



THEOCENTRIC THERAPEUTIC PREACHING: GOOD NEWS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The global COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all areas of life including the worship practices of local churches. It caused trauma, breaking connections, and shattering assumptions about the safety of the world and (for Christians) assumptions about God. Forced to take their worship and ministry online, church leaders continued to support the wellbeing and spiritual development of their congregants, including through their preaching. This research analysed the online worship services of three churches during the first weekend of Aotearoa New Zealand's March – May 2020 Lockdown. It drew on Neil Pembroke's work on divine therapeia, exploring the theocentric and therapeutic messages that preachers communicated to their attenders. Each church demonstrated an integration between the theocentric and the therapeutic. The theocentric related to God's character and attributes (particularly God's love, attentive presence and faithfulness), and activity and power. The therapeutic was expressed by lamenting and acknowledging

pain, offering words of comfort, and inviting response, including in care for others. For each church, the goal was towards human flourishing: shalom, or well-being even amid difficult circumstances. Three implications for the Church are evident. First, churches can be encouraged to include space for pain and lament alongside their talk about God. Secondly, the human need for personal agency might healthily be expressed in service towards others. Thirdly, the hopeful sense, experienced by many, that perhaps our church, community or world could be better post-COVID ought to be encouraged and explored. Suggestions for further research are also made.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all areas of life, everywhere. Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) adopted an elimination strategy early, and by 29 March 2020, was in Level-4 Lockdown. Everyone was “instructed to stay at home in their bubble other than for essential personal movement.”¹ Churches moved their ministry online, offering regular Sunday worship services, as well as other online resources and means of connection.

The lockdowns were difficult, particularly for those who were isolated, or overwhelmed due to their circumstances, be they related to challenging work and/or family responsibilities, concern for loved ones, illness, or fear of the disease. Many struggled to come to terms with the new and changing situation. While the experience of a global pandemic is new for this generation, ministers and churches are familiar with contexts and experiences that are challenging, even traumatic. The Hebrew Scriptures include a reservoir of human expression of pain, uncertainty, and grief. Overall, the Bible tells the story of God seeking relationship with humanity: loving, acting, and being present, and working towards the flourishing of the world. These are rich resources that can be drawn on to comfort and encourage, and to point to God as the source of hope and well-being.

Ministers spoke directly into the shared trauma of the pandemic. Their goal was to support the well-being or flourishing of their congregation (and others): to see them experiencing shalom: “well-being that exists in the very midst of threats.”² Sunday sermons were a key resource they employed, and the sermons of three ministers are the focus of this article.

On the first Sunday of NZ’s Level-4 Lockdown, the three preachers drew on (or mirrored) the ancient practice of lament. They made space for pain to be named. They offered comfort: speaking of God as loving, attentive and faithful, and active and powerful. They invited response, both internal, and towards others (other individuals, and wider society). They recognised that personal, societal, and ecclesial change was both inevitable and needed.

Drawing on and extending Neil Pembroke’s work on divine *therapeia*, the research demonstrates that these churches offered sermons that were both therapeutic and theocentric. They recognised and did not shy away from the trauma, and worked towards shalom.

THE TRAUMA OF A PANDEMIC AND THE NEED FOR SHALOM

Shalom ... is well-being that exists in the very midst of threats – from sword and drought and wild animals. It is well-being of a material, physical, historical kind, ... salvation ... in the very places where people always have to cope with anxiety, to struggle for survival, and deal with temptation. It is well-being of a very personal kind, ... but it is also deliberately corporate.³

The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted all aspects of life. As well as causing serious physical symptoms among those infected (and for some, death), COVID-19 also proved detrimental to the well-being and mental health of the uninfected, increasing stress, anxiety, and depression.⁴ Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), thanks to

both its isolation, and strong, proactive government response suffered comparatively low numbers of COVID-19 cases and deaths.⁵ However, even NZ was not immune from adverse effects.⁶ This is unsurprising, for as well as causing physical harm, COVID-19 negatively impacted “three innate needs crucial to overall wellbeing: competency, autonomy, and belonging.”⁷ As psychologist Chris Sibley and his collaborators note, “living through community-wide disasters ... results in immediate risk to people’s mental and physical health and social relationships.”⁸

Theologians Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla Grosch-Miller and Hilary Ison describe trauma as “a specific and automatic collection of physiological responses to an event, which are triggered when an individual’s or community’s adaptive capacity is overwhelmed.”⁹ In March 2020, offering “guidance to ministers as the coronavirus deepens,” Southgate, Grosch-Miller and Ison recognized that the COVID-19 pandemic “is a trauma to communities, the nation, [and] the world.”¹⁰ As research on other community-wide disasters has revealed, “watching the pandemic unfold, [and experiencing] social isolation and financial insecurity [are all] likely to affect people’s mental and physical health.”¹¹ Key impacts of trauma are the breaking of connections and the shattering of “assumptions about how the world is supposed to be,” including “for Christians, ... assumptions about who and how God is in the world.”¹² As a result, “one of the tasks in trauma recovery (or remaking) is to piece together from the shattered fragments a coherent view of God and the world.”¹³

The Judeo-Christian concept of *shalom* provides a framework for understanding how well-being might be experienced, even amid trauma. *Shalom* includes concepts such as “completeness, wholeness, and harmony or well-being.”¹⁴ It is an internal state, not wholly dependent on external circumstances. Yet, *shalom* is also aspirational. For Tim Harris, humanity is invited to participate in the *missio Dei* and work towards the flourishing of all creation.¹⁵ *Shalom*, therefore, involves a *becoming* towards a fuller realization of the *imago Dei*,

within the context and purposes of the healing of all: “personal, communal, and ... creational.”¹⁶ Such an understanding, and tension, is helpful to recall in the context of a global pandemic that reminds us of our world’s need for salvation and healing and makes very clear our human limitations. Church leaders can draw on such an understanding to support their congregations and communities.

