



Listening to Immigrant Voices

Preaching Courage and Hope in the Eye of a Hurricane¹

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The silence and the waiting are the worst. You have done all you can: after filling up the gas tank, buying non-perishable food, getting cash from the ATM, cleaning the backyard to make sure there are no possible projectile items, and cleaning the gutters for water to flow easily; you just have to wait. There is nothing else to do but wait and watch the hurricane get closer and closer to the island on TV or listen to weather reports on the radio. Then it happens. First comes the darkness, then the rain and the wind. Electric power is gone. The faucet does not work anymore. The cellular signals begin to work intermittently. The trees begin to dance and howl. You are on your feet, looking for water to seep its way into the house. You are just there, listening to the wind, taking apart your home. You double check: enough batteries, enough collected water, all lamps working, everyone safe. You check again and again, and then, you wait.

You are in darkness and turmoil with a mix of calm and nervousness, laughter and teary eyes, hoping for the best. You check again and play cards. You talk about nothing and pray about everything. We are experiencing María, a massive and destructive hurricane as it strikes an already battered island in the Caribbean. That is the easy part. Then the hurricane is gone. Now comes the hardest: assessment, survival, gathering of resources, reconstruction. Waiting in long lines and staring toward the sky during nights that seem to have no end. Frustrated by your inability to connect to loved ones on other parts of the island and in the continental U.S. Anxious by the gradual consumption of goods and scared by the reality of not being able to buy them again. Shocked by all the destruction other people saw first on the weather channel outside the island.

The country stands still. There is no power and no communication, weeks go by and the days are brighter and hotter, humid and itchy. Mountains have turned gray and brownish, looking more like one giant fire ball went through them than actually being hit by rain and wind. People gather and help each other. Food is shared. Power plants and long power cords connect houses in

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neighborhoods as people share resources. Pastors and civil leaders are overwhelmed and stressed, burnt out and exhausted, vulnerable and empty. Life goes on.

How can you preach? What can you preach? How does preaching survive this place? How can preaching gather itself and what it needs, to preach courage and hope? Moreover, what is courage and hope *in this place*?

Hurricane María was, and still is, a very painful and significant experience for Puerto Ricans. The memory that is being threaded in our history and ethos will be long-lasting and determinant of our future. The thread strings include hoarding, corruption, selfishness, greed, anger, taking advantage of the moment, pity and self-pity, entitlement, condescending attitudes, self-righteousness, and colonization as expressions of sin. It includes solidarity, community-building, accompaniment, mercy, good stewardship, unselfishness, love, going-the-extra-mile attitude, sharing the table, and dignity as expressions of Gospel.

The memory being formed includes courage and hope. Courage as lament, confession of sin, and empowerment to organize. Hope as pure rejoicing, Here-I-Stand attitudes, and unapologetic proclamation. These are personal, communal, and structural threads that entangle our lives. Hurricane María and its memory may also be a metaphor for the times we live in. We all may need to learn how to collect water, how to clean the backyard for possible projectile objects, and how to clean the gutters for water to

1. This article originated as a presentation for the Bishop's Convocation of the Metropolitan Washington, D.C. Synod of the ELCA in 2018.

flow rapidly. We all may need to be reminded how to be prepared and how to survive in trying times, how to react and create a new future because hurricanes happen.

Preaching as an artisan craft

Preaching is collecting, arranging, creating, and showing. Preaching is an art, an *evangelical* craftsmanship that uses the materials that life and tradition provide, to show God's reign to the church, to the world, and in creation. Preaching is always urgent. It is a flash of the eternal in the silences of our finitude and contingency. Hurricane María revealed reality in the numbness of our ordinary lives. The roar and whistle of the hurricane crushed our silences. The sheer force of the winds shook our finitude. Preaching in times and places such as Puerto Rico after a hurricane must not be crisis cacophony nor *ex opera operato*. Preaching needs urgently to become a life-giving event where life is re-assumed, re-interpreted, and re-launched *every eighth day*, as the resurrection texts tell us.

