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# Holy Space: Worship and Proclamation in the Liminal Space of Post-Disaster and Pre-Recovery

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When the storm has passed  
and the roads are tamed  
and we are the survivors  
of a collective shipwreck.  
—Alexis Valdes<sup>1</sup>

## BEFORE...

A typical day as a Presbyterian pastor contained appointments with people needing to process and pray with someone regarding life transitions and stressors: job dissatisfaction, the upcoming wedding, or the struggle of simultaneously caring for young children and aging parents. Time was carved out to read, reflect, and write the sermon or lesson plan for Sunday. Hospital visits were made in the afternoon and committee meetings in the evening. Dressing for work meant a well-tailored suit and heels, with careful attention to hair and makeup.

## AND AFTER...

A typical day included showing up early to a congregant's house to help sort through the soggy, putrid-smelling remnants of what was their life's treasures to see what could be salvaged before taking what could not be salvaged to the road. A sledgehammer and crowbar were common work accessories to gut houses, removing all the moldy and warped flooring and drywall. Dressing for work meant worn-out jeans, a t-shirt, and tennis shoes, with careful attention to sunscreen application and having enough water and KN-95 masks.

While no two individuals' "before" and "after" narrative is the same, this snapshot is a glimpse into what life was like for me as a pastor serving in New Orleans when Hurricane Katrina made landfall on August 29, 2005. Charley, Katrina, Harvey, Irma, Michael, and Ian: these named hurricanes of the past two decades are a representation of many others that have wrought catastrophic destruction on entire communities. Each of these storms decimated homes and businesses, as well as entire community infrastructures as wind and water destroyed life and property.

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1. Alexis Valdes, "Esperanza" (2020). English translation by America Valdes, Nilo Cruz, and Alexis Valdes for *Let Us Dream* by Pope Francis.

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## Trauma's impact on individuals and communities

Traumatic events affect one's physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual wellbeing. When people experience trauma, it is common that life is divided into before and after the traumatic event. Hurricane Katrina was a traumatic event, as all hurricanes and other natural disasters have the potential to be. Carolyn Yoder, a licensed clinical therapist who specializes in trauma healing, outlines traumatic events as those events which "involve threats to life or our bodies; produce terror and feelings of helplessness; overwhelm an individual or group's ability to cope or respond to the threat; lead to a sense of loss of control; challenge a person's or group's sense that life is meaningful and orderly."<sup>2</sup> In addition to the traumatic event itself, there is also the resulting experience of trauma. Kai Erikson, a sociologist who has worked and written extensively on the social impact of catastrophic events, offers a definition of the experience of trauma: "Trauma is generally taken to mean a blow to the tissues of the body—or more frequently now, to the tissues of the mind—that results in injury or some other disturbance."<sup>3</sup> Even this short definition of trauma alludes to the evolution of the understanding of trauma. Trauma can have an ongoing impact

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2. Carolyn Yoder, *The Little Book of Trauma Healing: When Violence Strikes and Community Security Is Threatened*. (Intercourse, Pa.: Good Books, 2005), 7.

3. Kai Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," in Cathy Caruth, ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 183.

which continues past the conclusion of the traumatic event.

Trauma can disrupt, threaten, and even destroy an individual's physical safety, their trust in themselves and others, and the meaning they derive from life. The disruption, threat, and destruction to safety, trust, and meaning is found not only in the individuals who constitute a community, but also within the fabric of the community. It is helpful for pastors and preachers to be aware that trauma affects community just as powerfully as it affects the individual(s) within the community. Common reactions to communal trauma include shock, a sense of chaos, survivor guilt, and preoccupation with images of death and destruction.<sup>4</sup> "The experience of trauma at its worst," says Erikson, "can mean not only a loss of confidence in the self, but a loss of confidence in the surrounding tissue of family and community, in the structures of human government, in the larger logics by which humankind lives, in the ways of nature itself, and often (if this is really the final step in such a succession) in God."<sup>5</sup> Another aspect of communal trauma is the bringing together of people who have the shared experience of surviving a catastrophic event which can illicit feelings of goodwill and togetherness. There can be an overwhelming desire to do good that draws people together as an act of celebration for having survived.

