

B.C. and A.C.: Preaching and Worship Before COVID and After COVID

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Lent of 2020 was a mad scramble for preachers. The U.S. had entered lockdown, and preachers entered a crash course in technology, becoming—practically overnight—producers, editors, and an online preacher/anchor/hosts for live streaming, Zoom rooms, YouTube, and Facebook. Doing so while trying to include technologically disadvantaged parishioners, while managing failed internet signals, and while finding security fixes for Zoom-bombing was enough to update the old phrase “build the ship while we sail it” to “build the platform while we worship in it.”

It is likely Church will remain both an in-person and online reality even after COVID-19 is under control, not only because there are distinct advantages to both, but because today’s children and young adults have always lived in-person and online concurrently. They know no other way. The pandemic may have pushed us into this sudden experiment of digital Church, but I’m convinced it also spared a future epic challenge between younger leaders demanding online options and those existing leaders who would have continued to balk at the mere idea of church online for a few more decades.

Assuming online church remains, it’s pushing us to examine our purposes for preaching and worship, and to replace our do-whatever-it-takes-to-survive-the-crisis approach with strategic, sustainable practices—for the sake of clergy and the church at large. Considerations around what defines preaching and worship, accessibility, demands on clergy time, and financing additional technology costs must be addressed by leadership at every level.

What of the B.C. Church (“before COVID”) will see us through to the other side? What practices are emerging D.C. (“during COVID”), and what might we see in the A. C. (“after COVID”) Church?

B.C. Preaching and Worship

As to preaching, the reasons we preach and the components that constitute a sermon are unaffected by the medium. The word of God is transmitted just as efficaciously whether told as a story in ancient times, read silently in a Bible a hundred years ago, or listened to in a podcast today.

To understand which aspects of preaching remain steady regardless of medium, we can look at the purpose and essential components of sermons. For instance, John McClure says sermons are made by linking “four authorities or authors of the Christian faith: Scripture, experience, theological tradition, and human reason.” Describing preaching from the Church of God tradition, Yvette Flunder adds, “Good preaching meant good performance that included choosing a good text, a good reading of the text, good entertainment, believability/authority, identification, food for thought, power, humor and passion, and a super celebration.”

Ruthlyn Bradshaw, writing from a Black, United Kingdom perspective in *The Future of Preaching*, articulates how the spirit of liberation permeates preaching,

making a sermon a holy lifeline from one generation to the next: “Black preaching, born in the context of struggle and marginalization, must seek to be relevant in the same context today...Black preaching, fearlessly proclaiming the liberating truths of God to a sinful and unjust world, will efficiently serve the future.”

Even from these few descriptions, a summary of the components of a sermon include:

- Scripture
- God’s relentless desire to be made known through words from the Word
- An expression of the preacher conceived in ancestry and born in particularity through tradition
- Humanity’s release from captivity
- Celebration resulting from gratitude
- Movement toward the liberation of all humanity from hatred, greed, sin, and lust for power
- Reliance on the communion of saints who have preached before us

Thus, a sermon includes such a deep knowing of the Word that it flows from the preacher to liberate the listener, leading toward its purpose: praise, gratitude, celebration, and action. This description of a sermon holds true whether offered by the preacher outdoors, through a mask, standing at least six feet away from the first row of parishioners; by a preacher at a poorly lit kitchen table with a cup of coffee and a laptop with a bad microphone, speaking to square faces in a Zoom room; or by a preacher who records on Wednesdays because the production crew needs enough time to cut and paste the best of three sermon takes, edit the recording with camera shifts, add the subtitles, cut to the visuals, link the sermon transcript, and paste in the right number of seconds of transition music so that it’s ready to cue up at the exact moment in the live-streamed Sunday service.

The purpose of the liturgy is also unaffected—to worship God. Liturgy as the work of the people continues whether they congregate in a church room or online room. We still worship together to praise God, grow in faith, and share the Good News with the world.

That said, there are notable and painful exceptions to worship actions that are so fundamentally incarnational through the Spirit and physically gathered community that we can’t see how there could be an equivalency, including the consecration of sacraments. To transition from ecclesial altar to family kitchen table would be so great a shift it might only be compared to the transition from Temple to Shabbat dining table. Few are ready to ask this question in earnest. It is too painful and fraught with implications, and there is still hope that the question can be avoided altogether once we are back to physical worship.