We collect and arrange. We collect our fragmented memories, our sweat and weathered experiences, our bright and colorful dreams, and gather them around the Word. We clean and repair, discard, rearrange, and put together a mosaic of our collective stories to create something new. As we cleaned and repaired houses and neighborhoods, as churches became life-forces in our rebuilding process, the Spirit strengthened us to do the same with our lives and our worshipping communities as we gathered and sang around God's Word. It is hard work to collect and arrange, to clean and repair stories, memories, and dreams. These materials become a thread as we create relationships with the biblical text, as we resonate or resist the tradition, as we pair life and history. Proclamation then explains, interprets, and creates a new matrix of meanings on a battered island in the Caribbean. Preaching shows otherwise—hope happens.

We use language to gather our experiences, giving *ethos* and *telos* to the moments we live and the memories we have. Language is embedded in our life to preserve and relate these moments and memories. The Word, which inhabits language, creates a new string of possibilities as we share life in time and space and as we eat and drink at the table. We become part of The Story, the Story of salvation. This is the story we show to the world. Our broken memories become part of this story. Our everyday language turns into a revelatory speaking as we tell the story. Our stories of pain, loneliness, and sorrow are gathered around the cross. Our stories of terror and death are left at the entrance of the empty tomb. Jesus' cry becomes ours as we remember not only the Hurricane María experience but all that has been uncovered and exposed by its winds. We finally can speak and share our lives.

But this speaking is different. It is *parrhesia*. *Parrhesia* is, as the late Vitor Westhelle asserted, transgressive language that convenes and transforms. *Parrhesia* lurks at the margins and slippery slopes of language and moves elusively, through our bones, blood, minds, and hearts as we boldly preach the truth. To speak the truth is to see our reflections in a mirror. It is hard to stare at the mirror, but there is no way around it. There is no fake Good News. Truth-

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speaking is looking in the mirror, just as we are, with nowhere to hide. It is death-and-life language. *Mori-vivi*.

Morivivi is a plant that grows close to the ground in Puerto Rico and other places. It is sensitive to touch and responds by retracting and closing its leaves. It returns to its normal state after a while. The movement is identified by its popular name *morivivi*: it dies when touched (*mori*) and comes to life again (*vivi*) as time passes. The cadential movement from death to life replicates—of course from my Lutheran standpoint—the hermeneutical movement from law to Gospel, grasping and assuming life in Puerto Rico. Its scientific name is *mimosa pudica*².

As Hurricane María bared it all to leave us with reality-as-it-is, the movement of the *morivivi* created a life-giving web that kept us alive. *Morivivi* is a movement from death to life. It is a movement that proclaims forgiveness, that bestows dignity and promotes justice. It is the movement that gives us resources to tell the story: to collect and arrange, to clean and repair our memories. As we tell our stories, as we claim the Story, life springs again. The language of *morivivi* spreads from the pulpit to the assembly, and from the assembly to the streets. God happens for identity and justice for all. God gives us a name in the location where we live. The Logos became a Galilean. On September 20, 2017, the Logos became a Puerto Rican. The Word began its movement from death to life, of *morivivi*, to restore, and better yet, to make things anew. We sit with Elijah and the widow in her kitchen. We venture at the entrance of the cave to feel God in the easy winds after the hurricane.

Preaching proposes a new way to be human, to be community, to be society, for all. Not only in Puerto Rico before, during, and after Hurricane María, but in any church, in any neighborhood, in any home, as we have become part of the web created by the preached Word as truth-speaking: as life exposes reality and we see it as in a mirror, without palliatives and euphemisms, without excuses or rationalizations. The *ethos* is justification. The *telos* is

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCFYg_GCVrE. Accessed February 2, 2019.

justice. Justice on this side of the *already but not yet*. Justice is at the root of what Pablo Richard calls “the experience from death to life”:

This is the experience of misery, poverty, injustice, oppression, repression, discrimination, marginalization, the experience of unjust and premature death; it is also the experience of the struggle for life, hope, the experience of consciousness and happiness...the radical experience of death and life...our theological reflections are tainted by this historical opposition between death and life, different from the metaphysical opposition of being and non being³.

