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Cultivating Biblical Imagination Through Preaching

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CULTIVATING BIBLICAL IMAGINATION
THROUGH PREACHING

by

EDWARD N. KAY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Luther Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment of

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ABSTRACT

Cultivating Biblical Imagination Through Preaching

by

Edward N. Kay

Explores the ways preaching can help increase familiarity and comfort with scripture so people are able to interpret their daily experiences and lifetime milestones with God's story revealed in the Bible. The importance of narrative is explored, especially in relationship with competing narratives in today's world. A variety of forms of interactive preaching are explored to evaluate the ability of the sermon to increase biblical imagination: biblical storytelling, people talking to one another, and writing down reflections to act on in the future. Sermons were preached in multiple ELCA congregation in a variety of contexts.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In the midst of major life changes throughout the course of this project, I am grateful for those who encouraged me to continue and see it through. For colleagues who endured hours of research and survey conversations, for willing congregations and their honest feedback, and for family who helped support my household when I was away: thank you.

I am grateful to Divinity Lutheran Church in Towson, MD for adopting me as my home congregation for parish work. The opportunity to preach and learn with the Parish Response Group helped to hone my work and process my degree coursework. A special thanks as well to my colleague Chris Chantelau for lending Divinity's pulpit on a number of occasions.

I am deeply grateful as well to the two places I served as a pastor in this midst of this work: the bishop's office of the Delaware-Maryland Synod, ELCA and St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lutherville, MD. In both places I received immense support for the time and focus this project required, without which this work not have been possible.

In all of the work for this project, my daughters Abigail and Nora have been my inspiration and my drive to pursue this passion. Their own imaginative questions and curiosity when we read our story Bible, and share our home together, make me a better preacher, disciple, and father.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ELCA Evangelical Lutheran Church in America

NRSV New Revised Standard Version

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION, PROBLEM, JUSTIFICATION, AND RATIONALE

Introduction

It's a September Saturday morning in a downtown Baltimore Lutheran church, and they're starting to gather—about 50 high school youth. They are the “cream of the crop,” young people who are part of the Delaware-Maryland Synod's flagship leadership development program. They have committed themselves to a year of training, work, worship, learning, service, and growth as leaders in the church, and we are starting this Saturday morning with a brief worship and devotion service.

This first gathering of the year is focused on team building and working off of one another's skills and gifts. Later in the morning, we will welcome the Baltimore Improv Group as our training facilitators. So I choose a section of Paul's letter to the Ephesians to focus our worship time on:

The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ. We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about by every wind of doctrine, by people's trickery, by their craftiness in deceitful scheming. But speaking the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knitted together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love. (Ephesians 4:11-16)¹

¹ All biblical citations are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

I jumped into talking about how God had brought us together to work as teams. “Each of us has gifts that we uniquely bring to this work together, and that we will experience in and through one another in the coming year,” I told the students. When I asked them to reflect on some of those gifts, and how they connected with what Paul shared with the Ephesians, no one had anything to say. Nothing. It wasn’t until one of the adult leaders chimed that the passage started to connect with the youth. “It’s just like in the first Harry Potter movie,” he said. “Do you remember when Harry and Ron and Hermone defeated Voldemort at the end by using their unique talents and skills?” That opened the floodgates! Then came other movie, TV show, book, and popular cultural examples from around the room. The cultural narratives of our time to made the connection to these leaders that I was not able to achieve through my brief preaching, or even through the words of the Apostle Paul.

These young leaders could imagine themselves in all of these other stories and narratives, but not in God’s story. Scripture was important, but more so as a moral compass rather than as a narrative that made a connection to their real, everyday lives. Harry Potter, the Kardashians, *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones*—all of these narratives were real and relatable to these young people. Scripture tells a story just as a compelling, and yet—especially in my preaching—it was not connecting with them. So what was the point of the words coming out of my mouth? It was then that I committed to crafting my preaching more effectively to equip people to imagine themselves in and through God’s ongoing story of love and grace.

After his crucifixion and resurrection, all of the Gospels continue the story of Jesus appearing to women, disciples, and other people who had spent their time following

him. In the Gospel of Luke, the resurrection account is immediately followed by the account of two of those disciples walking a road to the town of Emmaus and encountering the risen Christ. Presumably these were closer followers of Jesus, who had seen and heard him teaching and preaching and were trying to make sense of the events of the previous days. In the midst of the conversing and walking, Jesus comes among them, though they do not immediately recognize him as their risen Lord.

Yet for Jesus, his disappointment is not that they do not recognize him in bodily form, but that they do not recognize the purpose of the teaching and preaching he had shared with them. “[Jesus] said to them, ‘Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?’ Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in the scriptures” (Luke 24:25-27). Even those who had been with Jesus for some time and who had heard him teach and interpret scripture directly were not able to make the connection between what they heard and the real world they experienced.

That challenge to connect the importance and meaning of scripture with what people experience in daily life continues today. We may not be processing through the sadness and despair of the death of Jesus like those early disciples were. But there are joys, confusion, pain, and questioning throughout life that God has something to say about through scripture. This is part of the life of a follower of Jesus: to recognize the happenings of everyday life and use the lens of the narrative Word as the lens through which we would interpret them.

Problem

The problem is that today's followers of Jesus do not know scripture, and therefore, are not able to interpret the events of their lives in and through it. By all measures, both in percentages and in sheer volume, people are spending less time in personal scripture reading and in group Bible study than in previous years.² Even efforts like the Book of Faith Initiative in my own denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), have done little to encourage people to engage in scripture and group study any more often than before the initiative began. This is highlighted in an article on the *Faith & Leadership* blog, where David Odom, the Executive Director for Leadership Education at Duke Divinity School shared this summary: "At one time, 'active' meant attending services three or four times a month. Today people feel active when they enter the church building once or twice a month. Some people engage worship more regularly online than from the pew."³

A 2013 Pew Research Forum poll revealed that "The percentage of Americans who say they 'seldom' or 'never' attend religious services (aside from weddings and funerals) has risen modestly in the past decade."⁴ The poll also found that people attending weekly or more had decreased, as had those who only attended monthly or yearly. It seems that even those followers of Jesus who would consider themselves to be

² Todd Buegler, "Why Is No One Talking About This?," *ELCA Youth Ministry Network* (Blog), December 2, 2013, <http://elcaymnet.wordpress.com/2013/12/02/why-is-no-one-talking-about-this/> (accessed March 22, 2015).

³ David L. Odom, "Rip, Average Attendance," *Faith & Leadership*, August 21, 2014, <https://www.faithandleadership.com/rip-average-attendance> (accessed August 14, 2015).

⁴ Michael Lipka, "What Surveys Say About Worship Attendance - and Why Some Stay Home," Pew Research Forum, September 13, 2013, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/09/13/what-surveys-say-about-worship-attendance-and-why-some-stay-home/> (accessed August 5, 2015).

regularly worshipping members of mainline Protestant churches do not consider that to mean weekly. This, coupled with less people spending time in personal study⁵, would lead to the conclusion that people are spending less and less time with scripture. All of this leads to the likelihood that today's Christians do not know God's story as well as previous generations have known it.

Whether people have decreased their attention to abiding in scripture because they do not find meaning in it or because they are finding meaning for their lives elsewhere, it is not clear. Either way, "For most of our people, God is no longer a primary actor in their story of their lives."⁶ This realization, which more and more church leaders are becoming willing to say out loud, acknowledges that we are in a society that is competing with other actors and stories to interpret our lives. In his book *Preaching at the Crossroads*, David Lose calls this competition of stories a "secularization" of our culture, which has only increased in recent years. Lose writes, "We live in the age of the competition of the metanarratives, where each and every day, any number of stories seek to make sense of our lives and experience and in this way gain our allegiance."⁷ In the midst of this competition of stories, in which the biblical narrative competes as well and is no longer the only story (and especially not the primary story), the challenge for preachers is to help cultivate a sense of biblical imagination for the assembly in the midst of their preaching.

⁵ Caleb K. Bell, "Poll: Americans Love the Bible but Don't Read It Much," Religion News, April 4, 2013, <http://www.religionnews.com/2013/04/04/poll-americans-love-the-bible-but-dont-read-it-much/> (accessed August 12, 2015).

⁶ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (London: SCM Pr, 1992), 22.

⁷ David J. Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World and Our Preaching Is Changing* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 59.

Biblical imagination is more than a knowledge or understanding of scripture, or even the ability to quote the Word. Where biblical literacy can be described as knowledge of the place and history of scripture, biblical imagination goes well beyond that. Biblical imagination allows the hearer not only to know or recite the Word of God, but also to be able to see the intersection of the Word and everyday life. Imagination allows the hearers to close their eyes when listening to a story and to see God's work happening in their lives as well. Imagination is feeling the presence of Christ in our own walk to our own town of Emmaus, just as Jesus was present to his early followers. Imagination is believing that the work of the Holy Spirit is not limited to the original inspiration of the written Word, but that the Spirit is alive in the life of the hearer even today. Biblical imagination helps us find our home again in the narrative of scripture and then enables us to make our way in this world.

Cultivating biblical imagination, then, works to bridge the gap between the church world and the everyday world by helping people see their story in the midst of God's story. It helps people move from the Word being a fixed and unresponsive guide to using it as a lens through which to interpret their present experience in God's world. While I cannot control whether people will spend their time in personal or group Bible study, I can direct the focus and purpose of the preaching they will hear when they come to worship. I believe that cultivating a sense of biblical imagination through preaching will aid these followers of Jesus in hearing, experiencing, and sharing the Gospel for themselves and for others.

In a society where people are spending less and less time in organized Bible study and where Christian education programs continue to be in decline, one of the most

effective opportunity for people to engage in scripture is the hour of worship each week. Lose claims again, “Preaching and worship, from this point of view, take on tremendous significance as the primary place where we tell that story and offer it to our people as something they can entertain, enact, and live into.”⁸ I believe in preaching that speaks into people’s lives and connects with their daily experience of a human being in the world, striving to follow Jesus. Biblical imagination can help them make this connection, in a meaningful way that will make a difference for their lives and encourage them into deeper reading and study.

This thesis will work to address the ways in which preachers can use biblical imagination to help people connect with and understand scripture in interpreting their everyday life. This is no easy task, as many preachers face increasing pressure for their sermons to be short and to the point. They will hear about the average American’s attention span⁹, and the busy and valuable time of their congregants. They will worry about their own ability to cultivate boredom instead of imagination, to seem irrelevant and out of touch. They will fear the negativity that this kind of change in their preaching style might bring upon themselves. But this is a crucial time for the Church, and for God’s people who are becoming more and more disenfranchised and disconnected from scripture and the Body of Christ.

By setting aside the traditional, mainline Protestant standards of preaching—more lecture than interaction with the hearers—I hope to prove that the latter can assist people in connecting scripture to their daily live more effectively.

⁸ Ibid., 60.

⁹ Kevin McSpadden, “You Now Have a Shorter Attention Span Than a Goldfish,” *Time*, May 14, 2015, <http://time.com/3858309/attention-spans-goldfish/> (accessed February 15, 2016).

Justification

When it comes to how people in the church hear and experience scripture, ways to cultivate biblical imagination are as varied as are the generations to which people belong. Both because people are in different chapters of their lives and because of the varied life experiences of each generation, encouraging people to connect their story with God's story becomes ever more complicated and challenging in the gathered assembly. And for many, scripture is not the primary place to which they look to make sense of what they experience in daily life.

Lose tells a story of a family interaction in which he was trying to convey an experience to his brothers. After searching for the right analogy or perspective on the story to really have his brothers "get it," he settled on a cultural reference in an episode of the 1990's show *Seinfeld*. Immediately, his siblings knew and understood the experience he was trying to convey. I believe this same connection with scripture is possible and can be encouraged through the preaching moment.

One of the gifts of the church is that it is one of the few places in our modern society where it is normal for multiple generations of people to intentionally be together at the same time. Young and old alike gather around the table of grace, and in many churches, will be in the room together when the Word is proclaimed. In cultivating biblical imagination, a preacher will need to be intentionally aware of the perspectives of these different generations and of the variety of experience and need in the room.

To this point in time, I believe that preachers have solely relied on the work of the Holy Spirit to aid in the connection of faith and life in the midst of their assembly of hearers. And I believe that this has happened time and time again throughout the history

of the Church and its' preaching leaders. This trust is needed, because even in the most thoroughly prepared sermon, it will be the Spirit who will be tilling the soil of the heart and planting the seed of connection in the people. But the culture we are living in has changed, and the competition for finding meaning has only increased, so that the hearer is not choosing whether to find meaning or not, but where to find meaning.

To that end, preachers need to be more intentional about the purpose of their preaching and the means which they use to share what God is doing in and through the Word. People have more options of how they spend their time and where they find their meaning. I believe the stakes have never been greater for preachers to be effective in their proclamation so that it makes a connection to an individual's daily life.

To investigate this, my research included preaching in two sets of congregations: one in my capacity as an Assistant to the Bishop of the Delaware-Maryland Synod, and another as the pastor of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Lutherville, MD. In the former, I preached in four different congregations that varied in size and context. In the latter, I preached a series to one specific congregation to which I was called as pastor during the course of this project.

In both instances, I used a variety of creative practices to connect with the hearer, and to draw them and their lives into God's story. Examples of these approaches included having people converse with one another during the sermon, participate in an activity like writing sins on dissolvable paper and placing the paper into the baptismal font, writing a reflection or action they will take in the future, and using biblical storytelling skills to dramatically share scripture. These approaches involved an action-reflection

methodology to engage the hearer in the scripture and the proclamation and measure how it connected with their own experiences in life.

I surveyed the congregations, both with a written evaluation at the end of the respective service, along with an invitation to complete a further survey later in that same week to assess what from the preaching stayed and connected with the hearers into their week out in the world. I also tried to solicit respondents to participate in a focus group for in-person conversations about these interactive techniques and how they connected with their own biblical imagination. Ultimately, I was unable to gather a quality focus group, and did not include this method in my research results.

Rationale

At the heart of biblical imagination is the desire to have the primary place that we, as Christians, go to make sense of our world be the Word of God—not just to find a biblical reference, but also to know and embody the biblical witness in our own lives. This is because when we make our lives at home in the Word, we are better able to share that life with others and live the Great Commission: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

This is important to me as a disciple of Jesus Christ and as a pastor in the Lutheran Church because I have experienced what it feels like to be adrift in making sense of my life, struggling to find a narrative to make sense of it all. While I can turn on the TV or crack open a novel to find characters that have experienced similar life circumstances, I have found that my soul is still longing for the love and support that can

help me come to know that I am claimed and fully loved by the living God. The biblical narrative does that. God's continued embrace of and promise to humanity in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus gives the ultimate assurance of the power that is revealed in scripture. But this understanding and realization for myself has only come as I spend more time in scripture and prayer. I want other people to be able to experience this as well.

I understand that having all of this upon the shoulders of the preacher and her sermon is unrealistic. Twelve to fifteen minutes in a sermon once a week (at best) is not going to be enough for someone to develop a deep sense of discipleship and connection with the possibilities that are found in God's Word. Clearly, a more frequent pattern of engagement is necessary. My hope is that in encouraging people to explore the depth of possibility found in scripture through my preaching, it will further usher them to personal and group study so they can connect on a more consistent basis.

There are fan clubs and conventions and theme parties around Harry Potter or *Star Wars* or *The Hunger Games* because they are compelling narratives that connect with people. These stories echo themes and common experiences that connect with what people encounter in their daily lives. All of the major themes found in these alternate narratives—life-and-death struggles, relationships, finding a sense of self, working through tragedy, completing a major task—all of these are first found in scripture and the journey of God's people from thousands of years ago. Scripture can connect with people in these major themes too, but people do not know or regularly engage with it enough to know this.