With online preaching, worship is here to stay. I suggest we put to rest any suspicion that prayers, preaching, or praise transmitted by digital ones and zeroes is “less than.” I will go so far as it say it’s heresy to claim that online preaching or worship is “virtual” because virtual means it’s almost real. If we claim a virtual preaching is almost a sermon, we’re saying the Holy Spirit can almost empower those digital ones and zeroes to be divinely infused—but is still a bit beyond the Spirit’s reach. This is arrogant presumption that arises with every new medium. This is the same argument people made when they said the Holy Spirit couldn’t be present in a printed Bible placed into the hands of a literate populace, or ride on radio waves into back seats,

back yards, or back woods, or be wholly present in the utterances of women speaking from a pulpit. Let's be done with limiting the Spirit's capacity to act through any physical property God created, including waves of energy invisible to the human eye, known and unknown. The components of preaching and worship—Scripture, tradition, reason, theology, liberation, prayer, and praise—are not limited by the medium. They are the same B.C. as they will be A.C.

D.C.: Inclusion & Questions of Connection DC

Now that preaching has taken up sudden residence in parishioners' family rooms for worship, how have we adjusted, what are we learning from it, and what new challenges and questions have arisen?

On the Plus Side: Inclusion

With rare exception I hear the same story from preachers: worship attendance is up. Parishioners who usually attended pre-pandemic are continuing online, and they are joined more often now by the "C & E's" (Christmas- and Easter-only attenders), those who haven't attended in years, former parishioners who moved away, family, friends, and people from around the world. Worship is easier to access for parents who don't have to corral and dress children and get them out the door, the sick who don't have the energy to leave the house or can't risk germ exposure, and the elderly for the same reasons. As a result, more people than ever are worshipping together. The convenience of letting the kids attend church in their pajamas, of not driving through dangerous winter road conditions, and of gathering with coffee and bagels within reach has eliminated many Sunday morning hurdles to getting to church on time—or at all. That, of course, is excellent news!

In addition, more people can take an active part in the liturgy, not only those who don't live within proximity to the physical building, but those who don't have ready access to be a worship leader. For example, parishioners in nursing homes can play their instrument or sing a solo, those who work weekends can offer pre-recorded Scripture readings, and children can lead breakout room conversations and at-the-table projects. As the Rev. Taylor Watson Burton-Edwards told me, "The screen is no longer for projection, but for inclusion of people from around the world with us, whether live or recorded."

Preaching can likewise include more people. For example, after the preacher gives the Scripture context and poses a question, parishioners on Zoom can offer the ways they see the Good News interacting and calling them individually and corporately. In addition, even though many pine for a return to physical proximity, there is an unparalleled intimacy when the preacher looks directly into the camera; it's perceived that the preacher is looking directly into the viewer's eyes. More than ever, the listeners can feel that the sermon is preaching right to them, deepening its impact.

Preachers are including more visuals and learning to preach shorter, pithier sermons—about which few listeners complain! Preachers have learned that Zoom fatigue is real, attention spans are fragmented, and thus, short sermons are more effective. Many preachers report their sermons are 25-30% shorter than they used to be, and their skills have increased to discern and express the essence of their messages. They are learning to make every word and image count to praise, persuade, provoke, and empower.

Another benefit is that the services are recorded, either in real time or in advance. Parishioners are now accustomed to accessing a service wherever they are and whenever they wish, repeating it as many times as they want, and they know how to find it on the parish website.

On the Downside: Reading the Room and Missing Connections

One significant challenge is exegeting the congregation. Not only do preachers miss learning about those to whom they preach in those casual, in-person conversations when parishioners share what's "really" going on, but worshippers may live three states or a continent away, leading to wildly disparate contexts. How do questions of local application of the gospel get addressed? Is it appropriate to invite members to get involved locally when the invitation, by virtue of distance, leaves many out? Or is it that those invitations need to be applicable regardless of context?

