalls that when she entered seminary in 1976 at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific in Berkeley, California, women were not allowed to be ordained priests. They were allowed to be ordained deacons, but thus far none had been. "In fact," she says, "I thought 'Why am I doing this? I don't even know why I'm doing this.'" The first women she heard preach were her two classmates in her introduction to preaching class. There were actually four students in the class, Lucy recounts—three

25. Carol Norén (Wesley Nelson Professor of Homiletics, *emerita*, North Park Theological Seminary), interview questions answered in writing by Norén, November 5, 2018.

women and one man and the professor who was a church musician. “We just wrote a sermon every week and preached it to each other. So basically two other women and I taught ourselves to preach.”²⁶

Mary Donovan Turner, who has taught preaching for nearly three decades at Pacific School of Religion, says she has no memories of the first time she heard a woman preach and surmises that it must have been while she was in seminary. All of her pastors growing up in a Disciples of Christ church in Louisiana were men, and she even says that when she last visited that church about ten years ago, it still had an all-male pastoral staff and an all-male group of elders and deacons, marching down the aisle two by two, to serve Communion.

But Turner has very early positive memories of church and being drawn toward its mysteries:

Even as a five-year-old I was enthralled with the mystery of it. There was in the front of that Disciple church the baptistry . . . because we were immersed, and then there are these glass panels on each side of the baptistry. It is a phenomenally beautiful brick church, inside and out. . . . I still dream about it. So on Sunday morning the big organ would start playing and the minister would come through one of those glass panels that doesn't really look like a door. . . . And in my child's mind, there are all these passageways back there. It's mysterious and dark and close to God back there.²⁷

Lutheran pastor and professor Barbara Lundblad, now retired from teaching preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York, doesn't remember the first time she heard a woman preach either. But she does recall the first time she saw a woman preside at the Eucharist. It was in Marquand Chapel at Yale Divinity School in 1976 when Lundblad was a first-year seminary student and was thirty-two years old. Joan Forsberg, who had been ordained by the United Church of Christ in 1954, and who went on to serve as Registrar and then Dean of Students at the Divinity

26. Lucy Lind Hogan (Hugh Latimer Elderdice Professor of Preaching and Worship, *emerita*, Wesley Theological Seminary), Zoom interview by the author, December 12, 2018.

27. Mary Donovan Turner (Carl Patton Professor of Preaching, *emerita*, Pacific School of Religion), Zoom interview by the author, December 10, 2018.

School, mentoring many women students along the way, was the presider at the table.

“She was such an amazing presence,” Lundblad recounts. “What I think I most remember is her presence and the way she reached out to this whole community of people. We were all gathered around the Communion table there, and she did the invitation: ‘Come from the East and the West and the North and the South.’ As she did that, she turned around, and I just felt like, this is the first time I have ever been invited to Communion in my life.”²⁸

Jana Childers, an ordained Presbyterian minister and professor of preaching at University of Redlands/San Francisco Theological Seminary, recalls growing up as a child in a conservative Pentecostal church and surviving church by regularly critiquing the sermons she experienced as being in a “manipulative style.” Her first experience hearing a woman preach came just before she went to seminary. “She had red hair,” said Childers (who has red hair herself). “I was just so struck with the light falling on that hair, and that face, and the fact that I was watching a woman preach. It’s one of those mental snapshots that you carry all the rest of your life. She was lively and she was very sharp. Her points were very focused. I think I remember thinking, ‘I don’t think that I’m that focused, but I sure do like the whole idea of what she is doing.’”²⁹

Christine Smith, author of the first book that addressed preaching from a feminist perspective, recalls that she was in college and on vacation at Nags Head, North Carolina, with her family when she heard that a woman who ran a beach ministry there was going to be preaching the following Sunday morning. Smith herself says that she had had a strong sense of call to ordained ministry since high school but had never before seen a woman do what she wanted to do. She announced to her family that she was going to hear this woman preach. What was it like for her? “I

28. Barbara K. Lundblad (Joe R. Engle Professor of Homiletics, *emerita*, Union Theological Seminary, New York), Zoom interview by the author, November 1, 2018.

29. Jana Childers (Dean, University of Redlands School of Theology/San Francisco Theological Seminary; Professor of Homiletics and Speech Communication), Zoom interview by the author, November 16, 2018.

think I was really overcome with joy,” she said, “and with . . . some sorrow that I was in college and I had never seen a woman preach.”³⁰

For United Methodist Alyce McKenzie, who teaches preaching at Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University, the first time she heard a woman preach was after she had been ordained and was attending a workshop led by the noted preacher and author Barbara Brown Taylor. “I was in awe,” she said, “and I thought, ‘Why aren’t there more role models around? Where were they? Thank God I have had this experience.’”³¹

The Roman Catholic women I interviewed, both of whom are women religious, had a somewhat different experience than their Protestant counterparts regarding women and preaching.

Sister Joan Delaplane, who was the very first woman to join the Academy of Homiletics (the North American society of teachers of preaching) in 1977, and who celebrated seventy years as a sister in the Dominican Order (Order of Preachers) in 2019, recounts, “It’s a good question (when I first heard a woman preach), and it’s a hard one for me because growing up Catholic and having Catholic (biological) sisters, they really preached, I would say, in a different kind of way. Then I entered a community of all women who just ordinarily would speak, but they were really preaching, but we didn’t call it that. I think I was never taken aback, or stunned, or in awe when I’d hear women preaching because that’s just part of my life, but in a different kind of way. Not necessarily from the pulpit as it were.”³²

Mary Catherine Hilkert, professor of systematic theology at Notre Dame University and a former Lyman Beecher lecturer, is also a Dominican sister who recalls hearing her Dominican sisters preaching through the years. One of the most notable was Kathleen Cannon—now her colleague

30. Christine Marie Smith (Professor of Preaching *emerita* at United Theological Seminary of the Twin Cities), Zoom interview by the author, February 25, 2019.

31. Alyce M. McKenzie (George W. and Nell Ayers LeVan Professor of Preaching and Worship, Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University), Zoom interview by the author, November 16, 2018.

32. Joan Delaplane, O.P. (Adrian Dominican Sister of the Order of Preachers and professor of preaching for twenty-five years at Aquinas Institute of Theology in St. Louis), Zoom interview by the author, November 12, 2018.

at Notre Dame—who led a week-long retreat for Hilkert’s congregation in Akron, Ohio, where Hilkert was then serving as a school teacher. “It was a wonderful collaboration between herself and Paul Philbert, O.P., the Dominican friar she was preaching with, that gave me such a sense of the scriptures, and how she lives them, loves them.” Hilkert also recalled hearing a prioress in her community who had spent much of her life in El Salvador and who had known Oscar Romero, preaching powerfully and joyfully out of a strong sense of social justice.³³

Several of the women of color I interviewed also recalled women “preaching”—but not as ordained women and not from the pulpit.

Minerva Carcaño, the first Latina Bishop in The United Methodist Church, says that though she didn’t hear women officially preaching until she was in preaching class in seminary, she had known three women—lay-women—who were local pastors and gave tremendous witness to their faith “around the edges.” She also recalls how her grandmother Sophia and her mother, Rebecca, would preach to her at the table and unpack Scripture for her.

When she first heard her women classmates preach in seminary, she says, “I felt this great resonance with these women, I felt their spirit, I felt the possibility of preaching in my own voice. I found in our brothers in the class very much the model of traditional preaching and I thought, ‘I’m not a man. That doesn’t feel comfortable.’ It didn’t feel like that was a skin I could put on.”³⁴

Teresa Fry Brown, the Bandy Professor of Preaching at Candler School of Theology and the first African American woman tenured on that faculty, says that in her Black Baptist upbringing, though she didn’t hear women doing what was called “preaching,” there were women in her culture who were called “prayer warriors” who would lead testimony services. “They were doing the same thing as men were doing, but they were ‘speakers.’ So I heard speakers from the time I was aware I was in church.” She says that her own Aunt Thelma, her grandmother’s sister, was the

33. Mary Catherine Hilkert, O.P. (Professor of Theology, University of Notre Dame), Zoom interview by the author, December 5, 2018.

34. Minerva G. Carcaño (Bishop of the California-Nevada Conference of The United Methodist Church), Zoom interview by the author, December 6, 2018.

pastor of a church thirty-five miles from where she grew up but that the family never spoke of it and actually kept that fact a secret from her. She would hear Aunt Thelma speaking at churches, but she also reports that Thelma was never allowed to do so in the pulpit. She always had to do so from the floor.³⁵

Martha Simmons is one of those African American clergywomen De-lores Carpenter talks about who left her National Baptist denomination in the hopes of having more ministry options in the United Church of Christ. Simmons, the creator and director of the *African American Lectionary* and co-editor of the only African American preaching anthology to date, recalls that in her childhood, she never heard women preach from the pulpit but that she did hear women musicians “*sneak-a-preach.*” Simmons says this was a common practice in African American church history:

Women who couldn't use the title Reverend in certain circles, but who were very well liked in those circles, they didn't upset the apple cart; they'd *sneak-a-preach* while they were singing or praying. The most currently well-known preacher to do that is Shirley Caesar. I guess Shirley Caesar had been out there singing and sneaking preaching for thirty, forty years before she took the title Reverend. But I knew that woman was preaching. . . . And every time she sang, she would do it.³⁶

Gennifer Benjamin Brooks, Styberg professor of preaching at Garrett Evangelical Seminary, grew up in Trinidad in the Caribbean. She recounts that the one place she heard women preaching—though they wouldn't have considered themselves doing so—was in the Evangelical Spiritual Baptist (Shouters) church. These women would preach on street corners but not in church sanctuaries. “It seemed to me,” she said, “that what they preached was always very well connected to life. . . . I remember one woman coming down to the street where we lived and standing on the corner and preaching about the world . . . the state of the world. And she

35. Teresa Fry Brown (Bandy Professor of Preaching, Candler School of Theology, Emory University), Zoom interview by the author, December 7, 2018.

36. Martha Simmons (Creator and Director of the *African American Lectionary*), Zoom interview by the author, December 3, 2018.

saw babes with mothers in their arms. You heard what I said? Not mothers with babes in their arms. . . . That image has never left me.”³⁷

For Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig, who teaches preaching and liturgics at Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City, the path to preaching was somewhat different than that of her Christian homiletical colleagues. Wenig grew up in a secular Jewish household. She began to attend synagogue services and study with a rabbi only in high school. Her mother and aunt were pioneering feminists in their fields, so Wenig “just assumed women could do absolutely anything we wanted to. . . . It had not occurred to me that women couldn’t be rabbis.”³⁸ At the time she entered rabbinical school in 1978, there were only three women who had been ordained rabbis in the Reform movement (which began ordaining women in 1972) and one who had been ordained in the Reconstructionist movement.

The woman who was most influential in her preaching formation was Barbara Lundblad. The first congregation where Rabbi Wenig served, Beth Am, The People’s Temple in Washington Heights in New York City, rented space from the Lutheran congregation (Our Saviors Atonement Lutheran Church) where Barbara Lundblad served as pastor. “For all those years,” she recounts, “I not only heard [Barbara] preach. But for a number of those years, Barbara used to leave her Sunday sermon manuscript in the pulpit. And when I arrived for work on Monday, I’d find and read them. . . . Between the feedback that I received on a weekly basis from my congregation, which sat and discussed the sermon with the rabbi every Friday night following services, and Barbara’s example, I began to learn a lot more about preaching than I had learned in rabbinical school.”³⁹

37. Gennifer Benjamin Brooks (Ernest and Bernice Styberg Associate Professor of Preaching and Director of the Styberg Preaching Institute, Garrett Evangelical Seminary), Zoom interview by the author, November 2, 2018.

38. Margaret Moers Wenig (Lecturer on Homiletics and Liturgy, Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion), Zoom interview by the author, December 13, 2018.

39. Margaret Moers Wenig interview.

Challenges Faced on Path to Ministry

In my interviews with these women I also asked them about the challenges they faced along the way in their own paths toward ordination.

Alyce McKenzie recounts that the obstacles she encountered were mostly internal, since she was very shy and didn't want to go into a field that required public speaking.⁴⁰

Barbara Lundblad recounts a different internal struggle, pertaining to the whole matter of ordination itself. Before going to seminary Lundblad had worked for a number of years as a youth director in a parish in Minnesota and very much wanted to affirm the ministries of the laity. She felt that becoming ordained might be unfaithful to her affirmation of people in lay ministries and had to be convinced that this was an okay path for her to take. She recalls a panel at Yale Divinity School during her student days that helped clarify that calling for her.⁴¹

Linda Clader, who taught preaching for many years at the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, recounts that before she went to seminary, she was teaching Classics at a university and serving as the senior warden in her church and encountered opposition from some of the men on the vestry to having a woman in that position. "I had run into opposition about being a leader more than being an ordained person necessarily," she recounts.⁴²

But once again there is something of a divide between what the white women and women of color recounted about the intensity of opposition in their ordination experiences.

Minerva Carcaño, for example, tells of the opposition she received both from her parents and from her pastor when she indicated that she wanted to go to seminary and become ordained. When her father expressed concerns about his daughter going to seminary to their pastor, the pastor told him, "Pablito, let her go. She will find a good man called by

40. Alyce M. McKenzie interview.

41. Barbara K. Lundblad interview.

42. Linda Clader (Professor of Homiletics *Emerita*, Church Divinity School of the Pacific), Zoom interview by the author, November 5, 2018.

God, marry him, become a good wife to a pastor and all this will be left behind.”⁴³

A year or so later when Carcaño was in seminary at Perkins School of Theology, the Board of Ordained Ministry from her conference in Texas came to meet with the four people from the conference who were studying at Perkins: three men and Carcaño. She recounts that she was the last to be interviewed and that at the end of the interview, the people on the board turned to her pastor—who was sitting at the table with them, since he was the registrar for ministry for the conference—and said, “Why didn’t you tell us?” She realized in that moment that *her pastor had not even put her name on the list of seminarians up for ordination.*⁴⁴

Carcaño tells that later when she was ordained and was appointed by the Bishop to serve a small new church start of thirty people in Lubbock, Texas—a church that had been abandoned by their previous pastor—she arrived in January after a snow storm. She says, “It was tremendously cold and I’m trying to build a relationship with those who were present. And I felt the coldness of their welcome with some exceptions. When I got up to preach, I noticed that they were passing a book, person to person to person to person. In some cases I could see their finger pointing to a particular place in the book and whatever they were being invited to read as I preached. I learned at the end of the worship service that it was a Bible, and they had opened it to that Pauline passage that stated, ‘Women shall not speak in the community of faith.’ *[T]his was my first appointment, this was my first sermon as a pastor of a church in my own right. And that was the reception. And it was [the same] every Sunday for the time I was there.*”⁴⁵

Martha Simmons, who was worshipping at a Black Baptist church in San Francisco at the time she proposed going to seminary, recalls that some people in her congregation “lost their minds” when she indicated she wanted to become ordained, and they kept asking her, “Why are you doing this? Are you sure you can’t do something else?” “Finally,” she recounts, “the pastor gave me a date to preach [my licensing, or initial ser-

43. Minerva G. Carcaño interview.

44. Minerva G. Carcaño interview.

45. Minerva G. Carcaño interview.

mon], and the whole city was abuzz. They printed [an announcement] in the local newspaper . . . ; the place that held about two thousand people was packed. And [the pastor, at the last minute] cancelled it.” This happened to Simmons several more times over the space of a number of months before she eventually did preach her sermon and was licensed to preach.⁴⁶

Teresa Fry Brown recalls having six people in her AME ordination class: five men and herself. Fry Brown, whose husband divorced her when she decided to go into ministry, was a single mother. She said she expected opposition from men, but it was the older women in her home church who really made her life difficult. Some of them accused her of going into ministry so she could have sex with the men. Others acted out their opposition in more visual ways. “At that time,” she recounts, “we were worshipping in the education building, getting ready to build a new sanctuary. Whenever I was called to read a scripture, or do a prayer [this group of women] would literally stand up and turn their backs, turn the chairs around and sit with their backs to me.”⁴⁷

Certainly some of the Protestant women had very positive experiences in their first parishes. Jana Childers happily served a small New Jersey Presbyterian congregation for several years while she was in seminary at Princeton. Barbara Lundblad ended up serving in her first parish in New York City (Our Savior’s Atonement Lutheran Church) for over sixteen years.

But there were others who opted to go directly into PhD studies after seminary, in part because of the difficulty they had finding a job in a parish. Lucy Hogan recalls how difficult it was to find a job after she graduated from seminary. She said clergymen would just out and out lie to her that they didn’t have jobs, and the next thing she knew, they had hired one of her male classmates.

She also recalls that after she was ordained a priest in 1982, the Episcopal bishops voted in a “conscience clause” that allowed bishops in a diocese who opposed women’s ordination not to ordain women. Shortly

46. Martha Simmons interview.

47. Teresa Fry Brown interview.

thereafter Lucy's husband, who was a medical doctor in the Navy, was stationed in San Diego. Lucy, as a newly ordained priest from Minnesota, recalls visiting a local Episcopal church on a Sunday when the rector was absent because he was attending the church's General Convention. When he returned home, the rector called Lucy and said, "I understand you visited my church." She replied that she and her husband and son had visited. The rector then said, "I'd like to ask you not to do that again."⁴⁸ He didn't want an ordained woman worshipping in his congregation.

Christine Smith's story is the story, I fear, of far too many gay and lesbian folk who have answered the call of God to go into Christian ministry. As I've previously indicated, Chris grew up in the bosom of The United Methodist Church and felt a strong call to become a parish minister since her high school days. After graduating from seminary, she answered that call and went into parish ministry. But she says that she lived in constant fear of being outed and of losing either her church or her ordination or both. She pursued doctoral studies in preaching in order to chart a different career path for herself but testifies that her *true calling* was always to parish ministry. She later left The United Methodist Church for the United Church of Christ but also recounts standing in the midst of the seminary where she was teaching at the time she made her decision and weeping because she felt she had no choice but to do so.⁴⁹

The Challenges Continue

I share these stories with you because they give us just a glimpse into the reality of what contemporary clergywomen have had to go through to exercise their callings in Christ's church. And women are still struggling. I know outstanding clergywomen who, when they reach midlife, find it almost impossible to find a job in the parish appropriate for their gifts and capabilities because the preference for younger clergy or male clergy is so strong on the part of congregations. I know younger clergywomen who find that their denominations will ordain them but then give them

48. Lucy Lind Hogan interview.

49. Christine Marie Smith interview.

no help in finding parish-based jobs. And of course, there are still far too many LGBTQ+ clergy who live in constant fear of losing their jobs or their ordinations, or who are finding it impossible to be ordained at all in churches they dearly love.

Furthermore, there are still seminary students—including students I taught in recent years—who struggle to make their way in the church. I think of that Pentecostal student I taught who finally got her church body in Texas to ordain her but never could find a parish to serve within her denomination, so she ended up switching denominations and going through the entire ordination process all over again in the United Church of Christ. I think of that Roman Catholic Latina student I taught who had a fire in her bones to preach and finally announced to our class one day that she had begun preaching online, because God had called her and no one was going to stop her from exercising her gifts. And I think of a Korean American woman in my very last Women's Ways of Preaching class who also had a fire in her belly for preaching, who was quite a gifted preacher, but who seemed to face opposition to her voice and leadership at almost every turn.

As the statistics clearly show, we have come a long way during the past sixty years in ordaining more clergywomen, and in welcoming women into the pulpits of this land. I rejoice in and celebrate that reality. But we still have a way to go. As Lucy Hogan reminds us, "It is still the case that over half the church women of the world cannot be ordained."⁵⁰

And a part of what we need to do is to become the best advocates we can be for opening the pulpit to all women. I was struck when I interviewed these sixteen women preachers and teachers of preaching, at how many pointed to clergymen who had mentored them in their early years in ministry, had opened their pulpits to them, and had encouraged them to become all they were created to be. I was also struck by how important to these women was the support and encouragement of women—both lay and clergy—who would advocate for them and refuse to quit pressing the church to fully embrace them and their God-given callings.

