

## **Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is? Thoughts on Preaching and the Teaching of Preaching**

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My husband Murry and I have two young grandsons, Graham, 6, and Silas, 2½. Murry loves classic rock and often plays it in the car when the boys are with us. He recently told them he was making them a playlist and asked for requests. Along with the usual suspects—“Baby Shark,” “Elmo Slide,” “Happy” by Pharrell Williams, and “Them Bones” by Caspar Babypants—Silas requested “Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?” by Chicago. The chorus goes like this:

Does anybody really know what time it is?  
Does anybody really care?  
If so, I can't imagine why  
We've all got time enough to cry

After a few stanzas, the song ends with this:

If so, I can't imagine why  
We've all got time enough to die

Why would a 2½-year-old request this song? It must be the tune because it can't be the words!

But these lyrics sparked a question in my mind as a preacher and teacher of preaching: Does anybody really know what time it is for North American preaching—and its teaching—in 2020?

I began teaching preaching in a time very different from today. It was the fall of 1990. I remember, as a graduate student in the Practical Theology department at Princeton Theological Seminary, walking across campus to teach my first Introduction to Preaching class—my lecture notes in one hand, my cassette player in the other, my stomach full of butterflies. After receiving my PhD in homiletics, I stayed on as a visiting lecturer through much of the 1990s, often teaching several preaching classes a day. In 2000, I joined the faculty at SMU's Perkins School of Theology in Dallas, where I have taught preaching and worship ever since. In 2013, I became the director of the new Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence at SMU, funded by a grant from the Lilly Endowment Inc.

### **Characteristics of Our Cultural Climate That Affect Preaching and Teaching**

A lot has changed in our cultural context in the thirty years since that first class. I will highlight three changes that have particular significance for our preaching and teaching in 2020:

- Declining influence of religious affiliation on contemporary people
- Shortened attention spans due to habits of online searching
- Since March 2020, a double pandemic of COVID-19 and the preexisting condition of systemic racism

## *Declining Influence of Religious Affiliation*

Thirty years ago, 86 percent of Americans self-identified as Christians.<sup>1</sup> Decades later, in Pew Research Center surveys from 2018 and 2019, 65 percent of American adults described themselves as Christians—down from 77 percent in 2009. Meanwhile, “all subsets of the religiously unaffiliated population—a group also known as religious ‘nones’—have seen their numbers swell. Self-described atheists now account for 4% of U.S. adults, up modestly but significantly from 2% in 2009; agnostics make up 5% of U.S. adults, up from 3% a decade ago; and 17% of Americans now describe their religion as ‘nothing in particular,’ up from 12% in 2009.”<sup>2</sup>

Both Protestantism and Catholicism are losing population share, according to Pew. In 2019, 43 percent of U.S. adults identified with Protestantism, down from 51 percent in 2009, and 20 percent identified as Catholic, down from 23 percent in 2009.

In his book *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—Is Changing*, David J. Lose identifies three categories of contemporary people: postmodernists, who question whether there is any such thing as universal truth; secularists, who question whether everyday life is an arena of God’s presence and activity; and pluralists, who question what is distinctive about a Christian identity in the world.

He highlights three cultural shifts that have influenced all three groups:

- A shift from obligation to discretion: People are no longer motivated by a sense of duty or loyalty to institutions. They choose activities based on what these activities provide for the flourishing of their lives and their families’ lives. They tend to feel religion is irrelevant, though they still want to surround themselves with a supportive community and live an ethical life that includes a commitment to social justice.
- A shift from identity as received to identity as constructed: The rise of the internet has provided access to a plethora of competing worldviews and metanarratives, each with its own set of stories, convictions, and perspectives. Rather than receiving their identity from Christian religious traditions, many people are crafting them from competing options.<sup>3</sup>
- A shift from valuing tradition to valuing experience: Over the past 50 years, we have seen a gradual erosion of trust in the institutions from which we formerly received our communal identity, thanks to government, church, corporate, and educational scandals and betrayals.<sup>4</sup> To many, tradition seems less trustworthy and necessary today than in the past.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/metro/documents/aris030609.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>

