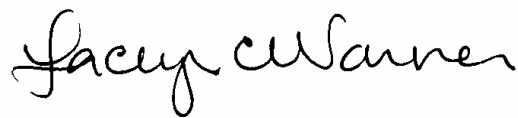


Preaching for Post-Traumatic Growth and Healing: Preaching and Worship After  
Communal Trauma

by  
Emily L. Chapman

December 8th, 2023

Approved:



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Rev. Dr. Lacey Warner, 1st Reader



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Christine Parton-Burkett, 2nd Reader



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Bishop Will Willimon

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor  
of Ministry in the Divinity School of Duke University

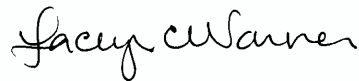
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ABSTRACT

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## Abstract

Our knowledge of the kinds of trauma people experience and the impact that it has has grown by leaps and bounds in recent years. Some margin of that knowledge has crossed over into the religious landscape, particularly about pastoral care and theology. This paper will take up the idea that preaching and, by extension, the other parts of the liturgy can be a part of reforming and healing the fractured imaginations of persons and communities who have experienced traumatic events, leading them to post-traumatic growth and thriving.

My knowledge of preaching being far greater than my knowledge of trauma theory, my first priority was extensive research in that field; I studied how trauma impacts both individual bodies and whole communities, first utilizing Bessel van der Kolk and Judith Hermann, two established and well-regarded researchers. From there, I moved into source material from the medical field, finding significant intrigue in a 1688 dissertation from a medical library that was one of the first texts to describe the way traumatic events fracture imagination. Then I moved to experts in the field of preaching and worship – Will Willimon, Barbara Brown Taylor, Rick Lischer, Luke Powery, and more.

It became clear that preaching is a vocation of words and imagination, and trauma's chief impacts rob people of those very things. Thus, preachers have a critical role to play in the healing of their communities by providing shared, sacred language and a space to reintegrate broken imaginations.

## Dedication

With a grateful heart, I dedicate this work to the congregation of St. Mark's United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas. They had to live many of these stories, and it is their witness to courage, grace, resilience, and joy that continues to inspire me.

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## Acknowledgements

I am deeply indebted to so many at Duke Divinity School for their guidance, patience, and grace in what proved to be a significantly longer project than predicted. Lacey Warner provided constant encouragement and understanding through the ups and downs of this writing, in addition to her excellent advice edits. Bishop Willimon did not give up on me when I am sure others would have, and encouraged me in both my ministry and my writing. Christine Parton-Burkett is, as ever, one of my favorite preaching experts who has made me a better preacher and a more creative student of scripture and storytelling. There are also countless staff who had to keep me going with paperwork and reminders and grace. I have loved Duke Divinity School for two decades now, and my love is only increased from their support in this venture.

My friends and family have lived through many iterations of this doctoral program, and they have given me space, encouragement, and even editing help! They also lived through the traumatic experiences that inspired this work and preached the Gospel to me time and again with their lives and presence in seasons that felt like endless chaos.

Finally, the staff and leaders of St. Paul's and St. Mark's UMCs, who had the vision for me to do this work and provided the support to make it happen. I am forever grateful.

## **Introduction**

It was a Sunday morning at the urban congregation where I served immediately after moving to Houston, Texas. A young woman I had not met before came in with a man I recognized as one of our street-dependent neighbors who often came for sack lunches that were handed out through one of the church's ministry partners. They sat together the entire service, as though they were friends. I greeted them during the passing of the peace. All seemed well. They got up to depart the service together. The next time I turned around, Amy, the young woman, had waited for the man to go to the bathroom and then made a run for it – dashing into a closet in our sacristy, where she shook and gasped for breath while curled up in a ball under where our albs hung.

Two of the pastors and a kind church member got down on the floor with her to help her calm down and find out what was wrong. It turned out she had just met the gentleman on the train this morning, and he had struck up a conversation with her, moving close to sit next to her, then following her from the train, to the church, and into the building for service. Amy, ostensibly for her own protection and out of her desire to be kind, had not resisted him at all, but the idea of him continuing to follow her as she left church paralyzed her.

While we were able to easily resolve the immediate situation on Sunday morning, I continued to think about Amy all week and finally heard from her. She apologized for falling apart and shared an experience from her past that had caused her to be stricken with panic at the thought of being followed by a man. But she felt that it was “the Christian thing to do” to welcome him into church, and then the sermon for the day had



talked about showing hospitality to strangers, citing some of our street-dependent friends as an example of those who are often left on the margins by those in the center. Amy was filled with guilt and shame at her fear, which led her to try to suppress her panic. In the end though, her past trauma had reared its head and taken over.

Since that experience, I have frequently encountered persons whose experiences of traumatic events impact the way they experience church life, reading scripture and participating in worship. I wondered in particular, after Amy's experience, about how the way scripture is publicly interpreted in a place (through preaching in worship) has an impact on traumatized individuals and traumatized communities. Many individuals I have worked with through the years who are victims of severe trauma and toxic stress struggle to connect in church life and find participation in community overwhelming. Couple that with sitting and listening to sermons that heap guilt upon shame, and suddenly it is no wonder that these individuals wrestle with worship.

My wonder about this grew exponentially as I began leading my congregation collectively through moments of trauma experienced communally – natural disasters, acts of terrorism, a young man related to our church being murdered in our neighborhood, a disastrous fire. Trauma disrupts everything from memory to language to a sense of ability to engage the world. How can the preaching moment speak to that reality, especially after a whole community has experienced a traumatic event? How can liturgy and preaching best encourage healing and open up new pathways in one's imagination to begin to see themselves as whole members of a community who are agents of God's grace, love and hope?

This paper will take up the idea that preaching and, by extension, the other parts of the liturgy can be a part of reforming and healing the fractured imaginations of persons and communities who have experienced traumatic events. Using the power of preaching to tell the story of the Gospel invites a community to hear stories of people who had agency in their own lives; people who lived through terrible things with a God who promised never to abandon them and were able to act on that grace from God. It gives story, framework, and language to re-order imaginations fractured by violence, by disaster, by loss, by forces beyond one's control. A deeper awareness in our preaching of the ways to respond to trauma will build churches that are places of healing, growth and empowerment.

For the sake of scope, this paper will focus primarily on collective, acute trauma, an event that a community experiences and responds to together. While it will at times point to how to respond to traumatized individuals, for the preacher in the preaching moment, responding to individuals is always in relation to the whole community. In a world constantly contending with disease, rampant inequality, and persistent conflict, no preacher will escape time in the pulpit without needing the skills to respond faithfully to communal trauma. The church already has the tools that modern research says will help our people heal from the trauma that is now inevitable – a supportive community, conceptual frameworks for understanding a broken world where trauma is a common experience, embodied practices that attune people to one another through rhythm, song, and prayer, and consistent retelling and reenactment of common stories.

This project is, in its own way, the story of how trauma interrupts. In the course of writing, my city faced one of the worst natural disasters in United States history<sup>1</sup> when Hurricane Harvey repeatedly made landfall and covered the city of Houston with fifty-four inches of rain, causing billions in damage as homes flooded, killing eighty-eight people, and displacing countless others<sup>2</sup>. Time stopped in a strange way for those of us here and did not resume at its regular speed for months. The trauma experienced by Houstonians was vast and continuous, and churches still grapple with our response, even years later. In those hard days after the storm, we learned more about creativity, imagination, and resilience than at any other time in my ministry...until 2019, when my local congregation suffered a devastating fire that we learned had been set by a child in our community. The damage was extensive, and the disruption and dislocation continued for more than three years and to this day is not fully resolved. Learning the cause of the fire reopened wounds that had not even had time to heal. It violated our sense of security, as in the early days we did not know the whole story and wondered if the church had been targeted for our inclusion of the LGBTQ community or for hosting a recent rally with March for Our Lives students to end gun violence. Learning that we were not targets helped, but only marginally, with the feelings of lost safety and the violation of a sacred space. The trauma the congregation experienced changed us, as it always does, but we have grown together as we sought to overcome it. I am still learning the ways that trauma changed me, and suspect that will continue to be revealed for years to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedman, Lisa, and John Schwartz. *"How Hurricane Harvey Became So Destructive."* *New York Times*, August 28, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Afiune, Giulia. "State says Harvey's death toll has reached 88." *Texas Tribune*. October 13, 2017. <https://www.texastribune.org/2017/10/13/harveys-death-toll-reaches-93-people>.

Six months after that, the world entered a global pandemic, the full effects of which we still likely have only a marginal grasp on. We do know that every faith community and every individual has felt the impact of this. While the trauma will vary by community, all pastors and church leaders had to stretch and transform to meet the moment – perhaps most especially those who served communities of front line workers and others who did not have the privilege of simply staying home and learning to do life online. Whatever the particular circumstance, in every one of these cases, Sunday still came, same as it does each week. And every time that happens, the preacher, ready or not, is called to bring words of life. This project aims to do some justice to that endeavor and to help prepare others to face their own traumatic interruptions with confidence.

## **Chapter 1: What is Trauma?**

The field of trauma-informed care has grown dramatically in multiple disciplines in recent years (psychology, education, social work, etc.) with the increasing knowledge of the levels of trauma that individuals and groups experience, and the impact that has on overall thriving. While this has changed many things about how professional providers treat clients in therapeutic and service settings, there are implications for church life. This work has not made its way into the life of the church in many ways beyond pastoral care formation, at best. To be able to respond to trauma, the preacher must first understand its definition and what characteristics mark it and distinguish it from the more standard difficulties of daily life. This is complex in today's world because trauma, trauma-informed care, and even Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and mental health in general have been "meme-ified" on social media, exposing wider populations to basic knowledge. This has both positive and negative impacts. Positively, people who have less access to mental health professionals and public health information have access through media. Additionally, it has provided some shared language that allows people to feel less alone. But a complicating factor is that it muddies the waters of correct information and clinical context and becomes a flat trend, rather than the multifaceted, complex concept that it truly is.

### **What is Trauma?**

Trauma has both suffered and benefited from its rise as a popular topic in recent years. Social media platforms are rife with memes and videos using therapeutic language to talk about trauma. While popular knowledge does mean that more folks are getting appropriately treated for post-traumatic disorders, it also means the word (along with

related terms like trigger, trauma response, etc.) are becoming looser in their meaning. The Greek word is τραύμα, meaning wound or injury.<sup>3</sup> While the Greeks only used it to describe physical, bodily injury, the definition has evolved to include a psychic state as a result of injuries that could be physical but also mental or emotional. To be traumatized is to be seized or struck by some external force that threatens to destroy you.<sup>4</sup> While the word may be used casually at times, too broadly even by those who are not well versed in its seriousness, it has specific characteristics which cannot be applied in blanket form to any adverse event. Trauma has specific components that distinguish it from tragedy.

Understanding the particularities of a traumatic event itself helps us better understand the effects it generates. This helps us to distinguish an actual traumatic event from some other disturbance or common stressor. Judith Herman defines a traumatic event as one in which a person or persons perceives themselves or others as threatened by an external force that seeks to annihilate them; they are unable to resist, and it overwhelms their capacity to cope. Thus, traumatic events are distinguishable from others in their order of magnitude. They are events that threaten one's very existence.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, an event is only experienced as traumatic for a person when it is internally, subjectively experienced that way. This means the event must register with the person as life-threatening. Trauma is provoked by a concrete, specific, real event,

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<sup>3</sup> "Trauma." Merriam-Webster.com. Accessed May 3, 2018.  
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trauma>.

<sup>4</sup> Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience : Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996.

<sup>5</sup> Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. New York, N.Y.: BasicBooks, 1992. In a field that is growing as rapidly as this, Herman's treatise is on the older side (though it has a brief update in 2015). I chose to proceed with it largely because Herman's conclusions about shared trauma remain a landmark in the field and a unique voice among other researchers as clinicians that is valuable for faith communities and anyone interested in communal responses.

although the memory associated with it may prove unstable.<sup>6</sup> Thus, a person's perception plays a role, meaning that even those who experience the same potentially traumatic event may not experience the ensuing trauma that comes with the event. This can cause persons who experience an event as traumatic that others take in stride to feel ashamed, embarrassed or isolated. It also means that when considering community response, many different outcomes must be considered, because every person will experience the event uniquely.

Events can be traumatic not just for the person most directly impacted, but also for nearby witnesses. For example, violent crimes are traumatic for the people who are the direct victims, but also for bystanders.<sup>7</sup> Key examples of this are when persons are targeted based on their identity – when a crime is committed against someone because of their race, gender, or sexual orientation, even those who did not witness the crime directly can experience the impact of the trauma in their own bodies. Traumatic events are also not limited to individuals – trauma can be experienced by a whole community, a whole region, even a whole country. This paper seeks to discern in particular how this sort of collective trauma is experienced and responded to by the Church.

A crucial note: while we often associate trauma with one-time, cataclysmic events, trauma is often caused by repeated, lower-intensity events, giving it a corrosive impact over time.<sup>8</sup> Ongoing abuse and continuous poverty are examples of this, as are the impacts of racism and homophobia. While the abuse or the difficult impacts of

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<sup>6</sup> Herman, 25

<sup>7</sup> Kilpatrick DG, Resnick HS, Milanak ME, Miller MW, Keyes KM, Friedman MJ. National Estimates of Exposure to Traumatic Events and PTSD Prevalence Using DSM-IV and DSM-5 Criteria. *Journal of traumatic stress*. 2013; 26(5): 537-547.

<sup>8</sup>J. Feriante and N.P. Sharma, "Acute and Chronic Mental Health Trauma," StatPearls, last modified August 2, 2023, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK594231/>.

poverty or marginalization may develop a routine that goes on for years, they are no less traumatic events. Traumatic events are overwhelming – they are experienced as inescapable and unmanageable whether they are a result of a one-time moment or long-term harm.

For the purposes of this project, I focus primarily on collective trauma experienced as a result of a particular event, and dealing collectively with a community knowing that many members of it have experienced a larger scale, acute trauma. This distinction is critical for two reasons. First, I am not talking about one-on-one or small group encounters with persons who have experienced trauma, as a pastor might provide in a pastoral care moment where there is more mutual conversation and the pastor is more likely to have had some training for these types of connections. Rather, I focus on the worship setting, with the assumption that a larger community is gathered and there is a moment of proclamation surrounded by liturgy. Second, I do not delve deeply into the trauma experienced over time by persons and communities that is not based on particular events, but rather on a pattern of oppression, violence, poverty, discrimination, or abuse – though many of the concepts herein could be applied. These are both worthy areas that require extensive focus in their own right for religious leaders of all kinds, but they will not be addressed directly here.

### **Trauma's Impact on the Human Body**

Trauma impacts every part of a person's system, from their brain function, to their reflexes, to their language, to the way they move their bodies. Signs of trauma often include<sup>9</sup>:

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<sup>9</sup> This list is largely taken from Serene Jones' *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, 16-18, but these symptoms and signs are confirmed in a variety



1. Hyperarousal – a sense of being on-edge or extra vigilant, easily startled by loud noises or sudden movements.
2. A feeling or attitude of numbness or disassociation from the world, even disassociation with one's own self.
3. Loss or diminishment of memory.
4. Loss or diminishment of language use.
5. An unraveling of one's sense of agency.
6. Loss of hope.
7. Isolation.

Some of these signs are physical, some psychological, and some environmental.

Physical signs, like the speed of a person's speech, to the way they shift their body weight, to eye movement, voice pitch, facial tension – as well as the things we notice in ourselves like salivating or having dry mouth, heart rate, breathing pace – all of this is controlled by a single regulatory system in the body, the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS), which has both a sympathetic nervous system (that acts like an accelerator) and parasympathetic nervous system (that acts like brakes).<sup>10</sup>

Bessel Van Der Kolk explains that the simplest way to understand how these two systems work together is to take a deep breath. Inhaling activates the sympathetic system, releasing a burst of adrenaline that speeds up your heart. Exhaling activates the parasympathetic system, which slows down the heart.<sup>11</sup> Think about an athlete preparing

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of sources including through the National Institute of Mental Health. It is not intended to be a comprehensive list of all possible reactions to trauma, but focuses on the ones to be addressed in this project and the ones most possible for churches to make a difference in.

<sup>10</sup> Van Der Kolk, Bessel A. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. 2015, pp 79.

<sup>11</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 79.

to compete, or watching a person who is upset trying to get a hold of themselves, or being in a yoga class. The athlete is likely to take deep quick breaths that get the heart going, whereas in the other instances, the focus is on long deep breaths in order to slow the heart and calm the body. Trauma is stored not just in one's mind but all over the body, and so any response to it, whether individual or communal, will not occupy space not just in one's cognitive capacity but in their body.