### Worship and preaching in response to trauma

Worship is a resource to communities of faith. Worship is a pathway providing the opportunity for the community to begin a process of feeling safe, building trust, and processing meaning. Within worship, preaching as a mode of pastoral care can hold the necessary space in worship for the community to grieve, heal, and experience God's grace.

The ordered flow and cadence of worship will be familiar to participants who are regularly connected to and participating in the worshipping life of their congregation. By embracing the congregation's standard pattern of worship in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster the pastor offers those gathered much needed spiritual comfort food. Worship is spiritual comfort food, "providing a patterned, purposeful, predictable way of behaving in the midst of crisis, by symbolically focusing our attention upon norms, beliefs, and sentiments regarding our ultimate concerns, religious ritual gives us a way through crises that might otherwise overwhelm us."<sup>6</sup> Amid a situation in which re-gaining equilibrium, focus, and purpose is difficult, worship can be a healing and a stabilizing force that creates a feeling of safety for individuals feeling isolated and estranged by the experiences of individual and communal trauma.

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ship the sermon functions to bear witness to God's work to a particular people living in a particular time and place. In naming what God has done in the past and naming the realities of the present day (both in gratitude and lament), the sermon can point people toward a future that, through faith, contains hope. Due to the importance of context informing the content of a sermon and the connectedness of the community being foundational to a community's resiliency, when a community experiences the traumatic event of a natural disaster, the sermon must function both as a response to the natural disaster and to God's character and promises amid the community's experience of the trauma. What one knew to be true about oneself, one's community, the world, and God before the trauma is no longer trusted and often questioned after the trauma. Such attention can provide nurture, support, and encouragement for people living and grappling with shattered meaning, which is one of trauma's effects.

A preacher crafting a sermon for a congregation experiencing trauma from a natural disaster will be attentive to the objective of connection to a community experiencing fractured meaning to reflect and draw upon the community's resilience in both the function and form of the sermon. *How* a sermon is communicated and delivered carries theological implications of similar significance as *what* a sermon says—both of which can work for or against the preacher's primary objective with the sermon. One of the voices currently researching and writing in the areas of trauma-informed and trauma-responsive preaching in relationship to collective trauma is Dr. Kimberly Wagner, Assistant Professor of Preaching at Princeton Theological Seminary. Her work on collective trauma speaks a helpful and informative word to pastors ministering to a community directly affected by natural disaster. Dr. Wagner prompts pastors leading worship in the aftermath of a traumatic event,

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4. Shoshanna Felman, "Education and Crisis, or the Vicissitudes of Teaching," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 28.

5. Erikson, "Notes on Trauma and Community," 198.

6. William H. Willimon, *Worship as Pastoral Care* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1982), 100.

to lead worship in such a way that welcomes the fragments of people's experience without trying to immediately put those fragments back together into a smooth, meaning-making narrative. We might preach in a way — in sermon content *and* sermon form — that honors, models, and opens up opportunities for people's fragments of incomprehensible and presently meaningless experience to be recognized and blessed as not beyond the love and hope of God.<sup>7</sup>

Though the word "grief" isn't explicitly stated, I would argue that when we welcome people and their fragments, we are doing the work of pastoral care by creating space for the grief they carry because of the trauma to be voiced and processed. Grief is the response to loss, often marked by deep sadness. While the experience of trauma is not solely defined as grief, grief is often part of a person's experience of trauma.

Mourning and grieving do not always come easily or naturally, particularly in the immediate aftermath of a natural disaster when there is so much destruction to the physical realm. Tending to the emotional and spiritual losses can be pushed aside when having to deal with the chaos of loss of electricity, water, and communication lines along with damage to the physical structures of homes and businesses, if not their complete loss. Worship and preaching can assist in facilitating a helpful and healthy processing of one's experience of trauma.