Preaching is collecting, arranging, creating, and showing. Preaching is an art, an *evangelical* craftsmanship that uses the materials that life and tradition provide to show God’s reign to the church, to the world, and in creation. Preaching is always urgent—preaching is *parrhesia*: bold and unapologetic truth-speaking. Preaching is the beat and movement of *morivivi* creating a web of life. Let me comment further on the movement from death to life; from *morí* to *viví*.

Morí

It is not easy to speak the truth. It is hard to look in the mirror. The movement of *morivivi* begins with death—*morí*. To speak about death takes courage; the courage to lament, to confess, and to organize.

Courage to Lament!

Hurricane María was, as one of Gabriel García Márquez’ book titles proclaims, *crónica de una muerte anunciada*—a chronicle of a death foretold. Do you expect hurricanes on a Caribbean island? What happens when your main development incentive is greed? What happens when you build housing projects in flood-prone places? When you use utilities companies’ staff positions to reward political parties’ friends at the expense of those utilities companies’ infrastructure maintenance costs? What happens when you promote U.S. mainland oil powers and dismiss alternative power options for decades, for political reasons? When your approach to life is *la última la paga el diablo* (the last bill is paid by the devil)? What happens when you dismiss and manipulate data to support your political agenda? When you do nothing to address global warming on a Caribbean island?

Help, Lord, for no one is faithful anymore;
those who are loyal have vanished from the human race;
Everyone lies to the neighbor; they flatter with their lips
But harbor deception in their hearts. (Ps 12:1–2)

3. Pablo Richard, “Teología en la Teología de la Liberación,” in Ignacio Ellacuría and Jon Sobrino, *Mysterium Liberationis: Conceptos Fundamentales de la Teología de la Liberación*. Vol. 1 (Madrid: Editorial Trotta, 1990), 201. Translation mine.

There is nothing compared to Hurricane María. . . . This time the hurricane was far more powerful and our infrastructure weaker. This time the recovery has been even more catastrophic because of corruption, leniency, and greed; because of politics as usual.

Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth...
The plowers plowed upon my back; they made long their furrows. (Ps 129:2–3)

Do not get me wrong. Hurricane María, for sure, has been the worst catastrophe in our history. There is nothing compared to Hurricane María. I lived through Hurricanes Hugo in 1989 and Georges in 1996. This time the hurricane was far more powerful and our infrastructure weaker. This time the recovery has been even more catastrophic because of corruption, leniency, and greed; because of politics as usual.

Do you indeed speak righteousness, you silent ones?
Do you judge uprightly, you sons of men?
No, in your heart you work wickedness;
You weigh out the violence of your hands in the earth.
(Ps. 58:1–2)

There is no recovery without lament, without permission to lament or without speaking the truth in tears. What is wrong needs to be said. What is wrong needs to be expressed out loud. Sin against our country needs to be named and made accountable. Sin done by our own hands, sin done by domestic and foreign hands, by sinful political and economic structures, and by sinful social and personal forces. Forgiveness without this accountability, without this naming and lament, is cheap grace.

We need courage to lament. We need the Spirit’s courage to express our anguish and anger. When we confront death, we need to lament. Death must be mourned.

Courage to Confess!

Lament turns into confession. Real lament is not simplistic criticism or conformist whining. Real lament turns into confession. Confession of the greed and privileges of the powers that be, confession of our complicities, confession of the sin against us, and of our own sin. Because, you see, it is easier to do nothing, to say nothing, to have no courage. We need courage to confess.

Against you, you only, have I sinned
And done what is evil in your sight. (Ps 51:4)

We need to confess everything: what is not grace is sin. Our fingerprints are everywhere, for what we have done, and for what we have left undone. We confess our leniency toward accountability in favor of our own personal and political parties' interests. We confess our participation in inconsequential political and economic processes that hide hegemonic structures. We confess our slavery to colonial mindsets and consumerist behavior. We confess our misuse and abuse of creation in our location in the Caribbean.