### **Hyperarousal and Hypervigilance**

Human beings are remarkably attuned to small changes in the emotional or physical state of the people around them; this is part of how we understand safety versus danger. One can observe by facial tension and the position of the neck whether someone is at ease, afraid, or suspicious.<sup>12</sup> When we receive messages of safety and security, we can relax and be at ease. In an ideal situation, a community of faith provides that for all its members and has the opportunity to offer it in a particular way to people recovering from trauma, through secure connections to others who can help them regulate and grow in trust as they heal. These reactions that we see in the human body can also be found in communities that have experienced a collective traumatic experience, though they manifest differently – but even communities lose memory, lose language, lose hope, and experience moments of hyperarousal and vigilance that keep them frozen and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

### **Language Loss**

Losing words is a frustrating phenomenon even on our best days. When one cannot find the right adjective to describe what they mean or the proper noun for what

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<sup>12</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 80.

they are trying to remember, it can range from irritating to alarming. For people who have experienced trauma, in the immediate aftermath of the event they may lose nearly all words, and for years after may experience alexithymia – the inability to find the word to name a feeling.<sup>13</sup>

This is an extreme example of a common human condition. Pastors are familiar with the experience of being in conversation about difficult things and having the parishioner sit at a loss for words. While severe trauma can lead to long-term alexithymia, even less personal events (something on the news, or something that a relative or friend experiences) lead to the loss of words, resulting in frustration, fear, and sometimes, deeper isolation. Because the exact nature of the problem cannot be expressed, those living it will struggle with relationships and with navigating their way to renewed health and recovery.

One of the consistent gifts of the church is its purveyorship of words – the way it has collected sacred words in poem, song, prayer, and story for thousands of years and offered them to every generation. The worship service in particular is a place where words can be provided; no one has to come up with their own laments or descriptions of how they feel, because in the Psalms and the prayers and the other scriptures, we can help people touch familiar human experience with trusted words already attached.

### **Trauma and Imagination**

Johannes Hofer, in a 1688 dissertation at a medical school in Switzerland, writes about nostalgia (though as a true illness or condition rather than the concept we have of it today), but addresses the way memory becomes fractured and disordered after a traumatic

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<sup>13</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 100.

event, and is one of the earliest scholars to write about the way trauma impacts the brain – and the first to use the phrase “disordered imagination” as a consequence of trauma.<sup>14</sup> While he does not use the same word, what he describes as pathologized nostalgia is how we would describe trauma today in its most rudimentary terms. He describes it as though the soldiers that he studied experienced an event that took all their signs for understanding meaning in their lives and tossed them. So if our brains have a series of guideposts that give us a sense of meaning and identity that help us navigate the world, trauma rips all those guideposts from their places.<sup>15</sup> While it does not necessarily obliterate them, it uproots and tosses them so that making meaning of the world has to be re-learned in light of the traumatic event. Hofer writes primarily about soldiers who have been in combat and their own experiences with trauma. Much of our understanding of trauma today originates in this community, and even now the focus of many post-traumatic stress disorder studies are first performed with veterans or enlisted soldiers.

Of course, we know that things like post-traumatic stress and trauma more broadly impact not only soldiers, but all kinds of people who can describe similar phenomena of feeling they can no longer easily make sense of a world that once felt familiar.

## **Hope**

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<sup>14</sup>Jones, Serene. *Trauma and Grace : Theology in a Ruptured World*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> Anspach, Carolyn Kiser. “MEDICAL DISSERTATION ON NOSTALGIA BY JOHANNES HOFER, 1688.” *Bulletin of the Institute of the History of Medicine* 2, no. 6 (1934): 376–91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44437799>.

Loss of hope is a common trauma response, and faith communities are not immune. Hope is a major facet of our faith and a core virtue, but it is not without its challenges, especially in moments of acute trauma. I vividly remember Desmond Tutu saying that he was “a prisoner of hope.” Tutu having been an actual prisoner many times, the phrase is not used casually or without regard for its full meaning. Hope makes no sense much of the time. It is sometimes exhausting and even frustrating, when the mounting evidence is that all is lost, and yet we are called to imagine a future we could not get for ourselves.

### **The Impact of Trauma on a Community**

Both Judith Herman and Bessel Van Der Kolk have deeply informed my own understanding of the origins of and responses to traumatic events. But perhaps the biggest difference between the two authors is that for Van Der Kolk, trauma lives in our individual bodies and can be treated primarily using our unconscious minds to overcome. For Herman, trauma is as much a community problem as an individual one. While Van Der Kolk offers primarily therapeutic solutions best achieved by an individual in a mental health setting, Herman wants us to look at social groups and systems. She appropriately points out that living in systems that are prone to racism and classism that leads to violence, and that political situations that allow the subjugation or exploitation of people are always going to create trauma without providing resources to stop it.<sup>16</sup>

Nearly everything that appears when an individual experiences trauma appears similarly in the larger collective: mistaken memories, loss of language, hyperarousal and over-response, and more. When an entire community experiences a traumatic event

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<sup>16</sup> Herman, 243-244

together, that body can take on the same posture as an individual body, even showing signs of fight, flight or freeze response. While groups do not share a central nervous system from which that response to threat stems, when all the individuals are highly activated within themselves, you can see them bump up against each other when the group tries to make decisions, tries to find their way back to routine, and even tries to care for one another after the event.

### **Trauma's Legacy**

There is much conversation in psychology and medicine about the ways trauma is passed down in families. This happens in a variety of ways. The most commonly known is when a family member who has experienced abuse then abuses or otherwise harms the next generation. The second is more systemic: trauma is passed down because people have become accustomed to unsafe systems and cultural norms that lead to continuing trauma through the generations simply using “unsafe standard operating procedures.”<sup>17</sup> It may be that they were simply born into a marginalized community, and trauma is passed down simply because they remain a member of that community and the systems have not stopped perpetuating the same cycles.

Finally, though, trauma is passed on as a “part of our DNA expression through the biochemistry of the human egg, sperm, and womb.” While it does not pass down as a mutation on the gene that can be identified but not fixed, trauma is passed down epigenetically, on the chemical molecules that coat the actual DNA that makes up our

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<sup>17</sup> Menakem, Resmaa. 2017. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press.

bodies and genetics. Epigenetic changes are changes in how the gene is expressed, not changes to the gene itself.<sup>18</sup>

This knowledge is critical for the pastor's response to individuals who have experienced trauma – but as we think about the impact of trauma on the body and how that same impact may happen to the gathered church body, understanding trauma's generational nature clarifies the imperative to help the community heal such that a congregation's "DNA," as it were, can be passed on without continuing harm to future generations. Preachers can begin with their words and actions in the pulpit and service to contribute to this healing.

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<sup>18</sup> Craigo-Snell, Shannon. 2020. "Generational Joy: Affections, Epigenetics, and Trauma." *Liturgy (Washington)* 35 (4): 60.

## Chapter 2: What is the Work of Preaching?

In Sunday preaching and worship, a pastor is present with the people of his or her congregation in a more intentional, explicit, and sustained manner than is possible in any other pastoral activity. Here is where the vast majority of our people will primarily know us as faithful, caring, competent pastors. Thus, any pastor who gives insufficient time and attention to his or her preaching and worship is simply not using time well, nor is he or she ministering to the needs of the laity as they see their needs.<sup>19</sup> – Bishop William H. Willimon

If the preacher may be a helpful guide in a traumatic moment, we must first understand what it is preachers do. In my own training, the only time trauma has been addressed is in terms of one-on-one conversation related to individual experience. But if trauma is indeed experienced collectively, the time when a pastor has the ability to connect with a large number of people on a deep level is at the moment of proclamation. It is in worship that the pastor can connect to the most people at the same time, with the same message.

In my own formation, my professor, Dr. Richard Lischer, assigned us to practice a skill in our preparation of trying to open a window into another person's or community's experience. Thus, the assignment was to do some portion of our sermon preparation for an assigned sermon in a place that we did not regularly occupy, and where the primary occupants were likely people on the margins of the community. Some students chose the waiting areas in the county hospital, or the lobby of a nursing home, or the visitation space of a prison, or the dining tables of a homeless shelter. The task was to read the text we were exploring and try to imagine how it would fall on the ears of the people gathered where we were sitting – and then to further imagine how the student's interpretation and proclamation of that text might land there. For students at an elite (and expensive)

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<sup>19</sup> Willimon, William H., and Willimon, William H. *A Guide to Preaching and Leading Worship / William H. Willimon*. 1st ed. Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008, ix.



university, most of us came from privilege and had not yet become aware of the ways that our interpretations were colored by that lens, and how many of us had not yet learned to take seriously the suffering of our people – both inside the doors of the churches we would serve, and in the communities to which God would send us. It was, at the time, a powerful and important assignment that I took with me as a practice in my early ministry. What happens when a major community trauma occurs, is that wherever you are becomes that waiting room, that homeless shelter, that prison...that unfamiliar place where there is suffering the preacher does not adequately understand and has to account for a new experience within the interpretation and proclamation of scripture.

On September 20th, 2019, a child from our neighborhood broke into my church's building on a day we were closed (and a day after a tropical storm had done extensive damage with flooding around our region) and started a fire that resulted in the loss of all our offices, classrooms, fellowship hall, and more. While the sanctuary still stood, it had filled with smoke, turning the bell tower into a smoke stack. The instruments and equipment were ruined by soot, the carpet by soot and water damage. A thick black layer of ash and water filled every inch of what was left of the building. Thankfully, no one was injured. But it was devastating, and the sense of security our community had was gone. The pain of seeing a place that had held so much for people – their weddings, baptisms, the funerals of loved ones, their first encounters with the love of God, the first time they met their friends or learned to serve and love their neighbors...and it was smoldering, roof gone, open to the sky when the skies opened and the rain fell. In the days that followed, I worried most about some of our long-tenured members. Some of them had been there since childhood in the 1950's and 1960's. They had raised their kids

there, given their whole lives to this old building they loved that stood as a monument of God's presence in our neighborhood. I was worried about them seeing some of the church's treasures ruined, sometimes getting shoveled into dumpsters with heavy equipment because they simply could not be reasonably salvaged.

The reality surprised me. On the whole, my older members and those who had been members of the church for more than twenty years coped remarkably well. They had resolve and confidence that we would rebuild, and that our community had weathered other crises and would weather this one, too. The ones that struggled most were folks who had only been at the church a short time – less than two years. These folks were often inconsolable, confused and shaken to the core by how this could have happened. While I have several theories on why this was, I suspect it has to do, at least in part, with the type of community we have. St. Mark's is a niche spot for people who have experienced previous religious trauma. Many of the folks who walk through our doors for the first time are stepping back into a church building for the first time in years. In it, they found peace and welcome and acceptance. They had exhaled the trauma of their past and decided to trust something again that they knew might hurt them. And while the community did not necessarily change because of the fire, the symbol of God's continuing presence and peace after trauma had now been traumatized itself and opened up a tidal wave of grief that we did not expect to still be present. Trauma nearly always refreshes old ones, just as one grief reminds us of a past one and can surprise us with its power to bring up things we thought we had long processed and healed.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Van Der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 173

The first question before me was the question before every preacher after a catastrophic event: how will my words on Sunday morning help, or at minimum not hurt, these folks as they grieve and wonder and sit in their sadness and fear? While the sermon does not stand alone as an act of response, its importance should not be dismissed. It is, as Bishop Willimon said above, the time you will be in front of the most people at one time, looking for what the meaning is and what may be the next step forward, if there is one. That is the task.

Preaching has been a central act of the Church for generations, yet there has not been a uniform definition of the task itself.<sup>21</sup> There are hundreds of definitions available, and the role calls for different work in different moments. While the word comes from the Latin “to proclaim,” the variations on what that looks like are as vastly diverse as the humans who dare to mount pulpits and do it. Preaching is the bold, perhaps even arrogant task of speaking for God. In his book *Preachers Dare*, Will Willimon says, “The meaning of ‘Let us make humanity in our image’ (Gen 1:26) is human speaking, even with its limitations, which is divinely permitted and authorized, imitating a defining characteristic of our Creator.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, while we sometimes chafe at the notion, God has invited us to imitate God in our speech, to speak for God just as the prophets and apostles dared to do. We have a gift and responsibility in this calling, especially in moments of deep challenge, and that gift originates as far back as creation itself, when God first set out to be in relationship with limited humans. We feel our limitations, but

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<sup>21</sup> Lischer, Richard. *In the Company of Preachers* Grand Rapids, MI : W.B. Eerdmans, 2002.

<sup>22</sup> Willimon, Will. *Preachers Dare: Speaking for God*. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019.

we are invited in traumatic moments in particular to embrace God's power and the Holy Spirit at work in us.

On that particular Sunday, September 21, 2019, just two days after the arson, and still with few answers about what had actually happened and what would come next, the preacher was left with few options. The first choice made was to ignore the lectionary and throw out everything I had prepared prior to that moment. The second was, instead of focusing on the many things we did not know, to find our way to the handful of important things we did know. The third was to imagine the future God had for us. Here is a small section of it, with the full version included in Appendix A.

“The building is important to us and important to our community. We have been saying and will continue to say that the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is the people. But that building held a lot for us and we are sad about what's happened and that's ok too. Both those things can be true at the same time. We feel so sad that the place that means so much to so many has been damaged so severely. But we can fix what's been damaged, and that warm, loving feeling that inhabited the space? Well, that's the part that comes from you and comes from God. It goes where we go and will be there when we return to the home we love. We don't know when that will be, but here are some things we do know:

First, we are loved. God's love has been poured out on us in so many ways....We have sowed seeds of love and so many have sowed those seeds in us, and it's a harvest we are reaping at the time when we need it most. Watching love in action is so amazing because it's a resource that gets bigger every time it's shared....

The second thing we know for sure is that we will recover. It will likely take longer than we want, and we don't have a road map for what it will be, like, but we will recover. Everything that was damaged can be repaired or replaced. Our hearts will heal....

...The third thing I know for sure is just what kind of God we serve and just who is this God who is going to continue to be with us in these days. The message from scripture is consistent in the kinds of things God does when it looks like all is lost. Jesus comes around and suddenly the rules of life and death are no longer in place. People who couldn't walk get

up and dance, who couldn't talk shout, who were tormented by demons are suddenly set free. The dead are raised and the blind see, and all give glory to God. We will rise up from this, friends... We will keep showing up for each other and our neighbors, we will keep being the people God has called us to be..."<sup>23</sup>

This was a wildly simple sermon situated in a very simple, toned-down service. We only had an electric keyboard, two microphones, a borrowed screen, a charred altar cross – and we were in a school cafeteria with 1970's mauve walls and chairs not meant for adults to sit in for more than five minutes. But we were able to be together, to remember that God was with us and that we would heal together. The community gathered to set up the chairs, make cards for the firefighters, feast on the food sent by sister churches around the city, and worship together and together preached the Gospel. The sermon provided shared language we continued to use and remember together as we moved into the longer and harder work of rebuilding and healing.

### **Preaching as an Imaginative Task**

Preaching, in all cases, is work of imagination – one grounded in scripture and tradition and community. Barbara Brown Taylor puts it this way:

The church's central task is an imaginative one. By that I do not mean a fanciful or fictional task, but one in which the human capacity to imagine – to form mental pictures of the self, the neighbor, the world, the future, to envision new realities – is both engaged and transformed.<sup>24</sup>

Encouraging and imagining new realities and helping congregants develop a Gospel-shaped imagination is the task of every preacher in every circumstance. Never is

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<sup>23</sup> Chapman, Emily. Sermon Preached

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, Barbara Brown. *The Preaching Life Barbara Brown Taylor*. Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1993, 39.

that more true than after a community has had its collective imagination obliterated by trauma. Guiding your people to reimagine a hopeful world paves the way for post-traumatic growth. If the preacher can imagine (and they may be living it) the pathways of meaning through the brains of the congregations, and see which sign posts marking the way have been uprooted and thrown aside, it may begin to help map an integrated way forward. For example, if there is a storm and people's homes have flooded, their understanding of home as a safe place and sanctuary (if they were fortunate to have that reality prior to the storm) has been thoroughly eviscerated. On a larger scale, the sense of control of the world that all humans need some sense of is gone, and perhaps trust in infrastructure and leadership that ought to have protected them is also gone. So if we can imagine that reality, how might we begin to imagine aloud the next steps of the path – that look more like reconstruction than destruction, that look like community care instead of abandonment or isolation? The preacher can acknowledge the reality of the pain without getting stuck there, and can lead the way into a vision for the future that holds promise and even delight.

### **Preaching to Give Language to People with No Words**

Preaching is fundamentally a vocation of words. Preachers use words to shape worlds for our congregations and to communicate the Gospel. Preachers give language to communities who want to imagine the world as God sees it, who want to share God's love, who ache for healing, who need friendship in cities filled with loneliness, who face terror and violence and all manner of things that cannot be controlled. Into this, the preacher speaks.

Trauma impacts the memory of a community, the story of a community, and the sense of connection to the community itself. Preaching is an opportunity to begin to restore all three by giving language for what the people have experienced that connects them to the story they know. This is exceptionally true when an acute traumatic event occurs that directly impacts the immediate community – where people have been hurt who we know by name, in their own particularity. But it remains true even when the trauma is further off but has implications for who we are and challenges our sense of identity and of peace – that has a more universal shockwave. People still lose language and struggle with memory. They need a story they know they can trust.

