

Against Your Absence

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All power, honor, glory be to you!
You...sometimes hidden, silent, absent, unresponsive.
We are so privileged that we seldom sense you
 hidden, silent, absent, unresponsive.
But we know people who do,
 we think of places where you do not appear.
We imagine you defeated,
 weak,
 held captive.
And we wait a day,
 two days,
 until the third day.
And then, most often then,
 quite reliably then,
 you appear then in your full glory.
This day we pray against your absence, silence, and hiddenness.
Come with full power into deathly places,
 and we will praise you deep and full. Amen.

On reading I Samuel 5/February 2001

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Beyond Survival: Easter Preaching when the Church Is in Survival Mode

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As I write this, my family is halfway through a six-month *trial* (in both senses) of a cable television subscription. The offer of free hookup and the “half-price for half-a-year” was too good to pass up; particularly given that I am told that *all* my kids’ friends have some kind of specialized TV that comes by cable, dish, or fiber optics.

One of my discoveries along the way is to observe that much of the programming one finds these days is devoted to themes about *survival*. Recently, I lamented this in the presence of my 12 year old. While he did not understand what I meant by apocalyptic television, he could relate when I reframed my observation to terminol-

ogy that relates to survival. He then proceeded to rattled off the title of a half-dozen shows without even thinking about it. *Survivor*, *Dual-Survival*, *Man versus Wild*, *Man-Woman-Wild*, *Beyond Survival*, *Survivorman*, and *The Colony* are a handful of representatives of the genre that came to his mind.

In each of these programs, participants willingly submit themselves to a specified setting with limited resources and less than favorable conditions. Armed with only their ingenuity and emerging showmanship, they neatly overcome a sometimes raw and unbridled creation. They live off the land, adapt to hostile weather conditions, fend off would-be threats – both human and animal – and do so from multiple camera angles in sixty minutes or less.

In my formative years, television’s curriculum included *MASH*—a TV show that modeled quick wit and good writing in a chaotic context. It included *Gilligan’s Island*—where attempts to create a new life and new community after the shipwreck are filled with hilarity; *Bewitched*—in an age of gender inequality, it is foolish not to recognize women’s power; *Cheers*—in a lonely world you can make places of belonging where everyone knows your name. Intriguingly, none of these shows promoted the setting for their storylines. *MASH* did not advocate for war, *Gilligan’s Island* did not campaign for more three-hour pleasure cruises in the South Pacific, *Bewitched* did not promote the magic arts, and *Cheers* was not a show about drinking (or not drinking). Each one of these programs was in some way reflective of the time, the concerns, and the cultural milieu in which they were embedded.

Survival Fits

If we pay attention to multiple forms of media today, it would seem that the presumed context undergirding news, marketing, and entertainment is *survival*. Popular news magazines frequently use the word survival to speak of everything from wise investing to car safety. Perhaps this is the shape of the United States’ post-traumatic world after 9-11. Threats abound. In such a dangerous world we find a new language that seems to either over or understate the reality at hand, with the result that parents and families work double-time during an “economic downturn.” “Helicopter parents” are hyper-vigilant to ensure the safety of their children. Not long ago, the values of *safety* and *security* were enough in vogue that consumers would pay premiums for them. In the wake of recent Transportation Security Administration pat downs at airports, many are beginning to recognize the absurdity of our quests for absolute security at any cost.

Words Make Worlds

So today we find ourselves in an era where the premium is *survival*. Our language is instructive. Often, our vocabulary leans in either revealing or concealing ways. Sometimes our words and our tone *expose our despair*. “It is what it is” is a despondent way of saying that this situation is unalterable and unchanging, so “deal with it.” At other times, our words are a hyperbolic expression of *restless anxiety*. So airports are on “orange alert”—a condition that offers few instructions; communities are hyper-vigilant about the appearances of mosques and practitioners of Islam; and the perceived threats to Second Amendment freedoms increases handgun and ammunition purchases under a President who is a Democrat. In a state of survival, we are also prone to minimize our pain and our losses in ways that *euphemize*, so

that the hard realities are less potent. We use words like *downsize* and *outsource* to speak of business decisions that cut deeply. Even our words about death are softened by speaking of “passing away” and “transitioned.”

