

The Rt. Rev. Porter Taylor
Preaching in the time of the COVID 19 Virus
May 26-27, 2020

Let me first thank Bishop Susan for inviting me to do this. And then let me confess I do this knowing that you preach week in, week out. Plus for the last three years I have been primarily a special occasion preacher. No doubt you have more to teach me than I have to teach you. So think of my talk as offering possibilities that might supplement what you are already doing. And I hope for the day when we can meet face to face and have an incarnated conversation about these matters.

The other self-disclosure is that while I have given talks many times, in truth—my talks are always sermons.

I might as well confess that I am not a linear thinker nor speaker.

Today---I will try to cover two topics

1. My general principles of preaching as I think of them
2. How Covid shapes preaching and why preaching is important in this time.

In one of my former lives, I was an English Professor. As a result, 99% of the times when I speak, I will open with a poem. The poem for today is “Kindness”--- by Naomi Shihab Nye

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.
How you ride and ride
thinking the bus will never stop,
the passengers eating maize and chicken
will stare out the window forever.

Before you learn the tender gravity of kindness,
you must travel where the Indian in a white poncho
lies dead by the side of the road.

You must see how this could be you,
how he too was someone
who journeyed through the night with plans
and the simple breath that kept him alive.

Before you know kindness as the deepest thing inside,
you must know sorrow as the other deepest thing.
You must wake up with sorrow.
You must speak to it till your voice
catches the thread of all sorrows
and you see the size of the cloth.
Then it is only kindness that makes sense anymore,
only kindness that ties your shoes
and sends you out into the day to mail letters and
purchase bread,
only kindness that raises its head
from the crowd of the world to say
it is I you have been looking for,
and then goes with you every where
like a shadow or a friend.

I start my talks and many sermons with poetry because poems get us out of our left brain. They move us away from the “how can we explain this”-- or “fix this” to how can we stand under this -- or understand this -- and see it from a new perspective.

Also, an image or story gives a way for our listeners to enter the narrative itself. My guess is some of our people feel like the girl on the bus. And some of our people feel like the Indian in the white poncho lying by the side of the road.

Poems are meeting places for our collective imagination. This poem invites us to be on the bus in order to re-discover that in the age of Covid 19 -- only kindness makes sense anymore.

Sometimes in order to talk about Covid -- we must talk about something else. We have to give folks an entrance.

I want to talk about 3 principles for preaching in these times.

Principle One—Go wide and go deep

My first step in preaching is to try to read the times---literally and figuratively—go wide. Then to get still enough to intuit the work of the Spirit---go deep. That means to keep up with what’s happening outside my cocoon. And to be aware

of what's happening inside me -- I read the Washington Post and NY Times and USA Today. I read poets like Naomi Shihab Nye----I listen to NPR and On point and 1A. I read The Atlantic---I am in love with Judy Woodruff. I gather all kinds of facts and viewpoints and then I get still--- and listen for a word, an image, a narrative, a nudge from the Spirit.

Many of my ideas happen in the car---so I keep a pad to write on (which means you probably don't want to ride with me when I am driving).

Really what I have to say to you is this:
In this time, it's not enough to do biblical exegesis or gather entertaining illustrations.

Yes, we must do our homework---theologically and scripturally and spiritually. But our people need a lens—an image—a story that comes from the depths -- something that will help them connect this confusion to the sacred story so that they reconnect to the pattern of God's interaction with the world.

You can't see the heavens without a telescope---and the telescope is usually right brain. We go wide and then we go deep---and that means—I think---to both console and move into heart work---which is the door to compassion.

That means we have to do our own internal work around what's going on. What are our fears? What's our reaction when someone sticks out their hand for us to shake? Or doesn't wear a mask? What happens when we ponder our own mortality? What are our regrets and what do we do with them? What is our real prayer in this day and time?

And what is our rock---what is the rope that keeps us tied to Jesus?

Principle 2 --- Going Deep means embracing your own story

You can't give away what you don't have. As preachers we must do our own heart work, or we will be empty suits. When we proclaim the Good NEWS, we begin with The Good News that is happening in us---during this time. Let's ask ourselves---What is the door that this disease has opened in our hearts? When have we felt infected? Whom and what do we mourn? What keeps us up at night? What's our experience of helplessness? What have we learned about how our society is structured? And How are we called to live together---now and tomorrow?

All of that is soul work --- and it pushes us into our own deep end.

