Silencing the Preacher: The Use of Silence During Post-Disaster Sermons

Linda Hamill

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SILENCING THE PREACHER:
THE USE OF SILENCE DURING POST-DISASTER SERMONS

by
LINDA HAMILL

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Luther Seminary
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

ST. PAUL, MINNESOTA
2020
This thesis examines the helpfulness of using silence during the sermon immediately following a disaster. It tests an adaptation of Paul Scott Wilson’s *The Four Pages of the Sermon*, which adds a period of silence which allows people to express their narrative on “page two” and a period of silence which allows people to experience God’s hope on “page four.” The action/reflection model was used to test this sermon form in five congregations which had experienced disasters in the past to determine the helpfulness of periods of silence during the sermon.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I give thanks to God for putting this task on my heart and bringing it to completion. I am especially thankful for my family’s support during these years of study; Mal you are great! I am very thankful to the Omega Cohort (you know who you are!) and Luther Seminary faculty. You all have made this program formative and enjoyable. I not only leave with an academic degree, a huge amount of learning and improved career skills but also lifelong friendships. Thank you, Rhondda King, editor and dear friend. You have the gift of encouragement and I needed that along the way. Thank you, St. Stephen’s Toowoomba Uniting Church (Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia) congregation for allowing time for research and writing; you were not only supportive but interested. Great thanks to the congregations who allowed me to visit and preach and who provided feedback; Brisbane Aboriginal and Islander Congress Congregations, Jandowae and Dalby UCA. I would be negligent if I do not offer thanks to the Presbytery of the Downs and to the Queensland Synod of the Uniting Church in Australia for accepting the response, “I will help after the thesis.” I also acknowledged the gift from the Alcorn Trust Fellowship for assistance in funding a portion of the cost of research. There are my friends and colleagues in the Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplaincy Alliance also to thank. It is my prayer that this work will benefit the whole of the church in Australia. You have supported this. Thank you.
I also acknowledge the work of Rev. Dr. Paul Scott Wilson. Thank you for the lectures, formation and for the Four Pages of the Sermon. To the many people involved in this project, I offer many thanks. May God add blessings.
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CHAPTER 1
STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

In an age when reported disasters are becoming more frequent and more severe, there is a heightened need to respond in a manner that facilitates healing and resilience building.\(^1\) Resources that help congregations develop safe and helpful responses to natural disasters are the new topic in ministry bookstores\(^2\); and there are books on theology around natural disasters. But few books or journal articles are specific to the needs of preachers or to the task of preaching after a disaster. What can be said to people during a sermon that is not merely simple platitudes, but is healing and builds resilience? Can a sermon in a disaster context make a difference? Are there guides or tools to help the minister in the midst of disaster write that first sermon after a disaster?

This project is aimed at answering these questions and will focus on the development of a preaching resource that can be used by preachers after a disaster to develop a sermon that will promote healing.


\(^2\) As an example of recent resources for disaster minister (which does not include preaching), see James D. Aten and David M Boan, *Disaster Ministry Handbook*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016).
Justification and Rationale

This project is an outcome of my experiences of ministry in Queensland, Australia. My first sermon in Australia as a lay person fell on what was called the “Tsunami National Day of Mourning.” In 2004, the day after Christmas in the Indian Ocean a major earthquake triggered a tsunami that killed an estimated 160,000 people. Many were Australian. In my congregation was a woman who lost her brother and sister-in-law in the disaster and only one of the bodies had been recovered. I struggled to find any resources helpful in writing that sermon; a sermon I dearly desired would help these people whom I knew and loved to heal and know God. The most available resources were the sermons of other ministers preached in similar times of disaster. My sermon that day was adequate, it met the standard you would expect from an untrained lay preacher. I knew the woman well enough to learn later that my words were nice but not particularly helpful.

As the years passed more disasters came and went. I learned that Queensland, Australia, the state in which I reside is said to be the most disaster prone of all of Australia. Early in my ministry studies, our home community was struck by a super cell storm with our own home losing a portion of the roof. In my first placement as Minister of the Word, the community was devastated by three “100-year” floods in twenty-two months. A one-hundred-year flood is defined as a flood that reaches heights which “have

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a long-term likelihood of occurring once in every hundred years” or in other terms floods with levels which have 1% chance of occurring in any given year.

In all these experiences the churches worked together to assist the community. The practical ministry of the churches undoubtedly proclaimed a gospel of hope which drew people to worship services to hear more. Did those who came seeking hope encounter a good God? A search through my post-disaster sermons reflect something more like platitudes. I suspect I am not alone.

What I or others say from the pulpit after a major disaster, whether in a small rural community or a larger regional city, has significant impact on the healing of people’s spirits and may also promote their emotional healing. Yet in this past decade, while disaster ministry resources focusing on the pastoral response to disaster are becoming more available; worship service resources like prayers and liturgies are becoming more available; preaching resources (once they are found) are still limited to sermons that others have preached in similar circumstances.

Figure 1. Screenshot of UCA Disaster Resource Page

A screenshot of the Uniting Church in Australia (UCA) national assembly website of disaster resources, accessed on the November 29, 2018, lists prayers and lists nothing
specific to the task of preaching (figure 1). If you open the “Rainbows of Hope” resource, you find prayers, liturgies and the manuscript of one sermon. Several of the other links are copies of worship services held after disasters. Each link must be opened and the worship service searched to determine if the sermon manuscript was included. Most of these worship orders of service do not include a sermon manuscript and only one sermon was found embedded behind a methodical checking of each link. How much time does a preacher have after a disaster to search for help and resources for developing a sermon?

A further search of other denominations’ websites discloses a similar experience. The Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUSA) website disaster resource screen, accessed on November 29, 2018, has three links; prayers and litanies, hymns and “other.” A search of the prayers and litanies link shows no readily discernable preaching resource (figure 2).

![PCUSA Disaster Resource Page](image_url)

**Figure 2. Screenshot of PCUSA Disaster Resource Page**

When disaster strikes a community, the preacher may be disaster-affected as well as their congregation and wider community. Their home or the church may have sustained damage or total destruction. The local minister is certainly involved in the
recovery and may be vicariously traumatized. The traumatized person has a diminished capacity to seek help or even to know what help they actually need. The already weary preacher who knows that they need advice in order to craft the sermon will be made more weary searching for help. They may feel overwhelmed and give up the task of preaching. I did.

After the second big flood, exhausted, I turned to a colleague’s blog site. He is known in my denomination as a good and thoughtful preacher and always posted his manuscript on his blog on the Thursday before he preached. I downloaded his sermon, told the congregation these are the words of my colleague, named him and read his sermon. This scenario is not good enough.

My experiences center around natural disasters. Natural disasters are becoming more severe as a consequence of climate change but there are also man-made disasters. Recent Australian examples are the Martin Place Siege and shooting in Sydney in 2014 and the Bourke Street stabbing in Melbourne in November 2018. Violent crime, major accidents and terrorism are recognized as man-made disasters. Regardless of the origin of the disaster, natural or man-made, the local government emergency response plans do not change. The immediate response is to the “primacy of life and relieve suffering, protect property and environment, and minimize social impact.” The immediate pastoral crisis intervention, likewise, is standard regardless of the cause of the disaster; its goal is to

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provide immediate holistic support which allow a disaster-affected person to gather their resources or the ‘pieces’ of their life in the first step of recovering. A post-disaster preaching tool will likely be helpful regardless the nature of the disaster.

Because disasters are indeed commonplace, it is therefore becoming urgent to properly resource all preachers so that they can craft biblical, relevant and healing sermons for their communities. Preachers need to know with some certainty, the best way to approach the pulpit after a disaster.

What is said from the pulpit can, not only facilitate healing and recovery, but also promote resilience; that is contribute to the capacity of an individual to recover so that they are more prepared for the next disaster. It is vital that the impact of the sermon be positive; therefore, research and development of resources to support a more positive impact becomes necessary. If trauma is cumulative and natural disasters are certain to reoccur then it becomes a primary concern to facilitate healing of the whole person: body, mind and spirit. Australian disaster recovery plans include and prioritize spiritual recovery after a disaster and communities are rolling out disaster recovery chaplaincy. Recovery and resilience building are a priority for those affected. Pastoral care and prayer services are deemed important by government and the community and are included in plans. The preaching though just as important receives less attention.

So, while there are resources for post-disaster preaching available from our own and other denominations, these come in the form of texts of sermons already preached, rather than researched principles to follow for developing one’s own sermon. There are a few books and a few helpful articles on the topic or theory of preaching after a disaster, Robinson, 62.
however following a disaster there is not enough time to trawl through journals or websites. In the midst of a disaster an easily accessible sermon development tool which is tested and trusted will not go astray. Not only will the pastoral care, liturgy, prayers and hymns be helpful to recovery, the preacher can be sure the sermon will likewise be healing. Additionally, the preparation of such a sermon will not cause additional stress but perhaps even help the disaster-affected preacher in their own recovery.

Any sermon development tool will be beneficial, in fact, the more tools available the better. It is my belief that while my own research is to be done in a particular context, i.e. Queensland, Australia, this work could be easily tested and adapted for other areas. Disasters are not limited to Australia. Rather, they are part of the whole of creation. Humans everywhere wrestle with recovery after a disaster; all requiring tools to assist in that recovery. This work is to that end.
CHAPTER 2
THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Introduction

In the days immediately following a disaster, basic human needs are first priority; safety, food and shelter. People are often in shock, overwhelmed and weary. Their cognitive functions can be slowed and they may suffer from tunnel vision. Their immediate physical needs and the need to tell the stories of their experience are high priority; yet in the background faithful people feel that they are held by God or may struggle with God.

During the time after a disaster, there are two theologies which are held in tension which the preacher should be aware. One is theodicy and the other is theophany or more practically put, the question of why a good God would let such terrible things happen and the sudden discovery of God in an event or unexpected way. While this work is aimed to assist the preacher with the preparation of those first one or two sermons in the immediate aftermath of disaster, questions and experience of God generally appear later in recovery after immediate needs have been met. Accordingly, the preacher needs to understand and be ready to respond to these two theologies as they appear; often in tension to one another. Many people do not struggle with faith questions but find their faith strengthened during the disaster and see or experience God working in and through
the disaster.¹ Theodicy and theophany may seem to walk together at after a disaster; people experiencing one or the other or both. The post-disaster sermon will be informed and strengthened by the preacher’s understanding both.

The primary research described in this paper is designed to determine a helpful way to preach the message of good news and hope to a community recently affected by a disaster. This message should be presented in a way that is not clichéd or platitudinal, but rather, is hopeful and healing. As the preacher approaches the task of preaching immediately after a disaster, it is likely that the preacher is also disaster-affected. They will need a solid foundational theology of self-care as well as drawing on prior understanding of theodicy when approaching the sermon task.

Theodicy—God in the Disaster?

In the disaster setting, theodicy comes in the form of questions. How can God let a disaster happen to the good and the bad alike? Is it rightful or just that entire communities should suffer? Or very simply, “Why?” These questions can stem from an individual’s perception of what God’s justice should look like. Individuals may wrestle with these questions in relation to their belief of God. Theodicy is that wrestling with God.

Job challenged God with similar questions. Job insisted that nature—or rather creation—was not just and he demanded answers. “Then the LORD answered Job out of the whirlwind” (Job 38:1).² This whirlwind is not a slight breeze but a tempest or a storm. God reveals Godself to Job through the very event we might identify as a natural

¹ Robinson, Ministry, 116.

² Kathryn Schifferdecker, Out of the Whirlwind: Creation Theology in the Book of Job, makes many of these points however, I chose to use Terrence Frethiem as the primary source for most references because his book is specifically in relation to disasters.
disaster. God chooses to answer Job through the event which Job complained of, “You lift me up on the wind, you make me ride on it, and you toss me about in the roar of the storm” (Job 30:22). Job believes creation is not playing the game according to Job’s understanding of the rules. He asserts that creation is not ordered in a Godly way so as to protect the righteous. Job is struggling to understand God.

From the storm, God replies (to paraphrase in my words), “God is too big for you to comprehend; there are boundaries even for the storm.” God created a dynamic world which is grand and complex in design, its size and complexities. This means that the world God created is not, and cannot be, risk-free or safe for human beings. Humanity is interconnected with all of creation and thus is subject to creation’s occasional eruptions of fierce strength and violence. Humanity’s sin, greed and brokenness can contribute to the consequences of nature’s ferocity, as when the impoverished or the marginalized are forced to exist in the more dangerous locations with the fewest of resources. God gives the same freedoms to creation that have been given to humanity and both have the potential to cause harm. Job must learn to live in that tension.

God’s answer to Job out of the whirlwind not only silences Job but brings Job to a greater understanding of his insignificance in God’s grand creation. The whirlwind not only displays the power of created order which is indeed dangerous to Job and all

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3 Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2010), 58, Koorong Reader.

4 All Biblical quotes will be taken from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

5 Fretheim, *Creation*, 64.

humanity; but it also demonstrates that God is in the storm and that God’s boundaries apply even to the storm. “God thereby depicts creation as both good and wild, both ordered and disorderly.” God does not give answers but out of the whirlwind gives God’s self. Understanding that the disaster belongs to God and not merely to humanity, does not necessarily stop people from wrestling with the questions. Job was allowed a long period of time to wrestle with friends and God before God finally answered.

Immediately following a disaster, people are in shock and are looking to meet immediate needs of safety and survival. The theological question, “Why?” often does not come until later in the recovery process, if indeed it arises at all. Early on during recovery, these questions come from the responders who come into the disaster situation from outside and who did not live through the disaster. They are struggling knowing their orderly life is nothing like the destruction before them and begin to wrestle with the questions of why. It is important during this initial response to the disaster event for the pastoral carer and the preacher to not move too quickly into the discussion of theodicy; people must be allowed to approach their questions in their own timeframe and manner. The preacher (and outsiders) should be cautioned not to introduce personal theology and philosophy because this additional information is often more than a disaster-affected person can cope with at the time of the event.

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7 Fretheim, Creation, 57.


9 Robinson, Ministry, 114
In fact, the preacher is likely to discover that people do not experience a crisis of faith at all.\(^\text{10}\) People of faith will indeed find God in the storm. This may create tension with those who are laboring with questions. Some people will ask faith-type questions after immediate physical, emotional and social needs are met. Nevertheless, it is necessary for the preacher to be prepared with a background understanding of theodicy for the community’s sake as well as their own.

In many cases, the preacher will not only be a responder but will also be an affected person.\(^\text{11}\) The preacher’s experience of disaster may in fact be similar to that of Elijah. The events in the life of Elijah, the Old Testament prophet, highlight the experience of the preacher. The prophet Elijah brought to the King the message of impending disaster, in the form of a drought. Delivering this difficult and highly stressful message gave rise to a dangerous situation for Elijah and causes the prophet to withdraw in fear and exhaustion (1Kings 17:3). Elijah is not protected from the effects of the drought, and as the drought disaster continues, Elijah exhibits classic signs of burnout or trauma-related critical incident stress, and eventually he wishes for his own death. Like Elijah, the preacher can begin to struggle understanding God and may in time experience their own crisis of faith.

God has not left Elijah. God not only ministers to Elijah in the midst of the drought providing food by unusual means (1 Kings 17:3,17) but God minsters to the emotional and spiritually exhausted Elijah, who is at the end of his rope and has nowhere left to turn (1 Kings 19:7). God is in the disaster, storm or drought, and God is also in the

\(^{10}\) Robinson, 115.

\(^{11}\) Robinson, 116.
recovery\textsuperscript{12}. This highlights the need for a preacher’s selfcare during the disaster and the work of Stephen Robinson in the book *Ministry in Disaster Settings: Lessons from the Edge* informs this very important topic.

As preparation for disaster, the preacher should do further reading on the topic of theodicy and consider reading Terence E. Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* in which there is a thorough examination of God and disasters in the Old Testament.

Given the question of theodicy generally arises later in recovery and is a question that the minister can research prior to or even much later, after the disaster, the more urgent question is, “What should the preacher say in the sermon immediately following the disaster?” Should there be focus on the disaster? Should there be apologetic explanation of God’s grand design of which human mind cannot imagine? Should the preacher speak of finding God in the storm? Or as Buechner suggests to preachers, “Let them tell the truth. Before the Gospel is a word, it is silence.”\textsuperscript{13} Silence allows people the chance to grapple or not with the questions they face but also may allow them to encounter God.

**Theophany—God in the Silence**

It is extremely common for people of faith to experience God during the disaster. As they narrate the events of their experience in the disaster, they express gratitude to God for miracles; experiences that they believed could have happened but did not. There

\textsuperscript{12} Robinson, 90-97.

\textsuperscript{13} Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 23.
are stories of people receiving help which appears just in the nick of time and these stories are credited to God. There are often reports of God-given courage or peace. These experiences are often expressed in terms of God revealing Godself during the disaster. These sudden and surprising revelatory experiences of God are theophany. God is revealing Godself during the disaster to people. This means that there is potential that God could also be experienced during that first sermon. The preacher can leave time of silence in the sermon for individuals to experience God.

It has long been a pastoral strategy to sit in silence with people and let them work out if they need to speak, and what it is they need to say. Pastoral caregivers are urged to be comfortable with silence. When Job’s friends came to visit after the disasters Job had experienced, natural and man-made, they sat in silence for seven days and seven nights because those friends saw Job’s suffering was very great (Job 2:13).

