

Preaching on Easter in a Good Friday Season

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Last Easter—which seems like many Easters ago—was celebrated just as the first wave of the coronavirus was cresting and crashing all over the country. Because so many congregations conducted their Easter services online, we could choose to worship virtually anywhere. That is, we could worship anywhere *virtually*.

I settled on First Congregational Church of Berkeley (United Church of Christ), which is served by pastors I admire. The service was so creative and engaging that I decided to drop in on other churches for their recorded Easter services. Over the next several days, I participated in seven Easter services, from California, to Chicago, to New York, to New England. It was a virtual movable feast of an Easter celebration.

There was considerable variety in the sermons I heard, but they all had two noteworthy characteristics in common.

First, the pandemic lent a certain urgency and gravity to the preaching. It was clear that this was not business as usual, not even Easter as usual. When I have taught preaching, I have encouraged preachers to imagine their sermon being preached in a prison or in a hospital ward for terminally ill patients. If the sermon would not hold up in those settings, it may not be worth preaching at all.

Such reminders are not necessary in the midst of a pandemic. It is a time when more of us are experiencing confinement, and the threat of death hovers over us all. Matt Fitzgerald, preaching from the sanctuary of Saint Paul's United Church of Christ in Chicago, said, "I am alone in this gigantic room because death is stalking us." It seems, to paraphrase Samuel Johnson, that the prospect of facing death in the morning wonderfully concentrates the preacher's mind. Several of the preachers I heard had to pause mid-sermon to collect themselves. The experience of frolicking in the shallows does not have the power to elicit such a response; it is only when one wades into the depths. These times require preaching that is worthy of the moment. Another kind of preaching, more facile and clever, might be sufficient at other times, but not Easter, and certainly not this year.

The sermons I heard reminded me of the best preaching at funerals, which often are very different from sermons delivered on a Sunday morning. William Muehl, who taught preaching for many years at Yale Divinity School, often admonished his students: "Just remember, most of the people you address on a Sunday morning almost decided not to come." So, preaching on a Sunday morning is often to people who have their arms folded—figuratively, and sometimes literally. The preacher has to earn a hearing. In such a setting, often I find that I have to spend the first part of a sermon putting people in touch with their need for the gospel before addressing that need. That is not so at a funeral, where most in the congregation could not imagine themselves anywhere else. They feel an urgent need to be there, and they are looking for good news. The preacher in such a setting is not required to put the members of the congregation in touch with their need because they are keenly aware of it already. It is what brought them there. It is inescapable. That is why preaching to a congregation at such a time has always felt to me like feeding baby birds, their beaks wide open, waiting, in their own way *demanding* to be fed. The preaching I heard last Easter had

some of that same quality. Preachers were serving up the gospel straight, no chaser.

The second common characteristic of these sermons is that they all grappled, one way or another, with the jarring disparity between the day and the experience of the day. Easter—the ultimate liturgical celebration, a feast day, a day when we are used to joyous fanfares, altars festooned with flowers, communal singing, crowded pews, ebullient greetings to friends and strangers. Last year, the experience of the day, stripped of most of these familiar trappings, refused to yield to the dictates of the calendar. After all, we were gathering in isolation in a time shadowed with fear, suffering, and death. We were worshipping on Easter at a time that felt more like Good Friday. Some of the preachers articulated the disconnect. All at least alluded to it.

The joyous proclamations of Easter had an anticipatory ring to them. Of course, the promise of Easter is both a present reality and a future hope. Those dimensions are always present at Easter, but in the sermons I heard last Easter, the emphasis on the future fulfillment of the promise seemed particularly pronounced, begging the question: Is Easter delayed Easter denied?

We are used to Easter following Good Friday according to a clearly established predictable rhythm. As the prophets foretold and as tradition dictates, God's anointed one died and was raised on the third day. Our Holy Week celebrations reflect that immutable rhythm. But what if, along with everything else we are experiencing, that familiar rhythm is thrown out of whack, not in God's dispensation, but in our experience of it? At such a time, can Good Friday be more like a season than a day?

And we don't know when this season of waiting will end. That is one of the most challenging aspects of this season. We are not following familiar rhythms. We have no idea how long this season will last. We do not know when we will be able to celebrate the Risen Christ unencumbered by lingering fear and unfamiliar limitations. In that sense, the current time may be more like waiting for the Second Coming. The promise is sure, but the timetable is anything but sure. We do not know the day and the hour of his coming, so we wait with patience—or, at least, we aspire to be patient.

I also wonder if our celebrations of Pentecost might have a particular resonance this year. Before he ascended, Jesus told his disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they were "clothed with a power from on high." And so they waited, in isolation as if in quarantine. They waited for the fulfillment of the promise, not knowing what form it would take or when it might be realized. We know now that the Holy Spirit would infuse and empower them fifty days after Passover at the celebration known as Pentecost. But they did not know that. The disciples were not given a timetable. They were given a promise and a one-word instruction: Wait.

