

For the Living of These Days: From the Front Lines of Ministry

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With Kristy Farber, Matt Fitzgerald, Sarah Hayden, Jennifer Maxell, Adam Mixon,
and Sam Wells

In her astonishing life, Pauli Murray, the twentieth-century American civil rights activist, lawyer, women's rights activist, author, and Episcopal priest, published just one volume of poetry. In the midst of "Dark Testament: Verse 8," she writes,

Hope is a song in a weary throat.
Give me a song of hope
And a world where I can sing it.

Almost a year into our experiences with the global pandemic, every reader of these pages is well acquainted with a deep sense of weariness, along with a renewed urgency for the needs of our world. Searching for a song of hope has become an "other duties as may be assigned" item on every pastor's job description. Rather than describe what we already know, we thought it wise to hear some dispatches from the front lines of ministry as we prepare for a second season of Lent in this de-centered world. Six of our colleagues were generous to take a moment to report what they are experiencing and learning. The reports are about preaching, and also about ritual, justice, trust, and risk. From diverse ministry settings, each reflects a faithfulness and attention to the contours and challenges of ministry in the multiple crises and upheavals of this past year.

Like almost every preacher this year, March 2020 found Matt Fitzgerald having to adapt creatively and imaginatively to a new reality.

Matt Fitzgerald, senior pastor of St Paul's United Church of Christ, Chicago (www.spucc.org)

I used to preach in a rat-a-tat style, full of asides and long sentences. But in my current church, the ceiling stretches toward the heavens. The room echoes. I preach in a loud voice at a deliberate pace, heavy with repetition. I have become intense. I wave my arms for emphasis. I crack jokes to get some warmth across. When the pandemic struck, we leapt to video. I started preaching from my office. My style looked bizarre on an iPod screen. The format calls for Mr. Rogers, and I had become Rev. Mussolini. I felt for Kimberly Guilfoyle when she spoke at the Republican National Convention. Her content repulsed me, but I sympathized with her approach. She was going for it! Kimberly, I know your pain. You are not the only person to bomb while hollering applause lines at a camera in an empty room. I've done it multiple Sundays in a row.

I don't know any preachers who preach regularly and think they're bad at it. Self-delusion helps us step into the pulpit. The camera kills the lie. I readjusted. Six months into the pandemic, I sit in a comfortable chair and bring the camera as close as I can. I try to speak gently. I don't tell as many jokes, and I illustrate my efforts

with photographs and paintings. I am calm.

I don't know if it's working. How can I spark a response to revelation when I am in the room alone? Then again, how could I ever do it? I remind myself of what Karl Barth said: "As ministers we must speak of God. We are human, however, and so cannot speak of God. We ought therefore to recognize both our obligation and our inability and by that very recognition give God the glory." So I keep preaching, giving God the glory, wincing as I watch myself.

Mark Ramsey

In our daily work with The Ministry Collaborative—encompassing work with 600+ pastors and congregations across 21 denominations (and non-denominational churches), an awareness has emerged that the pandemic has not introduced much that is new. It has, however, revealed many things that were just under the surface and accelerated every trend that was already at work in recent years. That has increased the pressure in many areas of ministry, but it is also good news where the global upheaval has aided diverse voices to claim long-delayed attention. We cannot separate the hard terrain of 2020 from the renewed attention and striving for racial justice and equity.

Jennifer Maxell, co-pastor of Breakthrough Fellowship (AME), Atlanta (<https://breakthroughfellowship.org>)

The Breakthrough Fellowship is a medium size church that was planted 10 years ago after being birthed as a Bible study in our home by my husband Rev. Charles A. Maxell, Jr. and me. Before the pandemic, our church was engaged in looking for a new location to worship, as we had outgrown our current location. Six months later and we are still discerning where God would have us go, which has added an additional layer of uncertainty as we navigate the issues of reopening and connecting with our members.

As a primarily African American congregation, the past six months have been a time of pain and frustration as we have navigated the increased risk and illness of our members to COVID 19 in conjunction with the latest instances of racial injustice. Our motto is "All About God. All About People," which has manifested in a strong emphasis on community outreach and justice work. While we have hosted several virtual town halls with key stakeholders in our community (ex. Smyrna Police Chief, Smyrna School Board Members, etc.), it has been a challenge to galvanize our congregation in this season. Currently, we are actively engaged with Black Church PAC to get our members and those in our community to the polls. As a newer worshipping community, building culture is always a constant as is managing a shallow organizational structure. As this time of dislocation persists, these two factors are becoming more problematic even as we seek to shore them up.