Among the resources that churches offer, three are particularly pertinent here. In response to relational dislocation, churches can be places of belonging and connection. When trauma has shaken prior understandings, the church can offer frameworks and ideas that one might use to piece (back) together healthy and coherent views of a disrupted world. When it is difficult to imagine or remember deep peace, churches might open a wider vision for creaturely flourishing and human participation in it. One means by which the church achieves such ends is by communicating the message of faith, including through preaching.

THEOCENTRIC THERAPEUTIC PREACHING

For Neil Pembroke, “preaching is essentially a liturgical naming of God’s redeeming love in Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷ Like pastoral counselling (and pastoral care), preaching can help “persons cope with various psychological, existential, and developmental challenges.”¹⁸ However, the endpoint of preaching is not merely comfort; preaching should challenge the hearer “to shape their lives in conformity to Christ.”¹⁹ As Pembroke notes, “God reaches out with compassion, understanding, and forgiveness, but God also confronts the skewed values, distorted thinking, and destructive actions of God’s people.”²⁰

Pembroke argues, therefore, that preaching can be both therapeutic and theocentric. Therapeutic because it helps bring healing. Theocentric because it acknowledges God as both the source of healing and the framework for living. Theocentric

therapeutic preaching should place God in Christ, rather than “human distress and psychological solutions,” at the centre of the sermon.²¹ It should also help the hearer to live well amid whatever circumstances they find themselves in.

All this raises the question of how theocentric therapeutic preaching might occur, in terms of both form and content, during a global pandemic. To explore this, Lynne reviewed early literature related to preaching during COVID-19, alongside insights from related fields.

Psychotherapist, Sasha Bates provides a helpful framing. She points to the therapeutic importance of bearing silent witness to pain during this pandemic period.²² This naming of pain can occur in the context of the worship service, as well as in other formal or informal pastoral interactions. Those who suffer need time to acknowledge the reality of their suffering.²³

Bates goes on to note the helpfulness of “poetry, works of art, [and] pieces of music” in enabling people to “express the pain they can't yet form into thought themselves.”²⁴ As David Nixon notes (citing Brueggemann), the Psalms, Lamentations, and Job all offer such a means of expressing the “rawness of human reality.”²⁵ These ancient texts put words to the unknown and the unspeakable and validate such longings and experiences as being common to human experience.²⁶ Cathy Ross draws on the book of Lamentations to emphasise the importance of crying out, not only as a means of naming our pain but also in order to sit with it. As she says, “we cannot rush away” from either the pain or the cause.²⁷

Lament also goes further, naming not only the pain, but also the presence (or, perhaps, apparent absence) of God in that pain. For Ross, “the public practice of lament is essentially having the courage to name what is happening, [and] to insist on engaging with God in the midst of the tragedy and the ruins.”²⁸ In this way, lament ensures the therapeutic is deeply theocentric.

Robert Beamish links lament to preaching, recognising the need for preaching to connect “with the hearer in their time of disruption and disorientation.”²⁹ Lament does not look for or

move prematurely to explanations or solutions that may appear satisfying to the mind, without touching the heart.³⁰ Rather, preaching at such a time can create space to honestly talk about both God and the context in which we find ourselves.³¹

Post-resurrection, Christian identity is shaped by a living hope that is grounded in Christ's life, suffering, death, and resurrection. This is a hope that needs to be articulated and accounted for, but softly, tenderly, and kindly.³² Such hope is expressed in an assertion that God is with us: a statement that must not only comfort but point to the reason *why* our comfort at such times comes from God.³³ In doing so, the preacher names what Pembroke, linking the theocentric and the therapeutic, calls "God's providential and redemptive activity ... in the contemporary context."³⁴

Kaze Yemtsa and David Nixon both note a key difference between pastoral ministry during normal times and during COVID-19: the pandemic is a uniquely shared experience. Although "pain is ubiquitous,"³⁵ pastoral leaders usually encounter "others' crises from a point of relative stability."³⁶ During COVID-19, however, pastoral leaders share with their congregations and communities the particular destabilisations and disembedding experiences of COVID-19.³⁷ As Nixon suggests, the resultant powerlessness and vulnerability may be a site from which one can discern God's activity.³⁸

THE RESEARCH PROCESS

In keeping with the core task of practical theology as defined by John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, this article offers "critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world."³⁹ Specifically, it investigates the preaching practices of three churches during the first Sunday of the COVID-19 lockdown. It considers how these sermons were part of participating in God's redemptive practices, as well as

what might be learned for future preaching ministry, particularly in times of trauma.