The pandemic also has given a body blow to sentimentality. People often testify that they see God most powerfully in nature. Even aspects of our Easter festivities—all the luxurious flowers, the pastel-colored eggs, and adorable bunnies—are a celebration of nature. But the virus is part of nature as well, and it is not beautiful. We are not sentimental about the virus because—as sure as hell—it is not sentimental about us. Sam Keen, reflecting on the work of noted social scientist Ernest Becker, offered this quite unsentimental assessment: "Mother nature is a brutal bitch, red in tooth and claw, who destroys what she creates."¹

During this pandemic I have gone back to Becker's seminal work, *The Denial of Death*, a book that captivated me when it was first published (1973) and I was an

undergraduate. The thesis of the book is that the fear of death is the animating force behind much of human behavior: “The idea of death, the fear of it, haunts the human animal like nothing else; it is a mainspring of human activity—designed largely to avoid the fatality of death, to overcome it by denying in some way that it is the final destiny for man [*sic*].”²

Although I no longer think the implications of Becker’s thesis are as far reaching as I once did, during the time of the pandemic we have seen a good deal of supporting evidence for it. The denial of death has been on full display. In the Trump administration, the denial of death was elevated to something like national policy. We were told that the pandemic is not as bad as it has been portrayed. Any move to act decisively in response to the pandemic was undercut, in part because any concerted action would call further attention to the disease and to the attendant deaths. It was deemed better to follow a policy of see no COVID, hear no COVID, speak no COVID.

And in various ways, we have seen the populace joining in the denial. One obvious example is the refusal of many to wear masks, in defiance of medical advice and, in the view of others, in rebellion against common sense. Some explain this phenomenon by pointing out that the wearing of masks has been politicized, which certainly is true. But that is not the only explanation. It is also an expression of the denial of death. Not wearing a mask is a way of whistling past the graveyard.

After all, during the 1918-19 pandemic, in the immediate aftermath of World War I—that is, in a very different political environment from today—there were similar responses. During a pandemic that claimed an estimated 650,000 American lives (and over 50 million worldwide), President Woodrow Wilson never made a single public reference to it. There were large demonstrations against local mandates to wear masks. Anti-mask leagues were established. Newspapers gave extensive coverage to the end of the war, while devoting scant column inches to a pandemic that claimed over five times as many American lives as the war did.

The denial seems to have reached into subsequent generations. The 1918-19 pandemic was not covered in any history class I ever took. My mother was born in 1918, and yet I never heard her make any reference to the fact that she was born in the midst of the most deadly pandemic in human history. Columnist David Brooks has suggested that this relative silence about such an enormous event can be attributed to the shame people felt in how they responded to their neighbors during such a time of emergency. But I wonder if straight-up denial also had a lot to do with it.

There is another phenomenon, evinced both in 1918-19 and during the current pandemic, that is related to denial, and that is the tendency to blame someone, anyone—any individual or group of people—for the disease. We know how to respond to a human enemy and we are used to having them. In fact, it seems that we long to have an enemy, we are lost without one, and it appears that only a human enemy will do. So, we know how to talk about war, and we lack the same ability to talk about a pandemic. It is not enough to see disease and death itself as the enemy; there is a need to find a human scapegoat.

In 1906 William James wrote about the need to address social ills as the “moral equivalent of war.” While decrying the horrors of war, James recognized the ways in which war can marshal the human spirit, unite people in a common cause, and invite sacrifice. James reasoned that we should be able to direct those same virtues in the cause of addressing urgent social needs.

In that spirit, Lyndon Johnson declared a “War on Poverty,” Richard Nixon waged a “War on Drugs,” and George W. Bush introduced a “War on Terror.” In a 1977 speech, Jimmy Carter used James’s phrase, “moral equivalent of war,” to suggest that was what was required to address the energy crisis of the time. Although none of those endeavors were notably successful, the search for a “moral equivalent of war” continues. The fight against the coronavirus often is described as a kind of war.

But a pandemic is not war, and it does not elicit the same responses because we are not fighting a human enemy. To be sure, Trump tried to find a human enemy we could blame by calling COVID-19 the “China Virus.” In a similar way, the 1918-19 influenza epidemic was called “The Spanish Flu.” Ironically, Spain earned that ignominious distinction because it was a neutral country, so the press there was able to report on the pandemic, something that both the Allied and Central Powers nations forbade. In other words, blaming Spain for the pandemic was a “shoot the messenger” strategy on an international scale. Not wanting to be the only country without a human enemy to scapegoat, in Spain the disease was called the “French Flu.”