In this time of silence, a great deal can happen. Emotions rise to the surface: our doubts, anxiety, questions, regrets and even hopes. Considering this difficulty of sitting still and being quiet, it was a rare gift Job’s friends gave by sitting with Job on the ground for an extended amount of time. Eventually, it was Job who broke the silence. The silence had allowed Job to move from shock and auto-responses to release his cry of distress and lament.14

Silence is “life with the sound turned off so that for a moment or two you can experience it not in terms of the words you make it bearable by but for the unutterable

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mystery that it is.”

Silence seems a natural response to disaster not only for Job. After extensive destruction to Israel, a man-made disaster, the elders sat on the ground in silence and the girls bowed their heads to the ground (Lam 2:10). It seems that the destruction was so great that there was nothing left for the people to say. The poet/writer of Lamentations asks the post-disaster preacher’s question, “What can I say for you? . . . What can I liken you, that I may comfort you?” (Lam 2:13). It is in that quiet place when the heart cries out to God. It is in the heart’s crying out that the poet “calls to mind . . . the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end” (Lam 3:21-22). In the silence, the poet determines that, “The Lord is good to those who wait . . . it is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the LORD” (Lam 3:25-26). The poet goes on to reminds us, “For the Lord will not reject forever” (Lam 3:31). The silence has given way to an outcry of emotion and that has subsequently given way to hope. In that quiet place of acknowledgment, we can find ourselves calm in God’s presence “like a weaned child with its mother” (Psa 131:2).

Prior to the calmness and quietness of soul in the presence of God of which Psalm 131 speaks, there is a tumultuous crying out to God in Psalm 130. “Out of the depths, I cry to you O, Lord” (Psa 130:1). The Psalmist’s appeal to God acknowledges God’s greatness, “who could stand?” (Psa 130:3), yet also affirms God’s forgiveness (vs 4) then following the outcry moves toward hope in waiting. “I wait for the Lord, my soul waits,

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15 Buechner, Telling the Truth, 23.

16 Paul R. House, Song of Songs & Lamentations, Word Biblical Commentary 23b (Dallas, TX: Thomas Nelson, 2004), chap 2, comments, Olive Tree Reader.

17 Jenny Tymms, Deep Work: Spiritual Practice in Our Workday World (Unley, SA, Australia, MediaCom Education Inc., 2017), 158.
and in his word, I hope.” While there is no specific mention of “quietly or silently” waiting, there is the image of the night watchman waiting for morning. The image of night and darkness captures the darkness of the soul which may be crying out in pain or lament and holds in tension the watchman, perhaps a solitary guard, who knows that his watch is over when the sun comes up; and indeed, the sun does come up. This image is suggestive of a quieter and more solitary period and while it is dark it is not without hope.

It is of note that the “hope” recorded in Psalm 130 is placed in God’s word. This mostly likely refers to Scripture or Torah as God’s word but would include God’s word as revealed to the prophets, or to the psalmist or the preacher. The UCA professes that Christ is present when He is preached and that Christ is the Word of God. It seems logical that on occasion, particularly after a time of disaster, silence in Christ’s presence, the Word of God, is not only appropriate but may be necessary and beneficial. It suggests that quietly waiting people can encounter the God of salvation.

The account in Nehemiah chapter eight seems to concur with this assessment of the benefit of silence before God. The people have just heard the law with its interpretation and began to weep. They were confronted by an event, war and subsequent destruction, that we now call a “man-made disaster”. They began to understand their experiences in exile were consequences of behavior unfaithful to the law. In response to the revelations from the spoken word, the people cried and grieved. These sorrow-filled people were told not to weep but to be quiet because this day was holy. The recognition of the revelation of God and God’s goodness in law was in fact a holy time. In the presence of God’s word there is the distinct movement from lament, to quiet, to

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celebration. The people were then sent on their way to celebrate, for God’s joy is their strength (Neh 8:10).

It is worthwhile looking at Jesus’ own silence in the face of eminent disaster. Without entering a complete treatment of the use of silence in Mark’s gospel, a brief examination of Jesus’ silence in the passion narrative can be helpful. Jesus is arrested and first faces the Sanhedrin, many falsely testified and there was not agreement in the testimony. The high priest asked Jesus to answer but Jesus “was silent and did not answer” (Mark 14:61). The word here for silent here comes from the Greek root word *siopia*; which is defined by Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance as “involuntary stillness, or inability to speak.” Reading this from the perspective of disaster, Jesus is facing a personal disaster or crisis. A typical trauma response is to freeze or to have difficulty in thinking and responding. As a disaster-affected person perhaps Jesus was simply unable to respond. Or could Jesus have been silent waiting as is suggested in Lamentations 3:22, “waiting quietly for the salvation of the Lord?” Jesus had moments earlier in the silence of the night poured his heart to God in prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, then in response to the extreme circumstances may be waiting in silence for God to reveal Godself. This is the image of a very human Jesus.

Alternately, if we consider Jesus playing the role of the preacher, he could be seen to be allowing silence for the high priest and court to wrestle with the identity of the man they charge. There were no ready answers from this preacher but in the silent struggle

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19 Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance accessed on https://biblehub.com/str/greek/4623.htm
individuals could determine where they stand. The high priest breaks the silence and eventually asks Jesus, “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” To which Jesus replies, “I am.” In the silence, the Messiah is revealed.

There is a holiness about silence and a sacred time to keep silence. It can occur in our personal spiritual practices, in our worship liturgy and during the preaching of the Word. Silence features in the UCA liturgies as a part of lament and confession. It also features in post-disaster prayer and liturgy resources and could also be part of the sermon. Silence is also common within the UCA as a spiritual practice.

Quiet time with God is valued as for its time to build the relationship with God. It is recognized as a need of individuals to stop their activity, to wait and listen for God’s word in their lives. Being quiet before God demonstrates respect for the fact that God is God; that God is greater than all creation.

Silence is not easy. Our culture often equates silence with loneliness. During times of silence, uncomfortable truths of our lives may rise to the surface and demand our attention. However, it is also during times of silence that the world steps aside making space for our own questioning and imagination. It allows us to approach our God who might be otherwise unapproachable and to abide in God’s glory and grace.

Not only in our spiritual practices and liturgy can we take advantage of the benefit of silence. In silence as well as in the sermon, God confronts the messiness of humanity

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22 Tymms, *Deep Work*, 228.
and the world around. “The sermon can be time to sit in humble relationship with God.”

Sometimes, we need to allow our shy inner self to come out of hiding and rest in the arms of God, “lulled by the quiet song of the universe.” Silence during a sermon would encourage and strengthen that humble relationship. This opportunity for connection with God is the basis for two times of silence in the post-disaster sermon. One time to cry out, one to return to that silent abiding in God’s healing presence.

Writing silence into a sermon may not only benefit the hearer, but also may benefit the preacher, both during its writing and during its presentation. As stated earlier, the preacher, after a disaster, may also be disaster-affected and dutiful selfcare becomes a necessity. Elijah, God’s prophet and messenger, not only experiences God’s provision in the drought disaster but also finds God in the silence.

“And after the earthquake a fire, but the LORD was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:12). It was in the cave, that God addressed Elijah’s spiritual and emotional needs. There was solitude: time to travel to, and rest in the cave; and in the quiet of a cave, God asks Elijah, “What are you doing here?” This question allows Elijah to intellectually or cognitively form a response. Elijah can think through his circumstances. Once acknowledging his own fears and issues, giving voice to his narrative, he then is ready to see God. And when Elijah heard the sound of sheer silence, he left the cave and experienced the very presence of God. Sacred pauses remind us that our identity is not the work which we undertake; our self-identity is more

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24 Tymms, *Deep Work*, 156.

than our role identity, more than the circumstances around us. Our identity is that of an individual who is in relationship with the God who programmed rest into our being and made it a command.26

In the post-disaster sermon, the preacher will participate in the silence and then guide it. The preacher need not say that God is present but by placing times of silence into the sermon, the preacher allows the people to experience God’s presence. The preacher is called to be themselves; called to tell the truth as they themselves have experienced it, and at the same time allow the listener, the privilege of silence to tell the truth as they have experienced it. Silence allows time for a person to give voice to their personal struggles with God and then allows a returning from that quiet and perhaps dark place to a place of hope and even theophany.27

The Tension Between Theophany and Theodicy

Post-disaster, the preacher is likely to eventually encounter theodicy; people who are trying to come to grips with the dissonance between their belief in God and their lived experience of disaster. Also, it is highly likely that the preacher will hear of amazing stories of theophany; stories about people’s encounters with God in the disaster; of God showing up in almost miraculous ways. These two theologies will be very present in the aftermath, walking side by side.

Any observer will be struck by the manner both theologies are present, and it can feel if one or the other is out of place. When encountering someone else’s theophany, a

26 Tymms, Deep Work, 140.
27 Buechner, Telling the Truth, 40.
person experience theodicy can feel as if they are doing something wrong. Both experiences are valid and present in disaster holding hands.

In response to both, scripture supports the development and inclusion of silence and its healing benefits in a sermon as a resource to the preacher. Job finishes his silent lament breaking the silence for himself and his friends by saying, “I am not at ease, nor am I quiet; (Job 3:26).” Perhaps, it was in the silence that Job could find the words to express the questions he had. After that silence, and unhelpful advice from friends, Job calls out the injustice he perceives. The silence alone is not enough; the questions of justice alone are not enough; the preacher will not remain in silence nor let silence remain but,

Let the preacher tell the truth. Let him make audible the silence of the news of the world with the sound turned off so that in the silence we can hear the tragic truth of the Gospel, which is that the world where God is absent is a dark and echoing emptiness; and the comic truth of the Gospel, which is that it is into the depths of this absence that God makes himself present in such unlikely ways and to such unlikely people . . . And finally let him preach this overwhelming of tragedy by comedy, of darkness by light, of the ordinary by the extraordinary, as the tale that is too good not to be true because to dismiss it as untrue is to dismiss along with it that catch of the breath, that beat and lifting of the heart near to or even accompanied by tears, which I believe is the deepest intuition of truth that we have.\(^{28}\)

There is a tension between telling the truth and the tragedy and telling of hope that may appear as fairy tale in the face of great pain or trauma. The sermon which heals will hold together the tension between theodicy and theophany; allowing for either or both. The sermon after the disaster will resemble the symmetrical structure offered in Psalms 130 and 131; it will acknowledge the suffering and it will offer hope. It will give

\(^{28}\) Buechner, 98.
permission for the person to cry out, “Oh, God!” and wrestle with questions. It will also allow the words of hope, of God’s self-revelation, to penetrate the darkness so that the person becomes the “weaned child” held closely to its mother God’s breast. The sermon after the disaster will allow the hearer to wrestle with God in their own way, to be guided by the Word during that struggle and to have potential encounter with God.
CHAPTER 3
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Buechner’s quote in the preceding chapter has shaped much of the inspiration to incorporate silence into preaching. A survey of available literature indicates that truth-telling—acknowledging openly and honestly the situation surrounding people enveloped in the disaster—is important. Pastoral strategies and in fact practice indicate that silence is an appropriate and healing response and silence is strongly supported academically and theologically. This chapter examines and unites these two components: truth telling and silence, reiterating Buechner’s statement that preaching can acknowledge the tragedy, the comedy and the fairy tale.¹

Karl Barth quips, “We do not always have to bring in the latest and most sensational events . . . People do not want to remain stuck in everyday problems. They want to go beyond them and rise above them.”² Indeed, people do desire to move beyond the disaster, to rise above and they deeply desire to hear good news. They also desire their situation to be validated and their pain or struggle acknowledged. Barth’s preference to ignore the situation completely in favor of preaching only on the text was formed in

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¹ Buechner, Telling the Truth, 98.

the context of a long and continuing war, a topic which may have seemed to dominate the pulpit rather than biblical preaching. Healthy psychology suggests that people should be allowed to acknowledge the disaster around them. However, Barth’s critique should not be ignored; preaching should not be solely about the disaster and should not, as in as Barth’s experience, have a continued long-term focus on the event. Preaching must hold in tension the experience of suffering and the hope which Christ brings; so, preaching post-disaster needs to remain biblical and Christ-centered bringing hope at all times. Yet, the acknowledgement of the disaster experience likewise cannot be platitudinal. In the post-disaster sermon as Buechner suggests, the preacher should tell the truth: its tragedy and comedy and allow the “fairy tale” gospel to bring hope.

**Preaching after a Disaster**

Preaching is an act naming reality in a manner which allows people to respond to life, joining with the preacher in the act of theology, and discerning the mysterious nature of God in the circumstances. Just as a sermon gives voice to weeping after violence, allows for confession after transgressions and resistance to injustice, it allows for healing after trauma. In the case of disaster, resistance may look like resilience or faith that builds anew out of the ruin and healing may look like having simply enough strength and courage to face the task of rebuilding one day at a time. No matter what shape healing takes, the preacher’s task is to acknowledge the pain and to proclaim hope.

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There are few texts specifically about the craft of preaching after a disaster, one notable text exists: *Crisis Preaching: Personal and Public*, by Joseph Jeter.\(^4\) This text is over twenty years old and there has been much research around the psychology of crisis and trauma recovery since it was written. There have been specific studies into needs and responses to public crisis, disaster recovery as well as personal recovery. Over time the understanding of the word “crisis” which Jeter uses in the title has changed; it is now not seen as the most appropriate word when referring to events such as disasters, rather there has been a shift to the use of the word “disaster” to describe large scale events. Crisis is generally defined as an event of intense difficulty or the time when a decision must be made.\(^5\) Its meaning over time has reverted to its root word in Greek “decision”. Jeter defines crisis as an upset of balance or “deep trouble”\(^6\) which is a good description of a personal crisis.

Disaster on the other hand is an event that causes great damage or loss of life beyond a single individual. The Australian Institute for Disaster Resilience defines a disaster as, “A serious disruption in the function of a community or a society at any scale due to hazardous events interacting with conditions of exposure, vulnerability and capacity, leading to one or more of the following: human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts.”\(^7\) Disasters affect an entire community in an event which causes many individuals’ capacity to adapt and cope to be overwhelmed. When the

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\(^6\) Jeter, *Crisis*, 13.

\(^7\) Australian Government, “Emergency Handbook,” vii,
healthy functioning of a community is disrupted, individuals will be in crisis; and some will initially be in shock or suffering from trauma. Responding to individual crises during a disaster is an important part of disaster recovery efforts, however, initial emergency responses are formed for the benefit of the whole of the community; restoring power and water for example. It is important to note that responders themselves can become overwhelmed by the circumstances of disaster.

Jeter is correct that while crisis can produce varied responses in individuals—anger, grief, fear and guilt—the initial response is often shock. In disaster recovery, it is uncommon to speak of or use the language of personal or individual crisis. Disaster recovery uses language regarding the trauma experienced and the associated trauma responses: anger, grief, fear and guilt. So while Jeter addresses the same basic issues, the language Jeter uses may not be easily understood in a disaster response setting immediately following a disaster; and in fact, the language he uses could actually be unhelpful, causing misunderstanding of purpose.

Jeter’s book examines crisis in two ways: crises of understanding and crises of decision. As earlier stated when addressing theodicy, during disasters people do not immediately experience a crisis of understanding of God and faith. If a crisis of faith happens at all, it happens later down the track of the long recovery process and not until basic human needs are met. It would, therefore, be unhelpful to address the theology of

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8 Robinson, Disaster Ministry, 58.


10 Jeter, Crisis Preaching, 25.
theodicy in a sermon immediately following a disaster and would be better to hold responses to questions of theodicy until a sermon much later in the recovery.

 Appropriately, Jeter suggests that the preacher will not know what questions of theodicy people may have; so he suggests a sermon can provide three affirmations: remembrance, presence and promise.\textsuperscript{11} The sermon form used in this study incorporating two intervals of silence, provides time for people to remember and sit in peace in God’s presence. In addition, it allows them to move to hope by remembering God’s promises or remembering past experiences of God’s faithfulness to them.

 Jeter also suggests that there is not a set form or structure for a crisis sermon.\textsuperscript{12} This is likely correct; however, in the chaos following a disaster, when likely even the preacher is impacted, a readily available tested sermon form or tool to aid in sermon preparation will be of value. In the days or hours after a disaster, shock is often the initial response even for the preacher. It is not uncommon during shock for a narrowing of thought processes and focus to occur: this stage of recovery is called tunnel vision,\textsuperscript{13} so in fact, the preacher indeed may not have sufficient capacity to decide what form should be used. Jeter acknowledges this potential situation and suggests to the preacher that the sermon which acknowledges the situation and moves to God’s hope has the best chance of being heard and assimilated by the listener.\textsuperscript{14} A sermon tool/form will provide both an

\textsuperscript{11} Jeter, 28.

\textsuperscript{12} Jeter, 95.

\textsuperscript{13} Raymond Scurfield, “Post-Katrina Storm Disorder and Recovery in Mississippi More Than 2 Years Later,” \textit{Traumatology} 14, no. 2 (2008), 11, https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/ac5b/fb848f5a5b54dce620703143813408086c5a.pdf.

\textsuperscript{14} Jeter, \textit{Crisis Preaching}, 105.
immediately available form which acknowledges the reality of the listeners; allowing them to sit with God in hope as well as provide that same support for the preacher themselves.

