

PREACHING NEAR THE ABYSS:
A HOMILETICAL STRATEGY FOR ENGAGING
EXISTENTIAL QUESTIONS

by

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ABSTRACT

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In preaching, the uncertainties of life can be addressed so that people experience hope and agency to join in God's shalom-action. This study explores preaching with a homiletical strategy comprising three components: invitation, identification, and transformation. Taking in the uncertainties in life, the sermon places the preacher and the congregation near the abyss, that which is threatening in life, being that this is a state of receptivity. Further, the study explores how the sermon can provide knowledge inherent in the Christian tradition that can strengthen individuals in life near the abyss, *abyss-knowledge*. With a heightened vulnerability to life's uncertainties in Sweden due to raised levels of security risk, war in a neighboring country, climate crisis and economic unrest, there is a need for spiritual resilience. The use of biblical and liturgical lament, eschatological understanding, moral imagination, partial power, and justice and solidarity were found to be resources from the Christian tradition that sustain spiritual resilience. In this project, the homiletical strategy near the abyss was used in preaching two sermons, each preceded by a feed-forward session including art work and bible study and followed by evaluation. The literature study of this thesis includes homiletic literature and a cognate field focusing on the uncertainties in life. The study affirms the effects of the homiletical strategy near the abyss to invite the congregation to engage existential questions and enable preaching to become an experience that embodies hope. The response indicates identification, expressions of transformation, and a desire for community and solidarity to join in God's shalom action for the world. The study concludes with a suggestion for exploring a field of *abyss-theology*.

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Prologue: An I-thou Moment

We've been away at confirmation camp and Confirmation Service in the church is coming up. The Confirmands have rehearsed, and Saturday evening I go for a swim in the nearby river with my family. We notice a couple, a man and a woman, sitting in a grassy rock area close to the shore. Their voices are loud with laughter and it is obvious that there is drinking involved. After our swim, as we start back, the sounds from the couple change, as the woman has begun screaming for help. I run to them and apparently the man is unconscious. Another person has also arrived. He is calling for an ambulance, and I begin talking to the woman. She is very worried. I stay with her until the ambulance arrives.

The next day is Confirmation. As I am standing in the vestibule of the church with the Confirmands about to start the procession, I see the couple from the night before entering the church. The man seems to be fine, and after a quick greeting, they sit down at the back of the church.

The Confirmands are seated in the chancel at the front of the church. They do a great job accounting for their experiences of faith and what they have learned at camp. After the confirmation part of the service, right before the Eucharist Liturgy is about to begin, I hear loud voices from the back of the church. The woman from the day before is approaching the chancel. Not only is she very loud, she is exclaiming obscenities, and cursing. I talk to her, but it is obvious that she is in a psychotic state. As she starts toward the Confirmands, I try to calm her down by holding her. We end up sitting in the floor of the chancel, in front of the altar, right below the giant cross that is hanging from the ceiling in this medieval church. The woman becomes calm when I hold her, but as soon as I let go, she gets rowdy and worried again. So, we sit there. I am dressed in the vestment that makes me represent Christ, this day in the red color of the Holy Spirit, sitting in the floor.

After a while, the ambulance arrives for the woman, and we resume church service. But before that, I need to say something to the congregation. My words are from within. Having held anxiety itself in my arms, I have nothing to fear. It is an I-thou moment. The words are not rehearsed, they come from the edge of the abyss. "People sometimes ask me if I believe in hell? I believe in a good, gracious and loving God. I cannot think that there is anything to fear after death. But I know that there are people who have experiences of hell in this life, here and now".

When we come to the end of the worship, when I am again placed underneath the giant cross, standing with my arms stretched out to bless the congregation, tears come streaming down my face. I just can't stop them. The blessing becomes an ugly-cry blessing, and I don't care. I stand in God's shalom.

Chapter One

Introduction

1.1 Background

This thesis constitutes a component of the doctoral journey toward a Doctor of Ministry degree (DMin) in preaching, focusing on practical theology and the development of "ministerial practice as enacted faith."¹

1.1.1 Homiletical Task

Homiletics can be defined as the art of preaching. The homiletical task is both theological and pedagogical, as underscored by Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson in *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology*. They assert that the primary purpose of a sermon is to reach the heart and facilitate transformative change in people's lives.² The aspiration is for the words to touch the congregation, transcending barriers and resonating with the world of the listener, their thoughts, longings and focal points.

Preaching is a great responsibility. It is an opportunity to embody the gospel, the good news, and to incarnate Christ and the hope inherent in it. The embodiment of Christ encompasses three dimensions. It involves conveying the narrative of a man walking on earth, imparting meaningful teachings that address profound existential questions. It also entails embodying the astonishing, unexpected news of resurrection and an ongoing exploration of its implications in the present, on a personal level and for all of creation. Thirdly, it encompasses an approach to life characterized by love in its ultimate quality, encouraging a perspective to look at the world through God's eyes. This approach prompts individuals to consider how they wish to be treated, how they believe others want to be treated, and how they think God's creation should be treated. This understanding of the purpose of preaching, an ongoing commitment to learning and an openness for the unseen aspects of life, sets the stage for this thesis.

¹ Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations* (Eugene: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock, 2022), 6. Sensing continues to define practical theology as "both theologizing about practice and practice doing theology, to transform communities of practice into the image of Christ for the sake of the world."

² Nancy Jean Vyhmeister & Terry Dwain Robertson, *Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 23.

The objective of the sermon is contextual, to articulate the word of God in a manner that resonates with the lives of individuals. Acknowledging that God is already active in their lives, the aim is to discover a gateway to their comprehension of God's realm within the context of everyday life. The aspiration is to bridge their understanding of the world with the language of the Gospel, connecting it to the events of Christ in a way that conveys hope.

1.1.2 Previous Parish Projects

The path to the ACTS DMin program was facilitated through participation in the Church of Sweden Qualified Preaching Program. The two parish projects within that program were conducted in the Enskede-Årsta Congregation.³

The initial parish project of 2019, was guided by the framework of W. Paul Jones's Theological Worlds, expounded in *Theological Worlds, Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief*.⁴ The investigation focused on the factors influencing the resonance of the sermon within the listener.⁵ Jones categorizes five distinct worlds based on individuals' theological attitudes and life themes. Addressing a person's theological perspective and life theme, such as loneliness, shame, or guilt, influences the proclaimed gospel. The discernment was that Theological Worlds serve as a valuable tool for comprehending the intricacies of a given congregation. By "translating" the message to encompass multiple worlds, the sermon's impact can be broadened, resonating with a more diverse audience.

The subsequent project in 2020 maintained the thematic emphasis on embedding the sermon in the receptive soil of the listener. The exploration centered on identifying an educational model that facilitates learning not just about faith, but in faith through preaching. The research question posed was: What characterizes preaching that fosters transformative learning?⁶ Among the practical insights uncovered was the significance of incorporating a dramaturgical

³ Enskede-Årsta Congregation, the researcher's place of employment at the time.

⁴ W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

⁵ Helena Ekhem, *I en annan värld: Predikostudie med W. Paul Jones Theological worlds som utgångspunkt*. Project Report, Church of Sweden Qualified Preaching Program in Sweden. (Uppsala 2019).

⁶ Ekhem, Helena, *Predikans transformativa möjlighet: En predikostudie om undervisning och lärande*. Project Report, Qualified Swedish Preaching Program in Sweden (Uppsala 2020).

twist, a *peripeteia*,⁷ that can create an "aha-moment" that surprises with relevance and challenges the listener. Another prominent finding underscored the necessity for the preacher to be open to personal transformation in life and theology when expecting transformative learning to occur.⁸

Both projects revolved around the overarching theme of establishing optimal connections for learning and spiritual growth, both for the congregation and the preacher. The ongoing curiosity persists along this trajectory.

1.2 Focus of the Thesis

Life always takes place on the edge of the abyss, where uncertainties and threats can change our conditions in an instant. Existential uncertainty can become overwhelming and paralyzing for people. This is something that has become especially notable during the pandemic, and then with the war in one of our neighboring countries, the Ukraine. Alongside these significant events, the escalating climate anxiety encompassing the threat of climate disaster and its consequences. As well, there are the challenges associated with managing large numbers of refugees, fostering integration, and countering rising xenophobia, add layers of complexity. The existential understanding of life and existence feels distinct and threatening to people.

Expressions such as "When all these distressing occurrences transpire globally and in personal life, belief in God becomes challenging" reflect sentiments of individuals lacking grounding in Christian faith. It is disheartening that these individuals might have missed out on the content of Christian faith and knowledge that could provide strength in difficult times.

Knowledge of the Christian faith is rapidly declining in Swedish society and in the church. Preaching serves as a crucial opportunity to illustrate and convey the church's faith and tradition, embodying Christ. According to the Church of Sweden Church Order, the purpose of teaching is for people to come to faith in Jesus Christ.⁹ This emphasizes that teaching extends beyond narrating Bible stories and expounding Christian traditions. It involves not just acquiring knowledge about faith but also learning with transformative aspects.

⁷ Anders Hagman, *Efter Emmaus – en pedagogik för förändring* (Västerås: Västerås stift).

⁸ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2007).

⁹ Svenska kyrkan, *Kyrkoordning 2016 med angränsande lagstiftning för Svenska kyrkan* (Stockholm: Verbum Ab, 2016).

Regarding preaching transformation, it is posited that moral directives and imperatives are ineffective tools. Sermons replete with imperatives run the risk of causing worshipers to disengage or experience feelings of discouragement and overwhelm. Teaching in a sermon faces the danger of becoming moral judgement.¹⁰ The challenge is to tell the story in a way that it becomes relevant and resonates with the lives of the worshipers.

Recent years have witnessed a marginal upswing in interest toward the church in Sweden, coinciding with an increased focus on existential questions among a growing number of individuals. People are searching for something to hold on to when the fear of “falling into the abyss” overpowers them. Despite this the search for meaning often unfolds outside the ecclesiastical sphere as the language employed within the church context appears foreign to these seekers.

When former Swedish Archbishop Antje Jackelén assumed the position, an interview with her appeared in the evening paper, *Expressen* (2014), during which she introduced the concept of “abyss-knowledge.” In her words, “People don’t just need basic knowledge about life, they need abyss-knowledge as well.” This term, coined by Jackelén, has gained heightened relevance in the wake of the pandemic.¹¹

1.3 Thesis Question

The assertion is that Christian tradition is in possession of language, theology and abyss-knowledge that can address the uncertainties in life, give hope to people, and lead to transformation. This thesis endeavors to develop and test a homiletical strategy in three parts, focusing the following question: How can preaching be an experience where abyss-knowledge is provided and received by the congregation?

The congregation will be guided toward the abyss for two primary reasons. Firstly, it is perceived as the most conducive setting for capturing attention. Secondly, the nature of the

¹⁰ Karin Johannesson, *Thérèse och Martin: Karmel och reformationen i nytt ljus* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma, 2018), 220. In an individualistic society like ours, with a strong turn toward the subjective in spirituality, less authority is given to power, scripture, ideologies or collective moral principles, Bishop Karin Johannesson writes. “Unfortunately, the result sometimes becomes moralizing attempts to educate or train those with differing views, whom one believes need to be indoctrinated into one’s own perspective. Such attempts do not appeal to independently thinking individuals who are interested in spirituality.” Researcher’s translation.

¹¹ Antje Jackelén, *Gud är Större* (Lund: Arcus, 2016), 107. The word Abyss-knowledge is a pun in Swedish, as basic knowledge is *grundkunskap*, “ground knowledge” and the word abyss translates *avgrund*, “off-ground”, becoming *avgrundskunskap*, “off-ground knowledge”.

message to be conveyed is abyss-knowledge. The project encompasses two main objectives: Explore what abyss-knowledge is and preach in a way that it can be received and considered.

1.3.1 Homiletical Strategy Near the Abyss

The homiletical strategy that this thesis will explore has three parts: Invitation, Identification, and Transformation.

