



LIGHTSTOCK/NEELY WANG

Introduction to This Issue

We are all living, teaching, ministering, and serving in challenging days. Like the messengers in the first chapter of Job, it sometimes feels like traumatic events are tripping over one another to arrive on our doorsteps or come across our news feeds. We live in pandemic-scarred days where we mourn the loss of over 6.8 million people worldwide, struggle to find a new normal, and exist in the uncertainty of what might be next. At the same time, in the U.S. (as of this writing) we have experienced more reported mass shootings than we have had days in the year. We grieve and grow angry at the ongoing reports of gun violence where people's lives are transformed or cut short in schools, churches, supermarkets, dance clubs, family homes, and city streets. Hate and hurt seem to rear their ugly heads at every turn. Prejudice, discrimination, and inequity infect our society and systems. Police brutality and anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation stand as signposts of larger, ongoing, historical and systemic traumatic realities. And, amid all this, exist individuals dealing with personal trauma from abuse, neglect, assault, traumatic illness, or traumatic loss. These are, to put it mildly, challenging days.

It is into this reality that clergy and leaders are called upon to care for communities contending with collective trauma that pulls at the fabric of communal relationships and identity, even as they care for individuals journeying through traumatic impact and recovery. As I suggest in the Introduction to *Fractured Ground*:

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Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma, during trauma-soaked seasons such as these, ministers and community leaders may find themselves at a loss for how to respond. After all, “trauma not only steals language but also seeks to silence the community’s meaning makers... Trauma threatens to throw into question all that we have known to be true and the ways we have normally navigated the world.”¹ In these unpredictable times for which we

1. Kimberly Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2023), 5-6.

could never be fully prepared, ministers, preachers, and teachers are being asked to journey alongside their communities through overlapping and interacting traumatic realities. We are figuring out, together, how to be disciples and faithful leaders in times we could not have anticipated and amid communities responding inconsistently to unfolding traumatic realities. Even more, clergy, teachers, and community leaders are not immune to the traumatic impact. They experience these same traumatic realities with their communities, even as they are called to serve.

However, ministers, teachers, and community leaders are not without resources and support. An increasing number of scholars, practitioners, and community leaders are taking seriously the reality of trauma, its impact on individuals and communities, and ways to foster trauma recovery and nurture resilience. Leaning into theological foundations, the biblical witness, historical memory, and contemporary theory, we are beginning to piece together tools for ministry amid our present reality. In this issue of *Currents in Theology and Mission* readers will find a variety of rich and insightful articles from professors, preachers, practitioners, and leaders who have first-hand experience with individuals and communities experiencing trauma. My greatest hope is that this issue will be an additional resource for all who are seeking to faithfully lead and live in these unsteady times. While each of these authors brings different insights, experiences, and expertise, they share a passion in thinking about the multi-faceted realities of trauma, even as they lean into a desire for repair and resilience.

“Trauma” is a loose term that is often hard to define because of the breadth of its usage and its nature to resist comprehension or language. Even when used precisely and well, “trauma” describes the response to a variety of events—everything from mass shootings to natural disasters to abuse or assault to traumatic loss to historical/cultural traumas such as racism, sexism, LGBTQIA+ discrimination, and white supremacy. Even more, “trauma” seeks to describe that which escapes encapsulation in language or our full understanding. As foundational trauma scholar Cathy Caruth writes, trauma “brings us to the limits of our understanding” and anything we can grasp about the nature of trauma is acquired only because we are “listening through the radical disruption and gaps of traumatic experience.”² So, I am grateful for the many listeners and interpreters of trauma who are at work today, and particularly for the contributors to this *Currents* issue.

Nicole Partin Abdnour begins the conversation, bringing together trauma research and personal experience as a pastor who has accompanied congregations through hurricanes, including serving a church in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina. Abdnour offers a foundational understanding of the impact of trauma from natural disasters and the ways the patterns of ministry necessarily change for church leaders. She then considers how preaching and worship might shift in the immediate aftermath of a traumatic event such as a natural disaster in order to help the

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community grieve, engage the gift of lament, and experience the hope of God’s presence amid suffering. With an eye toward the practitioner, Abdnour ends her article by offering guidance to and blessing upon those worship leaders and preachers accompanying communities through mass traumatic events, recognizing them as “co-sufferers” with the congregation.

