

Preaching Easter Hope and Pentecostal Peace in Trying Times—and Via New Media

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“Day 1” radio/podcast program, Atlanta, Georgia

The pandemic has certainly done a number on the church, hasn’t it? But then, every aspect of our lives—our work, our communities, our politics, even our entertainment—has been affected, perhaps permanently, by the ongoing assault of Covid 19. Then, fold in an utterly venomous political situation exacerbated by relentless argument, false social media memes, and news media bias, and stir: it’s a toxic stew absent any nourishment—flavored only by cynicism, mistrust, exhaustion, and skepticism at every level of our society.

Now, with the seasons of Easter and Pentecost upon us, we preachers face the daunting task of proclaiming peace with God and with one another, and of offering God’s hope in the midst of it all. And while evolution may have taken billions of years, it seems that we are being forced to evolve as preachers *immediately*, because of rapid changes in delivery platforms, technical capabilities, congregational expectations, and message relevance. What can we say—and how best can we say it—to cut through the gloom and kindle within our listeners a fresh fire of the Spirit and a renewed and hopeful faith?

Building on a Legacy of Preaching

For twenty-two years I’ve had the blessed opportunity to listen to a total of something like twelve hundred sermons by a diverse assortment of preachers representing the broad range of the mainline Protestant denominations. That’s because I produce and host a weekly program called “Day 1,” which airs nationally on two hundred radio stations, on our Day1.org website, and on podcast apps. Formerly known as “The Protestant Hour,” our program has been produced since the end of World War II, when peace and hope were breaking out all over after a hideously destructive war waged by an evil megalomaniac. The lessons of that time are just as needed today.

“Day 1” seeks to proclaim the good news of God’s hope for a divided world. Each week we present a preacher who shares a sermon crafted from a lectionary text to give us hope, to challenge us to love and serve God and our neighbors, to offer peace in the storms of life, and to share guidance for living a life of faith that seeks justice and equality for all.

But in recent years our mission seems more difficult than ever to achieve: entrenched cynicism, destructive division, and deep hatreds have resulted in a cultural landscape littered with bodies, mostly of innocent victims. How did we get to the place in our nation where we fear speaking to a neighbor or colleague because of suspected political or religious differences? How can we preach what we believe deep

in our bones without fearing the wrath of the vestry, session, administrative board, or major pledgers? We can blame any number of causes for this present darkness. But how can we be part of the solution?

How Then Shall We Preach?

In the wake of rapidly declining church membership, the pandemic has indeed hit the church hard, and among other effects has upended preaching practices in every church. Preachers have been forced not only to employ new avenues for preaching and worship via the internet on Zoom, YouTube, or Facebook, but also to adjust their sermon content and preaching style, moving from preaching from the pulpits in our naves—large, open, often transcendent spaces—to standing alone in front of an iPhone camera in our living rooms or chapels. Without the live congregational experience of the preaching moment, many preachers have foundered in making an authentic connection to their often-unseen audience. Now that most churches have returned to in-person and often hybrid worship experiences, preachers are having to balance communicating both to those congregating for live worship and to those watching and worshipping online, often from far locales.

Our production of “Day 1” programs usually involves the preacher doing “pick-ups” in their presentation when they stumble over their words, or retakes of paragraphs to improve delivery or fix problems. This sort of sermon editing was entirely foreign to our preachers prior to the pandemic, but now that most of them have experienced the frustration of blown lines and having to retake portions of their sermons while videotaping them, I’ve found that preachers these days are more than aware of the need to redo some things. (Over my years as host, we’ve had perhaps only a dozen “one-take wonders” who have required no retakes or pick-ups!)

In my conversations with our “Day 1” preachers in recent years about the impact of the pandemic on their preaching, most have expressed deep frustration, not only about the technical requirements and accompanying frustrations of this new world of preaching, but also a sense of theological lostness and confusion when it comes to grasping and exemplifying what effective and relevant preaching really should involve now, particularly when addressing listeners in person, but also virtually. How can a preacher proclaim authentic hope and peace in these dual live and virtual contexts, with listeners who have been worn down by our trying times, regardless of how they’re listening?

Equipping Preachers for the New Reality

The preachers I’ve talked to are wrestling with these questions individually and with colleagues in various ways. I’m pleased and grateful that a major four-year grant to “Day 1” by Lilly Endowment Inc., as part of their Compelling Preaching Initiative, will fund several new activities that we hope will knowledgeably address these issues and provide guidance. One of these activities is a careful and expert curation, with oversight by Atla, of our seventy-eight years (and counting) of weekly “Protestant Hour” and “Day 1” sermons, and making these archives available online

for preachers, students, scholars, teachers of preaching, and anyone else interested in the sociological, historical, theological, and stylistic evolutions of homiletics. We also plan research and resources for equipping lay persons, not only to assist their pastors with skilled and effective sermon feedback, but also to enable search committees to evaluate candidates' sermons responsibly for their church contexts.