As spiritual and community leaders, it will help pastors to remember that the "fear of being overwhelmed; inability to face what happened; threats to the known 'order'; truth that is unknowable; trauma that is ongoing; and inability to carry out usual rituals" are all obstacles to one's ability to grieve or mourn.<sup>8</sup> Worship, in both its content of witness and its ordered structure, can facilitate movement through these obstacles toward a space that not only permits but invites, encourages, and supports grieving and mourning, thus allowing movement toward healing. Grieving and mourning make way for healing because these acts "unfreeze(s) our body, mind, and spirit so we can think creatively, feel fully, and move forward again."<sup>9</sup> Worship creates space for communal connection and makes space for grieving both of which help foster community resilience.<sup>10</sup>

Although seventeen and a half years have passed since Hurricane Katrina made landfall in New Orleans, there are several distinctive moments in the immediate aftermath of the hurricane and

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subsequent levee break that I remember with such whole-bodied clarity it is as if they happened yesterday. One of those memories comes from the latter part of the week after the storm. When the hurricane made landfall on Sunday, August 29, I was safely sheltered at a friend's home in Birmingham, Alabama. When I awoke in Birmingham that Tuesday morning to the news that the levees had broken and the city of New Orleans was flooding, I needed the sanctuary of family and drove to Southwest Florida to shelter with them. The only distinctive memory I have from the latter part of that week is a conversation with a mentor who asked me what I needed. With a deep ache and a new overwhelming clarity, I replied, "I need it to be Sunday so I can be in church." I knew of course that I could go to my family's local church at any time to sit and be in the space for prayer and reflection. One never needs to be in a specific space to have access to God; God hears our prayers no matter where we are located. Intellectually I knew this, and yet what I longed for in the moment was to be in worship. I needed the community of faith to gather so I would be surrounded by people who could give expression to and bear witness to the faith I held but was at a loss to give expression to myself in the moment. When Sunday arrived and the community, led by the pastors and musicians, worshipped God, I exhaled for what felt like the first time in a week. The congregation sang songs of praise, prayed words of confession, petition, and thanksgiving, and listened to the Word of God through Scripture and proclamation. I breathed and cried. For the first time in a week, an overwhelming sense of peace washed over me; there, surrounded by the community of faith worshipping God and with the soundtrack of their prayers, songs, and proclamation, the space for me to breathe and cry was created. What I learned through this experience, the people of God have known intuitively, if not cognitively, all along.

### The gift of lament

Scripture models lament, the practice of giving voice to grief. Throughout scripture, lament is seen in the psalms, the book of Lamentations, and narratives found in both the Old and New Testaments. The Book of Psalms contains individual and communal

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7. Kimberly Wagner, "What Do We Preach? Trauma, Lament, and Social Action," *Call to Worship* 52.3 (February 2019): 8.

8. Yoder, *Trauma Healing*, 37.

9. Yoder, *Trauma Healing*, 35.

10. Jack Saul, writing for mental health professionals about large scale trauma, defines community resilience as, a "community's capacity, hope and faith to withstand major trauma and loss, overcome adversity, and to prevail, usually with increased resources, competence, and connectedness." Saul makes the case that a community's resilience is found within the connectedness of the community itself. Jack Saul, *Collective Trauma, Collective Healing: Promoting Community Resilience in the Aftermath of Disaster* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 8.

laments that give voice to a variety of contexts and seasons of life. What we find within those psalms is not simply grief, but often movement. Psalm 10 is an example of this movement where the author begins from a place of despair and devastation in which God is questioned, “Why, O Lord, do you stand far off?” (v. 1). The psalmist recounts the ways of the wicked: “Their ways prosper at all times; your judgments are on high, out of their sight,” (v.5a) accusing God of allowing the prosperity of the wicked and their preying on the vulnerable. Yet, the psalmist also gives expression to knowing and trusting the character of God to take action, and commands God to do so now, “Rise up, O Lord; O God, lift up your hand; do not forget the oppressed” (v. 12). The psalmist bears witness to God’s prior activity recounting, “But you do see! Indeed you note trouble and grief, that you may take it into your hands; the helpless commit themselves to you; you have been the helper of the orphan” (v. 14). The psalm of lament concludes by trusting God’s future action, “O Lord, you will hear the desire of the meek; you will strengthen their heart, you will incline your ear to do justice for the orphan and the oppressed, so that those from earth may strike terror no more” (vs. 13-14). These words praise God and give voice to the psalmist’s faith in God. Lament is a vulnerable expression of faith that is raw, honest, and rooted in relationship with God.