An example: David and Goliath is a wildly familiar story in Christian imagination, and even in secular imagination. In a sermon preached the Sunday following the shooting at Emmanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2015, I used this story from 1 Samuel 17 to address the racism that motivated the attack. I began simply by retelling the story itself. An excerpt from what followed:

There's a weird and sad irony about what becomes of David after he puts down the slingshot. Here he is, full of confidence, full of faith, full of hope, telling Saul he doesn't need the heavy armor because it doesn't fit him anyway, and telling Goliath he doesn't need weapons and big talk. David defeated Goliath. But then, David becomes king...he gets a little taste of power and privilege and comfort and he forgets who is...and David becomes Goliath. He becomes the giant bully who will do anything to protect the way of life he has come to love.

We can imagine this in many ways, but this week we only need one. It is all too often now that we are brought to our knees by violence that we do not understand. Today, friends, while we gather safely together in the comfort of this space on Father's Day, fathers of murdered children and children of murdered parents mourn what is lost. A church is violated, lives taken, and a survivor, a five-year-old

girl, is left to tell the story of what happened. Metropolitan African Methodist Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., gathers for worship this morning under a bomb threat. Church, we can no longer pretend that the giant of racism and racial violence was felled long ago.

We'll tell the story many ways. We'll talk about gun control and mental health care, about who is responsible. These are good and important conversations for us to have, but they leave a lot to be desired for us, for Christians who live and follow Jesus in a world of division and violence, where we are frightened of and threatened by difference. For us, this is not a political issue, nor even a moral issue. It's a Jesus issue, a question of if we are going to follow in the footsteps of the son of David to slay the giant of our country's race relations. Like David, taking up Goliath's weapons won't help because they don't fit us. And like David, there are five smooth stones that can help us – it's our time to take up the smooth stones of lament, solidarity, humility, storytelling, and friendship.<sup>25</sup>

I chose those as the five smooth stones because the sermon was preached in a predominantly white community that was examining the particularity of racist violence. For the rest of the sermon, I expounded on what those meant for us in our time and place and in the new reality of a world continuously wreaking trauma on the bodies and spirits of our Black brothers and sisters and all people of color. In a different context and for a different event, the five smooth stones could adjust. Part of what makes it impactful is that it is a story they know so well that connects to something they are struggling to think through. In this instance, most of my congregation had not experienced the actual trauma, though it was certainly a horrifically triggering event for our Black congregants. But we were all witnesses to that trauma that could not be ignored or dismissed. Those words gave us a continuous language and at least some sense of agency.

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<sup>25</sup> Chapman, Emily, sermon preached at St. Mark's United Methodist Church Houston TX, June 2015. I am indebted to Sam Wells, Chris Huertz, and others for sermons they gave over the years inviting me to think of the five smooth stones in this way as tools for slaying our giants.



If I could preach this over again, with an added five years or so of context and my own growth, there are things I would have done differently, perhaps. None of the sermons I include in this volume are included because they are the most exemplary example that exists. A preacher in a post-traumatic situation cannot be aiming for exemplary, but has to do the best that can be done with the knowledge and resources available to them in the moment. Those resources may be far fewer than on a standard Sunday, but regardless of what has occurred or what has changed, God's Spirit is at work in our preaching and worship, and the preacher can trust that whatever they have to bring in the moment before them is enough for God to be at work. Nothing more or less will do.

### **Singing a New Song: Reframing the Story to Build Resilience**

One of the great gifts of preaching is that we get to come back to a story time and again and expect that God will breathe new life into it. Never is that more important than in the sermon after the community has experienced tragedy. Being able to grasp and tell a story of support, truth, and help in the face of trauma can restore resilience and open imagination.<sup>26</sup> Storytelling is one of the Church's most powerful mechanisms, and the preacher gets to wield it week after week to help the community tell their own stories, tell God's story, and build their resilience along the way by utilizing various tools, the first of which is hospitality.

Hospitality often brings up thoughts of doilies and knowing which glasses are used for which beverage and cleaning up before guests come over. Even in Christian circles, our sense of hospitality is often centered around which coffee the church serves,

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<sup>26</sup> East, L., Jackson, D., O'Brien, L., & Peters, K. "Storytelling: An Approach that Can Help to Develop Resilience." *Nurse Researcher* 17, no. 3 (2010): 17-25.

where the greeters stand, and how many visitors make a return trip. Even in the most historically grounded concepts, it often involves making space for people to eat together or otherwise gather and have safe shelter.<sup>27</sup> None of those are things that happen in the pulpit. And yet, the preacher's hospitality in the pulpit has a significant role to play in post-traumatic seasons. After a crisis, the preacher is likely to preach to people whom they have not seen in quite some time, or ever. Depending on the nature of the event, people may come looking for solace, for meaning, for a way to respond, or any number of other longings that they can both name and not name at all.

After our building fire, we had neighbors and inactive members coming out of the woodwork, trying to figure out why they had such strong feelings about the loss of this space that really was not even theirs or had not been for some time. After hurricanes, people in the community profoundly impacted with injury or property damage are often looking for comfort, while those less directly impacted are searching for a way to respond. Whatever the reason, the Sunday directly after an event, and likely several Sundays after, the preacher will face a different congregation than the one they have come to know prior. This often means that when the church is at its lowest capacity – i.e., people are exhausted and traumatized themselves and cannot think about one more thing – the church will have more visitors than it has had since Christmas and Easter.

This hospitality will begin with the preacher doing what they have to do for themselves to enter the space well – with a heart and mind ready to receive whatever others bring to the space. But there are some basic practicalities of hospitality from the pulpit that are useful. A few practicalities and further tools:

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<sup>27</sup> Ku, Eliana Ah Rum. 2022. "A Call for Practicing Hospitality Based on Lament in Preaching For a Wounded Community." *Homiletic (Online)* 47 (2): 15–26.

1. Strong, loving, and wise: these were the words of the title of the book that I was given in a worship class, the idealized idea of what a presider and preacher would look like on a Sunday morning.<sup>28</sup> It still lives in my head when I raise my arms for the first welcome. It is exactly what people are looking for after they have lived through something awful. So the preacher should move with confidence and speak with wisdom, even as they express the ways that they, too, experienced a trauma.
2. Do no harm is always the first rule. If you cannot make the situation better, the least you can do is not make it worse. This means taking the situation seriously and bringing the Gospel to bear on it, and helping the gathered body find some Good News, perhaps even calming their bodies' trauma responses.
3. Over-communicate and over-explain. On a standard Sunday, I am a believer in an economy of words. While this is still true even in crisis mode, more robust work may be needed both on exegesis and sermon content, as well as on how the parts of the service function. Remember that a key thing for folks shaken from crisis is a sense of agency and control – so they all need to feel like competent listeners and worshippers. Announce songs out loud. Invite people to hold their hands in particular ways to pray so that you can explain how it works for the benefit of everyone. Incidentally, even simple body movements like raising hands and

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<sup>28</sup> Hovda, Robert W. *Strong, Loving, and Wise: Presiding in Liturgy*. Foreword by Godfrey Diekmann. Washington: Liturgical Conference, 1976.

clasping hands can actually impact the brain, calming the central nervous system.<sup>29</sup>

4. Give yourself grace for the content. It does not need to be the greatest sermon ever preached to match the moment. It needs to preach the Gospel well and with clarity, inspiring some hope and confidence in the listener. The preacher need not say all there is to say, and in fact should not make the sermon longer and more complex than necessary.

Preaching has enormous power to contribute to healing and re-engage and expand imaginations. Even small adjustments in the face of trauma have significant power and help the preacher take their own role appropriately seriously. The gift of gentle, shared language and ritual will support the thriving of the whole community.

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<sup>29</sup> Kuhfuß, M., Maldei, T., Hetmanek, A., and Baumann, N. "Somatic Experiencing - Effectiveness and Key Factors of a Body-Oriented Trauma Therapy: A Scoping Literature Review." *European Journal of Psychotraumatology* 12, no. 1 (2021)

### **Chapter 3: The Theological Imagination: Creating a New World**

Walter Brueggeman invites preachers and readers of scripture to an imagination that goes beyond fantasy, but instead is attached to the real world and God's covenant with God's people.<sup>30</sup> One of the incredible gifts of preaching and worship is that we get to help imagine a world that is different from the one we are in now. This is never more crucial than after an incident or incidents that destroy the imagination and rip up markers of meaning, both in the minds of individuals and in the community at large. In some sense, the task of the preaching and liturgy does not change at all. After all, any community faces consistent and ongoing trauma due to racism, poverty, and broken systems. Even in affluent communities, at any given time, a preacher knows their congregation is experiencing a myriad of maladies – physical, social, mental, and spiritual.

I want to be clear about what I am and am not suggesting. Preaching will not be a cure for someone's diagnosed PTSD, it is not a panacea for getting people over traumatic experiences, nor will it function on its own as means of healing for communally-experienced trauma. It is, however, a crucial exercise and a valuable tool as part of the whole for those in faith communities. Preaching has the power to inflict serious damage and to remedy it. It can contribute to the healing of the body or slow it, even stop it. A fundamental concept of preaching is that words carry real power to shape disciples and shape communities. If the Sunday morning service is the most time pastors have with the most people, then aiming to use that moment for healing and building resilience is an essential function. Preachers must hold some fundamental conviction in

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<sup>30</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. 22

the power of words, or this vocation would not be part of us. Never more so than in moments of our congregation or wider community's trauma, is the gift of someone tasked to shape language and story around a trusted story of a God who is present in all things. There are, of course, ways to do this better or worse, and the aim of this text is to help us hold trauma better – with a sense of assurance and seriousness that trusts that though trauma changes us forever, so does healing.

### **Tell the Story Well and Simply**

While we will attend to scripture choice in full in the next chapter, choosing scripture and placing the people in a story that they know and can use to start to rebuild their markers of meaning is a critical first step. Hopefully, the congregation is already being formed with a scriptural imagination and can do some of the work of situating themselves in the story of God, but in a moment of trauma they are likely to need more guidance than usual and extra care for what is tolerable in the moment, with knowledge that more difficult passages and themes can come later. Brueggeman uses the term “prophetic imagination” in particular, drawing us to a deeper understanding of both those words and the ways they can sustain us in moments of crisis. The first time someone ever asked me how to preach prophetically, especially in difficult circumstances, she was stunned by my reply. The first thing I said, rather than to consider all aspects of the issue at hand or make sure to use particular language or avoid particular tropes, was simply, “Stick close to the scripture.”

There tend to be a couple of false understandings of the prophetic. One is that it is a clear prediction of the future, and the other is the notion that prophetic preaching specifically means taking up a concrete social issue from contemporary culture and

speaking to it. Rather, looking at the whole term together invites us into preaching that is “playful, venturesome probing into the unknown” and a subversion of the generally accepted order of things.<sup>31</sup> What congregants need when it feels like the world is upside down is a story they can trust. This means the preacher must be attuned enough to choose the scripture well for the moment and to interpret it with intentional prayer and care. In my own context where we primarily use the Revised Common Lectionary, we rarely change the text of the day because something terrible has happened. We want to help expand our congregational imagination to hear the story with new ears, learning to incorporate our new reality and new understandings of how the world is broken. That does not always work, however. There are moments where it becomes necessary to change the subject at hand and look at a new thing in a new way – particularly in a moment of trauma or crisis that is within the community itself rather than a far-off disaster.

### **Do Theology Well and Simply**

There are still things you can do to help your people recreate a vision of the world that incorporates the trauma without letting it steer the entire worldview – that allows them to remember without being overcome. It is vital in moments of crisis and trauma that the preacher be able to tell the truth about God in a way that the hearers can understand correctly the first time. When everyone’s usual meaning markers feel uprooted and cast about, the preacher has a critical role in rebuilding that imagination using the simplest pieces possible:

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<sup>31</sup> Brueggeman, 22. His work focuses on the Old Testament and the subversion of the power, both political and economic, of royal Jerusalem. Here, I apply it more broadly, assuming that the New Testament and indeed the Church itself points toward the same subversion of the world as it is.

1. God is not the author of suffering.
2. God was with us in every step and will be with us.
3. We are given the gift of one another to walk through this.
4. This story is not the only story, nor is it the end of our story.
5. We are empowered for the rest of our story.

Let's take these one by one.

God is not the author of our suffering. Questions of theodicy have plagued people of faith in all traditions for centuries. Augustine of Hippo, in the third century, argued that evil is a privation or lack of goodness rather than a positive reality. In his book *Confessions*, Augustine writes,

And in truth, what is that which we call evil but the absence of good? In the bodies of animals, disease and wounds mean nothing but the absence of health; for when a cure is effected, that does not mean that the evils which were present—namely, the diseases and wounds—go away from the body and dwell elsewhere: they altogether cease to exist; for the wound or disease is not a substance, but a defect in the fleshly substance,—the flesh itself being a substance, and therefore something good, of which those evils—that is, privations of the good which we call health—are accidents. Just in the same way, what are called vices in the soul are nothing but privations of natural good. And when they are cured, they are not transferred elsewhere: when they cease to exist in the healthy soul, they cannot exist anywhere else.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, Irenaus of Lyon, who believed that evil was necessary for the growth of humans, maintained that God created a world with free will, and the misuse of that free will by humans and angels resulted in evil and suffering.<sup>33</sup> He emphasizes that evil is a departure from God's will and a distortion of what is good, but that matter is not inherently evil.

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<sup>32</sup> Book 7, Chapter 12, Section 18.

<sup>33</sup> Irenaus, *Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter 40



While these are classic explanations for both human suffering and human depravity, they leave much to be desired, and preachers have been trying, with varying levels of success, to fill in the gaps for centuries with other theories of theodicy and no small number of platitudes to try to brush past the conversation. To the detriment of many, those answers have often victim-blamed and misrepresented the character of God as one exacting some kind of revenge or justice, or bringing God's creation through all kinds of faith tests through suffering.

The second and third key points, reminding one another constantly of God's presence and the gift of community, will be the consistent work – that God is not the author of suffering but also never abandons us to suffer alone. I vividly remember a children's sermon from my first year in my current church, when a very astute child interrupted my song and dance about how God is with us all the time, with the question that all the adults are always too afraid to ask: "But how do we KNOW God is with us?" I paused and gathered myself, and still give thanks to this day that children along the way have trained me to tell them the truth. I told the kids, who were now all listening in a way they definitely were not before, that it was sometimes really hard to know. That sometimes we would be able to feel in our hearts and minds and bodies that God is with us, but also that we came to church together because we all need help remembering that God is with us when it doesn't feel like it. Blessedly, that satisfied her at least enough to save other questions for later. But she gave our church and her pastor a gift that day that has seen us through lots of hard days – knowing that we get to help each other when our feelings do not match our faith, or the faith we hope we have.

Reframing and telling a community's own story back to them will also be a constant refrain, as traumatized people need assurance that the story of the terrible thing is not the whole story and that there is a future with hope ahead. The whole history of Israel and of the Church is a story of God's people needing constant reminders of the things God has done for them. It was true for Moses and the people fleeing Egypt, for the Israelites in exile, for Job who heard God respond to his complaints with reminders of God's omnipotence; it was true for the early apostles, and it is true for us.

### **Give People Simple Next Steps**

Finally, the people of God need to feel empowered to take their next steps. Judith Herman writes at length about the crucial work of empowerment to combat the feelings of helplessness that accompany trauma – that giving people back a sense of agency and autonomy is one of the only modes of healing. Here, we have the joy of reminding people of the power of the Holy Spirit that commissions all of us to ministry in the world and goes with us even into the most challenging circumstances. Empowerment and reconnection are the core features of recovery from trauma,<sup>34</sup> and churches are in a unique position to make space for both of those needs. Scripture is filled with stories of both, and congregations are positioned as places for connection and reconnection, as well as places where we are empowered with our own agency to respond to God and to the needs of the world. Empowered people are able to heal and to experience post-traumatic growth.