Jeter’s text contains information which continues to be important when preparing to preach after a crisis and his annotated lectionary is helpful. This text is not readily available in Australia and due to the length of time since its publication and also to its linguistic challenges, it may be less favored for use in the United States. While this text has been a standard for some time, a further search for post-disaster preaching resources finds only a few more recent resources.

One monograph of more recent note is the book What Shall We Say? Evil, Suffering and the Crisis of Faith by Tom Long. This is a more contemporary text addressing the question of how to preach when words seem to fail. This helpful text presents something of a history of preaching after significant disastrous events and the issues of theodicy. It works through historic situations and Biblical texts exploring what has been and what can be said in the face of suffering. Long states that sermons are never finished; that there are follow-on questions and loose ends but at some point, the preacher must speak. The unfinished sermon mirrors faith, it is a snapshot of a moment in time, a movement from darkness to light. Long challenges the preacher to not shy away from the questions but allow for some level of untidiness.15

There does indeed need to be a level of untidiness and loose ends to the post-disaster sermon. There is no precise ending to a disaster. Recovery goes on for months

and even years and there is often no moment when a person can say with certainty that
the event has ended. Life after disaster does not return to what it was prior to the disaster.
There eventually begins to be a new normal.16

Long’s book is helpful because it gives the preacher a deeper understanding of the
task of preaching in the face of theodicy. Long balances the issues of suffering and hope;
theodicy and theophany, with a focus on answering the preacher’s question, “What shall
we say?” The inference is that something needs to be said. Long does not wish to
challenge the “ministry of presence,” however, he indicates that there is a theology that
can and should be spoken and taught in the face of disaster.17 He is correct that the
preacher must be prepared if and when the question of suffering or the questioning of
God comes.

The entire book has a strong focus on theodicy, a topic which provides a solid
background information for preachers when they face that first sermon following a
disaster in their community. The book is a corrective to poor theology and teaching on
theodicy, and there likely needs to be more. Like Jeter’s book, Long’s book must be read
and be practiced well in advance of a disaster. It is not a quick reference for the disaster-
affected preacher.

Sometimes words are necessary and sometimes in the rawest moment people need
to have the opportunity to give voice to their own struggle with God. The most recent
helpful resource available is from The Artistry of Preaching Series, Words That Heal:
Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls, by Joni S. Sancken. This text aims to help the

16 Robinson, Ministry, 63.

17 Long, What Shall We Say?, 34.
preacher understand trauma and help the preacher to create trauma-aware sermons. While trauma has many sources, one of which can be disaster, the language of this text is much more closely aligned with the language of disaster recovery in addressing trauma. This is an important text for preachers. It unpacks the complicated “wounded soul” in a sensitive and genuinely helpful way.

Sancken indicates that the first step in preaching which heals is listening and then during the sermon, the listening can give voice to the traumatic experience. 18 Sancken suggests that the preacher can “do” hope; that preaching must not only speak of love but enact love. In this way, the preaching task removes barriers between people and God’s love for them.19 Naming and openly acknowledging the trauma event is important to help remove any stigma from the human responses to that trauma.

Sancken goes on to say that people need to be allowed to construct a narrative which is helpful and healing for them. The preacher needs to let the wounded soul take the lead.20 Sermons can not only suggest a symbolic action but can be a symbolic reaction in response to the tragedy. Sancken suggests that it is helpful for the preacher to frame or suggest actions during the sermon and to “present the Spirit’s stirring in the preaching moment.” 21

While Sancken’s entire book should be read in preparation for disaster response preaching, it is a book that could be very usefully referred to in the space immediately

19 Sancken, Words, 16.
20 Sancken, 19.
21 Sancken, 13.
following a disaster. The book’s appendices are set out as simple tools and steps which would be extremely helpful in preparing the post-disaster sermon, particularly in relation to addressing trauma. These tools, particularly the appendix B will help the preacher understand and negotiate trauma during sermon preparations. After reading this book, I definitely wished its tools had been available to me when I was in the process of preparing post-disaster sermon.

Helpful articles regarding preaching after a disaster are also available. While most of the book Help and Hope: Disaster Preparedness and Response Tools for Congregations is about disaster ministry; it includes two essays regarding the task of preaching. One article specifically addresses the construction of a post-disaster sermon. This article asks, what story do we tell? It highlights several of the issues or risks in telling the story: if you tell your own story, you become the hero; or if you tell someone else’s story you could be exploiting that person. Neither of these extremes are helpful in any circumstance and during ordinary times are more easily avoided.

During the extraordinary events of a disaster, however, the boundaries for using stories can become clouded by trauma responses of fatigue, shock or tunnel vision. The periods of silence tested during this research are designed to allow each person to tell their own story directly to God and to give opportunity for God to help them reframe that story. It helps the preacher to avoid the traps of trying to acknowledge the events unfolding.

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22 Sancken, 107.

While helpful, one of the downsides of these particular articles is that they are contained a book regarding disaster ministry as a whole response to a disaster. As the title of the book indicates the bulk of the book contains resources for congregations and not specifically resources for the preacher. It may not, then, be a resource to which the preacher would turn when looking for preaching help. Under the pressure of time, it may be difficult to find these articles regarding the preaching task without some prior awareness of their existence.

Web articles may be more readily available. David Lose posted an article on the Working Preacher website that is helpful. David writes of preaching in the United States in response to a disaster far away in Haiti. He makes three points: be honest, see God, make promises. Though he is responding to a distant disaster, his points are relevant to a local disaster as well.

This helpful article is not difficult to find if familiar with the “Working Preacher” website; however, this article may not get enough search traffic to pop up in a search engine immediately. It is also possible that electrical power and/or internet service may be interrupted following the disaster impact meaning this—and other web-based resources will be inaccessible.

There is a common theme as posed by Buechner threaded throughout the literary resources which have been reviewed. Post-disaster, preachers will be Telling the truth: Tragedy, Comedy and Fairy Tale! Platitudes must be avoided. People need an avenue to voice their struggle; they need the truth to be told. And people need to hear the hope.

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which can be heard in so many of the Biblical texts. The preacher’s task then is to “make audible the silence of the news of the world with the sound turned off so that in the silence we can hear the tragic truth of the Gospel, which is that the world where God is absent is a dark and echoing emptiness; and the comic truth of the Gospel, which is that it is into the depths of this absence that God makes himself present in such unlikely ways and to such unlikely people . . .”25

Preaching Using Silence

There are volumes of pastoral texts and articles about the use of silence in worship and pastoral settings. There are infrequent references in preaching textbooks and articles to using silence during a sermon. A recent article in Christianity Today magazine entitled “Make a Joyful Silence unto the Lord,” while about the importance of silence during worship, makes the suggestion that there should be a full minute of silence after the sermon. It is proposed that silence in relation to the sermon is a gift “in order to hear Christ’s word to us personally.”26 The author suggests that silence is more important than ever in a world of noise and that the preacher must make time for silence so that God’s word has a “fighting chance to take root in our hearts and bear good fruit in our lives.” Silence is a passive action that creates space for the transforming and healing power of God.

25 Buechner, Telling the Truth, 98.

The Uniting Church in Australia promotes the use of silence in its liturgy and for some circumstances, the sermon. The UCA’s Service of the Lord’s Day: Third Service, contains a “Sermon of Stillness.” The instructions for this sermon recommend at least five minutes of silence after the scripture readings and before the preacher’s spoken sermon or reflection. It is intended to allow time for God’s Word to speak for itself. Following the spoken sermon is the liturgical action called “Prayers of The People.” Free prayer is encouraged at this time. People are encouraged to bring their personal petitions and prayers to God, and it is suggested that people additionally offer a symbol of their prayer by lighting a candle or placing a stone in a bowl of water. These acts would also include periods of silence or quietness. Then service then proceeds into the celebration of holy communion.

I have found that this liturgy, modeled after the Christian East, feels alien to the congregations in which I have served. The liturgy contains more silence and symbolism than people are accustomed to experiencing. This research adapts the existing UCA “sermon of stillness,” so the preacher can guide the gathered community through briefer periods of silence, trusting the text, the Word of God, to speak for itself28 and allow the preacher to proclaim a message of hope.

Jenny Tymms in her book *Deep Work: Spiritual Practice in Our Workaday World* promotes the use of silence in prayer and in life. She says, “there is also something quite liberating about claiming time, right in the very midst of our work, not to work.” She is


28 Karoline Lewis, lecture, Luther Seminary, St Paul MN, June 2017.
speaking of stopping work to pray the offices, however, if we believe that liturgy is the work of the people in worship then the conviction applies to the worship service as well. We need to stop our work to in order to not work and to “lean into the mystery of God . . . even if only for five minutes.” In that time God draws close and wraps around us and we can experience deep trust.29

Geoff Thompson, in his book Disturbing Much, Disturbing Many: Theology Provoked by the Basis of Union, discusses the challenge of preaching in general and in the Uniting Church. He comments on the distrust and inadequacy of using words to describe the divine mystery. He comments on the misuse and poor use of language which has created this distrust.30 He believes that the church needs to regain its confidence in biblical preaching and that doing so will include a renewed call to discipleship; as the Basis of Union suggests “participation of all the people of God in the preaching of the Word.”31 Thompson states that he is, “concerned less about how to craft a good sermon and more about how to reimagine the ministry of preaching.”32 This is a clear invitation to try something new in the sermon; the opportunity to allow the people to participate in the crafting a sermon of their own during a guided silence.

29 Tymms, Deep Work, 139 and 158.

30 Interesting research in Australian regarding trust. Religious leaders are near the bottom of the list just below Union leaders as trusted people and only above corporate executives and politicians. I might suggest that since the average people do not trust religious leaders it might be better to let people experience the divine mystery in their own words and narrative than in mine. https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-11-27/the-professions-australians-trust-the-most/11725448.


Preaching which includes silence is not only used in the Uniting Church, it is the common practice of Quaker worship. The Quakers, during the time which is traditionally reserved for a sermon, will sit in a long period of silence. In the silence, Quakers seek and sometimes achieve not only individual experiences of God but also corporate experiences. They find a deep communion with God in the silence.\textsuperscript{33} It is this deep fellowship with God that has the potential to encourage and even heal following a disaster.

Silence is not new to the church but has been important to worshippers for centuries. St Benedict, in his 6th century rule, has a brief comment on silence: “at times we ought to refrain from useful speech for the sake of silence” and “because of the importance of silence, let permission to speak be seldom given to perfect disciples even for good and holy and edifying discourse.”\textsuperscript{34} Benedict defends his thoughts by proof texting, however, this rule has been kept for centuries because of the inherent truth in the words. Sometimes we should not speak for the sake of silence and even trained professional disciples such as preachers ought to be given permission to be silent. In fact, considering Benedict’s teaching it would be argued that preachers should be encouraged to keep silent at times rather than offer “good discourse.” Benedict’s rule regarding silences offers a strong historic affirmation of idea of using silence during a sermon.

Keeping silence during a sermon is not at new idea. The Uniting Church already uses silence in preaching and promotes the use of silence as an appropriate interruption to


work. This research is a “reimagining” of existing practices of the UCA; in which the preacher guides the silences during the sermon drawing all the people into participation in the act of preaching as envisioned by the drafters of the UCA’s founding document.

The Tension

Just as there is a tension between theodicy and theophany; there is a tension between acknowledging the event of a disaster and experiencing hope. “Part of the process of healing is acknowledging that healing may coexist alongside brokenness and despair.”35 If, in the sermon, the preacher errs toward only the acknowledgement of experiences of disaster, there may not be room for healing; there could be a tendency to dwell on the pain. If the preacher errs toward healing only, there can be a glossing over of the pain. To allow for both, the preacher must pay attention to the disaster and to the hope during the sermon development. The compassionate God is in the disaster and is speaking hope.

Following a disaster, the disaster-affected and weary preacher wondering what to say can themselves find comfort in the fact that maybe they don’t need to say anything. There can be peace found in realizing that no human words are enough to express the pain. Also, there are no human words that adequately express the hope in the love of Christ. A good way to do both is to look to trouble and hope in the text and allow individuals to express their own trouble and be surrounded by the hope which the text promises.

35 Sancken, Words, 14.
Already available to the preacher is a resource which deals with trouble and hope in the text and in the world; Paul Scott Wilson’s text *The Four Pages of the Sermon*. It is the hope of Dr. Wilson to “encourage preachers to be biblical, grounding their sermons in the biblical text, and allowing the text to ‘speak’ the sermon.”36

In this work, Wilson examines trouble in the text, trouble or human brokenness in the world, hope and good news in the text, and hope and good news in the world; approaching each topic as a “page.” Like Long, Wilson seeks a good balance of truth and healing.37 These “pages” of the sermon are held together by an image that flows through the sermon like a movie.

Wilson asserts that most sermons do not allow signs of God’s work in the world.38 Following a disaster, people see signs of destruction, the awful power of creation and perhaps at some point may even credit the destruction to God. It is an important counter then, particularly immediately following a disaster, to allow God’s signs of healing, hope and good news to be seen in the world. Wilson’s form allows signs of God to be seen, emphasizing what God is actively doing. The four-page sermon captures, from the text, the images of God “doing” healing and allows that image or sign to be experienced by the hearers in their world through the word of the preacher.

Wilson’s text was written for the week to week task of preaching during ordinary time. Major disasters, where people have experienced more than they may have ever experienced before are not ordinary times but extraordinary. The people experiencing the


37 Wilson, *Four Pages*, 16.

38 Wilson, 23.
extraordinary circumstances are in a situation where healing can come through a sermon constructed as a “theological narrative that moves redemptively from death to life.”

Wilson’s form allows that kind of movement in the disaster context as well as during the ordinary times.

This research proposes a modification to Wilson’s form which remains true to Wilson’s intentions, however, adds silence in which there is room for individuals to express their narrative within the framework of a balance, suffering and hope. The silence is added in what Wilson calls page two, brokenness in the world and page four, hope and good news in the world. The silence allows individuals to speak for themselves their own narrative and redemption; effectively holding the tension between the words of the sermon and the benefits of silence. It also, as Sancken suggests, “enacts hope.”

Wilson’s resource is not widely known in the context of the UCA. It is a monograph which requires thorough reading and then its concepts require consistent practice. Following a disaster, this book, like most books which require a level of assimilation, is not an appropriate resource to quickly turn to unless the preacher is already very familiar with the content. So, drawing from its form and adding silence, a template or form was developed and tested as a model for a sermon following disaster.

**Summary**

Few readily usable resources are available in the Australian context for preachers who need to develop a sermon after a disaster. Most of these resources originate from the

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United States and consist mainly of monographs which must be studied well in advance of a disaster.

The modification of the Four Page sermon form to include two periods of silence addresses both the tension between disaster and hope; as well as, catering for the expression of the individual’s personal narrative in its movement from expressing suffering to experiencing hope. The intention is to create an easily accessible preaching resource which will empower the preacher as well as the individual to craft their narrative and experience God “doing” healing.
CHAPTER 4
PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The purpose of this research project is to determine whether silence during the sermon is helpful to people who have experienced a disaster. It is common to use silence during the liturgy, including pauses for silence during prayers so that people can form their own prayers. The research is the first step to determine if silence during the sermon can help people to transition from a place of weariness or despair to a place of cautious optimism or hope by allowing them to give voice to their lament and/or to sit quietly in God’s embrace.

Following Hurricane Katrina in the southern United States in 2005, a considerable body of research was carried out regarding disaster recovery and the importance of disaster recovery chaplaincy. This research centered around emotional and spiritual recovery and informs the importance of the ministry of presence, that is, the act of quietly sitting alongside the disaster-affected person. These studies of ministry in disaster, along with the previous chapters of theological reflection and literature review, serve as the lens through which the task of preaching after the disaster is examined; in particular the use of silence during a sermon.

1 This is a reference to the works specifically after Hurricane Katrina by of Dr. Raymond Scurfield, DSW, LCSW, Assoc. Professor of Social Work, University of Southern Mississippi--Gulf Coast, Long Beach, MS, raymond.scurfield@usm.edu and Rev. Dr. Naomi Paget, “Disaster Relief Chaplaincy for Community Clergy.”
This project is action/reflection-type research; preaching a sermon with survey and discussion or interviews following. To elaborate, a sermon which includes times of silence was preached and was followed by research participants completing a brief survey and optionally participating in a focus group discussion or interview in order to capture their thoughts.

Context

Research was conducted within the worship contexts of congregations as this is the natural setting for preaching after a disaster in a local community. Appropriate pastoral care by the local minister was arranged for each congregational location. It was unlikely that trauma would have been triggered, as the task was to evaluate a sermon containing a time of silence for its benefits on the day it was preached, however, pastoral support in the form of the local minister was available in the event of distress. Volunteers were asked to comment on the helpfulness of the sermon and to project an opinion regarding its potential helpfulness after a disaster, not to recount experiences.

It had been intended to preach research sermons in communities in Queensland that have experienced natural disasters within the past 10 years, so that some time has passed since the disaster events for each community. Because preaching after a disaster is new research and this research investigated something relatively unknown, the plan was to first test the idea with people who have generally recovered from a disaster and ask them, based on past experience, if the silence in their opinion would be helpful immediately post-disaster. It was not planned to test the thesis on distressed or disaster-

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affected people. This research would provide a baseline for future research to gain an understanding of how silence during the sermon is perceived in a typical worshipping group under relatively ordinary circumstances prior to testing the form in the disaster setting.