50. Lucy Lind Hogan interview.

Yes, we've come a long way. But before we are tempted to rest on our laurels we also need to take a look at history that predates the past sixty years—the stories of preaching women who embraced their calls long before their denominations even thought about ordaining women—and ask, “*What was it that empowered them and gave them courage to persevere in their callings when church and society so strongly opposed them? And what do we learn from their witness about how to keep persevering in our own day and time?*”

That history, or rather “herstory,” is the focus of chapter 2.



EDITED BY CHARLEY REEB

The Abingdon
**PREACHING
ANNUAL**

2022

Planning Sermons for Fifty-Two Sundays



The Abingdon Preaching Annual
2022

The Abingdon
**Preaching
Annual**

2022

Planning Sermons and Services
for Fifty-Two Sundays

Charley Reeb, General Editor

 Abingdon Press[®]

Nashville

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Planning Sermons and Services for Fifty-Two Sundays

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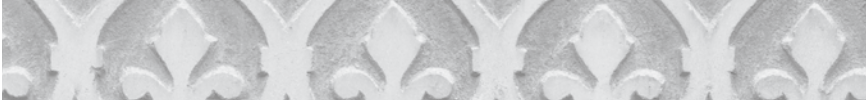
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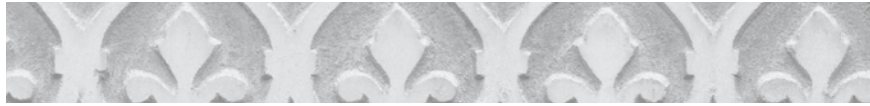
Preface

There are very few vocations that require an insightful and inspiring public address on a regular basis, but parish ministry is certainly one of them. Most parishioners will never know the amount of time and emotional energy needed to preach on a regular basis. “Don’t you just get up and talk?” It’s also difficult for most laypeople to appreciate the spiritual discipline, creativity, and resourcefulness necessary to offer fresh bread weekly from the pulpit. After all, choirs and praise bands can repeat songs and anthems and liturgists can rely on books of worship. But congregations don’t take too kindly to being served leftovers from the pulpit. Preachers, it would seem, are only as good as their last sermon.

I believe this year’s edition of *The Abingdon Preaching Annual* will be a useful resource for you as you seek to serve fresh bread to your congregations. I offer this helpful book to you as one who preaches weekly in the trenches of the local church and knows how quickly the well can run dry. I am certain you will find ideas, insights, and illustrations that will lessen the toil of “working up” a sermon each week. My goal as general editor was to acquire commentaries that aided preachers in the practical work of sermon preparation. One can only ruminate for so long on the meaning of a biblical text. Weekly worship is always rapidly approaching and the preacher must land on something to say that is clear, rousing, and relevant. The gifted contributors to this Annual will be reliable guides as you seek to be faithful to the sacred task of preaching.

I am grateful to Connie Stella and her gifted team at Abingdon Press. Putting together this resource takes many capable hands, and they have succeeded yet again.

Charley Reeb
General Editor



January 2, 2022–Second Sunday after Christmas Day

Jeremiah 31:7-14; Psalm 147:12-20; Ephesians 1:3-14;
John 1:(1-9), 10-18

Will Wold

Preacher to Preacher Prayer

Emmanuel, God with us, may you inspire us through this Christmas season to see where you are interacting in the world. Help us, this season and every season of our lives, to see where the Word becomes flesh. Might these moments inspire the words that we preach and speak to our communities. Amen.

Commentary

Well preacher, you made it. You survived. Advent is officially in the books. The Christmas musicals have been performed. The children have been corralled and dressed up like shepherds and donkeys. The Christmas Eve sermon has been preached and candles have been lifted. Take a deep breath.

Yet, liturgically, we are still in the Christmas season. All of your creative Christmas ideas have been preached, but we continue to celebrate the birth of Christ. What can we say about Jesus's birth that we have not said already?

We arrive at the Gospel of John's first chapter, the prologue. The prologue is a beautiful poem about the Word becoming flesh and making a home among us. There is so much content in this passage that the text almost preaches itself. So, before you, the preacher, read any more of this commentary, read the scripture slowly to yourself. As you read, make notes of what sticks out. Highlight words or phrases that resonate within your heart. Write in the margins what the Spirit is speaking to you. Do that before you move on to the rest of the commentary.

John 1:1-18 is full of images, wordplay, and metaphors. As you are moving from your own notes to crafting a sermon, try not to capture everything at once. If you do, it would be like trying to eat a pound of fudge in one sitting. It is too rich and will overwhelm you and your congregation. Pick one path or image and move deep into

that idea. Let the Spirit guide your sermon art to be precise and focused. If you do that, the congregation will be grateful for the morsel you are providing them.

The birth of Christ in the Gospel of John is uniquely different from the other two Gospel birth narratives found in Matthew and Luke. John is not a narrative with shepherds or magi, rather, it is a poem expressing Christ being with God in the beginning.

The Gospel of Matthew begins with the genealogy of Jesus starting with Abraham. Then the author narrates Joseph's experience with the Holy Spirit, the birth of Jesus, King Herod's trouble with the newborn king, and the magi visiting Jesus. In Matthew, the story is locked within that particular time and space—a time where Herod is king and Rome is the dominant empire. There is a temporal understanding of Jesus's birth.

A similar scenario occurs in the Gospel of Luke. Luke narrates the birth of John the Baptist, Mary visiting Elizabeth, Jesus being born when Quirinius governed Syria, and the shepherds visiting Jesus. Again, the birth story of Jesus is locked in the time and space of the world. Luke provides us with a birth story that is found in a particular time period.

The Gospel of John illustrates the birth of Jesus unusually. Instead of a narrative of Jesus being born, John writes of Jesus Christ as the "Word" and being with God in the beginning. John explicitly recognizes Jesus is outside of time and space, but instead was with God when nothing existed. On one hand, this is an artistic expression linking Jesus to Genesis 1. On the other hand, it is a theological expression to have Jesus exist within time and outside of time. The proclamation of John is that Jesus was with God before any existence. Jesus and God are interconnected as the same entity. Jesus is not chained to a temporal understanding, but exists outside of understood time.

Now what this means for the preacher is that the particularities of John illustrate that Christmas is not found only within the month of December. Churches can celebrate Christmas all year round. Everything came into being through the Word and we celebrate the Word, which is Christ, every day. There is no time in which Christ was not, so there is no time that is not Christmas.

How might you celebrate Christmas each day? What would that look like for you and your congregation? How might that shape your understanding of Christ? How might that change your Christmas season this year?

Bringing the Text to Life

When I first started preaching, I encountered a gentle, loving man named Jerry. Jerry was one of those people who never knew a stranger. He had a heart to get to know people and love them. I remember preaching my first Sunday in September and after the service Jerry met me in the receiving line in the back of the church. He introduced himself and his wife, and when he left he told me "Merry Christmas." I thought to myself, "It's September. Does Jerry not know what month we are in?"

The following week when I saw Jerry sitting in the front office volunteering, the first thing out of his mouth was "Merry Christmas, Pastor Will." I must have had a

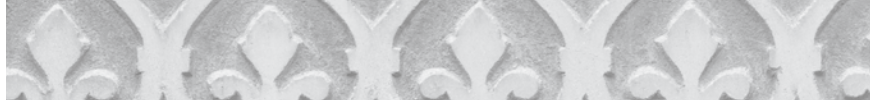
baffled look on my face—it was still September. So, I spoke up and said, “Jerry, it’s September and not December. Why are you wishing me a Merry Christmas?”

Jerry then leaned back in his chair with his hands on the back of head as if he were relaxing, and said, “I had a pastor once who told me that when Christ came to the earth it was not just to celebrate one day, but every day. So now, I say Merry Christmas every day as a reminder that Christ is with us every day.” I was flabbergasted and had never thought of Christmas that way.

Every time I saw Jerry he wished me a Merry Christmas and I wished it back to him. Four years later, heartbreakingly and ironically, on Christmas Eve, I got a dreadful phone call that Jerry had died of a heart attack. My heart broke and I remembered all of the moments he had wished me Merry Christmas. We had his funeral the following week and the first thing out of my mouth to welcome the congregation were two words, *Merry Christmas*.

Christ coming to be with us is something we remember all year long. In the same way, the Gospel of John reminds us of the “Word becoming flesh and making a home with us.”

May you, the preacher, remember that Christmas is available at any time. The Word has become flesh for eternity. During this Christmas season and every season, may you remember the words of Jerry, “Merry Christmas.”



January 9, 2022–Baptism of the Lord

Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; **Luke 3:15-17, 21-22**

Will Wold

Preacher to Preacher Prayer

God of wonder and inspiration, through baptism, you prepared Jesus for his ministry in the world. In this text, might you inspire us with your Holy Spirit to prepare our hearts and minds for preaching hope into our world. Amen.

Commentary

Preaching the lectionary texts can become difficult to do every year. We often find ourselves scratching the bottom of the sermon barrel after preaching multiple times on the same text. Baptism of the Lord Sunday is no different. We can only orchestrate a renewal of baptism service so many times before it becomes mundane and ordinary. However, what happens in baptism is anything but ordinary. So, what do we do with the Gospel of Luke's narrative of the baptism of Jesus? Are there other ways we can see this text? How can this passage be reimagined with newly baptized eyes?

One of the first questions a preacher must ask is "Am I going to preach on the festival of baptism or am I going to focus on the text itself and see where the Spirit guides me?" Both approaches can serve a purpose for the congregation, but the preacher has to decide which path to take. If the preacher focuses on the festival of baptism, there are many other baptismal texts that one can use (see further Matt 28:19-20; Acts 10; 1 Cor 12:12-14). The preacher might expound upon what baptism is, what it means in our tradition of faith, and how baptism impacts the lives of the congregation.

However, this pericope will focus on the specific Lukan text itself. How might the baptism of the Lord text from Luke open itself up for the preacher, and in turn, how might the preacher be opened to the Spirit of God?

Luke's narrative of the baptism of Jesus is distinctive in comparison to the other Gospel writers in a few ways. First, when John announces that Jesus will baptize the

people with Holy Spirit and fire, he uses imagery of a threshing area. Luke writes, “The shovel he [Jesus] uses to sift the wheat from the husks . . . he will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn.” The threshing area is a space to make crops edible.

Threshing is a process where one releases grains from crops, like wheat and barley. The farmer would tie the stalks together and crush the stalks in order to separate the grain from the stalk.¹ The stalk is then discarded. The grain is the edible part of the plant but contains a covering over the actual fruit. Once the grain is separated, then the process of winnowing begins. Winnowing is the process of throwing the grain into the air and having the wind remove the inedible covering over the grain.² In the ancient Near East, you could use your hand to throw the grain into the air or you could use a shovel. In the NIV, the word *shovel* is translated as “winnowing fork.” Once winnowing was complete, the grain would be ready for use.

The word in Greek used for wind and spirit is the same word, *pneuma*. The spirit and wind help to separate the usable from the unusable parts of the plant. In the same way, the Spirit helps us to separate the unusable in our lives and our faith, which then prepares us for ministry.

Sometimes this text is preached in an eschatological way, which is to say that Jesus is coming to separate the stalk from the grain in a final judgment. However, what if this text isn't solely about the future, but might be speaking about the present? What hard work needs to be done now with the help of the Spirit to purify us and remove the grain from the stalk? What are the parts of our lives needing threshing and winnowing? How might baptism be a tool of the spirit that gives us new life? How might the wind help us clear the stalks and unnecessary parts of our lives of faith?

Another exceptional part of this text is found in a small detail. Right after Jesus's baptism, Jesus was praying and then heaven opened up. Jesus praying is unique to the entire Gospel of Luke. In Luke 6:12-16, Jesus prays all night before he chooses the twelve disciples. In Luke 9:28-29 before the Transfiguration, Jesus went to the mountain in order to pray and is transfigured while he is praying (the Gospels of Matthew and Mark only state “they were alone” and “he was transformed”). In Luke 23:34, Jesus also prays for those who were crucifying him: “Father, forgive them, for they don't know what they're doing.” All of these times of prayer are unique to Luke when compared to other Gospels.

Prayer is powerful both in Luke and in the church. The prayers of Jesus precipitated large movements of the Spirit. Prayer prepares our hearts for how God works within our lives. What does prayer look like for you? How does it shape your relationship with God and others? How are you intentionally praying like Christ? Are there moments where you have seen God move as you have prayed?

Bringing the Text to Life

This time of year is perfect to discuss where God is threshing and winnowing within the congregation's life. Most people attempt a New Year's resolution, so it is timely that this scripture allows for the Spirit to share what stalks we need to thresh and winnow.

What would it look like to buy actual stalks of barley in order to illustrate how threshing and winnowing happens? The preacher would then move to discuss how Christ does this within our lives. Purification can occur through baptism or remembrance of your baptism. The theme of the sermon would be about God calling us into new life and leaving the old life behind.

Other texts the preacher could add into the sermon would be Galatians 3:26-27, where Paul writes, “You are all God’s children through faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.” The preacher could also discuss John 15:1-2, where Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don’t produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit.” Both of these texts talk about new life given by the Spirit and that the old must be removed.

On the Baptism of the Lord Sunday, may we recognize the Spirit’s ability to purify us through the threshing floor and baptism. May we ourselves be prepared for ministry by purifying our own lives of impurities.



January 16, 2022—Second Sunday after Epiphany

Isaiah 62:1-5; Psalm 36:5-10; **1 Corinthians 12:1-11**; John 2:1-11

Chris Jones

Preacher to Preacher Prayer

God, thank you for creating us in your image, for calling us to new life, and for infusing each of us with spiritual gifts. Remind us that these gifts are not for ourselves but for the building up of your church and the advancement of your kingdom on this planet. Please help us to use our spiritual gifts in ways that please and honor you. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Commentary

Whoever remarked that modern-day churches would be better off if they patterned themselves after a New Testament congregation clearly never read 1 Corinthians. Corinth was a church with all kinds of issues—from division to sexual immorality to abuse of the Lord's Supper. Like an attorney, Paul skillfully and masterfully addresses these issues as he exhorts the Corinthian Christians. Along the way, he draws attention to the subject of spiritual gifts, a subject of which he fears at least some in his congregation are ignorant. Indeed, he starts off this passage by writing, "Brothers and sisters, I don't want you to be *ignorant* about spiritual gifts" (1 Cor 12:1, emphasis mine).

Why does Paul worry about such ignorance? Because the apostle knows what is at stake if it abounds—the church, and therefore the ministry of Jesus Christ, will suffer. Paul's deepest desire is for the gospel message to go forth and spread into all the world. He wants others to come to know and experience the depth of God's love in Jesus. However, he also knows that for that dream to become a reality, the Corinthians must come to a proper understanding of spiritual gifts.

Spiritual gifts, he argues, have their origin in (surprise, surprise!) the Spirit (1 Cor 12:4-6). This means they're not the product of birth but rebirth. Put simply, spiritual gifts aren't intrinsic to who we are as people. They're not a part of our DNA

or genetic makeup. We don't inherit them from our parents. They're not passed down generationally. Instead, they're gifts of the Spirit, gifts that we receive when we give our lives over to God through Jesus Christ. Our conversion to God's goodness and love causes the Holy Spirit to produce certain gifts in us. Further, as Paul reminds us, these gifts are not for us but for the benefit of the church. The hope is that we will use our gifts in conjunction with the gifts of others so that the ministry of Jesus may flourish in the world.

Like any good preacher, Paul doesn't just talk about spiritual gifts in the theoretical. He identifies various examples—words of wisdom, words of knowledge, gifts of faith, and so on. It's an exhausting list but not an exhaustive one. Indeed, Paul goes on to name other gifts in Romans 12:6-8.

While Paul works hard in this passage to expel ignorance concerning spiritual gifts, sadly such ignorance continues today. How many in our congregations are informed of spiritual gifts and their role in the body of Christ? How many of us would be able to identify our own spiritual gifts or the gifts of those around us?

There are a plethora resources out there to help us in this area. (See, for example, the following webpage, which includes a spiritual gifts inventory as well as other information: <https://www.umc.org/en/content/spiritual-gifts>.) As United Methodists, we pledge to support our congregations in at least five ways—our prayers, our presence, our gifts, our service, and our witness. While we often interpret “gifts” to mean financial giving, what if we expanded our thinking here to include spiritual gifts? (One can make the argument that service includes spiritual gifts.) Too often we hear the expression in our churches, “Some people do everything!” What if instead we flipped that expression around so that it became “everybody does something”?

God's desire is that all of us will play a role in the upbuilding of the church and the advancement of his kingdom. To that end, God has gifted us in various ways. May each of us discover our gifts and use those gifts for the glory of God.

Bringing the Text to Life

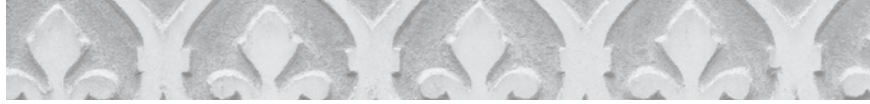
My friend Erwin had no idea God had called him to be a pastor. At the time, he wasn't part of a worshipping community. He wasn't even sure what he thought about God! But then one day, he was approached by an older woman whom he had never met. She came up to him and said, “Young man, God is calling you to be a preacher.” He thought she was crazy at the time. Now, as a preacher, he looks back on that experience and realizes she had the gift of prophecy—she proclaimed a vision for his life that had yet to be realized.

For as long as I can remember, my mom had the spiritual gift of knowing when and for what to pray. One morning, when I was about twelve, I woke up and found my mom in prayer. She explained that the Spirit led her out of bed at exactly 6:00 a.m. and told her to pray for Joann, who was in her small group. Later that day, my mom went to go run an errand. Meanwhile the phone rang. It was my mom's friend Barbara, who asked if my mom was there. I explained she wasn't and asked if I could take a message. Barbara told me to tell my mom that Joann was in the hospital. Evidently, she had been taken by ambulance at exactly 6:00 a.m., the same moment my

mom felt led to pray for her. Who, but the Spirit, could have told my mom to pray for her?

This gift doesn't show up in the 1 Corinthians 12 list. However, one of the spiritual gifts Paul identifies elsewhere (Rom 12) is showing kindness. I'll never forget an act of great kindness that a Christ follower showed me. I had just started serving at my current church. Two weeks into my appointment, my mom was diagnosed with cancer. A month later, she died. Shortly after I came back from her funeral, I was checking the mail at my community mailbox when I ran into my mail carrier whom I had yet to meet. She asked, "Are you Pastor Chris?" I nodded. She then asked, "Is everything OK? You've been getting a lot of cards recently. I was hoping they were birthday cards, but I had a feeling they weren't." I explained to her that they were condolence cards sent to me after my mom died. "That's what I feared," she said. "I want you to know how much I've been praying for you. As a mail carrier, I get an inside window into people's lives. I notice condolence cards, medical bills, overdue credit card statements, and so on. For this reason, I intentionally pray for the people on my route. You've been in my prayers every day." When I walked away from that encounter, I felt a sense of peace. It was an incredible act of kindness demonstrated to me by a perfect stranger, who advanced the ministry of Jesus.

I've never been into NASCAR, but I've always been fascinated by pit crews. Despite the number of people on the ground, pit crew members seem to work in sync to change tires, add fuel, and repair damages. What if Christians, united by their spiritual gifts, worked like a pit crew to advance the ministry of Jesus?



January 23, 2022—Third Sunday after Epiphany

Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

Chris Jones

Preacher to Preacher Prayer

God, all creation sings of your glory. Your power and might are on display for all to see. Thank you for the marvelous world you spoke into being. This world points to your beauty and magnifies your greatness. Thank you as well for the precepts of scripture, which call attention to your perfect and just ways and reveal your intention for all of us as human beings. Help us to see you in both creation and scripture and to celebrate how you have made yourself known. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Commentary

A core conviction of the Christian faith is that human beings don't know anything about God on our own. It's not as if we can go into a laboratory and discover something about God, nor can we think more and, suddenly, our thoughts will lead us to God. Rather, our knowledge of God comes through a single word: *revelation*. God's most definitive revelation of himself happened in Jesus, whom, as John says in the opening of his Gospel, "has made God known" (John 1:18). Elsewhere Paul reminds us that in Jesus "all the fullness of God was pleased to live" (Col 1:19). Still, there are other forms of revelation through which we can come to know and experience God. David beautifully highlights two of these forms here in Psalm 19—creation and scripture.

