

**PREACHING AS
RESISTANCE**

For Phillips Theological Seminary

PREACHING AS RESISTANCE

VOICES OF
HOPE,
JUSTICE, &
SOLIDARITY

EDITED BY
PHIL SNIDER



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Details in some anecdotes and stories have been changed to protect the identities of the persons involved.

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Phil Snider

February 18, 2018, First Sunday in Lent

Introduction

“Whatever else the true preaching of the word would need to include, it at least would have to be a word that speaks from the perspective of those who have been crushed and marginalized in our society. It would need to be a word of solidarity, healing, and love in situations of brokenness and despair and a disturbing and troubling word of justice to those who wish to protect their privilege by exclusion.” – Letty Russell¹

“Preachers and communities participate in resisting evil as they critique and uproot theologies that undergird it and seek to build new theologies that bring embodied justice into the world.” – Christine Smith²

In the wake of the nationalism, nihilism, and alt-right fear mongering that’s accompanied the surprising rise and valorization of Donald Trump, many pastors find themselves drawn toward acts of resistance—sometimes even from the pulpit—in ways they perhaps hadn’t considered before, at least not with the same sense of urgency they now feel.³ It’s easy for pastors to feel overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of the task. While they may be shocked that a significant number of Americans continue to lend their support to a person—and movement—fueled by white supremacy, exploitation, patriarchy, and greed, they also desire to have their own respective voices contribute to a world that’s much more reflective of the love, compassion, and justice at the heart of Christ than to the arrogance, violence, and authoritarianism that’s long been associated with the Pharaohs, Caesars, and tyrants of this world.

Crafting sermons that invite listeners to faithfully imagine, embody, and experience the transformation harbored in the gospel of Christ is among the most difficult of all vocational tasks. While pastors of the resistance recognize there is always much work to be done beyond the pulpit, they also know their call to preach—lived out within their respective congregational contexts—carries the potential to shape life-changing discourse in no small way. If pastors wish to resist, challenge, and trouble the problematic structures of oppression that are increasingly crashing in from all sides, the influence of preaching is not to be underestimated. Through the art of preaching—though not limited to it—communities of faith share in the kind of public theological discourses that can, in the words of Namsun Kang,

function in various ways as sites of contestation and resistance, of forming new religious and personal identities, and of

building solidarities. . . . Theological discourse contributes to the deconstruction of the old and the constant reconstitution of the new religious identities; to new understandings of the self, the world, and the divine; and to a new vision for an alternative world and one's commitment to a more just world.⁴

This book was put together for two main purposes: First, to help everyday pastors with a passion for justice reflect on how their preaching might meaningfully engage their congregations in times such as these. And second, to provide a Christian witness that reminds our culture at large that it's erroneous to think that all religious leaders and people of faith do the bidding of the Religious Right. The preachers whose sermons are featured in this volume do not hide behind the safe confines of the pastor's study nor the ivory tower of the academy. They may be preachers and teachers, but they're also activists and organizers (I anticipate that many of you reading this book are as well). Their vocational witness reminds us that choosing between the office of pastor and prophet has always been a false dichotomy, and one that perpetuates problematic power structures at that.⁵ Their passion for justice is palpable; in a certain sense, each of these sermons was forged on the streets, amidst the people, with hopes and sighs and tears too deep for words.

The scope of these sermons reminds us that preaching as resistance is not based on some sort of Pollyanna sentimentalism. Rather, we see that faithful preaching acknowledges the realities of the world we inhabit yet at the same time invites listeners hungry for justice and truth to experience another reality altogether: the call of the kin-dom of God and the claim that such a call makes on our lives and world. This call does not come with the same bombastic flair we have come to associate with the demagogues of this world; instead, it comes through the unconditional appeal and solicitation of the gospel of Christ. This call is not rooted in dominance, subjugation, and brute power, but in Christ's saving work of justice, solidarity, and love. It breaks into space and time, causing that which exists (the principalities and powers) to tremble under the weight of that which should be (the kin-dom of God), and as we experience it we hunger for it all the more (it carries an affective appeal). This approach to preaching harbors the potential to resist the intrusive impositions of death-dealing power structures in order to make room for the transforming realm of God. It opens the conventional horizon of our expectations and leads us into different ways of being, both individually and communally.⁶ From this perspective, Scott Haldeman's description of worship becomes apropos of preaching as well:

[Preaching] provides Christians with an opportunity to leave behind—for momentary and fragile periods—the structures of inequality and violence that pervade our lives and to

imagine—and, even more, to experience—an alternative mode of being, a place and time where justice and peace are known. . . . Political organization, action, and protest will always be necessary if we desire to reform society, but we must pursue ritual action as well—where in an environment of beauty and abundance, in gathering with neighbors and strangers, in the encounter of the Holy, we know a joy that, to invoke poet warrior Audre Lorde, makes us dissatisfied with anything less in our everyday lives.⁷

One might already notice that preaching as resistance isn't reduced to simply trying to communicate ideas through speech. It is better understood—in the words of Kwok Pui-lan—as a “performance that seeks to create a Third Space so that the faith community can imagine new ways of being in the world.”⁸ To borrow Donna Allen's language, it is “an act of embodiment and performed identity.”⁹ As such, *preaching as resistance isn't merely about describing the world, but changing the world*. Preachers of the resistance recognize they have the responsibility not just to call attention to the problematic principalities and powers that attempt to take life rather than give life, but also to cultivate experiential sites of embodied transformation wherein listeners celebrate the wonder and beauty of God's justice and love. In turn, listeners go from the worship space longing to enact such justice and love, in the here and now. From this vantage point, preaching is not simply about listening to ideas about truth, but is rather about experiencing the truth and then—as St. Augustine was prone to say—doing the truth, or making the truth happen (*facere veritatum*).¹⁰

Preaching as resistance has less to do with trying to get hardline right-wing listeners to change their minds through the act of speech alone, and more to do with Christian proclamation that helps create and shape life-giving identities and values, rooted in community and solidarity with those crushed by the ruling powers. While it's theoretically possible for sermons to resonate with those on “both sides of the aisle,” so to speak, the dominant narratives within contemporary American society (especially those aligned with the Religious Right that are primarily in the service of oligarchs) are problematic—or, might I say, *sinful*. As such, preachers of the gospel have the responsibility to resist these narratives, not placate them. Resistance preaching aims to help subjugated people reimagine and experience their lives freed from the authoritarian narratives that the dominant principalities and powers wish to impose upon them. And it aims to help those benefitting from—and (perhaps unwittingly) colluding with—those powers to imagine ways to disentangle their lives from them (to repent; to be born again). In this sense, preaching is a communal act of liberation, rooted in deep solidarity and freedom. When liberating narratives of ultimacy are offered by preachers of the resistance—narratives that disrupt, subvert, and provoke the dominant narratives imposed by

the oppressor—then preaching provides opportunities to experience a new mode of being, rooted in the saving work of Christ, for both the oppressed and, hopefully, the oppressor. James Cone captures the affective appeal of this mode of preaching in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*:

[Many black ministers] proclaimed what they felt in song and sermon and let the truth of their proclamation bear witness to God's redemptive presence in their resistance to oppression. Their sense of redemption through Jesus' cross was not a propositional belief or a doctrine derived from the study of theology. Redemption was an amazing *experience* of salvation, an eschatological promise of freedom that gave transcendent meaning to black lives that no lynching tree could take from them.¹¹

The promise that is evoked and harbored in the name of Christ, and the experience of its "transcendent meaning," as Cone describes, leads to mobilizing, organizing, and working for substantive change, as much as possible. But the work of changing hearts and minds—not to mention policies and communities—cannot be left to the work of proclamation alone (the call demands a response). Martin Luther King Jr. was a brilliant orator. He was an even better organizer and activist. This doesn't mean that all pastors must have the skillset necessary to excel at community organizing (in this regard it's sometimes beneficial for pastors to learn how to follow other community leaders), but it is to say that the work of justice can't be relegated just to preaching. Sermons can inspire listeners and invite them to experience another way of being, but such experiences are not the endgame. They are entry points along the way. As preaching invites listeners to reimagine and refigure their lives, it leaves them longing for the kin-dom to come all the more, so that their lives and communities might better live in to the justice and dignity that are hallmarks of it.