I believe that many church leaders and preachers want their congregations to know, love and embody scripture, but do not know how to help people connect with it in the ways they do with these competing narratives. When colleagues have asked me about my doctoral studies and this thesis topic, every conversation finishes with that person's desire to see the fruits of these efforts. My hope is that by developing a better understanding of biblical imagination and how it can be effectively used, this work will be a resource to the leaders and congregations in the whole Church.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL FRAMEWORK

Looking across the arc of the biblical narrative, there are clear examples throughout of leaders, prophets, and disciples using imagination to equip people to imagine themselves in and through God's ongoing story of love and grace. In a similar way to today's society, God's people across time have also been distracted, rebellious, shortsighted, and quick to follow an alternate narrative with the possibility of more immediate results.

In the previous chapter, I defined biblical imagination as a practice that, "allows the hearer not only to know or recite the Word of God, but also to be able to see the intersection of the Word and everyday life." Biblical imagination enables God's people to find their way through life using scripture as their primary lens, rather than an alternative one that the surrounding culture might otherwise suggest. The test of the preacher, then, is to use these moments of proclamation to make these connections. The literary nature of God's Word requires imagination to connect the message with today's lives.

It is important to note that oftentimes the way imagination was used in the transcribing of scripture and in the experience of God's people reflected an ongoing shift in their ability to experience not only the law of restrictions and boundaries, but also the grace of God's presence in their lives. Imagination enabled God's people throughout the narrative of scripture to be able to experience God for themselves and in their own lives.

Imagination in the Hebrew Scriptures

The experience of God’s people pursuing freedom in Egypt, a major story arc of the Old Testament, is a primary example of the use of biblical imagination. For hundreds of years, the Israelites had lived in captivity under an oppressive, foreign ruler. But with the leadership of Moses and God’s support and intervention, the people were able to flee their bondage under Pharaoh and begin their journey to the land that God had promised to them.

Along the way, God invited Moses to journey up Mount Sinai and leave his brother Aaron in charge of the people. The people became impatient waiting for Moses’s return and turned to Aaron to give them another god to follow. The narrative of God’s promise to guide them through the wilderness and into the Promised Land was taking too long—not at all what they had in mind when they began their journey—and so they turned to another narrative to guide them:

He took the gold from them, formed it in a mold, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, “These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made proclamation and said, “Tomorrow shall be a festival to the Lord.” They rose early the next day, and offered burnt-offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; and the people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel. (Exodus 32:4-6)

In this case, the alternative narrative that the people chose to find meaning in angered God and kindled God’s wrath against the people, who were only saved by Moses’s intervention. Once God’s temper subsided and the people gathered themselves together, they continued on, and they were called into remembrance of how God had been, and would be, present with them. The people already had a living, experienced narrative of God’s presence with them from slavery, and yet their impatience and fear drove them toward another narrative that might produce more immediate answers for

their life. Yet—unbeknownst to them—they were actually writing another part of the narrative of God’s faithfulness for the generations of God’s people who would follow them!

The Israelites had a clear and profound experience of God’s intervention along their sojourn, yet they were quick to become frustrated and waiver in their steadfast following. This experience of a people feeling like God has forgotten about them is a common human experience, both then and now. For God’s people then, it was a renewal of God’s presence with them. It was another opportunity for them to experience the fulfillment of God’s promises to journey with them out of slavery and into freedom. This is a clear and constant encouragement to God’s people who struggle and waiver now, yet still can experience a God who is ever present with us.

In many ways, the struggle of the sojourning Israelites to continue to follow God faithfully and to look for truth elsewhere is akin to our modern-day wandering and searching as well. This story is certainly one that modern Christians can look back on to help us interpret our own wanderings. Just like these early followers of the living God, we too experience times when we feel lost and abandoned; when Jesus’s promise—“And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age”—feels like a distant hope (Matthew 28:20b). We can easily place ourselves with the lonely Israelites and believe that God has left us, and that the promise of God’s presence has expired. But God has not left us, then or now. And there are a number of other occurrences in the Hebrew scriptures that illustrate this experience and stir our imagination.

The oracles and visions in the work of the prophets are rich in imagination and provide ample opportunity for God’s people to be able to find themselves and encounter

promise and new life. In the book of Ezekiel, the Lord delivers a number of visions to the prophet to proclaim to the people. One of the most well known of these visions is commonly referred to as the Valley of the Dry Bones. Throughout this vision, the writer stirs the imagination using evocative, sensory language as the prophet prophesies about the promised future of the nation of Israel:

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me, 'Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, mortal, and say to the breath: Thus says the Lord God: Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe upon these slain, that they may live.' I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude. (Ezekiel 37:7-10)

The noise of the bones coming together and the flesh covering the bones must have been tremendous, like the building of a freight train as it comes closer and closer. The reader is asked to imagine what the newly formed lungs now feel as they breathe in their first new breath. The prophet must have been filled with awe at the sight of this vast army of God's people standing tall and full of life once more. During this historical period, the people of Israel were in despair, in exile, and had virtually had their future removed from them. They were desperate and lost. Through the imagination that God proclaimed through Ezekiel, the people were reminded again that they were God's own people. They would never be forgotten or alone. This imaginative vision can speak the same message to our context today.

Another example of the use of imagination is found in 2 Samuel 12. God sends Nathan to deliver a message. After committing adultery with Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, David had ordered the soldier out into battle with the intent that he would be killed. David had then taken Uriah's widow as his wife. Rather than deliver the message of

God's judgment to David directly, Nathan used a hypothetical narrative to cultivate David's imagination and conviction and to open his eyes to what he himself had done to Uriah and Bathsheba.

Nathan told a story of a man who loved a lamb almost like one of his own children, giving it the best of his household and his love. Yet a rich man took possession of the lamb and killed it in order to make it the main course at his feast, rather than using one from his own large flock. David reacted with horror to this story; how could the rich man retain his own abundance while taking the little that the poor man owned? "Then David's anger was greatly kindled against the man. He said to Nathan, 'As the Lord lives, the man who has done this deserves to die; he shall restore the lamb fourfold, because he did this thing, and because he had no pity.' Nathan said to David, 'You are the man!' (2 Samuel 12:5-7a). Nathan was able to use imagination to help David see his own failing in the sight of the Lord. By Nathan painting a narrative in which David could find himself and see his own sin, the king was able to have his eyes opened and begged Nathan for God's forgiveness. The price was sharp for David—the loss of his son with Bathsheba—but the experience, which David was able to see because of the use of imagination, changed him and the way he would follow God for the future. This is particularly evident in his writing the confessional Psalm 51:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
 and put a new and right spirit within me.
 Do not cast me away from your presence,
 and do not take your holy spirit from me.
 Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
 and sustain in me a willing spirit.
 Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
 and sinners will return to you. (Psalm 51:10-13)

I believe this is a helpful example for today's followers of God to be able to see and experience as well. This technique of using simple stories and parables was continued in the teaching of Jesus. He would use these effectively throughout his interactions with the religious authorities and the everyday people in his own time to help them connect with God's narrative too.

Imagination in the New Testament

Early in his ministry, the Gospel of Mark tells us that Jesus began telling parables in order to teach important lessons to his followers in a relatable way. Many of these parables evoke imagination and allow the hearers, both then and now, to be able to find themselves within the stories. Sometimes too, he explained his parables to them to ensure that people would understand the meaning of his teaching.¹

In one such parable, Jesus tells about a sower—a farmer scattering seed in a field. I can imagine Jesus inviting his hearers to close their eyes and picture that sower: reaching into the bag of seed strapped to his side, looking ahead at where he would throw it, and hearing the sound of the kernels hitting the ground along the way. And the hearers would have known the fate of that seed: what had fallen on the path or in the shallow soil would perish, among the thorns the seeds would be choked and die, and the seeds that found deep, rich soil would find life and abundance.

But for those hearers who did not understand, and especially for us in a modern society, Jesus also explained the meaning of this picture:

And he said to them, “Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables? The sower sows the word. These are the ones on the

¹ It is worth mentioning as well that Jesus also said that made parables difficult to understand so that some would not be able to perceive their meaning. See Matthew 13:10-17.

path where the word is sown: when they hear, Satan immediately comes and takes away the word that is sown in them. And these are the ones sown on rocky ground: when they hear the word, they immediately receive it with joy. But they have no root, and endure only for a while; then, when trouble or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately they fall away. And others are those sown among the thorns: these are the ones who hear the word, but the cares of the world, and the lure of wealth, and the desire for other things come in and choke the word, and it yields nothing. And these are the ones sown on the good soil: they hear the word and accept it and bear fruit, thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.” (Mark 4:13-20)

This Parable of the Sower is not about the seed, but about God’s Word and how people receive it. The imaginative story helps us understand abstract spiritual truth. This is a parable about our own discipleship with Jesus and about the ways that we teach and encourage others. This parable, and many others that Jesus told, provided an imaginative opportunity for people to hear about the narrative of God’s love for them, and to be able to find themselves within that narrative.

The Walk to Emmaus story is another one of the clearest examples of how Jesus used biblical imagination to help the disciples to connect the narrative of what God has done with their daily lives. After the resurrection had taken place, two of the disciples were traveling along when Jesus came beside them (though they did not yet recognize him). Seeing the disciples were distressed, Jesus asked them what their concern was, and they expressed their disappointment in this Jesus they had hoped in and had seemingly been failed by. I can just imagine Jesus’s disappointment in their lack of retention of what he had taught them—like a preacher whose congregation just isn’t grasping her sermons: “Oh, how foolish you are, and how slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have declared! Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things and then enter into his glory?” (Luke 24:25-26).

The most extraordinary thing happened next: “Then beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:27). I believe that Jesus considered the way that he had taught his disciples about scripture previously and decided to try something different. Perhaps it was because of the different approach that the disciples received a new perspective that day. Now they were able to experience the fullness of scripture that Jesus had fulfilled. Jesus used biblical imagination to help connect the narrative of those disciples’ lives to the narrative that God had scripted throughout time.

Jesus’s teaching of God’s grand narrative continued all the way to their destination. At the dinner table, their eyes were finally opened and they saw that Jesus indeed was alive, just as he said. Their experiences on the road and in the home were something they were unable to keep to themselves. They had to go and tell the others: “That same hour they got up and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven and their companions gathered together. They were saying, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and he has appeared to Simon!’ Then they told what had happened on the road, and how he had been made known to them in the breaking of the bread” (Luke 24:33-35). This is what preachers hope for—that people begin to deeply connect scripture with their own narrative, that they would be so excited and deeply moved that they go and tell others.

This is exactly what happens in the life of the early church again and again. One such instance occurred when Philip encountered the Ethiopian eunuch on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. The eunuch was already a faithful believer in God; scripture tells us that “he had come to Jerusalem to worship and was returning home; seated in his chariot, he was reading the prophet Isaiah” (Acts 8:27b-28). He had taken time out of service as

the treasurer for Queen Candace to be able to go and worship in Jerusalem, possibly an inconvenience for his work and his subordinates. Clearly this was a priority for him. It is likely that he had some base knowledge of scripture, but he did not understand Isaiah.

The Holy Spirit moved Philip to go and interact with the eunuch:

So Philip ran up to it [the chariot] and heard him reading the prophet Isaiah. He asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" He replied, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to get in and sit beside him. . . . Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this scripture, he proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus. (Acts 8:30-31, 35)

The eunuch had been reading Isaiah, perhaps over and over again after his journey to worship in Jerusalem, but to no avail in understanding what the prophet was proclaiming. It was not an issue of the eunuch being able to read, but an issue of his ability to understand what the words meant. He lacked the imagination to translate the words on the page into meaning in his life. Yet through the Holy Spirit working to bring Philip alongside his chariot and into the moment, the eunuch was able to perceive God's story in a way that he could not before.

Just like Jesus's use of imagination with the disciples walking down the road to Emmaus, Philip was able to open the meaning of a passage the eunuch presumably had read many times before but was not able to decipher. He needed a new way to be able to understand. Philip used biblical imagination to connect the words of Isaiah with the life experience of the eunuch, so much so that revelation was able to happen in his understanding. This moved the eunuch to desire to be baptized: the outward sign of an inward confession of faith and trust in the grace of God.

Imagination in Lutheran Theology

Significant foundations of our Lutheran convictions point to how important it is for followers of Jesus to have direct access to scripture so that their imaginations can encounter it and experience it. One of the byproducts of Martin Luther translating the original languages of the Bible into a readable format for everyday Christians was that it allowed people to have the access to the narrative of God's love found in scripture, thereby connecting God's story with their own. With this new level of access, people did not need to rely on narrative mediators or translators, but would be able to read and wonder about the connection to their lives for themselves.

Outside of this access to scripture itself, Lutheran theology also shows the importance of biblical imagination in another way. The concept of the Theology of the Cross is central to how Lutherans view scripture and life. The idea is that God is *most* present in the places where we would often believe God is the *least* present. While our world might look at the rich and successful and powerful as the people God most often dwells with, the Theology of the Cross insists that God instead is most present among the poor and powerless and forgotten. When Jesus came to be with and among the people of his time, he chose to associate with those on the margins of society rather than those in power.

In Jesus's time, Martin Luther's time, and even in our world today, this is a radical concept. The Gospel of Prosperity still abounds, with megachurch pastors and televangelists proclaiming that God is responsive to bribery and prefers to walk with the successful. To look beyond what our world tells us and instead see what God reveals in the narrative of scripture requires a sense of biblical imagination. It helps us to uncover

God's reality and to make sense of our brokenness and our desperate need for God.

Regardless of what our financial situation or political status look like, we are always the outsider on the margins in need of God's grace.

CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

As I have noted, throughout the biblical narrative God's people have constantly been striving to understand who they are in light of the promise of God's love and abiding presence with them. In both the Old and New Testaments, people have worked to make sense of God's story of salvation and their place within it. Outside the canon of scripture, theologians and everyday Christians have employed a variety of practices to understand and encourage this ongoing opening of biblical understanding for themselves and the world around them. Through a variety of methods, including visual art, literature, and song, God's people have taken action to imagine the biblical narrative in a way they better could understand. In this way, they have been better able to place their story in the midst of God's story.

Scripture and the Arts

When it comes to biblical artwork as it applies to imagination and the ways interpreters have striven to make scripture more accessible, there is much literature that can be found. The arts are helpful for unleashing some of the creativity energy that I would consider essential for engaging in biblical imagination, especially in earlier times when the low rates of literacy did not allow people to read the Bible for themselves.

When one considers the literacy rate of the public for so many years, it's easy to see the need for art and image to convey God's story. In a compilation of literacy rates

stretching back to before the 1500s, early measures placed the ability of European citizens to read at less than 20% of the population.¹ Even the most educated countries of Great Britain and the Netherlands did not crest the 50% literacy rate until closer to 1650. As of 2010, the world literacy rate stood at 83%. While those who can read are clearly a majority of the world population, there are still those who must rely on more visual communication means to interpret life and scripture.

In *Painting the Text*, Martin O’Kane begins with the relationship between the written and the painted word: “The written word, constantly exercises our imagination so that it is not only the artist, but in fact every reader who is invited to visualize in the mind’s eye the colourful images and pictures so skillfully created by the biblical writers.”² O’Kane strongly encourages the reader to participate in the continued unfolding of meaning first begun with the authors of scripture. He then goes on to connect the vibrant imagery within scripture with the images that artists have created throughout the ages and to discuss how they have opened a wider audience to know and appreciate both art and scripture. Martin focuses on the ability of artists throughout time and describes how their technique, use of color, and perspective encouraged a greater depth of understanding, and thus the opportunity for personal and deeper imagination.