Lament is a scriptural resource and practical tool for congregations and their people living in the immediate aftermath of a catastrophic natural disaster. Individuals and communities experiencing trauma can benefit from this faithful expression, for lament is a tangible act of faith which trusts and relies on God to hear and respond to the suffering of God’s people. Biblical lament is not a private act, but rather an accessible tool for preaching and worship. Incorporating these scriptural resources into the liturgy of the worship service provides the gathered people with the language and words to express their questions, doubts, and fears when they may otherwise be at a loss for words due to the experience of trauma.

### **Worship leaders and preachers as co-sufferers within the community**

When a catastrophic hurricane or other natural disaster strikes a community, the preacher, who is a part of the community, arrives wounded, broken, and traumatized as well. As a result, the one responsible for the order, design, and leadership of the worship service may him/herself be at a loss for words, unable to make sense in their own mind let alone actually speak words aloud that will bring hope or consolation to those coming to worship. The gift of biblical lament is a sign of, and bears witness to, the truth that God comes before us, travels alongside us, and goes ahead of us—even amid our suffering and experiences of trauma. Preachers and worship leaders who identify as co-sufferers with the wider community post-disaster model for the community a relationship to and with God that trusts the promises of faith in chaotic times and allows the liturgy, the work of the people, to fully reflect the current reality of the people’s context. The presence of lament in

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**The presence of lament in scripture is an invitation both to those who read scripture and design worship to use and build upon these words as the community gathers following a disaster. Facilitating the work of the people to gather, to lament, and to journey through the disaster together, is the primary task of the pastor in the aftermath of trauma.**

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Holding together what is known about trauma theory and worship practices, preaching and worship may be used as a mode of pastoral care in congregations whose communities have experienced acute trauma from natural disasters holding the necessary space for the community to grieve, lament, heal, and experience God’s grace. Preaching, bearing witness to God’s work to a particular people in a particular time and place, is a holy and awesome responsibility in the best of times. Pastors spend hours each week in prayer, study, discernment, and writing to prepare a sermon. This preparation time is in addition to the extensive education requirement of mainline denominations for ordination into ministry. In the wake of a natural disaster, many preachers must prepare a sermon with a lack of access to the time or resources to which they are accustomed. Spending ten to twenty hours per week in sermon preparation is a luxury no longer afforded in the aftermath of a natural disaster. Days and nights are often filled with meeting the physical needs of survival and safety for self, family, and congregation. For the preacher to bear witness to God’s work in the world, with authenticity and integrity, to a community reeling from the destruction and chaos brought on by the disaster, they must not proclaim a false word of certainty detached from the reality of the present situation. Preaching is the product of the intersection of life experiences and the interpretation of God’s Word; preaching is not detached contemplation of God’s Word. The intersection of life experiences and God’s Word can at times seem incompatible. As Wagner rightly articulates, “Such an in-between space calls for

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11. Carla Grosch-Miller, et al., eds. “Enabling the work” in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations*, (New York: Routledge, 2021), 149.

an in-between word—a word located in the eschatological tension between what has been broken or lost, on the one hand, and the anticipation of God’s promised hope, on the other. . . . Such preaching lives in the tension between brokenness and hope; between death and resurrection; between loss and redemption.”<sup>12</sup>

The first step in embracing this tension is for worship services and sermons to name and lament the reality of the traumatic experience. Naming and lamenting the reality of the experiences of trauma through preaching is a primary task of pastoral care following a traumatic event; it is an act which creates a communal bond that pushes against the isolation and disruption of trauma. Naming and lamenting may be the primary work of preaching and worship immediately following the trauma event; it is what the community needs to build resilience and move forward with intentionality toward the possibility and promise of healing. The preacher may do this work of naming and lamenting on behalf of the people, which both models and gives permission for them to continue the work outside of the worship context, or the preacher may invite the people to do this work together as a community in the sermonic moment. Having one’s experience seen and heard, giving voice to one’s suffering and fears is an essential step of grieving in order to move to healing. Depending on the size of the body gathered for worship, this may be done collectively as a whole or in smaller groups. It may be helpful to invite people to share about the experience of the traumatic event from their own unique perspective: *where were you; what did you do; how did you feel?* This form of sharing creates a bond within the community and counteracts the isolation often brought on by traumatic events.

