



Preaching in the COVID-19 Moment

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With some regularity we have all seen articles, blogs, and even whole books that promote the same suggestion albeit from varying angles of approach. The suggestion comes down to some version or another of, “We need to rethink how we ‘do’ church.” Probably some form of this thought has cropped up all across church history.

Each new generation or each new historical epoch presents new challenges and new opportunities for the conduct of public worship, for what preaching looks like, for how liturgical seasons get observed (or not observed). In the last half century the field of sociology has accelerated such thinking by finding it necessary to rename each succeeding generation. It started, of course, with post-World War II Baby Boomers but then continued with Baby Busters and now in more recent times Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, Millennials. Sometimes it feels like we’ve got way more generational labels than actual generations.

But nothing has foisted upon us all the need to rethink how we “Do Church” like COVID-19. Here is a pandemic phenomenon that doesn’t care about generations, doesn’t care about liturgical practices or the history of any given denomination. COVID-19 is a kind of blind wrecking ball that has smashed everything from how Roman Catholics celebrate Mass to how any preacher in any tradition delivers God’s Word in sermons.

Our ministry partners at the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship have done a great job collating resources for most all aspects of how to do virtual worship, including things like pondering the taking of communion remotely. In this article I want to focus on what I have been hearing from pastors specifically about ***what it’s like to preach online***. I want to share some of their observations but then also make just a couple brief suggestions. I have not been the pastor of a congregation for nearly 15 years now so I cannot pretend I know what things are like for my fellow pastors in these bizarre, trying circumstances. But I have been glad to hear their testimonies, ideas, and concerns and will summarize a few here.

What Preachers Are Doing and Feeling

First, what are people doing? A few pastors I heard from are in churches that have been pretty good at doing Livestream for a while. Obviously they have found themselves in the best position to continue this, albeit with pastors and musicians—fewer and fewer physically present with each passing Sunday it seems—ministering inside completely empty sanctuaries. Other churches have been videotaping services for a while or featuring services on church Facebook pages and they, too, have found it relatively easier to transition to online services for now.

Others, however, have had to scramble to figure things out. Some pastors for various reasons have had to figure out how to tape sermons and lead worship from their own living rooms—an artificial-feeling setting if ever there were one. Others have wrestled with getting both good video and good audio quality, one or the other sometimes being sacrificed depending on their equipment or how adept they find themselves at managing these technologies. There have been technical meltdowns and glitches aplenty. And there can be some generational divides in terms of who has wireless, who has computers, who is on Facebook, etc. Mostly I have been impressed with people’s creativity and nimbleness, figuring all this out in literally just a couple weeks’ time.

And it’s not just Sunday worship. Pastors are finding ways to make mid-week Bible Study available online via Zoom meetings or other platforms that allow people to see each other, hear each other, interact with each other. (Only recently some would have deemed the idea of using Zoom to be strange. Yet many are now finding that it doesn’t take too many days of social isolation and distancing before you are surprisingly happy to see someone’s familiar face even in small Zoom frame on a screen!) Others have used online platforms to continue Lenten reflections on a daily basis even as at least one pastor I heard from is eating lunch virtually with whomever wants to click in to eat a sandwich and some chips on Zoom (definitely a brown bag lunch scenario!).

Second, however, how is this all feeling particularly in terms of preaching? On this front I was surprised to find nearly every pastor I heard from stating almost identical thoughts and emotions. What is it like to preach to an empty sanctuary or into the lens of a laptop’s camera? Lonely. Weird. Disconnected. Being that I am a Reformed pastor who teaches at a Reformed seminary, it will come as no surprise to anyone reading this that I don’t know a lot of pastors from “call and response” preaching traditions. Most of the places where I preach as a guest pastor—and most of the congregations where my former students now minister—are not likely to be places where sermons get punctuated with shouts from the congregation of “Amen! Preach It! There It Is!”

Yet nearly every pastor I have talked to says that every congregation does have its own version of this after all. And the longer you pastor in one place, the more of these (often silent) signals you learn to pick up on. Wry smiles. Knowing glances. Twinkles in people's eyes. The occasional wiped-away tear. Raised eyebrows. This is how pastors sense they are connecting. And whether we are conscious of it or not during any given sermon, I suspect we have all learned where to look—and at which specific people to look—at certain junctures of a sermon where we sense we're going to get a bit of affirmation from . . . Bill, Sally, Alexis, Hugh.

And now that living connection is gone for the moment. Empty sanctuaries and blank camera lenses don't cut it. Preaching this way feels odd for sure but definitely also lonely.

A related observation shared by almost all the pastors I talked to traffics in something a few are finding a little troubling. They also miss the comments while shaking hands at the church door after the service. But here a few pastors have essentially said, "This part bothers me—am I way more into being a performer than I like to think? If I like getting comments after the service about the sermon, is it because I am hankering to know I am being faithful or because my ego needs propping up and fluffing regularly?" Not surprisingly, the pastors who have raised this question fear it's the latter. I will comment on this at the end of this article.

What About Easter?

But lastly for now: what about Easter? COVID-19 has been so fast moving and created such uncertainty that it has been only in the last week to ten days that most of us have had to reckon with something we actually hoped might not happen only a few short weeks ago: there will be no in-person Easter Sunday celebrations in our churches.