<sup>3</sup> David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World—and Our Preaching—Is Changing* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013), 87.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

## ***Influence of the Internet on Our Thought Processes***

A second cultural change is the influence of the internet, which has shortened our attention spans and atrophied our critical thinking abilities. Nicholas Carr's book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains* explores the notion that in an age long on information and short on wisdom, there may be no limit to our distractibility. Carr quotes researcher Gary Small, who wrote that "many of us are developing neural circuitry that is customized for rapid and incisive spurts of directed attention."<sup>5</sup> We are losing the neurons for concentration and meditation, those "that support calm, linear thought—the ones we use in traversing a lengthy narrative or an involved argument, the ones we draw on when we reflect on our experiences," Carr writes.

In *I Refuse to Preach a Boring Sermon: Engaging the 21st Century Listener*, homiletician and pastor Karyn L. Wiseman describes the characteristics and tendencies of contemporary listeners (or people we would like to have as listeners). She says people today are likely to have shorter attention spans, fewer astute critical thinking abilities, less biblical literacy, less denominational affinity and knowledge, less knowledge of church history and liturgical traditions, and less clarity about what they believe.<sup>6</sup>

## ***Double Pandemic: COVID-19 and Systemic Racism***

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has had a disproportionate impact on people of color, has led to the deaths of more than a million people worldwide, widespread job losses, and the rise of domestic violence and child abuse. People's painful losses and isolation from human contact have led to mental health challenges for many. Churches have had to pivot to online worship experiences. Preachers have had to learn to preach to their computers.

At the same time, the racial unrest surrounding the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other black Americans at the hands of white police officers has brought to the surface the preexisting condition of systemic racism in this country—not only in policing, but in education, criminal justice, and the health care system. Preachers, white preachers in particular, struggle to preach a faithful prophetic word to congregations that confuse preaching the social impact of the gospel with "getting political from the pulpit."

## **Preaching in This Cultural Climate**

Does anybody really know what time it is for preaching, amid growing indifference to our message, shortening attention spans, a worldwide pandemic of COVID-19, and a nationwide pandemic of systemic racism? Consider these possibilities.

- 1. It's time for preaching that manifests the spirituality of the preacher and invites the congregation to join the journey.**

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<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, (W.W. Norton and Company, Inc.: 2011), Kindle.

<sup>6</sup> Karyn L. Wiseman, *I Refuse to Preach a Boring Sermon: Engaging the 21st Century Listener* (Cleveland, Ohio: The Pilgrim Press, 2013), 18.

To contemporary people who classify themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” we need to model for our congregations and the world that preparing to preach is a spiritual discipline and that the preaching life involves a lifelong commitment to crafting a Christian identity by noticing where God is at work healing the world. Such preaching invites listeners into the journey rather than prescribing prefab authoritative insights.

Under the shadow of COVID-19, many preachers have had to preach to an empty room, either by sitting in front of a computer screen or by standing in a sanctuary with only the tech and music teams for company. Preaching to a screen calls for heightened attention to our spiritual preparation for preaching. To maximize our connection with our hearers and minimize the distance between us, we need to be particularly mindful of the people on whose behalf we preach, picturing them throughout the week in our mind’s eye and praying to discern a message that will resonate with them in their homes and apartments. From such spiritual attunement comes the wisdom to discern what aspect of preaching, and of the preacher’s identity, needs to take the lead in any given sermon or situation.

## **2. It’s time for preaching that is pastoral and also prophetic, prophetic while remaining pastoral.**

During COVID-19, we preach to people who feel isolated and experience mental health challenges. To these listeners, our preaching needs to be comforting. We need to reassure them that God is with them and will see them through. Such preaching has a chaplaincy function. At the same time, many white preachers face the challenge of preaching against systemic racism in congregations who define racism as isolated acts by “bad apples.” Preaching also has a prophetic function.

