

LUTHERAN THEOLOGICAL SOUTHERN SEMINARY OF LENOIR-RHYNE  
UNIVERSITY

POETIC COMMUNION: TOWARD A LUTHERAN HOMILETIC FOR POSTMODERNITY

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
DR. CLAYTON J. SCHMIT AND DR. DAVID C. RATKE  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
MASTER OF SACRED THEOLOGY

BY  
ANDREW TUCKER

COLUMBIA, SOUTH CAROLINA  
MAY 2014

POETIC COMMUNION: TOWARD A LUTHERAN HOMILETIC FOR POSTMODERNITY

By

Andrew Tucker

APPROVED

By

First Reader \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. Clayton J. Schmit  
Faculty Advisor  
Provost, School of Theology

Second Reader \_\_\_\_\_

Dr. David C. Ratke  
Chair, School of Humanities and Social Sciences

Copyright 2014 by Andrew Tucker

All rights reserved.

*Soli Deo Gloria*

## CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	vi
ABSTRACT .....	vii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION	1
2. PREACHING’S DEPARTURE	6
3. A FORMATIONAL REASON TO PREACH	23
4. PREACHING EMMANUEL: A SACRAMENTAL REASON TO PREACH	38
5. PREACHING AS POETIC COMMUNION	49
6. PREACHING’S REVIVAL: A BRIEF GLIMPSE INTO POETIC COMMUNION	71
APPENDIX.....	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	95

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First off, thanks to my wife Michelle who has painstakingly edited every portion, not only of this thesis, but of every paper in my graduate school career. Without your help, comments, and keen eye for comma splices, I could not have made it through.

Thanks to my STM cohort for all of the conversation that honed this project from unmanageable ideas to an approachable topic, and especially the conversations outside of class with Edwin and David. Without your help, I'd still be writing this thing, and nobody wants that.

A special thanks to my supervisor, Clay Schmit, who took me on an STM candidate despite the addition to his schedule as Provost. The encouragement, commentary, and challenge were vital in my process of developing a model that has actually worked in the church.

Two people, perhaps more than any others, have encouraged me to continue to preach, both to appreciate the gift and to refine the craft. Diane Archer, a Lutheran Associate in Ministry and former colleague in ministry in Durham, NC constantly brought excitement and strength to our conversations about proclamation. This helped me to appreciate the reality that an ability to preach is a God-given gift. Elizabeth Michael, a Presbyterian pastor who precepted my introduction to preaching class, wasn't afraid to encourage a gift for preaching even as my grades indicated there was room for improvement. This helped me comprehend that, even as preaching is a gift from God, it is also a craft that requires attention, effort, and assistance from others.

Finally, thanks to the company of preachers that has inspired me and the church through your gift and craft. Walt, David, Barb, Norm, Dave, Aaron, Dan, Nate, Katie, Lisa, Luke, Sam, Meghan, Christy, Ed, Ray, and oh so many more: Christ became present through your words. I'm thankful for your witness that preaching is vital for the life of the church.

## ABSTRACT

In Curating Worship, Jonny Baker and certain interviewees propose a worship model that seeks a distributed model of authority in worship leadership, uplifts the role of creativity and art, and removes or demotes the role of the sermon within worship. As ELCA churches discern the shape of their church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, how should they respond to such developments? This project suggests that, while worship curating in alternative worship communities provides a powerful approach to worship leadership in postmodernity, sermons still demand a place of prominence within Lutheran worship. Built upon the framework of historical and liturgical motivations, the two primary reasons to retain the sermon are formational and sacramental. A look at the origins of Christian preaching reveal that sermons work to form individuals and communities for life in the world. Concomitantly, Lutheran theology that relies upon Luther and Bonhoeffer professes the sacramental reality of Christ's presence in preaching, for in preaching we find Christ "walking through the congregation as the Word." Thus, this project offers a reconsideration of preaching, called poetic communion, which is an improvisational, contextual art that may both reinvigorate Lutheran preaching for its postmodern location as it fits the creative paradigm of alternative worship.

## PERMISSION

I, the author of the above abstract, hereby give permission to the ATLA Index Board to edit and publish the above abstract and to use it in any information system with which the Index is affiliated. In addition, I certify that I have not assigned or granted my right to apply for a copyright, if any, in the above abstract.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In Curating Worship, Jonny Baker and other representatives of the Alternative Worship movement propose a model for Christian worship that seeks a distribution of authority in liturgical leadership and emphasizes the role of art within worship. Within this model, however, a demotion of preaching appears that sometimes entirely removes the sermon from the liturgy. As ELCA congregations discern the shape of their church in the postmodern landscape, how should they respond to the elimination of the sermon within the Alternative Worship model?

Rather than the full removal of the sermon from worship, this project argues for a new sermon form, one called poetic communion, which embraces the value of creativity and distributed authority in the liturgy. First, however, we must consider the reasons that Alternative Worship communities and worship curators choose to remove preaching from the liturgy, as well as what reasons exist to keep sermons within worship.

Chapter Two reviews the basic principles of Alternative Worship communities that lead to the exclusion of preaching within certain worship events, as well as the cultural forces of postmodernity that contribute to this phenomenon. Postfoundationalism appears both as a major contributor to the demise of preaching as well as a potential source of homiletical renewal.

Chapter Three considers the ways in which preaching functions as formational for persons and communities, as well as how preaching's removal from worship may negatively affect Christian formation. Here the emphasis lies upon preaching's dynamic potential within the

constant form of liturgy, which provide a mutually informative role in the life of faith. A review of Melito of Sardis' *On Pascha* legitimizes concerns that a single authoritative voice may lead to homiletical abuses, even as Melito's sermon reveals the powerful potential for sermonic artistry.

Chapter Four lifts up the Lutheran tradition of preaching, where we see an emphasis upon Christ's active presence within the sermon. With particular attention to the work of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, we see God's presence in the sermon in at least three ways: preaching is scriptural as we speak the Word of God in our words, preaching is conversational as God speaks through our words, and ultimately that preaching is sacramental because God becomes fully present within the community through the sermon.

Chapter Five considers the potential for artistic sermons that allow for perspectival truth. This builds upon recent work in conversational preaching by John McClure, Lucy Atkinson Rose, O. Wesley Allen, Jr., and Doug Pagitt, yet intentionally includes a heavy emphasis upon the poetic and improvisational elements of preaching. This chapter argues that preaching as poetic communion retains the sacramental aspects of the sermon and admits a trajectory of intent for preaching, even as it actively embraces the participation of multiple voices and the resulting potential for disagreement.

Chapter Six presents a brief summary of the argument and a few contextualized examples of preaching as poetic communion. Here we see the flexibility of the model, as no two contexts are the same.

Before we begin, a few terms require definition. *Alternative Worship* refers to a movement within the Emerging Church that promotes distributed authority, seeks active participation by all within worship, and values culturally resonant practices and creativity.<sup>1</sup> Since

---

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Steve Collins who helps to identify these major traits in an interview with Jonny Baker, ed., *Curating Worship* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 31.

this is a movement of communities with diverse denominational, theological, and cultural identities, no definition can fully grasp the movement, but those three aspects — distributed leadership, active participation, and cultural resonance — appear typical to most within the Alternative Worship movement. In fact, it is the confluence of these three emphases that identifies a congregation as part of Alternative Worship and not just another community under the larger umbrella of the Emerging Church, which is also notoriously difficult to identify.<sup>2</sup> For instance, if a congregation emphasizes participation and is culturally representative but utilizes a traditional hierarchy in worship and leadership, they would not likely fall under the Alternative Worship canopy but likely would belong to the Emerging Church.

*Worship curating*, a term coined within the Alternative Worship movement, is the process of a team assembling contributions for worship into a coherent event.<sup>3</sup> Much like a museum curator, this begins with setting the space and establishing a flow for necessary movement and participation. However, worship curating also includes decisions on the sorts of prayers and music for the service, who will act as leaders in various elements, indeed about all parts of the service. In some communities, staff employed for certain activities, like musicians and pastors, may act as standing members of this group, but in general people rotate into and out of membership in order to continually give voice to different congregants.

*Proclamation* here describes the active witness that humanity has been saved by the grace of the Triune God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Preaching is a form of proclamation, but proclamation may happen through various mediums and in any number of contexts. Words are not necessary for all proclamation, but words are necessary for preaching.

---

<sup>2</sup> For one helpful, if long winded, attempt, see Eddie Gibbs and Ryan Bolder, *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2005), 45.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Baker's *Curating Worship*, Mark Pierson's *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2010) offers a valuable introduction to the role of a worship curator.

*Preaching*, then, is the communally focused, vocally embodied proclamation of God's Word. Preaching is communally focused because not all preaching occurs within a worship service or an established church, but all preaching intends to bring people into the Body of Christ. Notice that this separates sermons from theology lectures, for lectures may talk about God, but do not seek to incorporate listeners into a community.

Preaching is necessarily vocal because it is the spoken application of God's Word for a particular people. This separates preaching from other forms of proclamation. For instance, while Caravaggio's *The Sacrifice of Isaac* proclaims the Gospel through powerful imagery, a sermon may give voice to Abraham and Isaac, to the Father who sacrificed a Son, and to the Son who rose from the dead.<sup>4</sup> Preaching is embodied because sermons are live events. Sermons are made not just by the preacher's words, but also by the environment and the people with which the sermon is given. Recordings and manuscripts of sermons are not sermons any more than script for or video of a play is the play itself.<sup>5</sup> Some meaning remains, but it is not the same meaning, nor is it the same emotion or interaction, as the original event. It is God's Word that gives preaching its ultimate identity, for Christ, the Incarnate God who took on flesh to be fully present with and offer salvation to all creation, is the content of preaching. Thus, Christ must remain the content of preaching, and sermons come alive in the messy mangers of the real world.

Definitions for other key terms, such as *postfoundationalism*, will appear as they become important to the project. Though the term *poetic communion* will not appear again until the

---

<sup>4</sup> There are actually two extant works by Caravaggio with this name, each of which presents an interpretation of Genesis 22:1-19. The elder of the two, painted prior to 1600 CE, is housed in the Piasecka-Johnson Collection in Princeton, New Jersey, while the second and better known of the two is from 1603 CE and currently is on display at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy. See John T. Spike, *Caravaggio* (New York: Abbeville, 2010), 126, 130, 252-4, 259-60.

<sup>5</sup> This follows the wisdom of Clay Schmit, who in turn plays off the work of Eugene Lowry: "a sermon manuscript is the corpse of a sermon once lived." See Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit, eds., *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 175.

fourth chapter when we will explore the concept at length. For now, we turn to our first inquiry.

Why do some communities choose to remove preaching from worship?

## CHAPTER 2

### PREACHING'S DEPARTURE

As the rationalistic foundations of modern religious thought falter in the face of postmodernity, some Christians within the Alternative Worship movement now question whether sermons ought to remain an integral part of worship. This chapter considers the reasons that led to the abandonment of preaching within this movement, as well as the potential for postfoundational thought to create space for preaching in such postmodern contexts. Numerous sources contribute to the sermon's demise: practical commitments to providence and the Priesthood of All Believers provide a theological grounding, even as these appear to fundamentally arise from a resilient resistance to modernity's foundationalism. Yet, as David Lose suggests, postfoundationalism allows church communities to move beyond the false certainty of modernity while still trusting our words approach truth enough that we may continue not only to speak, but also to preach.

### A CRITIQUE OF PREACHING

The implicit critique of preaching within Alternative Worship seems to arise from the movement's core commitments. As our definition indicates, Alternative Worship is based more on structure than on style. Distributed authority, active participation, and cultural resonance allow for vastly different worship forms from community to community, even as core values remain generally the same. Thus, rather than recognizable practices, these key traits must suffice to describe this community that often eschews traditional sermons.

Even so, Steve Collins, whose work helped to form our working definition, lifts up at least two formal commitments common to Alternative Worship communities: Alternative Worship communities seek the “rediscovery of ancient and alternative Christian traditions as resources,” as well as a bountiful use of artwork of any form by any artist, which is often created for the particular event at hand.<sup>6</sup> Notice, first, that the commitment to utilizing various Christian practices grounds Alternative Worship solidly in the Christian tradition, as well as indicates a respect for the life and faith of the saints. Notice also that the commitment to artistry dovetails with the movement’s core commitments, for these creations become expressions that carry the same authority as any other type of witness in the space, invite active participation of all regardless of talent or skill, and are deeply seated within the community’s culture.

Such core commitments reveal a desire for active participation by all congregants in the production and execution of worship, especially in ways that resonate with the present culture. As such, many alternative worship communities embrace the model of worship curating, a task where numerous people design, commission, and execute the worship event. In these settings, the role of worship curator (or more frequently, curators) often rotates to ensure that any who desire may find the opportunity to contribute to the community’s worship, and to guarantee that no single voice dominates the liturgical formation.<sup>7</sup> This also reflects a commitment to perspectival truth rather than foundational truth. More specifically, that people come to know God better by engaging multiple perspectives, especially those beyond one’s personal belief and communicated through actions other than the logical arguments of narrative sermons. This also appears within the community’s commitment to distributed authority and high value on

---

<sup>6</sup> Steve Collins, “A definition of alternative worship,” About alternative worship, last modified 2012, accessed December 8, 2013, [http://www.alternativeworship.org/definitions\\_definition.html](http://www.alternativeworship.org/definitions_definition.html).

<sup>7</sup> Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse Press, 2010), 11.

participation. Alternative Worship contends that we learn more about God through active engagement with others in worship than through passive participation with single human authorities.

Particular commitments to providence and the priesthood of all believers supply a theological rationale for such practices and structures in Alternative Worship communities. Of course, many other congregations value these theological categories without removing preaching from their worship. In the case of Alternative Worship, however, preaching dissipates as communities interpret their theology in context.

Martin Poole, a priest in the Church of England who has curated events at the Greenbelt Festival, describes the role of the curator as one who seeks to “provoke a response...[but] it’s not our job to try to control or predict that response.”<sup>8</sup> Of his own work with curating groups, he says, “We try to keep in mind all the time that the encounter comes from God, not us – we’re just there to create an environment where that can happen.”<sup>9</sup> Mark Pierson, a Baptist pastor who helped develop worship curatorship in New Zealand, describes this as “open-endedness.” Pierson contends, “the purpose of worship is to curate a setting in which an encounter [with God] can take place, not to dictate the outcome. Open-endedness is about allowing room for the Holy Spirit to move; it’s also about a willingness to raise question without always giving answers, to not feel it necessary to tell the whole story every time.”<sup>10</sup> Simply put, these people trust God’s providence to work amidst their curating.

Poole and Pierson typify the sort of providential outlook taken by curators, in particular, and Alternative Worship communities in general. God retains ultimate control, and curators seek to create settings where God engages people at various levels, in different ways, with multiple

---

<sup>8</sup> Jonny Baker, ed., *Curating Worship* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 78.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>10</sup> Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship*, 70.

meanings. Thus, this sort of providence is not concerned with predestination to particular ends, but rather assumes that God exercises providential care with and through the church. This trust in God's activity and sovereignty fosters a generous view of authority. Since God remains at work with all people, of course all people retain authority within the community. Active participation allows for that authority to become manifest within the community, an authority which ultimately belongs to God and is exercised through this equitable community.

From this belief in providence flows a commitment to the Priesthood of All Believers. Pierson describes the participatory nature of Alternative Worship in this way: "it is worship where a variety of people from all backgrounds, ages, levels of commitment, learning styles, education and stages of spiritual formation contribute creatively to the content, leadership, and shaping of the worship event."<sup>11</sup> Such a structure resonates with Luther's exhortation that "we are all priests, as many of us as are Christians," a claim that served as the foundation for the priesthood of all believers.<sup>12</sup> Consistent with Luther's trajectory, Pierson's description reflects a desire for all people to shape not only the form of worship, but the content as well. As Alternative Worship offers space that fosters an encounter with God, particularly the Triune God in whom we find salvation because of Jesus, participation becomes a form of proclamation. To create objects and experiences that enable people to meet the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit is to proclaim God and the Gospel of Christ. Those within the Alternative Worship movement take very seriously the belief that all are priests.

---

<sup>11</sup> Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship*, 64.

<sup>12</sup> *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*, in the Works of Martin Luther with Introduction and Notes Volume II, Translated by A.T.W. Steinhäuser, Kindle Edition, Location 3850. One important distinction here is that Luther required baptism as initiation into the Priesthood of All Believers, while many Alternative Worship communities would construe that as too restrictive. See also *To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation* for further reading on the Priesthood of All Believers.

From such a dynamic context comes a tendency to avoid preaching, a decision that appears consistent with the core values of Alternative Worship. As Pierson notes, a school of thought exists that “wants to dismiss the spoken word... or the solo spoken sermon” from within Christian worship, and he further claims, “I don’t see the sermon as pivotal or of primary significance in a worship event.”<sup>13</sup> Another curator laments the common appearance of “rational sermons” that preach particular behaviors.<sup>14</sup> Collins not only notes that Alternative Worship gatherings usually have “no sermons or didactic teachings,” but further lifts up a desire to “communicate in church without doing a sermon” or “being dominated by words,” hoping ultimately for more participatory forms of worship.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, preaching privileges a particular person in the service, and often the same person each week. The very act of preaching seems to embrace a scaled, rather than flat, hierarchy. Even if this one voice speaks faithfully, not only of God but also of the community in which she worships, a solo hardly seems inclusive of the choir. At a key point of communal proclamation, many priests are hushed.

Further, traditional preaching requires listeners rather than conversation partners or responders, which not only silences other voices but also limits the congregation’s freedom to participate in that liturgical act. However hard a preacher might work to represent the entire community in her sermon, one preacher’s perspective cannot truly represent a cross-section of the community. To apply the aforementioned theological lenses, a traditional sermon seems to silence the voices of the vast majority of priests at worship, and limits God’s providential movement to one interpretation. As many of us know personally, all too often this place of authority becomes a soapbox for poor theology and a source of exclusion and oppression. The abuse of the pulpit and of people by Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard, and Jim Jones, amongst all too

---

<sup>13</sup> Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship*, 90.

<sup>14</sup> Baker, *Curating Worship*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 59 and 24.

many others, indicates a need for change.<sup>16</sup> Though most Alternative Worship publications fail to draw these explicit connections, this brief comparison suggests a consistency between the foundational principles for alternative worship and worship curators' decisions to remove preaching from alternative worship liturgies.

Perhaps obviously, this marks a seismic shift in the practices of Christian worship. Early Christians inherited the practices of worship oration from both the synagogue of Judaism and the ambo of Greco-Roman culture, and for two millennia, preaching played a major role in Christian liturgy. Yet, Christian worship without preaching is not unprecedented. Certain worship experiences within the Christian tradition intentionally exclude sermons. The practice of celebrating mass without a sermon arose in the medieval church as a part of the indulgence system. The vast majority of these masses occurred with only a priest and perhaps a few assisting ministers in attendance. With no congregation, the sermon was unnecessary. Yet, this removal of the sermon from mass reflects not an enviable example, but rather the result of a system that inappropriately separated congregants from the sacramental presence of God, which led to a lamentable distance from God's presence in proclamation.

Other, more positive examples of worship without preaching exist. Consider the Liturgy of the Hours, often called the Breviary or, more colloquially, praying the hours. Throughout the day, monastics and other interested Christians gather in six services that occur every three hours beginning at 6am and concluding at 9pm. These liturgies include Scripture readings, prayers, and hymns, but not sermons. Following this wisdom that worship need not always include a sermon,

---

<sup>16</sup> Jim Bakker, a televangelist and pastor in the Assemblies of God, was caught in a sex scandal that led to his divorce and eventually went to jail for accounting fraud in relation to donations to his PTL television network and the Heritage USA theme park. Ted Haggard often preached against the so-called "sin" of homosexuality, but was eventually found to have had multiple gay relationships, including at least one with a prostitute. Jim Jones became famous preaching racial integration, but his charismatic personality and intensely loyal following led him to develop the cult of the People's Temple, where he led the congregation in a mass suicide after it was discovered Jones and other leaders regularly participated in emotional, physical, and sexual abuse of other members of the People's Temple.

occasional services like Lessons and Carols utilize texts, prayers, litanies, and song, all without sermons. Further, certain denominations like the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) eschew typical liturgy altogether, including the sermon. Quakers instead worship in gatherings that wait in silent hope for holy conversation where someone, inspired by the Holy Spirit, might speak. These Christians anticipate God's active role in producing that dialogue so much that people wait to speak until divinely inspired.