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<sup>34</sup> Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 197

## Chapter 4: When Scripture Needs a Content Warning

Stories are the style and substance of life. They fashion and fill existence. From primeval to eschatological vistas, from youthful dreams to seasoned experiences, from resounding disclosures to whispered intimacies, the narrative mode of speech prevails. Myth, parable, folk tale, epic, romance, novella, history, confession, biography—these and other genres proclaim the presence and power of the story.<sup>35</sup> – Phyllis Trible

I remember learning to preach, when we felt that no scripture ought to be left behind because it was too difficult, and that anything in the Bible could be faithfully wrestled with from the pulpit to the edification of the hearers. While I still believe that is true, trauma is a disruption and ought to be. Approaching worship planning like it is business as usual after a traumatic event is to fail in one of the basic tasks as a preacher – knowing your audience and what they can reasonably absorb. So a major task in the post-trauma period is to plan preaching and worship that acknowledges the present reality and points to the presence of God in the midst of it. This means choosing scriptures and stories that give the community voice and companions and teachers. It does not mean we abandon things because they are challenging; it means we spend the time it takes to discern what God is saying in the time and place the community is in now. The quote above is from the beginning of Phyllis Trible's *Texts of Terror*, in which she does four readings of stories from the Bible of female victims of trauma. While her aim is not primarily to help us be trauma-informed in our interpretation, she does help offer hints on how to read difficult texts appropriately (especially in telling stories with clear victims and perpetrators) within context and time— something that the sermon does not always have when its hearers are in a disoriented or untethered state. To do this well, the

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<sup>35</sup> Phyllis Trible and Gale A. Yee, [\*Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives\*](#) (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022), xxiv–1.

preacher has to be able to imagine the experiences of many in their congregation and prepare to speak to them all. Again, this is true at any time, but becomes more prone to pitfall in a post-traumatic moment.

It may be necessary to abandon the present series or lectionary readings not just for one Sunday but for several, as congregation members re-orient themselves to a new reality. Here I offer just a few of the many options the preacher will have that may be helpful to reach for in a moment of need.

### **The Psalms**

It is probable that the area of ancient Israel's greatest creativity was the praise of God. Other cultures were magnificently skilled in the fine arts or the practical arts, in architecture, in astronomy, sculpture or ivory work, embalming or warfare. Some of that ancient work remains unsurpassed to this day. What Israelites did best was praise God, and they knew it: "Every day I will bless you, and praise your Name for ever and ever" (145:2). That tradition is maintained to this day, as Jews and Christians continue to pray the Psalms.<sup>36</sup> - Ellen Davis

The Psalms are one of the most powerful and underutilized tools for recovering from trauma that the church has, because like trauma itself, the psalms have movement to them; they are not static nor are they a monolith of one person's journey, but the journey of all God's people. Serene Jones outlines three stages to what she calls "Psalmic Healing" from trauma that utilizes Calvin's traditional three categories of the book of Psalms: Deliverance, Lament and Thanksgiving. These align with Judith Herman's phases of trauma recovery in ways that are surprising, while also simple for a preacher to pick up and utilize as a series and to hand to congregations for their use and growth and formation— with a crucial caveat. As all scripture has the potential to be abused and

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<sup>36</sup> Davis, Ellen F.. *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament*, Cowley Publications, 2001. ProQuest Ebook Central, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/duke/detail.action?docID=1022293>.

weaponized in careless or cruel hands, the preacher cannot through the power of their words and convictions force a community through these phases in a perfect, formulaic process. They can introduce them and offer them as a gift. There are several types of psalms, and they correspond to various stages of the healing process.

### **Psalms of Deliverance**

Psalms of deliverance focus on the power of God – looking at what God has done and will do in the future that the Psalmist trusts in. For people recovering from trauma, a sense of God’s sovereignty and the notion of there being order and control in the world is a great comfort, and a necessity for beginning to recover. These psalms also remind us repeatedly that God will deliver us from evil and that God is good. All of this offers a stabilizing force to allow a person or group of people to begin to shift toward healing. The psalms of deliverance offer a salve for the feeling of helplessness caused by a traumatic experience that has robbed the sense of control. For example, we look at Psalm 10 (1, 8-18)<sup>37</sup>:

1 Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?  
    Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?...  
8 They sit in ambush in the villages;  
    in hiding places they murder the innocent.  
Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;  
9 they lurk in secret like a lion in its den;  
they lurk that they may seize the poor;  
    they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.  
10 They stoop, they crouch,  
    and the helpless fall by their might.  
11 They think in their heart, “God has forgotten;  
    he has hidden his face; he will never see it.”  
12 Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand;  
    do not forget the oppressed.  
13 Why do the wicked renounce God  
    and say in their hearts, “You will not call us to account”?

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<sup>37</sup> All Biblical references are from the NRSV.

14 But you do see! Indeed, you note trouble and grief,  
that you may take it into your hands;  
the helpless commit themselves to you;  
you have been the helper of the orphan.  
15 Break the arm of the wicked and evildoers;  
seek out their wickedness until you find none.  
16 The Lord is king forever and ever;  
the nations shall perish from his land.  
17 O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek;  
you will strengthen their heart; you will incline your ear  
18 to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed,  
so that those from earth may strike terror no more.<sup>38</sup>

This psalm is one example of the way the Psalmist leads us through an acknowledgement of evil and of enemies working, but God overcoming them, seeing God's people's troubles and their grief...and *responding* to that grief. Even though evil lurks, God is in charge, and God's people are strengthened.

### **Psalms of Lament**

Of course, knowing God is with us and helps us overcome cannot come without lament, already outlined above, but the psalms offer a particular language of lament that is crucial to healing. In the psalms, trauma sufferers may find friends and companions who do not judge them for being angry with God, or frustrated with the slowness or absence of justice. Psalms also offer, as we have previously addressed, words in a place where words are hard to come by. The psalms of lament are the largest category of psalms in the Bible, and heavily shape the whole of the Psalter.<sup>39</sup>

1 O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger  
or discipline me in your wrath.  
2 Be gracious to me, O Lord, for I am languishing;  
O Lord, heal me, for my bones are shaking with terror.  
3 My soul also is struck with terror,  
while you, O Lord—how long?

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<sup>38</sup> Psalm 10, NRSVUE

<sup>39</sup> Davis, *Getting Involved with God*, page 18

4 Turn, O Lord, save my life;  
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.

5 For in death there is no remembrance of you;  
in Sheol who can give you praise?

6 I am weary with my moaning;  
every night I flood my bed with tears;  
I drench my couch with my weeping.

7 My eyes waste away because of grief;  
they grow weak because of all my foes.

8 Depart from me, all you workers of evil,  
for the Lord has heard the sound of my weeping.

9 The Lord has heard my supplication;  
the Lord accepts my prayer.

10 All my enemies shall be ashamed and struck with terror;  
they shall turn back and in a moment be put to shame.

I have spent my life and career in churches that would be described by most as high church and liturgical, in which the Psalter is a regular part of worship. But rarely is a lament psalm presented in its entirety. In fact, the Psalter in the United Methodist Hymnal eliminates some of the most dramatic cries of despair from the psalms it chooses to include. And yet for victims of trauma, it is just these psalms that can open a door into reconnection and reimagination of what it means to trust God after the event. The lament psalms have a movement to them that follows a number of crucial steps turning complaint, petition, and lament into praise of God, but even more than that, they provide a language that churches are often tempted to silence: the ability to blame God, or at the very least implicate God in human suffering. In the above Psalm 6, the Psalmist begins with addressing God repeatedly and pleading their situation to the Almighty – even using words similar to trauma victims' descriptions of what happens in their bodies in the period immediately post-trauma. “My bones are shaking...my soul is struck.” And they

dare to say that God has something to do or say about what has happened. The Psalmist still somehow believes that God hears them shout that they soak their mattress with tears every night. These feelings are common after trauma, and churches are often not safe places for that side of being a human – especially the notion that God could be at fault for the suffering– if not causally, at least by failing to intervene. The knowledge that even our early ancestors in faith knew what abandonment felt like opens a door for modern people who are suffering.

The real power of the psalms of lament is their turn toward trust and praise that comes despite no evidence that external conditions have changed. This line is a fine one to walk in victimized communities, as forcing someone to look at the bright side or move on too quickly is detrimental to healing and to relationships more generally. That said, the knowledge that trust can be built or rebuilt with God, even under the shadow of trauma, can hold important space to begin to move toward healing and growth.

While Jones (and John Calvin!) skip over the imprecatory psalms as a tool for healing, they have been essential to my own spiritual practice and my congregation's growth. Church-y people are often led to believe that they cannot be angry with God, and that there are proper ways of speaking to God and speaking about others. But people who have been traumatized, especially if that trauma has come at the hands of a particular person, need a way to process and direct their anger. Tragically, many have been led to believe that God is of little help until one is “done” being angry. One example of an imprecatory or cursing Psalm is Psalm 109 (only a partial sample here):

- 1 Do not be silent, O God of my praise.
- 2 For wicked and deceitful mouths are opened against me,  
speaking against me with lying tongues.



- 3 They surround me with words of hate  
and attack me without cause.
- 4 In return for my love they accuse me,  
even while I make prayer for them.
- 5 So they reward me evil for good  
and hatred for my love.
- 6 They say, “Appoint a wicked man against him;  
let an accuser stand on his right.
- 7 When he is tried, let him be found guilty;  
let his prayer be counted as sin.
- 8 May his days be few;  
may another seize his position.
- 9 May his children be orphans  
and his wife a widow.
- 10 May his children wander about and beg;  
may they be driven out of[c] the ruins they inhabit.
- 11 May the creditor seize all that he has;  
may strangers plunder the fruits of his toil.
- 12 May there be no one to do him a kindness  
nor anyone to pity his orphaned children.

Most polite people would not approve of the Psalmist here, but “clapping our hand over the Psalmist’s mouth takes away something the Bible intended to give us.”<sup>40</sup>

We lose the ability to bring our anger to God, and subtly learn that perhaps God does not care about or even disapproves of our anger. In Psalm 109, the Psalmist’s enemy is known to the writer, not some faceless entity or random event. The anger is palpable and directed, and its presence in the Bible shows people experiencing their own trauma and suffering that they will not frighten God away with it, in the way that other humans are often put off by anger – especially this kind of anger that points toward vengeance, which we know to be a problem for people of faith, even a sin. But this cry for vengeance is not self expression – the Psalmist is not threatening the enemy. It is a prayer. It is a conversation with God. It trusts that God can hold and care for even our angriest

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<sup>40</sup> Davis, 24

moments, and that even our vengeful thoughts do not make us innately “bad.” Again, these must be approached with the utmost care not to fuel hatred. When our congregation learned the fire was not a consequence of the storm or old wiring, but a person, the impulse toward vengeance could have fueled unhealthy hate and further suffering. So we try to do what the psalms help us to do, which is to see the world as God sees – not to silence our true feelings, but to re-orient them toward God.

### **Psalms of Thanksgiving**

The final phase of healing with the psalms is thanksgiving – utilizing the psalms of praise. These correspond beautifully with Herman’s recovery stage of reconnection with everyday life.<sup>41</sup> In them, the suffering is neither ignored nor glorified, but is acknowledged and integrated into a much broader experience. The psalms of thanksgiving often involve praise for deliverance from major events, but also praise for simple and everyday gifts that also come from God and contribute to abundant life. The psalms do not ignore the realities of suffering or trauma, but appropriately remember it and mourn it. There are many examples of different types of praise Psalms. Psalm 33:

- 1 Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous.  
Praise befits the upright.
- 2 Praise the Lord with the lyre;  
make melody to him with the harp of ten strings.
- 3 Sing to him a new song;  
play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts.
  
- 4 For the word of the Lord is upright,  
and all his work is done in faithfulness.
- 5 He loves righteousness and justice;  
the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord.
  
- 6 By the word of the Lord the heavens were made  
and all their host by the breath of his mouth.

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<sup>41</sup> Jones, 62

7 He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle;  
he put the deeps in storehouses.

8 Let all the earth fear the Lord;  
let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him,  
9 for he spoke, and it came to be;  
he commanded, and it stood firm.

This psalm praises God broadly for many gifts, large and small. For Calvin, these types of psalms that praise God for nature, for music, for food, for the basic implements of life and beauty, helped re-center and stabilize a world and life thrown off-kilter by trauma.<sup>42</sup> One of the other gifts of the psalms of praise and thanksgiving is that not unlike the laments, they take a turn at the end, this time toward anticipation. For example, the end of Psalm 33:

20 Our soul waits for the Lord;  
he is our help and shield.  
21 Our heart is glad in him  
because we trust in his holy name.  
22 Let your steadfast love, O Lord, be upon us,  
even as we hope in you.

They assume that God will continue to act and continue to be praise-worthy in a future in which God can be trusted.<sup>43</sup> They assume hope. This is crucial for people recovering and healing – that is lifelong work. So learning to pray psalms that are forward-looking, that presume God's presence not just now but later, are an essential companion on that journey. They can invite a congregation to imagine more deeply what God's faithfulness looks like not just now but in the future, especially in moments when the storm has destroyed, or the fire has consumed, or the life has been snuffed out, or the war has come near.

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<sup>42</sup> Jones, 63

<sup>43</sup> Davis, 33

## **Trauma and the Cross**

Of course, the New Testament offers its own patterns for healing and for responding to evil and disaster. Our story of the cross is a story of suffering and redemption and can help us cut a path from trauma to new life, but only if we refuse to take shortcuts and we tell our story well. Churches who celebrate the fullness of Holy Week are best equipped for this work and its means of healing. The Holy Week celebrations are some of the most dramatic and most embodied experiences in (mainline, particularly largely white) churches. For worshippers who are accustomed to simply listening and watching a performance, the acts of Holy Week invite a participation that uses all the senses (we will address later why this ought to be the case more often for trauma recovery).

According to Jones, the cross traces the contours of traumatic experiences in five particular ways. First, the Passion and trauma both originate in embodied events of harm that are also publicly enacted – they have an impact on the whole. Secondly, both involve events inflicted by outside forces (the crucifiers in the case of the cross, violence or disaster or fracture in the trauma). Thirdly, they both grapple with the “fragility of memory” – Christ’s own disappearance and the chaos of his followers, and in trauma theory, the originating event that is improperly remembered and instead makes its presence known in flashbacks, nightmares and other symptoms. Fourth, both the Passion narrative and trauma stories exist in a sort of “third space” between factual reality and how an event is experienced – between the event and the dream of it. Trauma has to do with both, and the story of the cross also depends on the storyteller’s experience of it.

Finally, the acts of trauma are only recovered once they are testified to fully, in both their horror and their hoped recovery.<sup>44</sup>

Victims of trauma often find themselves and solidarity with Christ in the story of the cross. It is a story that involves both extreme particularity and universality. No story fits everyone's experience with precision, but inviting congregants who are suffering into this story, while carefully attending to the realities of their own trauma (realities even they themselves may not have a sense of the fullness of), has possibilities of healing and recovery in addition to the power of the story as it stands on its own. This can only happen if the preacher can tell the story and make the connections to trauma without *re-traumatizing victims*. For this work, Jones helpfully cites Mark's version of the Passion story. Strangely, Mark's is a Gospel without a true ending, at least as we understand them. It is this aspect that may make it the most helpful to people whose stories do not necessarily have clean, clear endings either, inviting us to think about endings themselves. Jones invites us to think of them as "graced possibilities of imagination that preaching can invite in every aspect of people's lives."<sup>45</sup> So, turning to Mark's ending:

The Intermediate Ending of Mark:

And all that had been commanded them they told briefly to those around Peter. And afterward Jesus himself sent out through them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation. Amen.

The Long Ending of Mark (slightly abridged)

Now after he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. She went out and told those who had been with him, while they

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<sup>44</sup> Jones, 78-79

<sup>45</sup> Jones, 86

were mourning and weeping. But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it...  
...Later he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were sitting at the table, and he upbraided them for their lack of faith and stubbornness, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. And he said to them, “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation...  
...So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. And they went out and proclaimed the good news everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that accompanied it.

The difference in the two is stark, and virtually no preacher wants to be stuck with just the former. As Jones puts it:

“...so unnerving that in the early days of the story’s circulation, other Gospel-tellers decided to add a nicer, more appropriate ending to the tale. We find that ending in the canon we now read. It begins right after this ‘unending’ and is written in a voice that is completely different from Mark’s, but it gives you everything one might want in an ending. Jesus does all the things expected of a risen Lord; he appears to his followers, plans out their future, and allows them to see him ascending in glory to heaven.”<sup>46</sup>

The earlier ending leaves the women terrified and silent, whereas the longer version leaves us with a much more satisfying, and importantly a more empowering story. Yet there is some power in the silence of the first. For people experiencing trauma, words are often weaponized against their experience, and can feel overwhelming or lost altogether. Sitting with the first ending before moving to the second may be a helpful lingering. It is another piece of making room for mourning and lament – another way of creating space. Creating space for a more embodied form of communication (silence in this instance) is almost always a helpful thing after trauma as people find their way back into their bodies.

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<sup>46</sup> Jones, 89

Mark's account of this central story of our faith brings us face to face with the silence of terror that follows trauma and then helps move us to language and empowerment.

### **The Gift of Scripture**

The Bible is an incredible gift in moments of crisis, with stories of people of God who have faced their own series of crises time and again and discovered that they had not been abandoned. It is a story that shows over and over that when everything else breaks, our covenant with God holds. The preacher has endless stories at their disposal of trauma encountered and healed, and with the guidance of God's Spirit, preachers can choose wisely from among riches about which characters best walk alongside their community in their darkest moments.

## **Chapter 5: Beyond Triggers: Practicalities of Proclaiming the Gospel in the Face of Trauma**

“Triggered” has become something of a buzzword and even the butt of jokes.

