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THE PANDEMIC AND HOMILETICS 101: A REFLECTION

ABSTRACT

The global pandemic of COVID-19 across the year 2020 afforded pastors everywhere an opportunity to engage in some critical reflection on their homiletic practices. The dual challenges of no longer being able to preach to a physically present congregation and of preaching during a time of significant fear, stress, and sorrow revealed to many preachers aspects of preaching of which they had not previously been aware. This article suggests that some of what was discovered during this unusual season provides correctives for the way in which homiletics and preaching have been practised in many places and that some of these correctives should endure in the preaching life of the church long after the pandemic has passed.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, new and more refined theological thinking has often resulted from a critical reflection on praxis. Even when a given person who practises a ministry skill is good at it – and the skill in question in this article is preaching – stopping long enough to reflect critically on the practice frequently yields key insights that might not emerge without the post-praxis reflection. Can we name what we have been doing? Can we perceive not simply *that* a certain form of preaching works, but how and why it works? If we can begin to reflect on such things, can we cull out of those reflections replicable skills and frames of mind which we can pass on to others?

In his book *Christian religious education: Sharing our story and vision*, Groome (1980:185) suggests that critical reflection or critical reason



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attempts to perceive what is 'obvious' about the present. Very often the obvious is so much a part of our given world that it is 'taken' for granted and either no longer noticed or seen as inevitable. Critical reflection, then, is first an attempt to notice the obvious, to critically apprehend it rather than just passively accept it as 'just the way things are'.

Of course, not everyone is good at assessing the obvious. We have all met skilled preachers who, when pressed on how they do what they do, cannot for the life of them tell you. They preach well, but they cannot help anyone else to preach well, because they cannot name what they do, how they do it, or why.

There are others who, when called upon to do some critical reflection on their own praxis, find it possible to do this fairly well in ways that will benefit others seeking to emulate those same skills. Sometimes this happens best when one is forced to stop for a season or when circumstances dictate that one has to practise one's skill in a very different venue. I can speak to this from experience. After preaching two different sermons just about every week as a pastor across fifteen years, I left pulpit ministry to begin teaching at a seminary. Suddenly, I had to stop preaching to my congregation and teach *others* how to preach. As a seminary faculty member, if I did get opportunities to preach, it was as a guest in unfamiliar settings, where I did not know the people in front of me and they did not know me either.

In short, I had to reflect on what I had been doing for a decade and a half. In the throes of ministry and with the pressure to write and deliver two new sermons every week, I never had time to slow down – much less stop – long enough to ask: "What am I doing and how am I doing it?" Once I became a teacher, I had to find out whether I could translate those years of practice into classroom pedagogy for aspiring preachers. What is more, preaching in unfamiliar settings forced me to recognise all the assumptions with which one preaches on one's home turf in a congregation in which there is a solid relationship between the preacher and the people who listen to that preacher each week. Preaching to strangers revealed aspects of my preaching I had never before realised were present.

But that was simply my own private experience as I transitioned from pulpit to classroom. However, across the year 2020, as the COVID-19 pandemic gripped the world, preachers everywhere were forced to stop doing what they had been doing in their preaching. They did not stop preaching, of course, but they were compelled by lockdown and quarantine to alter the way in which they had been preaching. Within the span of a few short, fast-moving weeks, preachers had to move from in-person worship to virtual worship. Some preachers had to record sermons from their own living rooms. Others continued to use their usual worship space with only two or three other people. They had to preach into a camera lens, not into the eyes of living people.

In the midst of all this, some aspects of preaching remained stable. Some things did not change. Everything else changed sufficiently. This became a moment to do some critical reflection on praxis for many preachers, including seasoned pastors who had been doing this work for decades. What had they been doing that they had not even been conscious of previously? What had they been doing well? What key aspects of preaching had perhaps become eclipsed for them without their knowing it, but that the COVID-19 time forced them to grapple with once more? For many, preaching became a lonely, frustrating experience. Why? What did this new mode of preaching reveal about the nature of preaching? What did preachers miss about how it used to be and, in recognising these things, can we all learn once again what preaching is supposed to be?

In this article, I reflect on the practice of homiletics during a pandemic. I convey some insights I have gained from conversations with a number of active preachers who have shared their experiences with me. I also suggest some key learning outcomes that are emerging from both those experiences and from a critical reflection on what these experiences have revealed about the nature of preaching. Perhaps, there are some vital aspects of homiletic practice that, in some places, have been neglected in recent times but that the pandemic might have brought back into focus.