Have mercy on me, oh God,
According to your unfailing love;
According to your great compassion
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash away my iniquity
And cleanse me from my sin. (Ps 51:1–2)

It takes courage to confess. The movement of *morivivi* turns us upside down. The beat of *morivivi* keeps us alive when we are confessing our sin. Our weakness is God's strength. Preaching gathers and collects our stories as the Spirit sustains us and intercedes for us in our weakness to express our lament and confession (Rom 8:26–27). The Word becomes incarnate in our language to give us words and ways to lament and confess.

Courage to Organize!

How have we survived Hurricane María? It has been mainly the doing of civil and religious organizations, the actions of individuals, the organization of the Puerto Rican diaspora, the prayers and economic resources of so many people in so many places for quite a long time.

Preaching gives permission to lament. Preaching urges people to confess. Preaching invites the church to organize: "Go in peace. Serve the Lord." Sermons have shoes. The sermon keeps walking and talking during the week as the Word preached incarnates in the lives of the people. The Word preached *does things* to people and people *do things* for the neighbor in gratitude for the sake of the world.

Preaching is not a sermon. Preaching is a ministry. It is persistent, constant, and continuous proclamation week after week, year after year, that somehow works its way into people's minds and hearts. This ministry of preaching is the power that made our church respond to the needs of Puerto Ricans and Virgin Islanders. You did what you do because the Word has been preached to you for a long time. The Word changes lives. The Word turns worldviews upside down and gathers people around the table.

Its takes courage to organize. To allocate money for things and people that are not part of our constituency, for situations that are not part of our immediate priorities. What is the Word doing with this organizing? Perhaps creating will and promoting ways to help the neighbor—not only the ones that are an ocean away—but the

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ones that are a gasp and bus stop away in the foreseeable future. What is the Word doing with this organizing? Perhaps creating bridges that provide resources, ideas, and language to impact ethnic-specific communities in this location.

Preaching is not a sermon. Preaching is a ministry. Sermons have shoes. Preaching gives permission to lament. Preaching urges people to confess. Preaching invites the church to organize. Thanks be to God!

Vivi

Hope is not a *hocus-pocus* word. Hope is sweaty, messy, life-giving. Hope is God's smile as She watches us doing our chores, the chores of the kingdom. Lament, confession, and organizing take a toll on our lives. Where do we find the energy to continue? To go on? We find this energy in God's smile. God's smile makes us hope against hope. We battle what the world calls hope—positive thinking, denial, and brute dominion—with the contagious, sun-like brightness and down-to-earth sending and commitment that Gods' smile provokes.

When you look in the mirror and lament, something miraculous happens. Suddenly what you see in the mirror is God's face, Jesus Christ, smiling at you and there it is: the forensic confirmation of your humanity and future! You have purpose and you are going places. Even in the eye of a hurricane, even after death. Hope happens in this happy interface of your lament and God's smile. There is reason to rejoice, to confess, and to proclaim.

Hope to rejoice!

It is *parranda!* We are loud. We speak fast. We dance. No matter what happens. As I walked a couple of eight- to ten-deep car lines the first couple of weeks after the hurricane, the story was always the same: people gathered while waiting to chat and then, naturally, music and dance followed. This festive attitude is not denial but a festive—a cultural ethos—that allows us to survive and move on. Hope is joyful. The design, content, and delivery of preaching needs to be joyful. It is fun to collect, rearrange, and

create. To study Scriptures and thread our lives into its stories is a passionate enterprise. Passionate and joyful. To be the medium for God's real presence in proclamation every Sunday is a humbling feast and all senses are involved. All intelligences are used. Our complete bodies and lives are transformed. It is a *parranda!*

Parrandas are musical festivities celebrated at Christmas. We gather, usually in the evening, with our musical instruments, and form a group that goes to friends' homes, singing popular Christian songs all night. Sometimes we wake them up and, as we continue to the next home, the family comes with us to continue the party. Although *parrandas* are not as common anymore, it is a cultural custom that has been incorporated into the Christian Advent and Christmas calendar. *Parrandas* document a resilient, communal, and joyful attitude ingrained in our Puerto Rican identity. Many songwriters, musical groups, and popular singers incorporated the Hurricane María experience into their Christmas song lyrics and musical proposals.⁴ We celebrated Christmas in 2017!