In tending to the community through worship and sermon, it will be important for the pastor to identify with and acknowledge their own place in the suffering of the community. We do not help ourselves or the community by pretending our role as a faith leader distances us or exempts us from the impact of the traumatic event. Joni Sancken suggests:

Preachers cannot pretend to be dispassionate when common shock strikes close to us. When we are aware of our own distress around an event, naming our involvement and connection can help our listener understand where we are coming from. Preaching itself becomes a moment of compassionate witness when we name the pain and brokenness, and offer examples of God’s incremental grace and healing in the midst of loss and tragedy.<sup>13</sup>

It seems prudent to offer a word of caution about providing examples of God’s grace and healing in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event. Sermons are never able to resolve neatly the complexity of a broken world riddled with sin. The wake of a traumatic event is not the time to employ cheap grace. The key is

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Sermons are never able to resolve neatly the complexity of a broken world riddled with sin. The wake of a traumatic event is not the time to employ cheap grace. The key is *honest* grace—bearing witness to the small ways in which God is present and seen at work in the community and the world even among unbearable loss and devastation. Honest grace in no way seeks to nullify the losses or erase the pain. Honest grace is the balm for the wounded soul.

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### Guidance for worship leaders and preachers

A traumatic event will disrupt whatever plans and preparations a pastor has made for worship and preaching prior to the event. Sometimes the pastor has days to pivot while other times mere hours. No matter the amount of time, pivoting is necessary for the pastor to lead worship and preach God’s Word to a particular people in a particular time and place. Lectionary preachers may be tempted to leave behind the lectionary text for the day, and those in the midst of a sermon series may need to alter course in order for a more appropriate and helpful reading from scripture to be read and heard by those assembling for worship. Pastors need to give themselves permission and be at peace about these changes even if the service or sermon is unpolished or imperfect. Likewise, if the “perfect” word from scripture for the situation is not making itself known to the preacher, they need to make peace with that as well and trust that the Holy Spirit will bring forth the word the people need to hear, no matter which text is selected.

The work of trusting the Holy Spirit to be at work within and among us and the community is work that needs to be done

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12. Kimberly Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Violent Trauma* (Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 95-96.

13. Joni S. Sancken, *Words That Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019), 97.

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14. “There is a Balm in Gilead” from *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), 394.

in the preaching moment as much as in the worship planning and text selection moment. For preachers in mainline Protestant traditions in which preaching is a well-prepared and thought-out moment in worship, not an extemporaneous one, this may prove challenging. Preachers may find comfort and encouragement when Sancken suggests, “Not being perfectionistic about the sermon and occasionally allowing ‘the seams’ to show can be more invitational to members with messy lives. In the immediate wake of local or broader traumatic events, listeners would rather have a relevant word that speaks to what is happening in our world than a perfect and well-researched sermon.”<sup>15</sup> The aim of an excellent crisis sermon is to be a cup of cold water for someone who is absolutely parched standing out in the hot noon-day sun. Water may not be the most extravagant drink and it likely is not served in the finest glassware you have to offer, but extravagance and finery is not what is needed. The thirsty do not care if the water comes from the tap and is served in a chipped glass or paper cup. What matters is that their thirst is seen and, in response to being seen, they are offered something which will quench the need.

Worship and preaching provide the space and opportunity for communities to grieve, heal, and experience God’s grace when acute natural disasters result in communal trauma. Practically speaking, what does this look like?

- Gather for worship in the space and at the time the community is accustomed to as soon as it is safe to do so. This provides continuity and familiarity.
- Use the familiar pattern of worship known by the congregation. The familiar pattern provides comfort and encouragement despite the fear of the unknown.
- Be authentic! Preachers, name the experience of trauma and acknowledge you are a co-sufferer with the community. Are you at a loss for words? Say so. Are you unable to make sense of what has occurred? Tell them. Model the truth that God comes before us, travels alongside us, and goes ahead of us—even amid our suffering and experiences of trauma.

Preachers and worship leaders who identify as co-sufferers with the wider community post-disaster model for the community a relationship to and with God that trusts the promises of faith in chaotic times and allows the liturgy, the work of the people, to fully reflect the current reality of the people’s context.

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15. Sancken, *Words that Heal*, 80.