The article proceeds in two sections. In the first section, I convey what preachers have been experiencing in the COVID-19 pandemic and particularly what preaching looked and felt like during the early critical months of lockdown and quarantine. In the second section, I use those experiences as an opportunity to reflect critically on the field and practice of homiletics. What aspects of preaching that we sometimes do not notice much have been revealed as vital by this pandemic? Have some preachers, who neglected homiletic practices and principles in recent times, made an essential comeback as a result of the pandemic?

2. WE HAVE NEVER DONE IT THIS WAY BEFORE

2.1 The lonely lens

No one saw it coming. In the USA, pastors preached their Lenten sermons the first two Sundays of March 2020 as usual, only dimly beginning to suspect that a hiccup might be coming, depending on what happened with the novel coronavirus and how communities might have to respond. Then things began to shut down and lock down and pastors began to tell their congregations, by the third Sunday in March, that they might have to take a break for a short time, with the hope that everyone would be back together for Easter on 12 April. By the fourth Sunday in March, preachers preached to completely empty

sanctuaries/worship spaces, some of which were then shuttered. Before April dawned and Lent ended, sermons were being taped on laptops, in living rooms, and from kitchen tables and streamed online for people to tune into if they could.

A number of active pastors shared what those weeks – and then even the subsequent months that followed – revealed to them about preaching. A first thing most of the preachers experienced – though I will not devote much space in this article to this – was a steep learning curve on technological matters involving computers, cameras, and online streaming. Unsurprisingly, more established and wealthier congregations, some of which had already been livestreaming their services for years, found themselves in a better position to make the switch to all virtual worship. Others struggled, trying to make do with iPhones or laptop cameras.

Technological meltdowns were abundant, especially in the early weeks. The entire virtual meeting platform Zoom crashed all but completely on one of the first Sundays in April, as its system was overwhelmed by the sheer volume of churches using their service to broadcast worship services and sermons. By mid-spring, most of the congregations had figured all of this out sufficiently that things were flowing fairly smoothly most of the weeks. The vast majority of pastors testified that, in the midst of the more significant aspects detailed below, these struggles only added to stress levels that had already been running on high. Nothing in seminary had ever prepared them to have to add “audio and video engineer” to their pastoral job descriptions.

A far more significant issue – and one with more important theological and homiletic ramifications – rapidly emerged for pastors in terms of having to deal with the above technological issues, namely homiletic loneliness. During the most distressing period of COVID-19 lockdown and quarantine in 2020, people everywhere experienced an acute sense of isolation. Seniors living in retirement homes or in nursing facilities suddenly found that people could no longer visit them. Social media soon became saturated with sad pictures of great longing, showing loved ones pressing hands to the window panes, unable to touch or to hug physically, talking on cellular phones on either sides of glass doors, or from retirement home balconies high above a lawn, where loved ones gather to wave from afar.

In addition, preachers soon discovered that, without a real congregation in front of them, they felt homiletically lost. Of course, some traditions had long been obvious in depending on the presence of a living congregation. One thinks immediately of the African-American preaching tradition of “call and response”, in which the congregation becomes an active participant in the preaching moment. Calls of “There it is!” and “Preach it!” and “Amen!” from

the members of the congregation are almost as important a verbal part of the sermon as the words from the preacher him-/herself. In such congregational settings, a preacher's inability to hear anything was particularly striking. A preacher could ask "Can I get an 'Amen'?" and that is all s/he wanted during the lockdown, but no such acclamations would come.

Surprising to many preachers, however, was that, even in traditions where a shouted "Amen!" was beyond rare, the absence of congregational response was palpable and deflating. The radio host and comedian Garrison Keillor used to describe Norwegian Lutherans in northern Minnesota as being a little on the austere side. In those congregations, a silently arched eyebrow was the equivalent of a full-throated "Hallelujah!" in more Pentecostal traditions! Even short of such an extreme, many Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox congregations have a tradition of liturgical reserve.

What people in even fairly reserved congregations do not know, however, and what, until recently, the pastors of some of those same congregations likewise did not realise is that people are signalling reactions to the sermon all the time. What is more, the longer a pastor is with a given group of people Sunday after Sunday, the more attuned s/he becomes to such reactions. There are those who smile, even just a little, to say that they are drawn in by the sermon. There are those members who reliably get slightly teary-eyed when moved by the beauty of the gospel. There are also certain tilts of people's heads, certain furrows on various brows, certain ways of essentially making eye contact with the preacher, all of which makes the moment of sermon delivery a living, vibrant and complete moment.