Regardless of our coping strategy, we often find ways of either denying the reality in front of us, or we distance ourselves from our feelings of fear and anxiety. When we do this, our pain, grief, and loss come out sideways with expressions of management and control. Unknowingly, the world that we are fighting to maintain is one that is passing away that something new might be born. To struggle to hold on and to survive may mean that we are working out of an energy that is not in step with the yielding fidelity of the Kingdom. Unfortunately, survival energy may very well be the context out of which our communities of faith are most familiar.

There is something to be said

Into such worlds the preacher must speak. More significantly, the preacher must first be able to see, imagine, and live in a different kind of world *before* s/he is able to speak. The question is: How do we do that--particularly when *the church itself is in survival mode*?

The first thing preachers must acknowledge, at least to ourselves, is that *we ourselves might be living in survival mode*. Most of us were not trained or prepared for the church-world we have inherited. Because of this, preachers are not any less prone to experiencing loss or vulnerability than anyone else. The truth is, if we have a healthy self-understanding, we will see ourselves *first as persons, then as pastors*. Doing so in our profession is hard work, particularly in a job with few natural boundaries and where our identities are quickly woven together with our occupation.

While pastors may not normally be known to use *competitive* language to describe other congregations, what does a parish pastor say (and feel) when the local megachurch is *inhaling* your membership? As one of my colleagues describes his own empty pew phenomenon, “I am not sure what has changed, but I am looking at a whole lot more wood these days.” A wisdom nugget some of us were offered in seminary was, “Don’t count nickels or noses.” Yet, it is hard not to notice when both seem like endangered species.

In the last decade, communities of faith have witnessed reductions of all kinds: budgets, staffing, memberships, programs, attention spans, and in some cases, reduced pay. Each one of these phenomena is not only a loss for the congregation, *but each one of these things is a disappointment and a grief for the pastor*. As Heifitz and Linsky have observed, “People do not resist change, people resist loss.”¹ If a pastor is living in survival mode, should we expect congregations to live any differently?

The second thing preachers must recognize is that pastors need the same things that congregations need: a safe place in which the deep truths of grief, loss, and disappointment can be spoken in honest ways. Too often in us as well as in the church, these fragile and vulnerable pains are handled harshly and with judgment. Transformation is not possible when these sacred hurts are handled roughly. Yet, when they are held gently with care and compassion, our griefs become shared in ways that *enfranchise* and validate them. This kind of relational articulation moves us past denial and through the apparent immutability of our pain and into something very different. Churches and pastors willing to yield to, listen to, and articulate their pain, loss, and grief can find new freedom and energy when these losses are held

safely and gently in tender vulnerability. The power of their hurt no longer holds them captive or *captivates them* by drawing their attention's best energies into defense strategies.

A third thing preachers must recognize is that more than ever, the church's preachers, pastors, and poets need to pause, reflect, practice Sabbath, and be aware of the unique way in which Christ lives in each one of us. Clergy need to be aware of their own emotional experience, including their losses and how these impact their functioning as pastors. Second, they need to be tuned into the hurts and disappointments unique to their community of faith. Unfortunately, the responses of *denial* and *despair* to the rapid changes in culture and church feed a survival mindset. Pastors' best resources for helping a community deal with these shifts are the learnings that have come to them as they have dealt with their own losses. Generally, for clergy and congregations alike, what is generally at stake is a familiar way of life that is slipping through our fingers. This is unsettling for everyone.

Often, our coping strategies have much to do with our attempts at preserving a way of life that is congruent with the way things have been. This is true of both clergy and congregations. We squander much energy as we fortify ourselves against realities that are painful. Ironically, the Gospel has never been about survival, and self-preservation is never Christ's objective. To move out of survival mode, we need fidelity and courage to be good stewards and caretakers of our losses. And we need safe, gentle, and compassionate places to articulate our woundedness. The truth spoken and experienced with trust, mutuality, and emotional safety is a truth that can set us free.

Beyond Survival: A Theology for the Season of Easter

This Easter Season, lectionary preachers will find multiple texts laden with movements through world-altering loss that can take us out of survival mode. I would propose that the preacher read the texts from Resurrection Sunday through Ascension Day and Pentecost through a lens that is offered both in the Resurrection and Ascension texts.

We find disciples who are filled with astonishment, confusion, disorientation, and loss. This is nothing new in the gospels, but is something that is amplified in resurrection and ascension. The world of the disciples is one of misunderstanding and confusion. This year, rather than reading the texts with a condescending view of the disciples as insipid and obtuse, we might instead read the texts empathizing with their stupor as we try to navigate *our own world* that has changed in ways that are beyond us.