David devotes the first six verses (almost half) of this psalm to the majesty of creation. In the opening verse, he speaks of heaven "declaring God's glory." Obviously, David is not referencing the spiritual realm of heaven, but rather, the atmosphere above the earth in which the stars and planetary bodies hang like sparkling ornaments on a Christmas tree. In other words, just by looking up in the sky, we see something of God's glory.

All of us can identify with this statement. We've watched a glorious sunrise or sunset. We've visited an area of the country untouched by manufactured light and had our breath taken away by the Milky Way streaking across the dark sky. It's hard to deny God's glory when considering the vastness of creation. Somebody once quipped, "There are no atheists in foxholes." We might also add, "There are no atheists when staring up at the heavens." The reality that God put all this together is nothing less than mind-boggling!

David goes on to write that while creation may not speak like we do (through an audible voice characterized by speech and words), this does not mean creation is silent. Indeed, the various voices of creation can be heard throughout the earth. We hear these voices in babbling brooks and rushing waterfalls, falling leaves and ocean waves. Even the sound of rain speaks of a creator.

In the above verses, David taps into two of our five senses—sight and sound. Then in the latter half of verse 6, he taps into a third sense—touch. He writes how nothing escapes the sun's heat, which of courses includes us who can feel its rays on our bodies. David understands our sensory nature as human beings, and he poetically plays into this nature while drawing attention to God's revelation of himself through creation.

Things take a turn in verse 7 as David describes a second form of revelation that demands our attention—scripture. To be fair, he doesn't use the word *scripture*. However, he does speak of God's instruction, law, regulations, commands, and judgments, all of which are recorded in scripture. David knows that while creation tells us *of* God and even identifies God's glorious nature, scripture gives *specificity* to God. This in turn gives specificity to us, particularly when it comes to how we are to live and behave under God's reign.

The modern tendency is to see scripture in a restrictive way. We tend to assume that the precepts we find in scripture will be joy stealing and suffocating. Consequently, we would prefer not to follow them. However, David speaks of scripture as reviving one's being (v. 7a), gladdening one's heart (v. 8a), and giving light to the eyes (v. 8b). He doesn't see scripture negatively. On the contrary, he grows excited when he considers the inspired words of God. What if we, too, abandoned the assumption that what we discover in scripture will bog us down rather than lift us up? Yes, we must read and interpret scripture responsibly, but we must remember that God's intent is not to bore us or take away our fun but to give us life and joy.

Bringing the Text to Life

Theodore Roosevelt was our nation's twenty-sixth president. He had a larger-than-life personality and a well-documented love of the outdoors, both of which paved the way for the creation of many of our national parks and monuments. It's been said that when he would entertain diplomatic guests at the White House and they were getting ready to retire for the night, President Roosevelt would lead them outside and have them look up in the night sky. They would stare at the vast array of stars in the canopy of space. Then, after a few moments, he would say, "Gentlemen, I believe we are small enough now. Let's go to bed." Despite his big personality, even

Theodore Roosevelt couldn't help feeling small when considering the wonder of Creation (<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2002/december/14018.html>).

Scientists tell us that light travels at a speed of 186,000 miles a second, and our sun is roughly 93 million miles away. These figures mean that when we see the sun, we're not actually seeing the sun as it exists in the *present* but rather eight minutes in the *past*. Actually, all of what we observe in space reflects the past. Further, our universe is constantly expanding. And yet the true wonder is that the God who spoke all this into being calls each one of us by name!

Masterful preacher Fred Craddock tells the story of a young woman who approached him one day. She explained that, during her first year at college, she felt like a failure. She wasn't doing well in her classes, she couldn't get many dates, and she didn't have as much money as the other students did. Then one Sunday afternoon, she decided to end it all by taking her own life. She went to the river near the campus, climbed up on the rail, and was looking into the dark water below. But just before she jumped, she remembered the words of scripture, "Throw all your anxiety onto him, because he cares about you" (1 Pet 5:7). It was at that point that she climbed down from the rail and decided not to take her own life.³ Those words reminded that young woman that there was a God in heaven who cared for her. Consequently, her life had meaning and purpose. The psalmist was right: the precepts of scripture revive our being and gladden our hearts!



January 30, 2022—Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; 1 Corinthians 13:1-13; Luke 4:21-30

Chris Jones

Preacher to Preacher Prayer

God, even as you called Jeremiah and set the prophet apart from before birth, you continue to call women and men to yourself and set them apart for service to your kingdom. By your grace, help us to be obedient to your call, even if that call may not be as glamorous as we imagined. Help us not to make excuses or look to our deficiencies, but rather, remind us of your faithfulness. You call and you equip. Equip us then to carry out the work that you have for us. Send your Spirit upon us as we go forth. In the name of Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

Commentary

Jeremiah's call story captivates the reader with language that is poetic and beautiful, moving and inspirational. However, historical circumstances reveal that there is far more to this call story than captivating language.

The year was 627 BC. Centuries earlier, Israel had endured civil unrest, which in turn caused the nation to split into two different kingdoms: the northern kingdom of Israel and the southern kingdom of Judah. Josiah was king over Judah where he had been reigning for the past thirteen years. Although history now recognizes Josiah as an upstanding king who "did what was right in the LORD's eyes" (2 Kgs 22:2), the nation he was tasked with leading was headed for destruction. The nearby nation of Babylon was quickly gaining strength, and God's people—the people God had chosen from all the nations in the world to be his own possession—no longer seemed content with following the One who had made covenant with them. Many of us are familiar with Charles Dickens's *Tale of Two Cities*, which opens with one of the most memorable lines in English literature: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times."⁴ For Judah, it was simply the worst of times. What's more, it was about to get even worse in the ensuing years. It is into *this* context that Jeremiah receives a call.

Jeremiah's call is a true sign of prevenient grace. Prior to his birth, God sets Jeremiah apart to serve as a prophet. More than half a millennium later, Paul would share something similar regarding his own call to be an apostle to the Gentiles: "But God *had set me apart from birth* and called me through his grace" (Gal 1:15, emphasis mine). Through both the prophet and apostle, we learn something of God's call: it is God's idea before it is ever our idea. It is not that we suddenly concoct plans for our lives and then ask God to bless those plans. Rather, God—however God deems fit—reveals those plans and then calls us to embrace them.

In the case of Jeremiah, these plans involved sharing the message of the Lord with a nation that was about to be conquered. This was no small task, especially given that other false prophets were preaching peace and prosperity (Jer 23:9-32; 28:1-17). Consequently, Jeremiah would go on to experience loneliness and despair. History now remembers him as "the weeping prophet." Fredrick Buechner has famously said, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."⁵ I imagine if Jeremiah were here today he would qualify these words. To be sure, the world's hunger will be there, but gladness may not always reign in our hearts as we respond to God's call. Instead of saying, "Send me!" we may cry out, "Why me?"

Like others before him (Moses, for example), Jeremiah comes up with an excuse for why he cannot follow God—his youthfulness. Upon careful examination, however, this excuse may have been masking something deeper. Indeed, while Jeremiah does not admit to feelings of fear, God commands the young prophet not to be afraid (Jer 1:8). Could it be that God detects an underlying sense of fear in Jeremiah that even the prophet is hesitant to admit? If so, how like God to cut straight to the heart of the matter and call out whatever it is that we are feeling inside! We come up with one excuse, but God, who created our inmost being and knows us inside and out (Ps 139:1-18), is familiar with the true source of our apprehension. God goes on to dispel Jeremiah's fear through the same promise issued to Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:12)—God will be with him. This is the promise to which all of us cling as we faithfully follow God.

Bringing the Text to Life

John Ortberg has pointed out that the command "fear not" is the most frequently cited command in scripture. More than anything else, God tells us not to be afraid. But why does God say these words so often? According to Ortberg, it is not because God is trying to spare us emotional discomfort. Rather, Ortberg believes, it is because fear tends to be the number one reason we are tempted to avoid doing what God wants us to do.⁶ Jeremiah was afraid, but God told him not to fear!

We tend to romanticize God's call, but what about those times when God's call causes distress and anxiety? Certainly, every pastor can relate. Not every moment of ministry is a walk in the park. Angry e-mails. Upset congregants. Anonymous "feedback." But God's promise to Jeremiah rings true: even in the difficulty, God is with us.

Jeremiah was technically a child. However, even children have a role to play in God's work. When I was in seminary, I interned at a church that had a partnership with other community churches to support vulnerable children in Kenya. When the youth group of one of the partner churches heard about the work being done in Kenya, they decided to raise money through a carnival. Even the parents and youth pastor didn't take them seriously. In their minds, they pictured a rinky-dink, backyard carnival that would cost more money than it raised. However, this carnival ended up being a huge shindig that defied all expectations. When it was all said and done, the youth—many of whom weren't old enough to drive—raised around \$14,000!

Jeremiah talks about God putting words in his mouth. It reminds me of a story President Jimmy Carter has told. In the year he was elected president, Carter was one of the three men scheduled to speak for five minutes at the Southern Baptist Convention. The other two men were Billy Graham and a truck driver. The truck driver was nervous. He had never given a speech before in his life. What's more, he had to immediately follow, of all people, Billy Graham! When he rose to speak, he talked about his ministry at a local bar where he told others about God's love in Jesus and how, as a result, fourteen of his friends became Christian. Carter writes, "The truck driver's speech, of course, was the highlight of the convention. I don't believe anyone who was there will ever forget that five-minute fumbling statement—or remember what I or even Billy Graham had to say."⁷

The background of the book cover features a dark, atmospheric scene of a stone archway leading to a bright, hazy light. To the left, a window with vertical bars is visible, suggesting a prison or a place of confinement. The overall color palette is dominated by dark blues, greys, and a bright white light at the end of the archway.

FRANK A. THOMAS

FOREWORD BY TERESA FRY BROWN

SURVIVING A

DANGEROUS

SERMON

Praise for *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon*

“Frank Thomas is not only one of our most dangerous preachers but also a teacher who hopes to instigate a new generation of dangerous preachers. If you know much of the preaching of Jesus Christ, you know why ‘dangerous’ is one of the highest compliments one can pay a preacher. Frank gives warm encouragement and practical guidance to embolden us preachers to preach Christ in risky, bold, life-giving ways.”

—Will Willimon, professor of the practice of Christian ministry, Duke Divinity School, Duke University, Durham, NC; United Methodist bishop; author, *Who Lynched Willie Earle?*, *Fear of the Other*, and *Stories from Abingdon Press*

“Now more than ever, preachers are called to use words to heal. In this jewel of a book, Frank Thomas helps us do just that. *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon* shows us why truth-telling, empathy, and moral imagination are vital concerns for anyone who aspires to preach a word of hope. Thomas offers incisive and timely wisdom for ‘such a time as this.’”

—Donyelle McCray, assistant professor of homiletics, Yale Divinity School, Yale University, New Haven, CT

“In the tradition of the civil rights movement, Frank Thomas encourages preachers to imagine a larger and more ‘dangerous’ moral vision that supersedes the worldviews of progressives, moderates, and conservatives. He then shows how an empathic understanding of persons holding these competing worldviews can help preachers survive after preaching such morally challenging sermons. Highly recommended.”

—John S. McClure, Charles G. Finney Professor of Preaching and Worship, Vanderbilt Divinity School, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, TN

“Thomas calls the church to preach the gospel of a savior who subversively upended the hierarchical powers and nearly got thrown off of a cliff for doing so. The church is called to preach dangerous sermons that offer prophetic challenge. But to survive this sort of preaching, the gospel must

be proclaimed with priestly empathy for the diversity of people to and for whom the gospel is preached. Thankfully, Thomas shows us how to walk the sermonic high wire with theological faithfulness, self-awareness, and contextual analysis.”

—Lenny Luchetti, professor of proclamation and Christian ministry, Wesley Seminary, Indiana Wesleyan University, Marion, IN

“Frank Thomas’s compelling sequel to *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* balm the wounded preacher’s ruptured moral imagination and exposes the shortfalls of competing idolatries of ‘working gospel’ perspectives—perspectives that reinforce homiletical arrogance and exegetical myopia, and define America’s pulpit polarization today. Seamlessly synthesizing homiletical theory, cognitive science, and practical wisdom, Thomas demonstrates why he is among the most prolific, creative, and respected scholar-teacher-practitioners in contemporary homiletics. *Surviving a Dangerous Sermon* is sage guidance for preaching an inclusive gospel before empathy-challenged, hope-vanquished Christians on the verge of vacating church pews never to return. This book inspires. It will change your preaching life for the better. After reading, you just might spend the balance of your lifetime trying to figure out how to justly return the favor.”

—Kenyatta R. Gilbert, professor of homiletics, Howard University, Washington, DC; author, *Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons about Justice and Hope* from Abingdon Press

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How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon

Introduction to the Practice of African-American Preaching

American Dream 2.0

FRANK A. THOMAS

SURVIVING A

DANGEROUS

SERMON

 Abingdon Press[™]
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SURVIVING A DANGEROUS SERMON

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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To the Memory of
Reverend Doctor Charles Edward Booth
February 4, 1947–March 23, 2019*

*Prophetic preacher, mentor, teacher, author, friend, revivalist,
pastor, encourager of my gifts, stately and kind gentleman,
and friend of preachers everywhere.*

*Watch this prolific interview of Charles Edward Booth:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQaiNZXe96Y>*

*To the Future of Our First Grandchild
August Elise Dickerson
Born May 4, 2018*

*Your grandparents believed and lived this:
We will not submit to any god, church, nation, president, party, flag, institution, narrative, or economic or political system that demands we become a second-class citizen. We will not abdicate our stature as created in the image of God, nor our right to be equal based upon all of the sacrifice of our ancestors for this nation. Neither will we demand consciously or unconsciously of any person that they be second class in regard to us. We will be equal and respect everyone as equal. Before we will be a slave or slave master, we will be buried in our grave and go home to our Lord and be free.*

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THE WORKING GOSPEL AND THE BRIDGE PARADIGM

The preacher is a theologian of the Word. She or he stands up in front of God and everybody and wrestles with what the scriptures say in all their diversity (for one, because the scriptures themselves embody various theologies and do not agree). There is no way of doing so apart from a careful act of theological reflection on the gospel. This is what makes preachers residential theologians of the gospel wherever they are.

—David Jacobsen

I graduated from Chicago Theological Seminary on the south side of Chicago in 1981. The scriptural text of Luke 4:18-19 was hammered into my head and heart as the sum total of Jesus's prophetic call and ministry, and therefore, in following Jesus, the synopsis of my ministry and developing call. This was the text that I heard over and over again in class, readings, teachings, peer discussions, sermons, and lectures:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to preach good news to the poor,
to proclaim release to the prisoners,
and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18-19)

We were trained for social justice ministry and delivering prophetic word/action to people, churches, communities, religious institutions, economic systems, and political structures.

We also were warned that prophetic ministry was hard and not very popular. Growing up in segregated Chicago, I had sufficient experience and anger at injustice and racism in order to form my own bias toward prophetic ministry. I expected that just as Jesus's prophetic words in this Lukan text led to the hometown folks attempting to throw him off the cliff, I would be treated likewise. I was young, overzealous, with a strong measure of righteous indignation, and, as I once heard Fred B. Craddock say, "knew everything and knew nothing." Notwithstanding the mistakes of my early zeal, across my forty years of ministry, this Lukan text is the heart and crux of my "working gospel," and I have diligently labored not to assume that my working gospel is the only legitimate gospel.

In fact, far too many of us in theological circles spend far too much time establishing theological supremacy by arguing that our working gospel is the only legitimate gospel. For example, on September 4, 2018, "The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel" was released with prominent Bible teacher John MacArthur as the founding signatory.¹ In the introduction, the Statement reads:

Specifically, we are deeply concerned that values borrowed from secular culture are currently undermining Scripture in the areas of race and ethnicity, manhood and womanhood, and human sexuality. The Bible's teaching on each of these subjects is being challenged under the broad and somewhat nebulous rubric of concern for "social justice." If the doctrines of God's Word are not uncompromisingly reasserted and defended at these points, there is every reason to anticipate that these dangerous ideas and corrupted moral values will spread their influence into other realms of biblical doctrines and principles.

The Statement goes on at another point to say:

And we emphatically deny that lectures on social issues (or activism aimed at reshaping wider culture) are as vital to the life and health of the church

1. "The Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel," <https://statementonsocialjustice.com>, John MacArthur, Founding Signatory, September 4, 2018.

as the preaching of the gospel and the exposition of Scripture. Historically, such things tend to become distractions that inevitably lead to departures from the gospel.

At its base, this statement dismisses the experience of millions of Christians working for social justice, and is a form of theological arrogance that supports the cultural dominance hierarchy of white supremacy. This statement emphatically states that marginalized people do not have the right to meet and interpret the God of scripture from their oppressed social location and believe that God is actively involved in their quest for spiritual and political freedom.

As a result of the damage of these kinds of divisive statements of dominance, my goal is to help preachers become honest about the fact that all preachers have a “working gospel” and, if they are not careful, their working gospel becomes embedded in their cultural and religious dominance hierarchy. When we present our working gospel as “the gospel” and thereby seek to make our interpretation normative for all people, we make our working gospel part of our dominance hierarchy. We operate out of a pseudo-legitimacy as definers of the authoritative interpretation of the text, and ignore the fact that there is such a thing as heresy. From the perspective of marginalized people, heresy is a working gospel that serves to justify privilege, racism, institutional discrimination, conquest, seizing of land, extermination and enslaving of people, the theft of resources of empire, and the like. A tremendous amount of conflict and violence is caused by a belief in the superiority of one’s own gospel as the complete and conclusive gospel.

The reality is that many working gospels have always been and are still being preached today that preachers de facto argue are grounded in the biblical text. In my research, a question was submitted to an online site: “Did Paul and the apostles preach the same gospel? If not, then how many gospels are there all together and what is the difference?” There is quite a bit of scholarly debate on the differences of the gospel of Paul and the gospel of Peter. The question as to how many gospels there are all together is more complex, but what is certain is, there are many working gospels. The discovery of the gnostic working gospels among the Nag

Hammadi documents uncovered in Egypt in the 1940s ignited a firestorm in theological circles over which are the legitimate gospels. Then we have the Apocrypha, a set of secret gospel texts included in the Latin Vulgate and Septuagint, but not in the Hebrew Bible. Catholic tradition considers these texts to be deuterocanonical. Protestants consider them apocryphal. History reveals the reality of many working gospels. I believe the sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible are the authoritative, divinely inspired word of God *and* the reality of a multiplicity of working gospels.

It would make the world a more just and safer place if we would own up to our working gospel and learn to respect the working gospel of others, so long as the working gospels does not justify dominance and oppression. As an alternative to delegitimizing the gospel of others, I will explore in detail the concept of “working gospel” as espoused by professor of homiletics André Resner.² For purposes of an overall illustration of working gospel, I would like to begin by offering a brief summary of several of the contemporary working gospels.

Contemporary Working Gospels in the American Context

I would like to briefly consider a few working gospels in the contemporary American context. This is not an exhaustive list, but a tangible starting point for us to practically reflect on the concept of working gospel. Some of the most prominent working gospels functioning in the American environment today would include: the gospel of American sentimentalism, the gospel of American exceptionalism, the prosperity gospel, the gospel of denominationalism, the evangelical gospel, and the social justice gospel.

2. André Resner, “Reading the Bible for Preaching the Gospel,” in *Collected Papers of the 2008 Annual Meeting of the Academy of Homiletics*, paper presented at the annual meeting of The Academy of Homiletics, Boston, MA (December 7, 2008), 223; “Do You See This Woman? A Little Exercise in Homiletical Theology,” in *Theologies of the Gospel in Context: The Crux of Homiletical Theology*, ed. David Schnasa Jacobsen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2017), 19–24; *Living In-Between: Lament, Justice, and the Persistence of the Gospel* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2015).