Sara Hayden, host of the New Way podcast and director of apprenticeships and residencies for 1001 New Worshipping Communities movement (<https://www.presbyterianmission.org/ministries/1001-2/our-team/sara-hayden-bio/>)

Six months into the COVID-19 reality in the USA, the 1001 New Worshipping Communities movement of the PCUSA has celebrated the ordinations of not one but three leaders to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament...via Zoom. April Alkema,

resident and co-pastor at Woven, kicked us off in late March as eight people stood six feet apart in the church sanctuary in Fresno, California, and the rest of us watched online, each at home in our own personal square-shaped sacred space. April placed her own red stole, a gift from the church, over her shoulders. I recall being moved by the symbolism, her profound choice to do ministry in this time, when words and action and truth hang in fragile balance.

During the short service, two members of Woven led us in song from their living room couch. Several young kids watched the whole thing, tucked under their guardian's arm. April's mom, not able to be in California, beamed proudly. People "attended" April's ordination that would have never been able to otherwise—a grandmother, someone who was sick, little children, people from her hometown and those from throughout the presbytery she now serves. We saw one another's living rooms/bedrooms/makeshift offices and backyards, and the everyday stuff of life—cats, dishes, board games, the remnants of online school. Some people had made a little sacred space for the occasion: flowers, a chalice, a paten, a cross. Somehow, each little window was a glimpse into the life we have been dealt this particular year and a beautiful nod to the brave attempts to do the best we could with the strange tools God saw fit to give us for every time and circumstance.

The ordinand and the commission must have empathized with those of us on Zoom, knowing that a captive audience on Zoom does not make a passive one. After being charged, the Rev. Alkema approached the camera and offered us each communion, by name, and we accepted and partook with the bread/graham crackers, etc. that we had prepared for the occasion of her ordination. I remember, most notably April saying, "Mom, this is the Body of Christ broken for you." We were privileged in a way we would not have been in person to witness the ways in which our lives are intertwined with April's life. We witnessed the impact of our lives on the journey of faith in a way that was as personal and profound as I have seen in any "in-person" ordination.

This is an exhausting time for all human beings, and in particular ministry leaders. If you're reading this issue of *Journal for Preachers*, you have a million reasons to be depleted and tired, not to mention the reasons that have nothing to do with pastoral ministry! Good job making it this far without quitting. Pastors clamor to respond to and simultaneously become exhausted by demands to return to worship in person. We recognize that many of our faithful pew dwellers—for all their time spent in church—have no idea what to do with themselves when the world is falling apart and reorienting—when the sanctuary doors are closed and locked.

We Protestants, in particular, take pride, and joy, by experiencing rituals collectively as one church. At times we've avoided (denied?) baptisms and eucharist in more personal occasions (a birthday party, a hospital bed) despite our polity and human empathy allowing for such circumstances. Some in the church continue to feel shaky about allowing the eucharist via zoom and wary about backyard baptisms, preferring to host once again a party that occurs on our terms, in our buildings, in our sanctuaries.

I remember once saying "no" to a baptism of someone who wasn't comfortable being up front in church; new to the faith, she wanted to be baptized at home with her family and close friends. That person left the church and never got baptized. I wish I'd had the courage to offer that baptism in her home; there were myriad possibilities

I couldn't see at the time and millions of reasons to go ahead with it. Now, thanks to 2020, I've celebrated both the eucharist and baptism via Zoom, and thanks to the ingenuity and "for such a time as this-ness" of a handful of new worshipping community leaders, I've celebrated three ordinations—April's, Riley's, and Libby's—as well. The rituals never felt out of place. And while there's no place I'd rather be on Christmas Eve than a candlelit sanctuary, and no sound I'd rather hear than brass trumpets on Easter morning (some things just can't happen on Zoom), I can't wait to see the ways we invest our energy, intelligence, imagination, and love to practice our way into a more faithful church and world to come.