Invitation

The sermon will invite the congregation to experience themselves at the edge of the abyss. This can be done through a story or a general reminder of the uncertainties in life, coming in contact with the listener's own experience of the abyss, someone else's, or a corporate experience of uncertainties. The aim is to create an I – thou meeting establishing a safe relationship and inviting the congregation to come close to that profound sense of the uncertainties in life.¹²

Identification

The chosen approach involves introducing the Biblical story of the day, contextualizing the narrative of Christian tradition in the here and now with the intention for the congregation to identify with it in their own lives.

Transformation

An exploration will be undertaken to discern what resources, words, actions, or rites that can address the uncertainties in life, give hope to people, and lead to transformation. Standing together with the congregation, near the abyss, the objective is for the sermon to embody hope, strength, and a sense of agency to join in God's shalom-action.¹³

¹² Martin Buber, *Jag och Du* (Ludvika: Dualis Förlag AB, 2006).

¹³ Jesper Svartvik, *Förunderligt förtroende* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2016), 257. God's justice, salvation as Shalom, a sense of wholeness.

1.4 Project

With the three elements of the homiletical strategy this thesis seeks to explore preaching that addresses the uncertainties of life, embodies hope, and strengthens and empowers the congregation. Along with literature study and reflection the project will consist of two sermons in Oscarskyrkan (Oscar's Church) during the fall of 2023.

The preaching will occur employing the homiletical strategy subsequent to a feed-forward session with the Parish Project Group (PPG), integrating art work and Lectio Divina. A Sermon Purpose Statement (SPS) will guide the shaping and refinement of each sermon. These sermons spanning 8-10 minutes will be preached without notes, delivered within the framework of High mass at Oscar's Church. The assessment of the sermon's impact on the congregation will be conducted in two main steps:

- A questionnaire offered to the congregation present the Sundays of the sermons.
- A group interview with the PPG mediated by one of the group members.

1.4.1 Parish Project Group

The PPG will consist of 6-8 persons. Some of them regularly attend worship services, while the majority rarely go to church. The emphasis is on engaging with individuals who perceive the church as mildly relevant in their lives.

1.4.2 Methodology

The group will convene for feed-forward sessions preceding each of the two sermons. Their presence in the church during the sermon will extend to participation in a feedback gathering afterward. During the post-service coffee time, they will assist in the distribution and collection of questionnaires, providing the congregation an opportunity to respond. This collected data will serve as the focus group response. Given the transient nature of the congregation at Oscar's Church, the composition of the focus group for each Sunday remains uncertain until the event.

During the feedback session the PPG will complete a questionnaire, addressing the same questions as the focus group. Subsequently a group interview facilitated by one of the members will take place while notes are taken by the researcher. The responses from the focus

group and the material from the group interview will undergo analysis, influencing the formulation of subsequent sermons.¹⁴

During the second feed-forward meeting with the PPG, before the commencement of the painting session, an inquiry will be made of the lasting impact of the previous sermon through a written questionnaire. Following the second sermon and the subsequent feedback session, the group will reconvene for the fifth and final gathering. In this session participants will once again respond to the questionnaire, sharing their recollections of the last sermon. This will be succeeded by a group discussion focusing on project learnings and reflecting on abyss-knowledge.

The employed research methods will encompass questionnaires and group interviews. Additionally, a semi-structured interview will be conducted with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén, focusing on the concept of abyss-knowledge.¹⁵

1.4.3 Delimitations

Given the transient nature of the congregation, members of the Parish Project Group have been selected based on specific criteria: individuals capable of articulating their thoughts, demonstrating an interest in contemplating matters of faith, and holding membership in the Church of Sweden. The intention is to include both those closely affiliated with the church and those with a more moderate connection. The group encompasses diverse backgrounds, featuring a member of the Church board, a church usher, and individuals exploring spirituality within Christianity and other religions. One member also participated in the Parish Project Group at Enskede-Årsta Congregation where the prior two Parish Projects unfolded within the Church of Sweden Qualified Preaching Program. Familiarity with group members is varied, ranging from vague acquaintances to well-known friends. While friendship or familial ties with a group member might pose a limitation, given the project's reliance on the group for both challenge and support, the familiarity with their reliability is deemed advantageous.

¹⁴ Although this thesis only analyses two sermons, the strategy will be tested on other sermons as well.

¹⁵ For quality research methods, the following literature will be consulted: Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Dissertations* (Eugene: Cascade Books, Wipf and Stock, 2022).

Nancy Jean Vyhmeister & Terry Dwain Robertson, *Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

1.4.4 Art in the feed-forward process

In 2005 within the Diocese of Strängnäs engagement with Expressive Arts commenced. Serving as the youth- and school pastor in Eskilstuna, the identification of a need among the youth to articulate themselves prompted this exploration. Challenges related to mental health, integration, identity, and various existential questions were prevalent. The community also grappled with the aftermath of student suicides in one of the schools, leaving the staff emotionally devastated and receptive to collaborations with the church. With a grant from the Church of Sweden national level, the exploring of how creativity could serve as a means for existential dialogue unfolded. Ansgarskyrkan (Ansgar's church) hosted Creative evenings, establishing a secure and inviting space where youth and young adults could freely express themselves and partake in an environment of unconditional community. The artistic activities encouraged were not advanced, even a simple spot of paint on paper is considered a valid expression. Theologian Matthew Fox writes:

Creativity is not about painting a picture or producing an object; it is about wrestling with the demons and angels in the depths of our psyches and daring to name them, to put them where they can breathe and have space and we can look at them. This process of listening to our images and birthing them allows us to embrace our "enemies" – that is, shadow side of ourselves – as well as to embrace our biggest vision and dreams.¹⁶

During the Creative evenings no inquiries were made about the faith of the visitors, yet conversations consistently gravitated toward existential questions. A monthly invitation was extended to the visitors to participate in a "Bible studio." They could choose a painting created during a previous Creative evening and while looking at the paintings, a Bible passage was read and discussed. The group would move on to engaging in free-form writing.¹⁷ The ensuing questions and discussions were profoundly moving, offering a delicate source for incorporation into preaching.

The art undertaken by the PPG in this project mirrors the approach of the Bible studio. The group members will be provided with watercolor supplies and be encouraged to apply

¹⁶ Björn Wiedel, *Personlig livstolkning och religiös tradition: Om det personligas plats i religionspedagogiken* (Stockholm: Verbum, 1999), 183. Wiedel quotes Theologian Matthew Fox.

¹⁷ Helena Ekhem, *En ny tonart* (Stockholm: Broderskaps Förlag AB, 2013). Paintings, poems and prayers from the Bible studios are presented in this book.

paint to the paper, preferably in a non-figurative manner.¹⁸ Soft music will accompany the process. The resulting paintings will capture a "here-and-now" snapshot from which spontaneous words will be drawn. This approach is not only intended to yield paintings and words that will be useful when crafting the sermon but also to ground the group members and provide a reprieve from the demands of daily life.

When reading the Bible passage for the sermon a *Lectio Divina* practice will be undertaken, incorporating the paintings as visual aids. Active participation in painting and connecting the Bible passages with personal life and context will be an integral aspect of the process for the entire group, including the researcher.

1.4.5 Preaching Without Notes

The pedagogical challenge associated with the sermon extends beyond the selection of words to convey a message. The impact of the sermon's embodiment is significant. The possibility of creating an I-thou moment is dependent on the delivery and the speaker's presence in the moment. For this reason, the sermons incorporated in this thesis will be preached without notes.

In the preaching approach adopted the preacher avoids standing in the pulpit, recognizing its elevated position as a potential source of distance from the congregation. Instead, the sermon is delivered from the floor. Attention is also given to non-verbal aspects such as gestures, tone of voice, pauses, and language speed. The expressed emotions must authentically align with the message, requiring the preacher to deliver the sermon in a manner that personally resonates and evokes a genuine expression.

1.5 Thesis Outline

Chapter one of the thesis is the introduction. This chapter includes an exposition of the background and the focus of the thesis. Along with the thesis question, the project and methodology will be described briefly. The chapter also includes this outline.

¹⁸ Erin Manning & Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minnesota, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), vii. Manning and Massumi explore the philosophy of Affect theory. "Every practice is a mode of thought, already in the act [...] To paint: a thinking through color." In this project, encouraging the PPG to paint non-figuratively, is an attempt to capture the effects before they crystallize into thoughts.

The context that is the setting for the thesis will be highlighted in chapter two. The Church of Sweden and the specific situation of a congregation located in Stockholm, as well as a brief reflection on the times that we live in. The mentality and existential questions of people here in the postmodern era of the 21st century will be described.

Chapter three is the literary survey focusing homileticians whose work addresses or is tangent to the focus of this thesis, and that have provided direction for the same.

The literature study of chapter four will expand beyond homiletics, engaging a multidisciplinary perspective with voices that speak to the issue of the uncertainties of life. An interview with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén highlighting her understanding of abyss-knowledge will be part of this chapter.

The fifth chapter describes the project plan and process, explaining the methodology and the steps taken.

In chapter six an account will be provided for the outcomes of the project, delineating its effects on the congregation. This will encompass an assessment of the project, the feedback received from the Parish Project Group (PPG), and the questionnaires administered to the congregation. The evaluation will include the two sermons, the feed-forward and feedback sessions, and the final response from the PPG. Additionally, a reflective analysis of the homiletical strategy will be presented, focusing on its efficacy in engaging existential questions and eliciting a resonant response from the congregation. The chapter will also offer findings and discussion on abyss-knowledge.

Chapter seven will offer a reflection on the significance of the strategy and the results of this thesis in the homiletical field and the context that is the Church of Sweden.

Chapter 2

Ministry Context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will describe and explain the context in which this research takes place. It will outline the demographic, socioeconomic, historical-denominational, and cultural-confessional context. The situational context of layers of unrest and increased uncertainty will also be illustrated, along with the societal context where society relies on the church. Limitations will be named at the end of the chapter.

2.2 Ministry Context

The setting for this research is Oscars församling (Oscar's congregation) situated in Stockholm, Sweden. The congregation is part of the Church of Sweden and has four churches, Oscar's church being the main church where the sermons for this thesis will take place.

2.2.1 Demographic Context

Stockholm is a city characterized by secularism. Although the Church of Sweden boasts a considerable nationwide membership of 5.5 million, only a small percentage actively engages in regular church attendance. Within the geographical scope of Oscar's congregation approximately 40,000 people reside, 59% of them members of the Church of Sweden.¹ Notably the composition of the congregation's church attendees is transient. Given the urban location of Oscar's congregation, close ties exist with neighboring congregations and individuals often opt to worship in different churches on varying Sundays. The musical elements and choirs play a significant role in the diverse offerings provided.

2.2.2 Socioeconomic Context

The area where Oscar's congregation is located is recognized as an upper-class area. The city of Stockholm is known for its beauty and Oscar's Church is situated in the middle of it. The congregation allocates a substantial budget for music, resulting in frequent well-attended

¹ The understanding of congregation within the Church of Sweden is a territorial definition, a remnant from the time before the year 2000 when it was a State Church.

concerts hosted within the church. Members of the congregation are characterized by friendliness, affluence, and enthusiasm for participating in charitable endeavors. They express admiration for the church and its social initiatives, recognizing that beneath the well-polished surface lies a community grappling with imperfect lives.

Sweden has generously taken in many immigrants in recent years and currently 20 percent of the population was born abroad. However, few of them reside in the area of Oscar's congregation. In this locality xenophobic remarks are not uncommon, especially among the youth. In other congregations within the Church of Sweden, in more socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, the approach is hands-on, celebrating diverse ethnicities, and fostering collaboration among multireligious groups. While those areas grapple with various social problems, the commitment to solidarity, equality, and the dignity of all is more deeply rooted.

2.2.3 Historical-denominational Context

Due to its substantial size the Church of Sweden encompasses diverse expressions accommodating various theological perspectives under its umbrella. Confessionally an Evangelical Lutheran church, the Church of Sweden exhibits a sacramental touch that has gained prominence in many congregations. In Swedish the term used for the pastor is "Priest,"² a remnant from the country's Catholic past 500 years ago. This Catholic influence is not limited to nomenclature, but is also evident in the church and worship service. This influence is partly attributed to connections with the Anglican/Episcopalian tradition and the churches of the Porvoo Communion in Europe.