First, the gospel of American sentimentalism is the working gospel of American civil religion that especially manifests itself in times of national crisis and tragedy. For example, when a national day of mourning is declared, the cultural religion of America is often evoked through the great hymn of “Amazing Grace.” As an example, former president Barack Obama sang “Amazing Grace” at the funeral of South Carolina senator Clementa Pinckney.³ “Amazing Grace” played on bagpipes is a tradition at public funerals of civic and national heroes.

The hymn “Amazing Grace” is very loosely connected with two biblical texts. The hymn borrows “I once was lost but now am found. Was blind, but now, I see,” from Luke 15:32 and John 9:25.⁴ This working gospel has little to do with whether or not one is a Christian, but the habits of American citizenship and mourning in the face of a national tragedy. This is the sentimental gospel of American civil religion.

Second, the gospel of American exceptionalism is the belief in America as “the errand in the wilderness” and the vision of “a city set up on a hill,” a paraphrase of Matthew 5:14 spoken by John Winthrop to his fellow passengers in 1619 in a sermon at sea on the *Arabella*, reminding them that New England was a model for future settlements and the “eyes of all the people are upon us.”⁵ According to Winthrop and Puritan ideology, America had a divine mission and their pilgrimage to America fulfilled biblical prophetic, apocalyptic, and eschatological visions. The “discovery” of America was a great revelatory and prophetic event in the course of progress of the church upon the earth in which God’s divine providence transformed the locus of the history of redemption and salvation from the corrupted Old World to the New World. God had miraculously kept the American continent from discovery such that a new chosen people of true Christians could be a light to the world and convert First Americans to

3. Sarah L. Kaufman, “Why Obama’s Singing of ‘Amazing Grace’ Is So Powerful,” *Washington Post*, June 26, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/arts-and-entertainment/wp/2015/06/26/why-obamas-singing-of-amazing-grace-is-so-powerful/?utm_term=.6662a0e9cc6d.

4. The lyrics to “Amazing Grace” can be found at <http://www.gospelsonglyrics.net/a/amazing-grace.htm>. Luke 15:32 (NIV) reads, “This brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found”; and John 9:25 (ASV) reads, “Whereas I was blind, now I see.”

5. Satyagraha, “America’s Covenant with God: John Winthrop’s ‘City on a Hill’ Speech (1630),” <https://satyagraha.wordpress.com/2013/04/18/john-winthrops-city-on-a-hill-speech-1630/>.

Christianity. This gospel centers around the theme that God has ordained the history and mission of America and has given it a superiority over other nations. American exceptionalism clothes America in a divine and scriptural mission as the best and brightest hope of humankind. Many preachers today still continue to mix, intermingle, and coalesce the Bible and the American flag and capitalist culture and preach a gospel of American exceptionalism.

Third, the peculiarly American gospel of prosperity—or sometimes called the health and wealth gospel, the gospel of success, or seed faith gospel—is the working gospel that provides an unequivocal message of health, wealth, and success to adherents. Sickness and poverty are curses that are to be broken by faith. Prosperity preaching often downplays social critique and focuses instead on an empowering, individualistic strategy of success and the acquisition of material possessions. Prosperity theology views the Bible as a contract between God and humans: if humans have faith in God, God will deliver security and prosperity. Displays of success and material blessing are signs of God's favor and blessing based in adherence to divine principles, such as faith, sowing seeds, positive speech, and visualization of miracles. Financial blessing, positive relationship, and physical well-being are always the will of God for the believer in the preaching of prosperity gospel.

Fourth, there is the working gospel of denominational affiliation. Many denominations are founded out of some individual's working gospel, and the tenets and beliefs of this working gospel become normative for faith adherents. Typically, the works, writings, and sermons of the founder are codified for study, analysis, interpretation, and dissemination. Often, much interpretation is grounded in the historical theological beliefs of the founder, whether it be Richard Allen and the African Methodist Episcopal Church, John Wesley and the Methodist church, Martin Luther and the Lutheran church, John Calvin and Calvinism, William Seymour and Pentecostalism, and on and on. Within the Catholic church, the working gospel and the interpretation flow from the top, such as the teachings and writings of the Pope, and strict adherence to the Pope's working gospel and interpretation is required. This is especially when the Pope speaks "ex cathedra" (infallible from "the chair") on doctrine and matters of faith or

morals and addresses it to the entire world in his capacity as the universal shepherd of the Catholic church.

I remember my complete shock at denominational gospel when several members left a church of which I was a member because in our church we baptized in the name of the “Father, Son, and Holy Ghost” (the Trinity). They argued that, according to the scriptures, our baptism was not a legitimate baptism. They went to the “Jesus only” movement, where the only true baptism was to be baptized in Jesus’s name. There was quite a vigorous theological debate with competing scriptures, and at a very early age, I saw how divisive denominational gospel could be. Such theological debates are commonplace in many denominations and are evidence of different working gospels.

Fifth is the working gospel of evangelicals. There is much discussion, claiming, reclaiming, denying, and re-branding of the term *evangelical*, given that 80 percent of evangelicals supported the candidacy of Donald J. Trump. In order to quickly define evangelicals, I want to use a tool that identified evangelical beliefs by respondents strongly agreeing to four statements:

1. The Bible is the highest authority for what I believe.
2. It is very important for me personally to encourage non-Christians to trust Jesus Christ as their Savior.
3. Jesus Christ’s death on the cross is the only sacrifice that could remove the penalty of my sin.
4. Only those who trust in Jesus Christ alone as their Savior receive God’s free gift of eternal salvation.⁶

The working gospel of evangelicalism is a major religious, economic, and political force in America, evidenced primarily in support for the Republican party by the Christian right.

Finally, the working gospel of social justice is a large working gospel movement in our time. Historically, the social justice gospel was a movement in North American Protestantism that applied Christian ethics to social

6. This tool was used by the National Association of Evangelicals and LifeWay research to identify evangelical beliefs. See “What Is an Evangelical?” National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), <https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>.

concerns, such as economic inequality, poverty, alcoholism, crime, racism, slums, an unclean environment, child labor, inadequate treatment of laborers, poor schools, and the danger of war. The work of the gospel is to help change and transform the social and economic conditions of people as well as the salvation of their souls. The term *social justice* was renewed on a mass scale in the work of the civil rights movement led by Martin Luther King Jr. and supported by many who wanted to see justice and equality for all American citizens. Contemporary social justice issues might include mass incarceration, sex trafficking, environmental justice, gender equality, equal rights for LGBTQI communities, police violence, and crony capitalism.

Many social gospel adherents could be identified under the umbrella of identity politics. Identity politics is the working gospel of taking seriously one's ethnicity, gender, race, or social location as an interpretive lens through which to view the biblical text and hence construction of theology. For me, the term *identity politics* does not have a negative connotation. It is popular to decry identity politics as the purview of minorities, referring to nonwhite people motivated by an irrational herd instinct to take political and religious positions based upon the interests and perspectives of social groups with which they identify. In fact, white people have utilized identity politics since their arrival upon American soil. Conquest, slavery, segregation, and so on were all based in identity politics. Identity politics in theology has existed since the beginning of interpretation, and for centuries, the identity politics of Europeans and Euro-Americans was considered the norm and standard by which theological inquiry could be shaped. In the late 1960s, James Cone inaugurated black theology in theological circles and, as a result, a new era of inclusive working gospel, in which the identity politics of women, Koreans, LatinX, LGBTQI, Womanists, the differently able, and their working gospels came to be of value and weight in homiletical and theological considerations.

I chose some of the most popular working gospels. Popular religion and piety, and all working gospels for that matter, in all of our collective finitude, must assert that we do not know it all and that the mystery of the infinite cannot be fully named. I will say more about popular piety, and the finitizing of the gospel in the next chapter. For now, I want to turn to preachers and their working gospels.

Preachers and Their Working Gospels

Every preacher has a constellation of culture, a family of origin, and ecclesiastical systems that influence, raise, and develop us from the earliest stages of life. Such systems include categories of gender, ethnicity, social and economic locations of neighborhood and class, as well as conditions of physical and mental health. Most preachers are heavily influenced by these systems as they shape both their theology and the sermon that flows out of that theology. In an article entitled “Do You See This Woman? A Little Exercise in Homiletical Theology,” André Resner clarifies that every preacher has an in-process “synopsis of the faith, an encapsulation of the whole point of Christianity, Christian community, of what difference God makes in and for the world.”⁷ Resner labels this “a working understanding of the gospel”: “the preacher’s ‘working understanding of the gospel’ is the imaginative theological and hermeneutical force that drives the way the preacher conceives, plots, and delivers sermons, structures worship services in which those sermons live, move, and have their being.”⁸ Though we do not have time to explore it, David Jacobsen has tremendous synergy with Resner and agrees with the fact that preachers have different working understandings of the gospel:

In practice, preaching requires preachers to have a *habitus*, some theological core wisdom about gospel that helps them to do their task. . . . Preachers fret rightly about getting from the text to sermon, but underlying this concern is their commission to go preach the *gospel*. In doing so, I start the process of theological worth with a provisional confession of the gospel, i.e. what I call confessional homiletical theology. Confessional homiletical theologians think about preaching as a theological enterprise beginning provisionally with gospel and brought into critical dialogue with texts, contexts, and situations. André Resner has given this provisional confessional move a name: “working gospel.”⁹

7. Resner, “Do You See This Woman?” 17.

8. Resner, “Do You See This Woman?” 18.

9. See David Schnasa Jacobsen, “The Practice of Homiletical Theology in a Confessional Mode: An Interim Report on the Homiletical Theology Project,” North American Academy of Homiletics meeting in Dallas, Texas (December 9, 2017), <http://www.bu.edu/homiletical-theology-project>,” 31–32.

Not only based upon Resner and Jacobsen, but even with a cursory perusal of historical and contemporary theological debates, it is clear that preachers can read the same Bible and texts yet witness to different working gospels. In essence, my main point is that many of us use the term *gospel*, but in reality we are not talking about the same thing. When we use the term *gospel*, most of us are referring to our working gospel. It is helpful in an environment of meaningful dialogue among Christian adherents if preachers would define what they mean gospel by clarifying their working gospel. For example, most would agree with Romans 1:16 (NRSV) where Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith . . .” What each of us means, consciously or unconsciously, when we affirm this text is that we are not ashamed of our working gospel. Yet, we carry on in dialogue as if we are using a common term and referring to the same thing. When I read John MacArthur’s “Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,” my overarching response was that we were not talking about the same gospel. He was simply expressing his working gospel.

This complexity then raises a monumental question begging for clarification in the theology of every preacher: What is the relationship between the Bible and the gospel? How does the Bible function in the preaching of the gospel? Or, how does the bridge paradigm work in our working gospel? Let’s look closely at preaching the Bible and preaching the gospel.

The Bridge Paradigm

Resner identifies reflections by professor of homiletics Ed Farley as the initial catalyst for his thinking about the concept of working gospel.¹⁰ Farley challenges the prevailing paradigm of preaching that uncritically assumes that every passage from scripture, whether by means of the lectionary or preacher’s choice, contains a preachable “X” that results in a

10. See Edward Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” *Theology Today*, 51, no. 1 (April 1994): 90–103, also in *Practicing Gospel: Unconventional Thoughts on the Practice of Ministry* (Louisville: John Knox, 2003), 71–82. Two other articles on prevailing assumptions about the relationship of the Bible to preaching are conveniently gathered in *Practicing Gospel* as well: “Toward a New Paradigm of Preaching” (pp. 83–92) and “Sacred Rhetoric: A Practical Theology of Preaching” (pp. 93–103).

preaching “theme” or “claim.” Farley argues that the preacher who seeks the preachable truth of God in a delineated passage of the Bible faces an impossible task. The impossible task is that, for several reasons (stated in the footnote below), there may be nothing preachable in the text and the preacher that must find a way from the text to the sermon—that is, the preacher must invent the “X,” the preachable element.¹¹ The preacher determines the preachable “X” of the text that is to be preached, such as a word, phrase, image, action, or the text as narrative. This preachable “X” is then made into a lesson for life and preached. On strict exegetical grounds, passages are not developed for lessons for life, and therefore the preacher must wring the preachable “X” out of the exegeted passage. The result is that the passage is not so much preached as it becomes something that provides the jumping-off point for the sermon. To discover the lesson for life, the preacher must abandon exegesis and move to “interpretation”—that is, to apply the preachable “X” to the life situation of the congregation. I will make a clarifying demonstration of Farley’s thinking in the later section titled “Your Haters Are Your Elevators.”

Altering a phrase from the Vietnam War, Farley says the preacher must kill the passage in order to preach on it:

Thus the preacher is not really starting with the text but with the lesson for life she knows is pertinent to the congregation. Rhetorically, the sermon may sound like it marches from the passage to the situation. Actually, the route is the reverse, from the situation, the in-the-light-of problem, to a constructed X of the text. The passage or its preachable X is not really that-which-is-reached, but the rhetorical occasion that jump-starts the sermon. Interpreting the passage is a modification of the exegeted content so that the passage’s lesson for life can be applied.¹²

The construction of the preachable “X” is what Farley calls “the bridge paradigm,” and its failure is built in from the beginning, by virtue of its

11. For Farley those reasons would include (a) the passage is a delimited piece in a larger writing, (b) there is no guaranteed inerrancy about the writing at any level, (c) there may be no X (preachable truth) in the passage, (d) the content of the passage would be something that must be preached against, and (e) the passage may have a moralizable content, something that lends itself to a lesson for life rather than the gospel. See Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” 96.

12. Farley, “Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel,” 97.

abandonment of the text. The preacher's task is to build a bridge from that which is preached (the truth of the specific passage) to the situation of the congregation.¹³ The construction of the bridge is not necessarily based in exegesis. That which is preached is not the content of the passage of scripture or the gospel but the preacher's preachable "X." Farley argues that if we are not careful, we will preach passages of the Bible and not the gospel.

As distinct from the paradigm of the early church, for us in this contemporary moment, preaching is a weekly liturgical event. Jesus and the early church preachers were itinerant preachers proclaiming the impending reign of God and were not the preachers of scheduled weekly liturgical services. Farley says, "primitive Christian preaching as we find it on the pages of the New Testament was an itinerant tradition proclaiming the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is somewhat anachronistic to compare what we now call preaching with the *kerisso* of Paul and other evangelists."¹⁴ The fact that preaching is a weekly liturgical event can be a strong catalyst to preach the content of the passage as a weekly life lesson for hearers rather than as a gospel event through which we are saved.

Farley even questions the dissection of the Bible into chapter headings and verses as interpretation that helps to move the preacher from the big picture of the gospel to looking in these weekly divisions for a small lesson for life. The preacher looks at a partitioned text and then seeks to find a weekly lesson for living life, often disregarding the meaning of the whole message. Farley suggests this division and portioning is problematic:

It is clear that to divide the Bible into necessarily true passages is only one way among many ways of thinking about the Bible, of being "biblical," of placing oneself under the power and influence of Scripture. Surely we can be moved and influenced by the *Iliad*, *King Lear*, or *The Color Purple* without dividing these great works into periscopes and assuming a necessary truth to each one. Why must this be done to Jeremiah or Paul?¹⁵

13. Farley, "Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel," 93.

14. Farley, "Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel," 93.

15. Farley, "Preaching the Bible and Preaching the Gospel," 95.

This atomistic approach to scripture and thinking of scripture as a collection of small units and segments helps the passage to become a jumping-off place for the sermon, and the gospel can be easily abandoned. Again, to discover the lesson for life, the preacher abandons exegesis and moves to “interpretation” in order to cross the bridge from passage to people.

Farley’s argument is important because it leads to the struggle to clarify what one means by preaching the “gospel” as opposed to life lessons from the text. One could conclude that life lessons is the preaching of the gospel, but though Farley finds that problematic, one has clarified one’s working gospel inclusive of distinct parts of the Bible and exclusive of others. As stated earlier, Christian preachers all use the term *gospel* but do not all mean the same thing. Resner identifies an often unmentioned truth existing in the field of homiletics:

One of the dirty little secrets about homiletics, the discipline that studies, writes about, and teaches preaching—that there is no consensus on what preachers and homileticians mean by the word *gospel*, and there is very little discussion about how a preacher’s construal of gospel functions hermeneutically as the preacher engages the Bible with a view to its use in preaching.¹⁶

David Jacobsen, whom we quoted earlier, responds to both Farley and Resner and takes up the challenge of defining how the Bible functions in preaching. Jacobsen and others define the function of the Homiletical Theology Project as: “to place the theological task more squarely in the middle of the practice of preaching and in the field of homiletics.”¹⁷ Defining the relationship between the Bible and the gospel is a theological task that all preachers must engage in on at least a weekly basis. Jacobsen reminds us that all preachers are “residential theologians of the gospel wherever they are” and “all sermon preparation is actually theology.”¹⁸

As promised, let me give a brief example to hopefully make Farley’s bridge paradigm clear by discussion of a popular sermonic form or trope: “your haters are your elevators.”

16. Resner, “Do You See This Woman?” 20.

17. Jacobsen, “The Practice of Homiletical Theology in a Confessional Mode,” 31.

18. Jacobsen, “The Practice of Homiletical Theology in a Confessional Mode,” 35.

Your Haters Are Your Elevators

First, let's look closely at the text in 1 Corinthians 1:18-25 (NRSV) for an example of how we find the preachable "X":

For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Exegesis on this text suggests that the proclamation of a crucified man as the Lord of glory was a stumbling block to Jews and Gentiles. Paul's preaching was considered pure foolishness, and he and other proclaimers were treated as stupid, ridiculous, and absurd. Exegesis helps us catch the flavor of the absolute outrage and indignation at the proclamation of the Lord of glory as a crucified criminal. It would be similar to a person in our time, condemned to death in the electric chair for a capital crime, and a small band of believers claiming that the deceased was raised and is the Lord of glory. Paul said Jews were looking for a sign and Greeks were looking for wisdom, but a crucified savior was offensive and a stumbling block. In the reality of the Greco-Roman culture to which Paul preached, a crucified Lord of glory was scandalous, embarrassing, humiliating, and shameful.

The preacher looking for the preachable "X" will transition from this exegesis to the interpretation of a life lesson from the text. One lesson would be to focus on "haters" in the contemporary context. Haters, in common vernacular, are people who dislike, disrespect, and disregard the value and work of a person and make it known by casting dispersion or disdain. The preacher would extrapolate that Paul and Christians had "haters" and then would call to mind that contemporary listeners have

haters. The life lesson that the preacher brings forth is summed up as “your haters are your elevators,” and this is the thematic focal point of the sermon. Your haters elevate you to your divine destiny.

My problem is that with all of the exegetical gospel texture that is available in this text, the preacher dismisses it or reduces it down and makes the point of how you can overcome your haters, given the fact that they raise you to your “destiny and purpose.” This is to minimize the gospel to a weekly life lesson. It is to reduce the opposition and venom that Paul faced in preaching a crucified Lord of glory to a few people on your job who are jealous because you got a raise. It is not possible to give moral equivalence to haters on your job and haters of Paul and the gospel, but when we are looking for a life lesson applicable to the life situation of our hearers, we make such concessions.

Paul even goes so far as to say later, in 1 Corinthians 4:9-13 (NRSV), speaking to the rich about the factional struggles in the Corinthian church, that because of preaching a crucified Lord of glory, the apostles were the refuse and trash of the world:

For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honor, but we in disrepute. To the present hour we are hungry and thirsty, we are poorly clothed and beaten and homeless, and we grow weary from the work of our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we speak kindly. We have become like *the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day.* (italics mine)

We choose “haters are your elevators” because who really wants to hear the gospel of a God who has exhibited Christians as last of all in the parade of a defeated army—last and condemned to die. Who really wants to hear that we suffer for the gospel and are considered as spectacles and the trash, refuse, and garbage of the world? It is difficult to preach this part of the gospel of Christ, and so we settle for a lessening and a cheapening of truth, rather than the unsettling and challenging message of mystery of the gospel.