The research is part of a wider project, exploring how Australian and New Zealand churches ministered during COVID-19, including the motivations behind their responses, and how they supported the holistic well-being of attendees and the wider community. Data for the wider project was gathered via a questionnaire, leadership interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of (and participation in) online worship.⁴⁰

An online questionnaire of NZ and Australian church leaders, undertaken in late 2020/early 2021, provided invaluable background on how churches responded to COVID-19, including how they engaged in pastoral care, in worship, and with the wider community. From the questionnaire, Lynne identified churches that had provided online worship gatherings during the first lockdown, continued to perceive that there were positive aspects of their experience of worshipping online, had recordings of lockdown services readily available, and were prepared to be included in further research. Three churches of different sizes, all located in neighbouring suburbs within the Tāmaki Makaurau/Auckland supercity were approached and consented to involvement in further research.

Church One (C1) is a small Anglican parish, with one paid minister (who we will call Rachel).⁴¹ Pre-COVID, they gathered weekly in two sites. Church Two (C2) is a large Baptist church, with a substantial staff team (including James, their lead pastor) and an extensive array of supporting ministries. Pre-COVID, in addition to their three on-campus weekly services, C2 held another service in a different location and offered a live stream of their main on-campus service. Church Three (C3) is a middle-sized Anglican parish, with one paid minister (Mark). Pre-COVID, they held two worship services each Sunday in the same building, as well as a midweek communion service.

Lynne carried out site visits in March 2021 to these three churches, conducting interviews and focus groups. We both undertook content analysis of recordings of selected services,

including the first compulsory lockdown service held on 29 March 2020. This is the service (Service #1) analysed in this paper.⁴²

We viewed each church's Service #1, recording impressions as memos. (C1 did not record Service #1. Instead, Rachel subsequently recorded and posted online "part of [her] reflection.") We uploaded transcripts of each service into NVivo for analysis. Jess then coded the Service #1 transcripts deductively, to Pembroke's themes, and categories derived from the initial literature review (see Table 1). Consistent with a critical realist approach, we considered how God's character and activity were presented during sermons and worship, as well as descriptions of how God might have been experienced by the hearers.⁴³ We included in the coding both implicit and explicit mentions of each category.⁴⁴

Table 1: Themes and categories used for coding

Themes (from Pembroke)	Category
Theocentric	God's character (being)
	God's activity
	... experienced by humans
Therapeutic	Lament ... and space for pain
	Lament ... including words of comfort
	Inviting response

Next, Lynne inductively coded the theocentric categories of the data into the specific attributes of God that were named in sermons.⁴⁵ Three were common to all churches (God's love; God's attentive presence and faithfulness; and God's activity and power). The goal towards human flourishing was also noted and coded for. Finally, Lynne coded and categorised the data on any response invited by each minister.

Data from focus groups and interviews of leaders and attendees was considered alongside data from the analysed services. Once a full draft of the article was completed, recordings of the three sermons/messages were replayed to ensure they had been represented accurately.

PREACHING IN THE PANDEMIC

During the early days of COVID-19, ministers spoke directly into the shared trauma of the pandemic. Their goal was to support the well-being of their congregation (and others); to see them experiencing shalom, even amid the challenging times. Sunday sermons were a key resource they employed, and are the focus of this article.

The findings are reported in three sections. The first considers the theocentric elements of the Service #1 sermons, exploring the three aspects of God's character and activity that were highlighted by all ministers. These are God's love; attentive presence and faithfulness; and activity and power. The end goal of human flourishing is also noted in this section. The second section considers the therapeutic aspects of the sermons. The final section focuses on other responses or calls to action that were invited, whether personal (towards God or others), as a church (in terms of the church's form or activity), or as a wider context (community, society, or nation).⁴⁶

Theocentric: Love

All three churches affirmed God's love. Rachel (C1) neared the end of her reflection with the affirmation: "God is love." James (C2) also spoke of "God's love," expressed in God's interactions with humanity throughout all generations: past, present, and future. Recapping an earlier service in some detail, he referred to Jesus as loving and accepting imperfect people. Mark (C3) clearly communicated that God knows us and loves us.

For each church, this love invited a response. Those at C1 were encouraged to "return" to God's love. C3 attendees were invited to "receiv[e] God's loving grace." James (C2) noted that God's love (and goodness) can and should be multiplied through the people of God. He was clear that God's love is not static and is not just for those in the church. Here, he offered both comfort

and challenge: because Jesus loves and accepts imperfect people, we should also love and accept others.

Theocentric: Attentive presence and faithfulness

God's love was linked with God's attentive presence and faithfulness. James (C2) affirmed that God is with us "whatever season we are going through." God "does not neglect [our] spiritual and ... physical ... needs." Mark (C3) similarly affirmed: "God hasn't abandoned us; God is there all the time." Mark also noted the grief that Jesus experienced when his friend Lazarus died, reassuring attendees that Jesus grieves and journeys with them. In doing so, Mark acknowledged what the listeners might be feeling, validated their own experiences with God, connected them to the biblical account, and offered hope of new life. Rachel (C1) encouraged a *return* to God. She linked the longings evident in Ezekiel 37:1-14 with Augustine's assertion that "restless hearts will only find rest when they return to God." She implied that some action or request was required on the hearer's part to regain the readily available connection with God.

