

Equity Lens on Preaching & Praying regarding the Insurrection on Capitol Hill

Hi.

I've heard from some of you, and see your exhaustion (stacked on exhaustion, stacked on exhaustion). This is just an attempt to offer some footholds as we move toward Sunday.

Because we're all overwhelmed and tired, this is set up for a "skim read" if that's what you need, and more clarity/explanations for those who want that or have the time.

We have the challenge this week of preaching in the context of the insurrection on the Capitol building on Wednesday afternoon. This event offered a stark example of some of the dynamics at play in this nation: the power of White racial resentment, conspiracy campaigns, and extremist radicalization. These are non-debatable realities, but the *challenge* remains that we must synthesize that awareness with the *work of the Gospel* in our lives and on our hearts – no simple task.

Much may change between now and Sunday morning (or whenever you record your sermon), so this reminder first of all: **sometimes we stumble into the pulpit with our hearts still confused and breaking. This is life. Don't be hard on yourself, or overly demanding of (or overly ambitious about) what you can do for this Sunday.** If you come with a few assurances and a few challenges or "Gospel questions" rather than a full sermon on the Scripture... that's enough. If you recorded your sermon already, or something else changes, it's also okay to let it stand and instead record a little addendum for inclusion with worship or write a pastoral letter. The point is to respond – and *keep* responding. Spend time in prayer and grounding, and the Holy Spirit will work within our efforts.

In our ongoing mission of justice, ethics and anti-racism work within the PTCA, and in my role as the coordinator for our anti-racism efforts, here are a few suggestions I'm humbly offering on how we might move toward Sunday and preaching in the coming weeks in a way that clearly communicates our commitment to fostering communities of wholeness and accountability.

First, some language suggestions ([why our language matters right now](#)):

Avoid calling them "protestors" – The people who stormed the capitol were intent on violating physical spaces and rejecting a legal election process -- including the voice of many newly enfranchised voters. Whatever they want to claim, the fact is they were *not* protesting any actual injustice but rather were expressing their resentment and rage, attempting to *intimidate / influence the process* through the violation of physical space and *impose their will* upon others.

Alternative language: rioters, street mobs, intimidators, bullies, extremists

Avoid just calling it "anger" – Anger can be healthy or unhealthy, but when we label mostly *harmful or negative* actions as expressions of anger, we inadvertently teach our people to *fear* their anger instead of understanding that it can be a messenger, it can be a substitute for another emotion we haven't allowed to surface, or even a creative force pushing us courage and wholeness.

Jesus' anger brought truth, healing, and clarity. We can learn from how he processed and lived out his anger, and the first step is to not accidentally vilify it.

Alternative language: resentment, bitterness, denial, rage, hostility, aggression

Avoid overusing the metaphors of "light" and "darkness" – Metaphors of light and darkness can be tempting shortcuts to reference our dismay or fear. They are powerful metaphors reflected in nature, especially as we emerge from the season of Advent and the winter solstice. That said, these metaphors *absolutely* and clearly have been used to imply racialized hierarchies in the history of the Church, associating darkness with danger, sin, ignorance, despair. But darkness can also be a safe space for reflection, a nurturing space for rest, etc. This is exactly the moment or situation where we do not need to perpetuate the traditional uses of these metaphors.

Alternative language: challenging/difficult, painful/excruciating, distorted, twisted, uncertain, brokenness, unhealed (*be sensitive to ableist terms here, but these are tentative examples*)

Avoid using or re quoting slang terms like "banana republic" to refer to the U.S. or using racist terms like "off the reservation" to describe rioting behavior – The unstable political situations in historic "banana republics" [was often due to direct interventionism or more subtle promotion via U.S. governmental or business interests](#), and many of the aspects we look down on in those communities (radical inequity, corruption, etc.) are also dynamics in our own country. In general, referring to the situation in the U.S. by comparing it to another country or group we tend to think of as less stable, wealthy, or respected is disrespectful and unnecessary.

Alternative language: [The best strategy is simply to describe our situation as our issue/ responsibility, and not use hyperbole to make unfair comparisons to other countries or minoritized groups]

Avoid apologies or defensiveness re: preaching about "politics" – this is less of a specific language suggestion, than an invitation *to be clear about the stakes of silence*. Politics is about the *polis*, the city/community, and how we choose to live together. Our structures and functioning around politics can be healthy or unhealthy, mature, manipulative, or more, but we are called as Christians to *engage*. Period. But if the word "politics" is activating, some other ways to reframe that idea might be:

Amplifying language: civic/community engagement, participation in community, encouraging clear debate and conversation, advocating for justice, active peacemaking and justice-bringing

How we can get to the heart of the matter – and the heart of the Gospel

One of the most common pitfalls that preaching about powerful, sensitive issues can fall into is "spiritual bypassing," which is a **way of offering passive, vague or 'spiritualized' answers to material and structural issues and suffering**. We can fall into this trap when: we don't know what to say, we are afraid of making clear claims, or even when we honestly mistake how our words can be misinterpreted.