While it is ethical and important to conduct research immediately after disasters, it seemed important to test the theory first in typical worship of people not immediately affected by disaster but who had experiences of disaster from which to form an opinion. This would determine if there is any value at all in the sermon form before taking that form into a disaster setting; that is if the sermon form was not perceived helpful in ordinary time, it may not warrant further study.

It was extremely challenging to find an opportunity, as was planned, to preach the research sermon in congregations which had some distance in time from a disaster event. I had planned to preach in Roma, Queensland, which flooded in 2010 and 2011. However, because this congregation was now in the midst of a significant drought event, this congregation’s leadership asked that I not come to test a disaster research sermon. I had scheduled to preach in another congregation but prior to that date, the community was affected by nearby bushfires which burned homes and workplaces of members of that congregation and again it was decided by leadership that the research should not take place there at this time.

This pattern of significant disasters continued for months and my own region was affected by bushfire in which 6 homes were lost and I was required to take time out of

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congregational ministry to perform disaster recovery chaplaincy ministry in response. In the end, the last two congregations in which I preached were disaster-affected, however, they were at a point where they felt encouraged by the fact that someone would come and hear their experiences and opinions for the sake of others.

The consequence of the scheduling challenge was that there was significant time between each of the research sermons. The process began in March 2019 and was complete in early January 2020. There were two main factors that contributed to this long process. First, the Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplains Alliance (AVECA) conference was held in March 2019 and the rest of the project was not set to begin until August 2020. Second was the attempt to preach in communities not immediately affected by disaster. These challenges are elaborated on in the description of the process, however, the challenges mean that the context of the research includes recently disaster-affected congregations.

The Uniting Church in Australia congregations where research took place were located at St. Stephen’s Toowoomba, where I serve as minister in placement; Brisbane suburb Zillmere, which is a first people’s congregation; Jandowae, a rural congregation, and Dalby, a larger rural community. These locations cover rural, regional and urban Queensland.

Toowoomba is a regional center with a population of over 100,000 people. As a regional centre Toowoomba has specialty medical services and 3 large hospitals, as well

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as State government offices for the region. The St. Stephen’s congregation has over 200 members and is located in the city center of Toowoomba. In 2011, Toowoomba was affected by major flash flooding which resulted in the loss of life. There were significant power outages during the flood and for days following during the recovery efforts. Several members of the congregation were washed out of workplaces or separated from family members by flood waters. Congregational member personally knew the families who lost loved ones during the flood. The congregation is made up of predominately white Australians of middle income, although there are people from other cultural backgrounds including first peoples.

The elders of the Brisbane Uniting Aboriginal and Islander Christian Congress congregation located in Zillmere, a suburb of Brisbane gave me permission to preach in their congregation. I pay respect to the elders; past, present and emerging and thank them for the opportunity. The members of this congregation are first and second peoples from diverse backgrounds. It is a lower socio-economic demographic. This congregation was impacted by the Brisbane floods of 2011; however, the first peoples would have experienced various other traumatic events in the past.

Jandowae is a small rural community of approximately 1,000 people and is located in the Western Downs region of Queensland. The primary industry is agriculture. Jandowae and the surrounding region have been affected by floods in the past; however, when the research occurred, the community was experiencing a severe long-term drought. The Jandowae congregation consists of about 20 to 30 people who are predominately involved in the agricultural industry and are a predominately white Australian congregation.
Dalby, a larger rural community also in the Western Downs region, has a population of approximately 13,000. The economy is largely dependent on agriculture and mining industries. The Western Downs regional government offices are located in Dalby. Myall Creek runs through the heart of Dalby and has flooded on numerous occasions most recently in 2010 and 2011. The town and its infrastructure were significantly impacted by those floods in close succession. It is currently impacted by the long-term drought now affecting the region and there have been bushfires in the region. The Dalby congregation is a reasonable cross section of its community composition in regard to age groups and cultural diversity. There were a mix of rural families from agricultural properties, as well as people who worked in supporting industries in the town.

The sermon form was also used to preach to the group known as Australian Volunteer Emergency Chaplaincy Alliance (AVECA). This group is a committee of the Australian National Council of Churches and works with government establishing and maintaining standards of chaplaincy in the disaster management setting. They also serve as a network for information sharing of best practices and resources across the states. The members of this group have influence in each of their respective states in disaster recovery ministry and are key people in providing training for local ministers in response to disaster. This group of eight women and men are the group that would endorse any disaster recovery resource at the national level.

While the AVECA group are ministers who are ministering to people in the disaster setting and who often preach in these settings, they are also affected by secondary trauma. They are regularly exposed to severe disasters. This group provided
feedback from two perspectives: that of listener to a sermon after a disaster and also that of preacher who may also be disaster-affected.

Project Process

A sermon form based on the “four pages of the sermon” which includes times of silence was developed and preached in four congregations which were either currently experiencing or at some point in their past had experienced severe natural disaster—whether drought, flood, fire, or cyclone. This sermon form which contained a significant time for silences was preached at its typical place during the normal worship service. The text of each sermon varied according to the lectionary, however; the form of the sermon and its use of silence was consistent. The same sermon form was also used to preach to the group of disaster recovery chaplains at their annual meeting.

The research sermon form closely followed the “Four Pages Sermon Form” of Paul Scott Wilson⁵ and was slightly modified to add two periods of silence. Using an established form for the basis of the sermon allowed the times of silence to be presented in a consistent manner at each location. The four-page sermon form also well suits the intention of each of the periods of silence, placing them in the page which best allows the purpose of each period to be controlled.

Silence during a sermon normally happens as a slight pause in normal speech or as a longer pause for dramatic effect, however, this research tests longer intentional periods of silence of one to two minutes, while the language of the sermon guided people through the silent times.

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⁵ Wilson, The Four Pages, 16.
The four-page sermon has an introductory paragraph, which states God’s action in the text. Page one describes the trouble that is happening in the text. It describes the need in the text for which God’s action as stated in the introduction is the correction.

Page two is a description of the trouble and need of the world; in the case of disaster the needs of the local community would be explored. This paragraph describes the need in the world for which God’s action as stated in the introduction is the remedy.

Dr. Wilson says, “Trouble should have tooth and bite.” Following a disaster, the individual’s story of disaster will certainly have both. The first period of silence, then, occurs after the moment the preacher acknowledges the trauma caused by the disaster. This period of silence was guided or directed so that the hearers understand that the purpose of the quiet was to give them the opportunity to relate their own pain to God. This opportunity gives the listener control of their narrative and empowers, acknowledges their own story and relationship or struggle with God; to complain directly to God as Job did.

Page three of the sermon describe God’s action, as stated in the introduction, as it happens in the biblical text. Wilson states, “Page three marks the negation of the world’s powers before God and it put God before listeners in unconditional, self-giving, restoring and liberating power.” It is the statement of correction to the trouble in the text and leads to hope in the correction for the trouble in the world.

Page four describes God’s action in the world. This is the same action as stated in the introduction and on page three. Examples of God’s action as seen during the disaster

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6 Wilson, 111.

7 Wilson, 141.
or recovery work can be included. Once God’s action is described and after the preacher has proclaimed hope, the listeners are given the second period of silence. Again, this silence was intentionally prefaced so that the hearers know that they are to sit quietly and receive or be surrounded by hope from God and experience God’s action. They are reassured that God meets them where they are and that they are held safely in God’s hands at this time.

The end of the silence was guided with a reassurance of God’s action and proclamation of God’s love. The following table portrays the form and the basic contents of the four-page sermon with the silences.

**Table 1 - Sermon Form Summary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Introduction</th>
<th>Make a statement of God’s action in the text. Describe an image that illustrates God’s action.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Page one 1-2 paragraphs</td>
<td>Trouble in the text. What do the biblical character/s need? What is the trouble that God’s action as described in the previous paragraph helps?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 2 1-2 paragraphs</td>
<td>Trouble in the world. Acknowledge the truth of the disaster. Point to the human need which is similar to that in the text. Allow a full minute of silence to let the people speak to God about their trouble.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 3 1-2 paragraphs</td>
<td>God’s action in the text. Restate God’s action from the introduction. How was God responding to the need of the character/s? What does the image used earlier look like now?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Page 4 1-2 paragraphs</td>
<td>God’s action in the world. Proclaim that God is doing the same now! Cite examples. Allow people to sit quietly in that hope for least a minute or two. Close by repeating that hope. Proclaim God’s action is for them.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to test how much silence is comfortable or helpful and to determine if there is a length of time where silence becomes unhelpful, the first period of silence was consistently timed for two minutes. The second period of silence was one minute.
Feedback regarding the helpfulness of the silence was sought by survey from volunteers of these congregations. People over the age of 18 who were willing to participate as volunteers were invited to complete a scaled survey, one being low and ten being high, to rate the helpfulness of the sermon and the helpfulness of the silence (Appendix E). People from each of the five preaching locations completed the survey and the results were compiled.

Background data was collected on the survey about the listeners’ experience of disaster and included questions about their view of the value their faith played during their recovery. This basic background about the disasters which have been experienced would provide a method to validate individual’s insights into what might be a helpful sermon after a natural disaster.

People were also invited to participate in a discussion of the sermon. People were not required to attend the discussion if they completed a survey; as a result, there were more surveys collected than people who attended the discussions or interviews. Only those deeply interested in the topic took the time to participate in the discussion. The discussion questions were the same for each group or interview. (Appendix F).

As mentioned, it had been intended to conduct focus group discussions where the central question for the discussion was whether the silence during the sermon was helpful today; and the next question was asking participants to speculate, based on their experiences, whether the silence might be helpful in a sermon after a disaster. The follow-up questions then asked people to describe how the silence in this sermon was helpful or unhelpful.
Discussions were guided towards obtaining comments in relation to any issues which may have influenced the survey results. The listener’s responses to the phenomenon of silence during the sermon were gathered by survey in an attempt to determine if there was a majority who found the sermon helpful on the day preached; and also, if a majority regarded the sermon potentially helpful after a disaster. From the discussion, some understanding of why the sermon was helpful (or not) on the day it was preached may indicate reasons why it may or may not help after a disaster. This process happened perhaps to a lesser degree during the interviews. People were asked the same questions during the interview, however, there was not a robust conversation which might have drawn out issues that were affecting the ratings, rather only individual responses to the sermon were gathered.

The guided focus group discussion occurred at only two of the preaching locations; the AVECA conference and my home congregation. At some locations, there were people who participated in a brief interview. All interviews were conducted in confidentiality, and the names of interviewees are withheld by mutual agreement. A description of the process at each location follows.

While not the natural setting for a sermon, AVECA agreed to participate in the research during the devotion portion of their annual meeting. All meetings open with a devotion or act of worship. The research sermon form served as the devotion and was followed by the survey and discussion. The disaster recovery chaplains were asked additional questions which were not asked of congregation members. Chaplains were asked, “Would the preparation of a sermon with silence assist the preacher themselves heal?” They were also asked to indicate if they would be willing to use this sermon form.
As AVECA only meets once per year in March, waiting until March 2020, would have been too late to include their responses in this research so I preached the research sermon form to this national gathering of Australian disaster recovery chaplains on March 7, 2019. Consents were signed prior to completing the survey. The recording of this discussion failed after a few minutes, possibly the device was bumped, so a transcript was created from detailed written notes of the conversation.

The research sermon at St. Stephen’s Uniting Church in Toowoomba, Queensland, took place on Sunday, Oct 6, 2019. During the two weeks prior to the research, the printed weekly notices carried an invitation to participate in the research following the regular worship service and during the announcement portion of worship on the day, I announced the opportunity to participate in the research. I lead the worship service as well as preached the research sermon.

Six people who had significant interest in the topic of disaster responded to the invitation. Each person who participated completed the consent and the survey. The conversation with this small focus group followed the survey and was recorded and transcribed. People were engaged and broad discussion occurred.

The next sermon was preached on December 15, 2019, in the Brisbane suburb of Zillmere at a first people’s congregation called Brisbane Aboriginal and Islander Congress Congregation. Arrangements were made with the elders of the congregation for the preaching research opportunity. The Uniting Church Queensland Synod’s covenant action plan indicates that decision makers of the Uniting Church should be aware of
Indigenous theology and use it as a lens. The inclusion of this congregation in the research ensured the first people’s voice is heard regarding preaching after a disaster and allowed the synod to fulfil its commitment to the first peoples.

The congregation’s regular worship team led the worship in the manner to which they were accustomed. At the appropriate time, I read the text which I was using and preached.

As this congregation expects the elders to speak on their behalf, no surveys were collected from the elders or the first peoples in the congregation, nor was focus group discussion conducted. This dynamic of the first people’s expectations dictated that individual conversations with two female elders be held. Consents were signed; however, these interviews were not recorded by request of the elders.

A few Non-Indigenous and Islander members of the congregation, however, did sign consents and answer questions which were not audio recorded. And two other Non-Indigenous people participated by filling out the survey, returning the survey and consents by mail. There was also a visitor to the church that Sunday who volunteered to share their experience of the sermon that day.

The next research sermon was on January 5, 2020, at Jandowae and Dalby Uniting Churches. The congregation at Jandowae is part of the Dalby parish. The


9 In Australian First People’s groups men’s and women’s business are kept separate. That is not to say that they do not interact, however, it becomes difficult for a man to speak to a woman about what she does; in this case preaching. It must be the women elders who critique a woman’s work or performance. The men can if asked by an elder for feedback pass their feedback through the appropriate process.
minister leads worship and preaches at 8:30 at the small town of Jandowae then leaves shortly after the service to drive to the larger town of Dalby where they lead worship and preach at 10:30. There was no time between service to conduct a focus group discussion at Jandowae, however, a few people took surveys and mailed their consent and responses.

At Dalby, a larger group of people completed the surveys and gave consent for use and a few came for individual interviews on the topic. All but one interview at Dalby were recorded and transcribed. One individual asked to be included but not recorded.

At both locations, the local minister and worship team led the worship as they normally did. The research sermon was preached immediately following the text set for the day.

**Summary**

The process was a simple action/reflection process that occurred in five preaching locations over a period of several months. Surveys were completed at each location and provide statistical method of data collection. Background information was included in the survey for reference and evaluation. The process for collecting and recording additional reflections was different at each location based on the needs of that particular location. Consents for use were received by all participants in the survey and were received for the additional reflections in focus group discussion or interview.
CHAPTER 5
ANALYSIS

Contextual Analysis

Australia is a disaster-prone nation. Queensland, where the research took place and often described as the state with the most natural disasters, is regularly impacted by major cyclone events each year. Of the thirty-seven surveys completed, only four of the survey respondents indicated that they had never experienced a natural disaster. The following is a chart showing of the prevalence of disasters experienced. Most people indicated that they had experienced several types of disaster. The category titled ‘other’ included volcanic eruption, earthquake, tornado and dust storm.

Table 2. Experience of Disasters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Types of Disasters Experienced</th>
<th>Cyclone</th>
<th>Storm</th>
<th>Drought</th>
<th>Bushfire</th>
<th>Flood</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Count</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While Australia does experience man-made disasters, they are not as prevalent compared to other nations. Only a third of the people participating in the survey indicated
they had experienced a man-made disaster. Nearly half of these reports were from the disaster recovery chaplains, who regularly respond to disaster. Of the reports which did not come from the disaster recovery chaplains, the man-made disasters which were reported were climate change, arson, and military action. The disaster recovery chaplains had attended structural collapses, mass shootings, multi-vehicle crashes, arson, and helicopter crash as well as military operations.

The contexts in which the research took place reflected the context of disaster in Queensland and Australia. The majority of people surveyed had experienced at least one type of disaster with most actually having several disaster experiences. The most common Australian disasters, bushfire, flood and drought were well represented as well as a few other disasters, natural and man-made. The people surveyed had significant experience with disasters and were the appropriate people to be participating in this research. Those people who participated in the discussion or interviews were confident in their sharing. A few commented incidentally, that they felt that this was important research.

About half the people who participated could remember a sermon that they had heard at the time of previous disaster experiences. This indicates that they would have something by which to compare as they rated the helpfulness of the sermon they heard as part of the research. The participants were certainly people who had legitimate experience to share in regard to reflecting on a sermon after the disaster. While people may have had experience with hearing sermons after disasters, there were comments that indicated several people were unsure about how they would respond in future disasters.
These comments will be explored further in the context of the discussion or interview in which they took place.

**Survey Respondent Demographics**

Thirty-seven surveys were completed; thirteen identified as male and twenty-three as female. There were no other gender identities reported though one survey did not indicate a gender. According to the National Church Life Survey in 2016, sixty percent of Australian worshippers are women.¹ Demographic of this study, in relation to, gender balance may not be representative of the surrounding community, but it is representative of church attendance. Age demographic of respondents also represents worshiping congregation averages nationally. There was a good and valid cross section of demographics in the sampling of this research. Below is the chart of age distribution of respondents showing that respondents from each age group are represented in the study.

**Table 3. Age Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Demographic</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20 to 29</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30 to 39</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40 to 49</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 to 59</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 to 69</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70 plus</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighty percent of the respondents were members of the Uniting Church in Australia. There were a small number of Lutheran, Catholic and Australian Christian Church (ACC) members. While the sample size of non-UCA participants was small;

there was no discernable impact on the results by denomination. There was not an
anticipate to be different responses by denomination, however, it seemed wise to verify
that assumption.