To the disciples' credit, they did not understand Jesus' mission or what it meant to be Messiah any more than we do. Jesus did not come with muscle or militancy, but overcame the world with self-giving love. He was not what they expected or what they would have chosen. One question we might ask is: "Can we imagine their disappointment?" "Has the Jesus we have met in our experience been someone who did not *deliver* in the way we had hoped?"

Not only does the Christ of our texts disappoint with his innocuous political theory, but to our astonishment, this same Jesus is executed. The disciples lost a beloved friend and a cherished Rabbi. Not only did they need to reckon with the loss of a person, but perhaps more importantly, they had to contend with *the loss of their*

dreams. It is no wonder that the texts report disciples who are filled with confusion in the face of resurrection. The narrative of the mission, death, and resurrection of Jesus seems to be one that proclaims God's surprising lack of predictability. Just when you thought you had settled into a new reality, the God in the text seems to take away that reality and replace it with a new one. The preacher might imagine the disciples' exasperation with all of this change: "*Now what?*" or "*What next?*" When we do, we hear the voice of our own questions and wonderings in the face of realities that are new and foreign to us. The church today has much in common with the *identity and context* questions of the first century church.

The bewilderment, loss, and difficulty of orienting themselves to their new reality that now includes resurrection is most pronounced in Acts 1. Just about the time the disciples are putting all of this together, just about the time in which they are getting a handle on things--and a handle on *him*--he is "taken away" or "taken up." This is the language that is used in verses 2, 9, and 11; it is also the language of the final verses of Luke. Preachers might legitimately wonder with their congregations if this is an exploration of *what it felt like* as much as a description of what happened. *He was taken from us*. Not just in the Messiah we hoped for, not just in death, but now he is taken up and taken away in Ascension. Now we find ourselves alone, abandoned, and in a world for which we do not feel equipped, not unlike the world in which the church now finds itself.

The first chapter of Acts features an early band of followers who must deal with a Jesus who is "taken" from them. This beginning is so very different from the grand ending of his Gospel. In Luke, the resurrection and ascension culminate the story he writes. In that narrative, *resurrection and ascension* are glory events that are seemingly compressed into the same day. The gospel concludes with the disciples in a state of rejoicing and worshipping in the temple. Not so in Acts. In Acts, Jesus' "exodus" by means of the Ascension appears to be yet another *necessary loss* for the first century church. We might legitimately wonder what happens to Luke or to his congregation for the Acts narrative to begin so differently. The disciples are bewildered again, and they are expecting the Kingdom of God. Perhaps what is needed is at least 40 days time to process, grow, and take time to embrace a new understanding of Jesus given his being taken away and taken up.

Articulated emptiness gives way to a new fullness

In the church's emptiness--its community that forms around its shared isolation, vulnerability, loss, and confusion--it finds itself as a community of prayer and waiting, watching, and listening. It is that "place" that makes it ready for the coming of the Spirit. The Spirit that hovers over creation's turbulent chaos hovers over and through the book of Luke. It is the Spirit that opens the elderly and barren wombs, it is the Spirit that brings about the Incarnation, and it is the Spirit that falls and then ascends at Christ's baptism.

In Luke's sequel it is no different. In the face of hopeless barrenness when survival is impossible, it is the Spirit that brings about a *Second Incarnation* as it takes on the flesh and body of the church. In the gospel of Luke, God is with us. In Acts, God is *in us*. It is unlikely that such a move is possible without *the disciples' negotiation of a new kind of trusting relationship with God given Christ's absence*.

To be sure, in order for a healthy community to emerge, the loss of the Christ that

the early church would have preferred would have needed to be articulated in ways that were honest and pain-filled. Instead of investing energy in survival, it would appear that the first century community invested in a narrative of articulated testimony of what faith can look like apart from the physical presence of Christ. Perhaps they realized that there can be no resurrection where there is no death. Well-acquainted with grief and loss and the failure of survival strategies to work in any lasting or life-giving way, the church's wounds of loss, abandonment, abuse, and persecution--like the physical Body of Christ--now become places that reveal the glory of God that shows up in vulnerability. Devoting energy to survival strategies may very well rob the church from experiencing resurrection in all of these places. When the church devotes itself to "praise" that is not grounded in the relational process of the messiness of anger, disappointment, and pain, it is denying the very reality that leads to its transformation. Without a crucifixion, there is no resurrection.