This is where congregations that are largely affluent or privileged must be particularly careful. All too often, well-meaning people in churches of privilege use sermonic discourse as part of their virtue signaling. They feel good about believing the right things. Or having their hearts in the right place. But they don't follow up such feelings with sustained, concrete acts of resistance. When this is the case, sermons become problematic symbolic gestures that run the risk of perpetuating power structures more than subverting them. Those who benefit from structures of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy—including white male cishet preachers like myself—must be willing to wade into this milieu far beyond the words they speak from behind a pulpit on Sunday mornings. While preaching can be transformative and sustaining—and an essential component of resistance—it's only part of the equation. The hard work of organizing, marching, protesting, demonstrating, and forging community must accompany the hard work of preaching.

When reflecting on what to preach, Thomas Long says that pastors must answer the question that cries out from every congregation, everywhere, every week: “The claim of the text is quite occasion specific; it is what we hear on *this day*, from *this text*, for *these people*, in *these circumstances*, at *this juncture* in their lives. Is there a word from the Lord *today*?”¹² What is that word, and how is it to be shared? While it’s difficult to distill the precise ingredients that go into all sermons that preach as part of the resistance (such a task would be futile, mostly because oversimplification reduces multilayered and polyvalent approaches to preaching in ways that diminish their overall value), the sermons in this book—through various modes of style and structure that are irreducible in form and often reflective of particular contexts and social locations—tend to have a few defining characteristics that can be integrated into a diverse range of preaching methods that are already at work in the lives of preachers with a passion for justice.

From a theological perspective, preaching as resistance—across a wide spectrum of social locations—does at least three things well (though not always in this linear sequence): First, it compares and contrasts the world as it is in comparison to how God wants it to be (*the subversive truth of the gospel*). Second, it invites listeners into another space and time, wherein the transforming realm of God is experienced and celebrated (*the transforming truth of the gospel*). Third, it equips listeners to do the truth, or make the truth happen, by responding to the call of justice and love harbored in the name of God (*the responsibility to the gospel*).¹³

Preaching as resistance is sometimes confused for preaching a particular sermon on a particular Sunday on a particular hot topic (the ill-advised “one and done” method). But instead of thinking about it from the standpoint of a single sermon delivered at a single time, sometimes it’s helpful to think about the way that preaching shapes and forms community as a whole, over a significant period of time and a significant number of sermons (what is often called “strategic preaching”). A clergy colleague recently pointed out to me that the whole idea of “crisis preaching” is a misnomer. In times like these, she said, we just reel from one crisis to the next, which makes it impossible to fire off one sermon after another on topic after topic.¹⁴ Deeper foundations must be built in order to withstand the deluge of information and announcements that flood us on a weekly, if not daily, basis. As such, preaching as resistance is committed to the pastoral work of community formation every bit as much as it’s committed to the pastoral work of theological formation (the two are mutually dependent; they go hand in hand). Sandhya Jha, a colleague and contributor to this book, highlights this tension as it frequently plays out on social media, especially in the wake of problematic events that unfold on a regular basis. Following the US Senate’s first attempt to transfer massive amounts of wealth from poor and middle-class Americans to the ultrarich robber barons of our era

(through tax cuts that negatively affect working-class Americans), she took to Facebook to write the following:

Last week there were a lot of posts about “if your pastor doesn’t mention how the tax bill hurts poor people, find a new church.” In the wake of some police-related murders, I think I have implied something similar. . . . The thing is, I don’t think we can keep doing this. Every week in church there is something we need to name and usually many things. Who talked about the Supreme Court temporarily reinstating the Muslim ban? Who talked about slavery in Libya? Who talked about the U.S. being the only country not in the Paris Accord? Who talked about Trump congratulating Navajo code talkers in front of a portrait of the president (Jackson) most committed to wiping out indigenous people? Who talked about Roy Moore and #MeToo?