The cultural demographic was heavily weighted to Australians of European
decent with eighty-six percent identifying culturally as Caucasian. Two were from India.
No Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders completed the survey although they were
included by the interview process and the sermon was tested in a first people’s
congregation.

Australia is a very multicultural nation with ethnic groups from all over the
world. In Queensland, approximately sixteen percent of the population is born overseas.²
Many of the immigrants came to Australia during times of crisis in their home country,
bringing with them varied amounts and types of trauma and responses to that trauma.
This majority of survey participants of European descent; however, there was an
intentional inclusion of the first people’s voice. This research did not capture a good
cross-section of this multi-cultural nation; though it may have come close to representing
the multicultural population of the state itself.

The input from the rural communities outweighed the input from urban
communities in this research. This is appropriate for Queensland, because while most of
the state’s population resides in the Southeast corner of the state, the bulk of the land
mass is rural. Rural people are the people most affected by disaster and generally have

ccept=ASGS_2016&measure=MEASURE&datasetASGS=ABS_REGIONAL_ASGS2016&datasetLGA=
ABS_REGIONAL_LGA2018&regionLGA=LGA_2018&regionASGS=ASGS_2016, accessed on March
12, 2020.
fewer resources. So while the rural communities may have had more input into the results, there was no variation between the opinions of rural and urban respondents. The majority of both groups found the sermon to be helpful as well as indicating that they found the silence to be helpful.

**Sermon Specific Survey Data**

Four sermons were preached in the five locations. Each sermon was based on the set reading from lectionary used by the congregation. Ninety-two percent of the survey participants indicated the sermon preach on the day was helpful. Three did not rate the helpfulness and no one indicated that the sermon was unhelpful. One of the surveys which did not mark on the survey that the sermon was helpful on the day, rated the helpfulness of every category as 1 (unhelpful), whether or not they had marked “yes” that an area was helpful or “no” it was not. This person was a non-English speaker whose husband translated the survey to her. As neither participated in discussion or interview, there is no assurance that the individual had understood the task nor is there any assurance of the validity of the responses. Although this single survey varies greatly from the rest, the results are included in the report as valid. While the validity was questionable, the answers did not change the overall positive response.

It is worth noting that one person wrote a comment on the questionnaire, stating, “All sermons are helpful.” Another person wrote on the survey, “As I am not going through the trauma of a disaster at present, I am not sure if my answers are true and

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accurate.” These comments do warrant some consideration but are also noted as written on the survey and no other context of the comments was given.

While the majority indicated on the survey that the sermon was helpful, there is some variance in the ratings of the level of helpfulness. Most of the ratings (on a scale of one to ten where one was unhelpful and ten was very helpful) were at a helpfulness of five or above and approximately two thirds rated the level of helpfulness at eight or above.

The next table indicates the ratings of helpfulness as a total from all locations. Not all people responding to this question but marked a rating, and vice versa, some marked that it was helpful but did not indicate a rating of the level of helpfulness.

**Table 4. Helpfulness rating of sermon on the day preached**

![Bar chart showing the helpfulness ratings of the sermon.]

The next question on the survey questionnaire is the research question and was specifically included to determine the helpfulness of the silence in the sermon. Eighty-one percent of the respondents felt the silence during the sermon was helpful, while thirteen percent did not. The remainder did not indicate an opinion. There was a varied opinion of how helpful the silence was, with some polarization between those who did...
not think the silence helpful at all and the majority who found it helpful at a rating of eight or above.

This is a very positive outcome. One survey respondent wrote, “Time for reflections. It helped me with reflection of the goodness of God and realizing he is always with me.” It is notable when people take the time to write additional information on a “tick the box” type survey because it generally indicates they feel what they have to say is worth the extra effort. Again, there were a several surveys that indicated the silence was helpful and did not rate how helpful and vice versa; those who rated the silence and did not mark yes or no that the silence was helpful. A chart of the total results follows:

Table 5. Helpfulness rating of silence in today’s sermon

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How Helpful Was The Silence In Today's Sermon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the results indicated the silence was helpful, with the degree of helpfulness varied by preaching location. Because the helpfulness of silence during the
sermon is the key to this research, it is important to look further into the variances. The next series of tables indicate the results by location.

The following table shows the ratings of the level of helpfulness of the silence by the disaster recovery chaplains. The ratings for the helpfulness of the silence were relatively high. The chaplains acknowledged that they are possibly more comfortable with silence because of their formation experiences.

**Table 6. AVECA rating of the helpfulness of silence**

The group surveyed in Toowoomba was small. At Toowoomba, one survey rated the silence helpful but did not indicate how unhelpful. Another survey left the question and rating blank. This was a more neutral response to the silence. There was robust discussion around this variation which will be explored further however, overall the ratings are all five or over.

**Table 7. Toowoomba rating of the helpfulness of silence**
There were two surveys returned from Zillmere by mail. Both were immigrants and one survey was from the wife who did not speak English; the husband said he would translate it for her. This survey was marked that, yes, the silence was helpful however, the number one was circled on all ratings whether or not the question was marked as helpful. No other surveys were completed though the conversations with the elder’s indicated that the silence was helpful. While the Zillmere results may seem skewed, it made no significant impact to the totals.

**Table 8. Zillmere rating of the helpfulness of silence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zillmere How Helpful Was The Silence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following the sermon in Jandowae, two surveys were returned immediately after the sermon and two were received by mail. While the sermon overall was rated as helpful, regarding the helpfulness of silence, the results were split, as the next table shows. At Jandowae, there was no time for discussions or interviews so there is no indication available as to reasons for the results.

**Table 9. Jandowae rating of the helpfulness of silence**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Jandowae How Helpful Was The Silence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Dalby had the highest participation in the surveys of any of the congregations. This is partly due to the fact that this location was experiencing disaster and people were engaged in the topic. Though surveys had already been completed, the local minister reminded the people at the morning fellowship following the service that they had agreed to participate so a few more surveys were completed. Again, overall, people rated the silence helpful with two people rating the helpfulness as low. The low ratings were not mentioned by anyone during the interviews.

Table 10. Dalby rating of the helpfulness of silence

![Bar chart showing Dalby How Helpful Was The Silence]  

Again, there is a minority for which the sermon was rated as being helpful but the silence was not rated as particularly helpful. There is no explanation given for this disconnect within the surveys.

The issues with silence at some locations are considered to be similar to those issues expressed during the discussion in Toowoomba. The small group in Toowoomba engaged in robust discussion whereby the first silence was determined to be too long and the second silence was a better length. Also, the longer silence was spent on the struggle and it was suggested that the longer silence be best used for the experience of grace. There seemed agreement in the Toowoomba group that those changes would have made the experience better and more helpful. It is possible that these corrections would create an even broader acceptance of the silence in other locations.
Overall, the low ratings of the helpfulness of silence are in the minority with the majority rating the level of helpfulness at five or greater in all locations. This response combined with the fact the sermon itself was rated as helpful by nearly all, would seem to indicate that the silence while not helpful for some was not a significant distractor from the impact of the whole of the sermon. Based on the survey results alone, there was a positive response to the helpfulness of silence in the sermon.

The third question on the survey asked based on their past experience of a disaster, if people thought the type of sermon which they had just heard would be helpful after a disaster. Eighty-nine percent of the responses indicated that the sermon they heard would be helpful after a disaster. Eight percent did not believe the sermon would be helpful. There were several who did not respond to this question. The ratings of how helpful showed a variety of opinion regarding how helpful the sermon would be. One person wrote several comments on the survey about how prayer and fasting would help a person empathize with others experiencing disaster. Then stated, “’Mere silence’ without any action by word or deed is questionable.” There were a couple of other comments written onto surveys regarding perceived helpfulness after a disaster. They were “depending on context” and “yes, to a Christian audience.” These are interesting comments suggesting perhaps, silence in a sermon would only be helpful to Christians.

The next table indicate the results of the ratings of helpfulness this sermon might be immediately following a disaster.
Table 11. Helpfulness of today's sermon after a disaster

Because Dalby was experiencing disaster in the form of drought and bushfire at the time of the research, the results to this question from that location are of particular interest. The Dalby results for this question reflects a similar opinion as demonstrated by the total from all locations; some of which have had years pass since they have experienced a disaster. This fact would seem to validate the opinions of respondents from the other locations. The majority of people for which some time had passed since their disaster experience believed that this sermon type would be helpful after a disaster. The people who were actually experiencing disaster gave very similar ratings to the helpfulness of this type sermon after a disaster; confirming the opinions of people in the not earlier disaster-affected communities.

There were two comments written on Dalby surveys: “visuals would help keep people's focus. Power point note.” and “disasters are all around us as people are suffering. And we all feel for all who are suffering.” While these may not be specifically directed toward the silence, they are worth noting as they indicate that people were engaged in the
research process. Below is the table with the Dalby results rating the helpfulness of this type of sermon following a disaster which reflect the results of the totals.

Table 12. Dalby helpfulness of today’s sermon after a disaster

The final survey question sought to determine how important people believed their faith to be in their healing or recovery following a disaster. Ninety-five percent responded that faith was important to healing with nearly two-thirds of those indicating the highest rating of importance (ten).

**Focus Discussion and Interview Analysis**

The first group discussion was held with emergency volunteer chaplains, AVECA at its annual meeting in Melbourne, Victoria. 4 This group was very positive about the project in general. Any well developed and tested resource which helps a local preacher after a disaster is highly supported. This group was asked an additional discussion question; whether the preparation of a sermon of this type would be helpful to the preacher after a disaster. There was a positive response and agreement that the preparation would be helpful to a disaster-affected preacher.

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4 The recording failed and the transcript was typed from the handwritten notes.
In notes from the discussion one minister commented, “Prepared sermons are extremely valuable. In my experience in the disaster, the local ministers are also affected. They are weary and tired and often very busy and taking time out to refine and choose their words carefully doesn’t happen. What they can say then sounds like platitudes or judgement. Creating a pre-prepared resource will help take the edge off the language that can sound harsh. There can also be the trend to over exegete, to try to explain away or justify God. How the gospel is presented is also important and can be compromised in the rush of disaster recovery. This allows the opportunity to be raw, and that is therapeutic.”

One person commented that ministers and chaplains are generally okay with silence as part of their self-reflection; and planning silence into a sermon will help them to slow down and process their own experience and situation. There was general agreement with this comment. This is an important comment to consider because this research is intended to help the weary preacher. This comment indicates the potential for a duel benefit: one, a resource which makes sermon preparation less stressful, and two, the preparation itself being cathartic.

When asked if the sermon was helpful, there was a comment that the context for silence is important; that churches during seasons such as Lent often find silence acceptable, however the context must be considered. This indicated that some congregations may not be as comfortable with silence as others and some church seasons lend themselves to greater comfort with silence.

There was discussion of public use of silence. It was mentioned that the military uses a minute of silence as do community war commemoration services. One minister believed that silence is universal and told a story of a community who came together for
an hour-long silent vigil after an event of violence in their community. And further stated it was remarkable; nearly 1,000 people standing for over an hour in silent respect, doing their own thinking and reflecting.

When asked if the silence was helpful in this sermon, there was agreement that it was helpful. Comments followed that the sermon was helpful because it did not pass over the dilemma. There was the acknowledgment of war (the disaster named in the sermon) and the opportunity to be angry and honest. The church was not named as the solution and the sermon named Jesus as the healer in present tense. “We are transformed, and we be the image of God.”

It was also noted that the silence was helpful because the issue is not the same for all people. Not everyone asks, “Where is God?” The issue for some people is pain. The sermon is about God, but the silence allowed people to go where they needed to go. It was noted that after the Black Saturday fires in Victoria that the theological response, repent and be healed, was abrasive. We cannot assume all people want God when they are in pain. It was mentioned that it was important that the silence was not named as prayer. It was thought that naming the silence would likely have lessened the impact. It was noted that we are called to comfort one another; and this sermon allowed for that comfort to occur.

There was a suggestion that some individuals may be uncomfortable with the silence; that perhaps young people who are so involved with sensory type technology may struggle with silence. Suggestions of corrective actions followed; a debate about the helpful and unhelpful aspects of music playing in the background. There were also
comments about the helpfulness of ritual, for instance, bringing tokens or lighting of candles might be used during the silences.

As chaplains they were asked if they would use this type of sermon; three indicated that they would not be likely to use it, the remaining six were very open to using it and two told me (after the discussion during the break) that they were adopting it for use in their context when they arrived back home from this event.

Two preachers shared texts they had used after disasters in the past which were suitable for use post-disaster; “By rivers of Babylon (Psalm 137:1)” and “the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:5).” One person mentioned that the sermon form could be used in many types of disasters, natural and man-made, maybe even in the event of child sex abuse in a church or community.

The chair of the meeting closed the discussion with this comment, “Again, I mention that a framework to pull off the shelf will be extremely helpful. It is a ministry tool to put into our resource toolbox. That is the point of this group, to resource ministry in the disaster and this is an important piece of work. I thank you for taking on this project.” Overall, there was good support for the project and for the inclusion of silence in the sermon.

The second group discussion was in my home congregation, St. Stephens Uniting Church Toowoomba. The group began the discussion by talking about what they believed was important to their recovery after a disaster; things like community, family, and faith. One commented that a gathering of people who experienced the same event and were likeminded is helpful and that we are not “Robinson Crusoe.” It was the simple act of gathering together which was important. One person stated that they came to church
looking for hope. That they didn’t blame God but simply needed to come to the sacred space, to be with God, one on one, and to be in the loving support of community.

When asked if the sermon was helpful, one commented that they found strength in the sermon they had just heard and they had found that helpful, however, they had needed hope after the flood and would have liked to have heard more hope in this sermon. One commented that the trauma of people leaving Egypt was a bit difficult to relate to. The choice of text was the likely factor for both these comments. Some texts will be more suited to this type of sermon than others.

Regarding the silence, it was discussed that perhaps the longer time should be on the grace and shorter time of silence spent on the trouble, or even perhaps putting the grace first might give it more emphasis. This suggests that the more helpful period of silence was the second silence on “page four.” It was also noted by the group that language of silence or quiet time might be more personal than a call to prayer, particularly when guided into the sharing of personal issues. This comment affirmed the AVECA chaplain comment that is was important not to call the time of silence prayer.

There was discussion about the helpfulness of the length of time, some desired more time of silence and one indicated they desired less time. There was the acknowledgment that some people may not cope well with silence. This was followed by a discussion of how to make the silence easier adding by music or placing instructions on the screen about what to do in the silence. One person commented that is was not so much that silence is uncomfortable, for them it is simply is less helpful.

One person was concerned that given silence, some people’s minds might wander in unhelpful ways. Another countered that there were instructions and that the silence was
guided. Another agreed that there was a risk of people dragging themselves down, however, commented that silence is important to slow down and be calm. There was agreement then that the silences should not be too long and that the guidance was important. There was a comment that children are often left out and wondering how they would respond.

Another potential risk which was pointed out was in regard to the whole of the liturgy. One person shared that only a couple of weeks after the flood, the song with lyrics, “let justice roll like a river” was part of the worship service. They had found these words confronting because they had just literally been washed away during the flood waters and had to remind themselves that justice was different. The point was that care must be taken in the selection of hymns and words of prayers for some time following the event.

One person shared the positive impact of preaching they had heard during disaster relief in Indonesia after a horrible military action. The military chaplains set up a service daily where recovery was happening with people who were not Christian or even English speakers. The chaplains spoke of faith in God and of the purpose for helping each other and everyone seemed to find it helpful. Even those who did not understand stood and took in the moment.

There was general agreement that this type of sermon using silence with a text more specific to a disaster event would be helpful for most people. There would be the expectation that the disaster be acknowledged and that the people would gather to gain strength and hope and not be given platitudes.
The group discussion in Toowoomba indicated that community and gathering in sacred space, a coming before God is also important to recovery. As well as the sermon, there is healing in gathering together with people of like experience. There is value in the whole of the worship service. The implication is that while the sermon itself was helpful, perhaps the worship service experience in its entirety is helpful. This comment seems to be supported by the data that a large percentage of people indicated their faith was important to their recovery.

The importance of gathering coupled with the comment on the impact of song lyrics may indicate that it is not only important for a sermon form to be available; but also that it is important that the worship service resources designed for use after a disaster be readily available to worship leaders and ministers; and be considered for use for some time after the disaster. Perhaps even training for ministers in planning the post-disaster worship service and preaching should be recommended.

There was no a focus group discussion following the third sermon at the first people’s congregation but instead conversations were held with the elders and a few individuals who attended the service. The elder who led worship this day was very affirming of the sermon using silence. She said, “Silence is appropriate at times and is in fact important, particularly in times of distress, to sit quietly with God.” She stated that the silence in this sermon was helpful and thanked me for preaching. She was also appreciative that they were included in the research project.

The congregation itself seemed very comfortable with silence as there were long moments of silence between the sharing of testimonies during the service. Each testimony was heard then significant time passed before the next testimony was given.
This practice seemed to be the typical for worship in this congregation. The worship leader did not step in to fill the silence nor continued the service until several minutes passed without someone volunteering to speak.

A woman not associated with the congregation, who was visiting from another denomination, confirmed that she felt the silence in the sermon was helpful and stated that people need time to sit and absorb what has been said and need time to speak to God and hear God during the worship.