In this example, the preacher is not really emphasizing the text, but the life lesson of encouragement that she or he believes is pertinent to the congregation. Encouragement is a legitimate concern, and absolutely every one of us needs encouragement; but, in this case, to produce encouragement, looking for the preachable “X,” the preacher minimizes Paul and the early church’s suffering in the text. This gives the illusion that preachers are preaching the text, but the needs of the people and experience of the preacher is the jumping-off place for the sermon. So, in Farley’s terms, preachers preach not the gospel but the Bible, the life lesson of a selected passage. This is a difficult and prophetic challenge to every preacher: just because the preacher is preaching a passage from the Bible does not mean that the gospel is being preached.

For those of us of the African American preaching tradition, I want to add this: just because we “go by the cross” at the close of the sermon every week does not mean that we are preaching the gospel. Going by the cross is the belief that regardless of what text one preaches, one must conclude the sermon with the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. Typically, the preacher would detail the events of crucifixion-resurrection narrative, starting with the crucifixion on Friday, the tomb on Friday night, and Jesus in the tomb all night Saturday, and closing with some form of emphasis on the resurrection such as, “Early, bright early, on Sunday morning, Jesus was resurrected with all power in his hands.” There are many preachers who think that if another preacher does not “go by the cross,” regardless of what that preacher has said, then that preacher has not preached. In its popular form, going by the cross can be formalism, legalism, and—I dare even say—entertainment. Going by the cross must mean presenting the Christ-event in such a way that this past event opens up a new and liberative future in the present. I will say more in the chapter, but we must preach the Christ-event, and not a trope that induces automatic responses to clichés to induce emotional affect from the audience.

In order that we might lower polarization and division, and build a just and more peaceable world, it was important to review several contemporary working gospels in the American context, help preachers to understand that all proclaimers of the gospel have a working gospel, and how

very often those working gospels are produced by reading the same biblical text and coming up with very different interpretations. This complexity of various interpretations raises the monumental question that must be responded to in the theology of every preacher: What is the relationship between the Bible and the gospel? How does the Bible function in the preaching of the gospel? In response to this question, Farley introduces us to the bridge paradigm in that the preacher looks for the preacheable “X” (life lesson) in the text and abandons the preaching of gospel, such as in the example of our haters being our elevators. In the next chapter, we will explore how the preacher overcomes the bridge paradigm, preaches the mystery of the gospel, and as a matter of integrity set forth my working gospel.

SIMPLIFY
the message

MULTIPLY
the impact

Talbot Davis

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 **Abingdon Press**
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SIMPLIFY THE MESSAGE:
MULTIPLY THE IMPACT

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Chapter One

From Clutter to Clarity

The Power of the One Point Sermon

DESIGNING A ONE POINT SERMON

As if the kind of enduring impact of the *forgiveness is learned so teach it well* message isn't enough of a reason to prompt you to join the ranks of the "one pointers," here's another one: you'll never have to think of a sermon outline again. Never.

I say that because most one point sermons follow mostly the same pattern (though in the section on **Openings and Closings** in Chapter Four I will discuss some of the nuance and variety possible within the one point design) with essentially the same movement. And I organize my one point sermons around three distinct movements:

Engage

Encounter

Empower

Yes, there are three of them, and yes, they alliterate, but no, the people of the church are not aware what is happening, nor will they fill in the blanks on an outline letting them know which "movement" they are currently experiencing. But I have found *engage, encounter,*

empower an *enormously* helpful construct to design a sermon from the listener's perspective rather than the speaker's. Here's what I mean.

Engage

Engage takes place, as you might expect, in the opening moments of the message. Through anecdote and observation, the pastor ensures that the people of the church are engaged in the subject at hand. Sermon openings are so critical because in these early moments people will decide whether you are likeable and interesting or unlikeable and boring. No pressure! I would estimate that 60 percent of the time, my *engage* section opens with something that I have either experienced or observed. I insert my own journey into the message early on so that the congregation will know I am taking an adventure with them, not delivering a lecture to them. The real engagement happens when I say something like, "...and I bet I'm not the only one. Some of you are going through the same thing. Some of you are wrestling with the same questions. Someone here didn't want to be here and now, suddenly, you know EXACTLY why God brought you here." The "someone here" moments ensure that the *engagement* is near universal in the room.

Two quick notes about the time to *engage*. First, if you tell a personal story, make sure you are not the hero of that story. Few things are more off-putting in preachers than a preacher who is the star of his or her own show. These opening moments need to reveal you as either an observer or a pilgrim or both. Second, there are many times in which the scripture itself is engaging enough. For example, in the message (and book) called *The Storm Before the Calm* I opened by reading the story of drunk, naked Noah in Genesis 9:18-29, put my Bible down, and said simply, "Well, THAT didn't make it into any illustrated children's Bible I ever saw." People were engaged—in part because most of them did not know that story *and* in part because

they were wondering, “How is that preacher going to get out of that mess?” *Engage.*

Encounter

Once everyone is with you on the adventure, it’s time to *encounter*: a congregational deep dive into the scripture. In this movement, the effective preacher will not tell the church ABOUT a text; he or she will give the congregation an experience OF the text... an encounter INSIDE the text. You will help people encounter the passage when you are honest with your doubts about it, when you are playful with scripture’s oddities (see drunk, naked Noah above), and when you are convinced that the difficult work of making sense of it and then applying it to life actually have eternal consequences.

When I work with some of my teammates at Good Shepherd on their sermon deliveries, I remind them that the time of digging into the Bible together needs to be a *high energy* moment in the sermon, not a Sunday morning obligation before you can get to your good stuff of application and illustration. The congregation needs to see the *joy of discovery* (more in Chapter Three) that you bring to your encounter with the inspired word.

For the vast majority of my sermons, the *encounter* leads to the unveiling of the *bottom line*, a term you will see throughout this book.

Empower

After the church has engaged and has had a scriptural encounter, the final movement is to *empower* the people. For some, that journey into the scripture was full of serenity; for others, it was deeply unsettling. For all, it will lead to points of application. And here is where the beauty of the one point sermon is most apparent: the preacher doesn’t have to think of multiple points; he or she instead takes the ONE POINT and directs it to people at different life stages. “For

Chapter One

some single adults here, this means . . .” “For those of you who aren’t sure about Jesus yet, I’d recommend . . .” “For moms and dads here today . . .” “Students, here’s how this works with you . . .”

The bulk of the sermon will apply that bottom line to the different life stages and personal situations of people in the room; the bottom line itself functions as a REFRAIN marking the transition to the next thought while also imprinting itself on hearers’ brains. There’s a reason you remember the chorus of songs better than the verses, after all. This concluding movement of the message will be full of conviction or hope . . . or both. You will be clear that you are not the source of empowerment that will make subsequent life change possible, but you must convey your assurance that the Holy Spirit can take your words—mere vocal vibrations!—and do something of everlasting significance with them.

And they’ll know that you have been on the adventure with them, not standing apart from them. They will be able to tell that you yourself have been *empowered* through the process of preparation and delivery. By crafting an encounter with the scripture, you have also designed an experience with the congregation. That shared adventure makes all the difference.

Yet in my own thinking and designing, I make use of a metaphor that I have found especially helpful: the parking lot shuttles you find at major American theme parks. Consider the following scenario. You drive your family (reluctantly) into the mammoth lot at Orlando’s Disney World. After locating a parking spot, you move to the shuttle stop. At just the right time, the shuttle arrives, picks you and yours up, and then travels to the next stop where it picks up the next three or four carloads. At each stop, passengers *get engaged*. Eventually, after gathering all the passengers it can, the shuttle takes you to the entrance of the park itself. That’s where the folks (poor folks or lucky folks depending on your perspective) *encounter* all the rides in the park. At the conclusion of each ride, they’re

empowered—sometimes shaking with delight and eager for the next ride, or perhaps they are overcome with relief that they’ve finally ridden that coaster. Engage, Encounter, Empower.

As a point of reference, Andy Stanley in his *Communicating for a Change* describes the structure of one point sermons as “ME WE GOD YOU WE,” but the effect is the same... the first part of the sermon is meant to engage, the God section to encounter, the last part consists of congregational empowerment.

Here’s how it happened in the opening sermon of 2018 at Good Shepherd Church. We began the year with a series called *Practicing the Presence*, a five-week conversation around prayer, solitude, and being strange enough people that we talk to God all day long. The first message in that series was “The Best Part of Waking Up” and it came from a collection of psalms that shares a remarkably similar theme centered on time **in the morning** with God—Psalm 5, 57, 59, 90, and 143.

I began the message by describing a high-pressure tryout camp for a national tennis team that I attended when I was seventeen. My roommate during that week was eighteen and considerably more worldly and experienced than I (I was voted Third Most Innocent in my high school class, which we all knew was simply code for Third Biggest Loser). Anyway, this roommate would greet the alarm clock each morning with a slew of profanity. Word combinations and choices that I didn’t even know existed. I shared this incident with the congregation while sparing the specifics of my roommate’s language!

Then I moved quickly to acknowledge that my roommate from so long ago is likely not the only person to greet the day in that manner. *Perhaps some of you gathered here do the same thing. Or, if not the language, at least the emotion... that is, until you get your first cup of morning brew.* I then observed how in the twenty-first century we have one other element to our morning routines: many people begin

their days by digging into their devices. All in all, it was a sobering and accurate ENGAGE moment. Everybody was engaged because every person has a morning routine.

From there I took the people into the Psalms under consideration, reading not only the “morning” references early in each psalm but also the hopeful way each one concludes. My exegetical work suggested that there had to be a connection between the morning prayer and the evening peace. Collectively, we discovered that seemingly disconnected psalms have a remarkably common thread. We *encountered* the thread together. So in the process of note taking, praying, and scribbling, I came up with this bottom line: **WHERE you start the day determines HOW you finish it.**

If you start the day reactively, in your device, you’ll conclude it chaotically. Yet if you start the day in silence, in solitude, and in the Word, you’ll finish it with serenity. From there I moved to an invitation to give the #First15 minutes of each day to God and at the end of the service our church provided daily devotion guides to equip people to enact the very things I had spoken about. **WHERE you start the day determines HOW you finish it.** After *engagement* and *encounter* my hope and prayer was that the people of the church would *emerge* as a holy club of #First15ers. At the conclusion of the service, we provided a hands-on Daily Prayer Guide that empowered them to do just that.

On Monday, a Good Shepherd friend sent me a photo. Her eleven-year-old daughter had taken a piece of paper, written the bottom line on it, and placed that paper on top of her mom’s smartphone. It was the daughter’s reminder to mom NOT to begin the day on the phone and in the world, but in the Word. Eleven years old! Again, I promise you: no eleven-year-old ever wrote down my four alliterative points to convey biblical truth to her mother. If you want sermons that simplify the message to multiply the impact, so

that even eleven-year-olds hear and respond, then the one point design is for you.

WHAT EXACTLY DO THESE BOTTOM LINES LOOK AND SOUND LIKE?

In my sermon work, I place my bottom lines into one of three categories, which I describe below:

Declarative

I'd estimate that 65 percent of my messages land at a “declarative” bottom line. By declarative I mean a simple (but not simplistic) summary statement that is faithful to the scripture, applicable to life, and memorable to the brain. Here are some examples:

From a sermon based on John 4 where Jesus has his interaction with the woman at the well: **Jesus exposes who you are so you will discover who he is.**

From a message drawing on Elijah's “death wish” prayer in 1 Kings 19 and the delicate yet empowering way the messenger feeds him: **God won't do for you what he needs to do with you.**

During a series called *Royal Pains*, I developed a message called “The However Kings”—those leaders like Jotham who were *basically* good; *however* (a word the texts use repeatedly), they failed to remove the high places. That failure led to this bottom line: **What you tolerate today will dominate you tomorrow.**

For the *Solutionists* sermon series (and the resulting *Solve* book), I looked at Nehemiah's legacy in terms of the workers he empowered rather than the wall he built: **Leaving your mark isn't about what you accomplish. It's about who you influence.**

Finally, the *Practicing the Presence* series featured a sermon from Psalm 55 called “TOs and THROUGHs.” The adventure of that

psalm and the betrayal that hovers over it led to this bottom line:
To get TO trust you have go THROUGH trauma.

Imperative

A second type of bottom line focuses more on exhortation and less on observation. These often take the form of a command—though a command I hope and pray I deliver with love and not with condescension. Here are three examples.

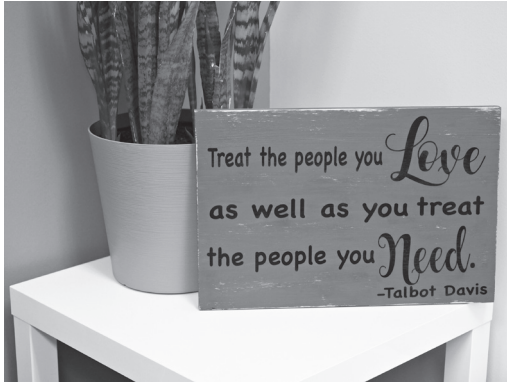
During *Solutionists*, we not only looked at how Nehemiah built a wall and influenced people but we also explored how he solved a famine. The takeaway? **Move on what you're moved by.**

As the concluding sermon of the *Crash Test Dummies* series (and final chapter of the book of the same name) we journeyed through Samson's story, being careful to separate the Samson of folklore from the Samson of scripture. His sad tale and bloody demise landed here: **Surrender your impulses so you don't surrender to them.**

Our *One-Sixty-Seven* series dwelt on the sources of wisdom and insight to which we open ourselves during the 167 hours a week we're NOT in church. One of the messages in that series was called "You Give Love a Bad Name" (thanks, Bon Jovi!) and resulted in this one point: **You'll give love a good name when your desires yield to his design.**

During a 2017 series called *Love Handles: Getting a Grip on Your Closest Relationships*, I delivered a message called "What Goes On Behind Closed Doors." After contrasting the level of kindness most of us have with people *beyond* our front doors with the type of cruelty many of us reserve for those who live *behind* our front door, I landed at this bottom line: **Treat the people you LOVE as well as you treat the people you NEED.** On Super Bowl Sunday in 2018, a Good Shepherd staffer attended a game-watching party at the home

of a family from the congregation. She sent me this photo via text message:



The family had found that particular bottom line memorable enough to design and mount on their kitchen wall as a household motto. The power of clarity...and the force of an imperative bottom line.

Inquisitive

I have found it highly effective to offer a question—specific, lingering, even painful—as the recurring bottom line. I suspect that “inquisitive” bottom lines make up about 10 percent of my sermons. Here are a few of the strongest.

As the concluding message of a series (and subsequent book) called *The Storm Before the Calm*, I dwelt on drunk, naked Noah in a message titled “After the Storm.” After examining the mess Noah left for his sons to deal with, I asked simply, **Who cleans up after you?**

During our *4U* series, I picked up that memorably phrased question from Romans 8 and riffed on it throughout: **If God is for us, who can be against us?**

One of the messages in the *One-Sixty-Seven* series dealt specifically with cell phone use and addiction. The sermon landed with this plaintive question: **Why be captive of the urgent when you can be captured by the ultimate?**

Chapter One

These, then, are the kinds of *bottom lines* you can use to design and deliver the kind of sermons that people from across the country remember five years later, *and* that eleven-year-olds from across the street use to preach to their own mothers: *Declarative, Imperative, and Inquisitive.*

You may well be wondering at this stage: How can I do the kind of biblical study required to distill a dense passage of scripture into a single compelling point? How can my time spent in exegesis result in a moment of discovery that I can joyfully share with the congregation? We will turn our attention to those and other matters in the next chapter.



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 The Artistry of Preaching Series

Words That Heal

Preaching Hope to
Wounded Souls

Joni S. Sancken

 Abingdon Press[®]
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WORDS THAT HEAL:
PREACHING HOPE TO WOUNDED SOULS

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Chapter 1

Soul Wounds

Human responses to traumatic or wounding experiences are mysterious. We do not understand why some people emerge seemingly unscathed in the wake of horrific events while others remain wounded and are unable to return to meaningful life and relationships. Consider these scenarios.

- A parenting group meets in a church basement. A few women linger afterward to share stories of childbirth. Some of the mothers express feelings of grief, shame, and isolation at what they expected to be a joyful time. Their experiences of birth were not positive but rather were experiences of deep fear or powerlessness.
- A man in his mid-thirties doesn't drive. He has arranged his life around walking and taking public transportation. When he was a teenager, he lost both parents in a fatal car accident and has been unable to get into a car without suffering a strong physical reaction.
- An idealistic mission worker in an urban context suffers a mental and emotional breakdown following the murder of one of the women with whom she worked.

On Sunday morning, when congregations gather for worship, many come with soul wounds buried deep within from previous life experiences. Survivors of abuse, family members of those with addictions, and parents who have lost children are among those listening to sermons. Some soul wounds are rooted in a national event—those who have survived a mass shooting or those for whom the news coverage of the most recent national

Chapter 1

tragedy triggers memories of a violent experience in their own lives. Because these wounds are often hidden, preachers may not be aware of the dynamics at work.

Peter Levine describes those who suffer in this way: “They are unable to overcome the anxiety of their experience. They remain overwhelmed by the event, defeated and terrified. Virtually imprisoned by their fear, they are unable to re-engage in life. Others who experience similar events may have no enduring symptoms at all.”¹

Language about trauma and diagnosis of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) have become part of our national vernacular. Many may find the word *trauma* repelling or jarring and may be unaware of the importance of having precise language to name the complexities of how trauma affects individuals and groups. The word *trauma* is related to the ancient Greek word for “wound.” The word *trauma* is important because it incorporates causal circumstances or events along with coping responses. Learning about trauma is beneficial for many because it helps them understand dynamics in their own lives or the lives of loved ones.

People who have experienced trauma of all kinds often share worldviews and behaviors caused by their experience of powerlessness, imminent death, and the ineffectiveness of language to help or describe their circumstances. Survivors of trauma struggle to feel safe, trust others, and find meaning in life. The past may be frozen in the moment in which the traumatic event occurred as the survivor experiences it again and again, unbidden, while the future is completely closed. The wound caused by trauma is deep—affecting the whole person. I use the term *soul wound* to speak of the pain that lingers within those who survive trauma and other wounding experiences.

Preachers today experience the pull of many possibilities and pressures. Sermons must contribute to congregational growth, encourage giving to support the church, avoid offending denominational leadership, teach the Bible, and speak a relevant and hopeful word for our time. This book doesn't seek to add one more burden to preachers but to shine the healing light of Christ on traumatic and other wounds carried by many in our world. The proposed methods and techniques may be helpful not only for survivors of trauma but also for others who feel the lingering effects of loss, bullying, or shame. The church has a unique and much needed balm for unhealed soul wounds. The Christian gospel travels through the cross to the resurrection, and the call to discipleship involves facing brokenness, pain, and loss armed with Christ's redemptive power.

To live fully into our calling, we who preach must do so with sensitivity and awareness toward those with soul wounds and a sense of hope and an

orientation toward God's promises of healing and new life. Every congregation includes people who carry soul wounds, leading to personal and social ramifications for the individual and surrounding community. When pastors encounter someone with a serious soul wound, listening and showing care can be intuitive responses; so too may be the reflex to refer the person to a professional counselor or mental health provider with more expertise in this area. However, just because a referral has been made does not mean that the congregation cannot be an agent of God's healing. Unsure of how to engage wounded members in the midst of gathered church life, pastors may experience a sense of internal division between pastoral care that often happens in private and the public ministries of preaching and worship. No matter how uncomfortable or unqualified a pastor may feel when confronted by church members with serious soul wounds, pastors cannot refer away their preaching ministry to everyone in the church.

Trauma-aware preaching can support healing for those with soul wounds from trauma and other, less-raw painful memories. Sermons can create a bridge between the gathered life of the congregation and care given by the pastor or members of the congregation. Sermons can offer instruction about the pain of traumatic experience and legitimize the effects of trauma. Sermons can reach out to those who may be suffering quietly and provide an open door for further conversation. Preaching can speak God's promises in a powerful way to those who need to hear them and provide theological tools to help people make sense of their experiences in a way that nurtures faith.