The use of visual art to convey and interpret the biblical story is echoed in a number of works. Arguably one of the most famous works is Leonardo da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, where the artist brings the scene of the instituting of the Lord’s Supper to

¹ Max Roser, “Literacy,” Our World In Data, 2015, <http://ourworldindata.org/data/education-knowledge/literacy/> (accessed October 4, 2015).

² Martin O’Kane, *Painting the Text: The Artist as Biblical Interpreter* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), 1.

life. Depicting the meal setting in the way that da Vinci did—in an expansive hall—allows us to gain a different perspective than the private, more intimate setting that is often conveyed when the story is customarily read in Holy Week. It allows us to experience this iconic moment in a way that can connect back to our own ordinary dinner tables in our own homes.

Another well-known work, one that adorns the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in Vatican City, is *The Creation of Adam* by Michelangelo. In his depiction of the hand of God actually reaching out to touch the created Adam, Michelangelo's fresco connects the personhood of God with the creation of humankind. It is a grand and eloquent rendition of our coming into being and even expands on the imagination of one of the most action-filled and visually inspiring stories in the Bible. It brings to life the very connectedness of God and humankind.

More recently, Henry Tanner's painting, *The Annunciation*, is a work that brings clarity and imagination to the account of the Angel Gabriel's visit to Mary in Luke 1. In this scene, Mary sits contemplating the news of God's choice for her to bear Jesus in her womb, while the angel Gabriel is represented in a blaze of light. Especially in a story like this, where many of the visual elements of the meeting are left out of the narrative, this painting is an example of how the use of imagination can bring life and understanding of the story.

In further works, such as David Brown's *Tradition and Imagination*³ and *Discipleship and Imagination*⁴, the case is made that some artists and creative people

³ David Brown, *Tradition and Imagination: Revelation and Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

undertake their work to find a deeper theological meaning and purpose for *themselves*. It seems as though the purpose of much of the artistic expression of the biblical narrative existed either to simply retell the story to the people in a clear, understandable way, or to provide interpretation for personal and spiritual growth in their own lives. These artists were not primarily intended in helping a *wider* audience to find themselves in the scriptures they were depicting.

Another prevailing area of biblical interpretation existed through the use of literary methods such as poetry and song. This, of course, is not new territory for the Bible, as numerous examples of such techniques are present throughout scripture. Yet some scholars contend that understanding and using such tools in our interpretation as well helps us understand the actual character of God, and to be able to relate such sacred moments to our own lives.

This is actually how Paul Avis begins his foundational work in the field of creative biblical interpretation in *God and the Creative Imagination*. Avis writes: “My central claim is that the role of the imagination is crucial to understanding the true nature of Christianity. Unless we attempt to do full justice to the part played by the imagination, we cannot understand the Christian faith and we cannot ourselves truly believe.”⁵ He continues by investigating the openness and prevalence of encouraging the use of imagination with scripture since the end of the Dark Ages. While imagination was discouraged during the period of the Enlightenment, Avis claims that now “the pendulum

⁴ David Brown, *Discipleship and Imagination: Christian Tradition and Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁵ Paul D. L. Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol, and Myth in Religion and Theology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 3.

has swung,” history having entered into postmodernity, and such imagination is now encouraged again as a way to understand and interpret truth.⁶

In a similar way to the function of visual art, Alison Searle addresses both the literary and the theological implications of biblical imagination in *The Eyes of Your Heart* and discusses how this enabled writers and hearers to express themselves and their interpretation of scripture. Searle develops a theory throughout her book of the ways scripture can contribute to new ways of thinking about creativity, reading, interpretation, and criticism. She gives numerous examples of groundbreaking novels and works in religious communities over the last two hundred years and describes how those works were made possible by the imagination found in and used from the biblical narrative, as well as how the biblical narrative impacted the writers themselves.

One of the literary works that Searle utilizes is Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, specifically in identifying the ways that the narrative form contributes to biblical imagination. In choosing Austen’s work, Searle notices that, “Narrative is the primary genre in which the biblical text is written, comprising a large part of the historical and also prophetic sections of the Old Testament, as well as the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles in the New.”⁷ In particular, Searle asserts that the third-person narration of *Pride and Prejudice* is primarily born out of the way much of the biblical narrative is formed, and because of the effectiveness that Austen found in this form of presentation. She further concludes that Austen’s writing was “often modeled on a

⁶ Ibid., 24.

⁷ Alison Searle, *"The Eyes of Your Heart": Literary and Theological Trajectories of Imagining Biblically* (Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2008), 112.

Christian narrative of self-awareness, repentance, and reconciliation leading to transformation and happiness.”⁸

While these approaches have worked well to cultivate the imagination of the individual, they have not always had the primary focus of making a personal connection between God’s story in scripture and the experience of everyday Christians in preaching. While art and literature about scripture that utilize imagination may be a prevalent historical manifestations of engaging people with the biblical narrative, I am seeking for a deeper and more personal connection for the hearers to make in the preaching moment. I want the hearers to be moved beyond simply an encounter with scripture; I want them also to connect that encounter with their lives. Considering the engagement of biblical imagination in the preaching moment is a more recent revelation to the world of interpretation and preaching and is the primary drive of my interest and research.

The Centrality of Narrative to Human Meaning

The modern sense of biblical imagination is for people to be able to interpret their daily lives through the lens of God’s story. Through the biblical narrative we are able to find God’s presence in the midst of the highs and lows of our lives today. What seems to be one of the first considerations of such an understanding comes from Stephen Crites in an article published in 1971 in *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. In his piece, entitled “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” Crites theorizes “that the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative.”⁹

⁸ Ibid., 126.

⁹ Stephen Crites, “The Narrative Quality of Experience,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. 39, no. 3 (1971): 291.

After walking through different types of narrative and myth in literature and how they connect with some of the most private thoughts and feelings human beings have, Crites then says, “these are the stories that orient the life of people through time, their life-time, their individual and corporate experience and their sense of style, to the great powers that establish the reality of their world.”¹⁰ Crites here articulates the connection between the importance of narratives—both secular and sacred—and how they help us make sense of our lives.

It is this work about which David Lose speaks at length in his most recent book, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World and Our Preaching Is Changing*. His book connects heavily with the way we talk about scripture and connect with it, especially in relation to the importance of narrative in our lives. Lose works off of Jean-François Lyotard’s contention that metanarratives¹¹, single stories that can be used to explain all things, are dead.¹² So in this postmodern age, understanding the competing narratives that we come into contact with is paramount in our work of helping people connect with the biblical narrative, especially when it comes to preaching. This book has been the primary modern source of my inspiration for this thesis project.

David Lose challenges those who are called as Christian leaders, both lay and ordained, on the purpose of passing on the faith. “We are charged with telling the sacred story as clearly as possible in order to render the Christian narrative as a three-dimensional worldview that seems a viable alternative to our people in light of other

¹⁰ Ibid., 295.

¹¹ The New World Encyclopedia defines a metanarrative as: “a term developed by Jean-François Lyotard to mean a theory that tries to give a totalizing, comprehensive account to various historical events, experiences, and social, cultural phenomena based upon the appeal to universal truth or universal values.”

¹² Lose, *Preaching at the Crossroads: How the World and Our Preaching Is Changing*, 59.

stories, both religious and secular, that they are regularly exposed to.”¹³ We do not do this through making up our own story or trying to prop up the existing biblical narrative on our own. Our goal is to know and tell the story in a full and compelling manner. Scripture is already alive; it is our job to not kill it.

As was highlighted in the previous chapter, the availability of alternative narratives permeates our culture. In the midst of these competing narratives, “the Christian story has not so much disappeared as it has shrunk.”¹⁴ Like a dusty book in a poorly lit aisle of the public library, our story has been lost in the flash of competing stories with bright new jackets set out in the entrance to attract patrons. It is in preaching that we have a unique opportunity to bring our story back into frequent circulation. We can reclaim the place of the biblical narrative as the foundation and source for meaning.

Imagination in Preaching

Countless authors and theologians have written on the importance of capturing the imagination of the hearer during the preaching event. Theologian and biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann highlights the concept often throughout his writings. In *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*, he states, “imagination moves outside of the box of the given and the taken for granted.”¹⁵ That is, the practice of imagination becomes the second step of the movement from the printed (or spoken) text, the second step from the hearing to the embodiment that comes with the aid of imagination. Later on, Brueggemann claims that “prophetic preaching, ancient or contemporary, is in a contest

¹³ Ibid., 24.

¹⁴ Ibid., 84.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2012), 25.

of competing imaginations,”¹⁶ further reinforcing the observation of Lose concerning the multiple metanarratives seeking our attention in the culture today.

Preaching theologian Paul Scott Wilson has also written much on the use of biblical imagination in the practice of preaching. He writes, “Imagination finds a meaningful connection between two apparently dissimilar ideas that have no causal relationship. Imagination not only brings two ideas together, it also perceives a unity between them ... it ‘reconciles’ them as a new identity.”¹⁷ Thus in the practice of preaching, the utilization of biblical imagination helps to connect the apparently dissimilar ideas of scripture and daily life together, helping to find a unity between them.

In his essay, Wilson continues to highlight three functions of imagination in preaching, as identified by Richard Kearney:

1. Testimonial imagination and biblical interpretation, which is defined as “narratives legacied by our cultural memorial and traditions for ethical guidance.”¹⁸ This is the idea that is revealed in the many ways that scripture can be interpreted and shared by various people and cultures.
2. Empathetic imagination and God’s action, which is defined as imagination that has “receptivity to the other.”¹⁹ This is an imagination that begins first with God’s love for us, which then enables us to care for the other.

¹⁶ Ibid., 27.

¹⁷ Fred B. Craddock, Gail R. O’Day, and Thomas G. Long, *Listening to the Word: Studies in Honor of Fred B. Craddock* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1993), 136.

¹⁸ Ibid., 138.

¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

3. Utopian (realm of God) imagination and mystery, which is defined as “the ability to disclose the possible in the actual, the other in the same, the old in the new ... the dissimilar in the similar ... [and] the similar in the dissimilar.”²⁰

All three of these highlight the means and opportunity to engage the hearer with the biblical narrative in different ways.

Wilson expands on this in the precursor to a sermon on 1 Kings 17:8-14:

Every time we preach a biblical text, no matter what method we use—classical exposition or contemporary narrative—we add something to the text that is not in it, be it history, geography, archaeology, translation, tradition, explicit discussion of a doctrine, information from other texts, or understandings and experiences from our own settings and cultures. It is impossible to preach by keeping the biblical text in the sermon exactly as it is in the Bible.²¹

Wilson highlights that it is possible to go beyond the actual content of the biblical text but still be able to be faithful to the central point of God in the reading. In many ways, this helps to reinforce the opportunities for biblical imagination in preaching, in that it is not limited by the historical context of the focus text of the sermon.

Previous Scholarly Work

In my search for previous doctoral work done on and around the topic of biblical or imaginative preaching, I found several from which to draw. In his thesis, “The Use of Imagination for Expository Hermeneutics and Homiletics,” Barnabas Youn Soo Kim delves into the evangelical world of preaching. In approaching this topic through an evangelical church lens, Kim comes to an early roadblock: “Imagination is an evasive

²⁰ Ibid., 144.

²¹ Paul Scott Wilson, *Broken Words: Reflections on the Craft of Preaching* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2004), 24.

concept, which could lead to subjective interpretation of the text. This is especially problematic to evangelical Christianity, whose hallmark is belief in the Bible as the Word of God. This Word, being the absolute truth, ought not to be tampered with.”²² The lack of available scholarly writings from this perspective, along with a perceived “potentially subjective understanding and application of God’s Word,” sets Kim’s foundation further from my own, since I was not limited to the same theological concerns. Instead of limiting interpretation, my theological viewpoint encourages people to imagine themselves as a part of God’s story and not simply as passive observers.

Furthermore, Kim’s thesis focused specifically on the “rightly developed evangelical theory for the use of imagination,”²³ and less on the actual practice of biblical imagination itself. He seemed more interested in bringing the evangelical Christian community along to embrace biblical imagination, whereas my focus is to build upon the practice in the Lutheran community, a community that is generally already open to this practice. I am more interested in better understanding most effective practices for optimal use of biblical imagination. This will be the focus of my research methodology outlined in chapter 4.

Another thesis that aligns closely to mine is by Michael Wilson, entitled “Open Endings and New Beginnings: The Role of Imagination in Preaching at Charleswood United Church.”²⁴ Wilson sets out to focus on the imagination of the listener, presenting three possible areas of imagination: God, the text, and the preacher. His work was

²² Barnabas Youn Soo Kim, “The Use of Imagination for Expository Hermeneutics and Homiletics” (D. Min Thesis, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2014), 11.

²³ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁴ Michael Wilson, “Open Endings and New Beginnings: The Role of Imagination in Preaching at Charleswood United Church” (D. Min. Thesis, Chicago Theological Seminary, 2001).

focused specifically on one United Church of Canada congregation. Within this context, Wilson identified six categories of imagination that he found to be helpful in connecting the biblical text with his congregation:

1. Imagined dialogue or speech
2. Utilizing the public imagination
3. Re-imagining the public consciousness
4. Imagined results or consequences
5. Imagined time
6. Playful imagination

I found these categories to be helpful as I considered the usage of biblical imagination in my own preaching. But again, the focus for my preaching and research was a bit more expansive than Wilson's. While he was focusing on the ways to use imagination in the preaching moment, my focus was on more interactive ways for people to connect with scripture. My emphasis is less focused on creative opportunities to use imagination but more on effective means of engaging with people.

A little closer to home, I found Grant Aaseng's thesis, "The Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Interactive Biblical Preaching in a Lutheran Context,"²⁵ to be very helpful to my work. In many ways, we are asking the same questions about the effectiveness of monologue-style preaching and the opportunity for more interactive preaching. We come from a similar Lutheran, suburban congregational background, with a passion for doing (or preaching) what matters to everyday people. When I first read

²⁵ Grant Luther Bretheim Aaseng, "The Appropriateness and Effectiveness of Interactive Biblical Preaching in a Lutheran Context" (D. Min. Thesis, Luther Seminary, 2012).

through Aaseng's thesis, I thought that I might be reproducing the same body of work, only a couple of years later.

But while Aaseng is focused on the effectiveness of preaching, he and I have diverged when it comes to what effective preaching looks like. He asserts that "In its most radical form, the purpose of a sermon in the traditional Lutheran sense is to kill and make alive."²⁶ His purpose for utilizing biblical imagination is to get the hearer to a place of experiencing both the Law and Gospel tradition of Lutheran preaching. This is a fine effort and one that I fully support and strive for in my own preaching as well. However, my thesis intends to help people take the next step to embody and remember the scripture in their wrestling with the Law and Gospel they experience out in the world. Where Aaseng wants the effectiveness of preaching to be measured simply as to whether it properly uses Law and Gospel, I want to use the outline of Law and Gospel as a vehicle to encourage biblical imagination. I want to see Law and Gospel show up in daily life.

It is this measure of effectiveness that I am looking for in the research I will do out in the field. Using the wealth of experience in conveying God's story throughout history in art, writing, media, and the practice of others' preaching, I hope to bring these elements together to not only convey the biblical narrative in an imaginative way, but in a way that will enable people to embody the story for themselves.