This kind of scapegoating is a way to localize the threat, to make it seem smaller and thus less formidable. We can understand a human enemy, we know how to fight a human enemy, and we know how to kill a human enemy. The idea that death itself is stalking us is overwhelming. So, we localize the threat and demonize the other. In this way, demonization is a form of denial.

Of course, our celebrations of Holy Week are meant to include an unflinching account of the power of death. Victory over death is central to the celebration of Easter, and it is no trifling victory over some meager enemy. In part, our celebrations of Easter are so rousing and exuberant precisely because we recognize that death is a powerful and fearsome enemy.

Nevertheless, the denial of death can even sneak into our Holy Week worship if, as happens in many congregations, the sanctuary is full on Palm Sunday and on Easter, but much more scarcely populated on Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. Those who follow that pattern go straight from triumphant parade to joyous fanfare, with nary a moment in the shadows, which can be an expression of denial.

Perhaps this year, in this time that seems tinged inescapably with the characteristics and mood of Good Friday, we have a chance to get it right. In this dark time, sentimentality and denial are still in evidence, but they are harder to come by. Therefore, this year may be the time when we can dispense with those responses entirely and in so doing, receive the good news of Easter as never before.

The Apostle Paul was chastised by the church in Corinth because he changed his plans about visiting them. Their feelings were hurt, and so they started to complain. (Sounds like church, doesn’t it?) They accused him of being a flip-flopper: First he says “Yes,” then he says, “No.” When Paul writes back he says, in effect, “I changed my plans. That does not mean I am inconsistent. I don’t say ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ to you at the same time, any more than Jesus does. In Jesus, it is always “Yes.”” He then goes on to offer this affirmation: “In him every one of God’s promises is a ‘Yes’” (2 Corinthians 1:16-22).

When Paul says that in Jesus, it is always “Yes,” he is not whistling past the graveyard because the story of Jesus is not over until he has spent some time in the graveyard. It is about life as it really is and will have no truck with denial. His story encompasses all of life — the shadows as well as the light; both the sin and the redemp-

tion; both death and resurrection.

Before the “Yes,” of course, there is a “No.” The human family used every way we knew to say “No” to Jesus. We betrayed him, we mocked him, we denied him, we killed him. We said “No” in every way we knew how. And in response to that “No,” in Jesus, it is always “Yes.” The resurrection is God’s “Yes” to the world. God wouldn’t take our “No” for an answer. Before and after, both under and above, our definite “No” is God’s triumphant “Yes.”

A famous book on negotiation is entitled *Getting to Yes*.³ That could also be the title of the gospel story because, in Jesus, God always gets to yes. Or, as poet Wallace Stevens wrote, “After the final no there comes a yes, and on that yes the future world depends.”⁴

Once I was among a group of authors asked to summarize the gospel in seven words. Here is what I came up with: “God gets the last word.” (I know, that is only five words. I thought I would save the other two for another time.)

If I had been asked to expand a bit, I would have said this: Our God is the kind of God who insists on having the last word. The second-to-last word, which can be very powerful, can be given over to something else—evil, disease, oppression, hopelessness, death itself. But our God is the kind of God who insists on having the very last word, and that is always a word of healing, a word of liberation, a word of hope, a word of life.

If I were asked to summarize the Christian gospel in one word—not in seven words or forty words, but one word—it would be the word “Yes.” God gets the last word, and that word is “Yes.” This promise is nothing new, of course, but perhaps in this singular time, we will be able to hear it anew.

I do not know what the world will look like this coming Easter. As I write this, vaccines are not yet available to the public, although it looks as if several vaccines are on the cusp of approval. So, by the time Easter arrives, our daily lives may be getting back to normal, or, at least beginning to. It is something we all long for, but my hope is that we will hold out for something more than normal. Going back to normal, or even trying to, itself may be a kind of denial. Instead, I hope our lives, and even our experience of Easter, will be transformed by what we have gone through. Obviously, Easter is not a return to normal; it is an upending of normal. Easter is not a return to life as we knew it; it is an invitation to a life beyond anything we have yet experienced. Even if there is a normal to go back to, the promise of Easter is that we don’t have to settle for normal, because God has so much more in store for us.

This past year, we have been forced into a time of isolation, uncertainty, fear, and death. We have not been able to get our Good Friday ticket punched easily so that we can move quickly on to Easter. This year, Good Friday has been more like a season in which we have had to linger. And yet within this season, the promise abides. Even in this time, perhaps especially in this time, we have been invited to imagine, with poet e.e. cummings, “that yes is the only living thing.”

Notes

1 Sam Keen, “Foreword,” in Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (London: Souvenir Press, 2011), xii.

2 Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973), ix.

3 Roger Fisher, *Getting to Yes* (New York: Penguin Press, 2011).

4 Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poetry and Prose of Wallace Stevens* (Boone, IA: Library of America), 224.