A starting place for speaking to those who have survived a traumatic experience can be marking the difference between healing and curing.² While curing can be an instantaneous act of the Spirit in the present, curing most often takes on eschatological dimensions, something that may not happen this side of the realm of God. On the other hand, and from a Christian perspective, healing is a process that is theologically rooted in the human experiences of salvation and sanctification.³ Healing can also be understood as a fruit of the resurrection breaking into our world here and now. Healing can be personal, bodily, communal, relational, ecological, structural, social, physical, or spiritual. When we see healing of any type in our world, it is a sign of the resurrection regardless of whether it is claimed as such by the ones who experience the healing. While PTSD is a complex illness and trauma causes deep wounds, as Christians we believe that healing is part of our experience of salvation. Healing is a process not to be confused with curing. It is not some extra bonus gift that God capriciously doles out to some believers and not others. Because we struggle with the eschatological

dimension of cures for the many wounds people carry, we may hesitate to talk about healing in our prayers and sermons. But we can ask God for healing with boldness. One of the ways that sin and brokenness affect us in our world is to blind us to signs of God's action among us. We can therefore also ask God to reveal healing that is already taking place so that we can name healing in our sermons.

What does it mean to be human in a world that stands between crucifixion and resurrection? In his essay "The Bitter Christ: Suffering and Spirituality in Denial," worship scholar Don Saliers addresses the necessity of dealing with complexity: "The mixed texture of our world—its terror and beauty—confronts our prayer and worship, our meditation and our liturgies. For increasing numbers of people the experience of the absence of God, or at least the loss of secure ideas of God, leads to giving up prayer and worship."⁴ Trauma-informed pastors can preach sermons that are relevant for people with soul wounds from trauma and past life experiences and helpfully participate in the Spirit's work breaking cycles of violence and abuse. However, in order to participate in healing, preachers must be equipped to recognize what can cause soul wounds; to understand how these deep wounds may affect relationships, participation in church, and worship; and how to preach in ways that minister not only to survivors of trauma but also to the many who struggle to find healing and meaning for disappointment, loss, and other painful experiences and memories.

What Causes Soul Wounds?

People carry many types of wounds that may harm relationships and hinder their ability to experience love and hope. What causes these soul wounds? They are caused by experiences in which survivors feared for their own lives and well-being or that of others. Survivors often name a common set of experiences including feeling powerless in the face of danger, that language and other tools had little or no effect on their situation, and that structure or order in the world has been lost.

The *perception* of danger or threat may be more important than the *specific nature* of the experience. A person's background and prior experiences may make him or her more susceptible to complicating reactions in the wake of trauma. Just because someone has a traumatic experience does not mean that she or he will have a soul wound. However, as pastors and caregivers we may be watchful for signs of unhealed wounds. The following discussion may be helpful for pastors who seek to preach healing for a range

of diverse wounds, those caused by unaddressed trauma as well as other more common painful experiences.

Not every traumatic event results in ongoing or lingering soul wounds. One clue that the event may be potentially wound-inducing is if someone describes her or his life with a clear sense of “before” and “after” surrounding a negative event. For example, more than twenty years ago a relative was involved in a serious car accident that left him paralyzed. This was an event with a clear “before” and “after” for his entire family, and for some time, they talked about life like this. Today, they no longer talk about life in this way. While he is still paralyzed, the traumatic wound around the accident has healed.

A serious car accident is only one example of a potentially trauma-inducing event. A wounding event can be “an intense one-time event, natural or human caused, where there is a serious threat of harm or death,” such as a “natural disaster, accident, rape, or sudden loss.”⁵ Traumatic events can also involve ongoing situations or repeated events such as living in a violent context or having everyday encounters with racism or gender issues that chip away at dignity and safety over time.⁶ These one-time events or repeated/ongoing situations can impact individuals as well as larger groups. Ongoing experiences of poverty or abuse can create traumatic wounds in addition to making an individual less resilient in the face of more common experiences of stress. Only the survivor can define an experience as traumatic, and not all traumatic experience leads to a lasting wound. Personality, history, and the presence or absence of a caring community can all affect experience of trauma.

Individuals can also experience secondary or vicarious trauma from hearing stories of those who have directly experienced trauma. This can happen in the case of first responders, family members and friends, lawyers or human-rights advocates, medical and mental health professionals, clergy, and those who operate crisis lines—anyone who “cares and listens to the stories of fear, pain, and suffering of others.”⁷ Secondary trauma can often have a cumulative impact over time that leads to “compassion fatigue.” Yet the satisfaction that care-providers experience can help counteract the cumulative emotional wear-and-tear.⁸

Trauma can also be experienced by individuals who may have participated in causing pain to others, especially in cases where the harm was unintentional, such as in a car accident, as part of a medical procedure or drug trial gone wrong, or following orders in a military context.⁹ This participation-induced trauma can also be called *moral injury*. Brite Divinity School’s Soul Repair Center describes moral injury as growing from making

decisions or witnessing actions that may violate moral values in the midst of life-or-death circumstances, often in a context of war or situation of violence and chaos following a mass shooting or terrorist attack. These decisions may cause a survivor to experience intense shame, loss, and disconnection from his or her core identity.¹⁰

Trauma can also be collective or societal, caused by one-time events or ongoing/repeated experiences. Examples of one-time events include large-scale natural disasters, such as the 2005 Indian Ocean Tsunami; human-induced disasters, such as a nuclear accident; deliberate actions from an enemy, such as a terrorist attack; political revolution that results in sudden cultural shifts, such as the Cultural Revolution in China; and the loss of a significant and symbolic leader, such as Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr.¹¹ Repeated or cumulative experiences can include *historical trauma* with ongoing effects, such as slavery and racism in the United States or conflict between religious groups in the Middle East; *cultural trauma* in which a group experienced a complete or nearly complete destruction of culture, such as the case with Native Americans and Jewish people through the Shoah; and *structurally induced trauma* created by laws and cultural practices that result in injustice, such as Jim Crow laws or South African apartheid.¹² These events are complex and multifaceted. Collective or societal trauma can be traced to actions in multiple categories.¹³ Hurricane Katrina would be an example of a multi-category catalyst for collective trauma, involving natural disaster as well as human error and racism.

Traumatic wounds can also be transferred from one generation to another through time as with the experience enslaved Africans brought to the United States, cultural and physical genocide of Native populations, and colonialism.¹⁴ Because of the wide variability in reactions and triggering experiences, it is important for pastors to validate a traumatic reaction regardless of how the precipitating event or events may appear to others.¹⁵ Many events and chronic conditions can cause trauma, from the murder of a colleague or car accident to childbirth, serious illnesses or pandemics, human-caused natural disasters such as an oil spill, homelessness, or being a refugee.¹⁶ Because trauma impacts not only individuals but also groups, communities, and societies, we can see how wounds, both named and unnamed, are likely present in most ministry contexts.¹⁷

While serious trauma does not impact everyone in a congregation directly, it is beneficial for the life of the church for pastors to preach trauma-aware sermons. Some of the same symptoms and concerns faced by survivors of trauma are also challenges for people who have a wide range of painful experiences such as losing a job, bullying, or betrayal in relationship.

Encounters with pain and brokenness are part of life in a world still waiting for complete redemption. Further, while we pray otherwise, serious traumatic events may happen at any time. Trauma-aware preachers will be prepared to speak to the immediate situation and begin fostering healing. Even if not every member experiences trauma directly, when a brother or sister is hurting it affects the whole community. Like a human body, participants in a community are not completely independent of each other. Part of our identity as Christians is to care for the whole body in order to witness to Christ's healing intentions. When wounded members experience care and healing, the witness of the whole church is stronger.

Stress and Trauma

The effects of trauma are physical, emotional, cognitive, relational, sociological, and spiritual.¹⁸ The field of trauma studies is like a fair or convention with various disciplines promoting their perspectives and wares. Expert insights range from clinical awareness brought by psychiatrists and neuroscientists to experiential knowledge from poets, memoirists, and anthropologists.¹⁹ What these varied approaches confirm is the thoroughly penetrating impacts of trauma on survivors and their communities.

Soul wounds can arise from a range of causes and circumstances, but the physiological response to stress always simmers beneath the surface. According to the Strategies for Trauma Awareness and Resilience (STAR) program, "stress is any outside force or event that has an effect on the body, mind, or emotions. It is the automatic physical, mental, or emotional response to these events."²⁰ A stressful experience triggers neurochemicals and hormones in our bodies that stimulate us to act.²¹ Not all stress is bad. At best, we can feel energized and motivated, such as the stress a student might feel in preparing for an exam, an athlete might feel before a big game, or a musician before a concert. At times we may feel unproductive stress, such as sitting in busy traffic as we watch the minutes tick by making us late for an appointment. These experiences of stress are fairly common and likely not wounding. However, prolonged stress can lead to fatigue, depression, and anxiety, which can make us more susceptible to deeper wounds that make it difficult to connect to others or experience God's presence and good news in our lives. Traumatic stress is different from other forms of stress in that it completely overwhelms a person so that his or her experience exceeds any ability to respond.²²

Responses to Traumatic Stress

It is important for us to realize that the reactions or coping mechanisms that emerge in the wake of a deep wounding experience are not usually a matter of choice but automatic physical, mental, emotional, and behavioral responses to ensure survival in the face of what feels like a deep threat. Like the sources of wounds themselves, responses and behaviors may vary depending on how long the wound has been present. Responses to traumatic stress are cross-culturally similar.²³

The first series of responses are organized into a “survivor-victim cycle.” Early responses include physiological changes, such as shutting down the cerebral cortex (or thinking brain) and operating primarily from the limbic system and amygdala that register fear, and the brain stem that has no sense of time other than an ongoing sense of “now” that controls instinctual actions.²⁴ This feels like a state of “hyper arousal,” as heart rate and breathing increase, blood rushes to muscles, and senses are heightened. Less crucial body functions, such as digestion, shut down.²⁵ After the moment of danger, traumatized people may shake, cry uncontrollably, or sweat profusely.²⁶ Because these reactions may appear unseemly or embarrassing, most people will suppress them. Yet allowing the body to release traumatic energy can actually be beneficial for long-term healing.²⁷

The physical responses to trauma have mental and cognitive dimensions that are important to understand. Dissociation, or a sense of detachment from what has happened, keeps people from being emotionally overwhelmed in the moment. Memories are not created or retained in the usual way and later produce extreme detail coupled with difficulty in recalling events.²⁸ Traumatic memories may return involuntarily with sensory details and a sense of collapsed time when the survivor encounters triggers, such as smell, sight, or sound.²⁹ When a traumatized person experiences an “intrusive memory” it is as if the event is happening again in real-time, and the body responds accordingly.³⁰ Fear of triggers and a sense that they should be “over it” can cause survivors to grow isolated as they withdraw from regular activities.³¹ One of the impacts of unhealed traumatic wounds over time is that survivors operate using mainly lower-brain functions rather than the “thinking brain.”³² This means that survivors may not be capable of thinking through consequences, may speak or act without a filter, and may respond to relatively minor annoyances with extreme actions—akin to going after a mosquito with a gun.³³ When the frontal cortex re-engages, the person may feel ashamed or emotionally numb, or they may even deny what just happened.³⁴

In addition to physical, mental, emotional, and relational responses, trauma also deeply affects a survivor's sense of self and spiritual grounding. Because trauma destroys meaning and harms a person's sense of identity and ability to make meaning from her or his life, a survivor may question God and may need access to different theology and different language to make sense of life.³⁵ Chronic or ongoing trauma can cause some physiological and emotional responses to become regular behavior. These adaptations can help people survive in dangerous settings, yet the effects can also be corrosive. Judith Herman observes that those who experience a single traumatic event may feel that they are "losing their minds" while those who experience chronic trauma feel that they have "lost themselves."³⁶ Wounding experiences also impact one's relationship with God. A survivor may wonder why God didn't intervene and struggle to make sense of what has happened.

Unhealed and unattended trauma does not just "go away." Rather, the pain is often transferred and the survivor may "get stuck" in a cycle of suffering and fear marked by a lack of power and hope.³⁷ PTSD is given as a diagnosis when severe responses to trauma persist for longer than one month.³⁸ Specific symptoms of PTSD often overlap with the immediate symptoms of trauma such as flashbacks to the event, symptoms of increased arousal such as inability to sleep, and finding patterns where none actually exist.³⁹ Some research shows that flashbacks are more than just "vivid memories" and are likely stored differently in the brain than typical memories.⁴⁰ Memories can usually be verbalized, but flashback memories exist beyond the scope of language, leading to frustration in explaining the experience to loved ones and professionals seeking to help.⁴¹ Making sense of what happened and reconstructing a meaningful narrative account may be a helpful part of healing. When someone tells us that they suffer from PTSD, we know that they have survived a traumatic event. PTSD is the most widely recognized response to trauma in our broader cultural vernacular, but reducing all trauma to PTSD risks minimizing other responses to trauma that fall short of a specific diagnosis.⁴²

Recognizing Unhealed Wounds

As ministers of the gospel with a calling to nurture faith and God's healing in the congregation, awareness of trauma is not only beneficial for pastoral care but for every part of ministry. Preaching is shaped by the context of the sermon and the situation of listeners. When that context

includes unhealed wounds from trauma and other experiences, sermons can be shaped to bring God's healing and empowerment to these situations.

Survivors of trauma need spiritual care and support that may not be provided by those outside the church. This care may come in part through pastoral counseling, but preaching is also an important part of caring for individuals as well as the whole community. Preaching with awareness of trauma legitimizes the experiences of survivors as well as others who have unhealed wounds from painful experiences and speaks God's love to those who need it. If preachers do not speak to these concerns, it implicitly communicates that the church—and, worse, that God—doesn't care. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Pastors and other caring friends may notice that someone who has come through trauma or another serious wounding experience may pull away from relationships, may be easily offended or hurt, may startle easily, and may experience physical symptoms that affect sleeping and eating. One who emerges from trauma may cognitively know the narrative around the wounding events but may not have corresponding personal memories. Instead she or he may have a series of images or sensations. These sensations may be triggers for flashbacks. For example, those who have experienced war may not enjoy celebrations with fireworks, as the noise is reminiscent of artillery bombardment. Some have described the experience of a flashback as similar to having a very vivid nightmare while being awake.⁴³

The neurochemistry of a trigger is complex. The brain has the amazing capacity to grow new pathways as we move through life, which means that when a trigger becomes associated with a traumatic response, they can become "wired together" in the brain's neural pathways.⁴⁴ If we know that someone suffers traumatic responses from specific triggers, it can be helpful to ask what those triggers are. Awareness can help us create emotionally safe worship spaces.

Unfortunately, violence and trauma are often reciprocally related. A violent act or event may inflict a traumatic wound, and unaddressed and unhealed trauma can lead to more violence. Violent behavior may be mainly turned inward toward oneself through addictions, such as substance abuse, workaholism, eating disorders, or self-mutilation.⁴⁵ These behaviors are a form of distraction to keep the wounded person from being completely preoccupied with her or his wound. Despite attempts to distract themselves with other behaviors, "shame, dread, and helplessness are pervasive, alternating with numbness, depression, or a sense of emptiness. Their sense of agency is damaged; they often feel powerless and alone in a hostile world, wondering whether anyone cares if they live or die."⁴⁶ Spiritually, wounded

people may wonder if God cares for them and how to find meaning in life amidst growing fear and disorientation.⁴⁷

Some people with deep soul wounds turn their sense of violation outward in anger that drives toward a revenge-themed sense of justice.⁴⁸ They may fabricate a narrative around the theme of “good versus evil” making the “bad guy” seem less than human.⁴⁹ The stories victims tell can become repetitive so that an identity of victim-turned-avenger becomes formative, much like the origin story of the superhero Batman. While revenge fantasies may be normal in the wake of a wounding experience at the hands of a perpetrator, if these desires are unexamined and unchallenged the wounded person can become a violent wounder of others.⁵⁰ In the wake of mass shootings or home-grown terrorist attacks, stories often emerge that portray perpetrators as deeply wounded individuals. While these wounds do not justify violence, they serve as examples of some of the most extreme potential outcomes when people with unhealed soul wounds turn their inner pain outward toward others. James Gilligan, director of the Center for the Study of Violence at Harvard Medical School, observes, “All violence is an effort to do justice or undo injustice.”⁵¹

Claiming Therapeutic Approaches for the Church

While a relatively small number of people in our congregations may carry wounds from major traumatic events, lower levels of pain and bitterness are widely present in our congregations. Associate clinical professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School Kaethe Weingarten’s work is practical and broadly applicable to people with a wide range of wounding experiences. Her *Witnessing Project* hopes to raise awareness around the acts of violence we witness and cultivate ways to deal with the effects.⁵² She uses the term “common shock” to emphasize that this experience is common, is part of simply being a person in our world, and isn’t connected to mental health challenges that can accompany a diagnosis related to post traumatic responses.⁵³ The term “common” also connotes that we have these experiences in common with others. Weingarten holds that the difference for individuals between common shock and what becomes an ongoing traumatic wound may have more to do with a community’s response, presence, and action or lack of action than with the nature of the event.⁵⁴ Weingarten’s work not only seeks to encourage healing and humanizing responses but

to change “toxic witnessing” into “compassionate witnessing with others.”⁵⁵ The concept of common shock expands the sense of who needs healing words. People in our congregations may experience a traumatic reaction even if they experience an event indirectly.

Compassionate Witness

The potential for common shock has only increased in recent years. Cameras are ever-present and videos of distressing events are readily posted or broadcast live on social media platforms. People can watch immediately on phones whether commuting to work on the train, waiting in line, at work, or at school. Every day children and adults witness numerous violent or wounding actions that may range from seeing an animal hit by a car, hearing a news story about assault, watching the count of dead bodies rise after a natural disaster half-way around the world, or seeing a video of police shooting a suspect. When we are exposed to violent actions in the news or elsewhere, we can experience different responses. Some may move into denial, setting up a psychological wall or barrier to keep it away. Some may strive to be strong and unmoved in the face of violence in our world, particularly violence that feels distant from us. When violence feels nearer to us or to those we love, we can become numb or emotionally and spiritually eroded and susceptible to physiological traumatic response.

In the face of such challenges, Weingarten advocates for another approach. She defines “compassionate witness” as that which “helps us recognize our shared humanity, restore our sense of common humanity when it falters, and block our dehumanizing others.”⁵⁶ Witnesses of a wide range of varied acts of violence and micro aggressions may feel tempted to “check-out” or look the other way. The challenge for compassionate witnesses is to “stay present.”⁵⁷ Compassionate witnessing is implicit in many group contexts such as AA or NA where listeners serve a role as witness to another’s truth-telling and offer accountability in a journey toward healing that at times involves coming to terms with traumatic events done to or by the one who is sharing with the group. Staying present and attentive to listeners is particularly crucial for preaching as it encourages shared vulnerability and sharing the compassionate presence of Christ, particularly in any congregational response that may follow the sermon.

Christians can find theological roots for compassionate witnessing in the very heart of God. In the Old Testament, God is described as compassionate. Exodus, Deuteronomy, Psalms, Lamentations, and Isaiah all name God’s compassion.⁵⁸ A Hebrew word for compassion, *rachamim*, has a

deeply visceral connotation.⁵⁹ Theologian Andrew Purves links the Hebrew sense of compassion to the word *rechem*, which means womb. The “literal” meaning of compassion is “the womb pained in solidarity with the suffering of another.”⁶⁰ “God’s womb” aches when God’s people suffer. Unpacking this biblical language for compassion helps us to see God’s compassion as deeply generative and creative, which sets a stage for our own compassion to not be an end in itself or just emotional but bodily and generative too.⁶¹

Weingarten outlines three steps for compassionate witnessing with great potential for preaching and worship: (1) choosing a reasonable and manageable focus for witness; (2) carefully and compassionately listening and responding; and (3) engaging in a literal or symbolic action that addresses the need of the other.⁶² Pastors can help congregations define a manageable focus in the way they shape a narrative of troubling events in the sermon. Preachers contribute to a compassionate response by listening and with permission giving voice to traumatic experience. Sermons can also suggest symbolic action, which could take place in the context of worship in addition to offering testimony concerning the entire compassionate witnessing event. For example, the crash of a bus carrying the junior hockey team of the town of Humboldt, Saskatchewan, killing sixteen and injuring many more, caused lasting trauma for that town and common shock for many. Hockey players and fans from around the world responded with acts of compassionate witness. Many placed hockey sticks outside their homes in remembrance of the dead and injured and people across Canada wore hockey jerseys several days after the accident.⁶³ The mayor of Toronto declared April 12, “Jersey Day.”⁶⁴ While this example represents a response from broader culture, the same process holds rich potential for the church to respond to the myriad of common everyday shocks and losses that we experience. Congregations can engage in communal acts of compassionate witness during worship and preachers can suggest actions, frame already existing practices, or share stories of actions in sermons. Benefits of this approach are that it is attainable rather than overwhelming and it keeps witnesses from feelings of helplessness and despair.