Theocentric: Active and powerful

All three ministers recounted God's activity, but how they did so differed. Rachel (C1) and Mark (C3) clearly articulated God's presence and comfort but expressed other aspects of God's activity in more implicit ways. While they had read the Ezekiel text, so it was fresh for the viewer, Rachel and Mark both relied on the listeners already understanding its meaning, or having a broad knowledge of God's activity, as described in the scriptures. Throughout Rachel's reflection (C1), her statements generally *implicitly* attributed God's agency. In the end, however, she explicitly stated that it was God who could and would breathe new life into people: "with breath, with Spirit, with God, with love." For Mark (C3) some actions were explicitly attributed to

God, while others were merely implied. For instance, his listeners were encouraged to trust and hope in God.⁴⁷

James (C2), however, in describing God as being both active and powerful, almost always directly attributed “God”, “Jesus”, or the “Spirit” as the active agent. For instance, as well as being attentive to human need, the “God of miracles” acts in “power” to multiply human efforts. The impetus here is beyond just themselves: they participate in God’s work towards holistic well-being, so that “others might be drawn into thinking about the greater perspective of the kingdom of God.” Rather than focusing on listeners’ individual lives, James focused on the activity of God in relation to their experiences as a church: they had experienced God in the past, and they will experience God again. He said: “There’s a part of me that thinks that everything that has been sown in our church over its life has prepared us ... for this season and for the future.” Here, the implication is that God has moved throughout their history, preparing them for the circumstances they find themselves in. He gave the example of the timely theme of the sermon series, “Questions Jesus asked,” chosen pre-COVID. The question for Service #1 (the fifth in their series) was “What do you have (that I can multiply at this time)?” Listeners were encouraged to offer what they had to God, trusting that God would multiply it. Here, as in the closing prayer (in which James asked the Spirit for help with patience, endurance, and the ability to look beyond oneself), human dependence on God-who-acts was reiterated.

Theocentric: Towards human flourishing

For each minister, a desired result of their preaching was human flourishing or thriving: shalom. Mark (C3) drew on the Ezekiel text to point to such flourishing. Reflecting on the work of Walter Brueggemann on the Psalms of orientation, disorientation, and new orientation, Mark noted the psalmists’ experiences of both closeness to and distance from God. He linked the move “from disorientation to new orientation” with the text where “Ezekiel

offers a vision of their worst moment, their worst disorientation and provides an image of orientation where that which was the worst [the dry bones] is knitted back together." At C1, Rachel also noted the agency of God in this transformation. She assured the hearers that "life can be breathed" into our difficult circumstances. "New life can definitely come and flourish" and the listener can experience "new life, ... new breath, ... [and a] real home." James (C2) made clear "that God wants us to thrive" during the pandemic. He acknowledged "[that] seems a little ironic and maybe a little hard for us in New Zealand at this time when we find ourselves in complete lockdown." However, he said, "we believe it's possible because we serve a God of the impossible." As James stated throughout, this flourishing was not just for themselves as individuals or as a church, but for the sake of others.

Therapeutic

All three churches incorporated therapeutic elements into their services by acknowledging pain and making space for lament in their sermons, including offering words of comfort. They invited response. Often, these therapeutic aspects occurred concurrently.

Therapeutic: Lamenting ... by providing space for pain

The primary way these leaders acknowledged pain was by simply naming the reality that they found themselves in. James (C2) used this method almost exclusively, pointing to the lockdown circumstances time and again throughout his sermon. For example, he acknowledged the challenging season COVID-19 brought. It was unexpected, brought "lots of questions," and caused people to feel "uncomfortable" and insecure, not least due to the loss of control and certainty. He named the potential for loneliness, as they were "experiencing scarcity and isolation in relationships."

Rachel (C1) and Mark (C3) both drew on resources from scripture (and Mark also used a poem) to help their congregations explore their pain and express their current reality. Rachel drew parallels with the experience of the exiled people of God in Babylon. She began her reflection by stating that “we find ourselves in interesting times ... dispersed from each other and ... trying to navigate an entirely new world.” Linking this to the Ezekiel text, she acknowledged “the feeling of dryness, death, dry bones, and ... exile” that her listeners, like the Israelites, “can have.” She concluded her reflection by specifying the “interesting times” as times of “lockdown” and isolation. In doing so, Rachel named the challenging circumstances, and provided a space for the listener to also acknowledge and examine their own pain, including their “hopelessness” and “longing.”

While Mark (C3) also acknowledged the reality of their situation, he was generally less specific about the detail; he made space for parallels between the contexts of Israelite and pandemic, without making them explicit. Near the beginning of his sermon, Mark stated, “[We are in a] time of societal disorientation. Things aren’t going how we’d intended at all.” However, he generally drew on scripture, and imagery of desert and wilderness, rather than explicitly naming the pandemic context. The exact detail was left open, therefore, allowing the hearer to find themselves in the scriptures, or to connect with others from the bible who have felt a similar pain, and to employ their own words, feelings, and expression. For example, he spoke of Psalms of disorientation where the people ask, “Where is God? Why did God let this happen?” In doing so, he legitimated the asking of such questions, before noting Psalms of reorientation that affirm God’s presence. He did not shy away from the difficulty that the enslaved Israelites faced: “Hundreds of people died, [including] the very young and the very old.” The Israelites had lost both the young people who represented their “hope for new life in the land” and the “wisdom, knowledge and stories”

that the old people held. "In one valley they had lost their past and their future."

Therapeutic: ... and offering words of comfort

The ministers did not stop at providing space to name pain; words of comfort often followed close behind. Each speaker, however, approached this therapeutic element differently. Rachel (C1) made broader sweeps with her words of comfort, allowing them to address more than the pandemic, including things "in our own personal lives that are a bit dry."