Frank A. Thomas, in his classic work on African American preaching, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*, insists that we preach against evil and injustice in specific, experiential terms. He insists that preachers preach justice and hope in specific, experiential terms as well. “Preaching creates a moment between the remembrance of a redemptive past and the conviction of a liberated future, a moment of the assurance of God’s presence and victory over evil and injustice,” Thomas writes.<sup>7</sup>

In this definition we hear the blend of comfort and challenge, of pastoral and prophetic, that we need to cultivate—both in our spiritual preparation to preach and in the preaching moment.

## **3. It’s time for preaching that knows when to make proposals rather than pronouncements.**

Without downplaying the need for bold assertions of God’s will for justice, I think preaching to postmodern skeptics often calls for a preaching posture that is humble as well as confident. In describing what they call “postapologetic preaching,” Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen portray preachers who enter into a conversation with their listeners.<sup>8</sup> Rather than name what people must believe in an authoritarian fashion, postapologetic preachers offer sermons that

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<sup>7</sup> Frank A. Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praisin’ God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1997), 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen, Jr., *The Sermon without End: A Conversational Approach to Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2015), 102-103.

serve as a resource for listeners. This doesn't mean preachers leave their hearers with no guidance. The postapologetic sermon is thoroughly Christian, "setting out particular claims about God's character, purposes, and good news through the lens of the Christ event as named and renamed in the church's scriptures, traditions, and practices." Yet, while such preachers have confidence in their proclamation, they recognize that "the proclamation is the preacher's proposal." Such preachers seek to contribute to the faith formation of those in the pews, not dictate it.

#### **4. It's time for preaching that acknowledges congregational and cultural contributions to the sermon.**

Approached with confident humility, preaching takes on the quality of wisdom teaching and the preacher the role of postmodern sage. Preaching acknowledges the communal nature of discernment and wisdom. Kenyatta R. Gilbert, in *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching*, calls on preachers to embrace the role of sage—one who keeps alive the scenes, stories, and values of the community enshrined in its folklore, idiom, and history.<sup>9</sup> Functioning as wisdom-seeker/teacher, the preacher recognizes that the true resident theologian is the community itself. What Gilbert affirms for African American preaching is instructive for all preaching in these chaotic times.

Lisa L. Thompson, author of *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider*, reminds us that cultural prophets, poets, and wisdom-bearers are interwoven in the history of black life and black preaching traditions. The voices of these individuals carry the "uncanny ability to crystalize truths that are part and parcel to black life."<sup>10</sup> This practice of respect for cultural voices transcends any one ethnicity.

#### **5. It's time for preaching that recovers its teaching function, conveyed not just in concepts but in vivid, vital language, scenes, and stories.**

We preach to people who not only are biblically and theologically illiterate and in need of instruction in the Christian metanarrative and identity, but who also have shortened attention spans. Since many people no longer know basic biblical stories and theological concepts, the preaching pendulum over the past fifteen years or so has swung from inductive, narrative preaching to sermons infused with deductive teaching about scripture and doctrine. But preaching can be both deeply theological and delightful. By that, I don't mean entertaining but engaging—it engages the heart, the will, and the mind through imagery, metaphor, scene, and story. Our knowledge-deficient, distractible listeners require nothing less from us.

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<sup>9</sup> Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *The Journey and Promise of African American Preaching* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2011), 14-15.

<sup>10</sup> Lisa L. Thompson, *Ingenuity: Preaching as an Outsider* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 47.

## Teaching Preaching in This Cultural Climate

What time is it for our teaching of preaching, both in seminary classrooms and in preaching peer groups? Time for some new approaches.

### **1. It's time for seminary professors who relate to students as companions on the learning journey more than as recipients of knowledge.**

Over the past ten years or so, I have noticed an increase in students' desire to know the professor as a whole person, not just as a classroom presence. Students want a collegial relationship with their professors, even before they graduate. While respecting our boundaries, they want to connect with us on Facebook and know something about our families, interests, and commitments. They want to know that the person they meet in the classroom or Zoom class lives out the gospel beyond the classroom. Perhaps this desire to know the professor has always been present and the proliferation of social media has made it more attainable. But I think it is a sign of something deeper—a postmodern shift from treating professors as authoritative repositories of knowledge to seeing them as authentic conversation partners in the learning process.

