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PREACHING WHEN VIRAL THREATS CONVERGE: USA SERMONS, 31 MAY AND 7 JUNE 2020

ABSTRACT

How is God present and active in this time and place? This question has been a pressing one for preachers and congregations amid the COVID-19 pandemic and its impacts. In the USA, the urgency of this theological question intensified when nationwide protests erupted following the release, on 26 May, of the video of the death of George Floyd. Floyd, an unarmed Black man, died pleading for breath, his neck pinned to the pavement by a police officer's knee. Sermons preached in the USA in congregations of distinctive predominant racial identity on the two Sundays following Floyd's death (31 May and 7 June 2020) are assessed hermeneutically, asking: "In what ways did US sermons, preached on 31 May and 7 June 2020, interpret divine presence and activity in relation to the preacher's interpretation of listeners' needs and responsibilities; biblical text(s) referenced, and/or the dual public crisis impinging on national life?"



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1. INTRODUCTION

At specific historical moments, a unique combination of events and conditions reshapes the concerns and behaviour of an entire society. For Christian congregations, such moments intensify questions about God's presence and activity in their particular time and place (Kamar 2020).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA, coupled with the extreme social and

economic constraints required to curb its spread, disrupted everyday life in the spring of 2020 to a degree not seen in the USA since the Second World War. In late May, a second crisis sent new shock waves through the nation. On Tuesday 26 May, a seventeen-year-old's video of the death in police custody of an unarmed Black man went "viral" on social media. The death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement triggered an eruption of widespread, sustained public outrage. Massive protests filled USA city streets from coast to coast, from north to south. Some led to violent confrontations between protestors and armed police, who used tear gas, smoke bombs, and rubber bullets to control protesters and opportunistic looters. As Christians confronted Floyd's tragic death and the massive social unrest it ignited, questions about God's presence and activity in their time and place intensified.

2. FOCUS OF THIS STUDY AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CONTEXT

This study aims to discover how sermons, preached on 31 May and 7 June 2020 – the first two Sundays after Floyd's death – in congregations of distinctly different predominant racial identity, addressed the question of God's presence and activity amid these deeply troubling events.

Any effort to delve into this question needs to take into account the contextual nature of Christian preaching, in general, and the pertinence of attending to a congregation's predominant racial identity in a study of USA sermons delivered on these key dates, in particular.

First, sermons are not religious essays for a general audience; they are embodied speaking/hearing events designed with a particular array of listeners in mind. Secondly, in the vast majority of Christian preaching traditions in the USA, the sermon involves interpretative engagement with one or more biblical texts. Interpreting these texts requires mining complex layers of social, historical, and literary context, and doing so in relation to a complex history of interpretation. Finally, sermons are discursive events that inevitably reverberate for preacher and listeners amid a complex web of past and present events and discourses – local and regional, national and global.

Sermons preached in the USA on 31 May and 7 June 2020 inevitably resonated against the backdrop of the COVID-19 crisis, as well as the national crisis over deeply embedded racist bias in law-enforcement practices triggered by Floyd's death. The impact of both these crises has been, and continues to be, profound for all USA citizens, but it is particularly deep for persons of colour.

3. USA SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT AFTER 26 MAY 2020: THE CORRELATION OF RACE AND RISK IN THE PANDEMIC-AND-PROTEST SPRING OF 2020

By late May, the ongoing pandemic in the USA, as well as the social upheaval over evidence of deep, systemic racism in social systems, left North Americans, whatever their racial identity, anxious about the present and fearful for the future. Persons of colour felt particularly vulnerable, even before Floyd's death and its aftermath.

Emerging statistics made it clear that Black Americans were over twice as likely to contract, and then succumb to COVID-19 as Whites. Among minority populations in the USA, only Asian Americans are less likely to die of COVID-19 than Whites are (CDC/USA 2020a; 2020b).

In addition, the financial impact of the economic shutdown required to contain the pandemic hit populations of colour especially hard. Low-wage, hourly workers – many of them persons of colour – were most at risk of job loss (Bartik *et al.* 2020). Restaurant wait-staff, retail clerks, stockroom staff, and waste management employees, as well as legions of maintenance workers in office buildings, retail stores, and other public venues either lost their jobs immediately or were furloughed indefinitely without pay. Among those who kept their jobs were emergency responders, truck drivers, hospital food service and sanitation staff, and cashiers in drug and food stores – all high-exposure occupations with increased risk of infection.

