

Is God Still Speaking? Preaching During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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*Hear my prayer, O LORD, and give ear to my cry;
do not hold your peace at my tears
(Psalm 39: 12a)*

The Stammering Condition

When Indonesia enacted *Work from Home* (WFH), and America *Shelter in Place*, our world suddenly began changing from offline to online. The implications extended to all spaces of life, including churches. In the US, 90 percent of churches closed in-person activities and switched to virtual worship.¹ In just a few days, churches prepared and screened worship services on electronic platforms, such as YouTube, Spotify, Facebook Video, and Instagram TV. What was happening in the US was also happening in Indonesia. Several churches held online worship in accordance with the Indonesian government's rules to prevent the spread of Covid-19.

This uncertain situation, frankly, has caused congregations to stammer in response. Most ministers were not fully prepared to arrange online worship. Some preachers felt strange about preaching in front of the camera without their hearers on the pews. For example, the Billy Graham Institute reported that some pastors in the US said the issue with technology was one of the greatest obstacles during the pandemic. They realized that they should modify the content, the method, and the form of their sermons contextually. However, they were not confident about doing so because they felt uncomfortable speaking and singing to an empty room.²

In response to these uncertain conditions, in this presentation I focus on our approach to homiletics amid the pandemic – the content and delivery of the sermon.

A World in Crisis, A World in Trauma

I do not deny that I became stressed at the beginning of the pandemic, and as it spread worldwide. I heard the news of the number of COVID-19 patients increasing massively. I received bad news from my congregation in Jakarta concerning some of our members whom I knew and who tested positive and then died because of the pandemic. I knew there wasn't yet a vaccine. People went crazy, buying masks, hand sanitizers, and food because of their many fears. Some

¹ “‘Things Will Never Be the Same.’ How the Pandemic Has Changed Worship,” NPR.Org, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/05/20/858918339/things-will-never-be-the-same-how-the-pandemic-has-changed-worship>. Radio NPR reported on a Pew Research Center survey of a fantastic number of churches switching their activities from on-site to online in early April.

² Andrew MacDonald, Daniel Yang, and Ed Stetzer, “COVID-19 Church Survey Second Round Report,” Exponential, April 2020, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://exponential.org/resource-ebooks/covid-report-2/>, 2-3. Unfortunately, I haven't found a similar survey in Indonesia, so I cannot compare the anxiety of the preachers in the US with those in Indonesia.

governments in the world closed their country borders to prevent people from entering from other countries. Many worries and griefs filled my lonely days in an isolated room. I was concerned about my health in face of the invisible virus all around me. I was terrified the virus would attack beloved family members or friends. At that moment, I realized that I was a vulnerable person in a crisis who couldn't control the situation. In the middle of my anxiety, I cried out to God because He was silent. I asked myself: was God still speaking in order to comfort us?

I was not alone in my anxiety. David Kinnaman, who organized the Barna Group survey, reported 1,759 senior Protestant pastors in the US said the pandemic had affected their life mentally and emotionally. Even though many of the respondents reported they were fine, 50 percent of pastors felt tired, sad, and panicked by this situation. Bad news from the pandemic had impacted their decisions for their congregations. They were overwhelmed with sad news from their members. They mentioned feelings of anger, helplessness, and strangeness, while social distancing caused more than 50 percent of respondents to experience deep loneliness.³

The pandemic impacted not only pastors and ministers but also our active members and churchgoers. The fear of disease, death, and losing a loved one suddenly became everyone's daily life during the pandemic. Worrying about losing jobs, facing family financial problems, isolating themselves in the house, and anxiety about the undefined time when the experts would find a vaccine were forcing people to accept the abnormal condition of the new normal, whether they liked it or not.

Joni S. Sancken, a homiletics professor at the United Theological Seminary, calls the crisis conditions of the pandemic traumatic. The symptoms of trauma crisis can be seen through numerous circumstances, such as people losing a beloved one unexpectedly, feeling threatened by tragedy, or being unable to process their painful experiences. Understanding and adapting to the pandemic went beyond people's abilities and limitations. In this traumatic situation, Sancken adds, the church, as a community of God, must face the crisis in ways that invite all members to adapt, survive, and become resilient amidst catastrophes.⁴