COVID-19 took all of this away for a time. A camera lens was a dim substitute for living people. Some pastors tried to compensate by affixing photos of loved ones or congregational members behind whatever camera they were using, so that they could see real people and not simply the dead eye of the lens while recording a sermon. Other pastors and priests became more creative, soliciting family photos of church members and then having those pictures blown up and taped onto the pews or the seats where those people usually sat on Sundays, so that when the preacher delivered the sermon, the empty sanctuary seemed a little less empty. The vast majority of pastors professed that even these moves were dim substitutes for the genuine article.

In the next section of this article, I reflect theologically on what this implies for homiletics and the meaning of preaching itself. It can also be noted, first, that not a few preachers who experienced this homiletic loneliness also fretted that their feeling this might be a bad sign. In ordinary times, thoughtful and sincere preachers resist the idea that they are performers or entertainers. They would be horrified at the thought of needing to install an "APPLAUSE"

sign in their sanctuaries the way television shows have long done to cue up the studio audience. They do not want their being in the pulpit spotlight each week to become a matter of ego. They do not want to be needy actors or stand-up comics who simply cannot go on if they do not get enough love from their audience. Thus, some pastors who felt disoriented by the lack of a human connection in preaching during lockdown and quarantine were concerned that this was revealing an egoism or a narcissistic neediness, which they had hoped was not a part of them in the first place.

Of course, we can admit that showy, flashy, swaggering, and egotistical preachers are and have been a problem in the history of the church. One Sunday when I was a seminarian, a man on his way out of a church service complimented my sermon quite strongly, but then he quickly followed this with “But don’t let it go to your head – there’s nothing worse than a cocky preacher!”. In the next section, I reflect that what most of the preachers have experienced has hardly anything to do with whether or not their egos are in check or whether they have a self-esteem issue which they are working out on their pulpits each week. What this COVID-19 experience has revealed may very well go to the heart of what homiletics in a Christian context is supposed to be.

2.1.1 The need for comfort

If the need to preach in the absence of living people revealed something of the acoustics of preaching, of the lived experience of the preacher and the congregation, then an equally (if not more) significant aspect of homiletic practice that COVID-19 may have forced preachers to grapple with ties in with the very content of preaching itself. What is a sermon? What should be the focus of a sermon? It is difficult to imagine more fundamental questions in the field of homiletics. Perhaps, answers to such a question have for too long come from places ill-suited to provide guidance on such vital matters.

Like all seasons or moments of national or international tragedy, a pandemic such as COVID-19 has a levelling effect. Although the specifics of how people are affected by a pandemic may vary depending on culture, location, or any number of factors, there is a sense in which such a phenomenon makes everyone feel like they are all in the same proverbial boat. The dangers, the fears, the isolation that can come from quarantines, the emotional fallout of living with significant stress: all of this comes to some degree to all people. In congregational settings, pastors and congregants alike encounter and express the same needs. The pastor cannot claim to be outside of the experience of anyone else; there is no place of objectivity from which to operate or do ministry. The preacher has to write and present sermons from the same place emotionally and spiritually as the people who receive those sermons.

What most of the preachers have discovered when surveying the state of their own hearts and souls is that what they need is also what the congregation needs, namely comfort and hope above all. People need the gospel, they need Good News. In the earliest weeks of the global pandemic, an American actor named John Krasinski developed a 20-minute weekly YouTube show called “SGN” or “Some Good News”. In a time when the main news of the day seemed to go perpetually from bad to worse, from scary to even scarier, surely there were good news stories out there, heart-warming tales of people taking care of each other, of families finding creative ways to make the most out of quarantine. SGN’s weekly pastiche of video clips and stories showed the best of human nature under terrible circumstances. The show became a global hit. It turned out that Krasinski was right: people under duress hunger for some good news.

The church of Jesus Christ, of course, has not just *some* good news but *the* Good News that just is the gospel. It is the Good News that God came to this world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth to enter into our brokenness, our sickness, our pandemics, our economic meltdowns, our fears and our sorrows to redeem the whole fallen mess from the inside out. And the Good News of the gospel is that Jesus by the Holy Spirit is still here doing exactly that every day. People have longed to hear this message, and preachers everywhere have found themselves returning to the basics of this proclamation during the season of COVID-19. Such proclamatory basics include chiefly heralding the Good News that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and that we can get caught up in that reconciling work by grace alone. This is the gospel.