²⁶ Ibid., 16.

CHAPTER 4

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

In order to test the effectiveness of how preaching can help cultivate biblical imagination in the hearts and lives of the hearers, I designed a research approach that would give me a wide array of opportunities to preach to the varied congregations in the Delaware and Maryland areas. I was fortunate that the timing of beginning a new call also allowed me to focus some of my research in one specific congregation. This provided me with the additional benefit of a focus group for my research.

Context of Research

When I began my research work, I had been serving as an Assistant to the Bishop in the Delaware-Maryland Synod of the ELCA. I primarily served the Eastern Cluster of congregations in the Delaware-Maryland Synod, which in its entirety is comprised of 55 churches and organizations to the north and east of Baltimore City, including Delaware and the eastern shore of Maryland. Within this area, there are congregations large and small, newly established and historic, urban and suburban and rural. The context of Maryland in particular is known as “America in miniature,” and the area of our synod to which I related certainly held true to that title.

Within this grouping of 55 congregations, 12 of them were situated in geographical areas that would be considered urban, or within the limits of a major city population. In the surrounding suburban areas, there were 33 congregations that fit this

classification. In the more rural areas of this part of our synod, 8 congregations were in more rural or remote areas. Some of the congregations in Harford County in Maryland were surrounded by an abundance of horse and dairy farms, while others in lower Delaware and along the eastern shore of Maryland were more geared toward agricultural and poultry industries. Three of the congregations I related to were within a resort area of our states; the population there would balloon during the summer vacation season as people traveled to the beach.

The breadth of such an area allowed me to have the flexibility to visit and preach in a variety of congregational contexts. Being able to travel about and intentionally utilize the diversity of these congregations by selecting a variety of church contexts for my research was a great asset in gaining a fuller sense of the response to the biblical imagination methodologies I was investigating.

Then, in the middle of my research timeline, I accepted a new call to serve in a congregational setting as the pastor of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church in Lutherville, Maryland. Located in the north-side suburbs of Baltimore, Lutherville is an affluent community with a rich history dating back to the 1700s. St. Paul's was founded in 1853 in the heart of the oldest section of the community, surrounded by majestic Victorian homes and towering oaks. I began my call to serve as the solo pastor of St. Paul's on August 17, 2015.

The congregation had been in a steady decline beginning 11 years ago after a peak of worship attendance and giving. In this time frame, they completed a major capital campaign and building renovation of their historic sanctuary building (originally constructed in 1898). At that time of the peak, there were an average of 220 people in

worship on a given Sunday, but the average was below 120 when I began my call. Some of the decline was due to the downturn in the economy, coupled with the massive debt that the capital improvements had brought upon the congregation, a debt that clearly had been a millstone around the neck of growing their ministry. Additionally, from stories that leaders have shared with me since my arrival, I have learned that not everyone in the congregation was in favor of the scale and cost of the project, leading to some households, including significant leaders, leaving the active membership of the congregation.

The congregation also lacked a clear vision for the mission of the congregation, and it was evident that there was significant lay and staff leader fatigue after the building phase of the renovation was complete. Before I began, an interim pastor served the congregation for 18 months, so while there was no gap in pastoral leadership, the attendance decline continued. In addition to bringing about a general malaise in the congregational membership, the worship decline also caused giving to decrease, which caused the leadership to be significantly stressed.

Research Methodology

After considering multiple methodologies for my research that would now be taking place in two unique stages, I decided to engage in a mixed methods research and analysis approach. This included surveys of parishioners in all of my contexts, as well as their initial responses to my sermons, with an invitation extended to engage in an additional survey five days later. The second survey would assess what was retained since the initial hearing of the sermon, and how the biblical imagination techniques utilized contributed to making a connection.

In the first phase of my research, I preached five sermons using the Revised Common Lectionary texts assigned for the day and incorporated a specific practice for cultivating biblical imagination in each sermon. These sermons were preached at a variety of congregations and contexts—twice at Divinity Lutheran Church (Towson, MD), and once each at Tree of Life Lutheran Church (Odessa, DE), New Light Lutheran Church (Dundalk, MD), and Epiphany Lutheran Church (Baltimore, MD). Examples of the approaches I used included having people converse with one another during the sermon, having people participate in an activity on a handout during the sermon, having people write a reflection or action they would take in the future, and using biblical storytelling skills to dramatically share scripture. These approaches involved an action-reflection methodology to engage the hearers in the proclamation of scripture and to measure how it connected with their own experiences in life. Examples of these sermons can be found in the appendix.

The first congregation I preached for was Divinity Lutheran Church in Towson, MD. Divinity had also been serving as my home congregation for the Parish Response Group requirement of my coursework for this program, so I had gotten to know them well. The church is located in an affluent suburb of Baltimore, MD, with an average worship attendance of about 100 people at one church service on a Sunday morning. In the summer months, they will occasionally add an additional worship service in their outdoor chapel in the woods, which was the case for the sermon I preached there on August 5, 2015. The people of Divinity are predominantly educated people, and I have found them to appreciate sermons that highlight historical and linguistic aspects of the given biblical texts and context.

The second congregation I preached for was Epiphany Lutheran Church in Baltimore, MD. Epiphany was the congregation where I served my first call in pastoral ministry, and where my family had retained our membership while I was serving in the bishop's office. While serving there on a half-time basis, I simultaneously served half time on the Delaware-Maryland Synod staff as a youth and family ministry coordinator. This allowed me to be present at Epiphany on Sunday mornings for almost three years, which meant the congregation and I got to know one another well. Epiphany is located inside of a city neighborhood, with many of the community in more traditional blue-collar and lower-management working positions. My colleague on staff when I served there was a wonderful preacher, and he helped me to understand the importance of connecting the text and real life. The congregation valued these types of sermons, especially when they motivated the people to action in their community.

The third congregation I preached for was Tree of Life Lutheran Church in Odessa, DE. Tree of Life is a former mission church, founded in 1999, with an average worship attendance of about 50 people each Sunday. This congregation had a somewhat strained relationship the previous administrations in the synod office over money and pastoral leadership. While my being there was generally regarded as a positive encounter, I was very aware of the past relationships and how broken they had been at one time.

The final congregation I preached for was New Light Lutheran Church in Dundalk, MD. New Light was a newly consolidated congregation of three previously struggling churches, which another colleague and I had worked with for more than two years to bring together as a new mission start. This was my first time being there on a Sunday morning since the consolidation, and it also happened to be my last Sunday

preaching as an Assistant to the Bishop, so it was joyful for everyone. The congregation would generally draw around 100 people between the two worship services on a given Sunday morning. The context of New Light was similar to that of Epiphany Lutheran Church, whom I described earlier.

Following the preaching of all of these sermons, I directed the worshipping communities to complete a ten-question, self-administered survey that followed the best practices outlined in *The Gallup Guide* for congregational research.¹ This guide helped me employ the use of a consistent rating scale for each question², along with helpful language for developing the short answer questions. The *Guide* also gave me helpful direction for phrasing and for inclusion of demographic information at the end of the survey. The survey asked how the preaching helped the hearers first connect with the scripture and then make a connection with their daily lives. In each case, the survey was distributed by the ushers of the congregation right before the service concluded and was not made available beforehand (so as not to encourage people to complete the survey prematurely). There was a place to collect the surveys as people exited each church. They were not permitted to take the surveys with them to return at a later time.

The surveys were largely anonymous, with no space for identifying information of adult participants other than the general demographic areas. However, if a young person under 18 years of age completed the survey, they were required to have a parent or legal guardian sign a short release statement at the conclusion of the questions. In my

¹ George Gallup and D. Michael Lindsay, *The Gallup Guide: Reality Check for 21st Century Churches* (Princeton, NJ: Gallup Organization, 2002), 38-44.

² I will be using a Likert rating scale for my survey questions, which poses a spectrum of questions from one extreme response to the other.

announcement at the beginning of the church service, I assured people of the confidential nature of their responses, as well as of my commitment to store their completed surveys confidentially. I also invited people to discuss any concerns they might have with me privately and reassured them of my impartiality for them and their congregation's relationship to the bishop's office regardless of whether or how they completed the survey. I also offered my gratitude for their assistance in participating in my research for this program.

In order to collate these paper surveys, I used the online survey tool Survey Monkey. Though this is a tool that is normally used to allow people to complete surveys on their own, I used it for this phase in the research as I have found the collection and analysis tools superior to trying to create something on my own. It also allows the survey to remain confidential, since everything is password protected. I took each Sunday's completed surveys and inputted them in as a new entry, logging each individual response with the appropriate scale and text. Once I completed the transcribing of the scores and comments, I organized each set of preaching survey results into an individual folder and kept them together in a locked cabinet in my home.

The surveys also included an opportunity for people to include their e-mail address in order to receive a follow-up online survey later that same week. The purpose of this second self-administered survey was to see what, if anything, from the sermon and the biblical imagination techniques had been brought by the hearers into their daily lives since worship. A number of the questions were the same from the survey they had completed on the Sunday before. The intent was that this follow-up would help me assess the "staying power" that the biblical imagination techniques had assisted with for the

previous Sunday's scripture. The most effective techniques would help the hearers amass a comfort level with a variety of scripture passages that they could then use for the variety of life circumstances they would face.

Again, I used the survey tool Survey Monkey in order to send an e-mail invitation and collect the submissions for this secondary survey. The tool allowed great flexibility and power in beginning and ending the surveys and in the ability to send follow-up e-mails to those who had not completed the survey in a timely manner. For all of the surveys, I sent an invitation, asking that they be completed sometime between 12:00 p.m. on the following Thursday of the same week all the way until 11:55 p.m. on the following Friday, allowing participants more than a full week to complete the survey. All of these survey responses were kept online and were secured by the password-protected site.

At the end of these online surveys, I solicited volunteers to be open to participating in a focus group toward the end of my project. My hope for this most focused group, which would be selected from the members of a variety of congregations and contexts where I preached, would be to interact with those who were most engaged with this type of preaching and who found it most enriching. My goal was to mine their experiences to get a better sense of what they found compelling and effective enough to warrant further conversation on their part. Was it a specific focus or approach, a style in my delivery, or the questions that I posed to people in the midst of my proclamation? I believe that the smaller group conversations, in person, with everyday Christians would yield significant learning.

The second approach in my work was through inductive research by interviewing fellow preachers who are already effectively using the biblical imagination techniques

that I was practicing in my contexts. In conversations with colleagues across the ELCA, it became clear that there are a number of preachers already helping their congregations cultivate a better sense of biblical imagination. Utilizing these relationships, as well as other networking tools such as the ELCA Clergy group on Facebook, I hoped to gather possible preachers to interview. I planned to ask each of the possible interviewees for a recorded example of their biblical preaching and examine it for the effective elements of preaching I have identified. From this group, I hoped to connect specifically with 8-10 fellow preachers for in-person or video interviews about how they practice biblical imagination in their craft of preaching.

I believed that this approach would help me in several ways. First, it would allow additional voices and approaches to biblical imaginative preaching other than my own, which would enhance this effort. Second, hearing from others' experiences in the field would help me think about the approaches I was taking and perhaps consider additional techniques that I had not already considered in my research. Finally, I would work to select a variety of interviewees that represent colleagues throughout the country and would help to make my research and findings broader than just the Delaware and Maryland areas.

Goals

In taking these approaches to my research, my goal was to come to some conclusions about the effectiveness of the biblical imagination techniques that I employed in my sermons. While understanding the limits of preaching in most cases a single sermon, in most cases to a new congregation, my hope was that I would be able to determine if using these ideas helped people understand and begin to embody the living

Word in a more effective way than the sermons they were used to did. I wanted to see if preaching in this focused way made any difference in the first place.

Another of my goals for this research was to see if one specific kind of biblical imagination made more of a difference in affecting people's connection with the story than others, and whether it varied by congregational context, participant age, gender, race, or educational level. Was it more effective to use biblical storytelling of the primary text or to have someone turn and talk to the person sitting next to them about what they were experiencing? Was it more effective for people to write down something that they could carry with them from the service or to stand up and move around to different places or stations during the preaching event? I wanted to know if one of these could be considered the *most* effective practice, or if one actually inhibited people from being able to experience the Gospel.

Finally, I wanted to see if preaching that encouraged biblical imagination provided an encouragement to deeper scriptural examination. Did the connection that people were able to make between the proclaimed text and their life experiences draw them to want to engage with the biblical text even more? I hoped to see if, in finding the Word to be more relevant and accessible to people's everyday lives, it compelled them to want to know more about the God revealed in scripture.

Limits of the Project

At the onset, I recognized my timeline and methodology for gathering research were going to be challenging. While my position serving as an Assistant to the Bishop provided me an opportunity to preach in a variety of settings, I was also concerned that this might skew the results I would be receiving. Throughout the almost five years of my

serving in the synod office, it was clear that congregations and parishioners were not always excited by a visit from the bishop's representative. Oftentimes this was colored by their experiences of the presence of the bishop's office in the past, which would often center around congregational and leadership conflict or a desire for increased mission support. Because of these preconceived notions, I was concerned that the congregants' personal biases might influence their survey responses one way or the other. The respondents might also respond in a more negative fashion than they actually felt because of their previous experience or bias against the office in which I now served. Additionally, I was very aware of the impression of power that someone in my position brought to any given visit and of the reality that people might express their desire to please me through their survey results.

But in general, I found that I was well accepted when I would come to preach in a new setting. It seemed as though people would be able to hear my preaching with fresh ears simply because there was a new voice proclaiming from their pulpit that Sunday. So would the results of any significant learning or openness to biblical imagination come from the focus of my thesis research or simply because I was a new voice?

I was limited, too, while serving at the synod because the nature of my work and responsibilities took me to churches that might not have been ideal for my research. Often my work would take me to congregations in conflict or experiencing the beginnings of a pastoral transition, so all of their energy would be focused elsewhere. On many of these occasions it was clear to me that I needed to be present for them first and not put my own research needs in front of them. As I was finishing my work in the synod office, it was also the summertime, and the worship attendance at many of the places I

visited was significantly down, just because of the time of the year. Had I been able to stretch this portion of my research into the fall, I believe I would have had broader results from which to pull.

Once I began serving at St. Paul's, I found that I was limited in my opportunities to be able to survey the congregation. While we theoretically had every Sunday from which to choose, the reality of beginning in a new place where we were needing to get to know one another prevented me from completing as many survey opportunities as I had hoped. I was in the midst of changing some pieces in worship, holding conversations and forums before and after church, and spending a month of focus on our stewardship efforts. Trying to fit in surveys in a way that did not feel like it was detracting from worship was a challenge. It meant that I had less survey results to pull from this one congregation.

Despite these challenges, I was able to receive valuable feedback from a variety of contexts, including the congregation I am presently serving. All along the way, I found gracious and willing worshippers who were eager to help me learn more about biblical imagination and test the effectiveness of my efforts.

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

In total, I preached and collected seven surveys across five congregations, which included two sermons at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church where I currently am called to serve. Following my preaching, the responses to the paper surveys that were distributed in worship were well received, and I believe that I have a wealth of data from which I can examine my primary research questions. Across all of these preaching opportunities, I received a total of 301 completed surveys, with the highest ratio of worship attendance to survey completion coming from the St. Paul's congregation.

Additionally, I received a total of 41 follow-up surveys that were distributed electronically later in the week of each preaching engagement. This was out of a total of 98 people who had indicated on their initial worship survey that they would be willing to engage in the follow-up Thursday survey, a 41.83 % follow-through rate from those initial electronic invitations.