However, important distinctions exist between these movements and Alternative Worship. Those praying the hours assume the presence of preaching in other services they attend, particularly on Sundays. For those who commit to practicing the Liturgy of the Hours, sermonic absence is appropriate in those times of prayer because of the sermon's presence within liturgies of Word and Sacrament. Lessons and Carols provide a seasonal celebration that complements a community's regular services, which include preaching. Further, while Quaker gatherings lack a typical sermon, each member retains the right to speak and offer a Spirit-inspired word from God, which takes on a sermonic form.<sup>17</sup> The Society of Friends even spawned a tradition of missionary preaching that brought numerous people into the Quaker fold.<sup>18</sup> These examples suggest a deep appreciation for preaching as a regular part of Christian worship.

Alternative Worship, in general, lacks this appreciation, and thus many communities seek to remove preaching from their regular worship gathering. This critique of preaching reflects more than the ancillary effects of poor theology, like that of the medieval church. Further, while certain perspectives on providence and the Priesthood of All Believers contribute to this sermonic moratorium, the bedrock for preaching's departure exists not within a theological

---

<sup>17</sup> Francis Clare Fischer, "Sure We Have Preachers!," Crossroads Friends Meeting, last modified 2011. <http://www.michiganquakers.org/preachers.htm>.

<sup>18</sup> O.C. Edwards, Jr. *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), Kindle Edition, Chapter 21, Location 14082-1490

rationale, but rather the postmodern context of Alternative Worship. In fact, Alternative Worship's intent to respond to and minister within postmodernity serves as the catalyst for this homiletical disappearance.

### A CRITIQUE OF FOUNDATIONALISM

The postmodern commitments of Alternative Worship place the movement squarely in a camp that constantly critiques modernity, and particularly the foundationalism inherent to the modern project. While modernity placed high trust in the ability for speech to connect with objective truth, postmodern critiques of modernity often entail disenchantment with absolute knowledge and the way in which the rhetorical and philosophical language of modernity attempted to prove the existence of such objectivity. Thus, to fully comprehend the cessation of preaching in Alternative Worship, we must first understand the philosophical underpinnings that critique foundationalism. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen provides a helpful definition of foundationalism as “the thesis that all our beliefs can be justified by appealing to some item of knowledge that is self evident or indubitable.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, foundationalism assumes that some universal foundation for knowledge exists, that humans can fully comprehend said foundation, and that humans may discover absolute truth through objective reliance upon this foundation.

One common argument for foundationalism appeared within René Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where he proposed that all universal knowledge relies upon the simple reality that *cogito ergo sum* (often translated as “I think, therefore I am”). The foundation for all Cartesian thought, then, is the “rational consciousness of our own existence,” often referred to as *a priori* thought, or rationalism.<sup>20</sup> A competing strand of foundationalism came from the pen of John Locke, whose writings greatly influenced the leaders of the American

---

<sup>19</sup> J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 2.

<sup>20</sup> David J. Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 2003), 8.

Revolution. Instead of Descartes' rationalism, Locke believed that only empiricism, or *a posteriori* knowledge, provides assurance of truth. Lockean empiricism suggests that one gains knowledge from outside the self, through the senses, and then verifies that data through analysis.

In his book *Confessing Jesus Christ*, David Lose explores the postmodern critique of modern foundationalism. As Lose notes, while Descartes and Locke approach truth from entirely opposite directions, each sought an "indubitable epistemological touchstone" upon which to ground all knowledge.<sup>21</sup> This offers a fairly descriptive view at modernity's approach to knowledge, for most people considered objective truth fully accessible so long as one approached knowledge from the proper foundation. Yet, as thinkers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century began to question the validity of modernity, classic foundationalism began to crumble. In the words of Nancey Murphy, "if the story of modern philosophy has been that of a quest for certain and universal knowledge, it is a sad story, for it has been a series of disappointments."<sup>22</sup> Rather than a sure set of knowledge, modernity produced numerous competing theories about the nature of truth, and thus seemingly provided only certain and universal conflict about knowledge. Foundationalism seemingly failed because no agreement arose about the identity of the foundation(s) or how to apply knowledge of the foundation(s) to the practical realities of life. Why this lack of agreement?

David Lose suggests three reasons for the fall of foundationalism, which help us to understand the postmodern situation of Alternative Worship. Perhaps the most evident problem is the issue of perspective. In Lose's words, "where you stand, quite simply, affects what you see (even what you are willing to look at), and there is no "God's-eye view" free of such bias. What modernists offered as knowledge, postmodernists therefore charge, turns out instead to be only

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>22</sup> Nancey Murphy et al., *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994), 10.

particular perspectives, influenced throughout by one's context, no more or less verifiable than any other claim."<sup>23</sup> In other words, finite human perspective both prevents humanity from fully comprehending any universal foundation and, further, limits our perspective to our situation in space and time. Neutrality and objectivity remain impossible. Modernists failed to admit the parameters to the human condition, and thus foundationalism grasps far beyond humanity's ken. Foundations may exist, but beyond any level of certainty we may obtain.

While perspective limits our ability to comprehend potential universal truths, a more fundamental problem with foundationalism is the inextricable relationship between knowledge and power. Following the thought of Foucault, Lose suggests that knowledge is "neither neutral nor unbiased, as beneath perspectival claims to rational knowledge lie assertions driven by self interest and enforced by force or threat of its use."<sup>24</sup> This argument contends that foundationalism preys upon humanity's fallenness. Like Adam and Eve grasping for knowledge-laden fruit, so foundationalism demands that humanity become the proprietors of ultimate truth, as well as the judges of submission to that truth, and enforcers of punishment should anyone rebel against the foundation at hand. At the root of an attempt to proffer universal truth is an attempt to control universal truth, which is not only beyond human ability, but like the sin of Adam and Eve, an attempt to usurp the place of God.

The limits of human perception and potential for coercion become even more problematic when in concert with the finitude of language. Describing the work of Ernest Becker, Lose indicates that, "as a product of our own linguistic construction and psychological projection, what we call 'reality' is both fragile and contingent...[because] language cannot refer beyond

---

<sup>23</sup> Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, 22.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

itself and ‘reality’ is therefore a sociosymbolic construction.”<sup>25</sup> Here Lose points to both the power and the impotence of language. Language is immensely powerful because, through it, humanity helps to name, form, and order the world in which we live, which works to create our reality. Language works not only as communication, but also carries creative and transformative potential. Words and phrases offer more than empty vessels filled with descriptive meaning. The very process of definition requires other words. Indeed, language becomes a descriptive agent itself, and as such, functions in ways that shape our experiences and give meaning to our lives, all of which suggests that language creates the worlds in which we live.

Yet, language, as a system, cannot completely refer beyond itself. Amongst other things, this means that our semantic systems remain slavishly bound to their internal logic. Language and linguistic definitions are culturally located, and more so, culturally conditioned. Despite attempts at objectivity, language ultimately remains culturally subjective. Just as human individuals and cultures offer only perspectives, because location limits what we can see and are willing to see, so too the languages created by human cultures remain perspectival at best. Whatever universal foundations may exist for human knowledge, human language simply cannot bear the weight of meaning necessary to fully describe what remains entirely beyond our experience.

In the midst of such critiques, antifoundationalism arose to counter foundationalism’s apparently vast limitations. Simply put, antifoundationalism propones the idea that no universal foundations exist. Instead, justification relies upon local consensus, where the basic understandings mutually agreed upon by a local culture become accepted as a limited but sufficient sort of truth. This perspective fosters an absolute relativism in relation to other cultures and belief systems, as well as allows for constant shifting in the definition of truth. As the culture

---

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 18-9.

changes in light of new technology and new residents (either born or immigrated), amongst other contributing factors, the very definition of truth may change. Without a foundation, truth becomes pliable and adaptable, which hardly resembles the sort of truth sought in modernity.

Here, then, we see the cultural milieu in which a departure from preaching becomes a comprehensible decision for Christian communities. If foundations seem unfathomable, if language seems incredibly finite, and if truth seems terribly wrapped up with coercive power, then preaching seems dreadfully outdated. Upon what do we rely for truth claims if not rational or empirical foundations? If what we see remains culturally conditioned, then what is worth saying? If ultimate truth leads to abusive authority, then why speak of truth at all? In this postmodern matrix, the decision by Alternative Worship communities to remove the sermon seems less like a thoughtless deviation from tradition and more of an attempt to find faithfulness in a new cultural setting. Even so, a different way forward provides us both with a chance to respond to the faults of modernity without jettisoning the preached Word of God. That way is postfoundationalism.

#### A POSTMODERN JUSTIFICATION TO PREACH

Lose's postfoundationalism looks to move beyond the impossible certainty of foundationalism and the desperate relativism of antifoundationalism. Postfoundationalism presents a promising opportunity because, "postmodernity pushes Christians to live more fully by faith alone; that is, to live apart from rationally guaranteed foundations."<sup>26</sup> In between foundationalism and antifoundationalism lies the possibility of faith as a source of knowledge. Lose here draws upon an ancient Christian tradition that considers faith as the source of all knowledge, not just religious or spiritual knowledge. St. Anselm bases his entire 11<sup>th</sup> century work *Prosologion* upon the mantra of faith seeking understanding, or *fides quaerens*

---

<sup>26</sup> Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, 63.

*intellectum*.<sup>27</sup> The tradition extends further still, as far back as St. Augustine who preached *crede, ut intelligas*, or “believe that you may understand.”<sup>28</sup> Scriptural resonance for faith preceding true knowledge appears even earlier within the cry of the grief stricken father to Jesus: “Lord I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24 NRSV).

To establish the possibility of *sola fide* within the postmodern matrix, Lose explores concepts of critical fideism, adequate translation, and dialogical realism as the core tenets of postfoundationalism, which seek to provide a constructive way out of foundationalism’s problems with perspectival limitation, power, and language. With this, Lose hopes “to speak of truth without succumbing either to a modernist foundationalism that quickly becomes univocal, even hegemonic, speech or to a postmodern constructivism that seriously undermines, if not eliminates, the possibility for speaking of truth at all.”<sup>29</sup>

Critical fideism, in Lose’s words, accepts “penultimate foundations as ineluctably necessary for constructive thought while simultaneously insisting that no such assumptions remain beyond the pale of critical review, revision, and even reversal.”<sup>30</sup> To speak of penultimate foundations suggests that core beliefs matter, and even alludes to the existence of an ultimate foundation, but admits humanity’s incapacity to fully comprehend such a foundation. Instead, Lose encourages an embrace of core beliefs, of faith, as intrinsically valuable and necessarily limited. Such limitation, then, leads to a requirement of critique, especially in relation to “utility and soundness,” and the constant awareness that the penultimate foundations may falter when seen in the light of other perspectives.<sup>31</sup> Critical fideism, then, opens an approach to truth and,

---

<sup>27</sup> See the prefaces to the *Monologion* and the *Prosologion*.

<sup>28</sup> Augustine, Sermon 43.7.

<sup>29</sup> Lose, *Confessing Jesus Christ*, 33; 111.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

through a humility that opens such penultimate foundations to critique, admits and seeks to work with humanity's inherent limitations.

To communicate within this critical fideism, however, one must establish adequate translation, not only to assure understanding, but more fundamentally, to erode the power differential inherent within foundationalism. Rather than follow Becker's assertion that language remains entirely unable to refer beyond itself, Lose reminds the reader that, "conversation between traditions is already happening and, in fact, happens all the time as cultures ineluctably understand themselves in relation to each other."<sup>32</sup> Though no translation may create an objective approach across any boundary, beginning the translation process at the site of these inevitable cross cultural interactions redeems the potential for meaningful conversation across linguistic and cultural barriers.<sup>33</sup> More simply, this means that while all translation is limited, we may speak with some level of assurance that people may understand our words, and that, when miscommunication occurs, we may corroborate in order to create understanding. Notice that this also requires a flat hierarchy, with no one as a chief authority, but rather invites all parties to work toward common comprehension.

Despite language's limited ability to make external references, the evidence that translation exists, albeit imperfect, suggests that conversation provides a space of incomplete but valuable connection to reality. In light of this, Lose proposes dialogical realism, where we admit that language helps to create the world in which we live, we embrace responsibility for the world(s) our words create, and in so doing, create a space with "enough stability for speakers and hearers to meet, converse, and form consensus about their common life."<sup>34</sup> This means that even in the midst of our limited language, we may speak with a relative assurance that our words not

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 50

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 58.

only refer to reality in some incomplete but helpful fashion, but also help to shape that reality. This requires that we continue as conversation members with others that we might all speak, listen, and become accountable for the reality in which we live, because, at least in part, we produce that reality as speakers. Dialogical realism, then, means that we may speak with a relative confidence about the world in which we live, and concomitantly must speak with integrity because we help shape that world through our words and our silence.

The confluence of critical fideism, adequate translation, and dialogical realism create what Lose calls “critical conversation,” where we enter into a search for truth where speech remains essential, but requires critique in order to more faithfully approach truth.<sup>35</sup> This gives a significant nuance to the role of preaching as seen by the Alternative Worship community. Alternative Worship seems to take an antifoundationalist route. In other words, the removal of preaching assumes we cannot speak with any sort of significance, believes that language remains too dangerous because of its coercive potential, and ultimately considers foundations nonexistent or entirely beyond the ken of humanity. Fortunately, Lose offers postmodern proponents of preaching a different perspective.

Rather than despair at the apparent difficulties of modern foundationalism, postfoundationalism encourages us to admit the faults of unfettered certainty based in humanity’s finite perspective. Even more so, critical conversation encourages us to reconsider a mitigated approach to truth that admits our faults and our finitude, even as we embrace the search for truth so core to our acts of faith. Indeed, the postfoundationalist approach of critical conversation allows us to speak with enough certainty to continue to speak – and to preach with enough certainty to continue to preach – but with an increased humility that requires us to listen, and to consider the all too real possibility that we may be wrong. Though not objectively verifiable,

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 63.

faith provides us with a space in which to seek truth, so long as we undertake that journey with conversation partners, with a community.

Postfoundationalism, then, encourages us to seek truth that lays entirely outside ourselves, not in our rationality or even in our senses. Postfoundationalism, as Lose describes it, opens the postmodern door to the vitality of faith. As a penultimate foundation located solely outside the self, faith as a gift from God provides us with a reason to speak and a reality to speak of, even as faith invites us to help speak into being a new creation, the Kingdom of God.

Still, this reality remains far off. Thus far we have seen that Alternative Worship communities have comprehensible reasons to avoid preaching, located within the antifoundationalist movement of postmodernity and augmented by strong allegiances to divine providence and the Priesthood of All Believers. At the same time we see that postfoundationalism provides us with a way to continue to speak reliably within postmodernity, and thus offers a way to continue to preach in postmodernity. Thus, while we must avoid the hegemony of modern foundationalism, we may still speak with limited but nevertheless vital connection to reality, especially in conversation with others.

Simply because we now see a postmodern justification for preaching does not mean that sermons must remain as an essential part of Christian worship. The next three chapters seek to answer this question within the context of Alternative Worship: Why preach? Recalling Collins' definition of Alternative Worship communities, we have yet to see where the ancient, alternative, and artistic traditions of Christianity come into play. Chapter Three looks to the ancient origins of Christianity and argues that preaching retains a vital role in the larger formational movement of Christian liturgy. Chapter Four argues that Christ becomes uniquely present in preaching, an alternative view that rises from within the Lutheran tradition. Chapter Five argues for one

particular form of preaching that embraces artistry and communal conversation. Taken together, these chapters suggest preaching ought to continue as a regular part of Christian worship.

## CHAPTER 3

### A FORMATIONAL REASON TO PREACH

As the last chapter suggested, Alternative Worship's removal of preaching arises from legitimate concerns about modernity's tenuous reliance upon foundationalism, a critique based in the socio-cultural setting of postmodernity. Yet, Lose's description of postfoundationalism offers communities a possible way forward for faithful preaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Before we entertain this possibility, however, we must consider the reasons for preaching, particularly in postmodernity. We must ask, "Why preach?" Remembering that Alternative Worship communities place a high premium on ancient practices, we now look to the origins of Christian preaching. This chapter argues that, as we see within the nascent days of the church, preaching's ability to form individuals and communities provides a vital tool for ministry in the postmodern matrix. The examples of the synagogue, New Testament, and Patristic eras of preaching offer a valuable witness for our discussion because, much like the present, post-Christian context, these examples lift up traditions of preaching within a pagan setting. Through a look at preaching's history in general, and the particular example of Melito of Sardis' *On Pascha*, we see both the great potential and significant dangers that lie with preaching.

#### SERMONIC ORIGINS IN SYNAGOGUE, SCRIPTURE, AND PATRISTICS

The tradition of Christian preaching relies in large part upon the Jewish roots of the faith. As Ronald Osborn notes, by the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, worship in the synagogue "gave primacy to the reading and exposition of scripture...[Judaism] flourished by speaking the words and the

meaning of the sacred text. *Midrash* became *derash* – sermon or biblical preaching.”<sup>36</sup>

Synagogue worship consisted largely of reading, interpreting, and conversing about Torah.

Despite our lack of manuscript evidence of specific sermons, the witness of the *Pirkei Avot* and Philo’s *Hypothetica*, amongst other works, alert us to this existence of preaching as central to synagogue life.<sup>37</sup> This practice, which likely began during the diaspora and continued even after the reconstruction of the temple in 520 BCE, helped to shape persons and communities with a discretely Jewish identity.<sup>38</sup> This occurred within a Hellenistic culture that threatened to erode the socio-religious identity of Israel as the people of God, and as such, preaching served the key purpose of forming a people of God in the midst of pagan democracies and idol worship.

For Jewish preachers, then, one key aspect of the sermon was to continually reorient people to their identity as God’s chosen people. In the synagogue, the Torah comprised the sermon’s primary content. Rabbis utilized two interpretive approaches in tandem to help orient people around the witness of Torah. The first task for rabbinical preachers was *peshat*, to delineate the meaning of the text *in se*, which often required a translation into the vernacular. Then came *midrash*, the task of applying this meaning to the situation of the synagogue members.<sup>39</sup> Different rabbis subscribed to various *middoth*, or rules for interpretation.<sup>40</sup> Significant variance occurred within sermon execution as well.<sup>41</sup> Yet, more important than the interpretive moves or methods of execution are the ends these sermons served, namely, the theological instruction and construction of communities whose lives were shaped by God’s

---

<sup>36</sup> Ronald E. Osborn, *A History of Christian Preaching*, vol. 1, *Folly of God: The Rise of Christian Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 1998), 178.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 110, 123-5.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 109-12.

<sup>39</sup> Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 1, *The Biblical Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 103.

<sup>40</sup> Osborn, *The Folly of God*, 146-51; 166-73. Rabbis often employed comparative, analogical, allegorical, arithmological, and etymological lenses to interpret Torah.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 166-73. Rabbis might use dialogue, stories, and exhortation, as well as poetic speech like simile, metaphor, and parable in the delivery of the sermon.

intervention.<sup>42</sup> The sermon act, as a part of the service, sought to form people not only to think rightly about God and God's relationship to creation, but also to act accordingly.

Nascent within this Jewish homiletic lays the conviction that the words in worship help to shape a congregation's beliefs, known amongst liturgists as *lex orandi, lex credendi*, loosely translated as "the law of prayer (or worship) is the law of belief." Synagogue preaching lay between two other major portions of the worship: Torah reading and prayer. Torah reading directly preceded the *peshat* and *midrash*, and prayer bookended these practices.<sup>43</sup> Whether sung psalms or spoken Scriptures, these prayers were built upon, and often explicit quotations of, Torah. All the service flowed from Torah, and all the service was the synagogue's worship, including, if not especially, the sermon.<sup>44</sup> Thus, while the developed principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi* lays in the future developments of Christian liturgical thought, the origins appear within the synagogue, where all of worship, including the sermon, both grew from Scripture and sought to instill within worshippers an identity consistent with God's scriptural revelation.