Who talked about all of it? . . . We can’t name everything. But we can shape a community ready to resist fascism. We can shape a community ready to shelter immigrants as the government comes after them more and more fiercely. We can shape a community creating strategies to show up alongside our non-Christian faith communities as they come under attack. We can shape a community that creates space for the wisdom and leadership of people with disabilities and gender diversity and diversity of orientation even in the face of national leadership trying to erase and dehumanize all of those groups and people. We can shape a community that claims a role in building systems of justice that align with God’s will for reconciliation, not just retribution. . . . In the face of an increasingly repressive and economically violent system of government, when we cannot name every current event in every sermon, let us be about the work of building a church that can resist exploitation and embrace community building alongside of and for the sake of vulnerable people. And if our congregations are not able to hear that word, let us build community in the places that can.¹⁵

The sermons in this book come from pastors and teachers who are trying their best to form meaningful community for such a time as this. Some pastors have been doing this in the same congregation for many years, while others are just beginning. It’s all a process, and no individual or community is at the same place. All of this speaks to the importance of the relationship that pastors share with participants in the congregation, and the level of trust that is essential to cultivating meaningful sites of communal resistance. Pastoral awareness and sensitivity is a key component

to building community. And building community is a key component to care and well-being, especially when despots rule with dictatorial aims.

The point of sharing the following sermons isn't for them to be replicated word for word in another setting (good preaching is too contextual for that), but to provide a sense of how various pastors draw on the rhetorical power of Christian proclamation in order to cultivate sites of communal resistance, right where they are, even if the powers and principalities don't change (as the Bible well attests, healing pockets of the kin-dom of God can still be experienced in empire, even—especially—as imperial powers try to snuff them out). These sermons highlight the shape and scope of preaching that not only resists, challenges, and troubles the problematic structures of authoritarianism and oppression crashing in from all sides, but also ones that invite listeners to experience the transformation, possibility, and hope stirring in the gospel of Christ. They demonstrate how preaching as resistance can be incorporated into a wide variety of social contexts and preaching styles. I included several sermons preached in the Bible Belt in order to demonstrate that preaching as resistance isn't relegated to big steeple churches in big cities in blue states. Rather, it's taking place everywhere, including small towns across the heartland, where it's not uncommon for parishioners to pass Confederate battle flags waving high in the air on their way to worship. Our world needs to be saved, and pastors are called to witness to God's saving work in Christ. Not just in blue states, but in red and purple ones too.

In full disclosure, I must admit from the outset that I'm not necessarily a big fan of sermon collections that only feature contributions from famous preachers who spend most of their vocational life on the speaking circuit. I wanted to show readers that preaching as resistance is not relegated to the big names in the big conferences, but is taking place among everyday pastors in everyday congregations. It's not that there isn't a place for conference preaching (one of the things I enjoy the most is listening to expert homileticians at the top of their game, whether in the classroom or the convention center). I'm just convinced that the most vital Christian preaching going on today quietly takes place week after week in local congregations, by everyday pastors committed to the hard work of justice and transformation in their particular contexts and communities. The bulk of the sermons in this book follow suit. Most were delivered in the trenches, Sunday after Sunday, week after week, among pastors and listeners who not only share a relationship but also a hunger for a transforming word of hope. That's not to say that Christian proclamation offered by pastors and leaders outside the context of a liturgical setting isn't vital to the work of resistance. It certainly is. Meaningful public theological discourse that harbors possibilities for transformation takes place at demonstrations, marches, protests, and numerous other venues, including in books and on social media. These can be essential sites of resistance.¹⁶ However, the

focus in this book, for the most part, is on preaching as resistance within a liturgical setting. This stems from the conviction that the worship space can become an essential site of resistance and that pastors need to think through the ways their preaching might contribute to it. But it doesn't mean that preachers should consider the liturgical setting to be the only place where public Christian proclamation is part of the work of resistance.

I initially planned to publish sermons that were preached immediately after Trump took office, but it became more and more clear that dynamics surrounding his ascendancy reached much deeper than his campaign alone, and would continue to play out throughout his presidency and beyond.¹⁷ Sermons in this book therefore touch on numerous subjects that may be associated with the Trump brand but are not confined to it, including but not limited to the assault on epistemology and truth (fake news, alternative facts), racism (the alt-right, Colin Kaepernick, Black Lives Matter), classism (health care, labor and tax policies, free market fundamentalism), nativism (the wall and the ban on immigrants), militarism (building the nuclear arsenal, the worship of military-grade weaponry among the populace and the NRA), nationalism and dominionism (America as a Christian nation, the supposedly Christian subjugation and degradation of the environment), sexism and the #MeToo moment (evangelical justification for Bill O'Reilly and Roy Moore, not to mention the infamous *Access Hollywood* tape), homophobia and transphobia (discrimination in the name of "freedom of religion," changes in military treatment of LGBTQ+ persons), and many more (this list is hardly comprehensive of the subject matter in this book).¹⁸ Although Trump is the chief representative of the straight-white-cis-patriarchal power structures that no small number of Americans desire to maintain, it's important to point out that he's not the cause of this desire, but the mere symbol of it. As Trevor Noah summarized in one of his stand-up comedy routines, "Donald Trump didn't make America racist; racism made Donald Trump." Indeed, the rise of the alt-right is nothing new; it's just the explicit expression of the racism and misogyny that has been the underbelly of the Religious Right for decades (let's recall that the Religious Right was originally founded to fight integration and keep white men in power, well before Fox News was on the air).¹⁹ The legal issues surrounding President Trump may keep him from filling out his term, but make no mistake about it: the dynamics that gave rise to his presidency will remain, which means preachers of the gospel will continue to have the responsibility to resist, challenge, and trouble all principalities and powers that are in the business of taking life rather than saving it. For now, and a long time to come.