Until the year 2000, the Church of Sweden was a State Church and even after the separation of Church and State many traditions remain closely connected to the Church. For instance, end-of-school-year celebrations are often held in the Church. The school perceives the church setting as providing a festive atmosphere, given its larger capacity compared to the school auditorium. This presents an opportunity to make the Christian tradition visible and spark curiosity. The space itself communicates through its language, as does the music. If invited to address the gathering, the pastor must exercise caution. In a highly secular environment, imposing prayer or blessings on the students could jeopardize this unique opportunity to convey words that contain the historic understanding of Christian tradition so deeply rooted in our

² Präst, in Swedish.

society, as well as words that address situations in life that resonate with the students, staff, and parents.

2.2.4 Cultural-confessional Context

Music and choirs assume a vital role in the community life of the church. There are several hundred individuals participating in various choirs in Oscar's congregation. Joining a church choir can offer both cultural and spiritual experiences. Many choir members may express that their involvement is driven by the enjoyment of singing and the sense of fellowship, with the church aspect being less prominent.

Most members express a positive sentiment towards the church, appreciating its traditions, music, and architecture. However, the use of religious language, particularly the term "God," tends to evoke discomfort among individuals. David Thurfjell, religious historian and professor in religious studies, author of *Det gudlösa folket* "The Godless People," gives a picture of the post Christian attitude toward religion in Sweden.³ He describes how most Swedes refrain from calling themselves Christians as they perceive the term to be reserved for individuals who are highly religious and devout.⁴ They celebrate Christian holidays, baptize their children and get married in the church. When that time comes, they wish to be buried within the context of the church. Many people are active in volunteer work and church related activities such as gathering funds for the less fortunate, arranging Christmas sales, teaching Swedish to immigrants, singing in a choir, or making snacks for the youth group. When talk of religious faith comes up however, they remain silent. Embracing a down-to-earth pragmatic attitude, resisting exaggerations and overconfidence is considered to be wise. For example, Thurfjell writes, many equate religion with individual belief and associate religious practice with adherence to theological dogmas."⁵

There is a potential risk of the church becoming transformed into an antiquated museum, admired for its aesthetic elements—ornate buildings, beautiful music, and eloquent words that resonate with sentiments from the past. While this historical and aesthetic appeal may serve to open people's lives to the gospel message, there is a discernible barrier, a growing sense

³ David Thurfjell, *Det gudlösa folket: De postkristna svenskarna och religionen* (Stockholm: Molin & Sorgenfrei, 2015.)

⁴ Ibid., 221f.

⁵ Ibid., 233.

that the beauty becomes a limiting boundary. It appears that, for many, the words of Christian tradition belong to a museum, something of the past, disconnected from the profound and eternal dimensions of existence. Nevertheless, there are moments when this perceived barrier dissipates, and the teachings of Christian faith become pillars offering support. Such instances often coincide with the realization of life's uncertainty, particularly when individuals are confronted with the thin membrane between life and death, overcome by the fear of falling into the abyss.

Traditionally, the teachings of the church have been conveyed through Bible studies, confirmation classes, and church lectures. However, in Sweden, there is a current situation where the biblical heritage, which has shaped a significant part of society, is under threat as younger generations are not familiar with these stories and traditions. The General Synod has identified a need for education in all aspects of church life.

2.2.5 Situational Context of Unrest

The work of this Thesis is being conducted during the fall of 2023. The world is perceived as one with more uncertainty than experienced in many decades. Not only is there a war in one of Sweden's neighboring countries, the Ukraine, there is now also a very severe situation in Gaza, with the war between Hamas and Israel, affecting so many people.⁶ Sweden grapples with challenges such as economic instability and rising hostility, along with an upsurge in crime, particularly never before seen drug-related gang violence in the Stockholm area.

In response to the Ukraine war, Sweden has sought Nato membership, facing opposition from certain European countries due to political disagreements. Instances of demonstrations involving the burning of the Quran have occurred, expressing freedom of religion and provoking tensions within the Muslim community. Tragically, two Swedish soccer fans were brutally murdered while supporting their team in Brussels. The sense of safety that being Swedish once provided has diminished, as the country contends with security threats.

The summer of 2023 was the warmest summer on record. Global warming is a serious threat. Extreme weather, species dying and eco-systems collapsing is what can be

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEv7VeiK18I> "I am here to sound the alarm," UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres said in a speech after the outbreak of the war in Gaza. He talked of the cascade of crises the world is facing: "A world filled with suspicion, distrust and despair. Covid-19 left us with greater divides than ever. Escalating climate crisis. Human rights in the crosshairs. Solidarity - missing in action."

expected in the future. Bishop Andreas Holmberg, the Bishop of the Diocese of Stockholm, urges pastors to preach on the climate.⁷

2.2.6 Societal Context

Oscar's congregation resides in the heart of Stockholm, in an area brimming with popular tourist attractions. Tourists from Sweden and other countries frequently visit this area and the churches of Oscar's congregation. In the summer of 2023, a tragic incident occurred at Gröna Lund, the amusement park adjacent to one of the churches. As active members of the area network, the congregation promptly opened the church doors to offer solace to people, including the park's staff, employees, and shocked visitors. This incident served as a reaffirmation of the church's role during times when individuals are confronted with life's uncertainties. Individuals had unexpectedly and literally fallen from the roller coaster into the abyss. A visitor to the church raised the poignant question: "If we can't rely on the security of the rollercoaster, what are we to put our faith in?"

2.3 Limitations

The above description of religion in Sweden represents the context and the cultural landscape of the research, the PPG, as well as that of the researcher. The fact that the researcher is active under these premises shapes the pre-understanding of the context.

⁷ Andreas Holmberg, *Gud såg att det var gott: Att vara människa och kyrka i klimatkrisens tid* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2023). To maintain credibility as a church, Holmberg writes, it becomes important not to compromise the values that can create a sustainable future. One challenge is to review how facilities and resources are utilized in order to safeguard the climate and contribute to a more climate-conscious world. Harnessing voluntary efforts and creating an organization around those who wish to engage in the church's work also contributes to sustainability and credibility for the church of the future, he urges. This book will be referenced further in Chapter 4.

Chapter 3

The Homiletical Issue

3.1 Introduction

Chapter three is a literary survey, focusing homiletics whose work addresses or is tangent to the focus of this thesis. The voices engaged speak to the homiletical issue of contextual preaching, the understanding of theological ground and the purpose of the sermon, giving special attention to transformation.

3.2 Theological Ground

In *Thinking Theologically. The Preacher as Theologian*, Ron Allen provides guiding questions when it comes to the goal of the sermon and the understanding of how the preacher's theological conviction shapes the sermon. Allen's exposé of different theologies sheds light on the Church of Sweden and its preaching tradition, where the sermon often can be identified as carrying a "narrative-kerygmatic quality," the preacher desiring to "invite the congregation to make sense of their lives in terms of the narrative and the promises of the gospel".¹ With a firm identity in the Lutheran heritage, the expressions of the Church of Sweden have much recognition in what Allen calls Other Theologies, most closely Theologies of Otherness.² It is never possible to know what it is like to be another person. This is an important insight when approaching one's neighbor; understanding that one cannot understand, the Other is other. This is also true for God, the ultimate Other, and the Biblical text. Respecting the otherness of the text entails not reading one's own agenda into the text. Interaction with the other provides an opportunity to learn something about life, faith, the eternal, and oneself. In his book, Allen writes:

When we perceive others only in terms of ourselves, we not only misperceive but also do violence to them. [...] The presence of the other may open us to possibilities for life that we have not previously identified. By attending to the other we may discover that we have more

¹ Ronald J. Allen, *Thinking Theologically: The Preacher as Theologian* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 62.

² *Ibid.*, 59f.

in common than we expected. Appreciation of the other should cause one to lose arrogance and to approach others with a deep sense of humility.³

In preaching, this asserting of the value of the Other can help shape the setting as a safe space for the worshiper. Learning from the other is of great importance to get the listener on board. The theological understanding is a great variable when choosing style of sermon.

3.2.1 Preaching as Conversation

In *Preaching in the purple zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide*, Leah Schade explains how through the past decades, preaching has tended to go from deductive methods to inductive ones, through the introduction of a New Homiletic. However, sermons still remain one-dimensional, one-way, still a monologue. It is still the preacher's journey. "In Purple Zone Preaching, we're looking for an alternative way to engage hearers that sees them more as co-creators of the journey rather than as passive recipients."⁴ The direction is one where the sermon obtains conversational quality and the preacher is one who "convenes a sacred conversation."⁵ In this collaborative method, Leah Schade mentions the Roundtable Pulpit,⁶ where the preacher meets with parishioners in preparing for the sermon to "develop a public theology that reconnects the private and public realms."⁷ Conversational preaching is about gathering voices, local and global, present and past, paying attention to those that have been drowned out and to the whispers and pauses where people's voices are missing.⁸

The idea that the sermon is born out of conversation with several voices is also prominent in *Predikan växer fram* by Maria Ottensten and Tina Johansson.⁹ This book, used as

³ Ibid., 62.

⁴ Leah D. Schade, *Preaching in the Purple Zone: Ministry in the Red-Blue Divide* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 54.

⁵ Ibid., xiv. Foreword by Ronald J. Allen.

⁶ Ibid., 54f. Referring to the work of Lucy Atkinson Rose: *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*.

⁷ Ibid., 119.

⁸ Ibid., 56.

⁹ Maria Ottensten & Tina Johansson, *Predikan växer fram* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2010), 13.

homiletical textbook for seminary students in Sweden, spans different styles of preaching. The authors remind the reader of Martin Luther's definition of the sermon purpose, being the incarnation of Christ: "Distributing the Word of God is equaled to distributing the bread and the wine in the Eucharist."¹⁰ Ottensten and Johansson discuss the language used in preaching and making the sermon easily accessible for the listener. If everyday language does not contain a multitude of traditionally religious words, then the sermon should not either.¹¹

3.2.2 Contextual Approach

Along the line of contextual approach, Anna Carter Florence writes in *Preaching as Testimony*: "Preaching is not just proclaiming good news; it is *making* good news, right here and now."¹² Carter Florence describes preaching as an embodiment of the gospel. Contextual activity, faith becoming the incarnation of God, is also one of the ways that Tim Sensing explains how practical theology can be understood. In *Qualitative Research*, he sets forth a sixfold paradigm. Apart from contextual activity, practical theology can be viewed as communal activity, focusing on participation in relation to others, and sacramental activity mediating the presence of God. Practical theology is also transformative, critical and public in its nature, according to Sensing.¹³

3.2.3 Ethical Approach

In preaching, the sermon is usually shaped by an interaction between the preacher, the congregation, and God. However, the powers and principalities that are in dominion are rarely included, Charles L. Campbell writes in *The Word before the Powers*. "These powers shape human life in profound ways and deserve serious attention as the primary ethical context of Christian preaching."¹⁴ The powers that Campbell refers to are all the things that hinder life, mainly composed of structural systems, rarely enemies of blood and flesh.¹⁵ Racism, ageism,

¹⁰ Ottensten & Johansson, *Predikan växer fram*, 21. Researcher's translation.

¹¹ Ibid., 79.

¹² Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony*, 107.

¹³ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 22f.

¹⁴ Charles L. Campbell, *The Word before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*. (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press 2002), 69.

¹⁵ Ibid., 6f.

sexism, dominion strategies, microaggression, indirect violence, exclusion, police brutality, and military strategy are all examples of these powers, Campbell notes.¹⁶ The ultimate power is death, not just physical death. It can be death of moral consciousness, or being numbed or desensitized. In contrast to this world of systemic powers and principalities, the power of God is a power of interruption. Life is a pilgrimage where old age and new creation are constantly at work, the potency of death and the tokens of resurrection. Others may see death, but we see resurrection, Campbell says, suggesting a *threshold theology*. Drawing from the first chapter in First Corinthians in the Bible, Campbell illustrates how the language of Paul creates a liminal space, a threshold space in the division between the wisdom of the world and the wisdom of God.