As part of the Jewish messianic movement, New Testament preaching arose within the context of the synagogue. Yet, many of the sermons recorded in the gospels and epistles occurred outside of a typical worship gathering. Luke tells us Jesus taught in synagogues (4:15ff), as do Matthew (13:54), Mark (1:21), and John (6:59). Further, Acts records numerous apostolic sermons in synagogues across the Greco-Roman world. Yet, we also know Jesus preached on the side of a mountain (Matt 5-7), on a plain (Luke 6:17-49), from a boat at the lakeshore (Luke 5:1), and at a meal (John 13-17). Paul preached at Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-33).

---

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 152-62.

<sup>43</sup> Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 68-70. Senn details the later development of the synagogue liturgies, which include the Invocation, *Shemah Israel*, *berakoth* (blessings), *Shemonah Esreh* (Eighteen Benedictions), Aaronic Blessing of Num 6:24-6, Torah reading, homily, Psalms. This reflects a likely outline of first century synagogue participation.

<sup>44</sup> Old, *The Biblical Period*, 97.

Peter preaches in Cornelius' home (Acts 10:23-43). The New Testament sermon is related to, but not bound within, the synagogue community.

This, however, is not the only significant shift in New Testament preaching. While Torah continued to provide major content to the sermons of Jesus and the apostles, a more personal sort of content came to the fore. Jesus taught from Isaiah in the synagogue (Luke 4), and though Paul does not quote Scripture at the Areopagus, he paraphrases the Genesis creation story. Yet, these two sermons indicate a seismic shift in the nature of preaching that occurs in the New Testament, because in each of them, the person of Jesus becomes a central point of the sermon's substance. The content of Jewish preaching in the synagogue was primarily the Torah, but in the New Testament, preaching's substance begins to include the person of Jesus. This suggests a shift in understanding revelation. Prior to the incarnation, God's chief gift to humanity was the Law of Israel, a book that revealed how humanity might have communion with the LORD. In Jesus, God accomplishes communion with humanity, and thus rather than the way to God, the revelation becomes God's very self. Scripture remains a chief mediator of God, but in Christ, God is immediately present, and thus, Christ becomes the content of New Testament preaching.

Vital to this point is the recognition that the New Testament contains books meant for preaching. Unlike today, where a plethora of texts exist for personal study, the relative rarity of books in the ancient world, especially amongst the poor, meant that texts like epistles arose as a means of communicating words that writers would otherwise share in person, and thus, the texts were intended for communal reading. The letters of Paul, with the exception of those to Philemon and Timothy, are written to the churches that gathered, first in synagogues and then in homes. As Bruce E. Shields suggests, Paul's letters imagine, "the Gospel becoming effective through God's empowerment in the act of speaking... [and] he expected even his letters to be

read aloud in assemblies of the church.”<sup>45</sup> Paul did not submit these texts for the community’s interpretation, but rather they are Paul’s *peshat* and *midrash* for the churches. They are his interpretation of the Scriptures, and more so, his witness to the person of Jesus as the God of Israel. Thus, the intended act of communal reading signifies a sort of preaching of the text itself. That Christ is the content of Paul’s letters means that Christ was the content of Paul’s preaching, for his letters are written to become sermons in the communities where they were first read, and the same function applies to the rest of the communal epistles.<sup>46</sup>

Shields also notes a particular orality within the Gospels and Acts. The narrative structure of these texts indicates a more complex compilation of material to witness to the life of Jesus and the church’s life in his resurrection. Though these texts contain numerous sermons, to suggest the Gospel writers intended their manuscripts as sermons is too strong. Gospels and epistles are different genres. Yet, as Shields notes, they are intended for performance, for vocalization. Both genres demand oration to fully activate the material within. Just as epistles were intended for communal listening, so too were the Gospels.<sup>47</sup> It seems that the trajectory of the New Testament canon is always toward preaching.

This oration of texts suggests that, even as Christ became the primary content of Christian preaching, vocalization of both the scriptures and the interpretation of how Christ relates to those scriptures remained an essential part of Christian practice. Acts 2 indicates that,

---

<sup>45</sup> Bruce E. Shields, *From the Housetops: Preaching in the Early Church and Today* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000), 85.

<sup>46</sup> In the revision process, David Ratke brought to the fore questions about scriptural interpretation in light of this theory. In particular, if these texts are intended for preaching within a particular cultural context when they now exist as part of a static canon? While this vital question remains beyond the scope of this project, two thoughts come to mind. First, exegetes ought to at least consider the authorial intent of the text because that shapes the ways in which we read and interpret. Secondly, an author’s intent ought never constitute the entire meaning of an inspired work. Just as prophecies that spoke immediately about the fall of Israel and Judah also entail meaning for the work of God in and through Jesus Christ, so too New Testament letters may take on new meaning beyond the initially intended scope.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

in the earliest days of the church's existence, Christians came together in a worship gathering that included a ritual meal, prayer, and apostolic teaching, and the prevalence of references to the Hebrew Bible throughout the New Testament solidify the core place of Scripture within communal worship.<sup>48</sup> Though we noted above that certain sermons existed outside of a ritual setting, a key relationship remains between preaching and worship. People recognized good news within the sermons of Jesus and the apostles, especially as they came to understand Jesus as Lord. This proclamation outside of worship led to the growth of the church and participation in this budding Christian liturgy. Thus, for the New Testament church, preaching not only belonged within worship, but, with Christ as the content, sermons entailed the power to call people and create new communities of worship.

This early form of liturgy, which matured within the Ante-Nicene Patristic period, also saw preaching flourish. As David Dunn-Wilson details, these preachers sought to both continue doctrinal and ethical development of congregations based on Torah, as well as the wisdom of apostolic writings that eventually became the New Testament.<sup>49</sup> The similarity in trajectory with preaching in the synagogue is no accident, for Christians now faced the problem of obedience to and development of a new monotheistic faith in the midst of Rome's polytheism. Belief and behavior were key to the Christian community's internal coherence, as well as to the expansion of the evangelistic invitation. So strong was the opposition to Christianity that pastors like Ignatius pointed to the faithfulness of martyrs, for their synthesis of belief in Christ and action for Christ led to their death in the hands of the empire.<sup>50</sup> Preachers connected Christ's suffering

---

<sup>48</sup> As Philo notes in *De vita contemplativa* 56-90, by the 1<sup>st</sup> century the synagogue became a place for festival meals considered part of the worship, and as such, the earliest Christian Eucharistic practices find a purpose and form from Jesus' Last Supper and established synagogue custom.

<sup>49</sup> David Dunn-Wilson, *A Mirror for the Church: Preaching in the First Five Centuries* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 30-1.

<sup>50</sup> See St. Ignatius' *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

for the salvation of all with the suffering of early Christians at the hand of Rome, for in their faithfulness, even unto martyrdom, they reflected the faithfulness of Christ. Preaching as a core focus of Christian worship literally had life and death consequences, for these sermons and liturgies sought to form people for death to this world and life in the Kingdom of God.

Another key development within this era is the advent of poetic rhetoric as a dominant sermon form. Surely, Hellenistic rhetoric influenced sermons both in the synagogue and in the New Testament. Yet, the Patristic period produced preachers like Melito of Sardis (d. 180), Tertullian (d. 225), and Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258), whose rhetorical flourishes revealed an adoption of cultural forms and strategies for their preaching without sacrificing the importance of theological content or exhortation to life transformation. Below, a fuller consideration of Melito's *On Pascha* details how the depths of liturgical and Eucharistic theology take new life in his poetic language. For now, we see that even as Christians died at the hands of Rome, preachers still found ways to faithfully engage the culture through appropriation of linguistic forms and functions, all in order to help contextualize the Gospel, which further helped connect congregants with God in Christ.

Before we turn to *On Pascha*, consider the key developments of the sermon in this brief historical review. Synagogue preaching lifted up the formative element of preaching and worship, especially within a culture hostile to faith. With a basis in scripture, sermons help to shape belief and action of the congregation. This formation included both beliefs and habits that reflected that God preached by rabbis. New Testament preaching continued this heritage, with the distinct change that the content of preaching shifted from Torah to the Person of Christ. Further, the New Testament era highlights that the authors of the Gospels and epistles intended them for speaking and preaching, and that such preaching gathered and formed the earliest

Christian communities. The Patristic era revealed the polar potential of preaching, that sermons may inhabit cultural art forms in order to communicate the Gospel even as preachers remind congregations that obedience to Christ in belief and activity may lead to martyrdom at the hands of that culture. In this, the uniqueness of Christ and the incarnational possibility of the sermon became evident.

Why preach? For Alternative Worship communities, the answer goes far beyond the fact that preaching is an ancient practice within Christian worship. Sermons functioned as a major catalyst of growth and identity in the first few centuries of the church's existence. In particular, preaching provides a valuable and consistent formation for people of faith, not only in their belief, but also in the way they live their lives.<sup>51</sup> Preaching entails the possibility of forming new faith communities, and reforming the lives of individuals, especially in the face of a hostile or ambivalent culture. Preaching provides one way to make sense of faith in the midst of a world that seems not to understand, and at the same time sermons provide an avenue through which faith might engage with and find the best of our cultural settings. This at the very least warrants the attention of Alternative Worship communities, as well as provides important fodder for further consideration as the movement grows within settings of various denominations and worship styles.

## FORMATION AND MALFORMATION IN MELITO OF SARDIS

Melito of Sardis wrote *On Pascha* sometime in the middle of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century CE, likely between 160-170. Why consider a sermon from this relatively obscure Patristic author? In

---

<sup>51</sup> Within the realm of liturgical theology, many authors argue that the sermon is formational as part of the larger formational matrix of liturgy. E. Byron Anderson explores this relationship in *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 39-112. Fred Edie makes this argument in the particular context of reforming youth ministry in *Book, Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007), 33-125.

Melito's work, we see the vital contributions of synagogue, New Testament, and Patristic preaching, particularly with the formative potential inherent to the sermon. Yet, Melito also reveals how an authoritative voice that lacks Lose's critical conversation may endanger the life and theological integrity of a community, particularly in Melito's anti-Judaism. In short, Melito allows us to see much of the formational value offered by preaching intermingled with the pitfalls of preaching. To see this in conflict shows us both the potential value for continued preaching, as well as reason to consider reformation rather than removal from worship.

As the Bishop of Sardis, an ancient city in the region of Lydia in the eastern region of present day Turkey, Melito likely preached *On Pascha* to many of the city's Christians gathered for Easter. As a Quartodeciman Bishop, Melito celebrated Christ's resurrection in combination with a Passover festival in accordance with the Jewish synagogue tradition.<sup>52</sup> By 160 CE, this practice reflected a minority position within Christianity for two reasons. First, since Christ rose on a Sunday, many early Christians preferred a Sunday Easter (and regular worship) celebration as a new tradition that took precedence over the former Passover festivities. Further, the increasingly Gentile population of churches had little reason to recognize Saturdays or Jewish festivals as important days. As such, *On Pascha* provides a deep reflection on how Jesus became the Passover lamb for the church, and further, a supersessionism of the church over Israel.

Consider, for instance, some of Melito's penultimate paragraphs:

He who hung the earth is hanging.  
He who fixed the heavens in place has been fixed in place.  
He who laid the foundations of the universe has been laid on a tree.  
The master has been profaned. God has been murdered.  
The King of Israel has been destroyed by an Israelite right hand.  
...  
You disowned the Lord, and so are not owned by him.  
You did not receive the Lord, so you were not pitied by him.

---

<sup>52</sup> Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha: with the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*, ed. and trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood: St Vladimir's, 2001), 2.

You smashed the Lord to the ground, you were razed to the ground.  
And you lie dead, while he rose from the dead, and is raised to the heights of heaven.

Within powerfully poetic language, Melito's anti-Judaism comes quickly to the fore.

Rather than a grafting in to the covenant with Israel, Melito suggests that Israel forsook and thus lost their covenant, and so the church's status as the new Israel is as a replacement for Jews rather than inheritors of a Jewish promise. Melito depicts a sort of cause and effect, where Israel's disobedience leads to God's total covenant abandonment, even though this seems a fundamental break from Torah's witness to God's covenant faithfulness (Jer 31:31-34). This anti-Judaic phenomenon seems especially odd considering that Melito continued the synagogue Passover celebration. He valued the witness of Israel, at least in terms of religious tradition, but likely viewed the Jews not only as culpable for Christ's death, but false witnesses and thus dangerous competition in 2<sup>nd</sup> century Asia Minor. This becomes especially important in light of the fact that the synagogue in Sardis, dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, held about 1,000 people.<sup>53</sup> In a context dominated by polytheism and an empire that accepted the large minority of Jews, Melito perceived the Jewish population as outside of God's promise of salvation. In no uncertain terms, Melito utilizes his sermon to blame Jews for the death Christ, and for this reason, suggests that God abandoned the people of Israel.

This reveals some of the worst potential feared by Alternative Worship communities. Melito, the highest Christian authority in Sardis, ascends the pulpit (or without an ambo, at least takes a position of authority) on a Jewish holiday and proceeds to defame and degrade these covenantal partners with God. If such sentiments lay within the congregation, to lend them the

---

<sup>53</sup> "The Ancient Synagogue of Sardis," Beit Hatfutsot: The Museum of the Jewish People, last modified December 2013, accessed December 8, 2013, <http://www.bh.org.il/database-article.aspx?48726>. Consider that, according to the architect, the largest synagogue in Jerusalem today seats at least 5,000. Though a minority in Sardis, the Jewish population was a large and likely influential minority. "The Belz Great Synagogue – Jerusalem," Steel Sagdor, accessed December 6, 2013, [http://www.steelsagdor.com/The\\_Belz\\_Great\\_Synagogue\\_Jerusalem/](http://www.steelsagdor.com/The_Belz_Great_Synagogue_Jerusalem/).

place of liturgical prominence allows anti-Judaism a *de facto* ecclesial authorization, a sort of sanctified hate that appears all too often within the mouths of white preachers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American South, State Church preachers in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century Germany, and too many other times to note. If the church at Sardis celebrated a Passover meal and Easter liturgy without such a sermon, the entire event may have communicated an appreciation for the salvation witnessed first by Israel and accomplished in Christ, but Melito's preaching suggests an antagonistic meal of supersession rather than a historical communion with the people of God. This surely legitimizes any fears that a privileged voice within communal worship may lead to prejudice or poor theology, and thus why curators might want to avoid a sermon altogether.

Yet, this reflects only a portion of Melito's sermon. At most, roughly one-third of Melito's material contains anti-Judaic sentiments.<sup>54</sup> The rest of the sermon reflects a masterful use of language to help form the beliefs and lifestyles of a community, as well as to witness passionately to Jesus as the creator and savior of the world, all couched within powerfully lyrical and typological language.<sup>55</sup> This does not excuse Melito's anti-Judaism, but rather provides a way toward envisioning sermon reform that embraces a formational approach through poetic language even as it admits the problems inherent to a monological sermon form. Consider this portion of Melito's introduction:

For the law was a word, and the old was new, going out from Sion and Jerusalem,  
and the commandment was grace, and the type was a reality,  
and the lamb was a son, and the sheep was a man, and the man was God.  
For he was born a son, and led as a lamb, and slaughtered as a sheep, and buried as a man,  
and rose from the dead as God, being God by his nature and a man.  
He is all things.

He is law, in that he judges. He is word, in that he teaches. He is grace, in that he saves.  
He is father, in that he begets. He is son, in that he is begotten. He is sheep, in that he suffers.  
He is human, in that he is buried. He is God, in that he is raised up.

---

<sup>54</sup> O.C. Edwards Jr, *A History of Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2004), Kindle Edition: Location 1029.

<sup>55</sup> Melito, *On Pascha*, 31-4.

This is Jesus the Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.<sup>56</sup>

This excerpt offers an insight into how a preacher might fuse the core components of synagogue, New Testament, and Patristic preaching. First, notice the way that Melito weaves together the content of Torah with the content of Christ. Melito elsewhere makes explicit reference to Cain's murder of Abel, Israel's deliverance from Egypt, the binding of Isaac, Joseph's sale into slavery, the work of the prophets, and other stories from Torah key to Israel's life and worship in synagogue.<sup>57</sup> Simultaneously, Melito suggests these stories prefigure Christ, who at this paschal celebration becomes the focus of Melito's preaching. Melito clearly reflects a commitment to content resonant both with synagogue and New Testament preaching. Further, the way that Melito suggests Torah refers to Christ, known as typology, is a practice that first appeared within rabbinic *midrash*.<sup>58</sup>

Another core aspect of synagogue and New Testament sermons was the capacity to form belief and lifestyle of communities. Clearly, Melito's content seeks a confirmation from his congregation that Jesus is the Lord, the God of Israel, and because of this divine identity, Jesus constitutes the fullness of the meaning of all creation and scripture. Further, in the context of a Passover celebration, Melito wants his congregation to recognize Christ as the sacrifice for sin, as well as the priest who accomplishes this sacrifice, a desire that resonates with the claim that Christ's sacrifice is "once for all" in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 10:10).

This attempt to form theological belief and seek assent is clear, but at first glance, *On Pascha* lacks any sort of moral exhortation for transformation. However, we must note the context of martyrdom so common to early Christians, and particularly, that Marcus Aurelius'

---

<sup>56</sup> Melito, *On Pascha*, 38-9.

<sup>57</sup> Melito, *On Pascha*, 44, 52-3.

<sup>58</sup> Osborn, *The Folly of God*, 275. Undoubtedly, the Christian development of the typological method led to further antagonism with Jews, but Christian preachers first found this method in their Jewish counterparts.

Rome ordered the executions of Polycarp of Smyrna, along with eleven other Christians, relatively soon before Melito preached *On Pascha*.<sup>59</sup> Thus, while the anti-Judaic rhetoric of Melito remains abhorrent, at least by current standards propriety, it also becomes an exhortation for his congregation not to abandon their faith in Christ, even at the hands of oppressors, for Melito legitimately feared a Christian's denial of Jesus would lead to God's denial of that person. Melito believed that, to ensure one's eternity with God, one must not abandon Christ. Here, then, *On Pascha* intends not only to provide formation to a community's belief, but also to form a congregation that boldly and fearlessly bears witness to Christ in word and deed.

Finally, it is helpful to note the very poetic style in which Melito writes directly reflects the influence of orators in Asia Minor, and, especially, an embrace of the Second Sophistic. Melito's use of Gorgianic figures, a rhetorical device that includes rhyme, a playfulness with sounds, corresponding literary structures, and antithesis, indicates that Melito borrowed heavily from, if not directly imitated, Hellenistic orators of the Second Sophistic.<sup>60</sup> His free use of anaphora, apostrophe, and personification only further suggest Melito employed the dominant oratorical art of the day in order to proclaim the Gospel. This attempt to contextualize the Gospel, even as he sought to remain faithful to Torah and Christ as content, reflects a willingness to borrow cultural forms, particularly art, in order to connect Christ with congregation. Such a commitment to art and contextualization ought to resonate powerfully with Alterative Worship.

*On Pascha* exemplifies the great formative potential of sermons spoken of in the synagogue, in the New Testament, and in the Patristic era. Melito sought to form a faith community unabashedly dedicated to Jesus and aware that their confession of Christ mattered. Yet, Melito's authority also became a place of derision for Jews. Without a component of critical

---

<sup>59</sup> Edwards, *A History of Preaching*, Location 1040.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, Location 1075.

conversation, the congregation at Sardis heard a proclamation of Christ wrapped up with hatred for God's covenant people Israel. This, then, lifts up both the importance of preaching as a formational aspect of Christian community, as well as suggests an inherent danger to allowing only one voice to dominate the theological content of a sermon. Some sort of critical conversation, it seems, may allow for a redemptive correction of Melito's anti-Judaism that complements an embrace of his Christology.

### FORMATION: A REASON TO PREACH

With this historical wisdom in mind, let us consider what the removal of preaching from Christian worship might mean. As we saw in the synagogue, preaching provides not only an interpretation of Scripture, but also an application to the lives of listeners. As we saw from the New Testament, with Christ as the content of preaching, sermons bring new people into the church and work to form entirely new communities. Further, since the New Testament contains texts meant for speaking, to remove preaching is to mute the fullness of the voices we find in the Gospels, Acts, and the Epistles. From the Patristic era, we hear that to remove preaching is to silence a voice that prepares us for martyrdom in a hostile empire, and to close an avenue for incarnation within our culture. Finally, each of these provides invaluable insight into the church's formation within a pagan context. Why preach? Because without preaching we lose this type of formation in Christ that weaves together the import of Scripture, the person of Christ, and the vitality of faith in face of culture either hostile or ambivalent toward faith. Such commitments offer a vivacity for the postmodern ministry of Alternative Worship communities.