The dominant note I heard from pastors on this one is sadness. Yes, in good old-fashioned Reformed parlance "Every Sunday is a little Easter." We celebrate the truth of the resurrection every week. That's why we come to church: Christ is Risen! But Easter is a concentrated and needed celebration of that abiding truth. And if it's true that Easter has been larded over by lots of extraneous trappings—from bonnets to eggs to maybe trying a little *too* hard at times to raise the volume level in worship—it is also true that it is a time to affirm this central tenet of the faith and to do so *together*.

It reminds me of a pastor friend who once told me of the moment in his life when the reality of Christ's resurrection hit him with a conviction he had never before known. He was in Moscow one year attending an Easter Vigil service. In the square in front of a large cathedral there was a gathering of hundreds—probably thousands—of people. At midnight someone knocked on

the front door of the cathedral. The priest on the other side opened the door and cried out “Christ Is Risen!” to which the assembled throng thundered in unison response “Risen Indeed!” And my friend said that somehow the power of that unified response pierced his heart with the truth of the Gospel.

But this year nothing like this can happen. As I wrote this article, I saw a posting from a worship planner who was wondering if there was any way online to duplicate the volunteer choir they traditionally assemble to sing Handel’s “Hallelujah Chorus” at the end of the Easter morning service. But even the way this person posted the question told the truth: it was unlikely to work very well. It might actually make people feel worse. Maybe.

For preachers, there is a sense that they don’t want these limiting circumstances to be so overwhelming that they actually preach sermons that will make people feel sad rather than glad. Sure, we’d all like to preach a stemwinder of a sermon to a fuller-than-usual church. But this year at least we can’t and so how do we avoid accidentally conveying the downer message of “Well, folks, this stinks and all but here’s my best shot at an Easter sermon anyway . . .”? This is an understandable concern.

Concluding Observations and Suggestions

So let me conclude this piece with a few observations on all of the above:

First, good job, everyone, at being creative at this difficult moment that descended on us so very quickly. Take heart. Your efforts are being appreciated. I hear this and see this all over my email and on social media. No one expects any of this is going to feel normal or be anywhere close to a typical Sunday experience but for all your efforts to keep the lights on and bring God’s people together, good job.

Second, please know that it is absolutely normal to miss both the cues you receive while preaching as well as comments at the church door. Yes, we all need to be on guard lest our egos get in the way of our ministry or our ardent desire to serve well in our preaching. But the fact is that the Christian faith is the faith of the incarnation. We are supposed to be physically present to each other in worship and in the preaching moment the same way the Son of God was physically present to us in his life and ministry and is present to us even now when in the Lord’s Supper we fellowship with our living Lord. The Son of God did not save us from a distance or by remote control. He came *here* to do it in person. We preachers need those faces, those smiles, those raised eyebrows, those church-door comments. That’s normal. Lord, haste the day when we have all of that again.

Third, perhaps we can do what we can to mitigate this sense of lonely disconnectedness a bit. When we started doing online education at Calvin Seminary nearly a decade ago, we professors were encouraged to put the photo of a loved one behind the computer camera so that when we looked into the camera to record a video lecture, we could be more personal in that we were also looking at someone we loved. Is there a way to do this for however long we need to Livestream or record sermons in empty sanctuaries? Would a few pictures of various congregation members in the pulpit (or behind a camera) help so that when we glance at our notes or manuscript we see also some real folks who are likely tuning in? It might. It's worth a shot.

Finally on Easter sermons: of course we don't want to be down in the mouth or come across as fundamentally disappointed that this is how we have to preach the resurrection this year. However, it might actually be an opportunity to recover how the Gospels themselves present the resurrection.

Let me explain by way of a story: the Bible commentator Frederick Dale Bruner said that at his church of Hollywood Presbyterian years ago the pastor did an Easter Sunday children's sermon. At one point the pastor asked the children what they thought were Jesus's first words to his followers after the resurrection. One little boy sprang to his feet, spread his arms out wide and said, "Ta-Da!"

Well, the humor aside, the fact is that a celebrative "Ta-Da!" is not at all what we actually find in any of the four Gospels. Rather, the Easter stories are filled with some darkness, some weeping, some uncertainty, some doubt. In almost every instance Jesus does not bang down anyone's front door gleefully and triumphantly to declare "I'm BAAACCK!" but rather Jesus creeps up from behind. He comes up behind a weeping woman and a deeply disappointed couple on the road. He doesn't stick around Jerusalem for long but directs everyone 80 miles north to Galilee. In one of the precious few post-Easter/pre-Ascension stories we get in the Bible (John 21), Jesus is depicted as sitting on a log on a beach tending a little fire on which he's cooking up some fish and biscuits. How ordinary a setting can you get?!

In other words: the resurrection emerges *from* the real world of sorrow and uncertainty with a message *for* that same world. The Gospels don't have brass quartets or thunderous choirs, streaming white banners or flower-drenched worship spaces. That's not to say that our now having all those things to celebrate the resurrection is wrong in any given year. But it is to suggest that we can still encounter the living Jesus in our present darkness, in our uncertainty and fears. That's how he showed up after the actual first Easter. Maybe this year we can celebrate his showing up that way now too.

And maybe that is an Easter sermon whose tone and content will resonate pretty well after all.

Blessings to you as you minister!

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