In places of death, hope itself finally becomes a form of resistance – a defiance of the powers that pretend to rule the world. In the face of the powers, hope is no passive, wishful longing for a better day. Rather, it is a form of resistance to the principalities that masquerade as common sense; it challenges the closed definitions of reality that offer no alternative future. Where hope is present, the powers have lost control, and their reign has been broken. The future opens up, and life becomes possible even in the midst of death.¹⁷

This hope portrayed by Paul, which Campbell's threshold theology points to, is part of Apocalyptic Imagination and can be reached through preaching "the sword of the Spirit" in an encounter with the principalities and powers.¹⁸

3.3 Framing the Sermon

When framing the sermon, John S. McClure suggests four different approaches, explaining how an approach is something more practical and accessible than a theory. In *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, McClure presents four questions that will guide and help organize the key elements of the approach. The first question has to do with how to theologically frame the ethical problem in order to identify the best way out of the problem. The second question is how to create a personal and communal experience. Thirdly McClure addresses signposts to be

¹⁶ Digital lecture by Campbell, June 9-10, 2020.

¹⁷ Campbell, *The Word before the Powers*, 188.

¹⁸ Ibid., 69.

identified and dealt with for the best way through the issue. The fourth question is how to articulate a final destination and set out toward it.¹⁹

Based on the ethical approach, identifying the problem and seeking its resolution can take on alternative scenarios, for example the choice of an accommodating approach versus resistance. “Only by working hard and getting into the shoes of others and increasing empathy for the suffering of others can a way out be found,” according to McClure.²⁰

The way into an ethical issue, getting the listeners onboard, McClure writes, can include such things as illustrations, analogies, stories, imagery, or clarifications of various types. This is the way that identification takes place.²¹ Another “way in” is through weeping and confessing, joining in lamentation for those who are being oppressed or victimized. Preachers can help congregations lament the impact of unjust social systems by truth-telling.²²

McClure’s question of the way through can take on different types of messaging, for example artistic and imaginative, didactic, catechetical, visual, conversational, or even theatrical. What feeling tones should the sermon have? What roadblocks need to be dealt with? What memorable terms or phrases will help people grasp where we are in our ethical journey and what the most important landmarks are? These are questions that can guide the shaping of the sermon.

In classical narrative preaching, there is a dramaturgical movement through the sermon, identifying trouble and speaking grace in to that situation. In *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*, Kimberly R. Wagner mentions for example the Four page sermon-style of preaching. This method describes trouble in the text and trouble in the world, and then moves on to point toward grace in the text, which is applied as grace in our world. This method and other narrative structures, Wagner writes, are loved, taught and used by many. Narrative preaching is good and useful. The risk that these structures run is in the case of traumatic situations. Premature resolution can desert the congregation. Wagner discusses ways to

¹⁹ John S. McClure, *Ethical Approaches to Preaching: Choosing the Best Way to Preach About Difficult Issues* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2021), xvii.

²⁰ Ibid., xviii.

²¹ Ibid., xix.

²² Ibid., 67-68. This reasoning draws on Christine Smith’s work *Preaching as Weeping, Confession and Resistance*.

make halt at Holy Saturday, not hasting past Good Friday into Easter Sunday.²³ Giving credit to phenomenologist and narrative theorist Paul Ricoeur, she explains how people long to make sense of experiences, organizing them into plots, and yet there are always unknown things to struggle with, upsetting the order. “Even the paradigm of Greek tragedy makes a place for the upsetting role of the *peripeteia*, those contingencies and reversals of future that solicit horror and pity.”²⁴ In cases of trauma, Wagner writes, the first step is to establish safety. This *Narratively fractured preaching* that she suggests, is grounded in the eschatological nature of the Christian faith.²⁵

Likewise, when considering the way toward, the “where are we going?” which is McClure’s fourth question, identifying and claiming a way toward a better world is in focus. Eschatological language and imagery are tools when envisioning this hoped-for future. Identifying the way toward will help preachers claim this vision.

3.3.1 Sermon Purpose Statement

The use of a Sermon Purpose Statement (SPS) is a refined tool that can be used in the process of framing and shaping the sermon, explained by Ottensten and Johansson, in *Predikan Växer Fram*.²⁶ The first step of the SPS, the *Situation* highlights questions and concerns in the context, the current time and place, taking in the make-up of the congregation. The second part, the *Goal* formulates the purpose of the sermon, what the preacher wishes to happen in the life and thoughts of the listener. And thirdly, the *Means* is how this is to be done, what language or images will be used.

²³ Kimberly R. Wagner, *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 20023), 48f.

²⁴ Ibid., 51. Wagner quotes Paul Ricoeur.

²⁵ Ibid., 52.

²⁶ Ottensten & Johansson, *Predikan växer fram*, 119.

3.4 Addressing the Postmodern

Giving attention to the situation, the specific context that is postmodern times, O. Wesley Allen Jr., like Leah Schade, argues for a homiletical approach that is conversational in nature, not pronouncing truth from on high.²⁷ In *Preaching in the era of Trump*, Allen writes:

Information is a way to persuade modernists who care about truth. Preachers in a postmodern context however must find ways to offer to their congregations experiences of those events, stories, values, and ideas from which they hope the hearers will make meaning.²⁸

Information and facts are simply not the way to get to the postmodern's heart, according to Allen.

Hermeneutics of conversation, which Lisa L. Thompson writes about in *Preaching the headlines*, follows along the same track. "The preacher does not give answers because they do not have all the answers. Instead, they extend an invitation." This creates a different paradigm for how to think and act. Asking open questions without knowing the responses encourages individuals to claim their agency, engage in critical thinking and imagination, and seek transformation.²⁹

3.4.1 Preaching in Divided Community

The Purple Zone Preaching explored by Leah Schade specifically focuses congregations divided in the political red and blue fields. Addressing the frustration of a morally divided community, O. Wesley Allen Jr. confesses his shock and awe in relation to the times we live in. In *Preaching in the era of Trump*, he expresses fear, anger, grief and shame over the fact that America has become so divided along lines of race, gender, class, religion, and sexual orientation; a world of "truthiness" and "fake news." The book deals with several of these issues that Allen finds problematic, and offers a pulpit strategy for them. Allen suggests three broad strategies for preaching mission, in his case a mission that will counter Trumpian values. These strategies include making room for confession and lament, preaching ecclesiology in declarative

²⁷ O. Wesley Allen Jr., *Preaching in the era of Trump* (Saint Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2017), 13.

²⁸ Allen, *Preaching in the era of Trump*, 19.

²⁹ Lisa L. Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines: Possibilities and Pitfalls* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021), 17-18. Thompson's thoughts on preaching as conversation are credited work by Ronald J. Allen and O. Wesley Allen.

terms instead of imperatives, and to preach eschatology.³⁰ These three strategies are recurring in the reviewed homiletical literature.

3.4.2 Justice

In *Preaching's Purpose: Thoughts on Message and Method*, André Resner Jr. writes of the importance of the preacher's understanding of the core message of the sermon, being that this is the lens that guides the use of scripture in preparing the sermon.

the good news of God's covenant-making and covenant-keeping, God's persistent desire and demand for justice, and God's empowerment of just actions for redemptive healing in the world.³¹

The hope that the sermon sets out to convey carries a seed of empowerment that can instill a sense of urgency and agency. It is the transformative nature of faith that Resner points to.³²

The thought of right relationships permeates both testaments.³³ God's Shalom, peace and welfare, is at the core of faith and tradition, the visionary goal and hope for humankind and creation.³⁴ In *Preaching God's Transforming Justice*, Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald J. Allen, and Dale P. Andrews write:

Many people today yearn to live in a world of love, peace, freedom, mutuality, respect, security, and abundance for all. The Bible calls this combination of qualities justice. The best of the Bible and Christian tradition envision the heart of God's own mission as re-creating the world as a realm of love and justice. Joining God in this mission is at the heart of the calling of the preacher and the congregation, [...] to empower sermons as active agents in God's mission.³⁵

³⁰ Allen, *Preaching in the era of Trump*, 53 ff.

³¹ André Resner Jr., *Preaching's Purpose: Thoughts on Message and Method*. In *Just Preaching: Prophetic Voices for Economic Justice*, edited by André Resner Jr. (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 14.

³² Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 9.

³³ Quote from Ron Allen in class June 12, 2023.

³⁴ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 7. The purpose (telos) of any ministerial work can be expressed with the word Shalom, seeking peace and welfare.

³⁵ Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm, Ronald J. Allen, Dale P. Andrews, *Preaching God's Transforming Justice: A Lectionary commentary, Year A. With 22 New Holy Days for Justice* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 2011), x.

It is not just that preaching has an innate quality seeking transformation, faith itself constantly seeks Shalom, the quality of peace and wholeness for heart, mind, and community.

3.5 Voice of the Preacher

The preacher, standing in the service of God's transforming justice, can opt toward different voices. Kenyatta Gilbert names three aspects or modes of preaching: The prophet, the priest and the sage.³⁶ The prophetic voice calls out for transformation, the priestly voice is pastorally encouraging, and the sagely voice conveys wisdom in a didactic way.

3.5.1 Pastoral and Prophetic

In *Prophetic Preaching, A Pastoral Approach*, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale suggests ways to preach pastorally while being prophetic, since she early in her ministry “quickly learned that the prophet’s style of confrontational, head-on witness didn’t play very well in the parish.”³⁷ Explaining that she is interested in “the type of preaching that is cutting edge and future oriented, and that addresses public and social concerns,” she goes on to name some hallmark characteristics of prophetic preaching.³⁸ Reminding us that Jesus was also a prophet, she names essential elements from Jesus’ own words and deeds including God’s passion for others, proclaiming the promises of God, and pointing the way to new possibilities, using the language of imagination. While avoiding “moral exhortation,” and “predicting the future”, things that are usually understood as prophetic, preaching must find its way of steering away from that which threatens God’s good intention for creation, God’s shalom.³⁹ This is to be done in the Spirit of Christ, reflecting his compassion for the world and its brokenness.⁴⁰ Prophetic preaching brings together sacred biblical texts and the present situation in imaginative ways.⁴¹ The hallmarks of

³⁶ Leah Schade. *Preaching in the Purple Zone*, 50. Schade refers to Tisdale, explaining the trivocal impulse, suggested by of Kenyatta R. Gilbert.

³⁷ Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching: A Pastoral Approach* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 41.

³⁸ Ibid., 3.

³⁹ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 5. This reasoning draws from the work of Dawn Ottoni-Wilhelm’s.

⁴¹ Ibid., 8. This is from John McClure’s definition of Prophetic Preaching.

prophetic preaching, according to Tisdale, require of the preacher to name both what is not of God in the world (criticizing) and the new reality God will bring to pass in the future, (energizing), and to have:

a heart that breaks with the things that break God's heart; a passion for justice in the world; the imagination, conviction, and courage to speak words from God; humility and honesty in the preaching moment; and a strong reliance on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit.⁴²

The criticizing can be hard for hearers to embrace, but real criticism begins in the capacity to grieve. In the old language of the prophets lamentation, grieving, is a first step. Establishing trust makes the sermon more accessible, standing with the congregation, moving from the familiar and comfortable toward the uncomfortable.⁴³ Tisdale also suggests joining in God's eschatological activities by envisioning a reality yet to come, a reality God is creating in the here and now.⁴⁴

3.5.2 Transformation

"Change feels risky," Lisa L. Thompson writes in *Preaching the Headlines: Possibilities and Pitfalls*. Faith is at the core of our identities. "If I change my beliefs, I risk losing relationships – often significant relationships – on which I rely to function in the world, so if I change my beliefs, I lose my identity."⁴⁵ In the findings from the second Parish project in the Church of Sweden Qualified Preaching Program, was identifying that constant openness to personal learning and growth is essential for the preacher, allowing continual transformation of one self through engagement with texts, tradition, and questions.⁴⁶ In *Preaching as Testimony*, Anna Carter Florence writes:

The goal of preaching is not consensus (the listener agreeing with the preacher). The goal of preaching is conversion, the *preacher's*

⁴² Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 10.