Admittedly, this does not eradicate at least one concern of Alternative Worship communities. Namely, a danger remains in allowing a single voice to dominate the preached

theology of a congregation. In Melito's anti-Judaism, we saw this critique validated. Preaching is a dangerous privilege, and as postmodernity reveals the pitfalls of foundationalism, we must reconsider how authority operates within the church.

Even so, the origins of preaching suggest that to remove preaching is to unnecessarily limit our Christian formation, and that is too high a price to pay. Explicit formation provides one reason to continue preaching, especially since, like Melito, our postmodern context grows increasingly pagan with many gods calling for the allegiance of Christians. Rather than removal, we ought to consider a reformation in the form of our preaching, assuming that such forms can continue to carry the formative content so important to preaching's origins. First, we turn to another reason to preach, one from within the Lutheran tradition, and one that complements the formational role of preaching: the presence of Christ. We explore this sacramental function of preaching in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 4

### PREACHING EMMANUEL: A SACRAMENTAL REASON TO PREACH

Thus far, we have discussed the legitimate concerns, both theological and cultural, raised by Alternative Worship communities about the role of preaching within postmodern worship. Through the work of David Lose we saw how postfoundational thought allows space for preaching within postmodernity that adequately addresses the cultural critiques raised by Alternative Worship. We further explored the historical and theological witness to the sermon's role in the formation of persons and communities in God's image, which provides at least one reason for preaching's continuation within Christian worship.

This chapter considers another theological reason to keep preaching, a lesser known theological commitment that arises from within the Lutheran tradition. From the works of Martin Luther and Dietrich Bonhoeffer we see an emphasis upon Christ's actual presence within the sermon, which suggests a sacramental reason to preach. Voices of current theologians, both Lutheran and otherwise, support this concept. Simply put, we encounter Christ uniquely in preaching, and to deny that sort of divine engagement unnecessarily inhibits personal and communal relationships with God.

### LUTHER AND BONHOEFFER ON CHRIST'S SERMONIC PRESENCE

While this idea is not entirely unique to Lutherans, Lutheranism carries a unique emphasis upon Christ's presence within the sermon that begins with Luther himself. During the Reformation, Martin Luther's main liturgical challenge to the Roman Catholic Church focused

upon the theology of sacrifice in the Mass. As Frank Senn, a Lutheran liturgical theologian notes, Luther's Roman contemporaries treated the Mass as a good work to gain divine favor, as though priests were the actors offering a sacrifice to influence God. Luther maintained that the church meets Christ in Eucharist because Christ is both the Lamb and the High Priest, the sacrifice and the performer of the sacrifice. In Mass, then, the entire church, including clergy, participate in the once for all sacrifice of Christ.<sup>61</sup>

Though this led to an eventual splintering of the church, Luther focused upon God's presence and agency within the Eucharistic meal. This focus upon God's liturgical presence expanded beyond the sacraments, as a similar emphasis of presence and agency appears within Luther's homiletical theology. In the last sermon Luther preached, he exclaimed, "how highly honored and richly blessed we are to know that God speaks with us and feeds us with his Word."<sup>62</sup> Such a declaration indicates not only a deep respect for the sermon, but more than that, a belief that God somehow becomes present to the congregation that witnesses preaching, whose main content was always to be the Gospel of Jesus, salvation by faith through grace.

Luther considered the act of preaching salvation through Christ such a high honor that he once quipped that pastors might leave the celebration of sacraments to others as they were "lower offices" than that of preaching.<sup>63</sup> Yet, he also knew the frustrations of preaching. As he struggled with the apparent fruitlessness of his sermons in the life of his church, Luther once reminded himself and the congregation that, "I did not invent this Word of God and this office. It is God's Word, God's work."<sup>64</sup> In another sermon he even more clearly asserts, "'Here God

---

<sup>61</sup> Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 269-75. The same theology commitments extended to Luther's baptismal theology.

<sup>62</sup> LW 51, 391.

<sup>63</sup> LW 39, 314.

<sup>64</sup> LW 51, 225.

speaks.’ God Himself has said it *et iterum* (again).”<sup>65</sup> Notice, here, the deep similarity between Luther’s Eucharistic and homiletical theologies. In both the sermon and the sacraments, God becomes present as the primary actor in the event. Just as Jesus is the sacrifice and priest, so the Word speaks through the preacher’s words. Indeed, the emphasis of *et iterum*, ‘again’ in Latin, suggests that God consistently and presently speaks the same word of grace for the people of God spoken in creation, incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection. Thus, for Luther, so long as the sermon proclaimed the Gospel, the sermon became a sacramental avenue for the presence of God. For Luther applies not only to his preaching and other sermons in the Lutheran tradition, but indeed to all sermons across Christian history that faithfully preached Christ.

Fred W. Meuser, a Lutheran theologian, articulates Luther’s doctrine of preaching in this way: “The word is not just preliminary to the sacraments, a kind of lower stage of God’s presence that we really get in the sacraments, or, as many would say today, in prayer or special kinds of spiritual experiences. The word brings God with all God’s gifts.”<sup>66</sup> Even more simply, Meuser states that, “in the sermon one actually encounters God,” for indeed, the church finds “the real presence of Christ in proclamation.”<sup>67</sup> Senn resounds in concert: “Luther was articulating a new understanding of the word. The word is as much a means of grace as the sacraments, but grace no longer understood in terms of substance but in terms of communication and response...As God’s self communication, the word of God is an encounter with the Person of God himself.”<sup>68</sup> Both theologians point to the fact that, for Luther, God becomes fully present in the proclamation. There is no distinction between spiritual and bodily presence in Luther’s theology, for in the sermon, Christ is completely with the community of faith. In an incarnational

---

<sup>65</sup> WA 51, 517. Quoted in Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983), 59.

<sup>66</sup> Meuser, *Luther*, 59.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, 13.

<sup>68</sup> Senn, *Christian Liturgy*, 306.

fashion, Christ takes on the words of a preacher to confront and comfort all who might hear the preached word.

Nearly four hundred years later, Dietrich Bonhoeffer continued to emphasize God's presence within sermons. In his homiletical lectures to the seminarians at Finkenwalde, Bonhoeffer masterfully combines clarity and poetry as he describes this miraculous event:

The proclaimed word is the incarnate Christ himself. As little as the incarnation is the outward shape of God, just so little does the proclaimed word present the outward form of a reality; rather, it is the thing itself. The preached Christ is both the Historical One and the Present One...the proclaimed word is not a medium of expression for something else, something which lies behind it, but rather it is the Christ himself walking through the congregation as the Word.<sup>69</sup>

Such a claim squashed any potential ambiguity within Bonhoeffer's perspective on preaching.

The sermon is nothing other than a self-revelation of Christ, personally and immediately, within the church. Notice that the words, then, are much more than a vehicle for God's presence. Just as Christ became fully human and forever inseparable from human nature, the sermonic proclamation is Christ. The sermon is not an ancillary husk to the essential kernel of Christ either hidden beneath the words or obscured by the sands of time.<sup>70</sup> For Bonhoeffer, presence of the Word made flesh remains inextricably tied up with the sermon's words.

Bonhoeffer himself recognized the similarity between such a claim and the divine presence within baptism and Eucharist. Quite simply, "there is a sacrament of the word."<sup>71</sup> Now, the language of sacraments recalls all sorts of theological divisions, but from the Lutheran perspective, this suggests a particular relationship. Lutheran theology considers God fully present in baptism and Eucharist, even as the elements remain fully themselves. Bread remains

---

<sup>69</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching*, trans. Clyde E. Fant (Nashville: T. Nelson, 1975), 126.

<sup>70</sup> Adolf von Harnack's references to the kernel and husk typify a German Liberal Protestant tendency to consider the divine to be hidden behind history, tradition, language, and anything else human. Bonhoeffer seems to offer an implicit critique in his emphasis on God's incarnate tie to the words of the sermon. See Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986), 12.

<sup>71</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Worldly Preaching*, 130.

bread, wine remains wine, water remains water, but in the midst of the church, in the ritual use of these elements, God is fully present. To say there is a sacrament of the word is to indicate that our words remain our words, but in the act of preaching for the church, God mysteriously and miraculously becomes present, and God's presence takes precedent. The ultimate import of the sacrament lays not the material alone, whether physical or verbal, but the incarnate presence of the divine tied to the material. Simply put, a sacrament of the word for Bonhoeffer means that Christ becomes present in the act of preaching.

Recall that both Luther and Bonhoeffer wrote at tumultuous times, not only in their own lives, but also on the world stage. The Reformation turned 16<sup>th</sup> century Europe on its theological head even as monarchs set out to colonize the newly discovered American continents, and at the core of Luther's theology lay an emphasis upon preaching. Bonhoeffer faced the rise of Nazism, the genocide of the Jews, and the bastardization of the church at the hands of the state. In the midst of this socio-theological hurricane, Bonhoeffer reminded young pastors of the vitality of preaching. For each theologian, in each context, preaching deserved attention because, in preaching, God became active in ways that met the needs of a drastically changing world. In the face of inconceivable change and unthinkable evil, we need God, and so we need the sermon.

This notion of Christ meeting people face to face through the sermon is prominent within Lutheran homiletics. In his *Theology is for Proclamation*, Gerhard Forde describes a "sacramental character of the preached Word."<sup>72</sup> In the words of Clay Schmit, the sermon is a "living Word, read from Scripture each Sunday morning, proclaimed anew from the pulpit, incarnated through the flesh and voice of the preacher so that Christ walks among his people. And it is a palpable word, rooted in the mysteries of the liturgy, alive in the washing work of

---

<sup>72</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990), 149.

baptism, and tangible as real presence in the bread and the wine of the Eucharist.”<sup>73</sup> With a poetic poignancy, Richard Lischer contends, “it is Jesus himself who is the preacher, blessing our sermons with his presence.”<sup>74</sup> These and other voices bring a sort of harmony to the melodic claims of Luther and Bonhoeffer, all of which highlight God’s personal appearance in the preached word.

Few others outside the Lutheran tradition write extensively about the incarnational potential of the sermon, at least in terms of a sacramental character for preaching. One exception from the Reformed perspective is Jana Childers, who suggests, “preaching Christ means participating in the ongoing action of God, of coming together with and being caught up in the unfolding of God’s business at work in the world.”<sup>75</sup> Childers focuses upon the capacity for the Gospel to appear through the preacher, that the preacher and congregation might become open to living lives of continuity with the good news.<sup>76</sup> Yet, Childers’ discussion stays in this abstract realm. The incredibly personal nature of the incarnation remains far off from Childers’ proposal. Though Childers’ makes important strides toward an incarnational homiletic, Lutheran theologians provide the sacramental ground through which people may not only experience the Gospel, but also engage with God.

Lutheran theology provides a unique homiletical paradigm, and one that might well fit within the desire of Alternative Worship to explore alternative Christian traditions. As this sacramental presence of Christ comes into consideration, two other functions of preaching become clear. First, preaching is a scriptural act, but not simply because preachers begin with a biblical text. Rather, recalling the origins of Christian preaching in the synagogue, in the

---

<sup>73</sup> Clay Schmit, “What Lutherans have to offer mission in preaching,” *Dialog* 42.4 (Winter 2003) 358.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Lischer, *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001), 74.

<sup>75</sup> Jana Childers, ed., *Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 44.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-6.

preacher's *peshat* and *midrash* the interpretation and application of the written and living Word of God take new life in the sermon. In the words of Michael Root, "the sermon then not only speaks about Christ, it *speaks Christ*. The sermon is then truly word of God."<sup>77</sup> To say that a sermon is scriptural is to indicate that it may function as Scripture in the life of the congregation. A preacher's words become Word of God, and thus a preacher's words speak scripture. Surely the canon must stand as the plumb line to judge against all sermons, but in our rapidly changing world, sermons provide an opportunity to view the incarnation not only as a historical event, but also as a consistent way that God continues to inhabit and transform today's world. Sermons embody the dynamic nature of Scripture, for in the words of a sermon the Word works into ever-new situations, speaking in unfathomed of ways from the same fountain of truth.

Secondly, the complementary voices of God and the preacher suggest an intimate conversation, not only in that moment, but also with all previous sermons and preachers. God's sacramental interaction in preaching suggests that the words of a sermon are not only human words to a congregation, but a human prayer to God and divine dictation to a congregation, all of which take part in the larger conversation with God that began in creation. This conversational form is a fluid one with dynamic potential to invite other voices to participate in the wonderfully sacramental sermon. To paraphrase Geoffrey Wainwright, sermons are "words from God, words to God, and words about God," and as such all people may participate in that conversation.<sup>78</sup> In this sort of juxtaposition, faith may find more clarity, both in terms of our beliefs as well as the

---

<sup>77</sup> Michael Root, "Preaching Justification," in *Proclaiming the Gospel: Preaching for the Life of the Church*, ed. Brian K. Peterson (Minneapolis.: Fortress, 2009), 31.

<sup>78</sup> Wainwright's original quote was this: "Theology is three things: words from God, words to God, and words about God." This quip became famous for our Introduction to Theology class at Duke Divinity School in Fall of 2009, and is also the basis of Geoffrey Wainwright, *Doxology: the Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life* (Salt Lake City: Oxford, 1984).

application of that faith to our lifestyle.<sup>79</sup> In other words, the combined force of scriptural and conversational elements suggests that sacramental preaching enables us to speak truth and life.

Relationally speaking, part of the sermon is entirely external. David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelly declare that, in preaching, “the word of promise breaks into the created world from the outside, crucifying the old and creating the new, the impossible possibility, in Christ.”<sup>80</sup> To claim that God becomes incarnate within the sermon is to trust the mystery of God’s activity rather than assume a human ability to conjure Christ. Such presence remains at the divine prerogative to unite us with Christ in baptism, where we find a death like His and a resurrection like His. Within our sermons, rather than sanctify our old lives, God intends to put them to death, that we might find life with Christ. Such conversation, then, anticipates transformation. The Lutheran tradition of preaching lifts up this interactional piece of preaching because, as we interact with Christ, we are inevitably transformed into His image and likeness.

In preaching we find Jesus, and in Jesus we find new ways to speak life into the world, all of which remains consistent with God’s self-revelation to creation. A sacramental presence of God, with scriptural and conversational implications, suggests that the sermon provides an invaluable event of interaction between God and humanity. As creatures made in the *imago dei*, we cannot underestimate the value of this. In the sermon we engage in a conversation that began at creation. In the sermon, we find ways to actively speak the Word of God as the Spirit breathes new life. In the sermon, we come face to face with Jesus.

---

<sup>79</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 52. Here I call upon Lathrop’s statement that, “Juxtapositions of texts and preaching, food and thanksgiving, many voices and one voice—these double words are the clearest ways Christianity can speak what it means and gather people into that meaning. A loss of these juxtapositions carries with it a diminishment in the clarity of faith.”

<sup>80</sup> David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelly, *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 25.

## THE CURIOUS CASE OF LUTHERAN ALTERNATIVE WORSHIP COMMUNITIES

Important to note at this point is the existence of ELCA congregations who operate within the Alternative Worship paradigm. Vibrant communities like Humble Walk in St. Paul, Church of the Apostles in Seattle, House for All Sinners and Saints in Denver, South Wedge Mission in Rochester, and House of the Rock in Atlanta operate from the basic principles of Alternative Worship and embrace a Lutheran identity. Each community indicates some value of distributed authority within the church, seeks active participation by congregants, and attempts to embody authentic, culturally resonant ministry. As such, these communities look vastly different from one another.

Like most Alternative Worship communities, each of these congregations commits to dynamic liturgical expressions that present the Gospel in the trappings of their particular contexts. Humble Walk worships in an art gallery. South Wedge Mission sometimes celebrates Supper Liturgies, informal Eucharistic meetings with full meals in a member's home, instead of their regular sanctuary liturgies. House of the Rock utilizes lamp and candle lighting along with throw rugs to create a living room feel within their worship space. House for All Sinners and Saints hosts a quarterly Beer and Hymns event in a local pub. Church of the Apostles acts as a patron for The Opiate Mass, a performing arts group that offers quarterly events of art installations, music, prayer, silence, and film.<sup>81</sup> Some overlap exists in these emphases – for instance, Humble Walk also hosts a Beer and Hymns event – but each congregation forms various worship gatherings that attempt to contextually communicate the Gospel of Jesus.

Unlike other Alternative Worship communities, however, each of these communities continues to give sermons a central place within worship. Some report the involvement of other

---

<sup>81</sup> “The Opiate Mass,” Church of the Apostles, last modified 2014, accessed February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. <http://www.apostleschurch.org/community/the-opiate-mass/>

elements in addition to a typical preaching. For instance, Matt Simpkins, pastor at House of the Rock, refers to this element of the service as “WORD proclaimed” and reports the use of videos, acting, dialogue, and congregational activity.<sup>82</sup> Yet, the majority of publicity info available – websites, podcasts, YouTube accounts, and articles – suggest that these congregations continue to utilize a monological sermon as the primary preaching style. Despite House of the Rock’s report of other types of sermonic elements, a brief review of the church’s YouTube channel indicates that the congregation primarily experiences solo preachers, and that when other elements appear, they exist to enhance the monological sermon.

These communities admirably take hold of the strong preaching tradition within Lutheranism and continue to speak the Gospel in their postmodern contexts. Yet, that they continue to employ sermons common to modernity within communities built for life after modernity is a dichotomy we cannot ignore. These churches commit time, energy, and resources to find ways to contextualize their worship liturgies and their life together within the 21<sup>st</sup> century. To continue to preach in a modern vernacular to a postmodern audience seems counterintuitive to the goals of Alternative Worship. We ought not abandon preaching altogether, but neither should we continue to utilize methods that, in the words of Matt Simpkins, fail to “speak the language of the people.”<sup>83</sup> In the next chapter, we look to reform this Lutheran homiletic to speak the postmodern language as we emerge into this new era.

## GOD’S PRESENCE FOR GOD’S PEOPLE

From the midst of the Reformation, Luther tells us that to stop preaching is to prevent the fullness of Christ’s presence with His church. Bonhoeffer reinforced this with the language of

---

<sup>82</sup> Matt Simpkins, email interview by author. November 7, 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Matt Simpkins, email interview by author. November 7, 2013.

the sacrament of the Word. Other theologians provide their own spin on this divine inhabitation of the preached word. The impossible possibility, the inconceivable reality, is that in the sermon, God becomes fully present with God's people, and seeks to restore within those people the *imago dei*.

Like Luther and Bonhoeffer, we too face an unknown future. The world is changing rapidly around us. We need this divine presence, that we might meet with God, and that God might shape us into little Christs so that we might live faithfully whatever future may come.<sup>84</sup> While ELCA Alternative Worship communities continue to preach in a way similar to modernity, we still see the why Alternative Worship communities may resist the presence of a sermon. To speak scripturally is to authorize an intense level of authority to the preacher. To experience God's presence through an event constantly controlled by a single preacher seems dangerous, and fails to represent the theology of the community of priests gathered for worship. We may commit the sins of Melito again, and assume our formation into prejudice is a divine formation.

What, then, ought we do? To become like Christ, we must meet Christ, and in the sermon, God meets us enfleshed in our language but intending our transformation. Might we preach in ways that invite more perspectives on God, that honors the input of the Priesthood of All Believers, and that embraces the formational and sacramental potential of the sermon?

---

<sup>84</sup> Many attribute the term "little Christs" to Luther. It appears he never used the term, though the concept is fairly obvious within the *Freedom of a Christian*, where he says, "Surely we are named after Christ, not because he is absent from us, but because he dwells in us, that is, because we believe in him and are Christs one to another and do to our neighbors as Christ does to us." See Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, edited by Mark D. Tranvik (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008), 84. C.S. Lewis apparently originated the term in *Mere Christianity*, where he suggests, "exists for nothing else but to draw men into Christ, to make them little Christs. If they are not doing that, all the cathedrals, clergy, missions, sermons, even the Bible itself, are simply a waste of time. God became Man for no other purpose." See C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper: San Francisco, 2009), 200.