In addition, gauging listeners' reactions can be impossible in the moment because the reaction may not be seen. If the sermon is pre-recorded or live-streamed, there are no visual cues for the preacher. When preaching live in a Zoom-type setting, the tiny projections of faces (or even harder, whole households in one square) make facial expressions and body language too small or subtle to discern. Moreover, the preacher must always be making a choice: to look directly into the camera and thus the "parishioner's eyes" or looking at their images, but never both. This means the preacher can't adjust the sermon on the fly or before the next worship service.

I've learned in my work mentoring preachers that "reading the online room" is a skill that often needs to be taught. It's not necessarily a natural transfer of pastoral skills to sense the emotional content of those gathered online. Some clergy pick this skill up faster than others, some are aware and ashamed of their lack of skills, and others are oblivious to it. As a result, in some cases, pastors miss the needs of parishioners. This skill gap further increases the stress of those preachers who are otherwise competent pastors but lack confidence in this area.

Perhaps more importantly, many preachers are losing an important source of their ministry fuel: the joy of connecting with those they serve through preaching. What will be the new ways to discover how the sermon is "landing"? What can accommodate for the missing joy when the preachers don't feel they're getting something back from their listeners?

There is another challenge to leading worship and preaching online from home. This is a sticky subject because it's inherently personal and judgmental, and yet this fool dares to tread. To put my comment in context, when I was in seminary in the early 1990's, the female students were pulled aside and instructed about "proper" attire regarding our clothing, earrings, and hair, so as not to distract parishioners unduly from paying attention to God instead of our female forms. It was galling, sexist, and offensive. What I am about to say may also be galling and offensive, but I'm pretty sure I will at least avoid being sexist.

While there can be a warm hospitality to leading worship out of necessity from the preacher's kitchen table with coffee cup in hand, it is not so warm or hospitable, and not at all necessary, for the preachers to look like they rolled out of bed five minutes earlier, yawning, wearing a crumpled t-shirt, and in front of a background distracting all parishioners with cluttered shelves or their "cool" art. It's not likely the preachers would invite parishioners so casually into their homes under any other circumstance.

There is still a professional decorum that needs to set the stage for worship, no matter from where it's led or by whom.

A.C.: Attendance, Accessibility, & Clergy Responsibilities

Lent of 2021 — the one year anniversary of our online church odyssey — will feel different than 2020. At the time I write this, Lent is six months away, and it's impossible to guess the state of the pandemic, vaccines, protocols in place to gather in person, or the risks people will be willing to take by then. Will it be the A.C. Church yet? I doubt it, though I pray I'm wrong. Regardless, I have a lot of questions. What should we be prepared for? What should remain? And what should be jettisoned whenever we get "back to normal" in the after-COVID church?

Here's my first question. While increased attendance has been a gift for all, is the increased attendance we see now our Christian equivalent of the "atheist's fox-hole" — where people attend because they feel under siege by the pandemic and other stressors? How much are these crises driving people's increased attendance? How much is it the convenience that they can pop into worship effortlessly? Or both? If attendance drops post-pandemic, should we feel we have failed — or succeeded — in our mission to share the Good News? Will clergy be blamed when our prayers for an end to the pandemic have finally been answered and people return to kids' soccer games, weekend getaways, and Sunday brunch instead of worship?

Returning to the blessings of easier accessibility for worship, online church is still not a panacea. We have to ask continually who has access? For online worship to be fully accessible, attendees need at least internet speeds fast enough for live-streaming, new-enough mobile devices or computers, and the financial means to pay for the above. If nothing else, our sudden foray into a national requirement for online public school education has revealed the poverty lines between the haves and have-nots. Moreover, we are keenly aware of geographic limits to broadband access. Those who live in nursing homes, remote locations, or without ready access to tech help may never gain access to worship.

Further complicating the accessibility question, many of our church buildings are now ADA compliant, but there are additional considerations for online worship. Structuring online worship for the visual- and hearing-impaired is critical for them to be fully welcomed. These considerations include closed-captions, adequate lighting, simple backgrounds for worship leaders to enhance visual contrast and clarity, and framing the preacher close up to make lip-reading easier for the hearing impaired. Sign-language and visual interpreters may also be necessary. What will be the mechanisms and funding for these to be as available as wheelchair ramps into the sanctuary?