Preaching during the Pandemic: A Sense of Crisis

I quoted a verse from Psalm 39 that reveals the confusion and loneliness experienced by the psalmist because of a crisis. The psalmist asks for God's presence in the midst of tragedy, calamity, and woundedness. He petitions God for help and speaks out when God has listened to his plea. The outcry of the psalmist is, in my opinion, the foundation for preachers as they struggle and seek a homiletical approach appropriate for the context of disaster caused by the ongoing pandemic. During a predicament, God's presence is the center of proclamation, and also, a *sense of crisis* recently became the focus of our virtual sermons. According to Ian Paul, preaching that summons a *sense of crisis* offers a strong pastoral message that allows space for an emotional reaction. If the emotional response - Paul calls it "pain" - results from sermons, preachers are encouraged to preach God's stories, which remind us of his promises to people enduring hard times. Moreover, Paul argues preaching in the context of crisis means "we move in the sermon from pain

³ Carey Nieuwhof et al., "COVID-19 Conversations: Many Pastors Are Tired, Overwhelmed and Lonely," Barna Group, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.barna.com/research/covid-19-pastor-emotions/>.

⁴ Joni S. Sancken, "Preaching in the Midst of a Global Pandemic," United Theological Seminary, n.d., accessed June 21, 2020, <https://united.edu/preaching-in-the-midst-of-a-global-pandemic/>. Sancken uses the word "resilience" to describe qualities of endurance, survival, and adaptation to bitter experiences. This word is a familiar term in trauma studies.

to promise.”⁵ Based on this approach, I propose the eight methodological hallmarks for preaching in the current traumatic context.

1. When preachers stammer in an empty church; Alyce McKenzie, a homiletics professor at the Perkins School of Theology, invites them to switch their lenses from a negative to an optimistic view. The empty pews summon the preacher to embrace preaching as a dialog, not a monolog, an engagement with the crisis and the congregation itself. Dialogue is real when the preacher prays for and has empathy with the congregation’s difficult situation in the preparation of the sermon. The compassion which brings to the fore the congregation’s fears, worries, and anxieties, will lead the preacher to exegete the biblical texts contextually. The sermon that is born from the womb of empathy takes the form of a lively dialogue between God and the preaching listeners.⁶
2. Sancken recommends that in a trauma situation, preachers preach in order to heal their listeners. She suggests preachers offer a sermon that calls the listeners to accept the real world, which is vulnerable and imperfect, rather than one that is profoundly academic.⁷
3. Preachers should voice emotional reactions, such as anger, fear, disappointment, anxiety, and frustration in their sermons from the virtual pulpit. Furthermore, they need to mention the events arising from the pandemic, such as layoffs, domestic violence, unsuccessful lockdown regulations that can’t control the virus, and the increasing numbers of patients. When preachers mention these feelings and events, they perform a dialogue between the listeners and the imperfect world, the place where people live.
4. A preacher should demonstrate true integrity by being an authentic person in a time of crisis. Joseph Jetter, Jr. reminds us that the preacher is often in a vulnerable position when preaching. However, God justifies and strengthens that person to preach in the midst of fragility. The preacher’s own experiences will become a powerful story of God’s presence in the middle of suffering.⁸ The listeners will admire a preacher who dares to share her/his feelings and life stories honestly as their companions during the pandemic.⁹
5. Preaching with a sense of crisis reveals someone vulnerable as the figure of God’s presence. Shelly Rambo, a theology professor at the Boston School of Theology, suggests Holy Saturday in the Easter season be used as a foundational theology for trauma healing. Holy Saturday, she explains, presents a God who embraces his death because of his trauma. The dead God is a

⁵ Ian Paul, “What Can We Preach in Moments of Crisis? | Psephizo,” Psephizo: Scholarship, Serving, Ministry, August 31, 2018, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://www.psephizo.com/preaching-2/what-can-we-preach-in-moments-of-crisis/>.

⁶ Alyce M. McKenzie, “Preaching to an Empty Room,” SMU Perkins School of Theology, last modified March 17, 2020, accessed June 21, 2020, <https://blog.smu.edu/perkins/preaching-to-empty-room/>.

⁷ Joni S. Sancken, *Words That Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls*, The Artistry of Preaching Series (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2019), 80.

⁸ Paul, “What Can We Preach in Moments of Crisis?”

⁹ Jeanne Stevenson-Moessner, “What’s a Preacher to Do?” Perkins School of Theology, Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence, last modified April 2020, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://pcpe.smu.edu/COVID-19-Resources>. In an interview with Alyce McKenzie, Stevenson-Moessner said that the vital aspect of a pastoral care approach to preaching is that the preacher should be authentic by saying honestly that she/he is also in a depressed condition during a time of crisis.

friend of trauma victims.¹⁰ We are familiar with the two stories from the Bible of Jesus weeping for the dead Lazarus, and of crying out on the cross, “My God, my God, why hast Thou has forsaken me?” Those stories display God as vulnerable, and hence in solidarity with the vulnerable listeners and the preacher.