## CHAPTER 5

### PREACHING AS POETIC COMMUNION

*It should therefore be considered whether the church would not be well advised to introduce the people to Scripture in still other ways than through the customary sermons on the appointed lessons.*

Philip Jakob Spener, *Pia Desideria*

Through David Lose, we saw that postfoundationalism allows a space for preaching in the midst of postmodern doubt about the value of speech. The early history of preaching revealed the formational character of the sermon. Lutheran theology revealed a sacramental substance of preaching, where Christ becomes uniquely present within the sermon. Despite the critiques of Alternative Worship, we see now both ability and reason to preach in the postmodern matrix. We turn, then, to the sermon's form for a proposal for how to preach in postmodernity. We must recall that Alternative Worship communities highly value the arts, and that worship curators allow artists abundant latitude in the construction and presentation of their pieces for worship. Preachers in Alternative Worship communities, then, must reclaim the identity of artist at the center of their vocation as artists, even as they invite multivalent perspectives into the act of preaching.<sup>85</sup> Before we consider the vitality of sermonic art, we turn to review a dominant strand of postmodern homiletics, colloquially known as conversational preaching.

---

<sup>85</sup> See Mark Pierson, *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader* (Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2010), 59, 90; Jonny Baker, ed., *Curating Worship* (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 24.

## DEVELOPMENTS IN CONVERSATIONAL PREACHING

Fifteen years before worship curating came into the public eye, homiletics John McClure and Lucy Atkinson Rose acknowledged certain problems with the execution of traditional preaching, especially in relation to the preacher's dominance of the message. O. Wesley Allen, Jr. followed suit a decade later. Rose describes the problem they see as a "gap between pulpit and pew" that suggests improperly imbalanced dynamics of power and authority.<sup>86</sup> To combat this distance between preacher and congregation, each author proposes a roundtable approach to preaching. McClure refers to a "collaborative" method of preaching, while Rose utilizes the moniker "conversational preaching."<sup>87</sup> Allen's approach desires for the sermon to enrich the congregation's ongoing conversational proclamation of the Gospel, rather than only utilizing the congregation's dialogue to enrich the sermon.<sup>88</sup>

Despite this different terminology and trajectory, each proposes a similar solution: a functional inclusion of congregational input in preaching. McClure suggests a more structured participation of the congregation through weekly meetings of a "sermon roundtable" or small group that helps plan and construct the sermon, while Rose provides principles for how a preacher might become more inclusive and emulate that inclusiveness in the pulpit.<sup>89</sup> Allen offers a combination of values and practical applications for his conversational homiletic.<sup>90</sup> Such commitments to equality of both process and language seek to involve marginalized voices and allow the sermon to more faithfully reflect the community in which the sermon grows.

---

<sup>86</sup> Lucy Atkinson Rose, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church* (Louisville: WJK, 1997), 15.

<sup>87</sup> John S. McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 48ff.; Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 121ff.

<sup>88</sup> O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching* (Louisville: WJK, 2005), 38-57.

<sup>89</sup> McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 59-94.; Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 121-31.

<sup>90</sup> Allen, *The Homiletic for All Believers*, 58-149.

Yet, McClure speaks for all three authors when he says, “I am not suggesting that preachers actually hold conversations from the pulpit or that the two- or three-party ‘dialogue sermon’ be reinstated.”<sup>91</sup> Similarly, Allen argues for the necessity of a “monological sermon in a conversational community.”<sup>92</sup> Despite the fact that each author professes a commitment to decentralized authority, all three attempt to retain the typical monological sermon. Each provides a compelling case that an inclusive approach to preaching may enable the church to hear otherwise unheard voices, such as those of racial minorities, the poor, and women.<sup>93</sup> Such an approach seeks to invite all voices to the table without privilege or prejudice.<sup>94</sup> Yet, when the time comes for sermon performance, one voice remains privileged to interpret and describe the collaborative conversation, at the expense of all other voices. With one preacher, authority remains centralized, and thus, others remain marginalized. Rose, McClure, and Allen seek to close the gap between pulpit and pew, but their execution leaves a chasm in place during worship, the space in time where the sermon becomes active and visible in the life of the entire church.

A practical prudence exists within this approach. The conversational values espoused by these roundtable preachers may help the sermon’s content to more faithfully reflect the convictions and questions of the congregation. The value for inclusiveness forces the preacher not only to consider the marginalized, but seek to shift the congregation’s center to include those once at the margins. The apparent commitment to the Priesthood of All Believers places great import on contextualizing the sermon as an extension of and service to the congregation. Retaining a monological form allows for clear presentation, a systematic digestion of all the potential data for inclusion in the sermon, and prevents divisiveness or disagreement from

---

<sup>91</sup> McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 48.

<sup>92</sup> Allen, *The Homiletic for All Believers*, 40.

<sup>93</sup> Rose, *Sharing the Word*, 106.

<sup>94</sup> McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 51.

becoming antagonistic within the community. However, the apparent inconsistency of monological sermon within a conversational homiletic leaves great room for improvement. We must search for a form that reflects the valuable principles espoused by roundtable preachers and Alternative Worship but finds utility within Christian worship.

Doug Pagitt, a pastor at the Alternative Worship community Solomon's Porch in Minneapolis, offers one way forward in his *Preaching Re-Imagined*. Pagitt offers an insider's perspective to creative preaching in curated contexts as he describes and defends a type of preaching called "progressional dialogue."<sup>95</sup> Progressional dialogue seeks the "intentional interplay of multiple viewpoints that leads to unexpected and unforeseen ideas. The message will change depending on who is present and who says what. This kind of preaching is dynamic in the sense that the outcome is determined on the spot by the participants."<sup>96</sup>

Progressional dialogue involves a monologue and a dialogue.<sup>97</sup> For Pagitt, the sermon must include both a presentation reminiscent of traditional sermons, typically though not exclusively given by the pastor, and then an unscripted conversation of multiple voices that is open to all in attendance. The topic arises within discussion groups that precede the worship event, much like those of the roundtable preachers, but progressional dialogue expects no particular outcome other than the dialogue itself, as well as a willingness on the part of dialogue partners to share their own perspectives and to consider the validity of the other perspectives shared. This disposition suggests that all people, regardless of baptism, have something to offer on account of the *imago dei* given within creation.<sup>98</sup>

---

<sup>95</sup> Doug Pagitt, *Preaching Re-Imagined: the Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith* (El Cajon: Zondervan, 2005), 52-5.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 222-4.

With such an open-ended conversation, Pagitt's approach obviously embodies the value for decentralized authority. Further, welcoming all speakers, even non-Christians, indicates a place for those at the margins. Though a monologue occurs, the distance between preacher and congregation collapses within the ensuing conversation. Like the roundtable preachers, Pagitt obviously values congregational input in the sermon's formation, but goes even further in his welcome of directional change brought on by new perspectives within dialogue's development. Here, it seems, lies the meaning of progressional: regardless of the groundwork performed by the preacher and small group prior to the preaching event, the sermon may progress into totally uncharted waters due to the contributions of congregants within the worship service itself.

Progressional dialogue does what other conversational approaches do not: it truly invites discourse within the sermon event. Yet, as Pagitt describes it, this sort of dialogue remains so open that preaching may lose its catechetical potential. This is not to say that the progressional dialogue would not provide formation. Rather, without an outcome in mind for the sermon, the sort of formation simply remains unknown until after the sermon occurs. Pagitt contends that progressional dialogue allows for correction of misunderstanding or poor theology, and further, that our worries about heresy often stifle the vibrancy of faith and inappropriately locates doctrine within the hands of a privileged few.<sup>99</sup> Yet, a certain intentionality behooves the act of preaching, and assures that such correction have a voice up front rather than as an afterthought. This does not mean the conversation must develop in a particular fashion, or that everyone must agree on all points at the end of the sermon, but rather, a certain benchmark for development in belief ought to play a part in our sermonic intent.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the sermon plays a critical role within the formative matrix of the liturgy. As Gordon Lathrop indicates, "preaching does not take place in a vacuum but within

---

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 132-5.

the action and discipline of the assembly.”<sup>100</sup> He shows that, within the assembly, numerous juxtapositions take place that serve to deepen the liturgical experience. The juxtaposition of preaching with other liturgical words helps to vivify the faith we share.<sup>101</sup> The sermon allows the pastor to make explicit connections between the liturgy, the text, the life of the congregation, current events for the wider community, and indeed anything else thought relevant to the life of the church. The juxtaposition of prescribed material and the uniqueness of a particular sermon fosters a purposive tension out of which communities may find deeper resonance of faith within the liturgy and within the world.<sup>102</sup> Pagitt’s ubiquitous openness within progressional dialogue allows a sermon the potential to make these connections, but without an intended direction or recognition of formation, progressional dialogue fails to ensure a best attempt at contextualization of the sermon in congregational life.<sup>103</sup>

The relationship between belief and action make this sermonic intent vital to the integrity of the sermon. The aforementioned maxim *lex orandi lex credendi* suggests an integral relationship between our worship practices and our faith convictions. As Frank Senn notes, primary theology occurs in the words we speak and sing together, as well the actions we perform in our common worship. These constitute our *lex orandi*, our law of prayer, which then leads to the development of and reflection upon our beliefs, our *lex credendi*.<sup>104</sup> The direction, form, and content of the sermon thus deserve manifest intentionality, because the sermon works to shape the belief of the church.

---

<sup>100</sup> Gordon W. Lathrop, *Holy Things: a Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 10.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-51.

<sup>102</sup> Here I echo the full discussion Gordon Lathrop gives to the concept of juxtaposition within the Lutheran liturgy.

<sup>103</sup> The sermon exists as unique amongst ordinaries and propers. It occurs every week yet changes in content, and often in form, every week. It offers a unique opportunity to take the ordinaries and propers for a given day and contextualize them for a community of faith.

<sup>104</sup> Frank C. Senn, *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1997), 42-3.

Conversational preaching provides a valuable possibility for creative preaching in postmodern contexts, but each of the above considerations falls short in some way. McClure, Rose, and Allen each encourage further connection between preacher and congregation in the development of the sermon, but leave the monological sermon, and thus the gap between pulpit and pew, in place. Pagitt collapses this space with progressional dialogue, which invites active participation on behalf of the entire congregation, but in so doing he abandons the formative intentionality common to preaching as a liturgical act. Yet, before we propose an adjustment, we first turn to the art of the sermon and the preacher's identity as an artist in order to consider how this might complement a conversational approach to preaching.

#### THE ART AND ARTISTS OF PREACHING

The literature that considers the intersection of preaching and art is at once vast and void: vast because innumerable preaching texts, dating at least to Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* and likely even earlier, assume an artistic element to the formation of Christian preaching, and void because most of these texts leave this assumption undeveloped, or simply describe preaching as a craft whose sole purpose is to convey the sermon's content.<sup>105</sup> Even so, out of the fray, certain authors provide valuable insights to consider the art and artists of preaching.<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>105</sup> For a brief introduction to how Augustine advises the use of rhetoric in preaching, see "Augustine: The Uses of Rhetoric," in Richard Lischer, ed., *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1987), 209-18.

<sup>106</sup> Jerusha Matsen Neal introduces the idea of sermonic art through *Blessed: Monologues for Mary* (Eugene: Cascade, 2013). Rather than a discussion or exploration of art within preaching, Neal offers imaginative examples of how a preacher might embody power of theatrical presentation. Neal makes notes on staging, props, use of space, and vocal inflection as she presents sermons given in character, whether biblical or a fiction of her own. Neal embodies narrative elements in a sermon acted out within a congregation. I came to know her work too late for full consideration within poetic communion. However, she provides a vivid depiction of how sermons may become more fully alive within worship. Appendix 1 includes an example of my own work that reflects this narrative—performative potential for preaching.

In *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale suggests that, “through its language, images, and form, preaching creates a world and invites the one hearing it to enter.”<sup>107</sup> Rather than the highly specialized fine arts, far removed from the everyday experience of the preacher’s community, Tisdale argues that the sermon ought to become folk art by utilizing the styles and figures common to the community in which the sermon occurs. As the preacher creates a world and invites the congregation into it, the utilization of artistic signs native to the congregants creates a bridge from the world in which they live to the world coming to be within the sermon. As such, preaching as folk art seeks to be incarnational to the core. Even the artistic metaphor Tisdale uses to describe the sermon – folk dance – calls upon incarnational imagery of embodiment, for she considers the preacher both a participant in and a leader of the dance that is the sermon. In this way, the preacher may both act as a co-participant in the development of the linguistic art, as well as lead when others seem disconnected from the rest of the community within the homiletical dance.

Notice that art here includes a necessarily local factor. Unlike the typical separation of fine art from the commoners, folk art necessarily embraces common, accessible forms. To preach in this way requires an incarnational disposition, in that the preacher must, to the best of her abilities, occupy the culture in order for the sermon to reflect and speak to the *Sitz im Leben* of the congregation. At the same time, the preacher must recognize that this sort of art remains purposive. Folk art tells the story of a particular people, place, and time, so preaching that is folk art must tell the story of how Jesus dwells with those people, lives in that place, and operates within that time. Much more than art for art’s sake, folk art combines beauty with purpose for the context in which and for which it is made. Notice, too, that this resonates with postfoundationalism’s conception of language forming a world, even as language describes the

---

<sup>107</sup> Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 122.

world. In the midst of the incarnation into a particular context, Tisdale suggests that preachers participate in the creative inhabitation and transformation of a particular place.

Complementing this discussion, Clay Schmit also argues that preaching is an art, but rather than folk art in general, Schmit considers preaching in terms of poetry. He suggests that, “preaching does what all poetry does. It creates an aura of illusion that sets itself apart from its immediate environment and engages the listener in an instance of virtual life.”<sup>108</sup> Similar to Tisdale, Schmit believes preaching creates a sort of new world. As poets, preachers weave a linguistic tapestry through which the congregation may come to know not only the virtual life created by the sermon, but the real God to whom those evocative words testify. Yet, Schmit’s focus is not simply upon the art, but the artist. To emphasize the preacher as a poet is to make a claim of identity. We may learn to embrace this identity more through education and exercise, especially in the use of figural speech, and yet we also inhabit this identity at the behest of God’s vocational call.<sup>109</sup> The preacher is not simply an artist because she produces art, but because she continues to grow in both her craft and her calling.

This identity reminds preachers of the gravity of the sermon. To rephrase Tisdale’s imagery, preachers act not only as dancers, but also as dance leaders. To preach requires something of the preacher. Schmit notes that to grow in one’s poetic execution, especially to learn what rules exist and when to break them for effect, requires constant discipline, and provides numerous examples of poetic devices to learn in order to become a more powerfully poetic preacher. For those called to preach, this discipline also includes a judicious exercise of authority within the sermon. While Fred Craddock notes that preachers can no longer assume they carry a recognized authority within the pulpit, Alternative Worship communities shy away

---

<sup>108</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Too Deep for Words: a Theology of Liturgical Expression* (Louisville: WJK, 2002), 86.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-6.

from the concept of a single person's authority altogether.<sup>110</sup> Yet, as artists called by God, a preacher's artistic purpose and authority reside not within her words or self, but within the Gospel to which God calls all preachers, and all Christians, to proclaim. Ultimately, the authority employed by a preacher is the same authority given to all Christians in baptism.

Trygve Johnson pushes the conversation a step further in his dissertation, *The Preacher as Artist*. Johnson argues that the art of the sermon ultimately exists to serve God. He contends, "the Preacher as Artist seeks to engage with what has been given in the fallen world by taking things that have been created and redeemed and offering them back to God with added value."<sup>111</sup> Notice the significant shift in both audience and purpose. The congregation remains, as does the teaching element of the sermon, but Johnson suggests the primary purpose for liturgical preaching lies with the sermon's existence as an act of worship before God. The sermon, like the liturgy, becomes both an honest witness of the Triune God's revelation in Jesus Christ, as well as an imaginative interpretation and application of that witness on behalf of the preacher.<sup>112</sup> As an artist, then, what preachers communicate still retains catechetical potential, but inhabits those truths within a creative offering of thanks and praise to God.

To consider God as an audience helps to reframe the place of the preacher fully as a member of the congregation. While pastors are called to certain tasks, as an act of worship the sermon becomes a piece performed on behalf of the entire church. The authority in preaching, then, becomes the authority of a worshipper, one on equal level with all others present to meet with God. Just as the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed simultaneously entail elements of praise and pedagogy, so too the sermon as an act of worship before God becomes an event that

---

<sup>110</sup> Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 14.

<sup>111</sup> Trygve Johnson, "The Preacher as Artist: Metaphor, Identity, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ," (PhD diss., University of Saint Andrews, 2009), 166.

<sup>112</sup> Johnson, *Preacher as Artist*, 167-178.

works to form the congregation in God's image even as it offers a thankful witness back to God. As an artist, the preacher offers this as a contextual interpretation of God to the community and of the community to God.

Bruce Ellis Benson takes the conversation about homiletical identity in a different direction. In his *Liturgy as a Way of Life*, Benson contends, "the very process [of creation] that God has set in motion is one in which we are to share. We are thus artisans in God's image, though in a significantly lesser sense than God is an artisan."<sup>113</sup> Though Benson speaks about all Christians rather than preachers in particular, his wisdom applies to preachers nonetheless. Benson uses the image of improvisation, which echoes Johnson's sentiment that preachers take up the worldly instruments given by God in their preaching acts, and also reflects the dynamic sort of conversation introduced by Pagitt. While God creates in a way simply beyond the ken of humanity, preachers may reflect the image of God through the imaginative construction of the sermon, through which they create out of compilation and reconfiguration. As an artist, preachers and all Christians seek to inhabit the *imago dei*, creating purposively for relationship, for beauty, and for utility.

Since Benson follows the witness of jazz improvisation in particular, he gestures to the fact that part of improvisation requires an embodied knowledge of not only the piece at hand or command the musical genre, but indeed the entire witness of the jazz community throughout time and space. In the same way, a sermon requires more than just training in poetic speech and a deep knowledge of the sermon's topic. The preacher must also inhabit the history and practices of the church (local, denominational and catholic) and obtain a working knowledge of the wider community in order to effectively improvise. In this way, the sermon may remain pliable as an

---

<sup>113</sup> Bruce Ellis Benson, *Liturgy as a Way of Life: Embodying the Arts in Christian Worship* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2013), 90.

art form, able to respond to other speakers and situations with immediacy, all while staying consistent with the material that precedes and the material that follows. In other words, as the preacher artistically composes a comprehensible world where God, the congregation, and all life collide, improvisation allows the preacher to consistently participate in the evolution of that world.

Benson's depiction of improvisation gathers together the other artistic witnesses. To improvise in this way reflects Tisdale's commitment to a local community, for an improviser must know the community in which she plays, as well as the rules and expectations within that community, in order to most effectively improvise. To improvise in this way calls upon Schmit's discussion of identity, particularly the creation of a virtual world through which one connects with the God to whom the improvisation witnesses. This creative process allows for Johnson's sense of an offering to God, for as creatures improvising in the image of our active Creator, Benson suggests our life's work serves divine and human audiences. Yet, improvisation also points toward the predictably unexpected realities of life and of sermon delivery. Most preachers know that the sermon on the page changes, sometimes in small and sometimes in massive ways, once the preacher enters the pulpit. This represents a sort of *de facto* improvisation, where the preacher realizes something must change from the intended direction.

However, Benson's vision for improvisation views this as a positive and constructive framework. What if, like jazz musicians, preachers entered sermons expecting to improvise in the midst of a community of improvisers? The conviction that improvisation may enhance the sermon, as well as contribute to conversational preaching, frames the subsequent proposal.

## PREACHING AS POETIC COMMUNION

The term “poetic communion” intends to draw upon much of the previous conversation to describe the sort of preaching sought. It is poetic foremost because it is linguistic. It is actualized when spoken. It is a vocal activity. It is also poetic because it is artistic, intended to convey meaning at a multivalent level and open to multiple interpretations. It is a communion because it is sacramental. In poetic communion, as in all preaching, Christ becomes uniquely present. It is also communion because, like the Lord’s Supper, all have an equal seat at the table even as a presider facilitates the event.

Preaching as poetic communion relies on artistic elements of preaching discussed in the previous section. Poetic communion attempts to incarnate in the language and art forms of the context, such that the entire sermon is accessible for congregants. Poetic communion helps to construct a new world, but with the addendum that all participants help to shape this space. As artistic creators in the image of the Artist Creator, preachers within poetic communion exercise the *imago dei* alongside other image bearers. Authority within poetic communion is the authority of proclamation given to all members of the Priesthood of All Believers. Fundamentally, this all comes as part of an act of worship within and on behalf of the church. As an act of improvisation, a selected preacher offers a monological interpretation, much like a solo, that then leads to a conversation, where the rest of the congregational jazz combo joins in to complete the riff. These convictions guide the structure and content of poetic communion.