James' words of comfort (C2) were often tied to God's activity, not least because "Jesus is with us." James saw God as the ultimate source of comfort. However, James' words of comfort were not always directed solely toward his audience. He encouraged his hearers to themselves comfort others: to offer to others what they had.

Mark (C3) pointed to comfort as he drew on the experiences of Ezekiel, the psalmists and Christ. He implied that we, like them, can experience a new orientation, where we discover that "God hasn't abandoned" us, that "God is there all the time" even in our despair, and that we can "rediscover God's call" on our lives. Here, Mark was linking trust and promises, saying, "We have to trust that a time of new orientation will come." Like James, Mark called for people to support one another: "We need to be kind to each other." Mark, however, was more explicit about the reciprocal nature of this support, noting "we all need support at this time."

Therapeutic: Inviting response

Each minister called for specific responses from the listeners. In addition to noting the inevitability of change, including for the church, these responses fit within three core categories: the individual attendee or hearer, the church, and the wider context. These are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Human response

	Who/what is invited to respond?	Response relates to...
1	Attender/hearer	God Others
2	Church	The form of the church The activity of the church
3	Wider context: community, society, or nation	Opportunity for change
	<i>Inevitability of change</i>	<i>All - individual, church, society</i>

For Rachel (C1) there was a sense of hopeful anticipation of what change might come. She invited listeners to commit to living in new ways personally and towards others—including as a society and as a church. She emphasised that the hearers' needed to personally respond to God, finding "new life" and "home" in relationship with the loving God. In relationship to others, she noted the need to find "some ways of being slower, of taking more care, of loving our neighbours." In saying this, her hope was not just for people in the church. The wider community also has a necessity and opportunity to embrace "different ways" of interacting with one another. Finally, she hoped that the pandemic might result in some "new and different ways of being church, [including] a return to some ancient ways as well."

Mark (C3) primarily emphasized the inevitability of change and personal responses. Concerning the former, he advocated for "go[ing] willingly into the desert." While he acknowledged the need to "grieve the change," he looked forward to God's "new way and new call ... com[ing] through in our lives." At a personal level, he challenged the hearer to consider, "Am I oriented towards God's call?" and encouraged them that they "can look to the hope of new life" in relationship with God.

Inviting response was the key focus of James' (C2) sermon. The main response he called for was that each person considers Jesus' question: "What do you have that I might be able to multiply at this exact time?" They were invited to bring what they have, for the sake of the well-being of others. "The God of miracles uses

his people to draw others closer to him.” The inevitability of change was implicit for James, while he explicitly (and often) emphasized the need for personal, church, and (to a lesser extent) wider societal responses. Most often, his statements applied to more than one of these categories at once, particularly individual responses towards others and the activity of the church. For example, he highlighted a church-wide initiative where everyone was encouraged to regularly contact and encourage three other people throughout the lockdown. While this action was personal, one-to-one, it was also corporate, on behalf of the church. As James noted, “it will go some way to showing that we are people of compassion.” There was a similar overlap when actions in response to God had a likely impact on others. For instance, he prayed that the church “would grow in our love and faith in God,” continuing to tell the story of their faith “and that future generations will look back and see the faith of God’s people ... at this time.”

CONSIDERING IMPLICATION FOR THEORY AND PRACTICE

Consistent with Pembroke’s recommendations, these ministers were preaching sermons that were both therapeutic and theocentric. They allowed room for pain to be expressed while naming the hope that can be found in God. Significantly, this hope was not just for the hearers: they were invited into active participation in God’s redemptive practices, both through caring for others and by working towards wider societal change.

LAMENT AS BALANCING PAIN AND COMFORT

Lament is a powerful tool for expressing the “pain and injustice” felt in the liminal space between trauma and resolution.⁴⁸ As Matthew Kim reminds us, lament should not be rushed over: “we must give our listeners the time they need to vent and wallow in their lament.”⁴⁹ However, balancing the therapeutic

with the theocentric, the practice of lament (usually) involves expressing both protest at how things are, and (thanks to God) hope in a future that will be better.⁵⁰ This balance was achieved in the sermons we analysed.

As Pembroke notes, in divine *therapeia*, “the preacher takes her lead primarily from the message of God’s therapy that is found in the particular text she is working with.”⁵¹ This was most clearly demonstrated in Mark’s (C3) sermon, where he reflected on the Israelites’ and Jesus’ experiences of disorientation and reorientation. There, Mark legitimated grief, acknowledged the current reality, and pointed towards hope, as he suggested that the hearer should “grieve the change, journey in the wilderness like Jesus, and know that God’s new life and way will come for us.” This dynamic interplay – lament with hope, (an interplay present throughout the Psalms⁵²) helped to situate the therapeutic in the theocentric. God was named as the source of hope, love and redemption, even amid struggle.

Such comfort is not triumphant. It fully acknowledges pain, yet points towards a good God who is beyond the particular situation, and beyond human understanding. This latter point, and the humility it engenders, proved essential in a season of uncertainty when the trauma of the pandemic rendered vulnerable not only us but also our images of God.⁵³

Amid such vulnerability, hope comes as a gift, fragile and remembered. There is no straight line, no simple cause and effect, between pain and hope. Hope echoes in the stories shared and the actions taken, because lament does not end with naming our difficulty.⁵⁴ Hope is evoked through remembering and telling of God’s greatness. Doing so, including through scripture and sermons, can work to make problems seem smaller and less overwhelming.⁵⁵ Lament itself offers this balance of pain and hope.