However, preachers would do well to be aware of common triggers, particularly the ones that may be most prevalent in their congregation’s social location. A trauma trigger is a stimulus that causes memories or sensory fragments of memories to invade the present.<sup>47</sup>

For example:

- You get a tight feeling in your chest every time you drive past the place where you had a car accident.
- Your palms sweat and your cheeks flush when a certain person touches you.
- You walk into a medical facility and the smell brings you back to your previous surgeries, making you feel nauseous.<sup>48</sup>

Van der Kolk also points out that survivors of trauma may be triggered frequently throughout their lifetime – even if they can’t always explain why– and that the triggers and memories are sometimes worse than the trauma itself.<sup>49</sup> Traumatic events are often related to violence and abuse. Thus, when one is speaking to a large number of people, one can assume that sermon illustrations related to those topics may be triggering. Even discussing large scale terror events or mass shootings, particularly in or near the communities where they happen, can have strong physical and emotional impacts on your listeners. Because we now know that the scale of trauma is massive and widespread, we

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<sup>47</sup> Van der Kolk, 66

<sup>48</sup> UPMC. "Trauma Triggers and How to Manage Them." UPMC HealthBeat. August 2021. <https://share.upmc.com/2021/08/trauma-trigger/>

<sup>49</sup> Van der Kolk, 66.



know that a significant percentage of our gathered congregations are showing up with trauma, regardless of whether there has been a collective event.

Does that mean, then, that as preachers we are simply not to take up difficult events or subjects? That is not an option for a diligent preacher seeking to connect with the world their congregants live in. How can a preacher be aware of language that might be triggering, but also go beyond that to empower their congregations to respond to traumatic events in healthy and faithful ways? It is possible to both attend to reality and make space for people who need a gentle hand. Finding ways to walk that line will help both preacher and listener be more prepared in the event of a larger scale collective traumatic event.

Awareness makes a difference, but there are practicalities to being trauma-informed in the pulpit and helping people recover healthy imagination. A good rule in general is that if you can't make the situation better, you can at least avoid making it worse! Thus, a few practicalities:

1. Validate the experience of trauma. In your preaching, acknowledge scriptural figures or persons you are using as examples in illustrations who are experiencing trauma. Give space for grief and acknowledge the need for lament without making it a joke.
2. The preacher is not a defense attorney for the Almighty. God does not need us to make a case. If the preacher responds to anger and despair and doubt with defensiveness, that impedes the healing and breaks down whatever trust has been built.

3. Remember that trauma places holes in the stories of people's lives that they are desperate, with or without awareness, to fill and make sense of. The preacher has an opportunity to provide just the framework that is needed and can provide, essentially, a new understanding of grace and freedom that was ruptured by trauma.
4. Avoid jokes about mental health. People recovering from trauma (or the large percentage of people in congregations touched by any form of mental illness) already feel isolated, even surrounded by a community of faith. Scoring laugh points off of that pain in a sermon only further alienates them and causes them to feel separated. Additionally, casually using words like "crazy," "triggered," etc., can cause feelings of separation from the community and even from God. It diminishes the preacher's credibility with no payoff.
5. Encourage seeking help. Take every opportunity that the text, the liturgical calendar, and your own church's tradition offer to encourage help in every form. Encourage seeking community support within the church; encourage your church to be the kind of place where that is welcome. But also advocate for help from outside the church – from mental health professionals, area support groups, and doctors. Set the example from the pulpit for your church to be a place where there is no stigma around receiving mental health care. When a community experiences a devastating event, it is possible that some will experience it as traumatic and some will not. Thus, making it acceptable for those who need extra help to get it makes your whole community a place where healing can occur.

6. Do not pose as a mental health expert unless you are a mental health expert.

When creating a culture where it is acceptable to seek help, let people know you are available as their pastor for a listening ear but that you will also refer them for counseling or other mental health care. The good news for preachers is that a lane exists for us that allows us to do the work of building communities of care without posing as medical professionals when we are not. Preachers are privileged to do the work of engaging people's minds, bodies and spirits with the scriptural narrative, empowering them to partner with God in the world, and inviting them to new life in Jesus Christ. We can leave professional advice about medication and treatment options to people who are trained in those fields.

7. Invite wonder. One of the most wonderful phrases for preaching is "I wonder..."

It is neither a question that demands an answer, nor a definitive statement.<sup>50</sup> It invites the listener to join the preacher in imagining something that may be uncertain, new, or challenging, without forcing assent. Serene Jones defines wonder as "the simple capacity to behold the world around you (and within you), to be awed by its mystery, to be made curious by its difference, and to marvel at its compelling form."<sup>51</sup>

8. Attend to ritual. Every church, regardless of their own "style" of worship, has ritual. There are things that anyone in the community, as long as they have been around for a little while, knows to do at a certain time. Stand up to sing. Bow your head to pray. Say the Lord's prayer. Pick up the hymnal. Look at the

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<sup>50</sup> I am indebted to Rev. Dr. Sam Wells, both my preacher and teacher over many years, for an introduction to the concepts of Godly Play for my leaning on that to talk about wonder in homiletics.

<sup>51</sup> Jones, 163

screen. While we are always innovating on worship, ritual is especially important and comforting for folks who have been through trauma. If trauma removes your sign posts of meaning and orientation that help you navigate the world, a ritual you can depend on brings them back. Being in a place where one can know what to expect and when to expect it builds trust and confidence, two things trauma severs. This does not mean worship must be repetitive, though traditions that use consistent liturgy are certainly at an advantage in this area. Worshippers who are accustomed to a particular form and liturgy can participate easily and almost thoughtlessly. While at other times we might worry about the liturgy becoming rote, after trauma, the natural knowledge of when to stand and sit and what to say or sing is a necessary comfort. Even those worship experiences that tend to be more varied can rely on familiar hymns and prayers, or scriptures that are familiar to the congregation, to help center them in the space and give a jolt of confidence that though control had/has been lost in one area of life, this place is safe and they are competent at what is to be done.

By way of example, a young woman in one of my congregations, in the midst of a long recovery from childhood trauma, is deeply sensitive to loud noises and sudden movements that she is not expecting. For her, coming to the early service, which is small, intentionally low-key, and follows a consistent liturgy, is really all she can manage. She needs to know what to expect in order to feel safe. This means I try to warn her when something may be different from what she has come to expect, so she can use her agency to make a choice about her participation. For the first year or two of her time with us, we went over the orders of service before any special service so she would know

what to expect and if there was something she might need to come late for, leave ahead of, or simply not participate in at all. This helped her grow in confidence enough to become a leader in that service during the seasons of life in which she is healthy enough to participate. Some of her only community connections besides a few work colleagues are at the church.

Working with her has helped me structure my response to the whole church after we have experienced trauma together, by using the tools I have learned alongside her. While for pastors serving in larger contexts that kind of time and attention may feel unattainable, it is possible to apply the methods in larger groups or in pre-worship communication. It has helped to give the whole community ritual they can rely on, tools to grieve, and ways to empower each other to re-engage and recover. Because her own childhood involved experiences of violence and neglect, we have to be cautious in every way to help her feel safe. She is also very smart and interested in theology – which means there is no talk of God that we have not viewed through the lens of trauma, so that God does not feel off-limits or impossible even to people who have experienced terror. This also means a particular way of reading of scripture for both study and proclamation that does not isolate or alienate her experience. And it means very practical things – like giving a warning to the whole congregation at the beginning of our Good Friday service that there will be darkness and a very loud noise at the end. This, again, gives congregants a chance to use their own agency to determine their tolerance, with permission to remove themselves if that is what is most needed.

When doing one's exegetical work, the preacher will also need to attend carefully to interpretation of even some of the Bible's most significant themes. For example, in

Luke 6, in a passage which is included in the Revised Common Lectionary,<sup>52</sup> the Gospel writer says:

“But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. If anyone strikes you on the cheek, offer the other also; and from anyone who takes away your coat do not withhold even your shirt. Give to everyone who begs from you; and if anyone takes away your goods, do not ask for them again. Do to others as you would have them do to you. “If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you hope to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners, to receive as much again. But love your enemies, do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return. Your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High; for he is kind to the ungrateful and the wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful. “Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.” (Luke 6:27-38)

This is the Golden Rule, upheld by Christians and those who practice other faiths and those who practice none at all as the “gold standard” of being a good Christian and a good person. Alongside it, the admonition to forgive and even to love your enemies, to allow someone who has struck you to strike you again, can heap additional guilt and shame onto victims of abuse. These are community members who need the Church to be a place that reminds them of their worth, of God’s desire for the justice and thriving of all people and a place of wholeness and healing. Too often, churches pile onto abuse victims, guiltning them with this language that is meant to be liberating, so that victims will return again and again to their abusers.

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<sup>52</sup> Revised Common Lectionary. Nashville: Consultation on Common Texts, 1992.

In this type of instance, the preacher could simply acknowledge at whatever key point in the sermon makes the most sense, that while forgiveness is the practice of Christians, sets us free from bitterness and regret, and is in so many ways the very thing we need to practice more of to be truly faithful, that the abused are not required to return to their abusers, and that forgiveness can be mysterious and not involve a return to the relationship. There is, of course, a radical forgiveness where even the worst, most heinous acts can be forgiven. But that forgiveness cannot be coerced, even subtly through guilt or shame.

### **Self-Care**

Preachers are subject to regular lectures on self-care. Self-care matters, but the correct kind of self-care matters here. There is no amount of vacation days, spa treatments, hobbies, spiritual disciplines, or time off that will help you if you are not doing the deeper work that attending to trauma requires. When the trauma is close to home – i.e., a trauma that did not happen somewhere else but directly impacted your community – the preacher must be aware of their own trauma and seek treatment and care for it as quickly as possible. As the preacher, you will have to find the words to speak about an event sooner than anyone else, and will have to sustain that language and care and imagination for a long time. It is imperative that the preacher take their own needs seriously and seek a counselor, therapist, or other mental health professional who can help guide recovery, especially once the initial adrenaline rush of the crisis wears off and the longer work begins.

When the pastor/preacher cannot emotionally regulate and quiet their own nervous system, that energy will either pass on to the congregation outrightly or will

come out sideways as snippy resentment, unexplained or misplaced anger, melancholy, or other unhealthy coping habits that will only make the healing of the community that much more challenging, and can potentially create additional rupture in relationships that are already frayed.

### **Resourcing**

Every community, no matter the size or location, has resources to deal with traumatic events. Some communities will lean more heavily on mutual aid; in larger communities, there are structures in place. The nature of the world's connectedness now means that even the resources of a larger area can be brought into a smaller one. Having a way for people to get the deeper help they may need outside the worship service is crucial and a good use of time in either the sermon, announcements, or both. This may include anything from therapists to victims' services organizations to support groups to FEMA. If these resources are gathered and invested in ahead of time, you will be ready for whatever comes.

In seasons of crisis, the most reliable support has come from pre-existing relationships – friendships among colleagues and neighbors, and long-held community partnerships with organizations and agencies where trust already exists and does not have to be assembled as the plane flies. These also give your church community additional support immediately, simply by already having knowledge of one another and the ability to predict needs and know what resources might be shared. Having relationships with local response agencies when there is NOT a crisis means not only will your congregation gain access to resources, but they will have an organized mechanism for



responding and helping, giving back a sense of personal agency and the knowledge that they are part of a team and not alone.

### **Know Your Congregation**

Every community is different and will have different triggers and responses to things that befall them. Just as the preacher is attentive to demographic and social realities of the world around them, they must be aware of the defining experiences of the congregation and the surrounding area – whether it is urban or rural or in between. The experiences, especially if they have not had a chance to heal, will impact their reaction to everything. Appropriate awareness will not only help heal, but can also help manage conflict and build relationships. The preacher would be wise not to dismiss where trauma may live in their communities, but to embrace and learn about it so that the community and the preacher can thrive together.

## Chapter 6: Trauma Recovery with Children and Youth in Church

While we think of preaching as primarily a task of adults speaking to adults, when a preacher speaks, they are speaking to children and teens as well, who also feel the profound impact of traumatic events – they may experience them as even more deeply formative. About the impact of childhood trauma, Perry writes, “Although [a critical] experience may alter the behavior of an adult, [that] experience literally provides the organizing framework for an infant and child.”<sup>53</sup> Thus, any large scale traumatic event will have a major impact on a child’s faith formation. While common childhood traumas are often tragically abuse or neglect, children also experience trauma from natural disaster, exposure to violence, or even prolonged illness.

Community support, in particular, has been found to significantly decrease delinquent and antisocial behavior. Additionally, while the significance of having familial support after traumatic experiences lessens as one ages, external supports become more important<sup>54</sup>. These factors indicate that community and relationship building should be key components to any methodology aimed at preventing long-term effects of trauma among survivors, particularly older children and teenagers, for whom external support beyond family is immensely important. Hearing from the faith leaders in their lives, especially in a worship context alongside their caregivers, about the trauma and how to heal can open up space for more secure connection.

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<sup>53</sup> Perry, B. D., Pollard, R. A., Blakley, T. L., Baker, W. L., & Vigilante, D. (1995). "Childhood Trauma, the Neurobiology of Adaptation, and 'Use-Dependent' Development of the Brain: How 'States' Become 'Traits.'" *Infant Mental Health Journal*, 16(4), 276.  
doi:10.1002/1097-0355(199524)16:4<271::AID-IMHJ2280160404>3.0.CO;2-B.

<sup>54</sup> Perry, 276

The preacher must always be aware that they have multiple generations before them when they speak. This is true each time one takes the pulpit, but never is it more important to remember than when the community has faced collective trauma. Children and teenagers process trauma in ways unique to each age level. At the time of the fire at our church, one of our largest demographics was families with children under the age of eight. Many of them live in the immediate neighborhood and saw the church burn, or saw it once the fire was out and the building essentially gone in one section. It was frightening even to the adults – a two alarm fire meant dozens of firefighters were out on the front lawn reeling and catching their breath from the effort of containing the blaze. Even the adults had big questions, so how much more must the children have been wondering?

Early on, one of the things we learned to ask the children after we had explained what happened and assured them that everyone was safe and no one was hurt was, “What questions do you have?” This is a very different question than “Do you have any questions?” When operating with the assumption that they still had questions lingering, even if it took them longer to process what those questions were, every child had a follow-up. They were all paying attention and all had more questions that they really needed answered in order to feel safe. They needed help to understand what had happened, assurance that no one had been hurt, and the promise that we could rebuild and our church would be a place of joy and fun for them again. They also needed space to grieve items and spaces they loved that were lost and that would not be rebuilt in the same way. In short, they had the same traumatic experience as the adults, but were in many cases better able to express what they were sad about. Children do not feel the

same pressure adults do to say things like “it’s just stuff” and “the important thing is that everyone is unharmed.” Those things are true, but children know that even stuff can be important to us, and the loss of the building was sad all on its own. In their own way, they led us and gave us permission to say we were also sad that DJ Cupcake and Flame the Red Panda, the puppets from Vacation Bible School, had been consumed in the fire. Children give us permission to be sad without qualification, but they also need unique support and help with language after a traumatic event.

Faith communities are in a unique position to respond to children who have experienced trauma because they are places that, at their best, foster a sense of connection and offer assurance and peace. Because children’s most frequent responses to crises are disconnection and hyperarousal, their faith communities are already equipped with what is needed to respond.<sup>55</sup> Again, while we are primarily focused on acute trauma, many of these concepts are also helpful in guiding children who have experienced ongoing, chronic trauma as well. The number of children that includes is appalling and is a statistic that, on its own, calls the Church to a more robust response than it currently offers. Nearly half (45%) of children have experienced trauma, having experienced at least one adverse childhood event; 1 in 10 have experienced at least three of these events.<sup>56</sup> This data will only increase as the climate crisis advances and as we grow in our understanding of the trauma experienced by children that are a part of historically

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<sup>55</sup> Westerfield, C.M., Doolittle, B.R. Spirituality of the Traumatized Child: A Call for Increased Faith Community Participation in the Trauma-Healing Process for Children. *J Relig Health* 61, 203–213 (2022). <https://doi-org.proxy.lib.duke.edu/10.1007/s10943-021-01416-1>

<sup>56</sup> Sacks, V., and D. Murphey. 2018. "The Prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences Nationally, by State, and by Race/Ethnicity." *Child Trends Publication #2018-03*. Accessed October 2, 2023. <https://www.childtrends.org/publications/prevalence-adversechildhood-experiences-nationally-state-race-ethnicity/>

marginalized communities. Regardless of localized events, preachers and church leaders of all stripes need to know that their children are facing adverse events that impact their development in every way, including spiritually.

There are countless ways churches can respond to this reality in moments of acute trauma, but even in moments of relative calm, knowing that children are facing all kinds of challenges that are ongoing and may not involve the whole community. This means an awareness both inside and outside of worship.