The electronic invitations also yielded 12 people who were interested in continuing in conversation and engagement by being part of a focus group to talk more about the creative preaching techniques around biblical imagination. However, none of these people actually were able to follow through with meeting in person or electronically, so I do not have any data to be able to analyze from this group. More consideration will be given to this later in the chapter.

Survey Results for Divinity Lutheran Church

I preached at Divinity Lutheran Church in Towson, MD twice. Divinity is located in an affluent, suburban area north of Baltimore city, with a congregation that is overwhelmingly college educated and justice oriented. This preaching event yielded a total of 71 completed survey results from the initial worship services, and 15 completed electronic surveys from the follow-up survey later in the week. These two preaching engagements were unique in the approach and methodology I used, so they will be considered separately from one another.

July 5, 2015 Sermon

The first sermon I preached at Divinity was on the July 4th holiday weekend, so I was unsure of the survey participation I would receive. This was also a unique Sunday at Divinity; while they would normally have only one Sunday service, on the first Sundays of the month in the summer, they would add a service in their outdoor chapel, set back in the woods. On this Sunday, there were a total of 88 people in worship. Between these two services, I was able to receive a total of 40 completed paper surveys, and another 6 electronic follow-up surveys.

The sermon I preached that Sunday was based on Mark 6:1-13, in which Jesus is rejected by the people of his hometown and in which he sends his disciples out into the surrounding villages. For this sermon, I used some personal imagery of my children playing outside and how they would come into the house with overwhelmingly dirty feet. This illustration led into a discussion of Jesus's instructions to his disciples: if they were not received into a home they might enter, they should shake the dust off their feet. With that image of dirty feet in the text, I thought it would be helpful to include in the bulletin

a drawing of feet, have people make them dirty, then set out to clean them. My contention was that, inversely, dirty feet were a sign that the Gospel had been received into that place: dirty feet are a good thing in Jesus's eyes. To go further with this image, I said that even when we shake the dirt off of those times when the Gospel did not take hold, it is impossible to get it all off; some of the dirt will remain. In the same way as the dirt remains, so does the experience of sharing the Gospel with others. It is something that we carry forward with us as we continue to be God's people in sharing the good news.

To connect the hearers with this image, I had provided each person a sheet of paper printed with an image of two feet. At the point of the sermon when I was talking about dirty feet, I asked people to shade in the images of the feet with the pencil they had been provided to make those feet dirty. After we shared some of the "dirty feet" with one another by holding them up around the room, I asked people to use the eraser on the other end of the pencil to try to make the feet clean by erasing the markings off of them. While people tried and tried to get the paper clear again, some of the shading remained. This was my image to help people see that our faith-sharing experiences go with us, even when we might try to shake them off. These experiences linger and shape us, even as we move on to continue to share our faith with other people.

In the initial surveys I received at the end of worship, many people responded that the sermon connected "very well" and "fairly well," which were the top two choices of measured response for the survey questions. The image of the dirty feet came up again and again in the open responses, though not always in an exact line with where the focus of my preaching had been going. One of the open responses summed up the lot quite well: "You get your feet dirty when you work hard to spread the word. If it doesn't take

with the people you are trying to impact, you shake off the dirt—but you never go back to the way you were before. Always some dirt left.”

Anecdotally, there were also several younger children and their parents in worship that day, and they said they appreciated having a more interactive sermon where they could all be involved together. These comments were not present in the submitted feedback I received, but I remember the conversations well at the end of worship.

August 9, 2015 Sermon

The second sermon I preached at Divinity was about a month after the first one, but still in the summer season when many people were away for travel and vacations. There was just one service that particular Sunday, and the pastor was away on vacation as well so I was also presiding at the service in addition to preaching. There were a total of 67 people in worship that morning. From the initial surveys, I received 31 completed responses, and added another 9 completed responses from the electronic follow-up survey. Of all of the surveyed preaching opportunities, this one yielded the highest rate of return between the initial worship survey and the follow-up survey later in the week. I would attribute this primarily to the relationship I had developed with this congregation over the years of my Doctor of Ministry study, as Divinity had been the host congregation, and this would be the last time I would be preaching there before going into my new call at St. Paul’s.

The sermon I preached that Sunday was based on the John 6 “Bread of Life” discourse that came up for several weeks in the Revised Common Lectionary cycle. The specific text for this sermon was John 6:51-58, but I used the wider discourse of the surrounding texts to place this specific passage in the wider context of the whole story.

This was a consistent theme for several of the sermons I preached at this time, as one can see in my analysis of preaching at Tree of Life and New Light Lutheran Churches on the surrounding Sundays.

For this sermon, the biblical imagination technique I primarily used was one of imaginative storytelling to help people place themselves in the midst of the scene in which Jesus was preaching to the people. I began with a story of scarcity and abundance, a story that had just taken place with one of the congregations in our synod at the 2015 ELCA Youth Gathering in Detroit, Michigan. This particular congregation, New Hope Lutheran Church in Columbia, MD, was out serving in the community during their “Proclaim Justice” day. When the leaders went to receive box lunches for their group, it became clear that there were not enough lunches available for the hundreds of volunteers on-site. The adult leaders for New Hope began scrounging around to find meals for the 17 young people in their group, which included several youth with special dietary needs. Through the generosity of others, they were able to find enough meals. Upon returning to their group’s work site, they found that other groups had already shared from their lunches, and the New Hope group had eaten and was satisfied. The additional meals that the leaders brought back were then shared with other groups who had not eaten yet.

Through this modern-day story of a miraculous feeding that took place while the congregation was out serving in the community, I made the connection with the story of Jesus and his disciples feeding the mass of people gathered to listen to him on the side of a mountain. My point in the sermon was that we are called to begin with the little bit that we might be able to offer, like the boy bringing what he had to Jesus to feed the people. From that offering, thousands of people were fed and a miraculous thing took place, just

as happened to the church group in Detroit, and in the same way we can work towards tackling some of the bigger issues of our time.

The results from both the initial worship surveys and from the online follow-up surveys showed this sermon connecting with people in relation to food and hunger justice concerns. I had quoted some statistics about the wastefulness of the United States, and this certainly resonated with people. One of the imagination ideas I had used during the sermon was to have people picture their own kitchen cupboards to see the abundance they already had and suggest ways they would be able to participate in a miracle of sharing as well. There were numerous comments about people being more aware of their own wastefulness and the need to share more out of the abundance in their lives. In one of the online comments, the respondent stated, “I took my grandchildren out to breakfast. Much could not be eaten due to ‘eyes bigger than tummy’ syndrome! We ended up bringing a lot home. On the past there was a good chance these take homes would eventually end up on the trash. This time we made an effort to eat them and not waste them.”

Survey Results for Epiphany Lutheran Church

As I stated before in the previous chapter, Epiphany is a congregation where I had previously served and had continued to be a member into my call as an Assistant to the Bishop, so the people there knew me quite well. At the same time, my preaching had developed a lot since I had served there, so where I am now as a preacher and where I was when I served there are two very different places.

I preached at Epiphany for a Saturday evening service, which is one of four weekly services there. Normally, this service brings in about 50 or so people, but as this was a bit of a homecoming for me before going into a new call, the attendance was closer

to 100 people that evening. This brought a total of 46 completed surveys that evening, with another 9 people completing the follow-up survey later in the week.

The text for this sermon was primarily based on John 6:1-21 which is the beginning of the story of the feeding of the 5,000 people. Like the text for my second sermon at Divinity Lutheran Church, this sermon at Epiphany was one in a series on the “Bread of Life” discourse in John 6. I used the same creative practice of biblical storytelling and the introduction from the ELCA Youth Gathering as I did for the other sermons in this series. I did notice in the evaluations that people seemed to connect more with the idea that a little effort can create a snowballing effect of change. This was a different theological focus than what I would experience at Divinity a couple of weekends later on this same topic. At Epiphany, one respondent’s comments were in line with this theme: “I am blown away by the number of times in life that out of seemingly nothing, God provides an abundance.”

Survey Results for Tree of Life Lutheran Church

I preached at Tree of Life Lutheran Church the week after my sermon at Epiphany, which followed along the same Gospel texts in this series from John. Specifically, the text was from John 6:24-35, but I brought in the same themes and practices as I had with the other messages in this scriptural series.

The sermon I preached at Tree of Life was the smallest sample group from all of my surveyed sermons. There were only 42 people in worship that Sunday. I received just 14 completed surveys after the worship service, and just 3 more from the follow-up later in that week. I attribute this primarily to the fact that this is a small church in the first place and that at the height of summer, the worship attendance was even smaller. This is

not a church that I normally would have considered for my preaching research. But because of my role as an Assistant to the Bishop, I was accompanying this congregation in the midst of a pastoral transition. It was necessary for me to be there, so I included them in my research all the same.

Despite the few number of responses, the feedback I did receive was rich and diverse. It was one of the few congregations I surveyed where almost every survey I received had significant written feedback in addition to the Likert scale ratings. Several of the surveys highlighted food and hunger issues, while others did make my hoped-for connection to wider justice issues. Six of the surveys specifically identified a feeding program that the congregation already participates in and related how they were encouraged by these words from Jesus about the work that they did for and with their community.

The online follow-up survey later in the week did not reveal any relevant feedback. Of the three respondents, only two regularly included comments, and one of those consistently gave feedback on an alternate text for the day that I did not focus on. Still, the Likert scale ratings revealed that these respondents, in a similar ratio to those surveyed immediately following the worship service, thought I connected “very well” with their lives and the world around them.

Survey Results for New Light Lutheran Church

My preaching at New Light Lutheran Church was my last official act of serving as an Assistant to the Bishop in the Delaware-Maryland Synod. As such, I brought significant emotion to the day and to my preaching, even though the sermon was based on the same ongoing discourse from the Gospel of John. This specific sermon was

focused around John 6:51-58, though I brought in much of the text from the rest of John 6 for the sermon.

In a similar way to my preaching at Epiphany, the people at New Light had gotten to know me well because of my involvement in the process of their consolidation of three churches to form one new mission congregation. As such, there was significant excitement and energy around my being there with them that Sunday. Additionally, I served not only as a preacher but also as a presider for the services, as their regularly called pastor was on vacation that day. Even though it was a summer service, there was a strong 100 people in worship, which yielded a total of 44 completed surveys for me to gather feedback from.

Even though I was using the same technique of biblical imagination through storytelling of the Gospel story and the same image from the ELCA Youth Gathering, the respondents from New Light offered different results than I had seen in the other places where I had preached in the same way. One participant in particular wrote, "I have learned that if I feel something in my heart that God is speaking, if I follow his lead and ask for help it always comes through." Another commented, when asked how the sermon connected with her life: "The need to let go to God's provision." These couple of comments were representative of the lot from New Light, which highlighted more introspective spiritual reflections on the sermon than the practical application that I had experienced while preaching in other places around this theme. There were still reflections that highlighted the need to be aware of food and hunger justice issues, well as the ability to make small efforts toward a bigger problem. But the individual spirituality of the people was an element that was clearly evident in the feedback from New Light.

Survey Results for St. Paul's Lutheran Church

After being called to St. Paul's Lutheran Church, I had intended to preach a number of sermons from which to gather feedback. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the pace and volume of work and activity, particularly on Sunday mornings, made it difficult to gather more than a couple of feedback opportunities. Nevertheless, I found that the quality of the responses I received was quite high, and the eagerness of the people to participate in this process was palpable.

September 20, 2015 Sermon

The first sermon I preached and collected surveys from at St. Paul's was four weeks after I started serving there. The primary text for the sermon was Mark 9:30-37, which follows the disciples walking along with Jesus, with some of them arguing about who was the greatest among them. For this sermon, I received a total of 70 responses across two services with a total of 121 people in worship that day. This was the largest number of responses I received out of any survey I conducted, and the highest ratio when compared with the number of people actually in worship on a given day, 57.85%.

For the sermon, the biblical imagination technique that I decided to use was having people get up and move a little bit. I used the image of a yoga class that I attend and described my tendency to compare my abilities with the other participants in the class. So at the beginning of the sermon, I demonstrated a couple of simple positions, and then had people give them a try, standing in front of the seats where they were sitting. I asked the congregation to consider whether they were looking around and comparing themselves with other people and to consider how they felt they were doing. I then made a connection to the disciples, who were comparing themselves and trying to determine

who was the greatest among them, until Jesus brought a little child into their midst and said, essentially, that their comparisons did not make any difference. The kingdom of God belongs to one who welcomes a little child, not to who is the greatest among us by worldly standards.

This example seemed to connect with people, which was highlighted in a few of the comments, such as these:

- “So often we try to out do our families, friends, and neighbors. None of us are greater in the Lord’s eyes than any other human.”
- “It hit a mark about how we all compare ourselves to others, in the large-little aspects of life. Give to the ones who need help/encouragement the most.

However, I think sometimes the ones who seem the most confident truly are the most scared; they feel they have the most to lose.”

- “I particularly connected with the comparisons we made to other people, i.e. the yoga class.”
- “Life is not a competition with others as to whom is the best or the greatest.”

I also found in this first sermon of research from St. Paul’s that I had a number of high schoolers and young adults who completed feedback surveys. I was grateful for this, since this was not my experience with other congregations to this point. I found that their feedback was consistent with other generations who had heard the same text and sermon.

November 15, 2015 Sermon

The second sermon for which I collected data at St. Paul’s was almost two months later. It came after some significant relationship building that I had been doing in the congregation, as well as after the completion of our stewardship program—a major

emphasis for the congregation to consider. Our worship attendance had been growing stronger and more consistent, and I was glad to see that it was reflected in the number of people who participated and gave feedback, as well as in those who participated in the follow-up survey during the week. In total, I received 56 completed surveys following worship, and another 6 online follow-up surveys the following Thursday.

The sermon was based on Mark 13:1-13, in which Jesus walks out of the Temple with his disciples as they marvel at the magnitude of the buildings surrounding them. Jesus remarks that the stones will come down, and the buildings will not be left standing when the Son of Man returns. For this sermon, I retold the biblical story in the midst of the sermon after talking through the different communities who heard this story: those who lived out the story, Mark's community who heard it 30 years later, and we who hear it today. This followed a theme in our congregational Bible study that focused on who wrote the Bible and how different communities experienced it. For the element of biblical imagination, I had people picture themselves within the story as I retold it, paying attention to the perspectives of each of these communities as they listened.

The feedback from the sermon surveys yielded a strong interest in this idea of when the Bible was written and how there were multiple communities that would have heard this story at different points in time. Our Bible study only has about 15 people who regularly attend, and with well over 100 people in worship on a regular basis, that leaves many people for whom this would have been new information. Yet even from these different perspectives, people seemed to catch the main point of God's assured presence with us at all times, especially in the midst of danger and chaos. As one participant

responded, “We always need to hear that God is with us even through the horrible things that happen in our lives.”

Gathering a Focus Group

One of the original intentions of my research had also been to gather a group of people to continue with in-person conversations around the topic of biblical imagination and preaching. I had plans to gather with people who had indicated on the Thursday follow-up surveys that they would be interested in engaging in such conversation. This engagement did not end up happening.

In total, there were 12 people who had initially indicated that they would be open to gathering for in-person conversations. After contacting these people, seven of them dropped out from their initial interest. Of the five who remained, two of them I had known personally and knew that they would not be good candidates for these conversations. They displayed personality characteristics that made it clear they would not work well in a group and be respectful of other people’s thoughts and experiences. I had contacted the other three to try to meet in person, but after a number of cancellations and apologies, they were not able to get together either individually or as a group.