Asian Americans also found themselves in a uniquely difficult position. Almost immediately after the appearance of the first cases of COVID-19 on the west coast, USA hate crimes against Asian Americans began to increase (Lee 2020).¹ From the onset of the pandemic in late February to end of June 2020, the state of California alone saw over 800 hate crimes against Asian Americans (Lin 2020).

Thus, for persons of colour, the release on 26 May of the George Floyd video only intensified an already heightened sense of threat. Floyd's inert body testified to a fact they already knew: Persons of colour in the USA have too often been presumed guilty until proven innocent and, in the minds of some, including some police officers, pose a threat so enormous as to warrant deadly force (Carbado & Rock 2009; Wallis 2016:1-56). For Whites, the video made undeniable that, amid the pandemic, a second deadly "virus"

1 Notably, USA President Donald Trump called the coronavirus the "Kung flu" on 24 June at a campaign rally in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and again on 29 June at a church in Phoenix, Arizona.

stalked persons of colour in the USA – a virus infecting every sector of USA life, not only education, healthcare, housing and employment, but also law enforcement, the very institution pledged to protect all citizens (Hernandez *et al.* 2020).

In these circumstances, there could be no single answer to the question “How is God present and active in this particular time and place?” Sermons needed to address the *specific* concerns, questions, and/or responsibilities of congregations whose racial identity positioned them differently in relation to the dual threat the nation faced.

4. A WORD ABOUT METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Before proceeding to describe the scope and strategy of this homiletical investigation, some guidance for the reader concerning the research method is in order.

Like practical theologians elsewhere, North American practical theologians often study theologically laden practices of ministry in concrete contexts. While some USA practical theologians employ empirical research designs and scientific tools of analysis (particularly, for example, in the field of congregational studies), empirical methods and tools are by no means standard for North American practical-theological research (Osmer 2008:31-78; 2014:61-77). An array of interpretative theoretical frameworks is used for the purpose of describing, critically assessing, and strategically guiding concrete instances of ministry practice (Osmer 2008:1-29). These may include, among others, critical social theory, including critical race theory, post-colonial theory and associated theological frameworks; feminist and womanist theories and theologies; hermeneutical theory in its broadest sense (as theories of the phenomenon of interpretative practice), and an array of psycho-social, ethnographic, and educational theories and models (Cahalan & Mikoski 2014:1-10).

The theoretical “lens” for the present inquiry is hermeneutical. Hermeneutically, I understand the sermon as a constructive interpretative practice that emerges at the convergence of three interpretative subpractices, namely the preacher’s interpretation of the listeners’ context, which includes not only interpretative judgements concerning the congregation’s immediate needs, questions, and responsibilities, but also events and issues in the public sphere bearing upon their lives; the preacher’s interpretation of the biblical text under consideration in the sermon, including its relevance for the present moment, and the preacher’s synthesis of the fruits of these two interpretative practices into one or more theological claims about what God has done, is

doing, or promises yet to do in God's ongoing redemptive engagement with the world (Brown & Powery 2016:18-19, 100, 106-107).

The American practical theologian Richard Osmer proposed that practical-theological inquiry into concrete instances of ministry praxis involves four dimensions, or tasks. These include contextualised description of the manner in which a practice is taking place; interpretative assessment, which elucidates factors within and beyond the context that are shaping the practice; norm-generation, in which one begins to educe contextualised criteria of excellence for the practice under study, and the strategic dimension, which seeks to move toward more excellent or fitting praxis (Osmer 2008:1-29). The constraints of an essay format necessarily limit my discussion of sermons preached on 31 May and 7 June 2020 to the description of context-specific practice and limited interpretative assessment of ways in which the three component interpretative subprocesses interact in these sermons to shape claims about divine presence and activity.