To be sure, the call to preach isn't for the faint of heart, in this time or any other. The prophets and sages from years past remind us that speaking truth to power isn't about accolades or rewards—it's about being faithful to the gospel, even and especially when it is risky, vulnerable business. We

don't preach because we're guaranteed a certain outcome; we preach out of faithfulness to the claim the kin-dom of God makes on our lives. And as we do this within community, we hope to find the courage and strength to go on, trusting that Christ's love is stronger than any force that tries to contain it. Indeed, when demagogues are on the throne (or in the White House), the weakness of Christ may be the only thing strong enough to save us.²⁰

¹Letty Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 139.

²Christine Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance: Radical Responses to Radical Evil* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 9.

³For the most part, this dynamic is more pronounced among white-hetero-male-cisgender pastors who've historically benefitted from prevailing societal power structures. It's not that pastors from historically marginalized communities don't also feel a major sense of urgency for such a time as this, but, generally speaking, this realization isn't nearly as new to them. Preaching as resistance has a pedigree at least as ancient as St. Paul, and has long been a primary mode of sermonic discourse among the marginalized in the United States. The rise of Trump may amplify the racism and misogyny that runs deep in our country, but it's been in the DNA of the United States since its inception, and preachers have long been responding to it.

⁴Namsoon Kang, *Cosmopolitan Theology: Reconstituting Planetary Hospitality, Neighbor-Love, and Solidarity in an Uneven World* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2013), 7–8.

⁵See especially Nora Tisdale's *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach and Kenyatta Gilbert's The Journey and Promise of African-American Preaching*.

⁶According to Smith, as an act of public theological naming, preaching discloses and articulates "the truths about our present human existence. It is an act of bringing new reality into being, an act of creation. It is also an act of redeeming and transforming reality, an act of shattering illusions and cracking open limited perspectives. It is nothing less than the interpretation of our present world and an invitation to build a profoundly different world." Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance*, 2.

⁷As quoted on his faculty page at Chicago Theological Seminary, <https://www.ctschicago.edu/people/w-scott-haldeman/>.

⁸See Kwok Pui-lan, "Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts," *Homiletic* 40, no. 1, 2015, doi:10.15695/hmltc.v40i1.4117.

⁹Donna E. Allen, *Toward a Womanist Homiletic: Katie Cannon, Alice Walker, and Emancipatory Proclamation* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2013), 6.

¹⁰For an introduction to what Augustine meant by doing the truth, see John D. Caputo, *On Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 28.

¹¹James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 74–75, emphasis mine.

¹²Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3d ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016), 114–15, emphasis original.

¹³For a more formal analysis of this structure, see Phil Snider, *Preaching after God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), ch. 5. See also the afterword in this book, in which Rich Voelz names five additional characteristics of resistance preaching.

¹⁴I owe this insight to Elizabeth Grasham.

¹⁵Public Facebook post, December 10, 2017.

¹⁶I'm rewriting this section just one day after Emma Gonzalez's moving speech at a public rally against gun violence, and my mind keeps coming back to her words. The rally was held on February 17, 2018, just three days after the tragic shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, where she's a senior. She provides an example of profound, transformative public discourse. Listeners experience the longing for a better

world, and are invited to go make it happen. See “Florida student Emma Gonzalez to lawmakers and gun advocates: ‘We call BS,’” <https://www.cnn.com/2018/02/17/us/florida-student-emma-gonzalez-speech/index.html>. This is also part of the reason I included a reflection that was first published on Wil Gafney’s blog; acts of public theology and biblical interpretation in the digital age provide wonderful opportunities for preachers to connect in ways otherwise not possible, and I want preachers to be mindful of them.