Overall Impressions

In general, I was very pleased with the amount of completed responses that I received both from the initial surveys and the follow-up surveys later in the week after the preaching engagements. I thought that the comments were insightful, and the Likert scale ratings gave me a general sense of how I was connecting with people through my preaching and use of biblical imagination. While I had initially hoped to have more surveys from St. Paul’s after I was called to serve there, I believe the 131 responses

between the two Sundays on which I was able to gather data, provided a significant amount of helpful feedback.

I had initially hoped that I would receive more feedback from the midweek follow-up surveys. With just 98 people from all of the surveyed congregations who volunteered to do this secondary step, I was already beginning with less than a third of the people who had completed the initial surveys. And of these 98 people, less than half of them completed the surveys before September 1, 2015, which was my cutoff for being able to engage with a focus group. I had placed a lot of weight on this follow-up survey, as well as its ability to yield me focus group participants, so I was a bit disappointed with these results. Nevertheless, the comments received and the information retained was helpful for my research.

Connections to My Goals

As I began to look at the surveys and the feedback as they were coming in, it was clear that I was answering the questions and addressing the goals that I had initially set out to consider. In both the initial and follow-up surveys, I was receiving feedback that my sermons were connecting with people. More importantly, my creative ideas in preaching were encouraging people to engage in the biblical narrative in a deeper way throughout the week.

CHAPTER 6

EVALUATION

As I began to work through the results from my preaching reflections and follow-up surveys, it became clear to me that I was addressing the questions that I had set out to answer. Both in the rating scales and in the qualitative responses, listeners were able to articulate ways in which my focus on biblical imagination in my preaching was providing effective communication. Across all of the preaching opportunities, there were a total of 657 people in worship, with a total of 312 surveys received, which is a 47.49% survey completion rate of those who attended worship.

Preaching That Makes A Difference

One of the first questions I sought to answer was whether biblically imaginative preaching made a difference in helping the hearer grapple with the larger issues of life and the world around us. As I suggested earlier, much of the preaching that has been taught in seminaries and that is practiced by more experienced preachers tends to be didactic and lecture oriented. The assembly is invited to sit and listen, but often to remain quiet and still while the proclamation from the preacher is presented to them. My creative practice of incorporating biblical imagination into my preaching required a more active participation of the assembly than this traditional approach did.

Especially through the follow-up surveys that came on the Thursdays after each sermon, I believe I was able to get a pulse on whether this imaginative and participatory

model was making a difference in the listeners' connection of the Bible to daily life. Two survey questions in particular helped to gather feedback and measure this effectiveness:

- What do you think about the preaching helped connect the scripture to your life?
- Have you had an occasion since this past Sunday's worship service where the scripture and/or preaching have connected to the world around you?

A full 92% of participants across all of the preaching sites responded with a "yes" to the second question. Elaborating on this connection, one respondent said that the sermon helped by, "Reminding me that we are all children of God and loved by God—we are called to live in that love and share it with all we meet."¹ These respondents were able to think about what they were experiencing in the world with a greater clarity because of the way scripture was approached in the Sunday sermon.

I believe this was possible because of the techniques I used to engage with people during the preaching. In response to the first question, in which I asked people to name the things that helped them experience scripture more effectively, I allowed participants to choose from the following: the use of stories, the use of current events, the use of real life stories, and the body language and tone of the preacher. I also provided a space for people to respond in their own words. Across all of the initial surveys, 76.9% of the respondents named the creative practice as key to their engaging with scripture. In the electronic follow-up surveys, more than one-third of the people providing feedback on any given sermon responded that the specific means that I used in that sermon was helpful to their being able to experience scripture in a new way. Even more encouraging,

¹ Response from the Thursday survey after preaching at St. Paul's Lutheran Church on September 20, 2015.

these respondents named the specific technique I had used in that sermon as an effective tool without my revealing it to them.

For example, in the sermon I preached on July 5, 2015, at Divinity Lutheran Church, in which I had people use a pencil to “dirty” the feet of the disciples being sent out into the world by Jesus, two of the six respondents in the follow-up surveys specifically named this activity as contributing to their ability to retain and apply the message of the sermon. They named the “coloring” and the “visual strategies” as being helpful in making the connection. In the same way, during the sermon I preached at St. Paul’s Lutheran Church on November 15, 2015, I used the technique of people imagining the story from the perspectives of three different hearers—the original characters in the story, the community Luke was writing to ~40 years later, and us today. Again, two of the six respondents on the electronic follow-up survey articulated that this was helpful to them being able to hear and find themselves in the story and to be able to apply this story in the week that followed. One in particular said that, “Asking us to hear the story from different time perspectives was meaningful.”

Effectiveness of Different Creative Practices

When I first was considering this topic, I identified a number of possible preaching techniques to help encourage biblical imagination and a deeper engagement of the hearer. I was interested in whether one of these practices would be more effective than the other. My data have given me mixed results.

With the limitations on my time and on opportunities to preach and collect data, I was not able to use all of the ideas that I had initially identified. I had chosen to follow the readings for each Sunday in the Revised Common Lectionary rather than developing

my own sermons on scriptures I chose independently of the lectionary. Because of this, I found that the readings appointed for the time period of my research did not necessarily lend themselves to an unforced usage of some of the biblical imagination techniques I had identified. Knowing that this style of preaching was going to be new to many of the contexts where I was preaching, I wanted the text to dictate the technique and not the other way around.

In choosing which practice to use, I listed all of the available ones I could think of, and also kept my ears and eyes open in my preparation for the coming week to see if any additional techniques might emerge in my study and conversations. The appointed text also gave direction for which practice I might use. For example, if there was a text with vivid details of the plot or setting, I might have chosen to use some imaginative storytelling. Or if there was an important question that Jesus asks his listeners, I might have chosen to have the gathered assembly answer that same question in their own context. Ultimately I took a creative license to choose which technique I thought would work best for the given text based on the direction I was going with the sermon. It is quite possible that other ideas or practices could have been used for the same text by another preacher and could have been equally effective.

The primary techniques I was able to use in my preaching were imaginative biblical storytelling, having people talk to one another during the sermon, and having people write/draw on a handout. Focusing on these three specifically, I did not find that one was more effective than the other. All of the responses from the initial and follow-up surveys were generally positive about all of these practices. There was not an overwhelmingly negative response to any of these sermons or techniques.

I am a bit mixed on what this might mean. On the one hand, I think that this means that people were open to receiving the different methods of engaging with scripture and that I chose well in matching a practice with the scripture appointed for that day. I think there would have been more negative feedback on a specific technique if it didn't seem to fit with the scripture selected for the day. I have come to the conclusion that people are more open to different kinds of preaching than we might initially give them credit for.

At the same time, each time I preached a sermon and received feedback, there was always a healthy minority of people who did not complete a survey. The numerical results would place this at 52.51% of the total worshippers. However, the overall worship attendance included children of all ages, and those less than eight years old were not likely participants, since completing the surveys required the ability to read. However, I would estimate that the response rate for the initial surveys would be between 50%-75% of adults depending on the site. The response rate for the Thursday follow-up surveys was even lower. It is possible that the people who did not find the different creative techniques that I used in my preaching very helpful also did not complete surveys, so their feedback would not be included in my results. I do not have any specific confirmation of this, as people will or will not complete surveys for a variety of reasons. But I hold that it is possible that the positive results I have from the surveys that were completed are not only because of how well they were received, but also because of the lack of feedback from those who felt differently.

Connection to a Deeper Life of Discipleship

The other question I sought to answer in my research was whether people made the move to a desire for deeper spirituality because of their experiencing scripture in a more meaningful way. That is, did the effort to use biblical imagination to connect the text with daily life help drive people to a desire for further spiritual formation? Were people more apt to look for and experience the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives because of being more attuned to their connection to scripture?

This is a difficult question about which to draw definitive conclusions, particularly due to the limited time and scope of my research. While the Holy Spirit moves and draws people into a deeper life of discipleship and spirituality in many different ways and times, achieving lasting results through one or two sermons delivered in a new way is a bit of a stretch. That said, there were several comments especially from the Thursday follow-up surveys that lead me to believe that people did experience a deeper encounter between scripture and the world around them.

One example came in a comment from the sermon I preached at St. Paul's Lutheran Church on September 20, 2015, using Mark 9:30-37, in which Jesus addresses the disciples' desire for him to name the greatest among them. During this sermon, I had people turn to their neighbors and discuss this idea of greatness—what the world names as most important and what Jesus names as most important. This sermon was preached at a time when Pope Francis was visiting the United States and when we were in the beginning stages of the 2016 Presidential primary process. One of the comments from the Thursday follow-up survey brought together these two news stories by naming “the striking contrast between the bragging of Donald Trump (and his greatness) vs. the

humble demeanor of Pope Francis and his message.” A later comment from this same respondent alluded to seeing this passage and the world with fresher eyes, which leads me to believe that the preaching helped to draw this person into a deeper desire for spirituality.

I believe this question in particular is one that would require additional, ongoing research and engagement with a particular congregation to come to any meaningful and trustworthy conclusion. While it is quite difficult and perhaps unrealistic to expect a sudden epiphany to occur with just one or two sermons, I do believe that drawing people into a deeper life of faith is a worthy goal for preaching and that an eye toward biblical imagination will help preachers do this more effectively.

Project Strengths

In evaluating my project and the research I was able to gather, I would like to hold up several positive highlights. My project helped to illustrate the variety of preaching that the assembly is able to receive, and it showed that the key to utilizing these options is to let the text determine the technique and not the other way around. Additionally, I found that people are generally very interested in giving feedback to the preacher, especially when they see that feedback helping to form ongoing sermons. Also, this project helped me to see that people are already more engaged with making the connection between scripture and the world than I had guessed, which I find to be very encouraging.

Flexibility of the Assembly

One of my initial concerns about preaching outside of a more traditional lecture-style sermon was whether people would be receptive of such sermons, and whether that

might create a barrier to more interactive sermons. This was especially a concern for me in regards to older generations since some of my early research had indicated that these hearers prefer a more didactic sermon.² But time and time again, the surveys I conducted provided data showing that people of all ages, educational backgrounds, and genders were receptive of these different preaching ideas. Especially in my current call, I have noticed that this openness needs to be stewarded carefully; the preacher must be careful not to use any given technique so often that it becomes stale. In addition, it seems as though even if people do not prefer a given practice, they will tolerate it on an occasional basis, so continuing to mix up the practice can be helpful.

Feedback to the Preacher

Another strength of the project was in allowing people to give both quantitative and qualitative feedback concerning my preaching. I found a number of people giving me positive comments on the notion—both in the surveys and in our conversations following worship—of being able to respond immediately to the preacher’s sermon and to engage with the delivery and topic in a deeper way than they normally would. I believe this is a credit to the way my surveys were designed, both in the initial paper response to a particular sermon and in the electronic surveys delivered later in the week.

This has been a significant insight gained and one that I think I will continue to employ throughout my preaching after this project is completed. While I trust my ability to be able to read the congregation and their responses to my preaching, I think that

² Some of my initial research focused on how different generations would respond to using creative techniques to encourage biblical imagination. In this research, the books “The Intergenerational Church” by Peter Menconi and “One Church, Four Generations” by Gary McIntosh both suggested that older generations preferred preaching that was more didactic and delivered as a lecture. This preference diminished exponentially in younger generations.

intentionally asking for responses occasionally will also be helpful. Recognizing that people do respond and process in different ways, and that they sometimes are not able to do so right to my face, having a paper response form allows for multiple streams of feedback. I believe I will also continue to employ electronic responses, since some people need additional time to be able to process the sermon before providing helpful feedback.

Presence of Engagement in Biblical Imagination

The final strength of this project has been helping me to see that people are already more engaged in the connection of scripture with daily life than I had initially thought. This is an encouraging insight learned for me, as I had previously been more pessimistic about the different narratives people used to interpret their life and about what priority the Christian narrative had among those others. Again, I believe the survey results are possibly a bit skewed with respondents being those people who already exhibit a readiness to make the ongoing connection between faith and life. I had hoped to have more of an equitable breakdown of the various generations in the assembly to help validate this across the age span, but my survey results were skewed toward the older generations, so I do not have concrete evidence on which to rely. But knowing that this is something everyday Christians are already doing, and that my preaching can contribute to helping deepen and widen this practice, is helpful for me.

Limitations of the Project

As is the case with every project, there are certainly ways that I might go about doing things differently if I were to begin my research again. While I had more than 47% of those in worship completing surveys, this was limited to just five churches. If I were to engage in this project again, I would try to gather data from a wider variety of

congregations, with the hopes of having stronger conclusions due to a larger pool of respondents.

I also recognize the limitations inherent in my decision to follow the readings of the Revised Common Lectionary; because lectionary readings dictated the creative practice of biblical imagination I could use and because I did not elect to choose scripture that would best highlight each technique, I was limited to fewer practices with which to experiment. Were I to engage in this project again, I might consider doing this differently. For example, I felt as though the text I preached on at Divinity Lutheran Church on July 5, 2015, was effective; it allowed people to draw on the handout. But I was not able to compare this experience at Divinity with another congregation's response to the same practice, which I would be able to do if I went off the lectionary for the day and preached essentially the same sermon.

Another process I considered was taking up a series of residencies in a variety of congregations—each for multiple weeks—and preaching a series of sermons that would consider a variety of biblical imagination practices. With this process, I would have used the same series of sermons from site to site. While this methodology would allow me to standardize the sermons that I would have preached across different sites, I ultimately decided not to pursue this route. One variable with which I was concerned was the possibility of a cumulative effect—either positive or negative—on my preaching, which would skew the results of the response to later sermons in the series. Other major concerns were the ability to find suitable research sites and the ability to find time in my schedule to preach multiple series in several research sites.

But probably the biggest limitation of this project was that it only focused on preaching. While this was appropriate, since my doctoral studies are in the area of preaching, I have come to realize that cultivating biblical imagination in hearers is best done when it is a priority in the life of the whole congregation and not only in the life of the preacher. Preaching can be transformative for people, but I think we have the best opportunity to bring people to the intersection of faith and life when scripture is a part of more than just preaching. As with any other personal discipline, engagement with scripture requires regular attention to become more of a second nature for the participant. Encountering scripture, even weekly, is a good start, but regular reading and study by everyday Christians will help ensure that biblical imagination becomes a way of life for them as well.

Overall, though, I believe the process I used to gather feedback was effective in answering my primary questions. Despite the timing and limited scope of this doctoral program and my limitations on research methodology, I think I was still able to draw important conclusions that will be a benefit both to the church I serve and to the wider Christian Church.

CHAPTER 7

REFLECTIONS

In the beginning of this journey, I sought to reflect on how a preacher could help to cultivate a sense of biblical imagination in the midst of the proclamation of the Gospel. This project was born out of a desire to concentrate on preaching that was effective—preaching that made a difference in the life and faith of the hearer.

This is clearly a concern in our day and age. In all mainline Protestant denominations of Christianity, worship attendance continues to decline. A recent Pew Research Center study uncovered that between 2003 and 2013, the following trends emerged:

The percentage of Americans who say they “seldom” or “never” attend religious services (aside from weddings and funerals) has risen modestly in the past decade. Roughly three-in-ten U.S. adults (29%) now say they seldom or never attend worship services, up from 25% in 2003, according to aggregated data from Pew Research Center surveys. The share of people who say they attend services at least once a week has remained relatively steady; 37% say they attend at least weekly today, compared with 39% a decade ago.¹

Active engagement with a faith community is on the decline in our culture. While this decline is marginal at present time, the Pew Research Center’s 2014 *Religious Landscape Study* pointed to a 6.7% increase in those in the United States who identify as having “no religious affiliation.”² People are engaging less and less in the narrative of

¹ Lipka, “What Surveys Say About Worship Attendance - and Why Some Stay Home.”