Within this, we remember from Chapter 2 that Lose provided a middle way between the untenable modern certainty and unbearable postmodern nihilism, which he terms critical conversation. This exists as part of a conversation where we seek truth together, where we all share authority, and where we must commit to attentive interpretation and application of ideas

other than our own. For Lose, and for us, this requires speaking, listening, and continued participation in the conversation. This not only allows us the realism Lose sought, but gives us a groundwork for productive, humble conversation within the church.

Indeed, we must consider the plausibility of the other's perspective, which also requires an admission of the finite nature of our perspective. This admission of limited knowledge alludes to the theological category of the *Deus absconditus*, the hidden God. Though the fullness of God became incarnate in Jesus Christ, our humanity remains incapable of grasping God completely. Rather, we come to know God as revealed through divine works, the incarnation chief amongst them. Our knowledge of truth, and especially our knowledge of God, always remains perspectival, for we know only what God reveals, and even then, we only know it from the limited perspective of our finite location. Thus, conversation provides an avenue through which we may gain increasing perspective on God's revelation, and consequently grow in our knowledge of God.

This, then, suggests the powerful potential for conversation in postmodern preaching. Rather than follow the roundtable preachers in their retention of a gap between pulpit and pew, Pagitt's model of progressional dialogue provides a powerful way forward because it embraces the perspectival offerings of all who attend. We must remember, however, that Pagitt's openness fails to ensure catechetical content, and that a certain benchmark for belief ought to exist within the sermon. This benchmark remains one bound by our language and our community, and yet, makes a gesture toward the hidden and revealed God. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ may remain so contextually bound and yet fully mysterious.

David Ratke contends that the cross of Jesus Christ is “the criterion for theology and thereby the foundation for Christian preaching.”<sup>114</sup> Andrew Weyermann echoes this sentiment as he claims, “the preacher needs to meditate to and from the gospel center in shaping the need and the goal of the sermon.”<sup>115</sup> To proclaim the Gospel is to describe God’s historical action on behalf of humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, as well as to consider the ways that particular act liberates Christians for immediate life as citizens in the Kingdom of God. All sermons must flow out from the centrifuge of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and welcome perspectives on the God revealed in this Jesus. Even so, the Gospel content may appear through a myriad of forms: monological or dialogical, rationally argued or poetically signaled. In our postmodern world, conversation and art provide invaluable ways for people to enter into perspectival dialogue about God and to engage this central Gospel message.

Consider, then, a modification of Pagitt’s progressional dialogue that includes a commitment to Gospel content as the aforementioned benchmark for proclamation and honestly declares the intentions behind the sermonic conversation. This allows for both monologue and dialogue, both artistic improvisation and congregational contributions, all approached with a humble honesty that declares we believe, and that we want God to help our unbelief through the perspectival witness of the church. Unlike the roundtable preachers who invite a conversational element into a monologue, this model begins with a privileged poetic voice and then invites actual conversation from the midst of the congregation. Unlike progressional dialogue, this model embraces the directive content of the Gospel and the catechetical potential for sermons. This is preaching as poetic communion.

---

<sup>114</sup> David C. Ratke, “Preaching Christ Crucified: Lutheran and the Revelation of God,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 43, no. 4 (Winter 2004): 27.

<sup>115</sup> Andrew Weyermann, “Preaching the Gospel Contextually,” in *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25, no. 1 (Fall 1998): 36.

Preaching as poetic communion embraces both the commitment to perspectival truth exhibited by Lose, Pagitt, and the roundtable preachers, as well as the commitment to artistic and especially poetic elements seen through Tisdale, Schmit, and Johnson. The improvisational character inspired by Benson occurs throughout the process. The execution of such a model occurs in four stages.

The first stage requires a small group that meets prior to the worship event to help frame the sermon as well as other elements from the service. This echoes the sermon roundtable proposed by McClure as well as the collaborative groups for worship curating described by Baker.<sup>116</sup> These groups, which I call sermon cohorts, gather prior to the service to discuss how the text(s), liturgies, prayer, music, physical setting, and artwork work to form and inform the sermon. Preferably, this includes both a core group committed to regular participation, which fosters voices of continuity, as well as an openness to drop-in participation by congregants, which allows for unique creative input. Obviously, this requires a somewhat porous and elastic community, as well as a rotating membership for those in the core group. The only constants would be the pastor(s), musician(s), and others with regular roles in the service.

Ideally, the sermon cohort meets weekly (at least for regularly scheduled worship events like Sunday worship). As such, they ought to work multiple weeks in advance on sermons for multiple upcoming services. As Ronald J. Allen's article suggests, groups such as this may function in a myriad of ways, including challenging the content or direction of the sermon as presented by the selected preacher.<sup>117</sup> The group may also help to select preachers, for while many congregations expect weekly sermons from the pastor, poetic communion values the pastoral vocation even as it embraces the potential for homiletic gifts from other members. Since

---

<sup>116</sup> McClure, *The Roundtable Pulpit*, 60ff., Baker, *Curating Worship*, 7.

<sup>117</sup> Ronald J. Allen, "Preaching as Mutual Critical Correlation through Conversation," in *Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), 17-8.

this model seeks an artistic sermonic interpretation, the group's discernment must include the training and gifts of those available to preach. This emphasizes the fact that the selected preacher comes as a member of the community, to offer a word from within the community to God and to the church, and then to welcome further development from the community at worship. With a look toward the dialogical aspect of the sermon, this group also helps to form questions to stimulate dialogue in case congregants appear hesitant to enter the conversation.

From the cohort's meeting, the selected preacher enters the second stage of sermon preparation, where she constructs the monological portion. One may rightly wonder why to keep any sort of monologue within a dialogical homily. With the goal to collapse the gap between pulpit and pew, why retain any privilege for any voice? A few reasons suggest this retention may highlight and empower the conversation. First, this recognizes Schmit's contention that preaching represents a vocational call, one that the church has fostered for two millennia, and one that has inspired vibrant conversation throughout that turbulent history. A closely related point is that a conversation requires instigation, and a poetic monologue will provide content, claims, images, and juxtapositions of ideas that can inspire excited agreement or passionate conflict, and that conversation allows for expression and further consideration of perspectives other than the monological preacher. Third, the value that Alternative Worship communities place upon art, especially locally constructed art, suggests that a portion of artistic interpretation will connect with the Alternative Worship context. Finally, along with Ratke and Weyermann, this monological portion ensures that the Gospel receives central proclamation, as well as a provisional application in the life of the community, who then may respond to whether that application fits their particular contexts.

Thus, in the second stage, the selected preacher prepares an artistic monologue that intends to proclaim the Gospel, to treat the text and context in a way consistent with the sermon cohort's discussion, and to produce an artistic interpretation of the text and context. The goal is to offer the selected preacher's perspective within a layered approach to truth, one that admits the potential for more than the speaker intended or can even imagine. Rather than fall prey to pure subjectivism or postmodern nihilism, this sort of presentation makes a strong case for the preacher's viewpoint, yet humbly admits the preacher's finitude and the viewpoint's limits. Herein comes the value of poetic language, for as Schmit says, "poetry means more than it says. It is multivalent and in its symbolic openness points us toward the awe-invoking greatness of God that cannot be fully known or expressed."<sup>118</sup> Indeed, this poetic monologue fully expects to fail at certain elements, and yet employs language that reaches beyond our self and our truth claims in order to disrupt our already ruptured world.<sup>119</sup> In addition to Schmit's guidance here, Johnson provides a constant reminder that God is a part of the audience, and as such, the sermon is an act of worship from within the congregation. In light of this, the selected preacher must employ all her skills as a poet to proclaim the Gospel, to present her perspective, and to offer her worship even as she embraces the confidence that God called her to this position. At most, this monologue should take half the liturgical time allotted for a sermon, which allows ample time for congregational discussion, and preferably, the selected preacher should present her work to the sermon cohort at least once for critique prior to use in a service.

The third stage is the poetic monologue's appearance within the liturgy. Other than the intentionally multivalent language and the poetic performance, this appears functionally no

---

<sup>118</sup> Clayton J. Schmit, *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), Kindle Edition: Location 1667.

<sup>119</sup> The concept of preaching as disruption comes from Mary Donovan Turner, "Disrupting A Ruptured World," in Jana Childers, ed, *Purposes of Preaching* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 131-140.

different than the traditional monological sermon, though as we note above, the content and intent push toward a conversation that immediately follows.<sup>120</sup> As Makoto Fujimura says, “art is an inherently hopeful act, an act that echoes the creativity of the Creator,” and as such, the monological portion ought to put forth an artist’s best offering.<sup>121</sup> As the selected preacher embraces the improvisational creativity that reflects the *imago dei*, this works both to inspire conversation as well as witness to the perspectival potential of the conversation.

The unscripted congregational dialogue is the fourth stage, and one whose execution depends greatly upon the size of the group and the flexibility of the worship space. If the congregation is smaller than twenty, as is common in alternative worship gatherings, the entire group may participate in one conversation rather than breaking into smaller segments, though this decision depends on relational dynamics and space limitations – such as immovable furniture – which the cohort must consider. It is especially important that all people can see one another during the discussion in order to encourage direct, honest communication. If the congregation split into small groups for discussion, it is vital to return as a larger group and share the most important aspects of each conversation, that all might benefit from the dialogues that occur.

One key for this to occur as a faithful and worshipful event is to set boundaries for the conversation. Such expectations ought to remain simple enough that they are memorable, but expansive enough to guide behavior in numerous situations. Consider these five basic guidelines that guided this sort of discussion at multiple congregations in Durham, NC:

In disagreement, we will dialogue without disparaging others.  
We will differentiate between persons and perspectives.

---

<sup>120</sup> As Adam J. Copeland suggests, in the rising context of postmodernity, preachers ought “style their sermons as open to questions,” which allows for a growth of dialogue. See Adam J. Copeland, “Open-Minded Preaching: Sharing a Word with the ‘Spiritual, but not Religious’,” *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2012): 17.

<sup>121</sup> Makoto Fujimura, *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2009), 69.

In agreement, we will embrace God's mystery over our mastery.  
We will recognize our fallibility and finitude.  
We will always recognize the image of God before us.<sup>122</sup>

Notice how these principles guard against harsh personal attacks yet still encourage conversation about particular perspectives. With the emphasis on our limits, this list attempts to ward off assumptions that the majority opinion is necessarily correct. Perhaps most importantly, the list recognizes a beauty within the *Deus absconditus*, even as we stretch our comprehension of divine revelation to the very limits of ourselves and our communities. Though surely imperfect, preaching as poetic communion requires boundaries such as these in order to ensure that the conversation remains faithful to the church's identity: a united, if never perfectly agreeing, Body of Christ.

The concept of improvisation underlies all four stages. The cohort must improvise as new personalities appear, as new contexts for interpretations appear, and as new concepts appear for both the expectations of the dialogue and space in which the dialogue occurs. The selected preacher must improvise as she works to produce a work of art that includes a proclamation of Gospel, a catechetical pedagogy, and the contributions of a cohort with her own convictions. As always, the monological portion of preaching will require something of contextualization, not only with shifted words but also with performative influences in vocalization and use of her body. All become improvisers within the conversation as they attempt to create a new work together out of the monologue, liturgy, and each of the histories brought to the discussion.

Within this conversation, the entire congregation rehearses their identity as the Priesthood of All Believers. All become preachers. Notice that while references to the 'selected preacher' within this argument indicate the one voice who offers the poetic monologue, she never becomes

---

<sup>122</sup> These come from my own experience as a leader of similar discussions as a worship curator in an Alternative Worship young adult ministry called Prophet's Porch at Grace Lutheran Church, as well as my time as the Lutheran Campus Minister at Duke University.

the sole preacher, for indeed this conversational model embraces the fact that all Christians are “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light” (1 Pet 2:9). As Luther emphasizes, all acts of Gospel proclamation are preaching, regardless of who performs them and where they occur.<sup>123</sup> Ordained pastors are not the only preachers, but rather publicly and often weekly perform the vocation to which God calls all Christians, to speak the good news and apply it to life in the world. Indeed, this is yet another reason to retain the monological portion of the sermon, especially in a poetic form, for it allows selected preachers to share the development of their gift with the congregation, and to encourage all people to develop their own language of proclamation.

Notice, then, the key differences between this offering and the other conversational preacher's. Unlike McClure, Rose, or Allen, poetic communion actually involves dialogue. Admittedly, this approach entails certain danger for the unknown, risks our clarity of presentation, and leaves open the potential for vocal disagreement. Yet, the suggested guidelines for dialogue provide a potential hedge to keep the conversation compassionate in its critique. They also allow us to consider that, in the juxtaposition of our different ideas, we may come to know God more fully. While Pagitt's offering remains entirely open ended, poetic communion unabashedly intends to accomplish something, first in the proclamation of the Gospel, and then in the potential for catechetical development as the conversation allows us to grow in knowledge about the particular topic at hand. Further, as a postfoundational method, poetic communion remains convicted that truth exists, and that we can talk about truth in a meaningful way, though can never fully grasp it. Thus, poetic language's multivalence and the perspectival offerings of

---

<sup>123</sup> Fred W. Meuser, *Luther the Preacher* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983), 14.

the conversation enable us not necessarily to know more truth, but to know truth differently, and thus more fully, than before the poetic communion.

Consider also the contributions of our other interlocutors. Though poetic preaching is not properly a folk art like Tisdale describes, it demands a contextual communication from the preacher that utilizes linguistic devices that arise from, are familiar to, and are evocative within the congregation. With Schmit, poetic preaching takes seriously the identity of the preacher as called by God and in need of continual training in skill. Alongside Johnson, poetic preaching embraces the content of the sermon not only as formative for the congregation but meaningful to God as an act of worship. Following Benson, we see this all wrapped up in the process of improvisation, not as a *de facto* state, but rather as an exciting potential for how all preachers, as bearers of the *imago dei*, might take all the stuff of life given by God and produce a brand new poetic communion along with a community.

#### POETIC COMMUNION IN CONTEXT

The application of poetic communion as a preaching practice in congregations demands contextualization. Each step of the process may require modification, indeed improvisation, into each unique congregation. Alternative Worship communities may find this sort of implementation relatively simple, for flexible seating arrangements and innovative liturgical practices typify these contexts. Yet, churches that utilize fixed chairs or pews will make the conversation piece especially difficult. Congregations that span into the hundreds or thousands may find breaking into discussion groups a logistical nightmare. Perhaps these churches may move the discussion portion to directly after the service, or more likely, these congregations will find that this sort of preaching is not for them.

Indeed, preaching as poetic communion is a postmodern homiletic that will work best in emerging worship settings, and one that requires careful consideration for how to help it resonate with the local congregation. Yet, as we have seen, a conversational homiletic helps to welcome the perspectives of all congregants in a postmodern matrix that values perspectival truth. We also have seen that poetic sermons can declare much more than the preacher intends in a postmodern culture that appreciates multivalent truth. Though logistical implementation will require local consideration, preaching as poetic communion has the potential not only to connect with a postmodern audience, but also to vivify the theology and proclamation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century church.

## CHAPTER 6

### PREACHING'S REVIVAL: A BRIEF GLIMPSE INTO POETIC COMMUNION

In the beginning, we saw that Alternative Worship communities offered timely critiques of the role of preaching within Christian worship, and how postmodernity's reaction to foundationalism led to a reemphasis upon the Priesthood of All Believers and providence. We then saw how postfoundationalism allowed us to speak even as the constructs of foundationalism fall, and particularly that faith is the grounding from which we speak meaningfully.

From the ancient origins of Christian preaching in the synagogue, the New Testament, and the patristic authors, we noted how preaching operates in a powerfully formative way for both individuals and communities, especially within a culture hostile to the Gospel. From Lutheran theology, we saw the unique perspective that God becomes fully present through the sermon, which Bonhoeffer called a Sacrament of the Word.

Finally, we turned to poetic communion, where we proposed a style of preaching that allows, and in fact requires, multiple voices to contribute to the sermon, as well as the contributions of artists, where we see the providence of God active within our improvisation as preachers. This allows congregations in the Alternative Worship movement to retain a reformed style of preaching, one that invites multiple voices, admits a desire for particular formation, but allows for the work of the Holy Spirit to modify the content and direction of the sermon, even amidst the act of preaching within worship. So what does this look like?

This chapter offers three examples of sermons inspired by the poetic communion model, which at least give a glimpse into how preaching might be revived in Alternative Communion contexts, as well as how the critiques of Alternative Worship might reshape preaching in other congregations. Each represents a different application of the model, which means that each process was contextualized in a way that fits the congregation. This means that none follows Chapter 5's framework step for step, but adapts to fit the situation. Each example tries to lift up a key component of poetic communion. The first looks to the poetic potential for content and the powerful contributions brought through the perspectival engagements. The second offers an example of how a final product may be shaped through conversation before and during the sermon. The third reveals one way we may introduce poetic communion into congregations otherwise wary of innovative preaching styles.

#### POETIC EXPRESSION AND PERSPECTIVAL REVELATIONS

This sermon, entitled "Love," occurred on March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014 at Lutheran Campus Ministry (LCM) of the University of South Carolina (USC), and explores the meaning of love through the lens of John 3:1-17. Though technically the first in a sermon series, this example was inspired by the lectionary and occurred as part of our regular Sunday worship. As such, it offers a glimpse into how one may implement poetic communion in a lectionary-driven context.

Since this sermon occurred on the Sunday after our return from a mission trip to St. Croix to work with Lutheran Social Services of the Virgin Islands (LSSVI), the LCM mission team served as the sermon cohort. This meant that, rather than one evening meeting of discussion, our entire week's conversation about love and service led to the formation of the monological portion. This included time in small group devotional, talk at worksites, and discussions during

free time. Since the new style of sermon was announced and all were invited to contribute, this allowed for an explicit introduction to sermonic contributions without adding the pressure of a first meeting.

My writing occurred during our last two days in St. Croix and on the flight home, when more of the conversations began to coalesce. This allowed for further conversation as this portion took form, which then received significant revision prior to the final implementation. The following sermon comes from the night of March 16<sup>th</sup>, 2014. The sermonic elements are in italics. Commentary and explanation, where necessary, are in normal type. The first portion, where a speaker is not identified, comes from the monological portion of the poetic communion.

*For God so loved the world... So let's talk about love. "What is love? Baby don't hurt me!"*<sup>124</sup> *Well, let's not talk about love like that.*

*Love is an active verb, a commitment twined with a motion and action. You see, love is a many splendored thing, knowable but ungraspable, felt yet not touched, prone to pain but heedlessly hopeful.*

*Love is a God who does not give up on a departed creation, but pursues the prodigal. Love is a God who reaches beyond heaven and commits to earth. Love is a God who creates by playing in the dirt, forming mounds of clay into a divine image, and breathing (a deep breath), breathing (another deep breath), breathing (a third deep breath), life into the dust.*

*Love does not ignore our mistakes but refuses to give the last word to folly. Love never dwells in shame, but assures of promise. Love does not dwell in the past, but inspires the present and gives shape to futures of fullness. Love lives in the face of death, and love flies in spite of*

---

<sup>124</sup> Sung to the tune of Haddaway's 1993 hit song "What is Love," which made a recurrence in more recent generations cultural context through the Saturday Night Live skit and movie *Night at the Roxbury*.