Inside of worship:

Opinions about Children's sermons/moments/etc. in the context of worship certainly vary, and communities have different practices. But if a community chooses to have a segment during the worship service aimed particularly at their youngest disciples, it is crucial that after a traumatic event, a moment of processing, reframing, and healing happens in that space and the service surrounding it. Children are listening far more than the adults in their lives often give them credit for and are not well served by pretending all is well in front of them, or attempting to avoid or sugarcoat their feelings. If the church involves children in worship in other ways, then all the more work to ensure that there are developmentally appropriate acknowledgements of and responses to any acute traumatic event. This can look like any number of things depending on context. A few things that are true regardless:

1. Even in other parts of the service, the preacher can avoid graphic details of a news story or event. While there are times to name difficult things in an explicit way (i.e., people of all ages need to hear their preacher talk about difficult things without euphemism – racism, mental health, etc.), there is no need to give details

that could be frightening to children and that cannot be well explained on their developmental level in the context and timeframe of a sermon. There may be times in which the preacher offers that difficult topics will be covered so that parents can plan accordingly – either by sending their children into childcare or by using provided resources to be able to help their child process further after worship.

2. Remember that your adults are, in moments of crisis and uncertainty, filled with the same fears as children. You will not be talking down to the adults in the room if you speak on a level for children to understand, at least for some part of the sermon and their liturgy. In fact, this is a great time to invite the children in your congregation to be its leaders; they will ask questions the adults fear and be willing to express themselves unreservedly in ways that will be permission-giving for the whole congregation to grieve and honor their feelings.<sup>57</sup> While that may look and feel different than a typical service, ultimately the whole community will be better poised for post-traumatic growth.
3. Affirm that all the feelings they have are acceptable and appropriate. Again, this is important for adults and children alike, but it is crucial that children not receive the message that their feelings of sadness, anger or confusion are wrong. Hillary McBride, a therapist, researcher, and author, says, “If I could sum up all my years of clinical training and research in one statement, it would be this: We heal when

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<sup>57</sup> Interestingly, some of the best resources for how adults can help do this well come from the Children’s Television Workshop, who are the creators of Sesame Street. They have resources devoted to children who have experienced trauma, especially through migration and resettlement-

<https://sesameworkshop.org/resources/what-are-traumatic-experiences/> This lead me to this work, where the above comes from:

American Academy of Pediatrics, “*When Things Aren’t Perfect: Caring for Yourself and Your Child*” 2014 [https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/ttb\\_caring\\_for\\_yourself.pdf](https://downloads.aap.org/AAP/PDF/ttb_caring_for_yourself.pdf)

we can be with what we feel. . . . trying to make feelings go away, and in a very authoritarian, cognitive, and seemingly disconnected manner, wouldn't do it. It is ironic that turning toward our emotions instead of exiling them is what helps us move through them."<sup>58</sup> Children and adults alike need space to feel what we honestly feel, but we are often more open to allowing that in children and resisting it as adults. If we create space for the feelings of children without labeling them as good or bad, by extension, we make room for our own.

4. Giving the children something tactile they can play with or do as a response may help them be more attuned to the message and their own feelings. My church kids spent the worship service on the Sunday after the fire making thank you notes for firefighters and drawing pictures of what they saw and felt. They were also given space to ask and to write questions. Even in the several weeks following the fire, we kept the children in worship the whole service, which is not our usual custom. This was in part, a practicality – we no longer had the space and supplies to have separate children's areas (we were offered as nursery space an eighth grade chemistry lab in the school we were meeting in)! But this also provided the opportunity for children to be present and see that though the building was damaged and everything felt like it had changed, their friends were still there, their teachers and other adults in their lives were still there, and that the community was still surrounding them and in many ways, the same as we ever were.

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<sup>58</sup> McBride, Hillary, *The Wisdom of Your Body*. Brazos Press, 2021. P. 107

5. Invite children to lead the parts of the service they can. If one of the feelings of trauma is helplessness,<sup>59</sup> making space for children to be leaders and play important roles in the community's healing gives them a critical sense of agency, along with joyful presence that is needed by the whole congregation.
6. Tell them stories. Children want to connect to, be invited into, and be incorporated into the unfolding of a good story. They yearn for a space where they can actively participate and reflect on the information presented.<sup>60</sup> Stories help orient children to the world and give them a space to interact that feels safe. Use familiar Bible stories or other stories they may already know or that can be easily accessed.
7. Help them use a "memory marker" of some kind to help them remember their story and how God is at work in it. Memory markers are children's ways of remembering what they have experienced and learned as they do the holy work of making meaning.<sup>61</sup> These can be objects or locations you set up in worship space or some other placeholder. Children use these tools to claim and reclaim their experiences as they make meaning that will become an essential part of their faith narrative on which they will continue to build and rely. The meaning made in these memories as captured and claimed via locations, objects, and symbols become the building blocks for children as they continue to grow in their

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<sup>59</sup> Westerfield, 207

<sup>60</sup> Campen, Tanya. *6 Tools for Holy Work With Children*. The Lewis Center for Church Leadership. September 23, 2023. Accessed December 1, 2023.

<https://www.churchleadership.com/leading-ideas/6-tools-for-holy-work-with-children/>

<sup>61</sup> Campen, Tanya



awareness of God and deepen their faith, incorporating even tragic and traumatic events into their overall faith story.

Outside of worship, the pastor can and must work with other leaders to create safe places for children to express themselves and to ask questions. The church community can also give them a place of empowerment and joy to truly feel like they are able to overcome the present challenges and continue to grow. For example, after Hurricane Harvey devastated the city of Houston, all our students and kids had been out of school for days – first watching in horror as the waters rose and fell and rose again and tornado warnings sounded repeatedly, then on to waiting to hear who had flooded and who had not and if everyone had made it to safety. As soon as we could safely get people to the church, we made ways to respond toward which even the smallest children could contribute. On the first day after the rain stopped, we opened our sanctuary for donations to be taken to the largest evacuation shelter at the George R. Brown Convention Center – a massive space in downtown Houston where thousands of refugees fled, and which members of my congregation with high trucks could reach with needed supplies. While we asked for all kinds of things, we also asked for any toys or art supplies that could be offered to children in that space which was not only frightening but boring. The children showed up, their moms trailing with half-empty packages of diapers they could spare, blankets, and towels. But the children shared their toys. One child came with a giant bag of Legos; on closer inspection, this child had separated all the Legos into separate Ziploc bags. Not by color or shape or size; there was a little bit of everything in each bag. They separated them so that thirty different kids in that shelter could get their own personal bag of Legos – could sit down among all the noise and anger and despair and frustration and

helplessness of a hurricane shelter and have a moment to be a kid, have something after losing, for some, literally everything – to shut out the world they are in and build a new one. The adults wept when we found them. Days later, when schools still could not reopen, so many kids, even those who had not flooded themselves, were still dislocated and disoriented with parents back at work and nowhere for them to go. Our teenagers spent those days planning and executing a field day for kids in the nearby federal housing complex, and volunteering with another church in an area where every house had flooded to put on “Camp Harvey,” which went on for two weeks for children to have a safe place to be while their parents figured out how to move forward. These all served the community but also helped our kids and youth overcome their feelings of helplessness and hopelessness to help make the city and themselves feel a little more “normal” again. It also helped us facilitate further conversations on trauma and healing and being supportive of those who had lost their homes.

Churches and religious organizations also have a more self-serving reason to provide trauma-informed responses to children and teens. Negative religious coping strategies after childhood trauma often lead to loss of faith or rejection of church by adulthood. If congregations become better prepared to assist survivors with the development of positive religious coping strategies, they could possibly save the spiritual faith of many of their constituents.<sup>62</sup> I cannot count the number of times an exasperated parent of an adult child has asked me to help them get their child to connect with their church. They are bewildered as to why their child has not kept up the faith they worked so hard to hand down to them. While there has been an inordinate amount of ink spilled

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<sup>62</sup> Westerfield et al, 211

over the reasons for that, consistently one among them is that the churches they grew up failed to appropriately grapple with their adverse childhood experiences (often their parents' divorce) and responded to their fears and even their identities in ways that did not consider the full personhood and gave them no tools for how their religious tradition could actually help them grow and heal.

During the aftermath of major collective trauma, the church has a profound opportunity to engage in practices that could help well beyond the initial recovery phase. Guiding children and teenagers through an acute crisis can help build the kinds of trust and genuine resilience needed for the things that they may face on their own, and help the faith community become a place of safety and assurance. Additionally, the things that are good for the young people are actually good for everyone in traumatic times, so taking care to attend to the needs of your youngest disciples has an impact on the whole, regardless of age.



## Chapter 7: The Secret Sauce: Responding to Community Trauma with Joy and Abundance

While there is no magic wand to wave to bring the healing and growth a community needs after trauma, research and church practice dovetail beautifully in terms of what the church can offer in traumatic moments. People who have experienced trauma need communities of support, a sense of safety, help re-narrating their own stories of meaning, and experiences of joy and life after the trauma. Worship offers all of that.

The wide consensus now is that trauma is absolutely passed down generationally. There are several notions of *how* precisely this happens, but there is little debate on *whether* it happens. According to Resma Menakem, trauma can be passed down generationally in at least three ways. The first is closest to what we might colloquially call the “cycle of violence,” in which a family member who has experienced abuse then abuses or otherwise harms the next generation. The second is more systemic: trauma is passed down because people have become accustomed to unsafe systems and cultural norms that lead to continuing trauma through the generations simply using “unsafe standard operating procedures.”<sup>63</sup> It is also, as we have established in chapter 1, passed down on our actual genes which are impacted by our environment and our mother’s environment. It has profound impacts that reverberate well beyond the event or events themselves but also well beyond what are often socially acceptable healing periods, leaving suffering people further adrift.

Never estimate the toll that a traumatic experience takes on a community. For months (even years) after Hurricane Harvey, if we had a hard rain on the night of a

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<sup>63</sup> Menakem, Resmaa. 2017. *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending our Hearts*. Las Vegas, NV: Central Recovery Press.

scheduled study or meeting, we knew we would have to cancel because people were afraid of getting caught in street flooding or getting stuck somewhere. Our whole city seemed to collectively tense up any time the weather was bad for several months. People who actually flooded and lost their homes reacted this way much longer – they mostly still do. Houston area meteorologists are some of the most trauma-informed professionals in our community! There is no escaping the weather or the climate in general, so we have to find our way through.

After our church fire, my staff and leaders constantly panicked because we thought we smelled smoke, even though there was no fire. When we found out the fire was intentionally set, we began to wonder constantly about who had done it and why and if there was anything we could have done to prevent it. It made us question ourselves individually and as a church and made us ask questions we never had about building security – we believe in being an open neighborhood gathering space, but then how much exposure can we tolerate? How much fear would we be willing and able to live with?

In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, even on the rare occasions people could encounter one another, we were skittish and constantly worried about what risks we might be taking. Our members who are front-line workers steeled themselves constantly for what they would face at work, only to be afraid to go near any loved ones for comfort in their own hours, for fear of exposing them. Our minds and bodies learned to tighten up and clamp down on the fear that surrounded us, and we adjusted to terrible new ways of being that were in sharp contrast to what we know helps people and communities

thrive. We became anxious and afraid of strangers, and for many people that remains a reality.<sup>64</sup>

It is also true, though, that after the flood and fire, our community banded together to help each other and our neighbors. During the pandemic, people offered themselves in every way they could to help serve community members in need of resources or support. After Robert was murdered, a group who had been close with him committed themselves to deeper advocacy and engagement around homeless youth in our city. We began to speak more openly about mental illness and tried to help one another stop fearing strangers.

Trauma has the ability to produce both positive and negative outcomes. While we never celebrate or welcome trauma, the healing work that follows it can bring a community into a space and a future it could never otherwise have found for itself. If you can help your congregation move people from fear and grief toward hope and empowerment, you can work toward post-traumatic growth. One person or groups of people can themselves experience post-traumatic growth that actually helps brains and bodies re-orient. Communities of faith have the power to help people turn pain and anger into courage and action, to help people who have been traumatized become a part of creating the new community and the new world they can envision on the other side.

### **The Aim: Post-Traumatic Growth**

Aiming toward growth requires going beyond the words from the pulpit to giving people tangible ways to respond. This is true in instances of both local trauma and

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<sup>64</sup> Kindred, R. and Bates, G. W. "The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Social Anxiety: A Systematic Review." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 20, no. 3 (2023): 2362. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph20032362>.

societal trauma. Giving people tangible ways to respond to terror attacks and mass shootings and even far-flung natural disasters has deepened our commitment to compassion and justice and helped us respond to things near home. If trauma takes away feelings of control and connection, then our first goal is to restore them by empowering people to take action in which they are in control.

Many people find healthy ways to cope with, respond to, and heal from trauma. Often, people automatically reevaluate their values and redefine what is important after a trauma. Such resilient responses include:

- Increased bonding with family and community
- Redefined or increased sense of purpose and meaning
- Increased commitment to a personal mission or goal
- Revised priorities
- Increased charitable giving and volunteerism<sup>65</sup>

### **Liturgical Response**

Within the context of the service, giving people an experience that engages more than one of their senses and invites some movement and engagement with their body will help them be more engaged in worship and connect to more parts of the brain.<sup>66</sup> How you do this will depend heavily on the type of worship service you lead. Black churches by and large do this incredibly naturally as part of their engagement with worship; the environment is responsive, and people are free to move about and sway and dance and clap. All these are embodied moments that in many mainline White churches would feel disruptive. But the Black Church has experienced profound collective trauma and have

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<sup>65</sup> Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US). Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services. Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (US); 2014. (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Chapter 3, Understanding the Impact of Trauma. Available from: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207191/>

<sup>66</sup> Newberg, Andrew. *Neurotheology: How Science Can Enlighten Us About Spirituality*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018. 197



long been agents of healing for their communities – and embodied theology is a key to how that has happened.<sup>67</sup> For churches where movement and sensory experiences are not a given, and where congregants may be accustomed to a more cognitive, cerebral experience, preachers have to get a bit creative.

Think about giving them something to interact with, either in their seats or at prayer stations around the room. This could be as simple as lighting a candle or as complicated as moving around the room interacting with various items or even something they take home to work through over the course of several days. Whatever ultimately is decided, the worship service – from welcome to sermon to benediction – can invite people to take the next steps toward recovery and even growth. Grief must be expressed and acknowledged; the greater the specificity of what we grieve and why, the more effective it will be at helping your congregation begin the healing process. Nearly simultaneously, though, the preacher and presider will need to help cast a vision of the good future God has for the community, in which the traumatic experience is integrated but not in control. People need to be able to experience delight and joy together again, as quickly as they are ready – not to try to cover up the real harm that has happened, but to begin to help re-set the sign posts of meaning that give them a full picture of themselves and their community.

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<sup>67</sup> This deserves a thesis all on its own, but for more on the Black Church and how its practices have helped people endure, see:

Blank, Michael B., et al. "Alternative Mental Health Services: The Role of the Black Church in the South." *American Journal of Public Health* 92, no. 10 (2002): 1668-1672.

doi:10.2105/ajph.92.10.1668.

Powery, Luke. *Dem Dry Bones*. Fortress Press, 2012.

Bryan-Davis, Thema. *Thriving in the Wake of Trauma: A Multicultural Guide*. AltaMira Press, 2008.

The work of lament and making space for grief and recovery is crucial. But also crucial, if we understand that trauma is not the only thing handed down generationally, is providing opportunity for the experience of joy and the kind of deep peace that makes room for healing at all levels, right down to individual DNA chemicals. Just as trauma rewires the brain, so does healing. And preachers and worship leaders have a unique opportunity to gather people around healing.

Inviting joy is an overlooked facet of community healing from trauma. If we are aware of trauma's impacts, we are so careful to avoid bright-siding people that we forget that joy and delight for their own sake are a form of healing and resistance to evil forces in the world. Joy has a similar power to reconfigure the brain, to establish new (or restore old!) markers of meaning and heal a person down to the DNA level. The study of epigenetics has grown in recent years to help our understanding of how trauma and healing change us at the deepest levels. Genes are "an ensemble cast of biochemicals," complex far beyond the average layperson's understanding from high school biology and drawing Punnett squares, but the study of the chemical molecules that "clothe" DNA and regulate how DNA is expressed is called "epigenetics."<sup>68</sup> Apart from mutations, genes do not appear to be affected by environmental changes.