² Alan Cooperman, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> (accessed January 2, 2016).

God's story of love that is revealed in and through scripture. Coupled with this is the continued rise of other cultural narratives in which people are finding meaning.

Television, film, books, music, pop culture, and even video games—all of these tell a story of the grand themes of life, and they tell this story well. These narratives are told in a way that leads people to connect with them deeply and to use these stories to help make sense of their own lives. God's story revealed in the Bible has become one of many narratives in our culture, thus making it less influential than it has been.

This is a problem for the church, and I believe effective preaching that connects people with the scriptural narrative will help people reengage. It starts with one sermon, a sermon that helps connect what people hear in the midst of worship with what they experience out in the world. This is the key to biblical imagination: helping people find a place for themselves and their lives in the midst of what they experience in scripture. Preaching is one opportunity to aid people in making this connection.

The biblical narrative is full of God's continual encounter with God's people through the challenges and celebrations of human existence, and it is an experience that we can connect with today. Scripture is not an ancient story in a dusty book, but a living experience with our God. Stories of God's faithfulness to the people of Israel connect with the times we feel alone and wandering without direction. Stories of the prophets called to bring the people to repentance and justice awaken us to the needs of our own neighbor. Stories of God's love for us in the flesh and blood of Jesus show us God's sacrificial love. Stories of the work of the Holy Spirit in the early church encourage us when we are unsure of our own direction in life and vocation. Scripture is our story, and it is a story with which we need to reconnect.

My project has sought to investigate a number of ways this can be effectively done in the midst of the preaching event. Until recently, the vast majority of preachers have been trained to preach a ten- to fifteen-minute sermon in a lecture style while the assembly patiently listens. A creative practice of preaching that encourages biblical imagination instead breaks free from this mold and encourages the preacher to be more creative and engaging with the congregation. Through my research, I was able to survey congregations using three types of imaginative practices in particular: congregational dialogue, storytelling, and the use of handouts. All of these techniques—and others—were done with the sole purpose of helping people find a tangible connection between God’s revelation in scripture and the world we encounter outside of the church walls.

This project clearly identified the positive aspects of preaching with an eye and ear toward biblical imagination. Survey respondents reflected on both personal and contemporary issues with which they were able to connect scripture. A substantial portion of these participants also highlighted the particular technique I had used in that given sermon as a positive aid to help them achieve this connection.

Next Steps in This Work

Beginning to preach with biblical imagination in mind was a strong first step in helping me to engage people with the biblical narrative. Early in my doctoral work, I had preached a sermon to my class, who offered critical feedback when I was finished. The professor for the class commented last, with words that struck me to the core. She said, “That was a fine sermon. But I wasn’t sure what text you were preaching on by the end because you jumped so quickly past it to get to your point that it almost didn’t matter what text you used. You could have preached on any of a dozen texts and have gotten to

the same point.” I realized that I had often been preaching more thematic sermons that were not dependent on the biblical texts. I was contributing to the assembly’s unfamiliarity with scripture in my own preaching! As a result of that moment, I now ask myself an intentional question whenever I am composing a sermon: Is the scripture at the heart of the proclamation or not? But this is only a first step.

The limitations on my time and resources meant that I was only able to spend a short period of time working with congregations and understanding their responses to this kind of preaching. Also, I was only able to utilize a few of the ideas I had identified for use in creative preaching. My continued engagement with this field will help me pursue additional possibilities for engaging with people. This will both help me to connect with people with different learning styles and help me to ensure that I do not become stale or predictable in my preaching. Additionally, the prolonged time spent in one specific congregation for the foreseeable future will help me to have a better understanding of that context and of how I can help connect scripture to their lives.

This is also an area that is much bigger than preaching. While preaching may be the most public and regular opportunity for many people to hear from the Bible, I believe that effective, ongoing biblical imagination requires more persistent attention than this. The Bible is at our fingertips, both in print and on digital devices, always at the ready for connection. My hope is that, through preaching, people might find a renewed interest in and understanding of the relevance of scripture’s connection with their daily lives. In terms of my preaching, it is my hope to be able to draw people into both corporate and individual study of scripture on a more regular basis.

Personal Growth

For me as a preacher, this project has helped to give focus and direction. In the past, my aim would simply be to preach a sermon that didn't put people to sleep and that was faithful to the text, but I now have a more comprehensive attention to my work.

My process for sermon development has taken on a new form. Early each week, I often go into the church sanctuary to read the appointed texts out loud from the pulpit. As I do so, I imagine the people sitting in the pews in front of me. How they are hearing these texts? What is the law they are experiencing in their lives, and how does this passage assure them of God's promise? What journey are they struggling with, and how can the characters in this particular story be an example of faith for them? These questions help to form my thinking about the purpose and voice of the particular scripture passage and to shape my message in a way that will connect the reality of our world with the love of God revealed to us in the Bible.

This project has also helped to affirm my own gifts for preaching and the unique lens that I bring to the pulpit. For many years, when I was considering my call to be a pastor, the idea of preaching was the main fear that kept me away. It took me a number of years after ordination to find my voice. This project has helped me to hone this voice and to bring a confidence to the words I speak in the midst of worship. It is a passion of mine to engage in work intentionally and with excellence. I want my preaching to be nothing less than the best work I can do.

Finally, this work has helped me to think more creatively about the craft of preaching and about ways I can help bring an assembly along with me for the journey through a given sermon. I have experienced the freedom of trying different things in my

preaching and have found a middle ground to be able to balance the familiar with the new for the gathered assembly. Preaching and worship do not need to be static. This project has helped me experience initiating change and new ideas in the pulpit. I believe this will serve me and the whole church well. As we use our imagination, we will grow in helping people connect with God's promise of love and life found in the Bible.

APPENDIX A

JULY 5, 2015 SERMON

The Holy Gospel according to Mark:

¹Jesus left that place and came to his home town, and his disciples followed him. ²On the Sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, ‘Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! ³Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?’ And they took offense at him. ⁴Then Jesus said to them, ‘Prophets are not without honor, except in their home town, and among their own kin, and in their own house.’ ⁵And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. ⁶And he was amazed at their unbelief.

Then he went about among the villages teaching. ⁷He called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. ⁸He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; ⁹but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics. ¹⁰He said to them, ‘Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. ¹¹If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.’ ¹²So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers: Grace, mercy, and peace be yours and mine from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ! Let all of God’s people say, “Amen!”

I love everything about this time of year. I love the cookouts and eating way too much food off of the grill. I love the pool and going to the beach, the smell of sunscreen & chlorine. I love the lazier days of going to the playground with my kiddos. Running through the grass, playing catch, capturing fireflies - I love it all... even the dirty feet.

Because that feeling of the grass and the playground mulch on my toes - it may be annoying, but... I love my kids' little dirty feet that this season brings into my house! Their heels, between their toes, under their nails... I love my kids, and especially their dirty, dusty feet. Even though I cringe when they’re ready to hit their crisp, clean sheets.

When you don't have time for a full bath, out comes the washcloth for a quick cleaning. Anything to clean those dirty feet!

Because this shaking the dust off thing that J is talking about - it doesn't work! There's too much dust and dirt left on there! It messes up the carpet, and the sheets, and even after soap and scrubbing, there's still dirt on those feet! But it's good enough for tonight, and the kids are laughing uncontrollably from the tickling... So goodnight.

In your bulletin was a handout with some feet on it. I want to invite you to do some coloring with a pencil now, or if you want to trace your own feet on the other side... Either way, shade them in a bit - make those feet dirty. Like playing outside in the mud. Like disciples home from a long journey. Take a minute and shade them in.

(pause for a few moments)

I don't know if J was ready then to start his ministry of foot washing with this story, but he was clearly expecting dirty, dusty feet to be the sign of their effective ministry. When he sends them out, two by two, he's expecting them to have success. Because clean feet mean that the Gospel has not taken hold, and all the dust has been shaken off of those feet. And they have already had plenty of those experiences.

At the beginning of the story, that's what they were presented with. Right in J's hometown. He's home for summer break, bringing his friends along to visit home, ready to show off what he's been up to out in the big, wide world.

But this isn't freshman calculus, or even a Doctor of Ministry thesis here. No, J comes to share wisdom, power, healing. And they'll have nothing of it.

'Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?'

The disappointment is in the hometown, the community who raised him up, who chooses now to respond only with sneers and snide remarks. Who is this guy? Who does he think he is? Big man goes off into the world? Look how fancy he thinks he is!

But that's not just in Jesus's community - it's on ours too. I don't know how many leaders and those who David Lose calls "everyday Christians" that I have met who are just frustrated that people won't respond the way they want. What I hear from them feels like what Jesus's response must have been. Don't they see how good this is? Grace, love, forgiveness, the wisdom in God's Word; the Power in this Meal? Why don't they respond? Why aren't they here?

And inevitably there is a dust-shaking moment in those conversations: Let's just be rid of them - shake the dust, turn our backs, focus on ourselves. But is that what Jesus is talking

about? To be frustrated with or dismiss our neighbor who doesn't respond? The one who doesn't find meaning in the same holy things & places? Is that what dust shaking is about?

Let's try to shake the dust off of your shaded feet on that handout - try to erase what you shaded and see if you can get it to come off.

(pause for a moment)

The funny thing though when you start shaking off that dust, or pull out the washcloth to clean some dirty feet... It doesn't all come off. Some of that dust, that dirt, that experience - it stays with you.

For Jesus and his disciples, fresh off of their disappointment in his home community, with some dust still lingering from the shaking, they are sent out into the world.

Two by two, out they go, with very little - only a staff and a partner to accompany them. They try their ministry again with others, to see where the message will take hold. Who will be receptive to the power and the wisdom they offer? To see where their feet will get dirty

And you know what, it works! The wisdom of the Word? It casts out demons! The power Jesus gives them? It heals and cures! Sure, there was probably still some dust shaking. But Mark is clear to tell us: those disciples get some dirty feet.

What about you? Are you ready to get your feet dirty? Because Jesus is sending you out again with exactly what you need. Out into a world that thinks you're crazy for spending your Sundays here, who might respond like those in Jesus's home: "Who does she think she is? Some big shot? Why should we listen to him?"

Sure, you might have been rejected before, frustrated with the response, shaken the dust off sometimes, but today, Jesus is sending you again. Into your world, and your community to be a vessel of wisdom and power. Into a place where you will be received, and where you can receive. To share words of grace, love, forgiveness into broken and hurting lives. Just as they have been spoken here to us.

With the wisdom of the Word Jesus offered his hometown, Jesus now sends you. With the power in the Meal that others refused, Jesus now sends you. With the confidence that you do not go alone, Jesus now sends you.

Jesus sends you out to use your hands, your voice, your heart, and even your dirty feet. Amen.

Get Those Feet Dirty!



JULY 25, 2015 SERMON¹*The Holy Gospel according to John:*

¹After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming towards him, Jesus said to Philip, ‘Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?’ ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?’ ¹⁰Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.’ ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, ‘This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.’

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself.

¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the lake to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The lake became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the lake and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, ‘It is I; do not be afraid.’ ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land towards which they were going.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers: Grace, mercy, and peace be yours and mine from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ! Let all of God’s people say, “Amen!”

¹ This sermon uses John 6:1-21 as the primary text, which is the first in a series of four weeks of Gospel readings from John 6 in the “Bread of Life” discourse. My sermons used for research from August 2, 9, and 16, 2015 also followed the overall narrative outlined in this sermon. I have included this sermon as a general example of these four.

It was one of those days when a full-fledged miracle would have been very helpful. Not so much the water-walking kind, but one of the feeding-5000-people-with-5-loaves-of-bread sort of miracles.

It was at the ELCA Youth Gathering, just completed less than a week ago, where 28K young people, adults, volunteers & leaders descended on Detroit for 5 days of service, worship, play - immersion into a city like our own Baltimore.

During the Gathering, there were 3 days of full-day, themed programming:

- Proclaim Community - learning, service, donation, fun - creating community
- Proclaim Story - together as a Synod for worship & immersion into our story
- Proclaim Justice - serving out in the city

It was on this Proclaim Justice Day when we needed a miracle. Because 9 days ago when our Synod gathered for our Proclaim Justice Day, almost everything was going wrong. Despite years of planning, it wasn't going as planned. There was a fatal traffic accident, and the police changed their plans for directing traffic. And the bus drivers couldn't start their days early because of the regulations so they had enough sleeping time. So launches that were supposed to start at 8:30am were 90 minutes late, and the next launch, was over 2 hours to wait, and the third launch was over 3 hours behind, and others had their time cancelled altogether.

So a Jesus-sized miracle could have helped get all of that under control... But there was another problem - there wasn't enough food to go around. So this text from John 6, where Jesus & his disciples are on the mountain - this scene from Detroit last week seemed like a modern telling of Jesus up on the mountain with all of those people.

Because that afternoon, with Jesus - there were a lot of people out and about, waiting for something to happen - teaching, healing, transformation. But the people got hungry, and the disciples were on it. They identified the problem, and set out to Jesus for a solution.

Our Synod, out on their Justice Day, was in need of a solution as well. Because even though people had planned for lunches to be there for these hungry servants, the caterer called the Gathering organizers that morning and said: "Those 9,000 lunches you need today? We can only provide 4,500." So for those who made it out into the city to serve, some would have nothing to eat.

It was a problem of seemingly Biblical proportions - you can't just run to Subway and get 4,500 sandwiches! Lots of Detroit is a food desert, and there aren't the means. Those disciples - they didn't have that kind of food with them either. They didn't have the money, or the means, or the time.

Hunger seems to be one of these big, huge, enormous problems that we need a Biblically-sized miracle to get through. On the first night of the Gathering, one of the speakers, Mikka McCracken from ELCA World Hunger, shared the startling reality that there actually is enough food in our world to feed everyone one and a half times. But in our

country, we waste 60 million metric tons of food a year. That's enough food to fill Ford Field 292 times.

We have enough food - scarcity is not our problem. Greed is our problem; selfishness is our problem. It's in our nature to keep more than we need. Just in case, because you never know... And as we hoard for ourselves, others go without. And that fruit we bought at the farmers market goes bad, and we throw it out. Those cans expire in the back of our cupboards, and we throw them out. And it fills Ford Field 292 times, and our neighbor goes hungry.

And it takes a little boy to break the epidemic of scarcity by offering a few loaves of bread and some measly fish. This seemingly overwhelming problem starts to work itself out. And really, we don't know how. It's a miracle, for sure - but what kind? Is it Jesus creating bread and fish out of nothing - a seemingly bottomless basket? Or is it a miracle of community and sharing - that this simple gesture by this boy, it encourages others to share what they have. Not only so there is enough, but an abundance of leftovers for others too.

At the Gathering, I was serving on another leadership team, so I wasn't out serving that day. But my friend, Pr. Ginny Price from New Hope in Columbia, MD told her experience of trying to get enough food for her group.

They had 17 people in their group, some with food allergies and special diets. As they were out serving, her and another adult leader left to the meal distribution point on that site, only to hear along the way and then see for themselves that there was not enough food for their group. She said it was like those videos of refugee camps when the aid workers dropped a crate of food and people just surrounded it to get a share.