There was a comment written on a survey from this congregation stating, “Aboriginal and Islander people live simply. For them any disaster can be coped by them easily, unlike materialist people. They have learnt to live with nature. ‘Small is beautiful.’” This person was not an “Aboriginal or Islander” however, has been associated with the congregation for some time.

The fourth sermon at the Jandowae Uniting Church did not have a discussion group because of the limited time before travel to the next congregation, however, four surveys were returned and were include in the data analysis.

After the fifth sermon at Dalby Uniting Church, individuals came and answered the discussion questions as interviews. One woman specifically asked not to be in a group discussion or recorded as she was going through a personal disaster, however, she wanted to provide feedback for the research. She said, “I want you to know that the sermon and the silence was powerful.” She indicated that during the sermon she found an opportunity to have time with God and receive comfort and even healing. She thanked me. She gave consent to include her comments but not to be recorded. She believed she was too fragile
to participate in conversation with others, but she wanted to be sure I knew that she had been helped.

In one interview, it was pointed out that Australians rely on their sense of humor. They were unsure if this fact is appropriate but noted there is the tendency to make light of things in the “madness.” This suggests that there may also be space for humor during the sermon and opportunity to address some of the joys as well as the suffering.

This respondent believed the silence was helpful because it was important to stop and take time to think about what has happened. It was the “presence of God,” that struck them, “in the silence to actually still everything and feel his (sic) presence is what gets lost in the drama.”

They also noted that it was helpful to note the joy and sadness, the contrast of Christmas with their reality; that “joy and sadness, the two always seem to be walking side by side in life.” This person was also honest believing that they were not really in a position to comment on the helpfulness of this type sermon after a disaster because they were not disaster-affected at this time. They believed it difficult to predict how they or anyone else will respond in any given circumstance. In this experience they found it easy to slide into silence and feel God’s presence “wrap around” them and they wondered if they would have the space to do that immediately after a disaster. They commented that in brokenness sometimes it is challenging to recognize God, even when offered in silence. They left me with the encouragement they had been given, “You only need to reach the heart of one person. If you have done that then you know you have done God’s work for that day.”
In another interview at Dalby, a young man spoke to me at the door following worship and told of how the bushfire a week earlier had reached his house and was stopped by neighbors before the house was consumed. He showed photos from his phone to illustrate the moment. He then indicated that he wanted to participate in an interview.

During the interview, he stated the sermon was good because it talked about the situation and did not ignore it, “even when the drought has been going on so long it is important that it is brought up because everyone is dealing with it.”

He commented that the silence was good. And stated that in some sermons when you need to concentrate your mind wanders, “the silence was good because it brought you back; it kept you listening. Sometimes at the end of a twenty or thirty-minute sermon, at the end you have forgotten what was at the beginning; this was good. It was a good time limit.”

There were several points that were common among most discussions and interviews. One point was that silence can be challenging for some people in some circumstances or contexts. There was concern that if the silence is too long, people’s minds could wander or could move into more negative thoughts. These comments were made in general and only one person stated that the longer silence became less helpful for them but that the shorter time was fine. Each group, after acknowledging that some may have issue with silence, immediately went into discussion about how to solve that or how to make the silence more palatable; for example, playing very quiet, unknown music in the background.

There was general agreement that while the participants themselves found the whole experience of the sermon helpful on the day, it was challenging to predict whether
or not it would be helpful after a disaster. There was general agreement that the silence would likely be helpful because it is important to slow down and spend time with God, however, there was also acknowledgement that silence may be difficult to enter into if a person was overly distressed. People agreed that the fact that the silence was guided helped to make the silence easier to be part of or to enter into.

Although there were a few people who indicated that the silence was less helpful, the majority found the sermon and the silence helpful. During discussions with the chaplains and in Toowoomba, most marked the sermon and silence helpful; however, it was perceived by the groups that for some people the silence may not be helpful. People in the discussion groups seemed concerned that silence is not universally accepted, particularly by youth. The responses on the survey would seem to indicate that this is less of a problem than perceived by those in the conversations.

During the discussions, the postulation that some may not find silence helpful was immediately followed by attempts to make the silence more palatable for those who may be uncomfortable. These are the people who are comfortable with silence, who believe that the silence is valuable, attempting to allow others to experience what they experience. While the concerns were important to be voiced, it likely inappropriate to solve theoretical problems without first verifying the problem and receiving input from those involved.

The one person who declared some discomfort with silence acknowledged that the shorter time was not uncomfortable. Though silence may not be as valuable to them as for others, they were willing to participate in a short silence. This person did not want
to be accommodated by music or visual aid, they simply did not want to sit in the quiet for more than a minute, a duration which they deemed was sufficient.

The belief held by many in the discussion that some people are uncomfortable with a short time of silence was not validated in this research. The study indicated no discomfort with the silence but rather indicated that for some the silence is not as helpful.

**The Tension Between Theodicy and Theophany**

The tension between theodicy and theophany was highlighted most by the interviews in the disaster-affected community of Dalby. There was a comment about “joy and sadness walking together” and a further comment about the importance of acknowledging the situation which they are in even when it is long-term disaster like drought. There was no indication that people struggled with the question of why? Or that they felt they need to challenge God. There was no indication that they were experiencing a crisis of faith but rather that faith was important for them to keep going and that it had been an important during recovery in the past.

It was noted by one person a discussion group that they remembered a sermon that only seemed to focus on disaster event which had happened. They believed that focus was helpful in one way, in that they were not alone in their pain but they also commented that in the long run it was not helpful to dwell on the disaster, but rather, that there could have been more hope or more help in moving forward from the event.

These comments are in line with the theology stated earlier. There is the need to acknowledge the condition or situation of disaster and there is also need for individuals to state their condition or brokenness. This is not in order to dwell but is part of the movement from one’s present state toward recovery. It would seem that the preacher
needs to understand the question of theodicy well enough to allow it to be presented in
the background of the statement of trouble (page one and two of the four pages) in the
sermon but not to allow it to take over or be the focus of the sermon. As one of the
disaster recovery chaplains commented, “we simply do not know what people’s issue
might be; and so, it best to empower them to express their concerns to God in their own
terms and to feel God’s presence according to their need.” It seems apparent that both the
disaster and the hope of God must be given their place.

**Analysis of the Sermons**

The sermons were kept intentionally simple. They held a very loose or basic four-
page format, with two silences. A longer silence for people to express their ‘trouble’ and
a shorter silence for people to sit in God’s presence. The final tool produced from this
research will need to be simple, or a fatigued disaster-affected preacher will not use it.

The texts used for the sermons were from the lectionary used by the location
where the sermon occurred. There were three sermons that used the New Testament texts
and one sermon came from the Old Testament. Some texts were easier to use than others,
in terms of finding a trouble in the text which related to disaster. The second sermon text
was from the narrative lectionary, an Old Testament text, and there was a comment that it
was difficult to relate to the trauma of leaving Egypt. The disaster recovery chaplains
offered their experience of using Psalm 137 and John 1.

The last research sermon was in fact using John 1, which was one of the Revised
Common Lectionary readings for after Christmas. The disaster recovery chaplain had

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5I owe Dr. Wilson an apology for over-simplifying a very good sermon form.
used this text near Christmas as well at the one-year anniversary of the Martin Place siege in Sydney. This text does indeed work well following a disaster, and particularly, during the season of Christmas, though it will likely be helpful in most disaster situations regardless of the season.

As the research process was drawn out over a long period of time, about ten months, there was time to practice and refine the form. The first sermon used a story of the confronting history of Guam and World War II, however, that image was not carried through the entire sermon and was mentioned only at the beginning. It is likely there would have been more impact by more closely following the four-page sermon instructions of using descriptive images that carry through the sermon as movement in a movie. More experience using the form will produce better sermons, however, as all the respondents said the sermon and most indicated the silence was helpful, it seems that the silence will be helpful regardless of the experience of the preacher or the quality of the sermon.

By the time of the development of last sermon on John, the image of light was carried through the entire sermon. The last sermon was better than the first, however, the first was still evaluated as a helpful sermon and the silence too, was evaluated as being helpful. The first sermon was being evaluated by experienced preachers who grasped the value of what the form was trying to accomplish and may have been focusing on the helpfulness of the silence. Early adoption by the chaplains to use in their contexts indicate that the form was useful despite the practiced use of the form. They were also aware that this was the first trial of the sermon form so there is the possibility that they recognized potential rough spots and evaluated the form for its own value.
After the conclusion of the focus group discussion, two of the disaster recovery chaplains indicated that they would be adapting the form. One chaplain later provided feedback on the use of the form, indicating that while the sermon was helpful there was too much going on during the rest of the service which limited its impact. The chaplain acknowledged that in their planning for the service, they were trying to address too many situations by ceremonious acts as well as addressing the pain in the community. It was thought that the sermon would have had far more impact had it been the only situation being addressed.

The sermon itself, while simple in form, is impacted by the rest of the service. It would be advisable after a disaster to focus only on the fact that there has been a disaster in the local community and not be drawn into trying to acknowledge or celebrate other commemorations or events.

**Beyond the Discussions**

After the discussion with the disaster recovery chaplains, during a break in the day’s meetings, two of the chaplains indicated they were taking the form home to use in their context; this represents early adoption of the form. One was being taken to a conflicted congregation where the minister was in an Intentional Interim Placement. The other chaplain was planning to use the form to end a specific series of preaching which was focused on healing in a community that had had suffered several tragedies in quick succession.

One person from the same AVECA group, handed me a note during the break which said, “I loved the text you brought us today and the delivery was deliberate, and I
felt it was powerful. It touched my heart, caused me to consider the state of the lost and also the goodness of God—slow to anger and abounding in love. Well done!”

Prior to preaching at AVECA, the research sermon was preached at my home congregation, St. Stephen’s Toowoomba on March 3, 2019 for Transfiguration Sunday. A visitor at the door of the church following the service commented that he had come from the Missouri Synod Lutheran background and that this sermon was “positively inspiring” and that he would happily drive the two hours once per month to be so inspired. His wife agreed and offered to do the driving.

In conversation about this research with an Australian Army Chaplain, he indicated that when the military says one minute of silence that the silence will last 45 seconds. If they indicate that there will be two minutes of silence the silence will last 90 seconds. He believed that because of the practice of holding “a minute of silence” regardless of the actual length in memorial type services, that people are accustomed to using silence for a particular purpose and he, in fact, thought most people would deem it to be important.

**Summary**

Surveys were collected from five preaching locations. The overall results strongly indicated that the sermon preached on the day was helpful. The results also strongly indicated that the silence in the sermon was helpful. There was some variation as to the level of helpfulness of the silence which was rated on a scale from one to ten with one being the lowest. The majority of respondents rated the level of helpfulness of the silence

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6 I asked permission to use the comments of the note and was given verbal consent. The name of the person is withheld by mutual agreement.
over the rating of five. The surveys also indicated that the majority of respondents believed that a sermon of this type would be helpful after a disaster. There was some variation in the rating of how helpful this type of sermon would be after a disaster, though the overall rating suggests that the majority believed that a sermon of this type would be helpful after a disaster.

A focus group type discussion was held at two of the locations. Both groups articulated the overall helpfulness of the sermon and silence. Both groups discussed potential risks and offered potential mitigation for the perceived risks.

Several interviews were conducted at two of the locations. These participants found the sermon and the silence very helpful and appropriate. The comments indicated that it was good to acknowledge both the disaster and the hope. They acknowledged the challenge of the post-disaster setting and challenge of predicting even their own response after a disaster.
CHAPTER 6
EVALUATION

The Process

The research process was to be simple: arrange preaching opportunities in communities which had previously been affected by a disaster, hand out surveys and consents, and invite interest people to participate in a brief discussion. This process worked at the AVECA conference and it worked in my home congregation.

There were expected to be some differences in the research process with the First People’s congregation because it is the elders who speak on behalf of the group and because of their reluctance to be recorded. Because these differences were known at the onset, the process would be adjusted for that context. It also meant that there was no particular way to plan a research process for this congregation other than to allow the opportunity to unfold.

What was unexpected was the difficulty in completing the remainder of the research as had been planned in communities which had experienced disaster at some time period in the past. In the end, because of the unfolding severe disasters in many Queensland communities, the prearranged preaching opportunities were cancelled. In
order to complete the project, the last sermons were presented in communities which were actually experiencing disaster in the form of severe drought and bushfire. ¹

People in the disaster-affected community of Dalby were not willing to have a group discussion. One person clearly articulated the concern with words like, “I am too fragile to speak in a group, but I want you to know…” This fact meant that the conversations were with individuals who were willing to share one-on-one rather than participate in a focus group discussion. I believe this an appropriate adaptation to the process considering that the setting was in a disaster-affected community rather than a more hypothetical discussion as originally planned.

These few people shared their thoughts because the topic mattered to them. There was a sense of deep importance to them that someone would care enough to seek to learn what is helpful. It seemed to empower them to know that they were helping people who would go through disaster in the future. These comments are not supported by evidence in the research but were clearly affirmed in comments passed on at the fellowship following worship: words of thanks for researching preaching after disaster, thanks for caring, thanks for making an effort to hear their story or letting their stories be heard. The support was shown by the greater number of people who filled out surveys even if they did not feel in a position to speak openly.

The unexpected factors not only affected how information was collected but also meant that the research took a long time to complete. It meant that several weeks would have been needed to complete the research. Early in discussion of this research, there was great concern from colleagues that there would not be disaster events to research. I assured them, that there had been enough in the past to test a form before going into the disaster setting which was preferable. The reality was there were so many disasters that it was difficult to be invited into someone else’s space for research. Communities were overwhelmed. I was asked over and over by local preachers who didn’t want research in their community, that once the form was complete “Could they have a copy?”

¹ Early in discussion of this research, there was great concern from colleagues that there would not be disaster events to research. I assured them, that there had been enough in the past to test a form before going into the disaster setting which was preferable. The reality was there were so many disasters that it was difficult to be invited into someone else’s space for research. Communities were overwhelmed. I was asked over and over by local preachers who didn’t want research in their community, that once the form was complete “Could they have a copy?”
pass between each opportunity to preach, and as a result the completion of research project was delayed.

One consequence of having a great deal of time between the research sermon presentations and the reality of disaster for some communities was that each research opportunity was completely different than expected. The first sermon in a congregation was actually a group discussion as planned while the other congregations afforded a few surveys and interviews.

Another consequence of the extended time period for research was that there was more opportunity to feed information forward into the next sermon. Because there was more time between each sermon to evaluate the results of the previous research, that information could be fed into the next sermon preparation. This led to reasonable improvement not only in the sermon form itself, but also the in delivery of the form.

Because of the extended time and extreme circumstances, no two focus group discussions were the same; the idea of group discussions was by necessity set aside and individual interviews took place. Conversations were held and where possible recorded and where not recorded notes were taken, all with consent of the participants. The results of discussion, comments and interviews took longer to evaluate because the feedback came in different forms; however, the data collection process using the survey did not change. The survey process was consistent for each preaching event. Surveys and consents were handed out, completed and returned. The data from the surveys was recorded by site.
**Strengths**

This sermon form proved helpful. One survey had a written note saying, “All sermons are helpful.” This should be very true, as any biblical preaching which proclaims God’s Word in hope should be helpful, however, in reality not all sermons are helpful. It was noted by the disaster recovery chaplains that the “repent and be healed” type of sermon was “abrasive” in a post-disaster setting. The sermon message must be one in which there is a balance between the topics of suffering and hope. The use of this form will ensure that there is such a balance.

While as Jeter suggested the form used for a post-disaster biblical sermon should not make significant difference to its helpfulness, the results of this research demonstrated that using this form is helpful. Furthermore, it was perceived that it would also be helpful after a disaster. Using this form to prepare a sermon after a disaster serves as a corrective to one which may be rushed in preparation and potentially sound abrasive, judgmental or simply platitudinal.

Comments from the disaster recovery chaplains mentioning that the sermon was “about God” and that the sermon “named Jesus as healer” seem to indicate that the form promotes Biblical preaching. The trouble comes from the text as does the hope. By using a standard form there is less room for extraneous comments on the nature of the disaster or theologies which are unhelpful, such as “repent and be healed”. The use of the four-page sermon form as a foundation for sermons after a disaster is a strength; it helps to ensure preaching remains biblical.

Overall, the inclusion of two periods of silence in the research sermon form was proven helpful. Although in the survey, a few indicated the silence unhelpful, there were
no comments available to determine why that might be and if there was a corrective. Instead, in discussion, there were comments which indicated it was not the silence itself that was unhelpful but rather the length of the first time of silence which was unpleasant. The majority of respondents found the silence helpful in varied degrees. This is supported by the fact that the sermon itself was found helpful on the day it was preached. Overall, the survey indicated that the sermon and its form which included silence was very helpful.

The people who indicated silence was less helpful were people were of European descent, while other cultures including the Australian First People were far more comfortable with periods of silence. It would seem that this form may have more impact in some cultures than others. The elder at Zillmere indicated that the use of silence was not only important but also necessary.

As the experience of coming before God and being in community are both important after a disaster, it is appropriate then that the silence should be framed in such a way that allows people to corporately be in God’s presence. The first time of silence allows the lament, expression of pain or wrestling with questions and the second period of silence allows the warmth and love of God to ‘wrap’ around people. It is a strength that allows people to be in community, all together, being cared for by God. This sermon allows God to be God and does not anthropomorphize God.