There is also a big question about the stewardship of sustaining online worship. To state the obvious, tech costs money — a lot of it. There's the hardware for computers, lighting, and sound; telecom expenses for high-speed internet, streaming services, and online meetings; software and their updates for pre- and post-production; and people with the expertise to teach and/or manage the tech and organization. How will these expenses be factored into already tight budgets?

One adage for clergy in congregational ministry is "never learn to run the dishwasher." Why? Because if the clergy know how to run the parish dishwasher, they'll be expected to take care of yet another task not listed in their letter of agreement. Learning how to run the tech for online worship should fall into the same category.

Producers—those who organize and work with the clergy to manage the pre-production hardware and tech needs, run the tech during worship so the clergy focus on leading and preaching, and follow-through afterwards with downloading, editing, and online posting—are essential. These time-consuming endeavors can and should be delegated. Clergy must be reserved for those functions that only they can provide and for which they are called. Not included in that job description is producing online worship.

Getting through the immediate crisis of this past year required many clergy to learn tech skills they never imagined they'd need. Now that the immediate crisis is over, however, clergy must have a frank conversation with their parish leaders: if clergy are expected to continue as the producers without the removal of other responsibilities, already overworked clergy will be utterly consumed by the demands.

Compounding this challenge will be the backlog of weddings, memorial services, graduations, and significant parish occasions and celebrations waiting for our A.C. time. When we can gather in person again, these rituals—on top of ongoing parish life—will be vying for resources of building time, clergy availability, and volunteers from altar guilds, cleaning crews, and hospitality committees. Expecting clergy by default to continue to function as the parish's "tech guru" will bring on a crisis in clergy's health physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. The Church simply cannot risk this crippling expense.

We must also consider duplication of efforts. If we have become clearer about the ministry that only the clergy can offer (and recording and video production isn't included), then what are the ministries only they can offer? While proximity to a physical congregation is a prerequisite for parishioners' regular involvement, no such requirement exists for its online counterpart. When people are free to attend any online worship service in the world at any time, live or on-demand, is it necessary for each congregation to produce its own online version? How will the stewardship of the resources required in time, money, and effort for online worship be discerned? Could this be an area where wise stewardship suggests the costs for online worship be shared with other congregations or a denominational region?

Frankly, I also wonder what future training for preachers will require. Just as there are different skill sets needed between broadcast and print journalism, and Broadway and film acting, there is a different skill set required between in-person and streamed preaching and worship leading. Similarly, how will young people—raised on digital multi-tasking and the fast-action and complex story lines of the online gaming world—find the slow pace of online worship (especially worship that is not designed from the ground up to be online)? They may have ready access to online worship, but will that worship translate to the world they inhabit?

Conclusion: My (Cloudy) Crystal Ball

With all the above in mind, and taking the following with not just a pinch, but a box, of salt, here are my predictions for the future of preaching and worship in the early years A.C.:

- Online worship and preaching will continue, and we'll wonder how we ever thought we could fulfill our mission without an online component.
- Akin to today's "traditional" and "contemporary" services, some services will be geared to the "locals," and others will be geared toward people we only know online and with whom we have less of a personal connection.

- Seminary liturgy and homiletics classes will add broadcasting skills.
- Parish membership, stewardship, and funding streams will be redefined.
- Some parish buildings will be sold for lack of use and others redesigned for dedicated online worship.
- Worship attendance and congregational membership will decline to pre-pandemic levels.
- Imaginations will continue to expand the ways online worship and preaching can be utilized.
- It will be harder to keep children and youth engaged in worship because we won't have adjusted dramatically enough to their context, but youth involvement will increase through parish online fellowship and outreach opportunities.
- Sermons will continue to be more visual, shorter, and pithier—and will still preach God's Good News for the world.

Notes

1 John McClure, *Preaching Words: 144 Key Terms in Homiletics* (Louisville, London: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2007), 125.

2 Ruthlynn Bradshaw, "Preaching in the Black Church," in *The Future of Preaching*, ed. Geoffrey Stevenson (London: SCM Press, 2010), 61.

3 Yvette Flunder, "Managing the Thorn," in *Birthing the Sermon: Women Preachers on the Creative Process*, ed. Jana Childers (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2001), 70.