⁴³ Ibid., 41f. Draws from chapter 3, *Speaking Truth in Love*.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines*, 121.

⁴⁶ Helena Ekhem, *Predikans transformativa möjlighet: En predikostudie om undervisning och lärande. Project Report, Qualified Swedish Preaching Program in Sweden* (Uppsala 2020), 24.

conversion. The preacher models conversion by engaging the text at a deeper level (“living it”) in order to be formed by it (or by the Other, which is God).⁴⁷

If expecting change within the listener, the preacher must also be open for transformation. Transformed people transform people.⁴⁸

3.5.3 Standing with the Congregation

Establishing contact with the congregation, gaining their trust, is of major importance in order to make the sermon more accessible. By taking stand with the congregation, Leonora Tubbs Tisdale writes, the preacher acknowledges that whatever convictions might be alluded in the sermon, the preacher stands equally as convicted.⁴⁹

Establishing this close connection is a pedagogical challenge that entails more than finding the words to convey a message. The way the sermon is delivered makes a great impact on the embodiment thereof. In *Preaching Without Notes*, Joseph M. Webb explains how the fullest and most intense bonding between the preacher and those who share the preaching is made possible:

Without notes, human passion is set free, and passion is as close to the cement of human bonding as we ever get [...] In preaching without notes, though, the passions of the preacher become – or *can* become – fully engaged. As the preacher’s passions become engaged, the congregation’s passions are also engaged.⁵⁰

The presence and the emotions expressed by the preacher must be true in order to create that inviting safe space where identification with the congregation is made possible.

⁴⁷ Anna Carter Florence, *Preaching as Testimony* (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 2007), 108.

⁴⁸ Quoted from conversation in digital classroom, Social Transformation, Dr. Jan Rippentrop-Schnell, June 5, 2023.

⁴⁹ Tisdale, *Prophetic Preaching*, 49f.

⁵⁰ Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching Without Notes* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 25-26.

3.6 Moral Imagination

Laying the ground for the congregation to imagine a better world and a step toward transformation is made possible by four qualities of moral imagination, suggested by Frank Thomas in *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*. Thomas argues strongly the need for preaching that will oppose the world of today, a world of misogyny, xenophobia, fake news, racism and hate, a world where white supremacy is on the rise. Preaching from moral imagination as proposed by Thomas includes the following qualities:

1. Envision equality and represent that by one's physical presence
2. Empathy as a catalyst or bridge to create opportunities to overcome the past and make new decisions for peace and justice
3. Sources of wisdom and truth in ancient texts, the wisdom of the ages
4. The language of poetry and art that lifts and elevates the human spirit by touching the emotive chords of wonder, hope and mystery⁵¹

The first quality Thomas mentions is physical presence. Like the benefits suggested by Joseph M. Webb in *Preaching without notes*, this is a way of coming nearer to the congregation. The second quality for Frank Thomas is empathy as a catalyst for transformation. Empathy makes identification possible. Wisdom and identification with ancient texts like biblical scripture is Thomas' third step.

While it is assumed that human beings understand the world through calculations and logical syllogisms, the reality is that people understand the world through images, myths, stories, and thereby comprehend relationship to God, nature, self, and others.⁵²

Using imagination, Thomas argues, the preacher can share God's abiding wisdom and ethical truth in the midst of a chaotic situation, something that benefits the individual and the community.⁵³ Using creative language, poetry and art, will touch emotive chords and generate

⁵¹ Frank Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), xxi.

⁵² Ibid., 20.

⁵³ Ibid., 106.

hope. One of Thomas' examples is that of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s speech "I have a dream," where Dr. King imagines black and white children holding hands.

3.6.1 Art and Imagination

Imagination is a crucial part of the method suggested in Gregory C. Ellison II's *Fear+Less Dialogues*. His method utilizes theories and practices to address fear, one of them being fear of the unknown. Ellison's method starts with creating a secure space, using imagination. Utilizing visual art, music, and interactive exercises, he creates a hypersensory environment that elevates seeing, hearing and changing.⁵⁴ Drawing on the theories of D. W. Winnicott and transitional space, Ellison seeks to create this safe and responsive holding environment.⁵⁵ This setting provides the security for people to truly see and interact with each other. When we truly see one another, there is an opening for healing of oppressive structures, of overcoming fear, both personally and on a structural level. "Only then can we truly begin to see 'the other'".⁵⁶ Identification can take place. "Once you see, you cannot unsee." Transformation has begun.

Fearless Dialogue creates crucible moments for time-bending transformation that emerge when human interaction collides with divine intervention. In these rare moments, the past is reframed, future possibilities appear attainable, the present is energized with hope, and the kingdom of God descends to earth.⁵⁷

Ellison's approach above is clearly spelled with eschatological language, one of the tools available in Christian theology and language.

⁵⁴ Gregory C. Ellison II, *Fear+Less Dialogues: A New Movement for Justice* (Louisville Westminster John Knox Press, 2017), 13. This draws from Ellison's explaining the hypersensory environment that he calls Laboratory of Discovery, with the three pillars: See, Hear, Change.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 43.

⁵⁶ Ibid., xi.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 13.

3.6.2 Preaching in Trauma

In confronting human tragedy and communal despair, our job as preachers is not to explain complex theological concepts in abstract terms, but to help persons imagine what it means in particular concrete situations. Kenyatta R. Gilbert, in *Exodus preaching*, draws on the work of homiletician Sally Brown. She urges that preaching should:

Be more pastoral than theoretical in terms of its character; be more evocative than comprehensive in its aims; be more textured by exploration (interpreting the cross in new imaginative ways) rather than seeking closure and completeness.⁵⁸

In other words, the sermon should embody the gospel rather than spell it out.

The work of homiletician Christine Smith, a radical approach to preaching of honesty, is mentioned by Lisa L. Thompson. Smith's *Weeping and confession* is a pathway to resistance and new future. Turning away from a way of living requires the acknowledgement of the undesirable and broken. That is the work of lament. "Lament is the means by which we expose and name what should not be in order to make way for alternative futures."⁵⁹ In *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, John McClure, also cites Christine Smith "By weeping, Smith implies that the first way into an issue is through joining in lamentation with and for those who are being oppressed or victimized."⁶⁰

In *Fractured Ground*, Kimberly R. Wagner writes about the use of lament both as a liturgical and biblical model. Lament has a capacity to give voice and restore agency. Modeling how the prophet Habakkuk holds tension amid trauma, standing with the people, Wagner describes the prophet's offering lament, naming the brokenness in a cry to God, and at the same time leaning into the hope of God's life-giving work, situated in an eschatological tension.⁶¹ The prayer of lament is a cry for justice, restoration and consolation, in situations of injustice, deceit

⁵⁸ Kenyatta R. Gilbert, *Exodus Preaching: Crafting Sermons about Justice and Hope*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), 50f.

⁵⁹ Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines*, 59.

⁶⁰ McClure, *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, 67.

⁶¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 70-71.

and death; a cry not just in the churches but in all the places where human struggle takes place: public spaces, hospitals, private homes.⁶²

Lament has the capacity to ground and support those who find themselves disoriented and fragmented due to trauma while also helping the community to find voice and agency to respond in sustainable ways.⁶³

Looking at the book of Lamentations in the Bible, historical facts such as items stolen, military strategy or persons held captive, are notably absent. Instead, through poetry, hyperbolic language, dramatic declarations, poetic insights and ambiguities, Lamentations witnesses monumental disaster. It gives voice to cries and emotional outpouring, the chaotic and confused sentiments of a people struggling.⁶⁴

Lament in preaching, Lisa L. Thompson writes, includes both grief and lamentation, as well as exposing and naming practices of violation, that which stands in the way for alternative futures.⁶⁵

3.7 Conclusion

Theological ground, context and the chosen voice of the preacher influence the shaping of the sermon. In times when uncertainty is particularly palpable, be it for instance divided community, trauma or injustice, many homileticians turn to strategies of lamentation, eschatology and imagination. This chapter has shown how the language and imagery of the prophets in the Bible can be used to address the congregation, providing identification and sustainable tools for consolation and transformation. Establishing trust and a safe relationship invites the congregation to receive the message.

⁶² Ibid., 117.

⁶³ Ibid., 8.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 83.

⁶⁵ Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines*, 59.

Chapter 4

Expanding the Issue beyond Homiletics

4.1 Introduction

In a cognate field study, this chapter will explore perspectives relevant to the proposed homiletical strategy, focusing on “The uncertainties of life.” Literature from multidisciplinary fields such as theology, sociology, pedagogy, and philosophy will be reviewed. The first part of this chapter will reference the interview with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén and some of her work that relates to the notion of Abyss-knowledge.

Through the selected authors and works that follow, this section will look more closely at the understanding of the alterity of the Other in exploring a violence free ethic, the width and make-up of different existential questions and understandings present in a congregation, as well as an account of the urgent abyss situation that the climate crisis constitutes. Finally, the field of hermeneutics and the framework that it contributes with, suggests an intersecting space for known and unknown variables.

4.2 Interview with Antje Jackelén

In a semi-structured interview, the conversation with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén focuses both on life near the abyss, current situations where uncertainty is prevalent, as well as the abyss-resources available in Christian tradition.¹ The interview is supplemented by quotes and reasonings from two of her books and a radio show.

4.2.1 Peace-injured

In the interview with Antje Jackelén, she mentions the word *peace-injured*, referring to an interview with Hungarian cancer doctor Georg Klein, who survived concentration camp and escaped the Nazis. The journalist asked, "Are you war-wounded?" No, he replied, it is you who are “peace-injured.” What he saw is similar to what we experienced during the pandemic, Jackelén says. Our neighboring country Finland had a different preparedness than Sweden. In their recent history, they have gone through Russian invasion and war, which has provided them with abyss-knowledge in a way that Sweden has not acquired. We have been blessed with a long

¹ The interview is transcribed word for word in Appendix A.

period of peace. We assume it will continue to be that way, that we are not in need of abyss-knowledge. In a crisis situation, Jackelén reflects, Swedish society turns to the church. They lean on the church to be there, providing structure and space for grieving, for existential questions and expressions, and for consolation. Society lacks abyss-knowledge, something that has to be cultivated even in times of less uncertainty. Existential and spiritual resilience is an important component of a resilient society.²

4.2.2 Need for Abyss-knowledge

Antje Jackelén quotes a newspaper article she has read a few years earlier. The person in the article said something like: "In school I spent many hours learning math and Swedish. I have learned a lot about many things, but haven't learned anything about life." This insinuates a void when it comes to existential questions and existential knowledge, Jackelén continues. We know that sooner or later, the existential abyss opens in front of the teenager's feet. It can happen very quickly. Without access to existential tools, the teenager must carry all their meaningfulness themselves. This is a heavy burden. There seems to be a fear of teaching this kind of knowledge to children. The Old Testament stories have cruelty in them. They have been told to children during all times, so why not to our children?

There needs to be a sensitivity to children's existential questions. This is something that Jackelén also addresses in her book, *Gud är större* (God is greater).³ Young people should not be placed in a spiritual quarantine until they can think abstractly. Instead, they require tools for spiritual development. If one desires the best for their child, they should for example not be excluded from the touch of divine love through baptism. Baptism is the work surface that is indestructible, Jackelén says in the interview. Here rests the calling to live courageously, in trust and love, to build good and goodness with Jesus as a role model, she notes. Difficulties in adulthood often stem from a lack of spiritual development, absence of spiritual resilience, and experiences of a supportive community.⁴ The right of children to spiritual development includes rituals, customs, and practices, as well as access to the treasure of stories. Here are tales of

² Jackelén develops this thought in a radio show *Vinterprat* from 2021.

³ Antje Jackelén, *Gud är större* (Lund: Arcus, 2016). The reasoning in this paragraph is from pages 155-160.