Using this form as a sermon template will allow consistent language to form and guide the entry into and the exit from the silence. The words of hope can come directly from the text and people can be encouraged to sit in that hope. This ensures that the
sermon is Biblical in nature and does not allow room for platitudes or “abrasive” theology.

More importantly by allowing people to enter into silence, the preacher gives people control over their individual narratives. People have the opportunity to shift their own narrative from a place of pain or hopelessness to that place of hope or comfort. Empowering people to control their narrative is preferable to offering pat answers. Yet the preacher offers boundaries for the individual’s expression of lament and hope from the biblical text and sound theology.

After the impact of disaster, the community needs the space to acknowledge the reality of life in general and needs even more space for hope. This sermon form did satisfy on both accounts, the joy and the sadness. It allowed both to sit in tension without judgement of right or wrong for feeling one way or the other. The final form of the sermon will be modified per the suggestions raised in discussion to allow slightly more time of sitting in the hope (page four of the sermon). Sancken states that preaching for healing is grounded on earth but that it is also to be “gravity defying”, lifting our perspective to God in the world then a counter-reality to the world can be imagined. This research suggests perhaps this can happen in the silence.  

Another strength is that this form is flexible. The preaching form that uses silence based on the Four Pages of the Sermon will be flexible enough to accommodate many biblical texts. The disaster-affected preacher will not necessarily need to depart from the set lectionary or planned text. They can still use any preparation which they may have

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2 Sancken, Healing, 85.
already done and simply organize the sermon into a set form. This has the potential to be a great benefit to the preacher who is disaster-affected.

Additionally, the form is flexible enough to be used in many contexts such including post-disaster but also in other contexts of trauma. Chaplains have already adopted the form for use in congregations with conflict or community trauma apart from disaster. It was suggested that it would be suitable for use in a community which had become aware of child sexual abuse which occurred in the community. There is a wide application beyond the post-disaster setting.

**Weaknesses**

There was general discussion in the two focus groups about how helpful the silence would be to youth. Young adults who participated in the research indicated a helpfulness. However, it is open to question as to whether or not the use of silence during a sermon is helpful to youth. Because of their vulnerability during disasters, children and adolescents have specific needs during recovery. This project was not designed to answer this question and more research will need to be completed in order to make a clear determination.

There were children in congregations. Some of the respondents and participants in conversations were parents of young children. They did not make any assessment or negative comment that the silences were a problem for their children; neither did they mention that their children received any benefit. It is reasonable to expect if there had been a negative experience for a child that the parents would bring that to attention.

Research regarding the needs of adolescents following disasters indicate teenagers do need ‘their’ space after a disaster. Younger children need physical contact. It is
conceivable that both groups will benefit from a guided silence which gives youth their space and allows younger children to be ‘held’ by God. More research will be needed to verify this conjecture. It is a recommendation that further study be undertaken to determine the helpfulness for children of using silence during a sermon.

Another factor that may be considered a weakness is that it is difficult to evaluate a sermon’s helpfulness in isolation from the whole of the worship experience. The music and the prayers all fit together to make the entire worship experience on the day feel helpful and healing. The complete worship service, from call to worship to benediction matters. There was general agreement from the responses that the sermon preached on the day was helpful though there was slight disagreement on how helpful. The same was said of the silence. It is possible that there was difficulty distinguishing between the helpfulness of the sermon and the helpfulness of the entire experience.

Preaching in the context of the AVECA meeting took the sermon outside of the whole worship experience; however, the group at AVECA are preachers. They were intentionally evaluating a form for helpfulness and for potential use by disaster-affected preachers. They evaluated the form for helpfulness to them, acknowledging that they are comfortable with silence as part of their disciplines. If taken out of the results the sample size may be too small to make appropriate judgments.

It was noted in feedback by one of the chaplains who had adopted the form that when there were many other events happening in a worship service that the form lost

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some of its impact. That is not to say it had no impact; but the recommendation was that this form be used as the sole focus or feature of a worship service.

It is, therefore, a recommendation that immediately following a disaster, should this sermon form be used, there should be no other events as part of the service, such as inductions, commissionings, commemorations, or other events. It is recommended for that the service immediately after the disaster or trauma, that the disaster/trauma event be allowed to hold center stage. It is important to set aside a particular time so that people are allowed to acknowledge that the event has happened and enter into a time of healing with each other and with God.

**Suggested Improvements**

The discussion group participants who found the silence less helpful indicated that the shorter of the two time periods was more suitable for their needs. It is likely that the Army chaplain is correct in his belief that people have become accustomed to the experience of holding a minute of silence because of the established practices during memorial services, particularly on ANZAC Day and Remembrance Day. The survey indicated that though the silences for some was not helpful, conversations indicated that there is a tolerance for a short period of a minute of silence.

One of the changes then, will be that both times of silence during the sermon will be of a duration of about one-minute. This may be lengthened at the discretion of the

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4 ANZAC day is the holiday which commemorates the Australian New Zealand Army Corps’ landing at Gallipoli, Turkey and marks the anniversary of the first major military action fought by Australian and New Zealand forces in World War I. For more information on ANZAC Day, see https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/anzac-day. Remembrance Day is the holiday on November 11 which commemorates the end of World War I and is similar to Veterans Day in the United States. For more information on Australian Remembrance Day, see https://www.awm.gov.au/commemoration/remembrance-day.
preacher for some contexts are more accustomed to using silence. For instance, the first people’s congregation which participated in the research were more comfortable with a longer time of silence. If the preacher were to consider lengthening the time of silence, they should give priority to lengthening the second silence to allow people to sit and experience God’s love ‘wrap around’ them. There was conversation that indicated a preference for the longer time to be spent in hope.

It may be tempting to leave out the first silence all together. There was no indication that doing so would be of any benefit. People indicated it was important to acknowledge the situation of disaster and there were no negative comments about the silent opportunity to speak troubles to God. As it was indicated that two minutes many have been too long, a shorter period was believed to be a benefit. The silence did not seem to be a distractor; therefore, it would be unnecessary to leave the first out and might even lessen the impact of the sermon form.

It may also be tempting to fill the silence with music, visual or symbolic action. Music or symbolic actions being added to the silence is not a recommendation that comes out of this study. The silence did not seem to be a distractor. During the discussions there were more comments about music distracting people from the task of reflection than there were comments regarding the silence being unhelpful. The visual in the form of onscreen projection slide with and image for reflection or instructions for the silence, may be an option as people will look out the window or at something within the worship space anyway. There would little harm in projecting an image on the screen or instructions regarding what to reflect on in the silence.
There are resources available regarding the silence of God. While the silence of God could be considered for research in relation to post-disaster preaching, it is not, in my experience, something that is mentioned by people after a disaster. God being silent was not a concern of any of the participants and was not mentioned by disaster recovery chaplains as a concern people articulate.

There are potential intersections between this research that should be explored. Positive psychology may have insights into the potential helpfulness of silence during a sermon. The overall well-being of the trauma-affected person with was not specifically addressed in this research. Words and silences that heal contribute to the whole person, however, there will need to be research regarding the long-term impact of trauma-aware preaching and other specific preaching responses to disaster.

**Summary**

The sermon form tested has several strengths. It promotes Biblical preaching under circumstances where preachers may find it challenging to have the time and/or energy for sermon preparation. It is a sermon that promotes healing and for a few respondents was named as ‘powerful’. It is adaptable to situations of trauma beyond the post-disaster context.

The sermon was not tested for its potential helpfulness for children. It is recommended that further study to be conducted regarding the needs of children in worship and preaching following a disaster.

The sermon can be less effective because of distractors in the whole of the worship service, so thought should be given to the preparation of the whole of the worship service following disaster and it is suggested that guidelines be developed.
The duration of the silences should be modified. Both periods of silence during the sermon should be approximately one minute with the option of extending the second period, so that more time can be spent sitting in God’s love and grace.
CHAPTER 7
REFLECTIONS

Project Value

The thesis that silence in a sermon can be healing found support at every step through the progression of the research. It is supported theologically and in the literature review. It is supported in the survey and in the conversations following the sermon. In a sermon on Genesis chapter one, Bruce Barber stated, “In the dramatic unfolding of creation…we hear how God has time for the world.”¹ It is important for people of faith to feel that God has time for them, and perhaps even more so after a disaster. This sermon form allows people to spend time in God’s embrace and to experience God having time for them.

This research is primarily spiritual and theological; it does however connect to the healing of the whole person. The sermon form gives adults control of their conversation with God so that they could feel somewhat empowered; though the question of empowerment was not specifically examined in this research. Rather, this study asked people who were removed from the disaster by time if they believed this sermon style would be helpful, based on their lived experiences with disaster. It also included people who were experiencing disaster in order to determine if the sermon was indeed helpful.

And in both cases the sermon form was determined by the majority to be helpful, likewise the silence was found by most respondents to be helpful and was ‘powerful’ for a few. The immediate time after a disaster, when so much control of life has been taken away, is exactly the time when adults need to be empowered.

One man who participated in a recorded interview, came to me directly after the worship service and asked questions about the purpose of the research. He showed me photographs of the fire which only days before had come within a few yards of his house. He was so very thoughtful in his responses. He believed the sermon helpful and felt the work was important. I sensed it was very important to him that he could be involved and that he believed his help would make a difference. This was moments after the woman told me that this experience had been powerful. If nothing else, this project has helped people.

Australian preachers will benefit from this research through the UCA and through AVECA. Australian theology is not significantly influential in the world and perhaps theologians do not look to Australia for insights. This research may be an offering from Australia to the world. It is unique in that there are few resources concerning preaching after a disaster, natural or man-made disaster. There is only scant literature with the topic of the use of silence as a healing tool during preaching.

The disaster-affected preacher will be able to use this preaching tool in its final form as a nearly fill-in-the-blanks sermon and be confident that the preaching will be biblical. They can have confidence that their words will have a positive impact on the hearers and may assist healing. The preacher will be able to find some rest and quiet for
their own edification as they prepare this sermon. For the overwhelmed preacher, who is simply living day-to-day, this sermon will make one of their responsibilities less stressful.

This research does not include aspects of disaster recovery ministry other than preaching. There are other more recent books and articles about disaster recovery ministry which should be considered when studying ministry in the disaster setting; however, for the purpose of this research, these are held in the background of the preaching task after a disaster. Additionally, there are numerous monographs published in the past 5 years on the theology of natural disaster and disaster chaplaincy. This research adds to the growing number of resources available, and for that I am grateful to have been able to contribute.

It is important to be aware that some kinds of silence can cause harm, for instance, keeping silent rather than reporting abuse. This research should not be seen as endorsing non-reporting of knowledge of self-harm, harm to others or illegal activities. Uniting Church ministers are required to report such activities. Ministers and preachers have the responsibility to be aware of the risk of abuse and illegal activities following a disaster and to report any knowledge of such occurrences immediately to the appropriate authorities. This important obligation is separate from the act of preaching; yet, these types of abusive events are very possible consequences of stress following a disaster and the task of reporting such abuse will add stress and trauma to the preacher.

The act of preparing a sermon using silence and keeping the silence themselves during the sermon is beneficial to the preacher as well as the congregation. Both in the preparation and in the presentation, the preacher is afforded the opportunity to pause and feel God’s presence for themselves together with the congregation. This research and its
sermon development tool, at minimum, will assist preachers to develop that first sermon for the Sunday after the disaster.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

This sermon form could be tested further in the disaster context. Most of the research was conducted in situations where some time had passed since the disaster was experienced. Although the results were positive and some testing was done in a disaster-affected congregation, there would be benefit in further research to verify the consistency of the results in other disasters and contexts.

Now that it is understood that this sermon form including silence is generally helpful, another research project should be undertaken with people immediately following a disaster which would include not solely the question of healing and helpfulness but also ask if the sermon empowered the hearers. This further research could determine in more detail if a “helpful” sermon is in fact a sermon in which its words truly heal.

Regarding the context of the research, more research is required in multicultural contexts including congregations with recent immigrants, refugees, or people for whom English is a second language. While it was apparent from the small sample that non-white Australian cultures are more comfortable with silence and even held some expectation that silence is necessary, the question remains as to whether silence in a sermon is acceptable to a wider range of cultures.

Additionally, there could be research into whether or not a corporate healing ritual would elicit a corporate response to the disaster and whether or not the ritual and/or response are in fact healing. It was suggested by one respondent that there should be a
corporate response to disaster which should include prayer, fasting and practical service. The comment gives cause to ask if there is room for prayer and fasting in preaching or even as part of the worship service and response? Additional research could capture some of the discussion regarding including ritual actions during the silence to determine whether these acts are helpful during the sermon or should be limited to other parts of the liturgy.

This sermon form is only one of potentially many forms that could be used after a disaster, which could achieve similar outcomes. There should be more work developing sermon forms that can be pulled off the shelf in response to disaster. There should be research testing these sermon forms for helpfulness for the congregation and for the preacher. The AVECA group is supportive of this kind of research and is committed to distributing all resources to the disaster-affected minister.

There should also be further research about the use of silence during a sermon for children. This research would best be done by a youth and family pastor/preacher who is working with that demographic or by someone who is sensitive to the needs of the community of youth and children.

Crisis intervention for children following a disaster is largely based on giving security, and, therefore touch is important for their recovery. Further work should be undertaken into the needs of children during worship after a disaster. Would language which indicates that we are being “held by God” with accompanying silence also be helpful to children? An age-sensitive research tool may be able to gather information to

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answer that question. I suspect that this sermon form would be just as useful for children as it seems to be for adults.

This research was conducted in what may be considered a traditional denomination’s style of worship. It has not been tested in Pentecostal or contemporary style worship. The theory does not change because of denominational context; however, it would be useful to gain certainty how the style of worship and the organization of the worship service impacts the effectiveness of silence during the sermon.

The most important work still to be done is to carry this work and research into the life of the Uniting Church in Australia. The template form needs to be developed into a useful tool that is endorsed by the UCA worship working group, and the tool placed officially onto resource websites; widely promoting its availability. It may be introduced to ministry candidates and theological students and be trained or practiced in the Uniting Church theological colleges.

Once fully developed the sermon tool will also be given to the AVECA group for their endorsement and further distribution to preachers of other denominations to use in preaching after a disaster. As AVECA is a committee of the Australia National Council of Churches there are many possibilities for sharing of this preaching tool and gaining support for its use.

There is considerable work yet to be done in the creation of a template, having that tool endorsed by various authoritative groups and disseminated for broad use by preachers in Australia.
Personal Growth

As I reflect on my personal growth and the impact that this research has had for me personally, I found it challenging to separate growth from the research itself and growth experienced through the entire program of Doctor of Ministry in Biblical Preaching. I believe I have grown in the knowledge and skill of preaching during the entire three-year program and I have become a better preacher.

I was extremely grateful to experience the lectures of Dr. Paul Scott Wilson and learning the Four Pages of the Sermon. This not only made me a better preacher, it provided a suitable platform to begin researching how silence during the sermon can be helpful.

I am a better preacher in general and I am now far more confident stepping into a pulpit after a disaster secure with the knowledge that the words that I say or the silences I keep will be biblical preaching and not apologetics or platitudes. This was my goal when imagining this project, that weary preachers could have a handy resource with practical instructions that had been tested as useful. Though there is yet work which needs to be competed in the distribution of this tool, I feel that I can confidently advise and/or instruct a preacher through the task of preaching immediately following a disaster.

I have developed a greater understanding of biblical preaching and the impact that God’s Word has on God’s people. As I was influenced by and reflected on each preaching experience, I believe my development and presentation improved for the next sermon development and presentation. In the process of research, the tool that will be shared with others was also refined and developed. The tool will be useful because it is not a matter of if there will be another disaster but when there is another disaster event. I
will be prepared not only for the work of recovery and disaster ministry, but also for the
task of preaching that first sermon to a community which may still be in shock.

My growth through the research in disaster settings and preaching, has meant that I have taken on more responsibility in the disaster ministry of the UCA in Queensland. I am asked to provide training to colleagues and communities regarding disaster recovery and spiritual care following disasters. My advice is sought on disaster ministry and responding to disasters which occur in Queensland.

I must acknowledge a level of disappointment about this fact. As I have just completed a doctor in ministry program in biblical preaching, I feel more of an expert at preaching than disaster recovery. I had hoped to be able to use my skills gained during the program to upskill ministers and preachers in the task of preaching. Also, I am not an expert on disaster ministry although I may have more experience than some of my colleagues. I find that I field few questions about how to be a better preacher and many more about how to minister in times of disaster, I wonder if this is a sign of the times but suspect it is because there has been a gap in ministers’ education which needed to be filled.

While there is some overlap between disaster ministry and preaching after a disaster, they are not the same thing. One is the unique task of preaching post-disaster; and the other is the ongoing practical and spiritual ministry to the community, because of the community and because of God’s love for the community.

I have learned more about my vulnerabilities and the vulnerabilities of people who minister after a disaster. We regularly find ourselves in situations for which we have limited or no experience to draw upon, yet, we soldier on doing our best with the
resources we have. Because of this research, I now have another reliable resource available; a resource which I am confident in sharing with others preaching in a disaster-affected community.