Abundant life practices

To thrive in abundant life may mean to put into place practices that run contrary to survival instincts. This may begin with the preacher becoming more painfully self-aware of some of the places in which s/he has been led without fully processing personal disappointments and loss. This is difficult. It is hard for clergy to make personal time to practice dying and rising in life-giving ways. When we do however, we become a valuable serum for our communities. Instead of protectively fortifying ourselves from our wounds in the hope of surviving parish life, we can embrace and befriend them as valuable resources for ministry. This happens when we have had the heavens of our own world torn apart, only to realize that it is God who is breaking through in order that God's own brokenness might begin transforming God's damaged creation. Such engagement is risky, but the *fruit* that comes from these painful intersections is restorative and healing that inevitably metastasizes.

Resisting survival tendencies will mean putting practices into place that are not only counter-cultural, but counter-intuitive. In an age of self-protectiveness and relational defensiveness, communities of faith may find themselves wanting to take more risks in hospitality. Instead of stinginess and hoarding of ministries and resources, churches may wish to find ways of broader resource-sharing. If we truly believe that God is rich in mercy and resources, we may find ourselves less preoccupied with measuring personal *prosperity* and more prone to looking for communal *abundance*. If clergy practice being *whole persons* before being *professional pastors*, congregation members may feel more free in the spectrum of their emotions that go with their humanity. Where there is safety and room for honest articulation of our whole human experience, community and relationships grow. Such a posture enables us to invest more in *learning from others* than in devoting ourselves to focus on what we have to offer. In this kind of communal relationship, we recognize that programs, ideas, and vision initiatives have their place, but these things can disrupt the more important work of forming lasting bonds. In survivor-mode, we are prone to seeking control rather than community and companionship; this too disrupts deeper relationship. Preaching that moves beyond survival mode seeks to explore, not to explain. It also validates and speaks needs and hurts that the congregation cannot always articulate on its own. This means communities need to find multiple expressions for their emotional vocabulary. Art, music, seasons and places of grieving, and

a receptive hospitality to another’s hurt all contribute to a communal life that is much richer and deeper than the superficiality of survival. Survival is about desperation, instincts, and adrenaline. To move beyond survival is to practice yielding attentiveness, imagination, and grace.

Easter Season text trajectories devoted to something more than survival

During the season of Easter, preachers will find texts where God shakes the world we had and replaces it with a new one. What follows is a number of texts from the Revised Common Lectionary that engage disappointment, loss, articulation of pain, and the disappearance of a world we thought would be ours. The texts are selected. What follows are homiletical themes and trajectories that the preacher might consider to move beyond a survival mindset.

Day	Selected texts	World-losing, Kingdom-gaining aphorisms
Resurrection Sunday	John 20:1-18	Astonishment and confusion in a world where not even death is reliable. A new world must be embraced.
	Acts 10:34-43	Greeks as well as Jews are of interest to God.
	Col 3:1-4	You have died and your life is now hidden in Christ.
Easter 2	John 20:19-31	The resurrected Christ speaks peace into a room of disciples locked in fear. The resurrected Body of Christ has wounds. Perhaps the church’s woundedness is where its glory is best evident. The Body’s weakness and places of injuries reveal the power of God for an alternative.
Easter 3	Psalms 116	I articulated my weakness and needs and God responded by giving me something else.
	Luke 24:13-35	To our great surprise, Christ companions us along the way when we tell the story of our loss and together break the bread.
Easter 4	Acts 2:42-47	Generous sharing is an antidote to anxious holding on.
	I Peter 2:19-25	Patiently endure rather than retaliate in the face of unfair suffering at the hands of others.

Easter 5	Acts 7:55-60	The apostle Stephen envisions an abundant life that was beyond survival.
	Psalm 31	Threats abound. O God, be my secure base where I can experience rescue and deliverance from my enemies.
	John 14:1-14	“Do not let your hearts live in a state of trouble but trust me.”
Easter 6	1 Peter 3:13-22	In this world, do not be surprised if you suffer for doing good. Respond to accusers with gentleness and reverence as part of your witness.
Ascension	Acts 1:1-11	Christ is “taken” from them; this is good news for Christ, but now what are we to do?
Pentecost	Acts 2	The Second Incarnation; The Body of Christ in the world is raised and empowered from despair to mission.

Notes

1 Ron Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line; Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 11.