*gravity. Love doubles down in spite of the odds, and love is a risk, a ridiculous risk, a ludicrous, loony, laughable risk. But it is a risk that God takes anyway.*

*Because, you see, in Jesus we find love, but it is not easy. It is never easy. Love, above all, is a sacrifice. To love is to care for another more than for yourself, and that is a risk. Love is a commitment to what is best for someone else rather than a personal pursuit of selfish desires, and that is a risk. Love is a sacrifice to ensure the success of others, even at the risk of your own safety, even at the risk of your own life. Love is not an isolated thing. A great cultural lie is that love is an individual experience, but love – true love, divine love – is a love that requires someone else. It is a love that can't help but create a community. Jesus is that love.*

*Jesus is the love that creates the church out of broken people and isolated individuals. Jesus is the love that redeems creation. For in Jesus we come to know the love that overflows from the everlasting relationships of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to make us all children of the Father, to remake us in the image of the Son, to fill us with the Holy Spirit. So this is no soap opera love that sparks and fizzles like a Roman candle. This is no top 40 love that relies on slick licks from a serpent's forked tongue to get your clothes off, naked before God. This is no secret love, spoken only in hushed voices and shy whispers.*

*This love is an eternal star, giving energy for passion and light for compassion. This love is steadfast, constant, the nothing can separate us from the love of God kind of love. This is the kind of love that woos us with truth, that convinces us with action. This love keeps promises and gives robes of righteousness to cover our naked shame. This is a love that demands to be screamed, that wants to rain down from a mountain, over the hills and everywhere. This is the love will take your breath away and then let you breathe love, only love, and breathe (a deep breath), breathe (another deep breath), breathe (one last breath) love deep.*

*For love sings sweetly the sounds of salvation even as the devil demands damnation. Love resonates with righteousness that justice might reign. Love relentlessly rescues us for redemption, refusing to give permanence to pain. "For God so loved the world that He gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal life. God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

*What is love? The world is saved through love.*

At this point, we split into four groups to continue the sermon act in further conversation about love. This included questions for inspiration that included: *What is love? How do you know that you are loved? What makes you feel loved? What does it mean that God so loved the world? What is the point in giving a son? How does verse 17 relate to verse 16? What does love have to do with community? Share one great act of love that someone has given you, other than God in Jesus.* The conversation that surrounded these questions, and any other content brought by congregants to the discussion, is properly considered part of the sermon within poetic communion.

One instructive reality is that there was some initial concern within the community for recording the conversation, which reveals the potential for initial discomfort with such a style, and with accepting the sort of responsibility and authority that comes with giving voice to a sermon. As we will see in the next example, this community quickly moved to a willingness to record and thus add their specific words to the sermon examples, but this first night, a pensiveness prevented a full recording, and thus a record here, of the sermonic dialogue.

Part of what helped to create an aura of comfort was the plethora of conversation that occurred in these groups of three to six people. One example that I received permission to share is this conversation that happened within my own small group.

***Madi** – I think that love has a lot to do with negotiation. When we are in a relationship with someone that we love, we have to be willing to give up certain things for their happiness, and for our mutual benefit.*

***Drew** – I love that idea. I think that is why I have such a hard time with people who say that love doesn't compromise. In relationships of love, we are constantly compromising. We have to compromise in order to fully exercise love. Even the cross is a sort of compromise, a way for God to restore full relationship even when we have sinned. Even when we fail God, Jesus finds a way to compromise to keep us in close relationship, because of love.*

***Lara** – Maybe that's what it means that love doesn't compromise. Love is the one thing that we can't compromise, but that allows us to compromise in order to make relationships work. Love doesn't compromise, but we make compromises in our relationships precisely because we love one another, and because we are loved by God.*

This kind of development exhibits the vast potential for perspectival truth. While I connected with the sermon to a colloquial saying about love, and Madi opened us to how God's love opens us to the possibility of negotiation, Lara helped to contextualize the saying, which revealed how God's love is the thing that makes space for flexibility in relationship. Without the witness of these two, I could not have seen how love operates as the uncompromising principle that allows for compromise within relationship. This potential for such revelatory conversation is a key asset of poetic communion.

Here, then, we cannot see the fullness of the sermon because we lack a full view of how conversation developed amongst congregants. Yet, as the above excerpt indicates, poetic communion entails the potential for vastly different perspectives to meet, and within the context of the liturgy, to come to new understandings of how God works amongst us. A fuller development of that conversation is seen within the next example.

## COMMUNAL WITNESS LEADS TO CONTENT SHIFTS

Entitled “Love on the Mountaintop,” this is the third in the sermon series, which began with the first example. However, we chose the transfiguration as an example of how God’s love manifests in the heights of our lives. The series itself explored how the love of God declared in John 3 manifests on our life journeys, which also included explorations of life on the plain, or in the normal places, and life in the wilderness, or the lonely, Gethsemane-like places we encounter. This particular sermon, from March 26<sup>th</sup>, 2014, explores how God’s love relates to our highest highs, our greatest experiences in life. One important dynamic to note is that the overall Wednesday attendance is typically smaller (approximately ten) than our normal Sunday services (usually above twenty). This week, there were eighteen total, and six of those were visiting missionaries with a Captive Free team, a ministry of Youth Encounter. Even as they offered significant ministry experience and led our musical portions of worship, their added number and the presence of new personalities added a dynamic of unknown to our conversations.

This sermon occurred in the midst of midterms, so rather than gather a discussion group that met in person, our sermon cohort utilized Facebook messaging to reflect upon Matthew 17:1-8. Without a face-to-face meeting, I felt it important to include at least one line verbatim from each person’s offering into the monological portion. This intended to communicate both an appreciation for the work, as well as the truly communal nature of the monologue’s composition.

*So here we are, up on the mountaintop. Here a Son radiates light. It’s blinding, burning, desperately bright. The Son of God now has our sight. The view is vibrant. Glistening robes. Awestruck faces. These details are vivid. A Word from heaven. Here on the mountaintop just the view of divinity makes us wobbly and weak. The heavenly sounds calm our terrors and bend our knees. But is this love? This is our question tonight. Is this love we find within the light?*

*First of all, we must admit, some of us have never been to the mountaintop. Some of us constantly walk the plains, day in and day out, ordinary lives through and throughout, and yet alongside the God who seeks to transform the everyday. But we see people up on that mountain, there with Jesus, and a distant voice rumbles. We can't make out the words because we are so far away. And we feel so far away. And this can be discouraging. What if we have never been to the mountaintop? Will we ever get there?*

*But, dear friends, remember this: God does not meet us on the mountain. God meets us in the everyday, in the mess of our birth and in bad morning breath and in the monotonous tasks that consume our days. Didn't Jesus climb the mountain with his disciples? The love of God is the promise to be with us on the entire journey. And when we come to the mountaintop, when our faith journeys lead us there, Jesus will glow. The Son will shine. Somewhat famously, Dr. King only said he had seen the mountaintop in the days before he died, but he had a lifelong journey with the Lord on the way. If we have not been to the mountaintop, with God, we are on our way.*

*And that is a gift of love, because upon the mountaintop we understand the presence of God is close at hand. What an incredible gift of love that God is with us, down from above. A moment so emphatic that our emotions become erratic. Excited and frightened, joyful and anxious. Do we build God a house? An act of service this may be, or an attempt to control God's divinity?*

*We're overwhelmed on the mountain, because here at this moment, excitement precedes logic, because this, simply this, God's presence and God's voice, is an incredible gesture, a vulnerable and divine gift. In the midst of the mountaintop, our questions about God all seem to fall away, and instead we embrace the mystery and majesty of the moment, the mystery and majesty of God. The majesty of the moment is here: God's most powerful quality becomes so*

*clear, and God's most powerful quality is love. It is an inspiration that inspires us, a revelation that redeems us. Upon the mountain, at the heights of our loves, God propels us toward discipleship, sends us on a trajectory of transformation.*

*But sometimes, at times like these, when excitement reigns... Do we thank the God who brings the change? So often when we come to the mountaintop – with a new job or a new love or a new joy – but in the heights of the highs too often we fail to thank God, or to even acknowledge God's presence in the high. It's easy for us to get caught up in the amazingness of our high points and not give praise to the one who led us there, the one who has been with us all along. Are we thankful on the mountaintop? Or does our selfishness obscure the savior beside us?*

*But as we said before, the mountaintop is not the only time we find Jesus. Jesus takes the journey with us to the mountaintop. The mountaintop experience itself is rare, but the peace of Jesus is on every step that leads there. Our thankfulness or our selfishness – however we respond to the experience – that reaction begins long before our ascent to our personal Everests. Our reactions to the mountaintops begin on the plain, where we journey with Jesus day after day.*

*And let's remember that in the midst of their excitement, mountaintops are dangerous places. Moses ascended a mountain, encountered a bush burning with the presence of God, and his life was forever changed. And in the last days of his life, Moses again climbed a mountain, saw the Promised Land from the mountaintop, and then he died. To have a mountain top experience is to be forever changed, because love burns bright. It is white hot. Sometimes it reveals to us visions of the future, Promised Lands and fantastic joys. But sometimes it requires our life. The mountaintop experience for Jesus begins his slow descent into death. Jesus descends the mountain, enters a wilderness, and goes to the cross.*

*The mountaintop, when we come to it, is a wonderful experience. It is easier to see God's majesty when we are living in the midst of it. But we cannot stay there. We must descend the mountain, and walk through the hard days ahead.*

At this point, we split into two groups for conversation. Below is a verbatim of the dialogue that occurred within one group that reveals how the sermon developed from this point.<sup>125</sup>

**Laura** – *A mountaintop experience is a time that is set apart from your every day routine that you're just really in awe of God, or feel close to Him. It is just something separate from your every day life where it is like a wake up call to God's awesomeness and you start to understand the greatness of God.*

**Michelle** – *Do you have an example of one?*

**Laura** – *It is hard to label one, but when I'm at camp in staff worship, that's one.*

**JD** – *I come from camp too, but those were different highs for me. I think the time that was most real or big was in a moment of absolute brokenness, of absolute I don't have anything else and I don't know where else to turn but God. And I think in that moment God revealed himself to me the most.*

**Aly** – *I was going to say that our week in St. Croix was an all around high. When you're there it is so much easier to see God because you're pulled away from your everyday worries or struggles. That week is just dedicated to that.*

**Michelle** – *If you don't feel like you have had a mountaintop experience, how does that make you feel? Do any of you feel that pressure to have a really intense spiritual moment, and have nothing? It can feel awkward, or like you're missing something, and you end up trying to fabricate something.*

**Aly** – *When I was younger, in my high school youth group, I would go with one of my friend's to a Baptist youth group, and they would talk about being saved or having felt the Lord. And I asked myself, is there something wrong with me? Am I supposed to have felt something? Maybe I should try to make this happen?*

**Michelle** – *Does that resonate with other people?*

**JD** – *I can definitely relate. I don't tend to get emotional. Some people, when we're playing, are like, "This song is so good!" I want to feel cool, and I want to have that, but I think that God didn't have a cookie cutter for each person. My mountaintop experience is being broken, while others are in the high. I think for me it is ultimately when God reveals something to us. When I have those high, spiritual, mountaintop experiences, it is normally a series of events where I finally realize God's presence. Maybe I just don't have the spiritual gift of realizing that interaction with God. Don't get me wrong, I think that God deals that way with some people and gives them that gift. But I think that God gives us different gifts, and reveals himself to us in different ways.*

---

<sup>125</sup> A verbatim, in contrast with a word-for-word transcript, is a reconstructed dialogue that comes either from the authors memory or, in this case, notes taken by someone in the group and relayed to the author. This reflects a best-attempt at the meaning of the conversation from a particular perspective.

**Michelle** – *I wonder how much we feel like our interactions with God are tied to emotion. Do we believe we feel God if we're not suddenly weeping and everyone else is?*

**Laura** – *I feel like it is a learning process to realize that God interacts with people in different ways. I've definitely been in situations like you're talking about. I went to this weekend thing and everyone was having these huge moments, and I felt totally awkward. But I think it is a learning process to realize that God deals with us all differently.*

**Michelle** – *How do your everyday experiences relate to the mountaintops in your life?*

**Salem** – *I don't feel like I've had a mountaintop experience in a while, but it keeps me going in that sense, helps me remember that God is there for me and not to worry as much. I also think that we can still feel an experience in a youth gathering or a camp can help us see God's presence later in everyday life.*

**JD** – *I once heard a pastor give a sermon on the transfiguration and he said that we have these experiences, and Jesus doesn't want us to build a house up there, because it is more about upward and outward. He doesn't want us to dwell on these things. He wants us to take them out. We may get dragged back down, but He fills us up again and then sends us out. I guess what the pastor was saying was that Jesus builds us intentionally not to dwell on these or keep these or to be seeking these because Jesus wants us to take these to other people.*

**Michelle** – *I wonder how much of our everyday lives that we are seeking mountaintop experiences and ignoring God in the everyday. Like Drew was saying, God is walking with us whether we are going up the mountain or going down or walking on the plains. God is always with us, and perhaps there are certain times when we get closer to him when we have these mountaintop experiences or when were in the wilderness and it is a struggle, but if we are only seeking those emotional highs and lows? That's exhausting! To always be really high or really low? In reality, we don't want all that drama. We prefer the everyday and it is learning to see God in that, to realize that God is always with us. We're not alone.*

**Laura** – *Plus I feel like there's going to be a lot of space and time between the highs and lows or the highs and the next high. It's important to still look for God during the not so dramatic times.*

**Michelle** – *When Moses kept going up the mountain and literally saw the back of God, literally conversing with him, while the people are down there twiddling their thumbs. But, God fed them with bread from heaven. Bread literally rained down on them every day. And God led them in a pillar of light and clouds in the wilderness. They could literally see him in their day, and it still wasn't enough for them. And I want to say, "Guys! He was right there!" For me, it would be so much easier if He was throwing bread at me or if I could see him in a cloud. But I'm probably still just like those Israelites, right? I still need those big gestures and still choose not to see God in the everyday because I'm distracted by other things and by what I want. We talked some about this last week, but it is easier to see where God's activity in our daily lives when we look back. Now as we look back at high school, or in a few years when y'all look back at college you might see things where God was constantly active and just didn't realize it at the time. But how can we transfer that into the now so we're not just trying to jog up mountains when God is walking calmly right next to us.*

**JD** – *I don't remember what book it was in, but the author talked about getting to heaven and asking Moses what it was like to talk to God in a burning bush, and then Moses replies back, "What is it like to have the Most High God living inside you every day of your life?" When you put it in that perspective, the everyday is powerful.*

Once back together, we invited both groups to share feedback that everyone might benefit from the ideas that rose to the surface. That conversation went as follows.

**Drew** – *Would a few of you mind sharing something that you heard someone else in your group say? Something that you thought was really powerful or really important or surprised you or touched you? Or a conversation that was started by someone else that developed into a theme for your group?*

**Laura** – *Someone shared that mountaintop experiences can be really great experiences but also that God can come to us in our brokenness, and that can still be a mountaintop experience.*

**Drew** – *That's awesome. The other group had a similar conversation along those lines. What else?*

**Aly** – *We talked about how God doesn't reveal himself to everyone in the same way. So even if a lot of people around us are having this mountaintop experiences and we're trying to have it in the same way, we might not be watching for where God wants to meet us, which could be completely different.*

**Mary** – *We talked about how, in the Bible, God is physically showing himself through a cloud and other ways, and someone else said that, when we get to heaven we might want to ask Moses what it was like to see all these amazing things, but he would be asking us what's it like to have God living inside you.*

**Drew** – *Interesting! So thinking about the indwelling of the Holy Spirit being inside of us, the gift of Pentecost that Moses just wasn't able to participate in because of his life and ministry at a point in history prior to Pentecost. That's really interesting.*

**Frank** – *Sometimes a mountaintop experience can be a painful experience that you learn something from.*

**Madi** – *Someone in our group said mountaintop experiences are times when you learn something. I thought that was really cool. A mountaintop experience doesn't have to be a high necessarily, but if you learn something from it, it is a mountaintop.*

**Eric** – *Something that can change our perspective.*

**Michelle** – *I thought it was interesting that not every, at least right off the bat, knew that phrase. It's just not in everyone's vocabulary, because for some people it is really important to be seeking those mountaintops, and that's just a different phrase for the same kind of experience.*

**Mary** – *I guess a lot of times when you look at someone else having a mountaintop experience, and you think that it is a big deal, but I like to think of it like something where you climbed a lot to get to the top. It takes so much work and energy to climb a mountain.*

**Drew** – *Well thank you all for sharing and participating. Now, before we move into the next song, I want to share something that I learned from someone else. I invited a few people to reflect on this passage beforehand, to think about highs and mountaintop experiences, because one of the convictions about this style of preaching is that you all have just as much authority as I do to be speaking or giving input. Someone shared that they have not had a mountaintop experience, or at least feel like that haven't met God in this exciting way. They don't even know what it imagine because they haven't felt it or had that kind of impactful moment. That's an important thing to remember as we walk in the midst of the church, and it is an important check for me as I entered into tonight. Not everyone is going to have the same vocabulary. Not everyone will have an experience from which to speak. So, if you are a person who has not really*

*had this kind of mountaintop experience, what I want to say is that Martin Luther King, Jr., one of the paradigmatic Christians of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, only said he had been to the mountaintop in the last days before his murder. Think about how much had happened. How much he had seen and been a part of the blooming and blossoming of justice and peace amidst the violence of this country, and he didn't feel that way until he was almost dead. That is not necessarily a comfort, but that is an assurance that just because you haven't had the experience doesn't mean you aren't doing fantastic, world changing work alongside the God of the universe. That means something, and I want to affirm that in everybody.*

***Michelle** – There's a similar story with Mother Teresa. She talked about how she had felt through most of her life in most of the time she was doing her work just how far removed she felt from God. At some point she said to someone, "I believe, in our walk with Christ that we're relating to some part of Jesus' life and what He went through. For whatever reason, the moments of Jesus' life that he has chosen to share with me are those moments on the cross when he felt far away from God." She said that, "If that's what he wants to share with me, that's where I want to be with him." For me, I was so mad for her, because this woman gave her entire life among the least of these, and felt so far from God for most of that time. She wasn't complaining about it, though. She was happy to be with Jesus where he wanted to be with her. And for her that was clearly not the mountaintop excitement. That's always been very convicting to me, when I'm seeking a mountain and feel like I can't know God without it, or that God is not there, that is just not the truth"*

One critical development in this as a communal process was the significant time given to the fact that many people cannot identify a mountaintop experience, some simply not with God, and others not at all. Going into this sermon, I thought most would identify some sort of mountaintop experience in life, and many would have one with God. However, one young woman in the sermon cohort spoke of her trouble with mountaintop experiences because she felt so far off from them. In her words, "If we could all be on that mountain, we would never have to doubt God's love for us. However frustrating it may be, that's unfortunately not how it works."<sup>126</sup> Though she hoped for a faith kindled by such incredible heights, her perceived distance from that experience greatly shaped the trajectory and content of the sermon. This came in contrast to others who fondly reflected upon multiple mountaintop experiences, and still others who encouraged us to seek the mountaintops in everyday life. Such varied experiences led to this multifaceted approach to a sermon on mountaintops. This all helped to expand the initial scope

---

<sup>126</sup> Lara Anne Hammond. Email with Author. March 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

of the sermon, as well as reflect some more of the nuances of how God's presence meets us in our journey.

Notice that, when the groups reconvened, certain clarity came to the topics of most importance. Many noted that some people did not have mountaintop experiences. Another majority suggested that our mountaintop experiences ought to make us more attentive to the joys found in every day. To return to a large group and hear how the sermon developed in other parts of the congregation allows the Holy Spirit's work amongst different factions to become evident to all those present. This return discussion also allows for improvisational extrapolation upon themes that arise. For instance, I had no plan to further discuss the witness of Martin Luther King, Jr., but the clear sense that many found God in someplace other than the mountaintop presented an opportunity to delve into his story a bit more. This then inspired the powerful story of Mother Teresa, who found powerful experiences of God despite her own perceived distance from Christ, except for in the depth of suffering.

#### CATECHESIS AND A TRIAL RUN

Some churches may not be ready to implement poetic communion in a full form, or may simply decide not to utilize the in-service conversation. This sermon, which occurred in St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Durham, North Carolina, on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013, offers a glimpse in how to introduce poetic communion into such contexts. The primary texts that contributed to the sermon were Ezekiel 37:1-14 and Daniel 3:1-29, as well as the Apostles' Creed. Some may object to the inclusion of a creed as an inspirational text, but this helps to exhibit the catechetical importance and preaching, as well as reveals a way to adapt poetic communion in congregations that object to an open conversation within worship. Though not ideal for the full trajectory of

poetic communion, this also recognizes some congregations may want to include multivalent approaches to the Gospel without a liturgical dialogue. While some congregations may not embrace the liturgical flexibility necessary for a full implementation of poetic communion, situations such as this require an adaptation in order to experience the benefits of a flattened hierarchy and perspectival witness within preaching. This sermon, then, is included here as an example of initial compromise in a congregation that wants to move toward, or at least explore the potential of, poetic communion, rather than a paradigm for full implementation of this new model.<sup>127</sup>

The congregation of St. Paul's utilizes liturgical forms common to mainline denominations in the and 20<sup>th</sup> century, which includes organ-led music, lectionary-based preaching, vested clergy and lay ministers, and congregational response within worship is typically reserved for rote prayers, litanies, and other scripted responses. With an attendance that can approach two hundred in one service, in a space filled with pews, neither the liturgical nor the spatial context provided space for the kind of dialogue desired by poetic communion.