I look forward to sharing these learning within the Uniting Church in Australia and maybe even beyond. I also anticipate being able to use the skills I have gained to develop other tools or forms for the task of preaching after a disaster.

This entire project has been a time of enrichment for me and benefit to some. I am thankful for the opportunity.
APPENDICES

APPENDIX A – SERMON ONE


Sermon title - Through God’s Eyes

There is a generation of people who have known war. When living in Guam, we would take our youth group to World War II sites and have lessons on man’s inhumanity to man. We would go to see the big guns which the Japanese used to keep the Americans at bay. We would go to the war memorials and read names of the lost. We would visit the suicide cliffs of Saipan where thousands of Japanese families chose suicide over losing their souls to the white ghosts. We visited Tinian where the Enola Gay loaded the atomic bomb “Little Boy” and the plane Boxcar was loaded with “Fat Man” that bombed Japan. A confronting experience.

Today’s text highlights the divine, likely a confronting experience. Jesus’ face changed; his clothes become dazzling white. He begins speaking in glory with the two prophets Elijah and Moses, long dead to earth now in glory speaking about things yet to come. The booming voice that says this is my Son, the chosen, listen to him. This text not only highlights the divine; it notes the inadequacy of humans, Peter’s poorly chosen words, “It is good Lord to be here.” “Let us build shelters.” It highlights the fear of the
unknown. Then entering a cloud, hearing the voice, saying nothing of the event, hiding their guilt, shame, fear in silence. Today’s text is a contrast of the divine and the human.

Yet, we need to see the divine. In the midst of drought, storm, flood, or fire, whatever life throws our way, we need to see the divine. It is not only situations in nature but look at the world. News of the Pakistan India relationship. There was great fear amongst my Pakistani and Indian friends that either of these atomic powers would push the button over an age-old border conflict. US and North Korean relationship talks have broken down and there is again no assurance of compassion winning out. Where is the divine in the world? Where is the divine in our own broken lives? We learn, we long, we wonder, God are you there? Will the weather ever be kind again? Will wars ever cease? We cry out, “Is it good for us to be here?” Take a minute now and tell God where it is in your life or world that needs transformation, what needs to be transfigured. Take a moment and tell God where you need to see the divine.

(Two minutes of silence)

Luke tells us of God’s kingdom. Take some time in the next few days and reread the book of Luke. From the beginning, Luke tells of a new order where the weak and lowly are lifted up; the powerful and mighty are brought low and all people are God’s children through Jesus. It might not be evident in this passage alone, but we know the rest of the story. In the presence of the divine there was fear and stumbling words. There was not yet the understand by the disciples that the transfiguration was for them. That not only would Jesus speak to the dead, but that Jesus would rise from the dead.
demonstrating the possibility of life after death. On this mountain top Jesus demonstrated
the transforming power of God, that is also ours.

When we turn back to God, like Peter did at the end of this book; like Paul did on
the road in the book of Acts; we too are transformed, transfigured, we become something
new that shines God’s glory in the world. When we most need the divine, we will find it
in believers in our community, our church, our friends, our family. We will even find
God’s divine transforming power in ourselves. Sit now in God’s glory right here. Sit and
imagine for a moment God’s glory around you, hold you, transforming you.

(One minute of silence)

Hear the voice of God say, “You are my child, my Chosen, turn to Jesus.”

Believe, God loves you, the divine is here.

Amen.
APPENDIX B – SERMON TWO

Sermon Text - Deut 5:1-21, 6:3-6

Sermon Title - God protects relationships

We have not long past Police Remembrance Day. I neglected to acknowledge recently, the loss of police officers in the line of duty and do so now. Their presence is a bit obvious on our street because the police offices are almost directly across the road. So, since they are in our neighbourhood we should not forget them and their sacrifice. But how much do we honestly think about the police force? And what do we think? Most of the time, I believe we are happy with the police force, we appreciate what they do. Most of us would even say that the police officers have a very challenging job. Enforcing law and keeping us safe. We say that until, it is us at the end of the enforcement.

I know people who as soon as they are pulled over for a traffic violation become argumentative. I didn’t see the sign. It was only 4 k over the limit. I was only using the phone at the stop light. We know the limits or boundaries of the law, and we expect law enforcers to keep the public to the boundaries yet, maybe we push back when we cross the line. Yet, we agree there must be limits and they must be kept and are happy to have the limits kept, It is a paradox. We hold contrary expectations. We generally follow the law but when caught out look for exception of the very law we accept and expect to keep us safe.

A preacher might present that same paradox with Biblical Law. We read the ten commands and think they are pretty reasonable rules for an ordered ancient society. I will
summarise them; love God, no Idols, respect God’s name, take time to rest and worship, honour your parents, don’t murder, be faithful, don’t steal, be truthful, don’t compare yourself with others. Moses too must have thought they were reasonable rules for their society going forward. Most of them were not new, these concepts had been bringing order to societies, to Hebrew society, for a long time. What was new to ancient society at the time was the worship of only one God. Most other ancient societies had many gods. The Hebrew monotheism is relatively new to the ancient writings we have in comparison. Worship one God. Be one people.

The nature of this God was different from other ancients as well. This God is relational. This God is in relationship with the people, from Genesis, walking and talking with them, co creating. Making promises and keeping them. Being wrestled with. Being negotiated with. Negotiating, that is what we heard Moses doing last week, protesting his call for a different outcome. These traits of God are hallmark of a relationship. Now this God adds redeeming to the list of traits.

The God of Moses interacts with saved the people; the whole mob, though individuals in the mob were not so grateful. This God is unlike other Gods, unlike gold and timber statues that hang around and do nothing for the people. This is a God the people can relate to and all God asks in return was for the people to be in a relationship with God and with each other. Ten commands about loving God and loving other, healthy relationship. We expect this of the law but oh, what happens if we mess up?

I don’t know about you; but I have messed up relationships in my life and I personally have messed up some of the relationships in my life, a fact of which I am not proud. Most of you know that I am divorced and remarried and have all the complications
of relationships that a blended family can bring. I wrestled with my understanding of the law on adultery. And in time, I decided that God has forgiven me that particular sin and all my other sin as well. Before you get uptight about that sin word, I remind you, my definition of sin is anything that separates us from God; that is anything that gets in the way of our relationship with God and others. I have that definition because I believe that the law is about relationships.

Like me, I am aware that some of you have complex relationships. I could start listing all the complexities, but perhaps, it is better that you spend a couple of minutes in silence telling God about just how complex your life is. Spend a bit of time telling God all about the issues and the struggles, the joys and the pain. I believe that God is relational. Moses argued with God, Let’s take the next couple of minutes to present our case in silence with God.

(Two minutes of silence)

Moses throughout the book of Exodus and Deuteronomy, complains to God. Moses appeals on behalf of the people even when the people are unfaithful. Moses complains about the people. God listens. God moves. God desires this open and honest relationship. Love God and love others. Keep these words on your heart. Recite them to your children. Write them on the foundations of your household. Love God and Love others.

Be in relationship with God and tell God what troubles you, return to the law to help keep healthy relationships not because it is law but because they are good
foundations of healthy relationships. You see. If God is indeed relational then these laws are intended to help that relationship be healthy and are not punitive. Unlike our police force with God there is grace. This is the God who redeemed the people from slavery. The God who gave God’s son for our sake. This is the God who redeems us not necessarily of the consequences of unhealthy relationships, we may journey with consequences for some time but is a God who allows us the grace to start over and try again. Right here, right now. Take a minute to sit in God’s mercy and grace. Forgiven for things done and left undone.

(One minute of silence)

"Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.” Our relational God gave us law to protect relationships. Guides to protect our relationship with God and with one another. Turn to God with your struggles and know that God promises to be in relationship with you for eternity. Amen.
APPENDIX C – SERMON THREE

Sermon Text - Matthew 11:2-11

Sermon Title - Jesus is hope and healing

I love how our bodies have an amazing capacity to heal itself if we give it the resources to do so. A broken arm will mend if it is immobilised for a time. A wound will heal if it is kept clean and undisturbed for a time. Our mental state can heal if we give it the time and resources it needs to heal. Depression can be overcome by medication, time, counselling, which give the mind the tools it needs to heal. Both the mind and the body will heal given time and resources. But what about the soul?

In today’s Bible reading, John is in jail. There his physical and mental health may have been injured, we do not know but it would make sense to expect that a person in jail may suffer physical and emotional trauma. However, the question that John sends to Jesus is not a question about his own physical or emotional state. John is asking a soul question. He is seeking hope and maybe even healing for his soul. He seems to need to be certain that Jesus is the Messiah. Yet, he needs to have his belief affirmed. He needs to have his faith built up. Jesus answered; then turned to the people around him and asked why they went to the wilderness to see John. Did they go to look at something physical? A reed shaking in the wind? No, they went to see a prophet. Why? They went in hope, for a prophet, good news, or maybe to be closer to God. They went looking for hope and healing for their soul.
Why did you come here today? Some may have come for physical healing. Jesus did plenty of that. I believe physical healing can happen. Did some of you come for emotional healing? Jesus can do that too. Did you come so that you could have hope again or for your soul to be healed? Maybe, you are like John. You just need to be reminded of what you see and hear, the lame walk and the blind see, the dead will live again. Maybe you simply need to have your hopes affirmed. I don’t know why you are here. I don’t think I need to know the details that bring you here. I need to tell you that it is okay to ask Jesus your questions. It is okay to say to Jesus, “Are you the Messiah?” It is okay to be unsure and need to ask. John needed to ask because he needed to hear the answer. John asked because he need to know again, needed to be reminded; he need his soul and faith lifted up. He needed his heart fed. So, John asked from jail, from the circumstance in his life, John asked. Sent disciples with his question directly to Jesus.

You can ask too! You can say, “Jesus is it really you?” “Are you real?” “Are you here with me?” You can tell Jesus about your circumstance. You can tell Jesus about the trouble you have. Just like John did. Take time right now. Right now, I will give you a couple of minutes to tell Jesus your trouble and ask Jesus your questions. Take two minutes right now talk to Jesus.

(Two minutes of silence)

Jesus didn’t get angry; Jesus didn’t yell or walk away when John’s question came. Jesus said, “Tell John what you see. Tell John what you hear. The blind see. The lame walk. The deaf can hear again. The dead are raised and the poor hear good news.” Jesus
seemed to think John knew the answer. John knew these things would be done by the Messiah. Jesus said, “You know.” Jesus seemed to say that all the people that went to see John knew. They went for a reason and they were right. The people went to the wilderness to see a prophet and they saw the greatest prophet. The people were right. They were affirmed. The question that John asked or the answers the people were seeking were affirmed.

How about for you? You know. You know the answer to the questions you just put on to Jesus. You know, deep down inside, you know that God is God and that Jesus is Saviour. Deep down, you know that somehow, some way you are not alone. You matter. You are important. God cares about you and your family and your situation God cares. I know. I think you do too. God sent Jesus, his only son to be our Messiah, to restore us to give us a healthy soul and relationship with God. God sent the Holy Spirit to be with us, always. Jesus is here to restore you soul. Sit for a minute with Jesus, with God and the Holy Spirit. Let the trinity build you up; comfort you; assure you that your soul is healed. Sit a minute and soak up God’s love. Let it sweep over your soul.

(One minute of silence)

Jesus told John, “The blind see; the lame walk; the deaf can hear again. The dead are raised and the poor hear good news.” Jesus affirmed for John that God cares. Jesus let John and his disciples know that God saves. Jesus tells us, “the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he; John was great you are greater! I proclaim Good news to you. God loves you, so do I. Amen.
APPENDIX D – SERMON FOUR AND FIVE

Sermon Text - John 1:(1-9)10-18

Sermon Title – God made a dwelling among us

Have you taken down your Christmas lights yet? Mine are still up. Not because of some belief that it is still Christmas but that I haven’t really had the energy to do so. In fact, I think I will leave the fairy lights on the back veranda to enjoy for evening events. But there are people with distinct opinions about when the lights are to come down. Some on New Year’s Day, some at the end of the 12 days of Christmas. The Church traditionally holds out for the 12 days. There is a good reason. The church has a calendar of seasons. They are an intentional pattern. We start in Advent that time before Christmas waiting for Christ to come. And I must say, more and more world events cause me to include the word, “Come, Lord Jesus,” in my prayers. Then there is Christmas, which I will come back to. Tomorrow is Epiphany an eight-week season where we will discover who Jesus is and what he does. Once we know Jesus, we see our failings and enter the six-week penitent season of Lent. That is followed by Easter. Which is the seven-week season where we learn about grace upon grace. Lastly, is the long season after Pentecost where we learn to live as Christ taught. Then we repeat because, we get busy and forget bits along the way.

But, back to Christmas. It is the season of reflection. We celebrate that Christ has indeed come but wonder because he came as a helpless infant in pretty ordinary circumstances. So ordinary was the baby; the humble family in extraordinary
circumstance; a census not at home in a small town; then running from violence as a refugee with no home. This is God. Here we sit in situations that cause us to long for the Messiah to come and rescue us and we get a baby. Christmas is the season when we sit in darkness and yet know that the light has come. We sit with this paradox and hold our darkness in tension with light that has come, and we wonder.

I don’t know about you but for me Christmas was a bunch of mixed feelings. The kids came it was fun, and my friends and colleagues were dealing with tremendous disasters in their communities. Out west, people I know and worked with are still being oppressed by the lack of rain. The big dry has turned the east coast into a tinder box. And I am forced to deeply think what this celebration of Christmas really means. Christmas - a season of awe and wonder, where we hold in tension the notion, the idea of Messiah who did not come as the powerful but as an infant. What was God thinking?

This is God. This is where God is. God is with the weak and struggling and the humble and the displaced. This is the God who made a dwelling place in a simple feed trough. Immanuel, God with us. God is with you in your struggles, your humble place, or ordinariness. Take a moment and tell God where you are. Tell God your circumstances. In the silence, sit in the tension between the idea of a messiah, king and a vulnerable child. In the silence, invite God into whatever darkness there is in your lives.

(Two minutes of silence)

Here we sit with the tension of God with us and yet a God we can barely see. What the other gospels explain using narrative, John puts into poetry. Light came into the
world. The light was the God; the Word. The Word, the breath of God, made its dwelling place among us. The breath of God took on flesh, ordinary human flesh and lived our lives. God moved into the neighbourhood a quote from The Message version. Oddly, this human God; light of the world was not recognized. Born a king yet not really king but Word become flesh. Light. God. John eloquently writes to give hope. John says though there is darkness, we are God’s children. John is not speaking in analogy or metaphor but as you continue reading John’s gospel you see that he means it literally. God in Christ was drawing us in as God children, brooding and holding us to God’s bosom. We are being held tight, close to God’s heart. From Jesus fullness, we have received grace upon grace. Good news. “What has a come into being in him was life!”

I invite you to sit now, be held by God close to God’s heart, in God’s bosom. Feel the warmth, the comfort the love. Sit in hope, sit in light and see God’s glory shine round.

(1 minute of silence)

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it”. I don’t know how everything will turn out this year...I know my life is packed to the rafters and only one thing could tip it over. I also know that I am God’s child. It is Christmas. We sit in that tension of wanting God to come save us and knowing that God is with us. There is still darkness around and there is the feeling of being held tight by a loving God. God loves you. You are a child born of the God. What has coming into being is life and darkness did not overcome. Amen.
APPENDIX E – SURVEY

PARTICIPANT BACKGROUND

Gender Identity

Male □ Female □ Other □ (pls specify) ____________

Age

Under 30 □ 30 to 39 □ 40 to 49 □ 50 to 59 □ 60 to 69 □ Over 70 □

Denomination

UCA □ Lutheran □ ACC □ Other □ (pls specify) ____________

Cultural background

Australian Aboriginal □ Torres Strait Islander □ Caucasian □ Other □ Pls specify ____________

Have you experience a disaster? YES □ NO □

What type of natural disasters? (you may pick more than one)

Cyclone □ Bush Fire □ Storm □ Drought □ Flood □ Other □ (pls specify) ____________

Have you experienced a man-made disaster? YES □ NO □

Specify type of disaster ____________

Do you remember a helpful sermon around that time? YES □ NO □

Was the sermon today helpful? YES □ NO □

Indicate how helpful? Please circle - 1 not helpful-10 very helpful 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Was the silence in the sermon helpful? YES □ NO □

Indicate how helpful? Circle one number between 1 and 10 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

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Would today’s sermon be helpful after a disaster?  

YES ☐  NO ☐

Indicate how helpful?  
Circle one number between 1 and 10  
1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

Was your faith important in your healing?  

YES ☐  NO ☐

Indicate how helpful?  
Circle one number between 1 and 10  
1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10
APPENDIX F – DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

TOPIC: Can Silence During a Sermon be Helpful after a Community Disaster?

GUIDED DISCUSSION

Can you describe things that were helpful to healing at the time of the disaster?

Can you describe any sermons you can remember from that time?

Can you explain why they were helpful or not?

Can you explain why today’s sermon was helpful or not?

Can you explain why the silence was helpful or not?

Can you explain why or why not, today’s sermon might be helpful after a disaster?

DISASTER RECOVERY CHAPLAINS QUESTIONS

Would this sermon model, style and form using times of silence be a model you would adapt and use?

Would preparation of such a sermon including the silence be beneficial to you as a preacher and support your own healing? Why or why not?