¹⁷Several of the sermons were edited from audio recordings and transcripts. Because sermons are generally written to be spoken instead of read, I’ve edited each of them for publication in book form.

¹⁸If one follows the trajectory of Christine Smith’s homiletic, to which I’m deeply indebted, these sermons land within what she calls the third world of preaching, i.e. “the larger social context in which we live our lives of faith.” Thus, they focus on “the particular issues, social systems, pervasive values, and theological understandings that dominate and structure the world in which we preach.” She maintains that all three worlds are important for the preaching task. (The first world is the text; the second is the world of the preacher and their community, which includes emphases on spirituality, psychology, and social location.) See Smith, *Preaching as Weeping, Confession, and Resistance*, 1.

¹⁹For a brief introduction, see Carol Howard Merritt, “Liberty University, your roots are showing,” *The Christian Century*, May 15, 2017, <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/liberty-university-your-roots-are-showing>.

²⁰See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God: A Theology of the Event* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006).

Part I: Responding to the Call

Prologue

When I Kept Silent

Laura Jean Truman

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*“Alas, Sovereign Lord,” I said, “I do not know how to speak;
I am too young!”*

Jeremiah 1:6 (NIV)

I used to work as a chaplain at an elderly residential facility and rehab hospital in Atlanta. I was there on December 28, 2015, the day that the police officer who killed Tamir Rice was not indicted. I was scheduled to preach to a community of little old black ladies who marched in Alabama for civil rights, and little old white ladies who practiced racism as a daily ritual.

I haven't ever felt so young, ever, ever, as when I stood up to preach. I looked at all these people who leaned on me for spiritual care and guidance, and a fear/anger/sadness/anxiety ball sunk in my stomach, because *oh Jesus*

this little white girl from one of the whitest states in the US who has only just barely graduated seminary is not prepared to do this. Let's just skip this subject and preach something else, because what I was holding felt too heavy and too fragile for me to lift and not shatter.

I want to start by clarifying that this is not a story of me wildly succeeding as a White Savior to end racism in the course of a nine-minute sermon. And it's definitely not a story of me mastering how to talk about oppression when the oppressed and the oppressor are both in the room with me. It's not even a story about me owning my spiritual authority and leaning into my female empowerment as a pastor.

I'm not really sure what this story is about, but ever since the presidential election I can't stop thinking about all those elderly faces watching me, and how it felt to talk about evil when we all disagree about what evil is.

I started work at the nursing home in August of 2015, and by December, I was excelling at ducking and dodging all sensitive topics with my congregation. It was a politically and racially diverse hospital, which seemed like a really good reason to just talk about "Jesus Loves Me" all the time. I avoided taking a stand like it was my job (I may have actually told folks this was my job). I was Chaplain Laura Jean for the middle-aged Midwestern white man as well as the black trans woman on suicide watch. My work was to be present to every member of the community, to love well, to listen well, to hold them up in prayer, and when preaching, to preach the gospel of grace and the unfailing, unrelenting, unstoppable love of God through Jesus Christ.

I had underestimated a really central part of life in the nursing home. Everyone, of every political, religious, ethnic, racial identity, was watching the news. Nonstop. There isn't a whole lot to do in a nursing home except play bingo (not a stereotype! We loved bingo!), sing old Broadway musicals (my favorite unofficial chaplain position was Broadway pianist), and watch the news. Every time I knocked on a door and walked into someone's room, people talked about politics. People wanted to talk to the chaplain about the primaries and the next year's general election and about the immigrants and about the urban crime and police violence and the gay agenda and racist politicians. So I listened super well to everyone, and asked good questions, and worked hard to be present to every member of the community.

Every week, I got up and I preached on Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday to a racially mixed community about trusting God, faith in light of physical sickness, God as reconciler of relationships, Jesus as comforter to our loneliness, unrelenting grace for our own sins of resentment and fear and greed. And every week, in people's cramped, barren hospital rooms, I listened to the patter of anxiety while TVs ran in the background like a morbid soundtrack—prayers and reflections punctuated by CNN and an endless loop of gunshots and shaky cameras and black bodies dying in the road.