6. Ian Paul recommends preachers pick the Psalms, especially the Psalms of lament, as the biblical texts for preaching. He notes the Psalms of lament allow preachers and listeners to express their faith in God in crisis moments. The Psalms allow us to doubt God and, at the same time, permit us to declare our faith in a God who is with us in times of crisis.¹¹
7. Tamara Lewis, a history professor at the Southern Methodist University, encourages preachers to recall the Church founders' testimonies from the whole of Church history, especially those leaders who are well-known to the congregation for offering a true testimony during a pandemic. She gives the example of Martin Luther, who, together with his family, opened his house to accommodate and take care of the patients of the great plagues at the time of the Reformation. Through such historical testimonies, listeners are invited to walk in faith with God, who liberates them from sorrows.¹²
8. Preaching hope during the pandemic is not always hope for the future. In other words, the preaching of hope doesn't contain false promises the virus will soon be gone forever. Hope in crisis is hope for today. It is a revelation of how God works through kind people who demonstrate his love to others. In the sermon, the preacher can perhaps suggest several actions that listeners can do practically: sending comforting words through social media, helping the local community to produce masks, or collecting money to help those with financial problems because of the pandemic's impact. Those actions then become examples of hope amid crises.

God is Still Speaking: Preach the Word of God!

At the beginning of this webinar, I mentioned the title of my presentation is a reflective question for all of us: Is God still speaking today, in the midst of catastrophe? How do we answer this question while COVID-19 pandemic numbers are still increasing? In her article, McKenzie mentions Ronald J. Allen's comments about delivery in preaching. Allen makes the vital point that delivery is the preacher's sense of presence. This is more than physical presence, such as posture, tone of voice, and body movement. McKenzie paraphrases Allen's notion of what a sense of presence means as follows:

It is something the congregation can feel more than describe. Some call presence passion or conviction. It is the sense that what the preacher is saying matters to her and ought to matter to me. It is an inner intensity that spills into the sermon. Presence, from the perspective of listeners, is a sense that the preacher is aware of the immediacy of the living God, fully

¹⁰ Shelly Rambo, *Spirit and Trauma: A Theology of Remaining* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010).

¹¹ Paul, “What Can We Preach in Moments of Crisis?”

¹² Tamara Lewis, “What’s a Preacher to Do?” Perkins School of Theology, Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence, last modified April 2020, accessed June 22, 2020, <https://pcpe.smu.edu/COVID-19Resources>.

present with the congregation, and centered within themselves. Presence is called forth by the awareness of God with us, by the congregation, and by the occasion.¹³

In other words, Allen calls the preacher to enact the presence of God through the preaching moment. The congregation feels the living God speaking to them when the preacher preaches good news. That is what performance means in preaching. It does not mean the preacher exhibits his or herself, but instead demonstrates how God communicates to the listeners in daily life. I agree with Allen that each preacher should know the congregation's needs before preaching. The preacher should conduct research, even making an interpretation of the congregations' needs as part of sermon preparation. When the preacher brings the community's needs to the fore, especially in the midst of suffering, he or she represents God's voice, the God who takes care of them and pays attention to their struggles.

Another component of performance in preaching is how the preacher reveals the voice of God through the faith stories of the congregation, of others, and even those of the preacher herself. I believe each person in the community, including the preacher, all have experiences of meeting God. These experiences might not be of seeing God directly. However, sometimes God is present through mysterious ways, such as through the strange people who help us, and in unexpected circumstances, even in the most profound sorrow. God strengthens us and gives us hope for the future when we walk in the dark. Even when the stories tell about our failures, mistakes, and sins, God nevertheless gives us a chance, forgiveness, and transformation for a better life as human beings. When the preacher creates sermons from faith experiences, these will help the congregation receive the message that God is still real, present, and speaking – not only in the Bible but also today.