5. CONGREGATIONAL CONTEXTS AND PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The sermons studied were preached in 13 different congregational contexts in the USA on 31 May and 7 June 2020. Congregations were selected to provide a representative homiletical sample in terms of predominant congregational racial identity and varieties of homiletical practice. A majority of theologically conservative independent or denominationally affiliated Christian churches in the USA, including many megachurches, embrace an exposition-application model of preaching, in which the meaning of the text is first fixed, and then “applied” to listeners’ concerns and responsibilities. Preachers who would identify themselves as more theologically centrist or progressive tend to embrace some form of critical correlation between layers of meaning in the biblical text and the needs and questions of the preaching context (Brown & Powery 2016:135-141).

The sermons for this study were drawn from the following contexts:

- Four predominantly White, urban or suburban churches belonging to theologically centrist denominational traditions, located in cities representing the Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest sections of the USA.
- Three predominantly Black, urban or semi-urban churches, located in major urban centres of the mid-South, Northeast, and North-Midwest regions of the country.

- Two intentionally multiracial, semi-urban congregations, each belonging to major USA denominations, located in East and West coast cities.
- Two English-speaking, predominantly Asian American, semi-urban congregations, located on the East and West coasts (exposition-application homiletic).
- Two predominantly White evangelical megachurches (exposition-application homiletic).
- One multicultural, conservative Reformed church (exposition-application homiletic).

Research began with a broad survey of sermons preached in these contexts from 15 March 2020 (the first Sunday after the declaration of a national emergency and widespread stay-at-home orders in response to the pandemic) to 7 June 2020 (the second Sunday after the death of George Floyd and the outbreak of protests). This initial broad assessment helped create a sense of the manner in which each preacher handled the three basic interpretative subprocesses that contribute to sermons.

Of particular interest was the “horizon” of each preacher’s interpretation of their listeners’ needs, concerns, and responsibilities as they helped their congregations face, week to week, the impacts of the pandemic. All of the preachers addressed one or more of three distinguishable horizons of listener concern:

- A. The private individual horizon: Christian individuals need theological/spiritual information about divine presence and activity to help them deal, individually, with difficult emotions (fear, grief, anger, worry, loneliness) and material challenges (job loss, resource scarcity, and so on).
- B. The public individual horizon: Christians need guidance for the public expression of faith and thus seek insight into divine presence and activity in relation to injustice and human suffering connected with public events.
- C. The public communal horizon: The community seeks guidance toward effective, collective public witness to the presence and activity of God in the public realm.

In both of the White megachurches in this study, the interpretation of listeners’ needs evident in sermons was confined almost entirely to horizon A (the private, individual level). By contrast, preachers in all three of the predominantly Black congregations regularly addressed the concerns and responsibilities of their listeners at horizons A and B, and occasionally pressed further, to horizon C, addressing matters of the congregation’s public witness.

In all but the two predominantly White megachurches, some form of critical correlational dialogue between text and congregational context occurred, either consistently week-to-week, or occasionally.

Preachers' rhetorical strategies varied. Some showed a preference for narrative analogies between the dynamics of present-day experience and stories in the biblical text. Others were especially skilful at deploying metaphors taken from the text to re-envision listeners' challenges and opportunities. Several took up psalms of lament, allowing the "voice" of the text to become the "voice" of a congregation struggling with anxiety and loss.

This preliminary exploration of general trends in each preacher's homiletical practice paved the way for a closer examination of sermons preached on 31 May (Pentecost) 2020 and 7 June (Trinity Sunday) 2020.

5.1 Proclaiming divine presence and action amid national crises: Sermons preached on 31 May 2020

For congregations who gathered virtually on 31 May, the question already provoked by the COVID-19 pandemic – "How is God present and active in this time and place?" – had taken on new depth and intensity. All but two of the 13 preachers in the study sample spoke specifically about Floyd's death on 31 May. The only exceptions were the pastors addressing the two predominantly White Southern megachurches. In both of these churches, a sermon series already in progress continued. One preacher, continuing a series titled "The fear virus" devoted only one short paragraph to the events of the past five days:

The things happening in our culture – the mayhem, the racism, the rebellion – where our country is going – cause me to fear the future.

In the second predominantly White megachurch, the sermon topic (in keeping with Pentecost) was the Holy Spirit's work of convicting individuals of wrong and bringing about change. The topic was not connected in any way to the events of the week.