The church has tremendous potential for compassionate witness and for supporting other witnesses. However, this is only possible when our compassion is grounded in Jesus Christ and preachers are vulnerable, humble, and present to the Spirit’s stirring in the preaching moment. Preachers can use stories of compassionate witness in their sermons as examples of faith in action, but also of God in action. Preaching to others in the midst of despair and brokenness is a privilege, impossible to undertake apart from the power of Christ. Pastoral theologian Deborah Hunsinger puts it well,

God alone can bear the sins of the world and not be destroyed by them. God alone can witness the horror and terror of what human beings are capable of inflicting on one another. In Jesus Christ, God takes the suffering of the world into his own capacious heart and ministers openly or secretly, through the power of the Holy Spirit to every creature in distress.⁶⁵

Reasonable Hope

Part of the process of healing is acknowledging that healing may co-exist alongside brokenness and despair. Healing does not always involve curing. Besides offering practices that foster compassionate witnessing in the midst of common shock experiences, Kaethe Weingarten also developed the practice of “reasonable hope.”⁶⁶ Reasonable hope is a community sustained practice rather than an individual feeling.⁶⁷ Reasonable hope engages with the here and now rather than a distant eschatological event. She encourages practitioners to live hope as a verb rather than as a noun because focusing on the action invokes and empowers God and us as subjects, rather than as passive recipients of either “having” hope or “not having” hope.⁶⁸ Reasonable hope operates under the assumption that the future is open and has not been decided; this belief is expressed through prayer.⁶⁹ Yet reasonable hope also offers a somewhat “limited horizon of expectations” that can help people move from situations of deep pain, suffering, and hopelessness toward a life that is better.⁷⁰

Weingarten’s practical view of hope arises from her concern that people become overwhelmed by brokenness. By engaging with practices around reasonable hope, “even while one cannot do everything one can do something, goals and pathways into the future are formed.”⁷¹ Weingarten calls reasonable hope, “humble hope.”⁷² It operates under the same principles that remind us that “perfect” is the enemy of “good.” In Weingarten’s words, “It allows reasonable goals to trump ideal ones. It is satisfied to do less than everything that needs to be done in order to ensure that something be done.”⁷³ She writes, “Small actions need not be trivial. They may have ripple effects.”⁷⁴

Practicing reasonable hope means engaging with concrete principles. Among them are these three: (1) Reasonable hope involves action or a set of actions that move a person toward a goal more than a feeling; (2) reasonable hope can and often does exist alongside doubt and even despair; and (3) other people can help someone with reasonable hope, both in envisioning and in the concrete steps needed to move toward a goal.⁷⁵

One of the most insidious symptoms of unhealed soul wounds is that they rob people of hope. When those we love lose hope, we can engage practices of reasonable hope to offer incremental steps toward a future. Sometimes these incremental steps can be shockingly simple and tangible. Weingarten's daughter, Miranda, has a serious disability. Shortly before a concert that Miranda was looking forward to participating in, she had an insensitive and cruel medical appointment. Weingarten asked her daughter what she could offer to sustain her in the moment and get to the concert. Her daughter responded, "white chocolate."⁷⁶

Weingarten outlines a set of supportive practices for those in the midst of pain from wounding experiences.⁷⁷ They may also be helpful for those who accompany wounded people on a journey to healing: "Listening without my own agenda; opening myself to sorrow; finding connection in loss; attending to the present; resting within uncertainties; accepting fear; tending my relationship to aloneness; believing that there is always something that can be sustaining; working for a preferred identity; and relating intimately and collaboratively."⁷⁸ Preachers can be on the lookout for these behaviors in our world. Sermons can name and nurture them as gifts of the Spirit and fractional glimpses of our ultimate hope in Jesus Christ who completely opened himself to these same experiences and overcame death so that pain, fear, and loss might not have the final say in our lives and future.

In the resurrection of Jesus Christ we have access to an "unreasonable" hope; a hope that is beyond the realm of what is normally possible. As preachers and Christian leaders, we are the keepers and proclaimers of this hope and we name it again and again. We join a chorus of other witnesses across time and proclaim this unreasonable hope even when people suffer and stagger under the weight of wounding experiences.

It is common, normal, and natural for those who are in the midst of suffering and trauma to waiver in belief. On July 4, 2016, my sister-in-law Twila died from a brain aneurysm. She was a healthy mother in her thirties with young children who had no prior symptoms. Following Twila's death, my father-in-law struggled with the promises of God.⁷⁹ He couldn't stand to hear the promise in Romans 8:38 that "nothing separates us from God's love." He felt distant from God's love.

In the midst of trauma, loss, and soul wounds, focusing on a reasonable hope may be a helpful intermediary point and appropriate tool when theologically framed as a fragmentary glimpse of God's fuller promises of new life. Part of the calling for preachers is to bear witness to and thereby amplify the small steps and moments of progress, pointing out God's divine

signature in the lower corner of the sermonic portraits we paint.⁸⁰ We also strive to proclaim hope that listeners in our congregations can hear and receive in challenging and painful times. “Reasonable hope coexists with doubt and despair.” It is hope for all of us who are caught in the messy eschatological realities of a world that still suffers, but where we are also graced with the presence of the living Christ and glimpses of God’s realm breaking in among us.⁸¹

Weingarten’s research shows that encounters with hope over time can build resilience in people before they experience trauma.⁸² People who grow in resilience are able to experience more hope.⁸³ Preaching that explicitly shares stories of hope serves as a kind of inoculation that can help prevent soul wounds before they start—or at least lessen their impact. Similarly, for us as preachers, the act of looking specifically for signs of God at work in our world changes us and makes us more resilient to traumatic experiences, whether in our own lives or in the lives of those we accompany in ministry. When people cannot get to hope on their own, Weingarten insists that vicarious hope can help.⁸⁴ We can “do” hope for others in our sermons, build resilience, and contribute to God’s actions of healing.

Weingarten’s writing is peppered with stories of hope that serve as smaller practical signs of God’s incremental healing. She talks about a man who expanded his self-understanding by looking at his childhood from another angle, which gave him tools to build stronger relationships, and a woman who found that she could set boundaries around her relationship with her young adult daughter. By saying no to the daughter who phoned to vent her anxieties, the woman was less drained and able to extend love. Another woman volunteers with former girl soldiers, now mothers, who gave birth while fighting alongside rebel groups in Uganda. She sees signs of joy amidst the suffering and rejection that these women experience as they support one another and break into spontaneous songs together in their camp.⁸⁵ These stories are not perfect and don’t involve tidy and complete fairy-tale endings but they are hopeful and represent practical steps toward our gospel hope rooted in the coming realm of God.

Weingarten notes that people often experience hope when barriers to love are torn down.⁸⁶ If we are experiencing an upsurge in despair or loss in the wake of a wounding experience, we may want to focus our gaze on where we can find love and make the path between us and love as direct as possible. Weingarten notes that therapists must love their clients.⁸⁷ The same is true for pastors. We must love our congregations and preach in a way that enacts that love. As preachers we can clearly proclaim the unbounded love of God directed toward people in our sermons while also

showing how God removes barriers between people in our world. If we find ourselves feeling hopeless in ministry, it can help to look for where love is being blocked in our own lives.

Contextual Awareness and Flexibility

Traumatic experiences are part of the context of our preaching, regardless of the background or location of our congregations. Twenty-five percent of the global population lives in the midst of high levels of criminal violence.⁸⁸ Ten percent of all girls experience forced sexual acts.⁸⁹ Thirty-five percent of all women and ten percent of men experience intimate partner violence.⁹⁰ Our nation is grappling with opioid abuse and mass incarceration.⁹¹ Unless they share their pain with us as pastors, we may not know what private wounds are aching in people's souls as they come to worship. Hunsinger poignantly wonders, "Is it possible to talk about trauma without causing pain to those already bearing trauma in their bodies and souls? Daily through the media, we are bombarded with stories capable of breaking our hearts, yet little attention is given to the impact of such accounts on their hearers. How do we bear these stories with an open heart? Indeed, how do we bear them at all?"⁹² The pulpit does not need to become a trauma center to deal with the realities of stress and trauma in congregations. Preachers nonetheless need to be aware how they can speak to trauma without raising it each week.

When a large-scale tragedy strikes, preachers have an opportunity to nurture healing before wounds have a chance to deepen. On a Friday afternoon in the midst of Advent 2012, a desperate and mentally ill young man took the life of his mother, twenty first-graders, and six teachers and staff from the Sandy Hook elementary school in Newtown, Connecticut. The horrific and heart-breaking news dominated the media that weekend as pastors and church leaders prepared for Sunday morning worship. Our church had planned a special seasonal service focused on music with a children's choir and other ensembles. The groups had been planning for weeks and leaders decided to carry on with worship as usual. The worship leader did acknowledge the tragedy at Newtown in her welcoming comments and opening prayer, but otherwise the service went on as planned, albeit with a muted tone rather than a raucously joyful one. By moving forward with business as usual, the congregation missed an opportunity to acknowledge and validate church members' experiences of this gun-inflicted wound in the soul of our nation. The preacher missed a chance to speak a word of Advent hope in the midst of devastation.

For those who have experienced prior trauma, these events may trigger a return to the previous wounding experience or a spiral into depression or hopelessness. Positively, it is never too late for God to bring healing to a wound. A triggering event in the present may provide an opportunity for new awareness of the painful effects of the wound and God's power to heal.

Some congregations are able to be flexible in the wake of traumatic experience, much like a palm tree bends in hurricane-force winds. When my sister-in-law died, it was not only a tragedy for our family. Twila was very involved in her local church and its various programs. She was a leader on church committees and ran the projection system for the congregation during worship. News of her death was so shocking for the community that the pastors decided to shift their worship plans to reflect on "God's covenant in times of trouble," a continuation of a series on covenant, rather than moving on to a new worship series as originally planned. They did not seek to make the service another funeral, but an opportunity for the community to respond to Twila's death together with quiet, listening, sharing, and lament in the presence of God. This is not the first time this congregation has changed plans to respond to a tragedy in the community. They engaged in a similar service following the sudden death of a toddler in the congregation. By being willing to bend, adapt, and engage with painful experiences of brokenness, this congregation implicitly witnesses to God's stake in these events. God and God's people care about our pain and loss.

Attending to Whole Persons

By participating in healing from soul wounds we are attending to people as whole persons. The church has long tended to focus on right beliefs, separating spirituality from the physical body. Interestingly, this sense of separating soul from body is often described by survivors of traumatic events and can be part of the "freeze" response.⁹³ The person becomes detached from the present. Many speak of being unable to move physically, even to defend themselves. "Victims of sexual assault, for instance, sometimes speak of 'leaving their body' and watching themselves from another point in the room: standing next to the bed or looking down from the ceiling."⁹⁴ Many who suffer the worst effects of unhealed soul wounds have little awareness of what is happening in their bodies. Studies show that this approach can actually make people more susceptible to traumatic wounds as well as to harmful conditions such as heart attacks, strokes, and physical collapse.⁹⁵

While we may find ourselves operating according to the “myth” that those who have a strong faith should be able to remain relaxed or calm with few or no adverse physical reactions or feelings, the truth is that “it is virtually impossible to remove all of the physiological reactions to stress and trauma.”⁹⁶ By openly acknowledging wounding experiences and lingering wounds in sermons we de-stigmatize human responses to these and other less severe experiences of brokenness and pain in our world. We can begin to help listeners to be more aware of what is happening in their own bodies, which can open them to deeper experiences of healing and build resilience against future traumatic experiences.

Healing from traumatic wounds involves facing what happened and going down into the accompanying fear in the presence of another.⁹⁷ It can involve reconstructing a narrative of events. It can involve making sense of, or finding a way to ascribe meaning to, what happened. Counterintuitively, talking about or trying to directly process the traumatic or wounding event can cause harm. Pastors need to tread lightly and let the wounded person take the lead. A preaching class provides an opportunity for unusually direct feedback. In one of our student preaching sessions, a particularly vivid and troubling story elicited responses from classmates who had survived traumatic experiences saying that on a “bad day” such a description may have triggered a flashback or another harmful response. Deborah Hunsinger compassionately writes, “Trauma survivors need to choose life over death, not once but many times, reaching out with the fragile hope that the trauma can be healed or transformed, that the pain will abate, or that some kind of normalcy will return.”⁹⁸

Theological Frameworks for Addressing Unhealed Wounds

We have already laid some groundwork for understanding healing as a gift of salvation that can be experienced by all and noted the eschatological dimensions around the slow process of healing as we encounter fragmentary glimpses of God’s realm breaking into our world. Healing comes to us as a foretaste of God’s intentions for all of creation.

In the midst of the pain of unhealed trauma, the church has theological frameworks that support approaches to preaching as a means of participating in God’s healing of traumatic wounds. Part of the challenge of practical theology in the midst of trauma is navigating the tension between claiming

our ultimate hope in Jesus Christ and being pastorally and contextually sensitive preachers amidst horrific realities that mark life this side of the realm of God. Our faith may call us to absolute proclamation of life in the face of death, but we may also wonder what good our words are if listeners shut down. We need to embrace both, proclaiming a word of life in ways that can bring comfort and peace to hurting lives. To this end, I will explore two theological perspectives with potential to move survivors toward healing.

Understanding the Dynamic of Han

Theologian Andrew Park moves beyond traditional theological understandings of personal direct agency and human sin. *Han* is an anguished wound created in those who are oppressed or sinned against, particularly recurrently.⁹⁹ *Han* is the unhealed wound carried by survivors of traumatic experience. Park uses evocative terms to describe the wound: “boxed-in hope,” “collapsed feeling of anguish,” “unfathomable wound,” “emotional heart attack,” “void of abysmal grief.”¹⁰⁰ Park recognizes that descriptive words cannot do justice to the concept of *han*, and so recounts stories of those who have survived horrific exploitation, such as Jewish people who survived Nazi concentration camps and victims of abuse and incest.¹⁰¹

Han can be individual, collective, conscious, and unconscious, with both active and passive signs. In situations of conscious *han* where there is a clear person or object that was the source of the traumatic suffering, active responses include all-consuming revenge.¹⁰² This violence can also be enacted inwardly through forms of self-harm and self-hatred when a specific offender can't be named or is too powerful to confront.¹⁰³ *Han* that bubbles beneath consciousness can emerge as a posture of “bitterness” in the active form and “helplessness” in the passive form.¹⁰⁴ Naomi in the biblical story of Ruth is an example of *han* manifesting in bitterness after watching her husband and sons die far from home. Because she is concerned for her survival, there is no time to reflect. She expresses the bitterness of *han* as she and Ruth struggle to survive.¹⁰⁵ In her *han* she is unrecognizable to herself and asks for others to call her “Mara,” a name that means “bitter.” Ultimately Naomi finds healing and transformation through God's empowerment and raising up of a protector and heir. Less active unconscious *han* can be expressed through passive helplessness.¹⁰⁶ Collectively, active forms of *han* can lead to revolution and the creation of racist or bias-based behaviors and systems, more passive forms find expression in despair and creation of spirituals and other laments.¹⁰⁷

Sin unfolds relationally so that *han* is a by-product of sin and also creates more sin in a cyclical pattern. The one who has been wounded

often becomes a wounder of others.¹⁰⁸ God attends to the different needs of wounder and wounded to stop the cycle. The wounder suffers from guilt, while the wounded person experiences shame.¹⁰⁹ Guilt and shame are associated with transgressed boundaries. The one who has been violated experiences shame for not having been able to stop the violation from occurring.¹¹⁰ Shame is associated with lack of self-esteem and being disempowered. Park names different types of shame, which may be experienced by those who have survived a wounding experience, including humiliation, failure, disgrace, and collective humiliation.¹¹¹ For example, a survivor of rape not only experiences the initial physical violation but also endures humiliating medical examination, a trial, and media scrutiny.¹¹² Park writes, “The shame that the victim experiences devastates her human dignity and inner space, haunting all aspects of her life.”¹¹³ Guilt is experienced by those who cause harm to others—this can also be trauma inducing. Appropriate guilt can lead to reparations and repaired social relationships.¹¹⁴ Both shame and guilt can lead to anger. For survivors, anger can be helpfully channeled into individual and communal restorative acts of resistance.¹¹⁵

Like traditional theology, our church processes have tended to focus more on the sin of perpetrators rather than the wounds of those who have been sinned against. This mirrors how criminal justice systems work in the West; however, Park notes that it does not reflect God’s sense of justice. While God hears and receives the prayers of both parties—the sinner who seeks forgiveness and the sinned against who seeks justice and healing, God is not impartial. God stands with the sinned-against who bear the wound of *han*.¹¹⁶

Because the criminal justice system and many other systems—such as those in schools and even church institutions—tend to focus on perpetrators rather than victims, there is space for congregations to step in and address those who have been ignored. Survivors of trauma need to experience liberation as much as perpetrators need to experience repentance and forgiveness. Understanding *han* gives preachers a greater vocabulary in understanding the dynamics of sin and brokenness. Preaching about trouble we experience will resonate with wounded listeners when it doesn’t only focus on things that we have done wrong but also addresses wrongs that have been done to us—either directly or indirectly. God offers especially devoted love for those who have been on the receiving end of sin and brokenness. Jesus’s woundedness brings *han* into the life of God and God transforms woundedness into healing.¹¹⁷ By offering God’s love to wounded victims, we can participate in God’s promise of peace by interrupting cycles that can lead to violence toward others or toward the self.

Theology of Remaining

Shelly Rambo's theological work around trauma seeks to name and claim a middle territory, the space of "Holy Saturday," the space between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Her work draws from the pattern many experience in processing traumatic experience, which often involves the initial traumatic experience, intense fear of the event recurring, and sometimes re-experiencing the event through flashbacks. The wound of trauma is created and deepened by the unfinished experience, the sense that the traumatic experience is still unfolding.¹¹⁸

Rambo seeks to develop this "middle" space between the cross and resurrection as a place of connection and healing for trauma survivors where the good news is not either the cross or resurrection but the movement between these events. Jesus's experience of death on a cross is not the end of his journey; he moves from cross through the middle ground to resurrection life.¹¹⁹ Standing with those who are suffering in the "middle" keeps us from glossing over traumatic experience in a rush to get to the resurrection.¹²⁰ As Rambo puts it, "Without witnessing to what does not go away, to what remains, theology fails to provide a sufficient account of redemption."¹²¹

For preachers, this means resisting the urge to preach "tidy" grace, avoiding easy answers and symmetrical stories where the exact trouble introduced earlier in the sermon is completely resolved, sermons where the puppy is lost in the introduction and found again in the conclusion, where every illness is cured, where every broken marriage is saved. While we should never deny God's miraculous action, we would do well to explore whether the good news we preach will ring true from the vantage point of life in the middle. From the middle, a story of a judge sentencing a drug addict to a jail term can be grace in that it saves the addict's life. From the middle, a story about caring hospice workers who love and attend to dying patients can be a sign of God's presence and action in our world.