Building on the conversation around the role of worship in relation to trauma, **Brooke Petersen** invites readers to consider the impact of worship and ritual leadership among those experiencing religious trauma. Focusing on the sacrament of communion, Petersen, John H. Tietjen Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care at Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, first offers an understanding of spiritual abuse and religious trauma, which she defines as “an internalized fragmentation that occurs when one’s relationship with God and a religious community is traumatically destroyed or lost.” With these understandings in place, Petersen invites leaders to embody “trauma-informed ritual leadership” that offers explicit welcome, pays attention to and holds space for overwhelmed bodies, and supports the growth and theological imagination of those who carry the weight of religious trauma.

Moving from sacraments toward the preaching task, **Anne Turner**, Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Alexandria, Virginia, invites readers to consider how they might preach in trauma-aware ways for those in the pews who are experiencing personal trauma, whether or not leaders are aware. Turner explores both the potential and limitation of words for the trauma survivor and the preacher. However, convicted by the necessity of preaching that takes trauma seriously, Turner studies, in conversation with members of her congregation, how three different sermon forms—didactic preaching, inductive preaching, and ritual preaching—might acknowledge trauma and develop resiliency.

Grounded in ministerial experience and a desire to care for traumatized communities, **Allie Rosner Bass** asks readers to consider trauma and pastoral care in relation to populations and individuals experiencing homelessness. Though currently a PhD student in Biblical Studies at Princeton Theological Seminary, Rosner Bass served for nine years as a United Methodist pastor in Arlington, Virginia, where she worked closely with the homeless population in the Rosslyn neighborhood, or, what she calls, her “weekday congregation.” Rosner Bass begins by offering a glimpse into both the trauma that *leads to* homelessness as well as

2. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

the trauma of homelessness. Reflecting on her own experiential learning in conversation with trauma literature, Rosner Bass offers guidance for how pastors and community members might better receive and care for those traumatized individuals experiencing homelessness, particularly offering care and dignity amid incoherent narratives and complicated conditions.

Coming from both his academic work and experience as a veteran and army reserve chaplain, **Joshua Morris**, Assistant Professor of Practical Theology at Union Presbyterian Seminary (Charlotte), invites readers to pay attention to another kind of trauma, moral injury. With an urgent desire to help congregations engage in solidarity with military veterans and servicemembers (rather than just thanking them for their service and moving on), Morris guides readers through an understanding of the nature and history of moral injury as a concept and traumatic reality. He then encourages readers to consider how moral injury may be a category of trauma helpful beyond the military experience. Taking all of this together, Morris returns to the congregational setting where he encourages care for those experiencing moral injury through solidarity and reintegration.

Adding to the breadth of trauma categories and experiences, **Lisa Cleath**, Assistant Professor of Old Testament at Princeton Theological Seminary, invites readers to better understand historical trauma and its implications for biblical interpretation. In engaging the discussion of narrative resilience in historical trauma scholarship, Cleath suggests that interpreters and communities might better understand the multi-vocal nature of the Hebrew Bible as a response to the historical traumatic experience of colonization. As such, these variegated narrations in Scripture might not be seen as problematic, but as a discourse that opens new understandings of trauma and resilience as embodied in the biblical witness.

Nick Peterson, Assistant Professor of Homiletics and Worship at Christian Theological Seminary, invites readers to dig deeper on the historical trauma of racism and anti-blackness, tracing “black trauma” from the Transatlantic Slave Trade through its “many afterlives” including Jim Crow laws, police brutality, inequity in healthcare, and the prison industrial complex. With a desire to think about care for black people and the needed shift in society’s construction and (re)enforcement of valuing certain bodies over others, Peterson turns to the Scripture, particularly considering the incarnation of Christ and Christ’s godforsakenness on the cross. In a robust and reorienting reading of the crucifixion narratives, Peterson offers initial suggestions for how we might attend to grief and care for black people experiencing the historical reality of black trauma.