On this date, both preachers' interpretation of their listeners' needs and questions remained, as before, at the horizon of private, individual spiritual or emotional experience, transmuting the question "How is God present and active in this time and place?" into "How is God present and active in my personal life?". Answers from the text were straightforward: God delivers me from the power of my fears. The Holy Spirit convicts me of sin and prompts me toward repentance and change.

Sermons preached in the three predominantly Black congregations envisioned the congregation as deeply and directly aligned with the heartbreak of Floyd's death and the outrage in USA city streets. In all four of the predominantly White, denominationally affiliated churches, both of the multiracial congregations, the conservative White Reformed congregation, and both of the Asian congregations, preachers interpreted the needs, questions, and responsibilities of their listeners in connection with racism and its effects. Three of these sermons are particularly instructive examples of the hermeneutical synthesis of a preacher's interpretation of listeners' needs, questions, and/or responsibilities against the backdrop of public events and issues; relevant vectors of meaning in the text, and theological affirmation concerning divine presence and action in the here-and-now.

The pastor of a predominantly Black downtown church in the mid-South had already posted an eloquent message to her congregation on YouTube on 29 May, urging that we need to "grieve as God grieves" over the tragedy of 100,000 COVID-19 deaths, and the taking of Black lives by those in uniform. Thus, she had already posed one answer to the implicit question of God's presence and action at this juncture in the nation's life: God is one who grieves alongside us (Stewart 2020).

After a reading of the traditional Acts 2 Pentecost text, with its outpouring of Spirit-gifted speech, the pastor began her 31 May sermon by decrying the "deafening silence" of national leaders at this critical moment in the nation's life:

100,000 are dead from the coronavirus, and George Floyd is dead; and when I turn my ear to Washington, I hear deafening silence ... My people are dying of a virus, my people are dying of violence, and from the White House there is 'no comment'. Silence.

Taking up the subject of White centrism in the USA, with its distorting effects on both White thinking and Black self-regard, she names her listeners' common experience:

Whiteness² is about the acceptance of violence and violation against some persons as normal. Whiteness is a virus, and it is killing us. We can't breathe. We are being systematically choked to death.

On this Pentecost Sunday, with the toxic effect of White centrism in public institutions never more obvious, there is utter silence from "the occupant of the White House".

2 In discussions of race and racism in the USA, "whiteness" does not refer to skin tone, but to a system of mutually reinforcing assumptions, privileges, practices, and tolerances that sustain systemic racism.

Yet, there are voices in the streets [as there were on Pentecost], and *they* refuse to be silent, night after night:

The White House may be silent, but the streets are not.

Atlanta, Georgia, refuses to be silent!

Washington, D.C. refuses to be silent!

Minneapolis, Minnesota, refuses to be silent!

Portland, Maine, refuses to be silent!

Los Angeles, California, refuses to be silent!

Chicago, Illinois, refuses to be silent! ...

Silence will not do for the church, either, the preacher declares. As the early church was not silent on Pentecost, but raised its voice in the power of the Spirit, so in the power of the Spirit must today's church bear witness against the deadliness of racial inequity, particularly when voices in high places are silent. God is present and active where voices refuse to be silent (Stewart 2020:n.p.).

In a well-known, predominantly Black urban church in North Central USA, the preacher shares his own angry sorrow:

My spirit is vexed, my heart is broken, and my rage is tempered only by holy lament ... Witnessing the death of George Floyd has drained my soul.

Alluding briefly to the call of Moses, on which he had intended to preach, the preacher goes on to speak of the continuing bondage of Blacks within racist systems and the need for persons of courage to speak, organise, and act.

Borrowing from Martin Luther King, Jr's "I have a dream" speech to establish the state of crisis the congregation and nation face, the preacher asks: "When is 'someday'?" His listeners readily recognised this reference to King's "someday", when justice for persons of colour in the USA would be won (King 1963). "We cannot continually defer that 'someday'", says the preacher; the time to act is now:

How many bodies must be broken, lives lost, mothers wailing – and then you say, some of you, 'I need to wait until all the facts come out.'

Dismissing excuses for refusing to speak or act, the preacher declares:

this nation has a fundamental flaw in its soul ... that only ... a moral revival and a spiritual revolution can heal, where lives matter, repentance takes place, systems are destroyed, and light comes in the darkness.