Not a few discovered that a meaningful way to channel this Good News came through the biblical Book of Psalms. The honesty of the Hebrew Psalter proved homiletically fruitful. Most obviously there are the Psalms of Lament, those sometimes raw, often almost bitter complaints about the state of the world and of our lives in it. Laments give voice to what so many people want to say right now.

As the preacher and teacher of preaching Fred Craddock used to note, the vast majority of people assume that a sermon delivers something that people need to *hear*. That is what preaching is in the minds of many: someone’s wagging a bony finger in their faces to let them have it. But that is as often as not a wrong notion of preaching, Craddock observed. As often as not, preaching is not about telling people what they need to hear, as it is an articulation of what people wish they could say (Craddock 1985:26). The Hebrew Psalter has long been the prayerbook for Jews and Christians alike, because it says what we often feel.

What is more, by virtue of its being part of sacred Scripture, the Psalms signal to us that God also accepts our expressing such things. Not deep piety, but false piety claims that one ought never complain to God, but only give thanks in all circumstances with not a whisper of lament or protest. The Psalms say “No” to this line of thought. It is not weak faith, but robust faith that dares to express lament to God’s face. Of course, at any given moment, there are individuals in all congregations who have cause for lament. Sometimes, whole congregations lament over a crime wave in their city or over the death of a much-beloved member. What has made the pandemic a unique season of lament is that Christians and congregations everywhere have both cause to lament and share a common cause at that.

The Psalms, of course, also help believers turn back to praise and thanksgiving. They proffer the hope not only that God can “take it” when we lament, but also that God is still in charge, is still listening to our prayers, and is still on track to bring about a better day for us as believers and for the whole creation. Or to paraphrase a line from Psalm 30:5, weeping lasts for but a night, but joy comes in the morning. This is not an easy or a simple truth and, in a time of pandemic when there is so much sorrow and death on all sides, neither should such a sentiment be applied lightly or tritely. In the time of COVID-19, preachers have discovered that people need both what Brueggemann (1993) calls “the Friday voice of faith” that is lament and the gospel Good News that joy is both here already now and is still coming in its fullness.

“Comfort, comfort my people”, the God of Israel commissioned the prophet Isaiah as the time of exile came to a close. The global pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus has brought that preaching mandate back to the forefront for many pastors. Emphasising the abiding presence of God, the ability of God in Christ to heal us, the comfort of knowing that Jesus has experienced hell itself and all else that we could ever experience: these themes have risen in prominence for many preachers in the events that unfolded across 2020.

3. CRITICAL REFLECTION ON PRAXIS: WHAT IT ALL MEANS

3.1 The religion of the incarnation

This article began with the claim that critical reflection on praxis has historically led to new or more refined theological thinking. It was also claimed that such a reflection on praxis sometimes happens most readily if, for some reason, one is forced to pause or alter a given practice in ways that bring to the surface aspects of a craft such as preaching that one may not always notice in the throes of actually doing it the same way week after week and year after year.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided such an occasion for preachers. Some things could not be done as they had long been done, due to lockdowns and quarantines. Other things could have continued to be done as they had long been done, but somehow doing so felt wrong, out of joint, in a time of disorientation and fear and so new themes emerged in many sermons. In this second section of the article, I want to do some critical reflection on the two primary experiences detailed in the first section and what these reflections may have to say on certain ecclesiastical and homiletic trends that have been occurring over the past few decades.

First, I reflect on what can be learned from the experience of not being able to preach to people in person. The experience of homiletic loneliness that many preachers have experienced points to something very close to the core of the Christian faith: Christianity is the religion of the incarnation. God did not save the world from a distance or via remote control. Instead, God the Son came down personally, born of a real woman as fully human, as the church has long confessed. The flesh and blood of Jesus was no costume or disguise nor was it a souped-up humanity immune to anything and everything to which any human body is susceptible. Salvation came through a real person, a man with a personality, a distinctive voice, and with real hands to reach out and touch those around him. Although other religions have variations on the idea of the gods coming down in disguise and such, only the Christian faith insists not only that the Son of God was fully and truly human in every way, but also that this incarnation was a *sine qua non* for God's ability to pull off salvation. In terms of the history of the church, the full reality of God-in-person has been the cornerstone of soteriology ever since Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?*

It was, therefore, no surprise that the founding of the church that was commissioned to carry on Jesus' saving work and to proclaim Jesus' saving gospel message was also an utterly human affair. The Holy Spirit at Pentecost was poured out on ordinary men and women who were then to bring the gospel to other people through the Word preached. Along with the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Lord's Supper, what the Apostles and all others after them primarily had in terms of gospel tools was their own human larynx through which to declare the gospel. If words and water and bread and wine all seem too simple and mundane a way to change the world or through which to have God save the world, the early church bore witness to the fact that this was more than enough. The Word had to be preached. As Paul reflected on in, for example, Romans 10:14-15:

How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can anyone

preach unless they are sent? As it is written: 'How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!'