Yet, as our congregation approached Holy Week, one member in particular raised the question of why we have certain readings on Holy Saturday, including the Ezekiel and Daniel passages, as well as why we declare God descended into hell within our creeds. Since conversation within worship was not amenable to the congregation, this began a series of conversations that led up to the sermon. At first, these included only this parishioner and me, but soon grew to include others, including two staff and three congregation members. While these were informal conversations, they reflected the formative potential of sermon cohorts. The

---

<sup>127</sup> Of course, this adaptation looks much more like the Roundtable Preachers of McLure, Rose, and Allen. I must also adamantly say that I think this neuters the potential of poetic communion. However, as I say in Chapter 5, some congregations may simply find poetic communion too far beyond their comfort zones. This effectively admits that, while the Roundtable Preachers do not go far enough, an approach that includes perspectival attempts is still a much better attempt than a single perspective forming the entirety of the sermon.

questions about our liturgical heritage from within the congregation led to the sermon's development. We gathered on Holy Saturday, as part of our Easter Vigil, and experienced this sermon.

*Grace to you and peace from God our Father, God's Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*"He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended into hell." On this holiest of Saturdays, the day upon which we await to anoint the body of Jesus, we sit in this tension. The innocent Lamb of God, the One who created all good things, "descended into hell." We, along with the disciples, remain outside the tomb where he was buried, away from the cross where he died, and wonder how we got this guy so wrong. Only a few days ago we shouted with the crowd, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!" Our hosannas, however, seem to have died with the last breath of Jesus. The one who should have overthrown Herod, who should have deposed Pilate, is now just beginning to decompose himself. Since it is the Sabbath, we await the morning so that we might dress his precious body, to give our friend and fallen revolutionary one last swath of dignity before he is gone forever. Though we await with assurance the resurrection of our Lord, the sensation of that first Saturday was failure and fear, death and despair. For Mary Magdalene, Mary, the Mother of James, and Joana to carry burial spices to the tomb was to admit defeat. For the eleven disciples to huddle together in a home rather than face the death of their leader and friend, was even worse, a denial of their connection to his life, much less his suffering or death.*

*How often do we declare Jesus dead in our lives? How often do we deny our connection to Christ's life and death? Whether because we feel we do not need him or we feel He has left us, we often carry burial spices in preparation to put Him forever away. When Christ appears*

*irrelevant due to the power of secular forces like materialism or individualism, how often do we hide our allegiance with Him?*

*And yet, we vigil not because of our fear, but because of His faithfulness. We vigil not because of our abandonment, but because of His presence. And so as we wonder and mourn, as we struggle with the fact that the Son of God is dead, something else is going on, something that works against our fear and failure, that works to correct our sinfulness and our struggles. A nearly imperceptible movement of the Lord is at hand, though we cannot yet grasp it. In the depths of hell, in the dejection of death, where even angels fear to tread, Christ stands within the fiery furnace, and brings life into the flames meant for the destruction. Christ walks into the valley of the shadow of death, where dry bones pave the hellish highways, and speaks a word that draws sinew upon skeleton, speaks a word that wraps flesh upon dead frames, speaks a word that gives a pulse to still hearts and breath to still lungs. As we vigil, the Lord invigorates the dead.*

*When the Apostle's Creed claims he descended into hell, it speaks of Christ's descent into the depths of humanity's division from God. Christ harrowed the gates of hell to protect those tossed in the fiery furnace, to deliver all those relegated to the trash heap of Gehenna, to remind the lost that they are not forgotten. On this holiest of Saturdays, while we mourn the death of Jesus in the relative safety of our own homes, Jesus breaks into the realms of despair, forsaking his own safety and instead bearing the blaze for us, for those who deserve to burn. By his very presence, Jesus deflects the force of the flames, and delivers from hell Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and all those throughout history who have rejected out without the hope of a savior.*

*On this night, precisely when all seems lost, when Jesus' death seems final, when the light of the world seem lost in the shadows, God begins a greater work in the darkness. The*

*dead Savior now knits together bones of the dead. Once dry and desperate, the God who knit together Adam and Eve from the dirt now takes these dusty skeletons and gives them new flesh, just as Christ took on flesh Himself. On Holy Saturday, a once deceased horde becomes an army victorious in the cross of Christ, for as He prepares to rise, so too does all humanity. The outcasts find inclusion in Christ who the world cast out. The dead become alive in Christ who the world killed.*

*This all seems nothing short of absurd. It seems too mysterious to be true. But on this holiest of Saturdays, the mystery is precisely where we find life. The mystery is that God became human for a purpose. God died for a purpose. To borrow a phrase from Nebuchadnezzar, tonight we find out that “no other God can save in this way,” because while we mourn our loss, Jesus is at work again giving life to the lifeless. Even if we cannot quite see it yet, even if the darkness remains where the light should reign, He will rise. Amen.*

Since there was no conversation within worship, the sermon, as such, ends here. However, the conversation continued far into the following weeks, with another half dozen members joining in the reflection, particularly about the church’s traditional teaching about Christ’s harrowing of hell, as well as some dialogue around the theological anthropology communicated by a God who weaves flesh onto bones, who prevents bodies from being harmed by flame, who raises humanity from the dead to new life. This dialogue directly contributed to a growth in understanding of and appreciation for the church’s history, tradition, and theology. In other words, these conversations revealed catechetical growth, due in large part to the sermon’s communal production.

Again, this is not properly poetic communion, because it fails to invite the entire congregation to hear the vital perspectives of brothers and sisters. Yet, like the similar models of

Roundtable Preachers, this allows for more perspectives to enter the sermon, and spreads authority to congregants, at least on a limited scale. Hopefully the revelation that multiple perspectives brings life, not only to a monologue within the liturgy but a dialogue within the rest of the church's activity, will move congregations toward an openness to poetic communion in its fullness. To allow for more exploration into poetic communion, organized discussions must be added to complement the sort of informal and organic conversations seen above.

### THE NECESSITY OF CONTEXTUALIZATION

Like much of Lutheran theology, poetic communion is more situational than systematic. The above examples indicate the necessity of implementing a strategy within particular situations that takes seriously the role of preaching, acknowledge the critiques brought by Alternative Worship, and seek to faithfully preach the Gospel to a 21<sup>st</sup> century context. As Lutheran congregations face the shifting sands of the social, political, economic, and cultural landscapes, we must admit the essential nature of preaching, as well as the need to translate sermons into a 21<sup>st</sup> century vernacular. For poetic communion to work, then, communities must commit to the act of preaching, and to the conviction that all Christians share in the call to become a nation of priests that declare the praises of God who brought us out of darkness and into light. From here, churches must discern how best to manifest poetic communion within their congregation. But why should anyone undertake such a task? Why preach?

Because the Alternative Worship movement brings timely critiques of Christian preaching, both in terms of social and theological realities. Rather than rely upon modernity's foundationalism, the only foundation from which we may preach is faith. And preach we must. Preaching within our worship allows us to form individuals and communities for the kingdom of

God. As the Word comes through our words, God becomes incarnate in the sermon, and as Lutherans, this is a great gift to offer the postmodern homiletical conversation. Poetic communion seeks to ensure that this formation evades the authoritarian potential within a single preacher, fosters perspectival and multivalent approaches to truth, and yet stakes particular claims as we hope to meet Christ and become fit for God's kingdom. However it looks in your context, I pray that you find poetic communion with your congregations, with God in your midst.

## APPENDIX

As mentioned in footnote 106, I came across the work of Jerusha Matsen Neal too late to fully include her within the concepts of poetic communion. However, her proposal resonates with the poetic and performative potential sought by this model. In particular, her idea that a sermon may offer a narrative theatrical performance within the community reveals a sense of dynamism within preaching that fits well within poetic communion. Below is one example of such a sermon that I wrote on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2011 for Susan Keefe's class *Eucharist in the First Eight Centuries of the Church*. It is based on Matthew 4 and inspired by Chrysostom's claim that Jesus "retires not, but remains, and asks of us to drink, not water, but holiness...For it is not water that he gives us from this fountain, but living blood."<sup>128</sup> I read this quote while sitting at the wishing well of a mall in Durham, NC, which inspired the setting for the sermon's narrative. The formatting intentionally mimics a script for a play to remind me that I am speaking as a narrator. I include this as an appendix, rather than in the main body, because I was the sole writer. Since there was no communal input in the formation of the sermon, it falls outside of the model. Yet, it also reflects another way to artistically implement a sermon that intends to inspire conversation, which was the case in the class. This sermon's title is "Something No One Else Sees"

*All look at her, though none notice her. She's infamous here, the one who to whom none will speak. She's senseless in their eyes.*

*She sees something no one else sees.*

---

<sup>128</sup> St. John Chrysostom, *Homily 7.7*.

*The woman walks toward the fountain, in the center of the Center. As the stores merchants peddle their goods, and the food court patron's offer superfluous samples, the woman walks toward the fountain.*

*Perhaps her shame widens her perception, or perhaps her conviction that her pain need not speak the last word within her leads her to a new vision. Yet, what she sees, she sees plainly. And no one else sees.*

*The patron's pass from plaza to place, purchasing the produce that punctuates their lives. So full of possessions, and so empty of purpose, life carries forth as time constricts living. Such great stones they see, and so many wonders to behold and to be had, but they simply do not see. Ice cream of the future and the soda fountain of the past, original pastries and newfangled candies! All portend to provide satiation.*

*All lie. And all believe the lie.*

*Except this woman who walks toward the fountain. The liquid that flows forth shows a tint, and while she can see the coins at the bottom, the source is not precisely clear.*

*The coins, so common, are not the abnormality in the flow. She smells the spring, and the sweetness betrays the purity. No minerals cause this discoloration, for the only iron and sulfur arise from the stench of the waste caused by this place.*

*Only she acknowledges such waste and wastefulness. All believe the lie, and no one else sees.*

*Capital demands the attention of all, and casts shadows upon consideration. No attentiveness goes to Mother Nature. The Lorax seems long gone, for no one will speak for the trees. The discarded piles high, with cuisines from the world that excrete all the same waste, remain behinds closed doors. Yet the wafting smell reveals the tainted nature of such falling stones.*

*Blood diamonds and some lady's secret draw more attention than poor man begging just outside the gate. The field of dreams, now a concrete jungle, screams. The pavement muffles the truth. Express outfitters clothe the God-given glory of Eden. Such bodily coverings can never hide the shame. Even so, the money flows forth, into the coffers of this new church and away from the destitute.*

*Complicit in the lie, no one admits the truth. No one else sees.*

*And still the woman walks forth. She ignores the pedantic pushing of property to find pleasure only in purpose. So, she walks toward the fountain.*

*What is it about this water? Except it is not water, as the coloration clearly claims the rouge touted by the makeup artists who can make no bodywork. The fountain's red provides the only true color in the midst of this bizarre bazar. The ringmaster at this circus attends only to*

*those who might pay the entrance fee, and ignores the last, the lost, the least. Even as they try to entice, the outfits become drab against the fountains deep rose.*

*No one else sees the lie, for they are the lie.*

*While this temple to Fort Knox contains no animals, the sacrifice still occurs. In the selfish purchase, the people sacrifice Charity.*

*The fountain is red because it is the fountain of flesh! There is no water in this fountain, but living blood.*

*The woman ignores the masquerade for she seeks more than a charade. She sees what no one else sees: salvation.*

*Sadly, others believe they see it! In crisp clothes, in fresh foods, in take-home technology and big-screen escapism, people seek hope and satiation and satisfaction. Faith in such faulty formulations finds no fruition.*

*In the lie, all anyone can do is die.*

*But this woman, in a field full of self-gratification, seeks something significant. She searches in the blood for something supererogatory, something abundant, something outside herself. In the fountain of blood, she—the one they call senseless—senses the Supreme. She finds the Savior, poured out for all.*

*Others cannot see this blood, for they only see what serves their insatiable desires. It seems water to them, a wishing well, into which a penny might bring good luck. Such a pitiful investment raises even more concern, for rather than see what's offered within this converted water, they proffer a pitiful pittance in hopes of prosperity. How pathetic is this pathology in which all the people walk.*

*So from this fountain, only one drinks. The scandalous one. She takes part in the scandal of another, drinking of this fountain of blood. For the first time, she is, and she is in I AM.*

*So she runs to the storefronts, to the restaurants, to the bath stalls and the long halls. She sprints to the kiosks, to the theatres, to the designer shoppes. She screams to the upper floors and department stores. "Look! See what I have found in front of your eyes! It is all that you seek and everything more!"*

*She sees something no one else sees.*

*All look at her, though none notice her. She's infamous here, the one who to whom none will speak. She's senseless in their eyes.*

*Yet, in the fountain of blood she swims, alive amongst the dead. She's sensed in His eyes.*

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Allen, O. Wesley, Jr. *The Homiletic of All Believers: A Conversational Approach to Proclamation and Preaching*. Louisville: WJK, 2005.
- “The Ancient Synagogue of Sardis.” Beit Hatfutsot: The Museum of the Jewish People. Last modified December 2013. Accessed December 8, 2013. <http://www.bh.org.il/database-article.aspx?48726>.
- Anderson, E. Byron. *Worship and Christian Identity: Practicing Ourselves*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003.
- Baker, Jonny, ed. *Curating Worship*. New York: Seabury Books, 2011.
- Benson, Bruce Ellis. *Liturgy as a Way of Life*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Bonhoeffer: Worldly Preaching*. Translated by Clyde E. Fant. Nashville: T. Nelson, 1975.
- “The Belz Great Synagogue – Jerusalem.” Steel Sagdor. Accessed December 6, 2013. [http://www.steelsagdor.com/The\\_Belz\\_Great\\_Synagogue\\_Jerusalem/](http://www.steelsagdor.com/The_Belz_Great_Synagogue_Jerusalem/).
- Childers, Jana, Editor. *Purposes of Preaching*. St. Louis: Chalice, 2004.
- Collins, Steve. “A Definition of Alternative Worship.” About Alternative Worship. Last modified 2012. Accessed December 8, 2013, [http://www.alternativeworship.org/definitions\\_definition.html](http://www.alternativeworship.org/definitions_definition.html).
- Copeland, Adam J. “Open-Minded Preaching: Sharing a Word with the ‘Spiritual, but not Religious.’” *Journal for Preachers* (Lent 2012): 13-8.
- Craddock, Fred B. *As One Without Authority*. Revised Edition. St. Louis: Chalice, 2001.
- Dunn-Wilson, David. *A Mirror for the Church: Preaching in the First Five Centuries*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.
- Eddie, Fred. *Bath, Table, and Time: Christian Worship as Source and Resource for Youth Ministry*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007.
- Edwards, O.C., Jr. *A History of Preaching*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2004. Kindle Edition.

- Fischer, Francis Clare. "Sure We Have Preachers!" Crossroads Friends Meeting. Last modified 2011. Accessed March 15, 2013. <http://www.michiganquakers.org/preachers.htm>.
- Forde, Gerhard O. *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections On Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997. Kindle Edition.
- Forde, Gerhard O. *Theology is for Proclamation*. Philadelphia: Fortress, 1990.
- Fujimura, Makoto *Refractions: A Journey of Faith, Art, and Culture*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2009.
- Gibbs, Eddie, and Ryan Bolder. *Emerging Churches: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. Baker: Grand Rapids, 2005.
- Jacobsen, David Schnasa, and Robert Allen Kelly. *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- Johnson, Trygve. "The Preacher as Artist: Metaphor, Identity, and the Vicarious Humanity of Christ." PhD diss., University of Saint Andrews, 2009.
- Lathrop, Gordon W. *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.
- Lewis, C.S. *Mere Christianity*. Harper: San Francisco, 2009.
- Lischer, Richard. *A Theology of Preaching: The Dynamics of the Gospel*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2001.
- Lischer, Richard. Editor. "Augustine: The Uses of Rhetoric." In *Theories of Preaching: Selected Readings in the Homiletical Tradition*. Durham: Labyrinth, 1987.
- Lose, David J. *Confessing Jesus Christ: Preaching in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.
- Luther, Martin. *On the Babylonian Captivity of the Church*. In *Works of Martin Luther with Introduction and Notes Volume II*. Translated by A.T.W. Steinhaeuser. Philadelphia: Holman Company, 1915. Kindle Edition.
- Luther, Martin. *The Freedom of a Christian*. Edited by Mark D. Tranvik. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008.
- McClure, John S. *The Roundtable Pulpit: Where Leadership and Preaching Meet*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995.
- Neal, Jerusha Matsen. *Blessed: Monologues for Mary*. Eugene: Cascade, 2013.

- Melito of Sardis. *On Pascha: with the Fragments of Melito and Other Material Related to the Quartodecimans*. Edited and Translated by Alistair Stewart-Sykes. Crestwood: St Vladimir's, 2001.
- Meuser, Fred W. *Luther the Preacher*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1983.
- Murphy, Nancey, et al. *Theology Without Foundations: Religious Practice and the Future of Theological Truth*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.
- Old, Hughes Oliphant. *The Biblical Period*. Volume 1 in *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.
- "The Opiate Mass." Last modified 2014. Accessed February 13<sup>th</sup>, 2014. Church of the Apostles. <http://www.apostleschurch.org/community/the-opiate-mass/>.
- Osborn, E. Osborn. *Folly of God: The Rise of Christian Preaching*. Volume 1 in *A History of Christian Preaching*. St. Louis: Chalice, 1998.
- Pagitt, Doug. *Preaching Re-Imagined: The Role of the Sermon in Communities of Faith*. El Cajon: Zondervan, 2005.
- Philo. "On the Contemplative Life or Supplicants." *The Works of Philo*. Early Christian Writings. Last Modified 2014. Accessed February 23, 2014. <http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/yonge/book34.html>.
- Pierson, Mark. *The Art of Curating Worship: Reshaping the Role of Worship Leader*. Minneapolis: Sparkhouse, 2010.
- Ratke, David C. "Preaching Christ Crucified: Lutheran and the Revelation of God." *Dialog*: 43.4 (Winter 2004): 272-78.
- Root, Michael. "Preaching Justification." In *Proclaiming the Gospel: Preaching for the Life of the Church*. Edited by Brian K. Peterson. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009.
- Rose, Lucy Atkinson. *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*. Louisville: WJK, 1997.
- Schmit, Clayton J. *Sent and Gathered: A Worship Manual for the Missional Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009. Kindle Edition.
- Schmit, Clayton J. *Too Deep for Words: A Theology of Liturgical Expression*. Louisville: WJK, 2002.
- Schmit, Clayton J. "What Lutherans Have to Offer Mission in Preaching." *Dialog* 42.4 (Winter 2003) 356-65.

- Senn, Frank C. *Christian Liturgy: Catholic and Evangelical*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.
- Shields, Bruce E. *From the Housetops: Preaching in the Early Church and Today*. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2000.
- Simpkins, Matt. Interview by Andre Tucker. Email. Columbia, SC. November 7, 2013. Spike, John T. *Caravaggio*. New York: Abbeville, 2010.
- St. Anselm of Canterbury. *Anselm of Canterbury: The Major Works*. New York: Oxford, 2008.
- St. Ignatius of Antioch. "The Martyrdom of Polycarp." *The Works of Philo*. Early Christian Writings. Last Modified 2014. Accessed February 23, 2014.  
<http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/martyrdompolycarp.html>.
- Tisdale, Leonora Tubbs. *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997.
- Van Huyssteen, J. Wentzel. *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.
- Von Harnack, Adolf. *What Is Christianity?* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986.
- Wainwright, Geoffrey *Doxology: the Praise of God in Worship, Doctrine and Life*. Salt Lake City: Oxford, 1984.
- Weyermann, Andrew. "Preaching the Gospel Contextually." *Currents in Theology and Mission* 25.1 (Fall 1998): 30-6.