Affirming the courage of Black persons who acted at great risk to themselves to change deadly realities in the past, the preacher challenges his predominantly Black congregation, which includes many persons with social and economic leverage and influence, to rise up and speak up:

Some want to know where God is today ... Do not ask the question, 'Where is God?' I challenge you to *hear* the question God is asking *us*, 'Where are *you*?' ... We must build a movement in this moment that is for our children and our children's children.

Recognising the global audience that accesses his broadcast via YouTube weekly, the preacher urges pastors to speak up and act.

If you have been boxed in by a particular theology where on Sunday all you can talk about is what is 'personal' – well, there is a place for the pastoral and the priestly. I do not debate that; but *we are in a state of emergency* ... Have the gumption to open your mouth! Speak with authority, with love, for a revolution, a moral revolution in this country. You post to Instagram, to Facebook and Twitter; but we need more than characters and memes to change what is happening in this country.

The preacher calls upon his listeners to use whatever form of power is theirs and commit themselves to a revival and a revolution that must not be deferred (Moss 2020).

On 31 May 2020, a multi-racial, East Coast congregation gathered for virtual worship. Their city was a site of massive protests, some violent. By Sunday morning, bridges were closed, train service was suspended, and the National Guard patrolled downtown streets where the embers of burning buildings still smoked (Gammage *et al.* 2020).

In this instance, elements of worship reflected the preacher's interpretation of the pastoral needs of his congregation. Worship began with a haunting, early-1900s recording of the African American spiritual "I been in the storm so long". The keening lament continues for a full three minutes. The preacher follows with pastoral words to his congregation that address the bitter irony of a Pentecost Sunday clouded by grief, anger, and dismay:

Church, we are in a storm. We are at the collision of a viral pandemic and a prejudice pandemic ... Many come to worship tired today; they haven't slept well. Some come feeling angry, hopeless, some broken and despondent. Some have stopped feeling at all for fear of where feeling will take them. Personally, *I* feel insufficient to lead today's worship ... Today we come to celebrate the church's birthday, but without the party we usually throw ... Although the sun shines today, we gather in a storm; yet the promise of God is that although the storm

surges, God is in the midst of the city. God is with us in our homes, God is in our hospitals, God is here ... Come, let us worship God.

The sermon draws not on the customary Acts 2 text, but on “John’s Pentecost” (John 20:19-23). “How do you celebrate Pentecost on a day like today?” asks the preacher.

John’s Pentecost isn’t the one we’re used to. This is the locked-inside-a-house Pentecost, the socially-isolated, scared-as-heck, anxious-about-the-future Pentecost. And the first thing Jesus says is, ‘Peace.’ So maybe that’s where we need to start: ‘Peace be with you.’

Peace is what we need, says the preacher; and yes, Jesus gives peace; but the Spirit Jesus breathes into his disciples on this occasion is not all about peace:

The Spirit when it comes always creates *unrest*. It propels the disciples into places they would not choose to go ... We, too, are baptized into Christ by the Spirit of unrest ... The Holy Spirit always seems to be inviting us to something difficult out ahead. And today it’s no different.

Interpreting the binding and loosening saying of Jesus (v. 23) as the unbinding of captives, the preacher evokes a now-familiar picture. A COVID-19 survivor is wheeled out of the infectious disease ward through an aisle of applauding health workers. They look exhausted, but exhilarated, says the preacher, adding,

I search their faces, because maybe *that’s* what the church looks like, at its best ...

I don’t have to tell you that the world remains captive. I see people shackled to their prejudice, I see people shackled by their fear, or shackled by their neighbors’ endless silence on racism, and I come back to Jesus’ command to unbind, to release captives, from every kind of captivity.

The preacher reflects briefly on Floyd’s death, joining it to a litany of other “extra-judicial” acts of violence against persons of colour, then adds:

Church, some viruses have been threatening people’s lives for a lot longer than three months, longer than we have been alive ... It isn’t just an act of political activism to seek an end to racism, it’s the work of the Spirit. Jesus gives peace, yes, but he breathes into us the Spirit, and the Spirit won’t let us make peace with racism. We need to free those who are bound to white supremacy ... bound to the status quo. Because the status quo is suffocating people to death.