When I think of Covid 19, I reflect on my own life: I remember what it was like for my wife and I not being able to get pregnant. Or my being with my father in ICU for three days before he died. Or my fears when I was in India and eating the food my host served, unsure if it would give me dysentery or worse---and then realizing how little millions of souls there have to eat.

To prepare to preach is to do our Soul work—Read the news—chew on the scriptures--say your prayers---reflect on your life. Let the Spirit speak.

It's not that our autobiography necessarily becomes part of the sermon, but doing that work is the way to ensure our preaching is more heart work than headwork.

And I think it must be more direct than ornamental in this time. People don't need homiletic fireworks---they need the Word spoken in a way that is transformative. Because our world has been transformed. As the other poet said--- "A terrible beauty is born." We will know it is the Word when we experience the transformation in us, even as we are writing the sermon.

In fact---we know our sermon is true when it preaches back to us.

Let me come at this in a different way Richard Rohr says there are at least 3 domes of meaning. To have a coherent universe, we must connect our persona story -- MY STORY -- With a Community Story—Our Story. And finally, with a mythic Story---The Story.

We live in a meaningful universe when these three domes are connected. But that's not where we are today.

We always begin with MY STORY. It's what you do when you go to a party--- you are sharing your resume to find a connection. I am an Episcopalian, I like poetry and North Carolina Basketball. Of course, if we stop on this level—it's just shallow narcissism.

So, we find our Tribe---Our Story—level two. This is how we get our sense of belonging. I am a Democrat or Republican or a Washington Nationals Fan or fill in the blank. But of course---it's never enough merely to claim a tribal identity. Because at this level to feel secure, we must find a different tribe to blame. And this is where we are in this country. It's our disease.

The writer George Packer says that our country is divided into four tribes:

1. Libertarian Narrative (values freedom)
2. Globalized America (flattening hierarchies)
3. Multicultural America (Sees USA as groups—values inclusion)
4. America First (USA lost is traditional identity)

The categories don't matter—what matters is that each one believes it has an exclusive claim on the truth. Therefore, for me to be right—the other three must be completely wrong. As a result, we have, what David Brooks calls, a “Telos Crisis, a crisis of purpose.” Our death grip on our small truth has stripped us of the deep call to citizenship. Or we would say discipleship.

Now—you might be thinking--- *this is interesting but irrelevant*. But let's remember the mission of the Church: “to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ”

ALL PEOPLE.

At the truth is---NO one in their hearts likes where we are as a country. In the face of dire calamity our nation stays split because citizens worship a small truth---we are stuck in MY story or OUR Story. But our deepest desire is to get beyond tribalism— to THE story—that is eternal. One of the few—maybe the only---benefit of Covid 19 is to soften our hearts. And enable us to move out of our small bubbles of meaning. And that is the Church's opportunity to move people into the 3rd dome—THE STORY.

We proclaim this every Sunday as the mystery of faith – “Christ has died, Christ is Risen, Christ will come again.”

So Preaching in the time of Covid 19 is calling God's children to come home. We must proclaim the deep story that connects—My -- Our -- THE -- which is the never-ending story — the story large enough for everyone.

Let me give you an example:

I have a friend who, at the age of 5, was at his great grandmother's death bed. And as an indication he'd become a courtroom lawyer, he asked her--- “Are you scared of dying?”

And the elderly woman looked at him and began to recite the 1928 burial office:

“I know that my Redeemer liveth

And that he shall stand at the latter day upon the earth

And this body be destroyed, yet I shall see God....”

She knew that her death and resurrection was connected to the death and resurrection of the saints--- and connected to the death and resurrection of Jesus.

She had a three-story universe: My story -- Our story -- The story -- and therefore she was not afraid.

Can we demonstrate that cohesion in our preaching?

Can we connect these 3 domes of meaning for our people?

To do that as preachers, we must ask ourselves: What is going on in me? What’s going on --in the individual stories of my people? What is going on in my community—this country---this world? And how does the GREAT Story make those meaningful and equip my people to have a meaningful existence?

Principle 3---Preach the Good News that connects to our time

Right now----our people don’t need to be dazzled by our oratory. They aren’t interested in our erudite exegesis -- and they don’t need to be amused by interesting but irrelevant stories.

They want to hear how the Good News connects with the mess we are in. And they want something they can hold onto---something they can ruminate on. Some manna to nourish them in this wilderness.

Here’s the thing----people yearn for the Good News for today. Because what does salvation mean when **almost 100,000** people have died in this country? And what do the images Jesus uses mean for us now? I am the gate, the vine, the bread of life, the good shepherd, the door, the light.