So they were able to get a few meals, but not enough. So they started to ask around, and got a couple more lunches from here, and another couple from there... They ended up with 14 and thought that was good enough, yet as they were walking back, someone who had heard they were 3 short offered what they needed to have meals for the whole group.

And when they arrived back at the work site, they found that other groups had shared their meals with the New Hope group! Their "not enough" turned into an abundance so all were fed, and even with leftovers.

It was a miracle! A small one, perhaps, but no less surprising and unexpected given the start: the chaos of traffic and frustrated adults and undelivered lunches. In the end, all were fed, and even to overflowing.

And the city we went to serve alongside - miracles happened there too. Here's some of the statistics from what our young people and adults did in Detroit:

- 1 million diapers collected
- 1,425 backpacks distributed
- 3,200 vacant lots cleared of debris

- 319 vacant homes boarded
- 1,847 mural boards painted
- 36 urban gardens installed
- 99 picnic tables built
- 26 dumpsters filled
- 600 neighborhoods affected

Friends, the impossibilities are before and all around us. Feeding those who experience the attitude of scarcity on a daily basis. Admitting to and working against the inherent racism in our society. Understanding and caring for those who struggle with mental illness. The list goes on and on and the future looks bleak

Like thousands on a mountainside at the disciple's feet, or streaming off busses into the city of Detroit, anxious to listen and serve, but their stomachs rumbling. And a miracle happens, and God's abundance comes forth, and all are fed.

Jesus sends us out in faith, and with confidence, knowing that no problem is too big. That with Christ, the impossible can happen. That through a community of God's people, all can be fed.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

SEPTEMBER 20, 2015 SERMON

The Holy Gospel according to Mark:

³⁰Jesus and his disciples went on from there and passed through Galilee. Jesus did not want anyone to know it; ³¹for he was teaching his disciples, saying to them, ‘The Son of Man is to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and three days after being killed, he will rise again.’ ³²But they did not understand what he was saying and were afraid to ask him.

³³Then they came to Capernaum; and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ ³⁴But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. ³⁵He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, ‘Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.’ ³⁶Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, ³⁷‘Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.’

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers: Grace, mercy, and peace be yours and mine from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ! Let all of God’s people say, “Amen!”

Breathe in 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe out 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe in 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe out 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe in 2, 3, 4, 5. Breathe out 2, 3, 4, 5.

That’s how my yoga class starts, every Friday – it’s part of my recharging routine on my day off. The entry into an hour of stretching and movement, connected with breathing, challenging a body that wasn’t really built for yoga, but is certainly benefitting from it.

While we’re getting into the breathing rhythm, Abir, our instructor, she encourages our mindset for the hour we’re going to spend together as well. “Whatever brought you through the doors today,” she’ll say, “You’re here for something for yourself, for what your body and soul need, and not for anyone else.”

Abir encourages us to focus on ourselves, and not to compare ourselves to the others in room. That the practice is about the individual, and stretching one’s own abilities, and not comparing ourselves to the other people in the room. Which, of course, is what I always start off doing before she says this.

Right from the beginning, I am sizing myself up to the other people in the room. Who is going to be able to hold the tree pose without falling over? (*said while imitating the pose*) Who is going to do the full wheel? Who will do crow without falling over? I’m sure I’m going to be able to stretch further than the person next to me!

Because that's what we do, right? In every part of our life, we're sizing each other up. Sometimes knowingly, and sometimes not. With our houses and our cars and our jobs, with our bodies and our hair and our clothes, with our children and our relationships, we're constantly measuring ourselves against one another. Even, perhaps in our ability to be a follower of Jesus.

That's what the disciples were doing on the way: arguing with one another about who was the greatest. The greatest at what, we don't know... Greatest servant, greatest at memorization, greatest Jesus impersonation, who knows?

Either way, they were busy ranking one another. Like the yoga participants on a mat, or soccer parents on the sideline, or business partners around the conference room, or students ready for an algebra test: Who is the greatest among us? "I'm certainly better than that guy" "No way you're better than me!"

"Hey - what were y'all talking about when we were walking back there?"

The disciples, they were quiet - they couldn't speak. Because they knew that Jesus wouldn't like their road trip conversations. But, he knew.

So he takes a child, and brings her among them, and uses her as an illustration to what really matters in the Kingdom of God. All of that ranking and comparing and sizing-up? Nope.

This child: someone with no real power, no real status, no real place, someone who in any ranking would undoubtedly be placed last, who really can't contribute to very much. Jesus takes her and says, "Here - this is what matters to God." It's not the status we give one another, or how we compare against one another, but it's in one such child. In how we would welcome someone that everyone else ranks at the bottom. This is what it means to welcome Jesus - this is what greatness looks like in the Kingdom of God.

Imagine how this changes those conversations. What might the disciples talk about along the way instead of greatness? What if they were more concerned about the least great one instead? The disciple who always seemed to be lagging behind, the disciple who couldn't carry as much of the supplies, the disciple who took longer to get Jesus's point.

What about us? How can we welcome the child that Jesus places in front of us? The least great one? I think it looks more like an under-10 girls soccer game, where the coaches spend extra time with those who can barely kick the ball. Where the parents cheer for that kid who misses the ball again and again, but finally does get it.

Think about those places for you - where you find you're sizing one another up, or being sized-up yourself. What would it feel like to be welcomed as that child? What would it feel like to someone else to welcome them in that way?

There are many examples of time and people who are welcoming the least great among us. When you see it, rejoice and give thanks, for there, Christ is being welcomed.

There are many opportunities for us to oppose the culture of greatness around us. For us to advocate for the least great, for us to practice the redefinition of how we welcome another, and to welcome Christ, as we too have been welcomed.

Amen.

NOVEMBER 15, 2015 SERMON

The Holy Gospel according to Mark:

¹As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, ‘Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!’ ²Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’

³When Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴‘Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?’ ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, ‘Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, “I am he!” and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

This is the Gospel of the Lord.

Dear sisters and brothers: Grace, mercy, and peace be yours and mine from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ! Let all of God’s people say, “Amen!”

Every other Tuesday, about 15 people from our church & community have gathered for Bible study. At noontime & later in the evening, we come together for prayer, study, reading Scripture, listening to one another...

The series we have been engaging in this Fall is called “Making Sense of Scripture.” It’s a bit of an overview of the Bible, but not in terms of the themes of the narrative. It’s an overview in terms of our feelings and attitudes we bring to reading it. What questions do we have? What do we expect? What do we listen for? What lens do we use to interpret what we’re experiencing?

And this past Tuesday, we were talking about who wrote the Bible, and how it came together. It’s a complicated history, with many sections and individual books having their own story. For the Gospels, it’s important to know that there wasn’t a note-taker among the disciples - the stories of Jesus’s life and ministry were initially passed orally. Beginning with people who witnessed these things first-hand, and out from there. There wasn’t someone walking around recording these things in real time.

And the first writings about Jesus were not physically recorded until 30-40 years after the resurrection. Written first in what is now the Gospel of Mark, presumed to be the oldest of Gospels, which means that for 30-40 years, this story about Jesus was passed orally: by people telling the stories of Jesus to one another.

When it was finally written down, it was written from a perspective to a certain community. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John - they all wrote a specific group of people about this Jesus story. People of a particular place and time and community of Jesus followers.

In Mark, who we hear today, this was a community of early Christians gathered in Jerusalem. Gathered during the first Jewish-Roman war which began around the year 66, and ended with the Siege of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 when the Temple was destroyed - the same Temple Mark writes about in today's Gospel.

So all of this is to say, that there are two, well really three, places where Scripture connects with any given community that encounters it:

- There's the community in which the setting is placed - Jesus & disciples & people
- Then there's the community & setting when it is written - Mark in Jerusalem
- And then there's us

And it's the beauty and mystery of the Holy Spirit bringing these written words alive, now, that tells the story of God's love in Jesus throughout time to connect to all people & places. One story, like this story of Jesus, can speak to all of these diverse communities at the same time.

So hear this story again - think of those settings as you hear it – the disciples, Mark's community, and us:

¹As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!' ²Then Jesus asked him, 'Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.'

³When Jesus was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?' ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, 'Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Think how the disciples would have heard this, and what Jesus was trying to say to them. They walk out of the Temple, where Jesus had just taught about generosity of the widow. And now they're looking up, wide-eyed at the structures around them. Like stepping onto the streets on New York for the first time, the disciples are captivated by the grandeur of what surrounds them.

And Jesus... he is not impressed. All of these buildings - they're all going to be thrown down - nothing will remain. When the end comes, it will be God who saves, and God who remains. Later in this chapter in Mark, Jesus says: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away."

Then there is that community Mark is writing to, 30-40 years later. Remember that they're experiencing violence in their city - the Romans are invading and the Temple is destroyed in the Siege of Jerusalem. The Temple - the home of religious life and practice - was destroyed. Think how this community would be hearing these words: "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come."

When the Temple is falling down, when the enemy is invading your city - do not be alarmed. These things are going to happen, but God is still in command. God will have the last word. The life and death and resurrection of Jesus is God's promise to be with you now in these times of trouble, and in the future that seems uncertain

To this community huddled among the rubble of the Temple, with war raging around them, Mark writes: God is with you, right here, and right now

So what is Mark writing for us? What does this Gospel speak into our community here and now? Wars and rumors of wars - nations rising against nations - they are all around us. But instead of a Siege of Jerusalem, it looks like

- 8 gunmen in Paris at concert hall, a stadium, restaurants and bars
- hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing Syria
- a young white man killing 9 black brothers/sisters in prayer
- a CVS on fire at North & Pennsylvania Avenues

The signs seem to be all around us - it's natural to be huddled together in fear. Just like that Markan community with the violence all around them. Just like families and friends and tourists out for a fun night in Paris. Just like our own city a few months ago with armored vehicles in the streets.

To us, to the early community of Christians, to the disciples gathered around Jesus that day, Jesus says - do not be alarmed; do not be afraid. These things will happen - it is part of the reality of the world we live in. But God has the final word - the reality that God has begun to usher in with Jesus. That reality is our hope, and where we place our trust.

So we huddle together, sometimes in fear, but always in trust. Trust in this God who lasts longer than any Temple will stand. In this God who speaks to us in the rubble of the life crumbling around us. In this God who huddles with those in fear under a Parisian bistro table. Who runs with those a European border. Who stands with our neighbors of color for justice & peace.

In this God who works with and through us to bring this reality into being for others. So that when we collect food for our neighbor, when we pray for people whom we'll never meet and for lands we'll never step foot on. When we talk about systems of racism & oppression. When we pray for peace and work for justice. When we enter into the rubble of our neighbor's life crumbling around them. That is when we embody the love of God in Jesus for another person.

That is when we live those promises we make in the waters of baptism. That is when we bring the forgiveness we experience in this Meal to another. That is when we participate in the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Amen.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE SUNDAY SURVEY

Survey Response to Today's Preaching
St. Paul's Lutheran Church (Lutherville, MD)

What do you remember about the Scripture used in today's sermon?

How well did the preacher connect the Scripture to your life?

- very well
- fairly well
- not well at all

Please comment how the sermon/Scripture connects to your life.

How well did the preacher connect the Scripture to the world around you?

- very well
- fairly well
- not well at all

Please comment how the sermon/Scripture connects to the world around you.

What about the preaching helped connect the Scripture to your life? (please check all that apply)

- use of stories
- use of current events
- use of real life situations
- body language & tone of preacher
- other: _____

What is your gender?

- male
- female

What is your age?

- under 18
- 18-29
- 30-49
- 50-64
- 65 and older

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- I'm still in elementary, middle, or high school
- some high school
- high school graduate
- some college
- trade/technical/vocational training
- college graduate
- some postgraduate study
- postgraduate degree
- don't know

Part of what the researcher is seeking to understand is how effective preaching can have a lasting effect into the daily lives of the hearers. If you would be willing to participate in a short follow-up online survey that will be sent to you by e-mail this coming Thursday, please print your e-mail address where this can be sent.

E-mail: _____

If you are under the age of 18, you must have a parent or guardian sign to consent to your participation in this follow-up survey.

Parent/Guardian Signature: _____

SAMPLE THURSDAY SURVEY

Thursday, November 19, 2015 St. Paul's (Lutherville)
Follow-up Survey Response

What do you remember about the Scripture used in this past Sunday's sermon?

- yes
- no
- unsure

If yes, what do you remember about the Scripture used in this past Sunday's sermon?

Have you had an occasion since this past Sunday's worship service where the Scripture and/or preaching have connected to your life?

- yes
- no
- unsure

If you answered yes, please describe what of the Scripture and/or preaching connected with your life.

What do you think about the preaching helped connect the Scripture to your life? (please check all that apply)

- use of stories
- use of current events
- use of real life situations
- body language & tone of preacher
- other: _____

Have you had an occasion since this past Sunday's worship service where the Scripture and/or preaching have connected to the world around you?

- yes
- no
- unsure

If you answered yes, please describe what of the Scripture and/or preaching connected to the world around you.

What do you think about the preaching helped connect the Scripture the world around you? (please check all that apply)

- use of stories
 use of current events
 use of real life situations
 body language & tone of preacher
 other: _____

What is your gender?

- male
 female

What is your age?

- under 18
 18-29
 30-49
 50-64
 65 and older

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- I'm still in elementary, middle, or high school
 some high school
 high school graduate
 some college
 trade/technical/vocational training
 college graduate
 some postgraduate study
 postgraduate degree
 don't know

If you are under the age of 18, you must have a parent or guardian sign to consent to your participation in this follow-up survey.

- check here if you have consent from your parent/guardian

Part of what the researcher is seeking to understand is how effective preaching can have a lasting effect into the daily lives of the hearers. If you would be willing to participate in an in-person focus group in the coming weeks, please provide the following contact information:

Name: _____

E-mail Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

If you are under the age of 18 and willing to participate in a focus group, you must have a parent or guardian sign to consent to your participation.

Parent/Guardian Name: _____

Parent/Guardian E-mail: _____

Parent/Guardian Preferred Phone Number: _____

Thank you for completing the survey! Your responses are invaluable to the researcher's process. Please be sure to click **DONE** to submit your survey responses.

If you have given your contact information to be a part of a future focus group, the researcher will be in touch with those selected in the beginning of September, 2015. Only a few people will be asked to participate to ensure a well-rounded and diverse panel of participants.

APPENDIX C

GENERAL SURVEY DATA

Preaching Date & Location	Worship Attendance	Sunday Surveys Completed	% Completion	Thursday Survey Invitations	Thursday Surveys Completed	% Completion
Sunday, July 5, 2015 Divinity Lutheran Church (Towson, MD)	88	40	45.45%			
				17	6	35.29%
Saturday, July 25, 2015 Epiphany Lutheran Church (Baltimore, MD)	100	46	46.00%			
				22	9	40.91%
Sunday, August 2, 2015 Tree of Life Lutheran Church (Odessa DE)	42	14	33.33%			
				6	3	50.00%
Sunday, August 9, 2015 Divinity Lutheran Church (Towson, MD)	67	31	46.27%			
				12	9	75.00%
Sunday, August 16, 2015 New Light Lutheran Church (Dundalk, MD)	100	44	44.00%			
				0	0	0.00%
Sunday, September 20, 2015 St. Paul's Lutheran Church (Lutherville, MD)	121	70	57.85%			
				25	8	32.00%
Sunday, November 14, 2015 St. Paul's Lutheran Church (Lutherville, MD)	128	56	43.75%			
				16	6	37.50%
SUNDAY SURVEY TOTALS	646	301	46.59%			
THURSDAY SURVEY TOTALS				98	41	41.83%

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