This sermon's answer to the question of divine presence and activity in the congregation's present time and place could not be clearer. Jesus breathes into us the power to release captives.

Let us be more than a group of well-meaning folks that gather on Sunday. Let us be the Church, released by the Spirit of God into the world (Hearlson 2020).

God "unbinds" captives – and so must we.

5.2 Proclaiming divine presence and action amid national crises: Sermons preached on 7 June 2020

By 7 June, protests had spread coast to coast, continuing night after night. The National Guard had been activated in many locations to curb opportunistic looting and deliberate burning of vehicles and buildings (Altman 2020). Public outrage surged anew when Washington DC police used teargas-like agents against peaceful protestors immediately outside the grounds of the White House on 5 June (*New York Times* 2020).

On 7 June, all but two of the congregations in the research sample, regardless of predominant racial identity, heard sermons that upheld interrogating the roots of racism as a Christian concern. The exceptions were sermons preached at the two megachurches. Again, at both locations, racial injustice was mentioned briefly in a list of circumstances that can cause us personal stress (Dykes 2020:5) or that stir up fears of the future (Young 2020). There is no indication of God's direct, redemptive engagement with the systems and forces that create racial injustice, or a suggestion that listeners might bear responsibility.

The sermon preached on 7 June at the predominantly White, conservative Reformed church in the sample reveals the rich potential of an exposition-application homiletical method when a more comprehensive, public horizon of listener concern and responsibility is in play.

The text of the day, part of an ongoing *lectio continua* series, was Revelation 17. The wicked city Babylon, doomed to destruction, is its central image. The preacher underscores that the city is not to be understood literally; rather, it symbolises the heartless power of empire – a power that makes itself felt in our own time in structures that exploit, intimidate, and oppress. Babylon is a critical lens, intended to reveal such unholy power in the readers' world and in our own.

The text's admonition to "flee" the sinful city is not to be read literally, either. Our calling, the preacher concludes, is not to abandon the public sphere, but to occupy it differently. "How is God present and active in this time and place?"

God is actively leading Christians to live by a different ordering of power, one that resists the power of empire and seeks the well-being of all (Gregory 2020).

The pastor of a large, White suburban congregation in the Northeast, chose on 7 June to draw on his own experience of growing up in the American South to address the subtle grip of racist thinking on our imaginations and actions. Although Pentecost texts were read in the worship service, the relationship between the sermon and the biblical text was allusive rather than explicit.

The preacher begins by reflecting on “those songs we don’t necessarily like, but know by heart and can’t quite get out of our heads”. Analogously, he suggests,

we ‘hum a cultural song’ that we don’t necessarily like, either – one that we have acquired simply by living in our culture. Sometimes we’re ‘singing’ this tune without realizing it, so deep is it in our cultural DNA. It is the ‘song’ of the chattel slavery system and its beliefs, and its enduring effects in our national life, the ‘deadly and pervasive ... American version of *apartheid*.

He reminds the congregation that originally, Southern police forces grew out of posses hired to capture runaway slaves and, later, to “protect” Whites from freed slaves. The preacher lists aphorisms that were part of the common

cultural ‘wisdom’ imparted to [his] Southern parents and grandparents: ‘Black people are dangerous/lazy/dishonest/don’t follow through/aren’t rational/are all the same.’

Such beliefs, even if not fully conscious, can trigger reactive behaviour under stress.

“How do we address the deeply embedded race ‘songs’ we ‘play’ under pressure?” the preacher asks. “How can we learn to sing a new song?” This sermon’s answer to the implicit homiletical question, “How is God present and active in our time and place?” is that God has given us one another to help us learn a new, anti-racist song. God gives us a community of faith so that we may hold one another accountable (Thompson 2020).