Mark Ramsey

Preaching and ritual, justice embodied in risk and trust, the need for connection and the new opportunities to reach beyond our well-chosen and comfortable boundaries, all of these are present in ministry right now—and yes, in revealing and accelerating forms. For all the expressed yearning of many to "get back to normal," I think we are hearing increasing realization that "normal" will not be a "return." But there are miles to go on this journey, I suspect. Adam Mixon testifies to these trends.

Adam Mixon, pastor of Zion Spring Baptist Church, Birmingham, Alabama (<https://www.zionsbconline.com>)

At our recent church council meeting, I asked this question: What's going on? I framed our meeting around the questions about what has been lost, what assumptions we made at the onset of the pandemic, and what we see that is emerging.

Initially we talked about the very real loss of life associated with Covid. There are several families that have been directly impacted by the disease. The grief over not being "present" with loved ones, not being able to make hospital visits, the strange way we're having to do funerals. We talked about missing the time we spent together several times a week, whether in prayer, study, or worship. I sensed a longing to get back to that. ("I was glad when they said unto me, let us go to the house of the LORD"). But there was also the acknowledgement of the tremendous risks associated with gathering, especially in a community that looks like ours.

The grief shifted organically into an amusingly different type of conversation about "what has been lost" to us thinking and reflecting on "what is trying to emerge." It was exciting and funny. Our congregation has surprised me by being so resilient. We are no strangers to struggles, but I am flabbergasted at the faithfulness in study, prayer, and giving that has persisted. Our virtual gatherings and small groups are flourishing. Our weekly prayer services are well-attended, and our reach has extended well beyond our geography. It's crazy! People (out of a sense of spiritual longing or disillusionment with the current social climate) are longing for connections, and finding them, in this virtual spiritual community!

Spontaneously the conversation became a celebration of some of the "stuff we lost" but we are actually glad to be rid of. The burden of a whole lot of our religious experience has some performative aspects—it's exhausting, unnecessary, and we are happy to be free of much of that. The weight of "going through the motions," the sight-seeing, we are all enjoying being free of these things. This celebration of our liberation, however, is set against the backdrop of our initial assumptions that pandemic was a blip. This is not a blip; this is a shift—a radical reorientation—rooted

in the forced assessment of our values exposed by this crisis. We have been forced to come to grips with where we were lacking, while embracing those things of real substance, the stuff that really matters.

As to what emerges, we are on an adventure, a scary, exhilarating, wildly fulfilling journey, and we have no idea where it's going to lead us, but we are not going back. How we move forward will look very different than where we have been. Certainly some of our experiences and rituals will endure, but much of the ways we "do ministry" and imagine community are going to be different and broader: in-person and virtual... with decentralized "needs" and demands on clergy, with increased sensitivity toward what faithfulness to the gospel looks like in the public square (this is less of a stretch for us than it is a continuation). What was will be no more—good!

Mark Ramsey

Thousands of miles from Alabama, Sam Wells offers a brief reflection on "Preaching and Worship BC and AC," that seems to be in correspondence with these other reports.

Sam Wells, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, London, UK (<https://www.stmartin-in-the-fields.org>)

What's the difference between a Sunday worship service and a funeral? Everyone listens to the sermon at a funeral. A good funeral sermon, showing deep knowledge of the deceased, true understanding of the human condition, and a tender ability to demonstrate how the gospel embraces and transcends them both, is worth 20 regular sermons.

Since March it's been a funeral every Sunday morning. The three catastrophes of the pandemic—public health, economic meltdown, relentless social disruption—have concatenated to leave every congregation member sprawling. Add in Black Lives Matter, political turmoil, and ecological horrors, and it's amounted to a lyric, personal nightmare and an epic, public trauma.

Preaching has succeeded AC when it took this as an invitation to explore the deepest themes—fear, loss, pain, isolation, death—and interweave with them, through them, and finally beyond them the gospel of resurrection; yet in a minor key, already but not yet, irresistible but not tangible, yesterday and tomorrow but not always today. Worship has succeeded when it resisted the attempt to replicate online the familiar routines of BC liturgy, not just because online is a broader brushstroke than incarnate, but because right now incarnate worship is humbler, gentler, more tentative. The truth hasn't changed, but we speak it as a loved one speaks truth to a dying family member while holding her hand at a hospital bedside.