We preachers are odd people. We see and smell differently. We make unusual connections. It is our vocation. You see, we need to connect temporality with eternity, to relate the human condition with grace, to connect ordinary things with revelation. *Morivivi* with *parranda*. We need to dig in unexpected places. We do all this, every week. If God is revealed *sub contraria specie* then we need to see and smell and sense differently. We need to be scavenger hunters at the margins. If we confess God on a cross, we need to find cross-like places to collect images, language, and stories to tell The Story today.

This hope, then, can survive 150 mph sustained winds. It floats in 38 inches of cumulative rain in a 24-hour period. This hope stubbornly plays cards and shares a battery lamp each and every one of the 365+ days without electricity in Yabucoa, Humacao, or Yauco.

The Movement from Morí to Viví Is Rejoicing!

It is a *parranda* of Good News. Hope to confess. There are civil groups in Puerto Rico calling for the audit of our 72+ billion-dollar debt. They have offered to do it for free. They keep calling on the government to audit the debt. There are other religious and civil groups that were alert and asking about the death toll and the real consequences of Hurricane María. They kept asking. They asked and asked again. People of all denominations have gone the extra mile using their hands, their money, and their time to help and restore communities all over the island, day after day; weekend after weekend. Groups from all the fifty states have come to clean debris and build houses.

Denominations such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America have sent millions of dollars for the reconstruction of

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our country. They are committed to stay and help, long-term. I have seen seminarian-pastors crying and mourning parishioners' deaths. Those same pastors and leaders helped to rebuild houses while theirs were gone. They kept doing what they did without complaining. Puerto Rican religious and civil institutions, the Puerto Rican diaspora, and people all over the U.S. and other countries have helped us rebuild our country. We have learned and confirmed the character of commitment and the tenacity of love. I call it Worms-like character, Worms-like resilience.⁵ The power to confess our faith.

If I remember correctly, the night between Martin Luther's two interrogations at the Diet of Worms was a difficult one. That night was filled with nightmares and demons. His life was at stake. Can you imagine that night? Your life will be decided by what you say. You must recant all what you have done in your ministry and teaching vocation to survive. You are in the eye of the hurricane that has touched land furiously. The winds are like turbines in your backyard that do not let you sleep. Can you imagine that night? Luther woke up and stood up: "Here I stand. I can do nothing else." When God's smile is the source of our life, hurricanes and life-threatening experiences are character-building. Resilience, tenacity, and commitment are the building blocks of reconstruction.

Hope to Proclaim!

Proclamation without hope is *a noisy gong and a tinkling cymbal*. The rejoicing and the tenacity, the joyfulness and the resilience, the *parranda* and the character-building, all lead to proclamation. We gather and collect, we rearrange and create, we lament and rejoice. Preaching conveys courage and hope in the eye of a hurricane.

Every eighth day we come to worship. We confess our sin and all our sins; we sing, pray, and listen. The Word assumes and forgives as Word and Sacrament gather us to themselves. We speak the truth and celebrate. *The true treasure of the church is the most holy Gospel of the glory and grace of God*. Grace abides. Hope envisions future. A future for an island in the Caribbean. God's work. Our hands.

5. It was at Worms that Luther confessed his faith before the emperor.

4. See José Noguera and Victoria Sanabria's song "Con luz o con planta", <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jy-N8N01PeA>. Accessed March 20, 2019. The refrain says: "With electricity or a power plant, I will bring you parranda, with a candle or an oil lamp, I'll bring you this party."