On 7 June in Atlanta, Georgia, the site of ongoing protests and confrontations with police, the lead English-service pastor at a Chinese Christian church preached from Isaiah 1:1-17. Strikingly, the preacher deliberately suspends his customary exposition-application approach and announces that he will instead address justice, especially with respect to racism, as a “gospel issue”. His diagnosis of congregation needs and responsibilities becomes clear as he pursues critical engagement with two sets of beliefs common in Asian American congregations. First, he challenges the temptation for Asian Americans, often regarded as a “more acceptable” minority group in the USA, to stand aloof

from issues of race. Secondly, he challenges assumptions sometimes present in Asian American Christian contexts that the Christian gospel is strictly about personal salvation.

After reminding his listeners of the shocking events of the past two weeks, beginning with “the murder of George Floyd”, the preacher asks his listeners to reconsider their relationship, as a minority group in the USA, to these events:

We are not distant bystanders of random, isolated incidents. Murders like that of George Floyd target minority culture. Asian and Black share common minority culture status; and we must love our minority culture neighbors ... The church must be a witness on matters of injustice and suffering to its community ... The issue of justice goes beyond politics, policing, protesting, and looting. Justice is a Gospel issue; and injustice is anti-Gospel. The Gospel is the beginning of justice.

The preacher goes on to challenge limited, and limiting ideas of redemption:

Our understanding of the Gospel is conditioned by culture. [It] has been heavily flavored with individualism – I, me, my. Is that all there is to the Gospel?

Citing the personal pronoun “our” in the Lord’s Prayer as evidence of the deeply corporate nature of the Gospel, the preacher turns briefly to Colossians 1:20, arguing that Christ’s reconciliation of “all things” includes institutions deeply distorted by racism. That reconciling work requires our participation (Shin 2020).

The preacher’s answer to the implicit question, “How is God present and active in this time and place?” is theologically rich, placing reconciling justice at the centre of God’s redemptive agenda for the world and for the church.

6. CLOSING OBSERVATIONS

USA sermons preached in racially, homiletically, and theologically diverse settings in the pandemic-and-protest spring of 2020 were assessed as interpretative events that respond in some way to the question, “How is God present and active in this present time and place?”

This inquiry viewed the sermon as an interplay of three component interpretative processes, namely the preacher’s assessment of congregational needs, questions and responsibilities, within the context of wider public events; the preacher’s interpretation of the meaning and relevance of the biblical text undergirding the sermon, in relation to his/her assessment of the listeners’ concerns and responsibilities, and the preacher’s interpretation of divine

presence and action on the basis of this hermeneutical engagement between congregational needs and responsibilities, on the one hand, and the fruits of critical engagement with the text, on the other. Several points are noteworthy.

- Affirmations of God's presence and activity were identifiable in all sermons in the sample preached on 31 May or 7 June 2020. The scope and size of these affirmations varied greatly. They ranged from affirmations of God's comfort amid personal, individual experiences of stress caused by public unrest (with no connection drawn between divine activity and public events and issues), to declarations that God gives the church the power and responsibility to challenge racist social and economic systems and to "unlearn" the White-centric thinking and habits that support these skewed systems.
- The horizon of a preacher's interpretation of his/her listeners' needs, questions, and responsibilities, and the degree to which these included the wide canvas of public, systemic events and issues appeared to be most determinative of the breadth of the sermon's theological claims concerning divine presence and activity in the world.
- Precisely *how* God was said to be present and active amid the national crises triggered by the pandemic and the stark exposure of racism in law enforcement practices appeared most closely related to the predominant racial identity of the congregation. God is aligned in grieving solidarity with the *sufferer* of racial injustice and its toll in lives and livelihood, as comforter and deliverer (engaged in the release of captives). But for those who, wittingly or unwittingly, *perpetuate* systems that privilege Whites and whiteness, God is the agent of conviction, disturbance, and deep change that disrupts the status quo.

Ahead of us lies a human future sure to be shaped by polarising politics, natural disasters, novel viruses, and the ongoing effects of racism and ethnocentrism. Each critical moment will raise anew the question, "How is God present and active in this time and place, amid the circumstances we are facing?" May preachers and theologians, with an eye to the full range of God's redemptive intentions, rise to its challenge "as the Spirit gives them utterance".

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Keywords

Trefwoorde

Preaching

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Interpretation of congregational context

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Text-to-context hermeneutics

Teks-konteks hermeneutiek

Racial identity

Ras identiteit

Divine presence/action

Godelike teenwoordigheid/aksie