Preaching happens in person, because the core of the proclamation is the Son of God who came here in person to bring salvation in the first place. Throughout the vast majority of church history, this has been true, because there were few alternatives. Perhaps the epistles of especially the Apostle Paul represent an early form of preaching from a distance, but even in those letters, Paul frequently expressed his frustration that communicating that way was not the end of the matter for him – it was stopgap at best. In Romans, 1 Thessalonians and in his letters to Timothy, Paul repeatedly expresses a heartfelt longing to visit in person to preach, to impart spiritual gifts, and to reap a great harvest of souls unto salvation. His letters were better than nothing, but in the long run, Paul knew that there was no substitute for preaching the gospel in person.

Recent decades, however, have witnessed some non-personal ways to preach after all. In some megachurches, the gathering space for the congregation is so cavernous that, although a preacher may be present in person, s/he is so far removed from most of the worshippers that they really only experience the pastor on the big projection screens in the worship space. The vast majority of megachurch members have never spoken with the primary preaching pastor in person. In many other megachurch settings, some have opted for a multi-campus approach, in which worshippers gather in theatre-type settings on Sundays. There may be some live, in-person musicians in such satellite venues to lead singing, but the preaching pastor is only virtually beamed in on a big screen – the pastor is not physically present in the building. Some high-tech churches have even experimented with holograms in recent years, giving a 3D version of the pastor on a stage, but making the pastor no more actually physically present than if it were simply a video on a flat screen.

The COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns and quarantines it has necessitated have forced almost all pastors to become virtual preachers. But the loneliness and emptiness of the experience – the lack of in-the-moment connection to real people with real needs, burdens, and cares – is not finally about the preacher's ego or a hidden desire for acclamation. Rather, it is all about something that the New Testament also reveals: preaching is supposed to be in person, because the Christian faith is meant to be incarnational. If so, churches and members of megachurches, who opt for virtual sermons all the time, are depriving themselves of some vital aspects of the Christian faith.

I make no judgement on the sincerity of the faith of people who never see an actual in-the-flesh preacher who is accessible to them (or who see a preacher only from such an extreme distance that s/he may as well be virtual),

but only assert that vital aspects of what preaching is supposed to be will perforce and inevitably be absent from this way of practising homiletics. As a side note: Some pastors have been concerned that, when the pandemic is over, some people will have come to like worshipping at home in their pyjamas enough that they might be tempted to make it permanent, even when they could once more go physically to church. That, however, would be a significant spiritual loss for both preachers and parishioners.

3.1.1 Proclaiming Good News

The absence of a pastor-member relationship that only an in-person presence can make possible leads to the second area of reflection to close this article: the substance of preaching itself. Could it be that preaching from a distance, as some churches have been doing by choice for some years now, has had a shaping influence on what gets preached? Might a tighter connection to the real lives of real people lead preachers to more fundamental preaching themes – more gospel-based themes – than what has too often emerged in some places as common sermon themes in recent decades?

What is a sermon? What is it supposed to do? These are the questions of Homiletics 101. The Greek words in the New Testament that are most often translated as “to preach” are revelatory on this point. The two primary Greek verbs for preaching are *keruxai* and *euaggelizein*. The first points to a heralding, a proclaiming, the making of an announcement, and the second is obviously tightly aligned etymologically with evangelism and with the “evangel” itself, the gospel. It is the bringing of Good News. Both make it clear that what homiletician Paul Scott Wilson contends is true: at its heart, preaching is proclamation. It is the heralding of Good News. It is the announcement that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself and so the cosmos has now turned the corner from darkness back into the light God intended in the beginning. This message is meant to bring hope, joy, and peace.

Proclamation may be understood to consist of the most loving, life-affirming, Spirit-inspired words that anyone could ever hope to hear because they come from God. They announce God’s redemptive activity in the moment, and in the announcement, also the fulfillment (Wilson 2008:2).