There's no land in sight, but we keep sailing. Whether incarnate or online, the point is not to decide between YouTube and livestream, purchase a better microphone, or get the social distancing measures perfectly correct. The point is what it's always been, only more so. See through life to Christ's life. See through death to Christ's death. See through Christ's resurrection to our resurrection. And trust the Holy Spirit to do the rest.

Mark Ramsey

Time in the Wilderness offers painful lessons and re-orientation...and also oppor-

tunities. With so many feeling loss, dislocation, and fear, even those who would never describe it so are looking for places of spiritual nurture and foundation. An opportunity for the church—if we can attend to it—is to re-introduce ourselves to our culture as a place of care, community, connection, depth, and equity. To offer, in Sam Wells’s words, to “see through life to Christ’s life..., see through death to Christ’s death..., see through Christ’s resurrection to our resurrection.” We can meet this moment with that deep spiritual sustenance, or we can continue our conversations of institutional maintenance. But the invitation of re-introduction becomes more prominent with each passing, painful, arduous day. Kristy Farber offers us a compelling image that is both summary of all these challenges, but also a profound hope and promise.

Kristy Farber, senior pastor, Mercer Island, Washington, Presbyterian Church (www.mipc.org)

At the end of a worship service last year in the sanctuary, during the final hymn, I stood at the front of the congregation watching a child walk the light of Christ out of the sanctuary. Rather than stop in the narthex and set the candle lighter down, he kept going. Out the doors of the building. Down the sidewalk by the parking lot. He just kept walking. I was so captivated, watching him, that I almost forgot to give the benediction. It was beautiful. In that moment, I saw the mission of the church. I watched as a child took the light of Jesus, the one who offers love, forgiveness, peace, and took it as far as he could go, embracing the world in front of him.

That image has grown stronger this year as we have not gathered together as a community in worship, yet our call to take the light of Jesus wherever we go has only deepened. While I am still preaching regularly and we are offering the nourishment of God’s word that way still, I have been watching how the pandemic has created much smaller ministries all over our area. I have been in awe of church staff and church members alike who are reading and proclaiming the Good News in unexpected places: in parking lots and at protests and in backyards and in our memorial garden and on zoom calls. The depth of our congregation to read and seek God’s word in this time has been profound, and it’s the place where I want to dive in and support and equip. I have been thinking about the ways people are taking the light of Christ and running with it.

At one point last year, a parent asked me, “How young is too young to carry the Christ candle?” I love that question. Sure, they were likely thinking about the risk of fire and small children. But there is a risk for anyone who takes the Christ candle into the world. The risk of encountering God in a new way. The risk of seeing the Kingdom of God in front of us. The risk of a world moving toward God’s peace and justice and wholeness. No one is too young. No one is too old. No one is too new. We are God’s people, called to bring God’s love and hope to the world.

Mark Ramsey

No attempt will be made in this piece to harmonize or summarize these important accounts from dedicated pastors and preachers who, like the readers of *JP*, are seeking to carry out their ministries with faithfulness and urgency. Part of their faithfulness is to not succumb to reducing or redirecting the complexity of the moment. Truly, ministry today is about proclamation and witness in vastly changed (and technologically challenging) circumstances. It is offering attention and witness to renewed calls for

justice in a politically fraught and culturally divided landscape. It includes attending to the grief, the uncertainty, the longing, the dislocation, the de-centering that has been revealed and accelerated. And it is about lifting up Christ, crucified and risen, in each new and often exhausting day—and offering that to our vulnerable world as generously as we can.

Hope is a song in a weary throat. A fuller context of Pauli Murray's verse gives larger perspective and content to the work ahead of us. Reading her words, I continue to think of the child carrying the light of Christ out of the church—and with that light, the song of hope, the song of faith, the song of kindness, and the yearning for the just and beloved community keeps going, and going, and going.

Hope is a crushed stalk
Between clenched fingers.
Hope is a bird's wing
Broken by a stone.
Hope is a word in a tuneless ditty —
A word whispered with the wind,
A dream of forty acres and a mule,
A cabin of one's own and a moment to rest,
A name and place for one's children
And children's children at last . . .
Hope is a song in a weary throat.
Give me a song of hope
And a world where I can sing it.
Give me a song of faith
And a people to believe in it.
Give me a song of kindness
And a country where I can live it.
Give me a song of hope and love
And a brown girl's heart to hear it.¹

Note

1 Pauli Murray, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1970, 2018).