### **Beyond Worship**

While this project is devoted to preaching and worship contexts, offering your congregation a "what's next" response gives a sense of empowerment. Trauma creates victimhood and a feeling of powerlessness; thus any hope of recovery and restoration

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<sup>68</sup> Craig-Snell, Shannon. 2020. "Generational Joy: Affections, Epigenetics, and Trauma." *Liturgy (Washington)* 35 (4): 58-66

must have strong elements of empowerment.<sup>69</sup> But this doesn't need to look like somber work all the time. When it comes to collective trauma, communities also need the relief valve that collective joy brings. Much of the science of epigenetics focuses on problems to be solved and on the trauma itself. Thus, while we have "natural experiments" in historical data regarding collective experiences of distress (such as famine) or trauma (the Holocaust), it is more difficult to identify sustained and intense experiences of collective joy. Yet, given what knowledge we do have of epigenetic inheritance, and recognizing the wisdom of the Christian liturgical traditions that have been handed down to us, it is possible to speculate about the influence of joy. We know that social environments and strong experiences have effects on the cellular level that can be passed down from one generation to the next. We know that the practices that form a Christian (ideally) include repeated strong experiences of joy. Joy also floods our brains and bodies with biochemicals that can change our very genetic material and re-form us. Could it condition our bodies to certain responses? Would it leave its mark on our genetic expression? Our worship, then, is not just healing our trauma and preventing more – it offers protective benefits.

### **Joy in Life Together**

Joy is clearly not incidental to the life of a congregation, but necessary for healing, for deepening connections, and for growth.<sup>70</sup> Creating opportunities for fun, play, worship, and connection rebuilds individuals and communities – as does using the sermon and liturgy to encourage those practices together. Churches are equipped in a

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<sup>69</sup> Herman, Judith. *Truth and Repair: How Trauma Survivors Envision Justice*. BasicBooks, 2022. Pg2

<sup>70</sup>Johnson, Matthew Kuan. "Joy: A Review of the Literature and Suggestions for Future Directions." *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 15, no. 1 (2020): 5-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2019.1685581>.

way that few other modern institutions are to contribute to the rebuilding of imagination, joy and a healthy post-traumatic growth. Too often, we fail to meet that moment. But joy is something every community needs and that can be easily cultivated with intention to the needs and particularities of their location. It empowers communities for the kind of post-traumatic growth that brings new life and deeper connection to one another and to God.

## Conclusion

The Sunday after the fire at St. Mark's, one of our trustees went to the church building after worship at the elementary school, because he and his family had not seen it in person yet. Their preschool-aged child, like all the children, had questions and concerns. Their conversation went something like this, as the dad recounted it later:

Sam: Daddy, our church is broken.

Dad: I know, buddy. It got damaged in the fire we talked about.

Sam: Are Pastor Emily and Pastor Katie okay?

Dad: Yes, everyone is okay.

Sam: I really liked our church.

Dad: Me too, but we are going to fix it.

Sam: Okay, let's fix it. I will hand you the pieces.

My own healing started there. Because we could hand each other the pieces to put the whole thing back together. And four-year old Sam could lead the way. Trauma impacts every community at some time or another, and the incidence is only increasing with climate change and current geopolitics and economic woes that impact millions. Our congregations are situated to be places of refuge and recovery like few other public spaces. Preachers have a unique voice to lend to truth-telling that leads to healing, if we choose to use it. We have a particular location and gift to help people whose sign posts of meaning for their brains have been ripped out of order by trauma. We can hand each other the pieces and help each other rebuild, as we learn to trust that God is with us in all times and places.

For many people who have experienced trauma, worship does not feel healing or even safe. Church can feel like a place of judgment and danger, unmet expectations, and communal pretense that all is well. Despite ourselves, the Christian tradition has granted

us the ingredients that contemporary research says are profoundly useful for healing from trauma: a supportive community, conceptual frameworks for understanding trauma, bodily practices that attune people to one another through rhythm and song, and theatrical reenactment of common stories.<sup>71</sup> Being trauma-aware and informed matters not just in pastoral care but in all aspects of ministry, and because of the widespread impact of preaching, we can use the tools we have and grow in our skills to help bring people toward regulation, healing, and post-traumatic growth. Using the power of preaching to tell the story of the Gospel invites a community to hear stories of people who had agency in their own lives and to act on God's grace; people who lived through terrible things with a God who promised never to abandon them. It gives story, framework and language to re-order imaginations fractured by violence, by disaster, by loss, by forces beyond one's control. A deeper awareness in our preaching of the ways to respond to trauma will build churches that are places of healing, growth, and empowerment. We have everything we need, and the world is waiting.

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<sup>71</sup> Craigo-Snell, Shannon. 2020. "Generational Joy: Affections, Epigenetics, and Trauma." *Liturgy (Washington)* 35 (4): 58-66.

## Appendix A: Sample Sermons

### **Sermon Preached after the St. Mark's UMC Fire, Clemente Martinez Elementary Cafeteria, September 22, 2019**

This sermon was preached two days after a catastrophic fire that destroyed our historic building and did so the day after a tropical storm flooded the city. People, including me, were threadbare and exhausted. For perhaps the only time in my fifteen years of weekly preaching, I began not with the text itself, but with personal experience and stories of what we still had and what the future might hold. It was an unusual sermon for an unusual day, in an unusual setting – the cafetorium of the elementary school we had recently partnered with in an adjacent neighborhood. They opened their doors to us, and the principal and teachers showed up to help us set up on a Sunday morning.

I remember when I was 12, my godfather and godbrother were in a terrible accident in Montana while they were on vacation. We got the phone call that it had happened late at night; the next morning my dad was on a plane to Montana. My parents were teachers and we were not a family that flew often. Even then I knew a last minute plane ticket cost a small fortune and when I asked why he ran up there so quickly to be present for such a short time he said “that’s what family does.”

That’s what family does. They show up. I got the call that the church had caught fire and started calling people and everyone said “I’m on my way.” So many of you rushed over. Colleagues from other United Methodist Churches and other denominations came running. Our neighbors gathered.

The worst thing was that there was not one thing to be done. All anyone could do was watch. Which is...terrible. I’m guessing no one here likes to feel helpless. I’d always rather be the helper. But family means sometimes you get to be the helper and sometimes you don’t. If you’re lucky, when it's time for you to be in need of help, you have a community like the one we live in. My email inbox, my text messages, my

voicemail box, my DMs on facebook and instagram, everything I've got is packed full of messages letting me know that our church family is so covered in prayer, but also messages that say "whatever you need." We have been offered space in other churches for our meetings, for worship, for offices – the pastor of one of our neighboring UMC churches offered to change their church's worship time this morning so we could use their worship space at whatever time we wanted. I was glad not to need the offer, generous though it was, because our school partners came through as I knew they would.

Most of you would know that a big part of our church's ministry in the last few years has been connecting with local schools, especially here at Martinez. Principals have been texting with the pastors, offering us their spaces. The principal here, Mr. Lopez, is here personally to unlock and let us in and provide all that we need. I am so grateful this morning for real, mutual partnerships, where communities support each other. There's a Caedmon's Call song I hadn't thought about in years and that I can't even remember most of the words to, but in my head I keep singing the last line of the Chorus that just say love keeps growing more love. Love keeps growing more love. I've seen that in a hundred ways in these last 48 hours.

At one point on Friday afternoon I am betting there were at least 15 pastors on site, bringing love from their whole community. An Episcopal colleague was on site as fast as the firefighters and gathered us for prayer while the flames were still raging in the background. Before the fire was even out, I had an email from her bishop with the names of all the other priests in the area, who were copied and had already responded that they were here for whatever we needed. The Methodists of course, were there with a consistent message: you won't be alone. Your community won't go through alone. Any



time something terrible has happened, isn't that mostly what you want to know? That you won't be alone. That's what family does.

Some of our leadership was on site almost all day yesterday as the inspectors and insurance and the beginnings of our restoration team were gathering. All day neighbors came by to share the same word, that we are not alone, and to tell us what the church means to them. In real life and in social media, I've heard so many stories of what really makes a church. People have posted their wedding photos, talked about their kids growing up in our day school, about this being the place where they said goodbye to dear friends, talked about finding God's love for the first time, or for the first time in a long time when they came through our doors. I met on the lawn with one of our recovery groups yesterday that talked about how coming into this place makes them relax immediately, how it just feels warm and welcoming. I must have heard that 100 times. They want to help us rebuild what was lost. Another colleague came by with a check and said they wanted to be among the first to start our resurrection fund. They believe with us that we will rise.

The building is important to us and important to our community. We have been saying and will continue to say that the church is not a building, the church is not a steeple, the church is the people. But that building held a lot for us and we are sad about what's happened and that's ok too. Both those things can be true at the same time. We feel so sad that the place that means so much to so many has been damaged so severely. But we can fix what's been damaged, and that warm, loving feeling that inhabited the space? Well, that's the part that comes from you and comes from God. It goes where we go and will be there when we return to the home we love.

We don't know when that will be, but here are some things we do know:

First, we are loved. God's love has been poured out on us in so many ways. The other song that's been on repeat in my head probably because it's also been on repeat on my Spotify is Crowded Table by the Highwomen (I recommend the whole album) and the second verse ends with "If it's love that we give, then it's love that we reap, if we want a garden, we're gonna have to sow the seed." We have sowed seeds of love and so many have sowed those seeds in us and it's a harvest we are reaping at the time when we need it most. Watching love in action is so amazing because it's a resource that gets bigger every time it's shared. Loving and being loved teaches us more about God than most anything else because we imitate God when we love one another. Someone once asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment and he said "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus wanted to make sure that we forever knew how inseparable those two things are. When we love our neighbor, we are imitating the love of God by taking our neighbors' needs seriously. And our love for God is always reflected in how we love our neighbor. We talk a lot about neighbors around here and we remember this week to just be grateful that God designed it this way.

The second thing we know for sure is that we will recover. It will likely take longer than we want and we don't have a road map for what it will be like, but we will recover. Everything that was damaged can be repaired or replaced. Our hearts will heal. And we will continue to be who we are. Our ministry together will not stop, if anything, I hope it will grow in this season as we are being reminded of just how important it is to

be part of this community. We will keep proclaiming in all we do that God's love and grace is for ALL people.

The third thing I know for sure is just what kind of God we serve and just who is this God who is going to continue to be with us in these days. The message from scripture is consistent in the kinds of things God does when it looks like all is lost. Jesus comes around and suddenly the rules of life and death are no longer in place. People who couldn't walk get up and dance, who couldn't talk shout, who were tormented by demons are suddenly set free. The dead are raised and the blind see and all give glory to God. We will rise up from this, friends. We have risen up to more challenges than we could name over the years. God will be with us and will guide us. For the time in between we'll keep singing and praying and telling about the God we know who gives beauty in the place of our ashes, who raises up old devastations and who gives the oil of praise instead of mourning. We will keep showing up for each other and our neighbors, we will keep being the people God has called us to be. That's what families do.

**Sermon the Sunday After Hurricane Harvey, preached at St. Mark's UMC Houston,  
September 3rd, 2017, 5 days after the storm departed Houston**

We had not been able to have service on the Sunday before because the storm had already hit and roads were not passable and people could not leave their homes. I still had power, along with a number of our congregants, and we had a Facebook Live service (that seemed like a big deal pre-2020!) of prayer and readings to try to provide some comfort. This was the Sunday following. Many people had flooded or had their family homes flood. Everyone knew dozens of people whose homes were destroyed. People were displaced and had both friends and strangers living with them. Those whose homes were undamaged had spent most of the week helping muck and gut their loved ones' houses. This sermon attempts to do justice to that but also addresses the trauma recovery process covered in this paper and offers a sample of how it looks to address trauma directly and in the moment.

If we heard it once this week, we heard it a thousand times: I've never seen anything like this before. We have never seen ANYTHING like this before. So today I am going to offer you a sermon not much like one I've given before. Because after this week I don't have profound reflection on scripture, even though scripture has sustained me this week. I don't have a well organized set of thoughts, even though God has shown me and all of us amazing things. My brain is mush and this is the first time in a week that I've known what day it is. So all I have are reminders. Reminders of things we knew, but that we might have forgotten that we remembered this week.

1. We are not nearly as in control of our lives as we'd like to be. I tried this week, don't know about you, but I tried to control the weather with the power of my own worrying. Like if I just thought about it and fretted about it long enough and hard enough I could keep the people I love safe, I could stop water from coming into the house, I could make those awful rain bands move faster or break into tiny pieces. It didn't work. And I had to face once again that horrible notion that while there are many things about my life I can control, there will always be things that I can't. The next one is kinda like it.
2. It's scary when what we are used to being on the inside shows up on the outside. This is true in a lot of ways. Circling around impacted areas these last few days to help friends and support work teams, street after street, house after house has all of its insides piled on the outside. It's awful to see and even more awful when it's yours – your life, your home, pulled apart by your friends or by helpful strangers. But it's not just that. A lot of our insides were on our outsides this week. While

we can normally manage worries and fears and concern for our loved ones and generally look like we have it all together, that fell apart for a lot of us this week – into exhaustion or tears or anger or despair....I can't tell you how many times this week I have said or had someone say to me something to the effect of I don't know why I'm crying. We've seen the world just a little more tenderly this week, a little more vulnerable, a little more beautiful even when it's frightening – a little more like God sees it all the time. It breaks our hearts. It breaks God's heart.

We have spent so much time reassuring ourselves that we are safe and ok that the build up of what has happened and its magnitude spills over sometimes. And that's ok. There are blessings to the insides being on the outside. Maybe not when it's your house, but even then, once everything is out, the recovery can really begin. The same is true for us. Whatever you're feeling about the whole thing, even if like me you're a person who doesn't love to talk about feelings....that feeling is manageable and mentionable. One of the gifts of this week is the way we have gotten to care for each other because people have said when they need help and people agreed to walk alongside. Which brings me to my next point.

3. It's good to have friends. We know that, I think. But this week, I don't know about you but I've heard from all kinds of people from every stage of my life, wanting to make sure I am ok. Even people I've said wrong things to or who said wrong things to me, who I'd fallen out with intentionally or unintentionally. None of that mattered this week. We have checked on each other and actually spent time together. I remembered this week how palpable God's love is to me

when I am around my dining room table sharing a meal with friends. I've felt a little extra nudge to pull my people close and not worry so much about minding my own business. We are busy people. And sometimes we get so busy that we forget the importance of a community that actually spends time together and checks in regularly – we forget that our relationships are worth investing in and maybe it's not always such a good thing to just stay in our lane. It's one of the things I won't soon forget.

4. Your gift is needed. The first part of this week was terrible and terrifying. We watched water climb and recede and climb again, we learned more than most of us have ever known about how many cubic feet of water per second can spill. We've adjusted to the sounds of helicopters and the presence of tanks and curfews and closed airports. It's been strange and wearisome and anxious. But friends, what magic we have made together this week. People with boats joined right alongside emergency crews to rescue people from flooded neighborhoods. Techies created a website that was quickly staffed by volunteers that had power to match people needing rescue with rescue crews in what may have been the first ever crowd-sourced natural disaster. Cooks cooked and bakers baked and people collected supplies and sorted, sorted, sorted. There were lines so long to volunteer at shelters they had to turn people away. One hundred people turned this room into a disaster recovery zone. People sitting in this room navigated around flooded streets to get needed items to shelters as quickly as possible. We have emergency personnel in this room who left their own homes and families for days on end to make sure we were safe and cared for. As soon as the water went

down, people dug in. They mucked houses, cared for kids, organized teams, made tough choices, helped pack and do laundry, helped with FEMA forms, and took people into their own homes. We have gotten to see people this week step up and be who God made them be, using everything they have to make things a little better for our city. And it takes all of us. I have been in awe watching each person use their own God given gifts to do what they can this week. We have had a chance to see and appreciate the best in every person and when we do that, we are doing what God does. In God's Kingdom, every person is a gift and every person's gifts are needed.

5. We belong to each other/we're neighbors. Again, we knew this, right? Except that we sometimes forget. We talk so much about being neighbors around here and this week we got to see what it means to be a neighbor magnified. So, I watched the news for 5 days straight...anyone else willing to 'fess up to how much news you watched? And while I watched the news, when the reporters would ask people as they came out of the water on their boats or kayaks, "why are you out here?" to a person they replied "these are my neighbors." These are my neighbors. What else could I do? Someone once asked Jesus what was the greatest commandment and he said "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength and love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus wanted to make sure that we forever knew how inseparable those two things are. When we love our neighbor we are imitating the love of God by taking our neighbors' needs seriously. And our love for God is always reflected in how we love our neighbor.

Today we remember that we are neighbors, in a week where we were reminded that though it doesn't always seem like it, we are actually willing to die for each other. Houstonians literally risked life and limb for one another this week. We know we are neighbors and what that means. We know how to imitate the love of Jesus who gave everything. Now we just have to remember that when there isn't a flood. We have lived these words from Romans this week and every new day will bring us a chance to live them again: Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good. Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honor. Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good. Or maybe we'd say it, do not be overcome by water, but overcome water with good.

I don't know if that was a sermon, but those are my reflections on the week in the hope that it will help you, in this moment of quiet, reflect on your own. I only have this left to say, friends. When all of the above is true – when we lose control, when we are clinging desperately to our people, when we are risking life and limb for one another, when the water is rising, this one thing does not change. God is with us. God's promises do not change. They tell us that God is our refuge and strength,

an ever-present help in trouble.

Therefore we will not fear, though the earth may change  
and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea,



though its waters roar and foam

and the mountains quake with their surging...

The Lord Almighty is with us;

the God of Jacob is our fortress.