I took a semester-long course last year on how to teach online. One of the most important factors in the success of an online course, our instructor told us, is *instructor presence*. At one point in the semester when I was feeling discouraged, the instructor sent me a two-minute video, a brief message of affirmation and encouragement. I was surprised by how energizing it was for me to see and hear from my teacher. Instructor presence has an incarnational quality. It has become a central concept in my teaching of preaching, whether in person or online.

### **2. It's time for preaching peer group leaders who serve as trail guides/pilgrims.**

Our Perkins Center for Preaching Excellence has facilitated preaching peer groups since 2013. Groups of ten to twelve pastors in the field meet monthly to discuss readings, preach, and offer one another constructive feedback. Each group has a convener, a pastor with a record of excellence in preaching who convenes and moderates the group. We have found the most effective model for that role is what I call the trail guide/pilgrim—one who leads but is transparent about the fact that she or he is also in need of, and open to, learning and growing.

### **3. It's time for an emphasis on preaching as spiritual formation.**

Both for students in the classroom and for experienced pastors in our preaching peer groups, we have found it fruitful and formative to frame the exegetical process with prayer. We have also found it valuable to make the crafting of a covenant a key component of seminary classes and peer groups. A covenant sets out the group's agreed-upon guidelines and goals, and it documents members' commitment to make participation in the group a priority.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *So Much Better: How Thousands of Pastors Help Each Other Thrive* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2013) lists several features of positive peer group experiences, including a formal group covenant and a group spiritual practice.

#### **4. It's time for seminary and peer group curricula to include training in preaching and conducting worship online.**

To meet the challenges of the COVID-19 era and beyond, we need to offer students and experienced preachers technology-related training that is wise and practical. The training should include heightened attention to details such as these:

- The structure, length, and delivery of online sermons
- The technicalities of lighting and camera placement
- Choosing vivid content
- Projecting emotion and conviction

#### **5. It's time to model preaching that meets people where they are, not where we wish they were.**

In preaching classes and preaching groups, we need to welcome encounters with postmodernists, secularists, and pluralists as opportunities to offer creative, concrete, compelling sermons that speak to their strengths, needs, and struggles.

Preaching to postmodernists offers preachers an opportunity to share our convictions with confidence, while at the same time being open to a communal process of wisdom-sharing with those in our congregations and culture.

Preaching to secularists offers us the opportunity to point people toward the multiple examples of God's presence and healing activity in the world.

Preaching to pluralists means preaching to people who do not receive their identity from Christian religious traditions but instead craft their identity from competing options. Preaching to pluralists offers us the opportunity to share a vision of a Christian identity that is a unique combination of life-giving sacrifice and joy, of gradual growth in love of God and neighbor.

Preaching to those who value experience over tradition, benefits over obligation, allows preachers to make a compelling case for the spiritual, relational benefits of a faith in Christ lived out in community.

What about preaching to people whose attention spans have shrunk, whose critical thinking has dulled, and who do not know the stories of the Bible or the beliefs and practices of our traditions? This gives us the chance to teach not with dry lectures but with compelling scenes and stories connected to substantive content.<sup>12</sup>

I still haven't figured out why 2½-year-old Silas wanted "Does Anybody Really Know What Time It Is?" on his toddler playlist. But his curious song choice reminds us preachers of our ongoing need to ask "What time is it?" and to discern what it's time to grab onto and what to let go of in our preaching—so that, when this preschooler becomes a young adult, a person in midlife, an active senior, and, one day, an old man, we will still have listeners who are willing, maybe even eager, to hear the gospel and live it out in the world.

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<sup>12</sup> My book *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018) offers scenes—segments of larger stories—as forms for preaching to contemporary audiences.