When the church needs to arrange online worship during the pandemic, what should we do to embody the living God? At this time, whether we like it or not, we are in a competitive world that offers exciting programs from institutions other than the church. How do we present the Word of God from a digital pulpit? To achieve a sense of the presence of God, I offer three methods of delivering a sermon, particularly when the preacher shares the Gospel virtually. I give the methods abbreviations 1 – S – D.¹⁴

First, **1 (Ind. Satu; Eng.: One) idea.** As preachers, we study the text(s) for our sermons. We interpret them using many resources and our contextual experiences. From this study, we gain ideas or wisdom concerning their meaning. Sometimes we are tempted to put all of this into our sermons. As a result, the sermon becomes heavy, complicated, and lacks a clear goal. The preacher, as well as the listeners, lose the vital message. Fred B. Craddock, an emeritus professor at the Candler School of Theology, argues against the “three-point sermon” method, saying that it doesn’t encourage the listeners to participate in preaching. He notes inductive preaching doesn’t depend on points. He said that the preacher should forget points, although “there is a point, and the discipline of this one idea is creative in preparation, in delivery, and reception of the message.”¹⁵ He adds that if the preacher states the point in a straightforward statement, “he knows the destination of the trip that will be his sermon. He knows where he is going.”¹⁶

¹³ McKenzie, “Preaching to an Empty Room.”

¹⁴ In Indonesia, the first-grade elementary level is called “Satu” (Eng. one or first) Sekolah Dasar (Eng. elementary school) which is abbreviated as 1 SD.

¹⁵ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority: Revised and with New Sermons* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2001), 81.

¹⁶ Ibid.

Second, Keep it **Simple**. Here I expand Craddock's notion of the one-point sermon to include delivery. He mentions that the singleness of ideas is the key to an effective and powerful message. The idea is the theme of the sermon will control the preacher in how it is performed. The theme tells the preacher and listeners how the sermon works for them.¹⁷ What he is saying, for me, is that each preacher should keep the sermon simple. As preachers, we sometimes attempt to bring our academic skills to the sermon, employing research, and including resources in our interpretations. We use complex hermeneutics and biblical language that is not clearly explained, and cite a group of scholarly figures to support our thesis. In fact, our listeners, who are mostly from a non-theological background, need a message that speaks to them gently, compassionately, and passionately. Sometimes they need a direct message that lectures them genuinely. They don't need a clever preacher with a complicated sermon. When their lives are already full of disturbing negative news and emotions, they are longing for God's Word that warms, calms the fear, and gives them hope and clear direction. Moreover, the online service faces the challenge of engaging the audience throughout the duration of the worship. Simplicity is the way to do so.

Three, **Dialogue**. Marcell Silva Steuernagel, a professor of Church music and director at Perkins School of Theology, writes in her article, "Doing Church Online: Some Insight" as follows: "Preachers, remember that your congregants are sitting at home in front of a screen. If you don't find ways to interact and engage with them, they may 'tune out; and go make espresso instead."¹⁸ In other words, she urges preachers to create space for including the audience in preaching. Preaching on the screen doesn't mean the audience sees the preacher in the way they see an actress play her role. However, the preacher should learn ways of performing the good news that are touching and inspiring and should speak directly to the audience when the sermon invites them into a dialogue with God.

First and foremost, such a conversation brings a sense of crisis and a sense of God's presence, as I have mentioned above. Second, this dialogue will challenge the preacher to choose words that express God's love for those who are suffering in uncertain situations. Third, the embodiment of the Gospel in preaching, as a dialogue between God and people, happens when the preacher applies tone, voice, and body language as part of the message of the good news. Hence, preachers should be aware of their intonation and body movements.

I intentionally quoted Psalm 39:12 at the start of my reflection on homiletical methodology in the uncertain world of the pandemic. When the psalmist expresses his faith by crying out about the silence of God, at the same time I believe it is an expression of his belief that God is not in fact silent. His hope that God will help him comes from his relationship with God in the past. He is a witness of the Almighty, who has comforted him in the middle of suffering. Now, when we read or listen to the verse from the Psalms, we reflect it is not only the psalmist's word, it is God's word.

So, now, preachers, we are still called to preach God is speaking in a world that is longing for God's presence and work. This summons is a challenge to us to experience what God is saying in this time of crisis. Your and my experiences with God become a dialogical bridge for God to speak to our congregations, and for them in turn to cry out to God. Martin Luther once said the preacher is "the mouth of our Lord Jesus Christ and the instrument whereby He openly preached the Word."¹⁹ Go, preach, my fellow preachers, even though our hearts are broken, and

¹⁷ Ibid, 82.

¹⁸ Marcell Silva Steuernagel, "'Doing Church' Online: Some Insights," SMU Perkins School of Theology, accessed November 9, 2020, <https://blog.smu.edu/perkins/doing-church-online-some-insights/>.

¹⁹ Key Steven, "Luther on Preaching," accessed November 10, 2020, <http://www.prca.org/resources/publications/articles/item/5160-luther-and-preaching>.

our eyes are full of tears, and we feel like we are walking in heavy fog, and can't see the end of our complicated lives. When God seems unspeaking, indeed, he is speaking to us!