Yet, in recent decades, all of that seems to have faded into the background in many churches. As Willimon observed, starting in the late 20th century, sermons in many places morphed from a proclamation of Good News into the dispensing of Good Advice. Recently, some preachers have resembled less Billy Graham and more Dr. Phil, or some other self-help guru from television or the internet. Too many sermon series carry titles such as *Five ways to raise successful children*; *Four ways to grow your business*; *Six tips to improve*

your marriage, and other forms of what some describe as a kind of DIY (Do It Yourself) form of the Christian faith. As Willimon (1992:9) once put it, “Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved”. Sermons thus frequently end not with what Wilson calls the “camera on God” focus, in which God is declared to be active and on the move in working in this world unto salvation. Instead, sermons conclude with a “camera on us” angle, as pastors end with long “To-Do” lists of tasks the members of the church need to engage in during the coming week if they are to grow their compassion or crank up their prayer life or otherwise try to build God’s kingdom via their own industry and effort (Wilson 2018:91-93).

Although many people seem to like what a preaching friend calls “shouldy sermons” that are all about “You should ... You must ... You ought ...”, are such sermons really proclaiming Good News? To at least some people, it feels the opposite. Life is tough, the economy is bad, our job situation feels precarious, our spouse is waiting for laboratory results, our children seem to be lost in the cosmos. Then we come to church and, instead of lifting the burdens from our shoulders that weighed us down into a stoop as we entered church, we get *more* burdens piled on top of the other burdens. Now, I have to worry about my children *and* follow five steps this week, if I want to do better with my prayers.

As noted earlier, could it be that a lack of connection to real people and their daily struggles leads some pastors to preach sermons and whole sermon series that are all rather entrepreneurial and laden with advice? If preachers only show up as a virtual presence in people’s lives, do they thereby cut themselves off from the kinds of worries and fears that something such as COVID-19 has brought to the forefront (but that, in reality, exists for all people all the time anyway)? Many pastors have found that the pandemic and all that it has entailed for people’s mental and spiritual health and well-being have forced them back to homiletic basics.

The pastoral issues facing people, the hurts, the fears, and the questions have all been so obvious during a pandemic. Wise and discerning preachers know that addressing those concerns is a key task for preaching. Not all questions can be answered, of course, not from the pulpit, if anywhere. Sometimes, the most pastoral thing a preacher can do is to use a sermon as a *de facto* way to sit with people in the silence of their confusion when no answers to life’s questions are forthcoming, or at least to acknowledge that such a posture is also a deeply biblical one. For some preachers, doing this pastoral work from the pulpit did not require a significant overhaul in that they had not strayed terribly far from a weekly desire to provide people with the hope, comfort and assurance of the gospel in the first place.

Others could, perhaps, find in this season an occasion to reassess the themes that have been driving their preaching in recent years. Dispensing good advice or tips for successful living is not going to do much for people who have lost loved ones to COVID-19 or to those who live in lonely isolation or to those who are depressed or living with great fear of this disease and all it portends. Only the Saviour who came to this world in person to engage our hurts, our fears and our diseases can be of help now. Only the gospel that gives Good News and that can engender hope and even joy during dark times can help now. If some pastors have found themselves returning to the basic answer to the question “What should a sermon say?” during this pandemic season, might that not be an indication that more (and not less) of their preaching ought to be centred on that gospel all the time in the first place, including long after this pandemic is behind us?

4. CONCLUSION

Few areas of life have been left untouched by the pandemic that caught up the entire planet in 2020. People everywhere have been pondering new ways to do things in restaurants, shopping malls, schools, universities, and hotels. Families have had to reassess how to take holidays, and businesses have sought new economic models to ensure their survival. The church has had to assess its ministries in every way, including chiefly in its most public weekly ministry offering: worship services that include the Word preached. Unlike some past events that shook the world – the 9/11 terrorist attacks, for instance – a chief way in which the church has comforted people in crisis in the past was the first thing COVID-19 took away: the ability to gather, to hold hands and pray together, to receive pastoral counselling privately or from the pulpit.

This article tried to suggest that, in sifting through the layers of what was lost in these difficult moments, preachers have recovered some of the wonders of preaching, even as they have been challenged to note where perhaps the content of preaching has been misdirected recently by other cultural and ecclesiastical forces. In time, many things will revert back to what they used to look and feel like in the church. By God’s grace, perhaps, the positive lessons preachers have learned and the necessary correctives preachers have encountered will remain with the church long after this crisis has blessedly been left behind in the history books.

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