And that nothing...either death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor **depth**, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Sermon on Esther 4 for Commitment Sunday the year of Hurricane Harvey in Houston, preached at St. Mark's UMC in Houston, November 12, 2017**

This sermon was several months after one of the most dramatic traumatic events in Houston's history – one that still heavily defines who we are now. This demonstrates the continuous follow-up needed to integrate the experience and how it can come into play in the full life of the congregation. This was the Sunday at the end of our annual generosity campaign – a day we use to remind each other who we are and why what we do together matters.

When we were talking about what Biblical text to use to undergird our Better Together campaign, we arrived at Esther 4, which we read from this morning. It's hard to preach on the book of Esther when you've only heard a little part of the story. If you have read the book of Esther, you know that it's a little different than most books of the Bible. I'll go ahead and get out of the way the issue that most folks have with Esther. Not once in the entire book is the name of God mentioned. This is the thing that even those of us who have never read the book have learned about it. Many have argued that this makes the book so strange and different from the rest of the Bible that it ought not be there at all. Yet once we read her story, we learn that even though God may not be

named, God can still be known. Those of us who live in a time and place where we can use God's name any time, whether it is in reverence or profanity, forget that our privilege is one that has not been afforded to God's people for all of history. We forget that there are people throughout history who have had to trust that though God is not named, God is the one behind the action.

Esther ought to be powerless in every sense of the word. She is an orphaned cousin of an exiled people, leaving in some far-flung province of a shaken empire. She's a woman in a male society, she is a foreigner, a Jew in the Persian Palace, snatched from her people to be used by a pagan emperor. By all accounts, Esther should be nobody, completely helpless. But God seems to have a habit of picking people who we say are nobody and reminding everyone just what God can do with nobody. She rises in royal favor and is made Queen of Persia. When her adopted father, Mordecai, learns of the plot to destroy the Jews, he is helpless, powerless to defend his people. But Mordecai trusts God and knows that God cherishes his people. And Mordecai goes to Esther to try to get her to help – she may seem like a long shot, but desperate times call for desperate measures, right? Mordecai places his trust in the only place he can, hoping that it was God's providence that placed a young Israelite woman in the wicked king's court. And Esther saves her people by boldly asking the king for what she wants, at great risk to herself. She did the only thing she could do, and it was enough. It saved her people. Esther gives thanks for the salvation of Israel and the Jewish festival of Purim is instituted. It was to be a time of feasting and celebration because God's people were given relief from their enemies, turning "sorrow into gladness and mourning into

holiday." It was to be a day in which the people sent food to one another and offered gifts to the poor. Purim is still celebrated in Jewish communities today.

The characters in the story are helpless in the face of the world around them. But they do not respond by growing volatile or defensive. They do not respond by trying harder to take care of things for themselves. Instead, they put their trust in God and in God's people. Then Esther takes action in the only way she can. It may not seem like much and it may seem like a big risk for not much reward, but she does it. And when she receives what she asked for, she and her people together give thanks to God. Trust. Action. Thanksgiving. Some of God's best stuff happens when those things come together.

Incidentally, those are some of the things we come here to help each other out with – to trust God when that feels foolish, to act when it would be easier to sit back, to give thanks when we otherwise might not notice enough to be grateful. Esther calls us to care for one another and celebrate with one another as a community, just as God's people did at the institution of Purim, to come together and pray not as individuals, but together. Because it's so routine for us to come here, we forget sometimes what a gift it is and not one to be taken for granted. We know that last week, the peace of a worship service was shattered by horrific violence. Last weekend, between that and a dear friend whose preschooler is facing a nightmarish life threatening illness and the general instability of the world, it was one of those weeks where I remembered profoundly and painfully something that deep down, we know all the time – that everything I love is so vulnerable. And there are so many things that leave me helpless.

That's why I need a place like this and people like you to help me remember that everything I love is also beloved of God. And that actually, I am not, and we are not helpless. God has placed us here for such a time as this – for a time of storms and recovery, a time of conflict and forgiveness, a time of vicious rhetoric interspersed with moments of compassion.

Esther should have been helpless, but instead she found courage to walk with the rest of her people and stand up for them. She found a way to trust God when all seemed lost.

When we can do the same, we join all the people of God who have put their sometimes helpless and seemingly powerless faith into the hands of a loving God. I have to admit friends, with all that's been going on in the world I have been a little fatalistic. Watching endless gun violence and persistent racism and soul crushing poverty that we are all too intractable to do anything meaningful about, I feel helpless and powerless and like we are just stuck on this ride we can't get off of...and it's made me ask God over and over again, why don't you do something? And I have to say, the more I have prayed that, the more I have begged God to just change something, just heal something, just some little miracle, the more I see that God is changing everything. My heart and my mind have shifted in new ways this year that have honestly surprised me – that the world around me looks a little different, a little more fragile and a little stronger at the same time. I'm guessing your heart and mind has moved some too, in some way. Partially because that's what happens with time but also because people are changing the story. People are standing up, are having conversations we were not having before, are opening their hearts and sometimes their actual homes to people who they'd never have known before. And that means change is happening: right in our midst.

I believe that God is up to something in this world, often despite our best intentions. That's why we make commitments to this place together. We commit our gifts today, some portion of what we have to say that this matters – that God is up to something and we want to be part of it. Today we do it with our gifts and hope that later today and tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that we'll commit with our whole selves and our whole lives – that each of us and this community together will be shaped along the contours of the heart of God. And today our story tells us that though the action might look small at first, small things add up to big things. This is why we talk about being better together. Because all of our gifts, whatever thing we bring that may not feel like quite enough, when it matches up with everyone else's we begin to see a shift, and slowly, our lives and our church and our world come into view looking just a little more like Jesus, filled with more compassion and grace, showing more light and more love.

Below is a side-by-side of seasonal sermons, using the church year to address collective trauma that shows up acutely but reflects chronic realities. These sermons were preached several years apart but utilize similar themes. Both respond to events that happened in or near the Advent season. One relies on the other – because a preacher does not have to reinvent the wheel every time there is an important event to speak to. We experience our own trauma and can trust our previous work, properly reviewed and reworked where needed, to hold us again.

**Sermon after the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting, preached at St. Paul's United Methodist Church Houston, December 16, 2012, Advent 3**

Both the Gospel and the prophet Jeremiah tell it this way: “A voice is heard in Ramah, lamentation and bitter weeping. Rachel is weeping for her children; she refuses to be comforted for her children, because they are no more.” In Matthew’s gospel, Rachel is weeping over the slaughter of the innocents, the little children who were killed by order of Herod. Matthew is quoting Jeremiah, leading us, I suppose, to know that the tears we have cried have been cried before. They will likely be cried again. We weep with Rachel this morning, for our precious children who are no more.

It is all too often now, that we are brought to our knees by senseless violence. People will say all manner of things in the days to come. Some will argue that if access to guns was not so easy in the United States, these things might not happen. Some will argue that we are overly desensitized to violence from TV and video games, causing some vulnerable people not to be mortified at the notion of killing other people. Some will say that we have to finally reassess our care of the mentally ill. Some will ask what we have to do to heal our deep divisions and act more civilly to one another. These are good and important conversations for us to have, but they leave a lot to be desired. They don’t answer the fear that fills us in the wake of such an incident, or the excruciating sadness

we experienced watching parents weeping for their lost children, or the anger we have at the gunman and if we are honest, at God.

Most of those things leave us at a loss for words. That's the only way it can be. In fact, silence is likely a better response than the usual platitudes that we throw around when terrible things happen – like God needed more angels in heaven, or it's God's will and everything happens for a reason. There is a lot I do not know about God, but there are some things about which I am certain. So to clear up some of the rumors, God did NOT just need more angels in heaven and wrench 20 kids from the parents to fill some celestial job opening. It was NOT God's will that made it happen, but the will of a deeply troubled young man. Everything about this terrible event is antithetical to the heart and character of God. Acting as though God is somehow ok with it so that we can act as if we are ok with it does not serve the world. What we need is lament, to spend time calling out to God for what has been lost, what is broken. Without lament, our faith is incomplete. Scripture is filled with the words of those who have cried out to God before us. Since we so often say the wrong things, or can't come up with anything to say at all, we can be thankful that scripture has given us words of pain along with words of life. The writers of scripture were not afraid to tell God how angry or sad or afraid they were- they never sugar coated things or tried to make them ok. They offer us words when we have none. Here these words from the book of Lamentations:

Cry out to the Lord;  
Moan, Daughter Zion!  
Let your tears flow like a torrent  
day and night;  
Let there be no respite for you,  
no repose for your eyes.  
Rise up, shrill in the night,

at the beginning of every watch;  
Pour out your heart like water  
in the presence of the Lord  
Lift up your hands to God  
for the lives of your little ones.  
Lamentations 2:18-19

Or from the seldom-read prophet Habakkuk:

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you

‘VIOLENCE!’ and you will not save?” ( Habakkuk 1:2)

Or from the Psalms:

“You have shaken the land and torn it open; mend its fractures, for it is quaking. You have made your people suffer hard things; you have given us wine to drink that made us reel.” (Ps 60:2)

Or even today’s reading from the prophet Zephaniah. Also seldom read, most of Zephaniah is painfully grim. It is line after line of gloom and doom, of death and despair, of a world that is far from God. Zephaniah and his people are in a very dark place. They are in a foreign land, an enemy has destroyed their communities and their places of worship. They are forced to live in a land where nothing is familiar, the language is strange, the customs are bizarre, the whole culture feels surreal. They have lost loved ones, they are overcome with grief, they do not feel safe. In their grief they turned from the Lord, and Zephaniah is desperately trying to bring them back.

We are mourning, we have lost, we do not feel safe. Maya Angelou said yesterday that “Our country is grieving. Each child who has been slaughtered belongs to each of us and each slain adult is a member of our family.” And so we grieve the loss of life, but our faith reminds us that we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Even for Zephaniah’s



people, who were so bereft, we hear the amazing promise from God – “I will bring you home, I will gather you up....the Lord your God is in your midst.”

It is the season of Advent. In Advent, we face head-on the pain of seeing the world as it is, because we can joyfully hope for that promised day when Jesus will return and peace and justice will rule all things. Though our hearts are heavy, rather than becoming hopeless, we turn to God, not afraid to tell God exactly how we feel, not afraid to lament together what has been lost. At this time of year, we see that in spite of everything, it is great longing of God's heart to be with us. God wanted to be with us so desperately, that we are met far more than halfway in our desire to be at home with God. God came and made a home with us. This week is the week of Advent in which we celebrate the joy we have in finding our home in God. We do not feel joyful, and if we do, we might feel a little guilty about it. But our joy is not fleeting and does not depend on the circumstances around us. We have joy because in spite of everything, God comes to us, bringing the light that shines in the darkness.

The way Luke tells it, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, all went to their towns to be registered, and among them were Joseph and Mary, who was expecting a baby. In the city of David called Bethlehem, the baby was born and as Zephaniah promised, the exile was over. The Lord God is here to stay. So with our brother Zechariah, whose song we sang last week, we proclaim again and again to help us believe that it is true –

“By the tender mercy of our God,  
the dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

**Sermon After Michael Brown's Murder and the Ferguson Uprisings, preached at St. Mark's United Methodist Church, November 30, 2014, Advent 1**

Isaiah's prayer has been heavy on my heart this week. The prophet says "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" A brash and sort of embarrassingly impetuous request from the people to God. Tear open the heavens and come down! Don't you see what is happening down here?? The people were in exile, the world seemed chaotic and disturbed. They needed God, not up in heaven, not sort of vaguely present. Right here. Right now. It's an Advent prayer. It's our prayer.

We always begin at the end....the first Sunday of Advent every year, we read a passage from the Gospel about the end of the world. This passage from Mark has been named the "Little Apocalypse" by scholars though it doesn't sound all that little to me. But it does sound a lot like Isaiah's prayer for the earth to quake with the presence of God.

When we think of Jesus at this time of year, we think of him as a baby. A small, defenseless and non-threatening presence, a sentimental picture of the Little Town of Bethlehem. That is not the Jesus we have read about in our readings today. We call him Emmanuel, God with us. God with us has power that we have never dared to imagine. This morning we read that our God can tear open the heavens and cause the mountains to quake. When he comes, Mark tells us that the sun will be darkened, the moon will not light, the stars will fall from the sky and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Hardly a silent night. Christ's coming promises to turn the world as we know it upside down and inside out. When we pray Come, Lord Jesus, during this time we are praying for a reversal of the powers of the world, for a time every valley is lifted, every mountain

made low and the rough places a plain. A time when the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together. And it seems from our scriptures this morning that it is likely to be a bumpy ride.

I suspect that's a good thing. Things are already pretty bumpy down here and we need a God who is up to the task. We have been reminded this week that we are on shaky ground. Our brothers and sisters in Ferguson, Missouri, have been holding a mirror up to our country that we would prefer not to look into. Regardless of what you think about evidence or grand jury verdicts, a few things are clear. Despite our best, or at least our halfway, lukewarm, barely scratching the surface efforts, this country is still a deeply unequal place. The color of your skin and the zip code you are born in still determine an enormous amount about the opportunities you'll have in the world. If you are young, African American, and male, you will be treated with greater suspicion and hostility than your Anglo peers, putting your very life at risk routinely. And Americans, all of us, and at least if my social media feeds are any indication, maybe especially white Christians are mostly painfully ill equipped to have the conversations we need to have about race in this country.

We have been given an opportunity to listen to people who are trying to tell us something about their experience in the world, which is very different from the experience of most of us in this room. But mostly, we have not listened. We have thrown rocks at each other over the mere suggestion that privilege exists, we have listened to talking heads who are trying to fill a 24 hour news cycle instead of the voices of those most impacted by the systemic problems that led to the death of Mike Brown, we have begged to just move on and talk about something else, is though that were an option for black mothers and fathers

who still have to explain to their children how to survive in a world that values their lives less than other lives. We have drawn lines in the sand even though deep down we know that “us” against “them” is the opposite of God. We have called for calm. But our scriptures this morning seem to tell us that calm is not what precedes the light breaking into the world. We learn that we need not fear chaos and quaking but instead we need to pay attention to it, or as Mark would tell us, “keep awake.” Don’t look away from the suffering of your neighbor or be lulled to sleep by disengaging from the world.

You may be a little squirmy in your seat right now and I may be a little squirmy in this pulpit because this is hard to talk about, and we all enter the story from a different perspective. It’s uncomfortable because we know that Ferguson and our reaction to it exposes something about us that is deeper than a political inclination or an opinion about a legal case, that goes further than where we enter the story of what has happened in Ferguson. It exposes our fear, our prejudice, our tendency toward apathy or avoidance. It exposes empty places in us that we try to fill with all kinds of things that still leave us wanting. All of these things we know are true of us all the time, it's just that most of the time, we can lull ourselves to sleep by ignoring them.

But that is not what the Advent season is for. Advent is a season for facing head on the tumult of the world in which we live and the lives that we lead. It is a season for removing the armor and letting go of whatever it is we use to fill empty places in us that by all rights, belong to God. It's a season for keeping awake, and not lulling off. We all use something that lulls us into a kind of sleep – maybe it's reruns of Law and Order, maybe it's Facebook, or your cell phone, or a glass of wine, Danielle Steele novels or online shopping. None of these things are terrible things. It's the way we use them that's

our problem. These are the things we reach for when we are too tired or too afraid to face the world in front of us. They are the things we use to avoid feeling small and powerless, never realizing that only then do we recognize God's strength and power. Advent is a time to try to let go of some of those things we use like a shot of anesthesia so that we do not have to really face how it feels to live the kind of life we live. Taking away those painkillers we have been addicted to is never easy. Advent is time where we learn how loud silence can be once the earbuds are out, where we learn how long the night is once the television is turned off, how hard it might be to get to sleep with the wine bottle tucked away, where we have to find out what happens when we stop blaming other people for everything, where we see what might become of us if we stopped compulsively taking care of everyone else all the time. We figure out what happens if instead of tuning out, we really listen to one another and especially to the voices of those who are very different from us.

But we are in a time of expectation. We are in a season where we remember the heart of God's promise to never leave us alone, even when the world seems too loud or too silent, too chaotic or too fearful. We come into this place, at this time of year more than ever, expecting God to show up, longing for God to show up to tear open the heavens and come down and make right all the things of this world that are so deeply wrong. We come to know that even when we are stripped bare of all the tools we use to distract ourselves and exposed for who we are through and through we are left with something for more than we could have gotten on our own. It is there we find Emmanuel, God with us. There we find the power of God that makes mountains tremble and the stars get out of the way.

This is what we pray for during the Advent season. We pray that God would tear open the Heavens and come down...because we are lost, we aren't sure how to live together, the world feels like it's coming apart. So we pray, not politely and calmly, but with the boldness of a prophet and the volume of a protester – tear open the heavens and COME DOWN. We pray it until we believe together that the promise of Advent is true, the promise that says:

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

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