⁴ Ibid., 157.

departure, jealousy, oppression and liberation, struggle, suffering, and death and resurrection. Here are dreams, visions, and ideas that resonate. Spiritual education also includes access to the religious tradition's sacred spaces. The Sanctuary of the church provides room for an address that is difficult or impossible elsewhere.⁵

We need to acknowledge mortality, Jackelén says in the interview: “It is like we try to hide death. We no longer die of mortality, rather because of the failure of healthcare.” Jackelén quotes philosopher Søren Kirkegaard: “The one who has learned to live with anxiety has learned the greatest thing.” In order to become more human, we need knowledge of the abyss.⁶

4.2.3 Pandemic

An abyssal uncertainty that the world was confronted with during Antje Jackelén’s time as Archbishop was the pandemic. She writes about this in her book *Otålig i hoppet* (Impatient in Hope). “When the virus brought existence to a sudden halt, it revealed how swiftly many of us live our lives and how unfamiliar we are with our inner chambers.”⁷ Hope is a gift, Jackelén writes.⁸ It is also a virtue, like a muscle that can be trained. Celebrating a worship service for example is such training. Jackelén pictures hope as a composite power that can be illustrated containing three parts.

Credible hope must accommodate frustration and sorrow. Since it does not flee reality, hope contains the anger over all that contradicts the true good and beautiful. The second part is humility: to wisely relate to duality, both our human limitations and the responsibility we have as created co-creators. In the interview, Jackelén makes a pause here. “What I love about ‘created co-creator,’ which was originally formulated by my predecessor at Lutheran School of Theology in Chicago, Phillip Heffner, is that it thematizes this tension: we are created, in every moment absolutely dependent, at the same time, we are responsible as co-creators.” This responsibility means being empowered, capable of responding to emergency. Even in a strong feeling of powerlessness, there is power in the weakness, Jackelén explains. The third part is

⁵ Ibid., 190.

⁶ Ibid., 125. Jackelén writes about Kirkegaard.

⁷ Antje Jackelén, *Otålig i hoppet* (Stockholm: Verbum AB, 2020), 82. The quote comes from theologian Anna Alebo, Researcher’s translation.

⁸ Ibid., 114f. Discussion on hope on pages 114-116, and from the interview.

courage. Hope is something other than passive endurance, therefore hope is also characterized by courage. Love conquers fear. When worry and uncertainty is converted to love and care, then hope and consolation is within reach. Hope is not a solitary voyage on stormy oceans, it is desiring to stay in the net of relations that make up life.⁹

4.2.4 Hope or Panic?

"I don't want you to have hope, I want you to panic." The words come from climate activist Greta Thunberg, recited by Jackelén. Hope is deceptive, she says. We understand Thunberg, however, falling into despair can lead to paralysis or stress reactions, both being completely counterproductive. Jackelén quotes Luther: God hates both presumption and despair. Working towards a credible hope is about opening the entire existential treasure chest for children and young people, as well as for adults. The collective abyss that opens up in connection with the climate crisis does something to people. When it is no longer possible to deny it, this is when the reaction must come and the longing for tools will emerge, Jackelén says, and continues: Clearly, an impending climate catastrophe raises the question "What happens when the world ends?" We have to trust that when everything ends, we can still never fall out of God's hands. But what does it mean for an entire planet? This rhetorical question takes the conversation into the field of eschatology.

4.2.5 Eschatology

Looking at what theologians have written about eschatology, Jackelén says, it often transitions rapidly from humans to the whole of universe as if there wasn't much in between in terms of size. Traditionally, eschatology is understood as the study of the final events meaning death, judgment, resurrection, eternal life, the return of Christ, heaven and the realm of God, Jackelén writes in *Otålig i hoppet*.¹⁰ In more recent theology, eschatology takes on three different directions, Jackelén mentions in the interview, and explains in further detail in her book.¹¹ One direction pertains to what occurs when the calendar ends, signifying the end of the world. This

⁹ Ibid., 116.

¹⁰ Ibid., 97.

¹¹ Ibid., 97-104. Contents paraphrased.

type of theology emphasizes the individual and may not foster community action. It directs attention towards life after this and can foster fatalism, discouraging action in the present.

Another direction of eschatology is envisioning a better future, taking responsibility for the realm of God here and now. Helping exposed people such as the homeless, sick, hungry, and imprisoned is a way of engaging with Jesus. Although this is plausible, there is a risk that persons of power obtain a divine aura when sanctioning these types of political programs. Part of the identity of the realm of God is that it always questions contemporary times and can never be built into social structures.

The third direction does not consider eschatology a way of building structures for the realm of God, nor does it attempt to make predictions about who will get eternal life. This type of eschatology is like a ferment, a deep dimension of the present. Eschatology as ferment becomes something that permeates all of life and takes us on a search for signs and language of hope. It matters both on a personal level and for the future of all of creation. God is the Other, coming to meet us from the future.

All three directions of eschatology need to be in conversation, Jackelén continues. There needs to be room for the individual, community and the meeting with the Other, that which is different.

With the help of eschatology, we can find words for the space between what we already are and know, and what we are not yet and do not yet know. Eschatology is the language of the interval: between the hope of "already now" and "not yet." [...] It awaits a future that emerges more from ahead than from a future we can extrapolate from the past and present.¹²

Good eschatology unites resistance against the life-threatening and the patience of hope in the love of God. It can help us bear vulnerability, powerlessness and mortality without despair.

4.2.6 Abyss-resources

In a recorded lecture, Chaplains Lars Björklund and Kerstin Dillmar of the Hospital Church in Uppsala, Sweden, address ways to handle the abyss in personal life.¹³ Using the word

¹² Ibid., 104-105. Researcher's translation.

¹³ Lecture by Hospital Chaplains Lars Björklund and Kerstin Dillmar. They acknowledge having received permission from Antje Jackelén to use the word Abyss-knowledge.

Abyss-knowledge, minted by Jackelén, they talk about ways to deal with grief and feelings of powerlessness. Accentuating partial power, when overwhelmed by powerlessness in life, focus can be directed toward the power that still remains in being able to achieve small things. They talk about a triangle where the three legs identity, relationship, and meaning compose areas that together create resilience in life, resources near the abyss.

4.2.7 Breaking Privatization

Something that also relates to abyss-knowledge, Antje Jackelén adds at the end of the interview, is breaking privatization. Faith is personal, not just private. She uses the example of burning the Qur'an. People claim "It's private, it can't be violated."¹⁴ Having bought a Qur'an, they consider it private property and a commodity. However, any book is a symbol of freedom of speech, Jackelén continues. To burn a symbol of freedom of speech in the name of freedom of speech is tricky, and even more so with a book like the Qur'an which is symbolically charged. Perhaps they don't wish to bow to dictatorships, but they don't make the connection that others suffer because of it, she reflects. It has also been argued that Muslims must learn to be offended, that believers must endure being mocked. We would never say that children must learn to be offended or mocked, Jackelén exclaims. This, however, will happen even to my beloved child, they may be bullied or mocked. You can prepare the child, you can be there to console and strengthen them, but you will never tell your child they must endure this. It is the same thing with people with disabilities. But the believers, they are supposed to endure. Why? Abyss-knowledge, she concludes, perhaps is not just knowledge of how deep the abyss is, what can happen if you fall, and how to get up. It is also what the bridges across are.

4.3 The Alterity of the Other

At the time of writing his book *Förunderligt förtroende*, a title that translates Marvelous Confidence, Jesper Svartvik held the Krister Stendahl Professorship in Religious Theology at the University of Lund and The Swedish Theological Institute in Jerusalem. Discussing the nature of the Divine, the understanding of God as relating to all people regardless of religion, Svartvik notes the alterity of the Other. We need an approach that makes it possible to

¹⁴ During 2023 there has been rioting in Sweden due to persons burning the Qur'an.

appreciate diversity and consider it a resource.¹⁵ Drawing on the works of Emmanuel Levinas, he explains how the image of the face of the fellow human, the *visage*, can embody the understanding of the dissimilarity of the other. Accepting alterity is of importance, otherwise the Other will be reduced to the same, and:

The thinking about others becomes a reflection of the self: philosophy then becomes more of an 'egology,' and theology is characterized not by theological humility but instead by self-assertion and vanity.¹⁶

The interpersonal relationship is not about the union with the other, but rather being together face to face. The face expresses needs and feelings, not excluding pain. According to Levinas, the Other is the absolute Other. When discussing the epiphany of the face, the revelation inherent in facial expressions, or the face as a source of revelation, it implies a perpetual element of surprise—a meeting with the unknown. By using the theological word *epiphany* to describe the face, Levinas conveys a deeper meaning of being created in the image of God.

4.3.1 Approaching a Violence Free Ethic

Professor of Pedagogy Sharon Todd analyses the ethical possibilities in education and learning. Learning about the Other needs to consider the alterity as described by Levinas, in order to reach an ethical, violence free relationship. Todd's book *Att lära av den Andre* (Learning from the Other) seeks to liberate the understanding of alterity from the kind of oppression that is inevitable in learning about the Other.¹⁷ In her study, the theories of Levinas meet the understanding of psychoanalysis as represented by Sigmund Freud and others. There is a tension between the two that becomes particularly interesting when meeting the Other. In psychoanalysis there is no objective way to encounter other persons, as we always carry our past as a lens through which we view the future. Todd sets out to explore how people come together, shaped by their own history which influences the encounter as understood by psychoanalysis, and a kind of surprising transcendent openness according to the understanding of Levinas. Focusing on

¹⁵ Svartvik, *Förunderligt förtroende*, 190.

¹⁶ Ibid., 192. Researcher's translation.

¹⁷ Sharon Todd, *Att lära av den Andre* (Pozkal, Poland: Studentlitteratur, 2008), 17.

different relational forms Todd discusses how empathy, love, guilt, and listening show the complexity in learning from the Other and seeking violence free relationships.

When it comes to empathy, this is based on identifying with the other which means that the alterity of the other becomes invisible. Empathy is an opportunity to learn about the self in relation to others, it is constructive self-reflection. However, it is not the best candidate as a relational quality when it comes to acknowledging the suffering of others.¹⁸ The relational quality of love works much the same way as these are closely connected.

The works of Levinas makes possible an understanding of guilt as a responsible response to the suffering of others, Todd concludes. The feeling of guilt when encountering suffering reveals the difficulties in working across differences, such as injustice for example. If there is guilt when encountering suffering within the Other, and a struggle handling the love and aggression before the pain of others, then this guilt needs to be heard and listened to, Todd writes.¹⁹ True listening is the way to most closely obtain learning from others and a non-violent ethic. The hope that this can culminate in is reached only through a transformational process of grief, an inevitable loss of previous ways of seeing and evaluating things. The face to face that Svartvik writes about.

4.3.2 God's Shalom Action and the Language of Peace

Svartvik refers to a lecture by Bishop Professor Krister Stendahl on salvation. When salvation is described in words of victory, Christ victorious over death, sooner or later the language of victory becomes the language of war and violence. Therefore, Stendahl seeks alternative ways of talking about salvation. One way is through mysticism, where the words about God are expressed in the negative. That which is unreachable, unspeakable and unfathomable can only be explained in paradoxes. This kind of language has the advantage of reminding us of how incomplete language is, however, it also leaves us with a theological gap when it comes to images and language of hope. The third notion in Stendahl's lecture is that of Shalom:

Salvation as Shalom. It is not a question about whether we win. It is healing. It is reconciling. It is redeeming. Not just souls, but the cosmos.

¹⁸ Ibid., 95.

¹⁹ Ibid., 164.