CARING FOR OTHERS

Lament also has the potential to move people beyond their individual concerns. In fact, for Ross, lament “has the potential to be creative and generative” as we move towards becoming “a community of compassion and solidarity.”⁵⁶

James (C2) demonstrated this most clearly, including as he invited the listeners (uncertain of how to act) to offer what they had in their hands – including a mobile phone – and to use it to connect with others, intentionally and regularly.⁵⁷ As he noted, this was something that everyone could do, even as their usual experiences and ways of being and contributing were not possible.⁵⁸

Two impulses were at play. The first was towards interpersonal connection. As Sibley et al. note, “common threats [as well as bringing risks] also provide an opportunity for people to increase social cohesion and connection.”⁵⁹ Connection is a core value of C2, so it is unsurprising that it was emphasised so strongly.⁶⁰

The second impulse was evangelistic: sharing “that God is with us” and “being the hands and feet of Jesus ... who deliver the good news of God’s love into people’s lives.” Here, James named the potential for others to help their friends by pointing them to the source of peace.

There was a third, perhaps unintended consequence. The pandemic caused a loss of individual agency as decisions imposed by the government and the virus itself severely restricted personal choice. A communal impetus and concern beyond oneself provide a potential means for people, struggling with a loss of autonomy and competency, to regain some sense of personal agency.⁶¹

WORKING TOWARDS POSITIVE SOCIETAL CHANGE

Wider still, the invitation to work towards societal change is a key aspect of lament: not only crying out to God but acting

towards what Brueggemann calls God's "new thing".⁶² Early on in the pandemic, there was for many a sense that perhaps our world might be positively changed as a result of COVID-19. Such a stirring was evidenced, for example, in Tomfoolery's "The Great Realisation," viewed over seven million times, and later published as a children's book.⁶³

Three years on, the reality seems to be increased polarization and emboldened racism and misogyny.⁶⁴ Globally, health systems struggle and inflation continues to rise. As Marmott and Allen note, COVID-19 "exposes the fault lines in society and amplifies inequalities."⁶⁵ Essentially, the pandemic acted as an x-ray, revealing what was already there below the surface. The problems that we face were rooted, not only in a virus, but also in processes, systems, structures, and attitudes that predated the pandemic. There is an ongoing invitation to change and deeper reflection; to acknowledge and work towards solutions for the challenges that COVID-19 has highlighted, challenges that are both ecclesial and societal.

Many types of action are required: An increased emphasis on connection. An honest valuing and naming of human emotion. An (again honest) lament and struggle. A movement away from "a preoccupation with self to a submission to and reliance upon God."⁶⁶ Active protest that seeks to ameliorate the effects of the pandemic.⁶⁷

Such a desire for change was evident in each of the sermons reviewed, including Rachel (C1) who looked hopefully towards a "new normal ... as we find new and different ways of being church, ... community ... and country." As the quote often attributed to Winston Churchill says, "don't let a good crisis go to waste."

A word of caution is necessary. As has been the case throughout history, there are different understandings of the nature and cause of contemporary problems, and different visions of the solutions required and how they might be enacted. Humility is required, as is an emphasis on genuine compassion

and solidarity, and careful discernment about what positive change might be.

CONCLUSION

In the trauma and disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a need for shalom. Churches and ministers recognised this need and worked to meet it, including through their preaching. In the first Lockdown services, an overall impetus towards shalom (“well-being that exists in the very midst of threats”⁶⁸) was present in each of the sermons reviewed. In doing so, they mirrored the ancient tradition of lament, providing space to sit with pain, before offering comfort by speaking of God as loving; attentive and faithful; and active and powerful. Their goal was towards not only personal shalom, but participation in God’s wider purposes, primarily (in this early stage) for the well-being of other people, also struggling with the pandemic.⁶⁹

Both through and in addition to offering words of comfort, the sermons and other work of the three churches addressed three significant needs. They encouraged deliberate efforts towards interpersonal connectedness, addressing the relational dislocation of the Lockdown. They helped people make sense of the struggle and rebuild a coherent view of the disrupted world. Each minister did so not by ignoring the struggle, but by allowing “the groan[s] of protest and anguish”⁷⁰ and pointing to the work of God in their midst and beyond. In doing so, they encouraged not only crying out to God but acting towards God’s purposes. They invited participation in God’s mission.

In this way, the preaching was what Pembroke would describe as both therapeutic and theocentric. This approach to preaching was effective during the pandemic and provides a helpful model for future preaching ministry, including in times of difficulty or trauma. The preaching retained a therapeutic concern for the hearers, while clearly pointing to God as the source of life, hope and comfort. It appropriately balanced both

comfort and challenge and retained “the essential message of the [biblical] text” being preached.⁷¹

Three implications for churches have been noted. There is always a need to appropriately balance the therapeutic with the theocentric, to allow grief to be expressed, and to point to God’s goodness and grace. A degree of personal agency can be experienced by reaching out to others. The desire to see our world, communities and churches changed for the better should continue to motivate us. Emphasising these three things might help keep us firmly centred on God, attentive and responsive to the therapeutic needs of our church and communities, and also recognises our call to participating in the *missio Dei* as seen beyond the church. As James (C2) prayed: may there “be a miraculous abundance of love, of grace, of compassion, of kindness, and creative ways” of being the church.