Finally, **Rebecca W. Poe Hays**, Assistant Professor of Christian Scriptures at George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University, invites readers to look toward models of resiliency in the psalms, particularly Psalm 96. Tracing the evidence of trauma and “shadows of injustice” that mark and shape the poetry, Hays considers how both the linguistic structure of the psalm and its history of reception nod to how communities might imagine

While all these authors take seriously the realities and impacts of trauma, it is clear they are also all committed to repair and resilience. In that spirit, I am grateful to bring this collection together with hopes that it might provide tools for trauma response and resilience for all who are called to care for the world’s hurting, hungry, and oppressed.

processing trauma and cultivating resilience. Taking a careful and engaging journey through Psalm 96, Hays ultimately invites readers to recognize how not only the language of the psalm, but the act of re-narrating and communal singing exemplifies the kind of communal work needed for healing and resilience.

As mentioned above, while all these authors take seriously the realities and impacts of trauma, it is clear they are also all committed to repair and resilience. In that spirit, I am grateful to bring this collection together with hopes that it might provide tools for trauma response and resilience for all who are called to care for the world’s hurting, hungry, and oppressed. It is hard work, and we engage this work in challenging times. But we do not enter into this alone: we trust that the Spirit of God, who called life “out of the depths” may use our imperfect offerings for holy and redeeming work amid trauma.

Kimberly R. Wagner, guest editor
Assistant Professor of Preaching
Princeton Theological Seminary

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From the General Co-Editors

I (Kathleen Billman) had the opportunity to learn about the important scholarship and vibrant teaching ministry of Kimberly R. Wagner when we served together on the faculty of the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago. Dr. Wagner's deep compassion for individuals and communities shattered by traumatic events and her skill in teaching students how to practice trauma-informed preaching are making a profound difference in the lives of ministerial leaders and the communities they serve. Her recent book, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, is already stimulating deep conversations about how the church might respond to the enormous shock and horror that is depicted almost daily on our television and computer screens. Craig Nesson and I were delighted when Dr. Wagner agreed to serve as guest editor for an issue devoted to various dimensions of trauma-informed ministry, for which she gathered a web of experienced and dedicated scholars and ministers.

The **Currents Focus** feature articles both engage global and interfaith horizons. **Pintor Marihot Sitanggang** describes efforts at reconciliation and interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims in Indonesia under the guidance of Pancasila as ideology and with the motto *Bhineka Tunggal Ika* (unity in diversity). The author focuses on the encounter and the sense of reconciliation and interfaith dialogue between Christians and Muslims, based on the experience of living as a Christian among the largest Muslim population in the world. Interfaith dialogue remains a long journey in Indonesia, but the church works to promote it with all

established religions in Indonesia. Reconciliation and interfaith dialogue contribute to peace and harmony in society. **Sylvester O. Ngonga** investigates whether the God of the Luo people is the same as the Judeo-Christian God. He reflects on the worldview of the Luo people, the praxis of African Christian theology, and the biblical understanding of God to address contemporary African Christian mission endeavors. The article articulates an enduring perspective on the Luo people's ontology.

In the **Book Reviews**, our authors offer wisdom and thoughtful reflections on books of interest to our readers. The Book Review section provides direction for ongoing study and opportunity for continuing education.

Preaching Helps in this issue moves through the Sundays of Ordinary Time, from summer into fall. The introduction to these Sundays draws on the theme of trauma with a focus on the Indian Boarding Schools operated by the federal government and churches from 1879 to the present. Children who never attended these schools still speak of the generational trauma passed down from their grandparents and great-grandparents. Hopefully many preachers will read the essays in this issue especially since editor Kim Wagner has written a book about trauma and preaching.

We trust that the essays, together with Preaching Helps and Book Reviews in this July 2023 issue, will contribute richly to our readers' reflection and action for "such a time as this" (Esther 4:14).

Kathleen D. Billman and Craig L. Nesson
General Editors
Currents in Theology and Mission

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