[...] let us go on a hunt in the Scriptures for the language of peace, for the mystery, which is always open and always revealing more. For us Christians, Jesus is the window into that mystery.²⁰

The language of peace serves healing, a sense of wholeness and mercy. Beyond ruin is the experience of belonging, a true identity in that which is holy. Shalom is the total well-being, not confined to the individual, but which understood contains community.²¹

4.4 Understanding the Congregation through Theological Worlds

The five different theological worlds described by W. Paul Jones in *Theological Worlds* are functional theology and offer an understanding of the different rhythms of Christian belief that can be represented in a congregation at any given time.²² Jones explains how these rhythms have consequences for the way different persons reason and experience life and the existential questions of life. Knowing that these different rhythms of existential hurt are represented in the congregation can help when shaping the sermon, identifying the uncertain, the abyss, in the particular time and place. On an individual basis, persons may sense recognition in several worlds, however most of the time one of the worlds offers more identification than the others. Recognizing that a theological world is never reducible to a conceptual paraphrase, Jones goes on to chart the five worlds. Briefly explained, these are the Theological Worlds according to Jones.²³

In world one separation and reunion is the essential rhythm. Existential questions are characterized by longing and a feeling of being alienated, homeless in space. Salvation can be expressed as Christ leading the person home to the place of harmony.

World two is a world of good and evil, where persons experience chaos and anger. Language of war and combat is well understood by a person identifying themselves in this world. Christ is the Messiah, the liberator toward a new earth, and hope is expressed through the notion

²⁰ Svartvik, *Förunderligt förtroende*, 257. Quote from Krister Stendahl.

²¹ Ibid., 256.

²² W. Paul Jones, *Theological Worlds: Understanding the Alternative Rhythms of Christian Belief* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989).

²³ Ibid., 39f. The description of the different worlds is charted on page 42-43 of Jones' book and explained more in depth throughout the book.

that good always in the end is victorious over evil. Literature and drama often take place in this world, with dramaturgical plot that takes the reader on a journey through conflict toward good.

World three focuses to a large extent on the self, with a feeling of emptiness or void seeking fulfillment. Experiencing insignificance, like an outcast or even fake, a person of this world feels shame and longs for wholeness and belonging. Christ becomes the ever loving, the one that says: You are loved, you are worthy just the way you are.

The fourth world has the rhythm of condemnation and forgiveness. The sinful human experiences great guilt, falling short of doing good and right deeds. Redemption comes through the forgiveness offered by Christ the Lamb of God cleansing all sin when dying on the cross.

In world five, life is experienced as a suffering to be endured. Feelings of meaninglessness, being plagued, manipulated or wronged are not uncommon here. Love has to do with patience and endurance. Christ is a companion. Hope and salvation are expressed through the identification with Christ, himself suffering and thereby in his own body being familiar with the worst pain of life.

Jones offers advice on how translating from one world of thinking to another can help to shed light on a problem and cause understanding and identification for more people. For a person being stuck in one world, conversion to another world can offer a sense of epiphany. This kind of conversion is best accomplished through aesthetic activity.

As long as this relationship remains aesthetic, the question of truth or falsity never arises. [...] Poetry, consequently, is evaluated qualitatively not by its “truth” but by its power to effect participation.²⁴

Jones explains how aesthetic experience is a hermeneutic that involves fascination and a submission of the mind to its object, finding it to be familiar and not extraneous.

4.5 Wounded Creation

A galloping situation of uncertainty today is the climate crisis. In his Pastoral letter, *Gud såg att det var gott* (God Saw that it was Good), Stockholm Bishop Andreas Holmberg addresses the role of the Church, its prophetic voice and the responsibility to strengthen

²⁴ Ibid. In this passage Jones draws from the works of Paul Tillich.

awareness and take action in restoring creation. The matter of the condition of our creation is not a separate question, it is at the core of the identity of the church.²⁵ Salvation, Holmberg writes, is not anthropocentric, it includes all of creation. The expression *created co-creator* captures the fact that as humans we are created in the image of God, both dependent on God and creation, and with a designated stewardship for all of creation. Caring for creation is caring for our neighbor.²⁶

In a lecture to the clergy of the Diocese of Stockholm the fall of 2023, Bishop Holmberg points out the mission statement in Mark 16:15, where all of creation is included: “Go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”²⁷ Even from other Bible texts, it becomes clear that Jesus' death and resurrection not only concern humanity, they compose a cosmic event that fundamentally affects the entire creation.²⁸ The thought of creation being included in salvation is deeply biblical. Preaching in time of climate crisis and wounded creation should be rooted in this theology, according to Holmberg. Feelings among people of grief, guilt and anger in reference to the climate should be taken seriously as they stand at risk of intensifying, leading to a sense of escalating despair and climate anxiety.²⁹ The acknowledgment of guilt is a catalyst for a changed world. In faith and tradition, there are powerful tools for dealing with guilt, Holmberg writes, the Psalms being one example. Tools from our biblical tradition include liturgical expressions such as the kyrie, the confession, prayer and eschatological understanding. Heaven and earth will pass away, we read in the Bible. This has led to eschatology being understood as new life in another heaven and earth after this life. A different reading suggests that salvation encompasses all of creation and just like in baptism a new life is begun, so will the reborn earth be this same earth, resurrected. It will remain the same earth where Jesus proclaimed that the realm of God is at hand. In the Lord's prayer, we pray: Let thy

²⁵ Andreas Holmberg, *Gud såg att det var gott: Att vara människa och kyrka i klimatnödens tid* (Stockholm: Verbum, 2023), 38.

²⁶ Ibid., 18f.

²⁷ Mk 16:15 NRSV. Bishop Holmberg video lecture. He talks about the different mission statements approximately 15 minutes into the lecture.

²⁸ Holmberg, *Gud såg att det var gott*, 21.

²⁹ Ibid., 52.

kingdom come. We don't pray: Let us come to a realm up above. God's realm is here and now. Holmberg calls this *Grounded Eschatology*, referring to theologian Michael Nausner.³⁰

In *A Watered Garden*, Benjamin M. Stewart writes about ecology in worship. Remembering how Augustine called the human body “the earth we carry,” reminding us that “our human bodies gathered for worship are dust, earth, and to dust, earth we shall return.”³¹ Worship takes place in the intersection of mercy and ashes: for my sake the world was created, I am nothing but dust.

4.6 Hermeneutics of the Slash

The field of Hermeneutics offers a way of understanding and addressing the Swede of today. In *Slaget om verkligheten*, translated *The Battle for Reality*, Bengt Kristensson Uggla explains how Nietzsches' statement: “God is dead” in the late 1800's is to be understood as a sign of a viewpoint of the world as anthropocentric rather than theocentric.³² Hermeneutics is an area of interpretation where there is no definitive representation of what God stands for. Every interpretation is incomplete. Drawing on the works of Paul Ricoeur, Kristensson Uggla notes how interpretation occurs in a movement between understanding and explanation in a dialectical relationship. Explain natural science. Understand the humanities. This creativity of interpretation Kristensson Uggla calls *Hermeneutics of the Slash*.³³ This is the interface between discovering and inventing, the movement between inside and outside perspectives, and the uniting of both the world behind and in front of the text. According to Kristensson Uggla, the eschatological language of the church has already done this for centuries. The church already holds a deep understanding of the tension between “‘already now’ and ‘not yet.’”³⁴ This language of the church becomes a treasure when trying to explain and understand the times we live in.

³⁰ From Holmberg's lecture approximately 19 minutes into the video.

³¹ Benjamin M. Stewart, *A Watered Garden: Christian Worship and Earth's Ecology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2011), 72.

³² Bengt Kristensson Uggla, *Slaget om verkligheten: Filosofi - omvärldsanalys – tolkning* (Stockholm/Höör: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 2012), 341. Wikipedia: “God is dead” is a statement made by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. The first instance of this statement in Nietzsche's writings is in his 1882 *The Gay Science*.

³³ Ibid., 315f. This draws from his chapter on Interpretation.

³⁴ Ibid., 504. Researcher's translation.

4.6.1 Transitional Space

Professor of Pedagogy Birgitta Knutsdotter Olofsson writes about the transitional space where learning takes place. In *I lekens värld* (In the realm of play), she draws on the theories of Winnicott, explaining how this space, also called the third room, is where the experiences, in the state of consciousness of play, lead to maturity, personal integration, and health.³⁵ If this space is allowed to grow large, it will contain the intense experiencing associated with poetry, art, religion, and creative scientific work according to Winnicott, Knutsdotter Olofsson states. The third room is full of transformations, analogies, metaphors, and symbols. Here, one can constantly choose between different levels of interpretation.³⁶ Having access to this space is what enables us to maintain a transformational awe, the creativity to see how things can represent something other than what they appear to be. This is where bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ.³⁷ Play and storytelling separates us from chaos, from nothingness, and allows us to imagine that the world is comprehensible and graspable.³⁸

4.6.2 The Unknown and the Not Yet Known

The title of Philosopher Jonna Bornemark's book *Det omätbaras renässans* translates Renaissance of the Immeasurable. Bornemark explores a field in the intersecting realms of Theology and Philosophy. Drawing upon the works of philosopher Nicholas Cusanus (1401-1464), she writes about the two areas *ratio* and *intellectus*. Ratio is the system where things are measurable, rationally organized with clear definitions. Intellectus is a way of understanding parts of life as something that will remain unknown and immeasurable. Bornemark writes that intellectus has a capability to intercept the concepts of ratio, and take them to the edge of not-knowing and there examine them, which can lead to reevaluation of the contents of the concepts of ratio. It can lead to transformation, and a deepening or rejection of the concept. This is the critical work of the arts.³⁹

³⁵ Birgitta Knutsdotter Olofsson, *I lekens värld* (Stockholm: Liber, 2003), 58.

³⁶ Ibid., 52-56.

³⁷ Ibid., 11-13.

³⁸ Ibid., 40. Author P.C. Jersild is quoted by Knutsdotter Olofsson.

³⁹ Jonna Bornemark, *Det omätbaras renässans: En uppgörelse med pedanternas världsherravälde* (Stockholm: Volante, 2018), 250. Researcher's translation.

In this line of reasoning, Bornemark discusses the language used around the word God, an understanding of our society today, and the role of faith. According to Cusanus, God is the movement which creates the world, that which we can never encompass. The notion of God is a hole in the language, offering that which cannot be said within the framework of language. This understanding, however, has become less common in public language.

When "God" becomes more like "an old man on a cloud," it is a concept we can no longer seek within but something pre-formed that we can either embrace or reject. With such a development of the concept, it's not surprising that fewer and fewer claim to believe in God.⁴⁰

Lifting for example the word God from ratio to the realm of intellectus makes transformation possible, a process that requires aesthetic activity. "In artistic expressions, we journey alongside human experiences and can also experience how they extend beyond our individual selves."⁴¹ Bornemark also acknowledges the fact that in this intercultural journey, shared experience can never fully be accomplished. Seeing the world with the eyes of the Other always involves the insight that what another person sees extends what the self is able to see.

4.6.3 Individualism and Spiritual Theology

Bishop Andreas Holmberg encourages preaching that is prophetic in nature, countering individualism and re-exploring the notions of "we" and togetherness, as the individual is always dependent on community.⁴² Aware that this can come across as moral pointers, Holmberg imagines the kind of preaching that disrupts and liberates, criticizes, and provides alternative illustrations of the future. Dare to challenge like Jesus did when he said: Change your way of thinking. We need a change of paradigm.⁴³

Addressing the individualism of the Swedish person of today, in *Thérèse och Martin* (Thérèse and Martin), Bishop Karin Johannesson presents Spiritual Theology as a

⁴⁰ Ibid., 232. Researcher's translation.

⁴¹ Ibid., 251. Researcher's translation.

⁴² Holmberg, *Gud såg att det var gott*, 69.

⁴³ Ibid., 37.

crossover between Carmelite tradition and the Lutheran tradition.⁴⁴ In an individualistic society like the Swedish, with a strong turn toward the subjective in spirituality, less authority is given to power, scripture, ideologies or collective moral principles. She writes:

Unfortunately, the result sometimes becomes moralizing attempts to educate or train those with differing views, whom one believes need to be indoctrinated into one's own perspective. Such attempts do not appeal to independently thinking individuals who are interested in spirituality.⁴⁵

The kind of theology that appeals to the Individualist, Spiritual Theology, is addressed by Teresa of Ávila describing how God guides us through The Dark Night and leads us to an understanding of how dependent we are and that the cross is the staff we lean on during our pilgrimage.⁴⁶ Since the love of God is in each person, community and togetherness begin in focusing on Christ more than the boundaries of the community.