Unaddressed and unhealed soul wounds can color an entire community's witness. Our world is changed by traumatic violence and we all experience the ramifications. Rambo asserts that engaging with the middle is not only necessary for attending to those with traumatic wounds, but is important for all of us.¹²² Our lives are bound together so that, for example, my sister's wound is also painful to me. Rambo seeks power in testimony as we seek to bring voice to that which defies language.¹²³ The power of God, the love of God, and the pain of human violence all stretch the limits of what we can express in language and metaphor. Yet, this too is the calling of

preaching and God equips us for the task at hand as we carefully attend to the language we use and the purposes behind that language.¹²⁴

Positively, Rambo sees the lens of traumatic experience as a gift rather than a problem that we must solve. She writes, “The insights of trauma actually constitute the hermeneutical lens through which an alternative theological vision of healing and redemption emerges. This lens casts the relationship between death and life in the Christian narrative in a much more complex light. Trauma is the key to articulating a theology of redemption rather than the problem around which theology must navigate.”¹²⁵ She likens trauma to a “shattered lens” that impacts how the world is seen but through which we can also see new things.¹²⁶

As pastors and Christians, we inhabit an eschatological middle space between the advents of Christ empowered by the Spirit of God who stays with us. This same Spirit comforts survivors of trauma. This Spirit-breath exhaled by Jesus on the cross remains lovingly present with creation before the resurrection and enters Jesus’s disciples who testify to the persistent “primal breath of God.”¹²⁷ In the wake of trauma, language evades and survivors may struggle to find structure and meaning. In the middle, the Spirit “directs” and “gives form to the chaos.”¹²⁸

Not only are the cross and resurrection events that occur out of time, impacting creation before and after Jesus’s death and resurrection, but so too is Holy Saturday, which is the space between. While still pre-resurrection, the middle is a Spirit-infused space of “second beginnings,” where “the Spirit searches for forms of life where life cannot be easily recognized as such.”¹²⁹ Further, the Spirit is not relegated to a linear form of time. Rather than reading the narrative from death to resurrection in a linear way, Rambo follows Hans Urs Von Balthazar in finding meaning in the timeless abyss of Holy Saturday.¹³⁰ “In the ‘second chaos,’ the recreation, the Spirit oscillates, turning not simply forward but back and forth.”¹³¹

This sense of being outside of linear time relates to those who have experienced trauma. Past traumatic events may invade the present and present life may pale in comparison to vivid memories or flashbacks. Further, the experience of tragedy changes our relationship with time. Rambo writes, “Tragedies have no clear beginnings or endings; instead, they narrate events as if they are part of an endless cycle of existence.”¹³² Our experiences of grief are often cyclical. We experience grief afresh when a loved one who has died is not present for significant events. We may miss a lost job or a former home around particular seasons in the year, for example, a former teacher may feel loss when September rolls around. Following my sister-in-law Twila’s death, our niece’s first day of junior kindergarten was painful because

we knew that Twila would have been so proud of her daughter. These experiences show us that our experiences in time may not always be linear. These cycles are often more pronounced for those who have experienced trauma.

Even for preachers who proclaim the resurrection of Christ, celebration of Holy Saturday is a significant reminder that victory does not always come immediately.¹³³ The hope of the middle, between life and death, is that God's breath persists and remains with us in love.¹³⁴ Rambo focuses on the Spirit that remains, but in our theological traditions, Jesus is still doing redemptive work on Holy Saturday. He descends into hell and releases those imprisoned there. For trauma survivors living through hell-on-earth, this is a powerful promise that we can name in preaching. In sermons we can appropriate Rambo's work on the "middle" by not leaping from trouble to a perfect or easy gospel. Showing how grace is often incremental may ring true to those with wounds from traumatic experience.

Conclusions: Moving toward Healing

Every congregation is touched by trauma. We have already noted the theological tension between our Christian hope and the challenges of preaching to wounded people. The horror of trauma is well documented and must never be minimized. Engaging with those who have experienced trauma is not for the faint of heart and preachers and other caregivers should not enter into relationships with naivete or optimism built on well-meaning platitudes. PTSD is a serious diagnosis and those who have experienced trauma or who have symptoms of PTSD should be under the care of professionals who are trained and experienced in dealing specifically with trauma. However, as Christians who believe in the God who brings new life from death, the horror of trauma is not the final verdict and preachers can play an important role in fostering avenues for God's healing, not only for serious trauma for but a wide range of experiences of brokenness, despair, and loss.

The next chapter turns to the Bible as a resource for preaching healing for those with soul wounds. I will offer five interpretive tools for preachers and demonstrate how these tools can be part of a trauma-informed process of moving from biblical text to sermon creation.



CLÁUDIO CARVALHAES

LITURGIES

from

BELOW

462 acts of worship

Praying with People
at the End of the World

More Praise for *Liturgies from Below*

“*Liturgies from Below* has come to us at a time when racial violence, hunger, migration, and death is on the rise. Rather than rely on the traditional Western canons of liturgical practice and expressions, this book offers a needed corpus of liturgies that will reinvigorate communities of faith to respond faithfully and lovingly to the social and political injustices of this era. For Christian communities seeking to democratize their worship experiences with the voices of those rendered unseen by colonizing elite power, this book is essential.”

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“*Liturgies from Below* unleashes the subversive and creative power of prayer that destabilizes dominant forms and acts of worship, by praying with the ‘unwanted’ people and the earth. The ‘unwanted’ people who cry out ‘I can’t breathe’ invite us to breathe God’s breath in the world to bring about healing, justice, and restoration. This book, with imagination and creativity, gathers and weaves these prayers from ‘unwanted’ locations and demonstrates that worship can be a system-threatening and therapeutic spiritual and political act that creates counter-imperial alternatives.”

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“This book confronts Empire, not only in its centering of voices, spaces, and places that are often unheard and marginalized but also in its clear acknowledgment that even Western dominant ways of doing theology do not have the last word. The prayers and liturgies contained in this powerful and useful collection embrace the pain and injustice and the joy and beauty of such voices, places, and spaces in a way that affirms and invites the shalom of a God who acts concretely in history. It invites us as readers to do likewise as we stand in prayerful solidarity and sing the songs of freedom together with all who yearn.”

—Nadine Bowers Du Toit, professor of practical theology and missiology, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa

“What should prayer and worship look like in a world that is seeming more unjust and less hopeful each day? *Liturgies from Below* shows how worship that occurs in contexts of war, poverty, dehumanization, and hopelessness engenders courage and inspires resistance to oppressive structures. It demonstrates forcefully that worship should never be an exercise that lulls us into indifference, or even worse complacency, to injustices around us, but worship should inspire us to become catalysts for change. An essential resource for every Christian community that seeks to worship faithfully and live out its calling as people committed to justice.”

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“*Liturgies from Below* touches the mind, stirs the heart, and ennobles the spirit within us all. With a myriad of liturgical styles and emphases, there is something for everyone in this impactful worship resource. Minority and poor communities will find words that

leap from the heart of their very existence. Majority and affluent communities will find prophetic challenges so compellingly penned it will move them to examine deeply held assumptions of wealth and privilege.”

—B. J. Beu, worship and preaching consultant, co-editor of *The Abingdon Worship Annual* from Abingdon Press

“The seeming ordinariness of a traditional book of prayers is quickly disrupted by the invasive smells, noisy hustle, fears and exuberance, cardboard houses, and ready-to-eat meals of global city streets. These street prayers reek of the aroma of Christ.”

—Steed Vernyl Davidson, professor of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament, vice president of academic affairs, and dean of the faculty, McCormick Theological Seminary, Chicago, IL

“Christian prayer is a participation in the ongoing, eternal intercession of Jesus the Christ before his Father. As we participate in Jesus’ prayer, we gain God’s heart for the entire created order—and in particular for the poor, the marginalized, the innocent, the oppressed, the sick, the dying. But, as *Liturgies from Below* makes clear, we also come to the realization of our own complicity in perpetuating evil and oppressive systems of thought, politics, economics, behaviors, and activities that militate against the kingdom of Christ, and we are led to a place of metanoia, or repentance. That change of heart by the Spirit of God working in us, is the only real hope of the world, but a hope rooted in God’s love for the entire created order. I commend these prayers as they participate in the prayer of the Savior for the ‘least of these.’”

—James R. Hart, President, Robert E. Webber Institute for Worship Studies, Jacksonville, FL

“*Liturgies from Below* invites readers on a vital journey to pray with people ‘at the ends of the world’ and, as one of the prayers says, ‘to step into their lives.’ Continually yielding insight, often deeply moving, not always easy, and sometimes searing, *Liturgies from Below* powerfully implores that when we ‘raise our hands in prayer’ we need to ‘use those hands to help.’”

—Stephen Burns, professor of liturgical and practical theology, Pilgrim Theological College, University of Divinity, Melbourne, Australia

“This is a priceless resource. We can no longer be satisfied praying the prayers that we know; we must instead begin to pray in a way that can ‘heal, recuperate, reconfigure, restore, and restitute our communities, the earth, and our social-natural systems.’”

—Vinnie Zarletti, Director, School of Worship Arts, North Central University, Minneapolis, MN

“Cláudio Carvalhaes has gathered a great variety of prayers for many occasions. Some fit classical liturgical settings and are offered for specific concerns. The collection will inspire leaders to facilitate liturgical creativity and lament, and it will help people resist authoritarian cultures of repression and capitalist structures of exploitation.”

—Marion Grau, professor of systematic theology, ecumenism, and missiology; research fellow, Norwegian School of Theology, Religion and Society, Oslo, Norway

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at the Ends of the World

 Abingdon Press[™]
Nashville

LITURGIES FROM BELOW:
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MANUFACTURED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*To Sudipta Singh, a shining light,
whose passion, creativity, and love for the poor is a gift to the
world*

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Please visit www.reimaginingworship.com, to find prayers and liturgies not included in this book. You'll also find reflections and testimonies from participants, visual art, songs, and theater compositions created as part of this project, plus photos and videos from the locations. You're invited to engage with all the content, to write your own prayers and liturgies, and to share them in your faith community and social networks.

PRAYING WITH UNWANTED PEOPLE

What It Means and Why It's Important

Faced with pain that rips apart, we cry out in one voice,
**intercede with us,
oh solidarity Lord.**

Faced with death that wounds,
and marks with pain,
**give us the strength of an embrace
and the peace that your love gives us.**

Faced with injustice that kills
and cries out for conversion,
**move us to transform the world
and let all death become a song.**

In the face of desolation and crying,
faced with impotence and frustration,
**come to our side,
sustain us with your life, Lord.**

You are the God of the poor, the One who sows hope,
you are the God of solidarity, the One who gives love.

You are God with us, the Eternal, the Great I am.
**God of the embrace, God of song, God who caresses,
God who strengthens, God who surrenders, God of action.**

O Lord of Solidarity: Your kingdom come to the mourner,
lean your ear to the cry,
**your sons and daughters are coming
to show your great love.¹**

1. Find many additional prayers from this project at <http://reimaginingworship.com>.

Introduction

A diverse group of about one hundred pastors, theologians, students, artists, and activists from various Christian traditions, churches, and walks of life from about fifty countries gathered together during 2018–2019 in four different countries on four continents, blessed and supported by the Council for World Mission.² They gathered for a common purpose: learning to pray with local communities in order to create liturgical resources for Christian communities around the world. This project is rooted in God's demand for us to live a life of compassion, listening to those who are suffering and learning how to pray with them. We hope that, in the desire of God and the strength of our faith, we will respond to the challenges of our world today.

Challenges in Our World, Challenges for Our Praying

Many people are feeling, in one way or another, that the world is moving toward a difficult place, that we are moving toward an impending collective death. Inequality soars. The vast majority of people around the earth are getting poorer. As Oxfam says, "The world's 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the planet's population."³ We live in a slow-moving catastrophe that doesn't make headlines. Our era has been designated as *anthropocene*, *capitalocene*, *plantationocene*, or *chthulucene*.⁴ Most of us humans, who place ourselves above any other form of life, are extracting more from the earth than it can offer, straining natural resources beyond the earth's sustainable supply. Our planet is losing its balance. Global warming, melting ice caps, erratic seasons, droughts, overpopulation, deforestation, the ocean's warming, extinction of species, death, and loss are showing up everywhere. Geopolitical configurations are marked by an expanding movement of migrants and refugees due to climate change and civil wars. Democracies are collapsing, social inequality is widening, nation states are dissolving into dictatorships with fascist leaders, public spaces are collapsing, fear is the political emotion of our time, various forms of destruction and violence are becoming normalized, and the consequences of an unrestrained neoliberal economy are thrusting us toward a place of no return.

What prayers are Christians called to pray during these times? How are we to pray as we are confronted by a world in collapse? While some Christians recite the

2. <https://www.cwmission.org>.

3. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/press-releases/worlds-billionaires-have-more-wealth-46-billion-people>.

4. Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities*, vol. 6, 2015; <https://environmentalhumanities.org/arch/vol6/6.7.pdf>.

ancient prayers in the midst of a church burnt by wars, other Christians try to find words to pray that make sense of the absurdity of their conditions. For the ways of praying that we are proposing here, the condition of our world begs for different prayers and different forms of prayer. As we witness the pain of the poor, the collapsing of the world we know, and the natural disasters around the globe, there seems to be no prayer that can respond to it all. However, we must pray anyway, and the way we pray makes total difference! Where should our prayers come from? If our prayers come from places of collapse and the debris of horrors, then what prayers may Christians offer to God and the world? That is what this book is wrestling with.

Learning New Grammar for Our Faith

If we are to pray today from real historical and social locations, from places of deep pain and places that are entirely foreign to us, we Christians must learn a new grammar for our faith. We must learn new prayers and new ways to pray.⁵ We will have to look at tradition differently. We will have to delve into a variety of prayer resources to engage with the earth and other people more fully. We will have to be willing to understand other people's lives, ways of being, and religions. Our prayers must learn how to speak of the trauma poor people face every day. Our prayers must teach us to reject altogether any historical construction founded in the unhappiness and oppression of others. Otherwise our prayers are something other than prayer.

As God's voice in the world is expressed in our prayers, we are called to be radically converted in our ways of praying, to go deeper within ourselves, and to relate more deeply with nature. We are called to be radically converted toward forms of action that heal, recuperate, reconfigure, restore, and restitute our communities, the earth, and our social-natural systems. May our prayers be anathema to any form of government that sustains war, that oppresses people, animals, mountains, oceans, and the whole earth! Instead of being apart, prayers can reconcile us back into a deep sense of communities. And blessed be those who understand that we live in *conjunto*, together, with the same rights and responsibilities.

5. Paul Holmer in *The Grammar of Faith* shows how prayer consists of structural languages that shape people's ways of being. The grammar of faith for him is marked by language *of* faith and not language *about* faith. Theology for him is done by the one praying and not a comment or reflection on proper theology done elsewhere. Theology is a personal event. He says, "Theology must always move towards a present-tense, first-person mood" (p. 24). Following Holmer, we believe that every individual prays from their own life experiences and through their own lives. Their prayers are the forms and contents of theology. In other words, theology happens in the moment when one is praying, with their self/collective presence, the conditions, quality, and limitations of their lives. When we pray in places of hurt and violence, our theologies pulse with sweat and blood, and a new grammar of faith ensues. See Paul L. Holmer, *The Grammar of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1978).

Composing a New Tradition to Breathe God's Breath in the World

It is within our “anathema” and our “blessed be” that we *compose tradition*. This entails betrayal, a break with that which is harmful, and a rupture in our longtime habits and assumptions. But it also entails moving along with that which is important to our living. This form of living tradition goes beyond texts. The group of pastors, theologians, students, artists, and activists who joined in this project decided to hear firsthand what was meaningful for people living at the margins of the world and to compose a bundle of resources for the rest of the world's Christians. In this way, this collection of liturgies is more a path, a journey into and from places where people are struggling, rather than a self-enclosed set of prayers.

Only a prayer that has its ear attached to the earth, its eye upon those who suffer, and its hands stretched out in solidarity can help us realize our distance from God and a world in flaming pain. If prayer is about loving God, then prayer is also about building a house for the abandoned, becoming a wall of protection for the vulnerable, and giving our life away for those who are at the brink of disappearance. This building of a common happiness and place of safety for those who are vulnerable is an absolute imperative in our world today. Fascism and white nationalism globally have become a fundamental power effect in our times. The *de-negation* of the world; of the poor; of brown, yellow, red, and black bodies; as well as of the natural world has become the global political process of necropolitics by and for the sake of white supremacy.

Against that daily threat to the lives of so many, Christians must build expansive practices of compassion and solidarity with those who have been deemed to die. We must realize our deep connections with all from the lower classes, all the poor—in whatever religion or color they come—and expand this solidarity to include animals, rivers, oceans, birds, and the whole earth. Only through that confluence of mutualities and belonging does our prayer become breathing God's breath in the world.⁶ In that way, prayers become a continuation of Jesus's prophetic life, expressing a radical commitment with the poor.

Avoiding or Embracing the Poor

Many Christians have created a faith that avoids the poor. In the United States, for instance, Protestantism is often a church full of middle- and upper-class people anxiously wrestling with secularism and the decline of their church. Only a few of these churches can boast large memberships or bountiful resources. Instead, most Protestant churches are growing smaller and weaker. Just like the neoliberal economy of the world.

6. Cláudio Carvalhaes, *Praying With: A Christian Orientation of the Heart* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2021), forthcoming.

In other parts of the world, however, there is a Christian renewal thriving amidst the poor at the fringes of Empire. This Christian renewal is taking place fundamentally through the ritual of Christian worship and prayers. Christian neo-Pentecostalism is exploding everywhere,⁷ offering a new grammar of faith that gives strength, mission, and purpose to those who are exposed to social threats, chaos, and loss. These churches are embracing the poor and speaking from places where abandoned people live. Many of these churches are giving people tools to survive in the midst of violence, social and personal trauma, illness, anxiety and depression, deep economic hardships, and death. While many of these churches do exploit people, they also offer sanctuary and hope to those who are suffering and impoverished by creating new songs and prayers, new ways to pray and listen to the word of God. While we must be radically opposed to their exploitive theologies, theirs is a faith grammar grounded in the hearts of those who are unwanted around the world but who *are* wanted by God.

How Are We to Pray?

This prayer book offers an alternative to both the traditional prayer books of Christian liturgies and neo-Pentecostal cultic prayers. It *intertwines* traditional Christian liturgies and neo-Pentecostal prayers. Based on a gospel insistence that we must get closer to the poorest and the abandoned in the world, this book is intended to help us pray with those who are suffering the psychological, social, economic, sexual, and racial violence of our times. Thus, the main question here is: **How are we to pray with the unwanted of the world?** How can our prayers not only address the disasters of the world and the killing of people everywhere but also, in God's love, offer hope and actions of transformation? And in that way of praying, how do we get to the point where we can see our own vulnerability, our own incompleteness, our own frailty, and our own shakable ontological structure and impossibility to deal with life itself?

Once in a worship class, a guest speaker told my students that we needed to pray the established, written prayers of the church for at least twenty years before we were able to pray our own newly composed prayers. Does such a rule still apply? I do not think so. A new movement is required for this time: not to abandon the prayers of the church but to also pray new prayers in new ways, for others and ourselves, in a constant movement of God's grace into an expansive mindfulness, transforming and recreating ourselves and the world. This will mean learning how to pray differently, to be faithful to Jesus in these devastating times by praying with and for the

7. Jung Mo Sung, *Desire, Market, and Religion* (London: SCM Press, 2012); "Christianity Reborn: A Century After Its Birth Pentecostalism Is Redrawing the Religious Map of the World and Undermining the Notion That Modernity Is Secular," *The Economist*, December 19, 2006, <https://www.economist.com/special-report/2006/12/19/christianity-reborn>.

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unwanted—those who are the “undercommons,”⁸ including not only humans but also the whole earth and other animals, because their conditions of living are also the conditions of existence for all of us.

Through our collective prayers, with those who we are called to listen to, serve, and fight for, God calls us to live our faith in much deeper ways, understand our world in broader ways, and make a radical commitment with the poor in the name of God. Through prayers, we can envision a radical moral imagination of new worlds! By the grace of God, we can birth these new worlds through *ora et labora*—our prayers and our work in solidarity.

A lost voice. Squatting in my little street corner this very dark night. It is cold and the darkness is scary. Who can hold me—the hand of God. Is there a God out there? God, if you are there—if you can hear me, hold me through the night. I really want to sleep, but my belly is rumbling. Please don't let them find me here, stop them from taking and hurting me. God—if you are there—hear my voice!⁹

8. Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), Kindle Locations 26–30, Kindle Edition.

9. Find many additional prayers from this project at <http://reimaginingworship.com>.