There are several avenues for future research. First, exploring if and how these churches engaged in theocentric therapeutic preaching in their later services will provide insight into longer-term responses to ongoing difficulties. Were the same attributes of God emphasised? To what extent was space continued to be given to lament and naming of pain? Was there a point at which it became unhelpful to speak of the pandemic? Did the way that it was spoken of change over time? Secondly, investigating the preaching of other churches, including churches in different socioeconomic contexts, will provide rich comparative data. Thirdly, the pandemic meant that (although each exact circumstance was unique) pastoral leaders and their congregations experienced the same difficult situation. Further research can explore how ministers balanced an appropriate vulnerability with providing a ministry of steady or non-anxious presence.

NOTES

1. <https://covid19.govt.nz/alert-system/alert-level-4/>
Accessed 17 June 2021.
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Peace* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2001).
3. Ibid.
4. Nader Salari, Amin Hosseinian-Far, Rostam Jalali, Aliakbar Vaisi-Raygani, Shna Rasoulpoor, Masoud Mohammadi, Shabnam Rasoulpoor, and Behnam Khaledi-Paveh, "Prevalence of Stress, Anxiety, Depression among the General Population During the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis." *Globalization and Health* 16:1 (2020): 1-11.
5. Particularly prior to the omicron outbreak in early 2022. <https://covid19.who.int/region/wpro/country/nz>
6. Chris G. Sibley, Lara M. Greaves, Nicole Satherley, Marc S. Wilson, Nickola C. Overall, Carol H. J. Lee, Petar Milojev, *et al.*, "Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic and Nationwide Lockdown on Trust, Attitudes toward Government, and Well-Being." *The American Psychologist* 75:5 (2020): 618-30.
7. Elizabeth Hathaway, "Assisting Faith-Based Organizations Increase Sense of Belonging During the Covid-19 Pandemic." *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling* 74:4 (2020): 226-28.
8. Sibley et al., "Effects of COVID-19."
9. Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla Grosch-Miller, and Hilary Ison, "Introduction" in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma*, eds., Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla Grosch-Miller and Hilary Ison, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (Abingdon, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2020).
10. Christopher Southgate, Daniel H Grosseohme, and Hilary Ison, "Guidance for Ministers as the Coronavirus Crisis Deepens," in *Tragedy and Congregations*, 2 March, 2020, <https://tragedyandcongregations.org.uk/2020/03/24/guidance-for-ministers-as-the-coronavirus-crisis-deepens/>.
11. Sibley et al., "Effects of COVID-19."
12. Warner et al., "Introduction."

13. Ibid.
14. Craig Ellison, *From Stress to Well-Being: Contemporary Christian Counseling* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003).
15. Tim Harris, "Shalom, Gospel and the Mission of God," in *Flourishing in Faith: Theology Encountering Positive Psychology*, 65-80, 2017.
16. Ibid.
17. Neil Pembroke, *Divine Therapeia and the Sermon: Theocentric Therapeutic Preaching* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2013).
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Sasha Bates, "Finding New Languages for Loss." *Therapy Today* 31:6 (2020): 43-45.
23. Robert Beamish, "Preaching in the Time of COVID: Finding the Words to Speak of God," *Practical Theology* 14:1-2 (2021): 47-57.
24. Bates, "Finding New Languages for Loss." Also, see Cathy Ross, "Hope Is Tough: Reflections in a Time of COVID-19." *Practical Theology* 14:1-2 (2021): 86-97.
25. David Nixon, "Despatches from the Frontline: Parish Responses to COVID-19 and Some Initial Analysis." Ibid.: 35-46; Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*. 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2007).
26. Nixon, "Despatches from the Frontline."
27. Ross, "Hope Is Tough."
28. Ibid.
29. Beamish, "Preaching in the Time of COVID."
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid. Matthew Kim reminds us to "preach lament without an immediately happy ending." Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching to People in Pain: How Suffering Can Shape Your Sermons and Connect with Your Congregation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021).
32. Ross, "Hope Is Tough."
33. Beamish, "Preaching in the Time of COVID."

34. Pembroke, *Divine Therapeia*. Bates' third suggestion towards healing is (literal) movement. Useful not only as a means of "shifting stuck patterns and for addressing trauma," movement can also be helpful in "representing pain in a way that words couldn't do." Bates, "Finding New Languages for Loss." During COVID-19, the churches' worship expressions that may involve movement were disrupted. Sharing communion, moving to songs (for example, dancing, clapping or swaying), greeting one another with physical touch, and engaging in embodied worship responses were not possible in a way that was physically shared beyond the viewer's household. However, each of these therapeutic techniques—holding space, drawing on poetic and literary resources, and movement—are possible in an online context. Of course, the form they take may be different.

35. Kim, *Preaching to People in Pain*.

36. Nixon, "Despatches from the Frontline."

37. Kaze Yemtsa, Bachelard. "Using the COVID-19 Pandemic as Fresh Lenses to Generate a Thicker Analysis of Four Research Theories on Discipleship within a Reformed Congregation;" *Ibid.*: 58-71; Nixon, "Despatches from the Frontline."

38. "Despatches from the Frontline."

39. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006).