We don't generally *mean* to engage in spiritual bypassing, but here are some ways to counteract it:

Be specific. Avoid vague or overly neutral responses or "all sides" language.

For instance, suggesting that parishioners "pray" or even pray *for* leaders or institutions is certainly something that is within the options of encouragement in our faith, but if this is our

primary response, it can inadvertently encourage people to swallow or bypass their feelings of betrayal, confusion, lament and anger. Helping each other remember that we can “pray through” difficult times and emotions together and in community can help us stay spiritually grounded even as the floor shifts beneath us. The Psalms teach us that *all* emotions are ones that God can receive, and that, through the Holy Spirit and our own humility, our messy emotions *can be transformed* into healing, spiritual growth, and actions for radical peacemaking, wholeness and justice.

Getting more specific than “prayer”:

- Maybe... be honest about your own struggles in prayer. Affirm that not immediately “knowing where God is [working] in this” *is part of the journey of faith* – but we stay in the journey together and keep looking around and toward the horizon for glimpses of the Holy Spirit’s work.
- Encourage “praying with our hands and feet” for justice and wholeness is another way to avoid encouraging passivity.
- When praying for problematic figures or tense situations, admit “we don’t always know what words to pray for but you know our heart and we trust that even in this painful moment you are moving for the good of all people – help us join in” or make specific petitions, e.g. for “clarity, wise action, humility” rather than just naming names or situations without specific petitions.

Directly name the inequities that have been exposed.

We absolutely must tell the truth about why capitol police were under-responsive to the riot even when they knew for weeks it would happen, and it was the reverse of what happened with the uprisings in the summer after the murder of George Floyd: this is white supremacy culture at work, in both subtle and obvious ways. Tough truths, but real ones. We need to tell the truth about how twisted our longing for “business as usual” in government has actually enabled a dangerous leader.

Acknowledge people’s fear/frozenness, but also invite people to think about what they can do – not to “fix” but in response.

There are concrete and specific ways we can build up our communities, help those most vulnerable, and advocate for structural justice and change, *no matter how hard things are*. Christians have gone through incredibly hard eras before, and we will again, so giving *some* space for paralysis is okay, but not “leaving” people stuck there can be both good mental health care and good theology. Even something like commitment cards (even if people need to fill them out later) is a way to invite less worry and frozenness and more engagement.

Preach your “soul material.”¹ Now is not the time for dense sermons or trying to please people.

We know there’s a difference between the “comfort” of the message of the Gospel and staying *emotionally comfortable*. The Gospel afflicts us, it compels us – yes, it meets us where we are at, but it also pushes and *moves* us. “*God never leaves us where God meets us,*” *right? That sometimes means being willing to say what’s true about the Gospel in the light of this moment in time... and be willing to let people choose their own way if they find that upsetting or uncomfortable.* We’re not dismissing or disowning people – but we are releasing ourselves of

¹ c.f. Rev. Dr. Frank Thomas, *They Like to Never Quit Praising God: The Role of Celebration in Preaching*.

the responsibility to keep everyone content. Jesus knew how to be clear about his own Gospel path and he let people choose to join him or not – that’s part of our call as well.

*On the other hand, we don’t have to say everything **now**, but we do need to say **something real**.*

If *you* aren’t being spiritual pushed and transformed, or receiving a word in your own spiritual life, as you craft a sermon for preaching with your people, dig deeper for connection. **If you’re saying words that are more about your ethical self-image or forcing yourself to “be bold” rather than truly allowing this situation to move and remake your own spirituality, aim for more authentic, rooted engagement.** We can help meaningful change take root in our communities with our humble, honest preaching, teaching and praying – being bold doesn’t require fireworks.

Remember the Black, Indigenous, and People of Color may have distinct needs and reactions.

Many BIPOC folks were far less surprised about what happened in D.C. than their white peers, and even find some of the shock being expressed by white siblings in Christ as a stressful reminder of how differently this country is experienced by BIPOC people and white people. BIPOC folks also may have been more affected by vicarious trauma or the stunning hypocrisy of police response. While we have *all* spiritually suffered in the witnesses of these tragic and painful events, being aware that our community members of color *may* have specific levels of exhaustion or mixed feelings can remind us to be humble about what we are carrying and how we express it. Remembering the differences in our experiences can also remind us to recognize the *resources for resilience* that communities of color have always used to sustain and care for themselves and each other. **Learning the importance of rest, taking breaks from the news, celebrating joy, and staying focused on working for good is something that can benefit every one of us, as it reflects the Gospel invitation to carve out space for joy in spite of our challenges.**

Yes, we’re all tired, our hearts are full, and we feel buffeted by the waves of change, but *we can move through this together*, and work for greater justice and healing.

This document is received with gratitude by the Rev. Kendra Grams, chair, PTCA Anti-Racism Task Force