The third and most relevant activity for this discussion, however, is to equip pastors for preaching in this age of new media and virtual audiences. Those crafting sermons for media dissemination must understand that it may be consumed synchronously or asynchronously, and across any number of platforms in any number of contexts by communities or individuals. Some must record sermons days in advance for digitally edited worship services. The use of these new forms of media for preaching obviously raises issues of best techniques, but they also pose challenging questions beyond the merely technological.

Just as the most skilled preachers on "Day 1" have discovered through the years, effective preaching on the radio involves more than simply delivering the sermon to the microphone in the same way as it would be delivered in a pulpit to a gathered congregation. A change in medium necessitates changes in preaching methods, styles, and relationships to the sermon hearers. Edmund Steimle, the accomplished Lutheran preacher and pastor who taught for many years at Union Theological Seminary, and who preached on the "Protestant Hour" some two hundred fifty times, grasped the unique challenges of radio preaching, and his powerfully intimate sermons landed deeply in listeners' hearts and minds. Radio, by changing the means of delivery, also changes the methods and the content of the sermon as well. These distinctions hold true today in preaching via new media or virtually.

Preaching That Reaches All Our Audiences

Many "Day 1" preachers I worked with prior to the pandemic expressed frustration not only with retakes and pick-ups, but with the fact that they could not see their audience and thereby gain feedback in the preaching moment, whether verbal or visual. And in crafting their sermons, they felt a bit adrift in understanding their audience, because it was so much broader and mostly unknowable as opposed to their own familiar congregation. They realized that inside jokes, current congregational events or issues, even timely references to the news could not be incorporated, and they felt the resulting sermon for such a broad audience lacked something important. Now, most preachers are struggling with the same frustrations in preaching in their virtual or hybrid contexts.

It's clear that much work must be done to explore and resolve these concerns. In preparing for our grant proposal, our planning team, which included Dr. Katie Givens Kime, Dr. Thomas G. Long, Dr. Micah Jackson, Atla representatives, and other luminaries, discovered a critical gap in research and teaching resources related to these enormously important and timely questions around the impact of this rapid evolution in preaching.

Dr. Richard “Bo” Adams, director of Candler School of Theology Pitts Library, who also assisted our planning team, has regularly taught a course called “Hacking Ministry: The Work of the Church in a Digital Age,” and it has been my honor during several semesters to lead a session on effective preaching on the radio or by podcast. Adams spends the first segment of the course, as it is currently structured in the wake of the pandemic, on exploring these vital questions and the noticeable gap in the literature.

In order to help fill this gap in teaching tools and in robust theological engagement of the dynamics of new media preaching, we are assembling an advisory team of homeliticians, pastors, teachers of preaching, theological librarians, and effective “Day 1” preachers to review relevant literature and craft an educational program of best practices for new media preaching that reflects the shifts and learnings of the pandemic age. As part of this Compelling Preaching Initiative activity, we also plan to create teaching sessions and instructional materials to communicate and train preachers in these best practices. Deliverables could include pedagogically informed insights, scholarly pieces on the theological issues raised, and audio/video podcast conversations on these issues with experts.¹

Other organizations and seminaries are pursuing similar goals to help preachers of all kinds think through the theological ramifications of this new age of preaching, and effectively proclaim the gospel message through new and emerging media—some platforms of which are only being dreamed up as we speak. As I face my own retirement later this year, I can only hope and pray that “Day 1” will continue to be in the forefront of these efforts to preach the good news effectively in this confusing and often horrifying age.

Becoming Part of the Solution

But this brings us back to the content of the sermon. No matter what media platforms or theological approaches today’s preachers employ, how can we break through the depressing darkness of these times and offer genuine hope, peace, and joy? How can we be part of the solution?

Recently we recorded a “Day 1” program with the Rev. Monica Mainwaring, rector of St. Martin in the Fields Episcopal Church in Atlanta. In her sermon she said,

My bishop, Rob Wright, in tribute to the late Archbishop Desmond Tutu, said that for Tutu, “Jesus was his center, not his border.” Isn’t that how it should be for all of us? Jesus at our core. Jesus at the center of our being, motivating our cry for justice, our call to mercy, our work, which for Tutu was toward the end of apartheid. The name of Jesus shouldn’t be a border, a boundary, a line in the sand. The name of Jesus is not meant to divide and to delineate, but to welcome and to enfold....