40. The research was reviewed and approved by the School of Arts, University of Otago, New Zealand. For further publications, see Lynne Taylor, "Learning from Bear Hunts, Workouts and Generosity: Noticing Five Ways to Wellbeing in a Pandemic." *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 27:1 (2020): 14-19; Lynne Maree Taylor, "Reaching Out Online: Learning from One Church's Embrace of Digital Worship, Ministry and Witness," *Witness: The Journal of the Academy for Evangelism in Theological Education* 35 (2021): 1-14; Lynne Taylor, "Lessons from and for the Church in Covid Times: Looking Back and Forwards." *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 28:2 (2021).

41. All names are pseudonyms.

42. In Service #1, C1 and C3 both drew on the lectionary texts for Year A: 29 March 2020. C2 continued working through their series exploring “questions [that] Jesus asked.”

43. Lynne Taylor, "Making Room for the Missio Dei in Missiological Research." *Mission Studies* 37:1 (2020): 52-77.

44. For instance, when Rachel talks about “the dry bones having life breathed into them” the inference is that God did the breathing. Therefore, this was code to *God’s activity*.

45. These were: goodness, love, presence and faithfulness, meeting needs, acceptance, true home, personal, active, powerful, preparing us.

46. While the sermons are analysed here, other elements of the worship service also focused on the reality that the viewers were experiencing and offered words of comfort. This was particularly evident at C3, during both their opening statement and the responsive activity that followed the sermon. C1 also did so during their opening reflection. Rachel only recorded her reflection, so it was not possible to explore this in relation to C2.

47. Mark (C2) read Ruth Burgess’ poem, *The Desert Waits: An Invitation to Lent*. This poem refers to angels “who come when God decides / that we need their help; / when we are ready / for what they can give us.”

<https://danny61.wordpress.com/tag/ruth-burgess/> Accessed 15 July 2021.

48. Carla Grosch-Miller, Megan Warner, and Hilary Ison, "Enabling the Work of the People: Liturgy in the Aftermath of Trauma," in *Tragedies and Christian Congregations: The Practical Theology of Trauma*, eds., Megan Warner, Christopher Southgate, Carla Grosch-Miller and Hilary Ison. Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology, 149-66 (Abingdon, UK: Taylor and Francis, 2020).

49. Kim, *Preaching to People in Pain*.

50. John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

51. Pembroke, *Divine Therapeia*.

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52. Ken Langley, "Preaching Hope and Lament from the Psalms" *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 22:1 (2022): 34-54.
53. The humility is also crucial when it comes to discerning and working towards positive change, as will be discussed in the final subsection.
54. Ross, "Hope Is Tough."
55. Kim, *Preaching to People in Pain*.
56. Ross, "Hope Is Tough."
57. One potential weakness was evident here. One could infer from James' sermon that he thought those in the church did not themselves need support. Rather, they would offer support to others. It is unlikely that was his intention, and the church offered an extensive array of support services, but it does point to the need to be clear about our own vulnerabilities, and the fact that we may offer support to others despite our weaknesses, rather than from a position of strength.
58. Marileen Steyn, Cas Wepener, and Hennie Pieterse, "Preaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa" *The International Journal of Homiletics* 4 (2020): 1-20.
59. Sibley et al., "Effects of COVID-19." This was evident for people surveyed during NZ's national lockdown. They "reported a greater sense of community than those prelockdown" and this was "associated with lower levels of psychological distress." Ibid.
60. Taylor, "Reaching Out Online." While the recording Rachel (C2) uploaded only contained her reflection, she emphasised the importance of connection and hearing one another, mentioning in her introduction that it was "fabulous" to have heard other voices during their Zoom service.
61. Hathaway, "Sense of Belonging." Steyn, Wepener, and Pieterse, "Preaching During COVID-19."
62. Walter Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020).

63. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nw5KQMXDiM4>
Accessed 6 July 2021. Roberts, Tomos, and Nomoco. *The Great Realization* (New York: Harper Collins Children's Books, 2020).
64. I write this the day after Aotearoa New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, announced her resignation. No politician is perfect, or makes decisions anyone can always wholly agree with. However, it is unacceptable that Ardern has been subject to increasing threats of violence and misogyny. Social media posts (including from some Christian agencies) frequently permit, even encourage, posts and comments sharing misinformation and disinformation, as well as racist, sexist, misogynistic, dehumanizing, and/or threatening content. See, for example, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/political/482761/the-hatred-and-vitriol-jacinda-ardern-endured-would-affect-anybody>
Accessed 20/1/2023.
65. Michael Marmot and Jessica Allen, "COVID-19: Exposing and Amplifying Inequalities." *J Epidemiol Community Health* 74:9 (2020): 681-82.. Much research explores the disproportionate negative impact of Covid-19 on certain communities and groups. For example, Nikki Fortier, "COVID-19, Gender Inequality, and the Responsibility of the State" *International Journal of Wellbeing* 10:3 (2020).
66. Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*.
67. Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, "Lamenting God's 'Good' Creation." Paper presented at the Christian Theology in the Midst of Covid-19, University of Winchester, 2020.
68. Brueggemann, *Peace*.
69. Harris, "Shalom, Gospel, Mission." While shalom is for all creatures, in the first sermons analysed here, the emphasis was interpersonal. (Andrew Shepherd explores ecological dimensions in his article: Andrew Shepherd, "COVID-19 - an Invitation to Ecological Repentance?". *Stimulus: The New Zealand Journal of Christian Thought and Practice* 27:2 (2020): 12-18.)
70. Brueggemann, *Virus as a Summons to Faith*.
71. Pembroke, *Divine Therapeia*.