How do those apply to people who are frightened or mourning or impatient? Because nothing is simple about where we are -- *before you know what kindness really is, You must lose things.* Like our sense that we are immune from pain because we are holy. Or our illusion that we can control our lives.

So—Let me give you my most recent example. The Diocese ask me to post a sermon for Trinity Sunday. And I have been mulling over the Great

Commission. Here is the translation in the Message of making disciples: “Go out and train everyone you meet far and near in this way of life.” So I thought about our way of life as Christians.

I remembered a story about a Rabbi named Michael Weisser and his wife Julie who moved to Nebraska. Their first day in their new house, they got a call that threatened their lives—ending with “Jew Boy.” Two days later there was a package on their doorstep with pictures of Hitler and the holocaust.

Rabbi Weisser found out that this came from Larry Trapp, a Grand Dragon in the KKK. Michael Weisser began calling Larry Trapp. And even though his calls went unanswered—he kept calling. Finally, Larry Trapp answer and after some conversation said “I want a way out but I don’t know how.”

So the Rabbi’s wife when to Larry Trapp’s house. She took Larry’s two rings with swastika’s on them and gave him a new silver ring. And Larry Trapp resigned from the KKK.

And when he got terminally ill, he moved in with the Wiessners. And before his death he became a Jew.

Here’s the point---Tomorrow all you will remember about this talk is this story. But that’s what stories and poems and images do—we remember them and we connect them to our context.

In other words, we must find a way to preach transformation even though everything is suspended. We must find a way to keep our hearts and our people’s hearts open. There is so much pain and anxiety in our country and they can manifest as divisions. Our task is to help people find the water table.

So, the challenge before us is this: We have to preach about the Coved 19 virus---mourn the dead--recognize the sacrifices---hold up the opportunities to open our hearts.

But we must preach it in a way that is a door to the deep water, that takes our hearts of stone and makes them hearts of flesh. The best way I have found is telling stories or offering images.

Okay—that was the long part 1 but don’t worry part 2 is short.

A long time ago and galaxies away I was taught homiletics by Bill Hethcock at Sewanee. And the most important thing I learned was this—Before you preach---be sure you have thought through two aspects of your sermon:

1. What is the focus sentence?
2. What is the function sentence?

The Focus Sentence---What's the subject?---But It's the function sentence – the purpose sentence---I want to talk about. I am only one baptized Christian—but I think we have at least 2 functions as preachers in this time:

One---to connect the 3 domes of meaning.

But TWO---to assert that the disease that is as dangerous as the Covid 19 Virus is despair.

And the antidote—which is our function as preachers to proclaim--is hope.

To preach a hope that is real and applicable to today's mess, a hope grounded on a 3-story world, we don't need more people to blame—We need a glimpse of God's promise that will move our feet towards to the promised land. A cloud by day and a pillar of fire every night. Hope for the families that grieve the death of their loved one. Hope for a friend of mine's granddaughter who lives in the heart of Manhattan and counts the ambulance sirens every day. A few weeks ago, her average count was 350 per day. Hope for the business people who don't know if they still have a business. Hope for those who are angry because they feel their government denies their basic rights. We are talking about the disorientation and the despair and the fear and the sorrow and the bewilderment and the loneliness and on and on.

The function for you the preacher is to speak to these experiences and give them a dome of meaning---a sacred context---a narrative that makes sense.

We can't fix anything.

But we can connect with the pain---give a story or image---and point to our mythic pattern---of death and resurrection and deepen our and our people's faith and hope.

The good news is that the lectionary after Pentecost is filled with passages about hope.

Like Paul's passage in Romans on June 14--- *Suffering produces endurance and endurance produces character and character produces hope and hope does not disappoint us....*

Let me say one other thing: We don't need to name Covid 19 to talk about Covid 19. If we talk about a woman on a bus who sees an Indian dead on the side of the road—we are talking about Covid 19.

I will end with this.

We always preach ourselves.

As preachers we stand in the middle---between the hopes and hurts of the world, the hopes and hurts of our people—and the good news of the scripture. We are always responding to what is and then hold up what could be. We are translating what is going on in the world and in the pews and in ourselves. And connecting it to God's ongoing story of redemption. And we must trust ourselves to do that. We do that by paying attention—to ourselves to our world to God's story.

What is going on in us?

What is going on with our people?

What are the wounds as well as the healing in this world?

What's the movement of the Spirit and how can we align ourselves with that?

Then we speak the WORD given to us with an assurance that If we are true to our calling God will speak to us and through us.

May it be so.