Wouldn’t it be remarkable if we could all say, in the name of Jesus, I am figuring out how to love my enemy? In the name of Jesus, my neighbor is dialoging with me across difference. In the name of Jesus, my nation is pursuing peace.²

Is this peace really possible? Do we dare hope for it? If so, how can we experience true peace in our hearts, our family life, our nation and world? And then, how can we preach that peace in the midst of a skeptical, cynical, and even violent society? Despite all the frustration and exhaustion life brings us, true peace is possible if we can better understand what it looks and feels like, what its purpose is, and how it changes things. And Easter and Pentecost offer the preacher the ultimate expressions of how God can inspire a resurrection-sourced hope and a Spirit-powered peace.

The beloved song “Let There Be Peace on Earth, and Let It Begin with Me” was written for a youth choir in 1955, a time that seems so innocent in hindsight and yet was fraught with as much inequality and injustice as we seem to witness today. Even so, the song’s message remains true: peace starts with each one of us. The lyricist, Jill Jackson-Miller, once spoke to an NPR host about how the song came about: “When I attempted suicide [in 1944] and I didn’t succeed,” she said, “I knew for the first time unconditional love—which God is.... I had an eternal moment of truth in which I knew I was loved, and I knew I was here for a purpose.” The song, with a tune composed later by her husband, was introduced during a youth retreat in California. The young people attending represented “a wide variety of religious, ethnic, and socioeconomic background.... The song’s focus on peace and God made it easy to cross many boundaries.” Those young people returned carrying this song—and its heartfelt reality—to their homes, schools, and churches.³

I pray that we can follow that example not only in our preaching, but in our everyday lives.

Jesus as Our Model for Peacemaking

Though fully divine, Jesus experienced a wide range of fully human emotions when he walked the earth.⁴ Regardless of his circumstances, which were difficult and divisive if not life-threatening, he seemed to walk on a bedrock of peace. Not an otherworldly, ethereal, new age cloud of empty silence—the peace Jesus knew and lived through was solid and real. It was a peace that fueled his passionate work. And that peace is available to us as well. Peace on earth begins with each one of us.

In an adult formation class I taught on peace, a dear 90-year-old churchgoer said she enjoyed just staying home and praying—that was her peace. She added, “It’s interaction with other people and outside forces that destroy my peace!” Someone else responded, “Well, for those of us who still have to interact with the rest of the world, a lot of it is about knowing you are where you’re supposed to be, accepting that, and being confident in what you’re being called to do. Even when the world around you is going nuts, you know this is what you’re supposed to be doing. I think that’s how Jesus experienced peace—there was turmoil around him, but he knew what he was about.”

I believe we preachers can relate to what they are saying and, beyond that, we can find that center core of peace as well, if we intentionally open ourselves up to it. But there is much work we must do to experience and to proclaim this peace in our world.

I'm encouraged by the amazing amount of work that is being done now by organizations, seminaries, churches, and other entities to help us genuinely grasp the challenges we are facing and figure out ways to overcome them in order to free preachers to proclaim wholehearted hope and lifechanging peace in these difficult days. I'm grateful that "Day 1" can play a small part in that effort, and I invite you to follow us as we work to that end.

My prayer for you, fellow preacher, echoes the one attributed to St. Francis: "Lord, make us instruments of your peace. Where there is hatred, let us sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is discord, union; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light..."⁵

Notes

¹Some of the material concerning the "Day 1" Compelling Preaching Initiative grant activities is adapted from our proposal to Lilly Endowment, Inc., which was originally written primarily by our project director, Dr. Katie Givens Kime.

²Monica Mainwaring, "God's Name for You," "Day 1" sermon for January 1, 2023, <https://day1.org/>.

³Dr. C. Michael Hawn, *History of Hymns*: "Let There Be Peace on Earth," June 12, 2013, accessed at <https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/history-of-hymns-let-there-be-peace-on-earth>.

⁴I love exploring Jesus' emotions and have done so in my books *A Passionate Jesus: What We Can Learn from Jesus about Fear, Grief, Joy, and Living Authentically* (SkyLight Paths, 2013) and *Heart and Soul: The Emotions of Jesus*, an edited and annotated version of Robert Law's lost 1915 devotional (Church Publishing, 2019).

⁵<https://www.loyolapress.com/catholic-resources/prayer/traditional-catholic-prayers/saints-prayers/peace-prayer-of-saint-francis/>.