Then, the week after Christmas, a grand jury declined to indict the police officer who killed Tamir Rice, a twelve-year-old black boy playing with a toy gun. The police officer pulled up in his car and shot him dead. The official record states it was less than two seconds after his arrival on the scene. The officer did not go to trial. Tamir was a little boy who likely hadn't even hit his growth spurt yet. He was still young enough that he probably wasn't embarrassed to be seen at the grocery store with his mom. We know that he liked to draw and play drums.

What I had started to feel somewhere in my gut was suddenly out loud and in my face. I had worked so hard to "be present to every member of the community" by avoiding difficult issues in public. That week I realized that my avoidance was also a statement—a statement of non-presence to my black residents. My silence said that both sides of the issue of racism had equal weight and that as a spiritual leader I was committed to letting evil hide as long as it was uncomfortable for me to talk about. I had chosen the most vulnerable members of my congregation, and had decided that I'd address their fear and sorrow and anger privately, just in case I unsettled a cart of apples that I didn't have the skills to re-bag.

I had another sermon prepared that day and I threw it away. I sat in my car outside the building I worked in, and cried, and prayed, and looked at my watch because I had to walk into that building in forty-five minutes to preach a sermon to my brokenhearted and oppressed and racist and lonely congregation.

There are times in a preacher's life when the lectionary is more than just a convenience, it's a sacred mandate. I went scrabbling to the lectionary to throw me a line and keep me from drowning, and the text for the week was Matthew 2:13–23. "The Slaughter of the Innocents."

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they are no more." (Mt. 2:16–18)

Little boys, innocent children who didn't know the geopolitical scene they were born into, didn't know that they represented something terrifying and threatening to the powerful, didn't know that they weren't just "little children" but symbols of a deadly threat to the oppressor, little boys taken down in the streets by an insecure regime terrified of what they signified. Mothers weeping, because they didn't lose a symbol but their babies. Oppression driven by rage and above all, by fear. And always it's the babies, the innocent, the harmless, the different, the unarmed, that are shot down in the streets.

A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more. The sorrow of black women and mothers and sisters, right here, in our sacred text.

I wrote my sermon on the back of a charting clipboard, and I don't have it anymore. What I remember most is how scared I was when I stood up. It would have been easier to preach to homogeneity—to my seminarian friends, to the college ministry group, to the small liberal church plant. It was terrifying to preach to a room of beautiful ancient black women that I loved, that I was scared to betray by saying the wrong thing; and a room full of beautiful ancient white women who grew up in the South as far back as the 1920s and whose racism was rooted as deeply in their hearts as their identity—and who I also loved, loved, loved so much.

What I preached that day was probably eighty percent wrong, unhelpful, overly self-righteous, or overly capitulating. I “spoke of things that I did not understand” and spoke to people that I barely understood.

But I did speak. Too late, too young, too wrong, too complex, overly simplified—but none of those things were silence.

Scripture gives us a lot of ways to speak. It's rich with language for calling angry judgment on pastors and priests (Malachi), mocking authorities with potty humor (Elijah: “LOL, maybe your God is on the toilet hehe”), for performance art as activism (Jeremiah), for calling rulers to repentance with metaphors (Nathan), for answering questions in the dead of night with the religious leaders (Jesus), and also for calling religious leaders names (also Jesus). Jesus submits to evil even unto death, and meanwhile Moses is dropping an ocean on an oppressive army.

The only thing that is not a powerful force against injustice in scripture is silence.

I'm going to get it wrong. You're also going to get it wrong. I've already gotten it wrong a ridiculous amount of times and I'm not even to my thirties yet. Some days I'll be too gentle toward evil, and some days I'll be too self-righteous toward humans made in the image of God. I'm going to be angry when I should be listening well, and listen silently when I should be angry at injustice. I'm going to get called out, sometimes kindly and sometimes angrily, by people that I hurt when I get it wrong. And I'm going to have to learn how to humbly course-correct myself when I'm called out, so that I keep learning how to speak, when to speak, and what to say.

These are weird and confusing and evil times. Don't let fear of getting it wrong keep you from saying what your conscience prods you to say. Listen humbly, be kind, be angry, and speak bravely.