4.7 Conclusion

In a world of uncertainty, spiritual resilience is needed. Antje Jackelén calls this abyss-knowledge, which includes not just the awareness of life's abysses, but also the existential tools to handle uncertainty, accommodate fear and gain agency to strive toward the common good. Accepting mortality, bible stories, rituals and practices, sanctuaries and symbols, eschatological language, these are all examples of abyss-resources inherent in Christian tradition. An understanding of the Theological worlds present in a congregation can help direct the use of different aspects of abyss resources. When it comes to the climate crisis, a combination of guilt and awe helps understand how salvation encompasses all of creation.

In chapter three, Theologies of Otherness was identified as a theological ground in the context of the Church of Sweden. This chapter has explored the understanding of the Other further. An encounter with the Other is a meeting with that which is not yet known, as well as that which will remain unknown. Striving toward a peaceful world of Shalom within and with all of creation, hermeneutics and eschatology can guide the way.

⁴⁴ Karin Johannesson, *Thérèse och Martin: Karmel och reformationen i nytt ljus* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma, 2018).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 220. Researcher's translation.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 225.

Chapter 5

Project Plan and Process

5.1 Introduction

Inspired by previous Parish Projects, the context of Oscar's congregation, and homiletical literature, the homiletical strategy near the abyss was created. For testing the strategy, a methodology was developed. The methodology is based on Tim Sensing's *Qualitative Research*.

5.2 Methodology

When it comes to research in Practical Theology, Sensing suggests the method of Participatory Action Research (PAR) since this kind of research involves investigating concrete practices in time and space, generating new knowledge and transformative action.”¹ PAR includes a three-step-recipe: rationale, intervention and evaluation.² The *rationale* of this thesis focuses on the uncertainties of life, how the abyss is experienced as something fearful that life dwells close to. *Intervention* involves feed-forward sessions with the PPG, in the case of the second sermon also a feed-forward meeting with the choir, preaching in accordance with the homiletical strategy near the abyss, and sampling the members of the PPG, as well as the focus group, namely the congregation present at each given time of the sermons. It also includes the interview with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén. The *evaluation* is the analysis of the collected material, the qualitative data gathered in the questionnaires and group interview, as well as the notes taken by the researcher, reflecting on the response from the participants and personal transformation. The analysis of the responses gathered focuses on the initial assumption of the thesis, that in preaching, the uncertainties of life can be addressed and abyss-knowledge be provided so that people experience hope and agency to join in God's shalom-action.

5.2.1 Qualitative research tools

Research tools used for data gathering and thesis development:

- Study of literature, homiletics and theology along with philosophy on life's uncertainties

¹ Sensing, *Qualitative Research*, 20-21.

² Ibid., 158.

- Interview with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelen
- Feed-forward and feedback from the PPG. In the case of the second sermon, a feed-forward meeting with the choir
- Group interviews mediated by one of the group members while researcher takes notes
- Questionnaire for congregational members at the time of each of the two sermons
- Attention to transformation of researcher and context through journal entries

The main instrument for evaluation will be the feedback from the PPG along with reflection on the preaching and literature. The questionnaires offered to the congregation will also guide the process of the thesis.

5.3 First sermon

For the Sunday of the first sermon of the project, September 10, the Church of Sweden lectionary has set the topic “Oneness in Christ.”³ The Gospel is John 17:18-23.

5.3.1 PPG Feed-forward Session

The first meeting with the PPG started with a short introduction of each of the members. Without much instruction, the group quickly moved on to painting, non-figuratively with soft music in the background. Several participants expressed surprise at the joy painting brought and became very attached to their own paintings.

³ The Church of Sweden Lectionary has a topic for each Sunday. The preacher is not tied to that topic, the texts are in focus.



PPG paintings from the first feed-forward session

Spontaneous words were gathered from the paintings: “Life, glimmer of light, life, it starts bright, ends dark, warmth, joy, sways, power, in-between-spaces, chaos, Christmas tree, escape, envelops, harmony, challenging, shelter, space, black hole, red hole, context, symbolism, design, nature, bleeds, imperfection, future, gathering.”

Reading of the Gospel took place within the framework of Lectio Divina practice. The conversation following included thoughts on community as opposed to forced togetherness, letting go of control, and some thoughts on abyss-knowledge:

- I want community, but want to be part of the planning. Is this manipulation? Do I have any say? Community is fantastic, but not forced togetherness. An invitation - but with elbows...?
- A strong sense of “we,” togetherness, community. A call for solidarity. One body, one humanity.
- What is community, is it scary? Vulnerable? Do I have to make an effort?
- Letting go of control. Perhaps I never had it?
- Inspiration to make myself available.
- Religion – a tool for reflection. Nice, a nice bubble. There is a strength in sitting here, outside of time and space. A relief from thoughts of what’s going on, shootings, Quran burnings etc.
- How much can a person endure? When tragedies strike, what can I do?
- Bring out resources – asking for help. When there is a shift in life, you lose balance, have to redefine oneself.

- When I was very sick, I planted tomatoes and sweet peas anyway, thinking that there will come a day, although I can't feel it now, that I will be glad to pick these tomatoes.

Last round, a word from each person:

Inspiring, challenging, rewarding, hopeful, relaxing, reflective, curiosity-building, tiring, grateful, luxurious.

5.3.2 Forming and Shaping Sermon

Fear is a reality that can prevent people from wanting or seeking transformation. Naming fear from the pulpit is a way of reducing its power.⁴ The image of the tunnel and the poetic “day before” were ways of naming these powers. Another question, or fear, that came up in the feed-forward time was that of inclusion or exclusion. Am I truly invited? What are the boundaries? Do I have to make adjustments, limit myself to be part of this community? Identifying the prayer that Jesus prays for us and the prayer of Kristina from Duvemåla as prayers near the uncertain, the sermon sought to tear down barriers, borders that people hold on to, making it difficult to trust in God whose identity is one beyond words, beyond walls and without limitations. An eternal Thou.⁵

Fear of the unknown often has its roots in our lack of control.⁶ In the feed-forward meeting, one of the PPG members told us of a hard time that she had gone through. At the time she felt little hope, but she still planted her tomatoes and sweet peas. This became a strong picture of moral imagination. The deep eschatological meaning of the Communion as a picture of oneness also served as an image of hope.

Readings that influenced formation of the sermon include Bishop Karin Johannesson's Spiritual Theology in *Thérèse och Martin*.⁷ Using the individuality of the postmodern, directing the attention toward Christ, the eternal Thou, a sense of community could take place.

⁴ DeRay Mckesson, *On the Other Side of Freedom: The Case for Hope*. (New York: Viking, 2018).

⁵ Lyrics for Kristina från Duvemåla's song “Du måste finnas” (You must be real), see Appendix E.

⁶ Ellison, *Fear+Less Dialogues*, 17: “As we move ever deeper into the country dark, be aware of your fears of the unknown.”

⁷ Karin Johannesson, *Thérèse och Martin: Karmel och reformationen i nytt ljus* (Skellefteå: Artos & Norma, 2018).

5.3.3 Sermon Purpose Statement

Drawing from the feed-forward session, the following Sermon Purpose Statement was outlined:

The Situation: In view of the increased violence and a raised level of terrorism threat,⁸ the members of the congregation long to be in community, but with suspicion. They want to be part of community, but questioning the terms, having a hard time letting go of control.

The Goal: Instilling trust, daring the congregation to surrender into God's hands and share in the community.

The Means: Prayer “at the edge of uncertainty,” inviting the congregation to the borderland of “the day before,” the image of the tunnel, identifying with Kristina from *Duvemåla*,⁹ and an eschatological communion of belonging, in community with nature and one another.

5.3.4 Delivery and Response

The group interview, where the researcher stayed silent, showed an understanding of the homiletical strategy at work. The members of the PPG expressed that they felt hope, trust, empowerment, and liberation; liberated to a sense of power despite fear of unknown. They heard a message of letting go of the desire to have control, surrender lack of control, leaving to God the things we have no power over. One person said that she listened to every word – taking it in like a sponge. The others agreed but one person zoned out at one point, she said. This turned out to have been at a point where the sermon deviated from the manuscript, a risk when preaching without notes. The group agreed that the benefits of preaching without notes are far greater.

The group recognized an *Invitation* to:

- Feel that I can come as I am
- Hope; believe in the future - planting seeds, letting go of control
- Transformation

⁸ The Swedish government has recently raised the level of anticipated risk of terrorism in our country. The level is now 4 on a scale from 1-5, much due to the burnings of the Quran that have been taking place in various places in Sweden, as an expression of freedom of speech. Although this new level is one that for example London has had for many years, it was only 13 years ago that the long-time level of 2 was raised to 3.

⁹ Kristina from *Duvemåla* is a Swedish musical by musicians Björn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson (of ABBA). It stages the well-known epos by Swedish author Vilhelm Moberg, the tale of a Swedish family that emigrated to the new territory in the 1800's. Kristina's prayer, the song “You have to be real” was sung in the Worship Service before I preached.

- Join in Community

They also felt an invitation “through”:

- Helena - without notes, she makes herself open and accessible, vulnerable. Something happens. A brave preacher who dares preach a well-thought-out sermon without notes.

The group talked about *Identification*, most concretely through the image of the tunnel, “it was spot on.” One member of the PPG said, I work as a curator at a museum. Ancient artifacts have lost touch with people’s lives today. Our job is to bring them to context, create a story around them so that they become relatable for people. I feel Helena’s work with the biblical text is a similar thing, bringing it to our context.

Examples of *Transformation*:

- I became teary eyed when Helena started talking about “the day before.” There was strong recognition. I become teary eyed talking about it now. It is easy to park oneself in a state of “before,” afraid to take the leap. You need this liberating power. You have a choice.
- The seeds, the tomatoes and the Thou, that’s an invitation to transformation. There is hope in planting, in letting go.
- The sermon challenges and opens up.
- The “aha-moment”, the recognition, that is enough for transformation. It starts you thinking how you want to use that insight.
- We got to do things. Painting was daring for me. But we just fell into it, and I didn’t mind showing what I had done. It wasn’t like an abyss but uncertainty. I didn’t think, just did it. I recognized this trust in the sermon.

The PPG’s answers to the written questionnaire were all covered in the group interview – they said the things that they had written. Filling out the questionnaire became a way for them to gather their own thoughts, before discussing the sermon with the group.

Nine persons from the congregation filled out the questionnaire. Their response was affirming. They had felt hope, they identified, and there were also some marks of transformation such as trusting in God. One person wrote: “So nice, Helena, that you stood on the same level as us in the congregation. Before Jesus, we are all alike.”

5.3.5 Reflection

In the response, the naked and vulnerable part of the sermon that was constituted by Kristina's prayer was not specifically mentioned. In the SPS, the identity in God was rooted here. However, the eternal Thou and this type of prayer on the edge of uncertainty were referenced, as well as the singing of Kristina's song.

The words expressed by the PPG suggest that the intent with the homiletical strategy has had effect. The uncertainties of life have been addressed, hope has been experienced, as well as empowerment. Something that was somewhat unclear was the part of Identification. When the questionnaire asked "was there a personal address," some of the respondents understood this to mean, "was the preacher personal in the address." With this interpretation of the question, identification was sought on a personal level with the preacher. The questionnaire will be altered to specify the question more clearly: "Was there a personal address *to you* in the sermon?"

5.3.6 PPG Recollection of First Sermon

At the time for the second feed-forward meeting, the group was first asked to write down things that they remembered from the first sermon. One person did not remember anything of the content. Others mentioned a part or two from the content, an emotion they felt, or something connected to the conversation after sermon:

- The tomatoes, might as well grow them.
- Community – to encounter each other as a "Thou."
- Community, Hope, Love. Strong together. In difficult moments, turning to God, and at the same time finding strength in family and friends. Daring to share my worries and seek support before significant, challenging decisions. Daring to trust myself and my inherent strength, yet relying on God.
- The music was absolutely fantastic.
- The sermon, so captivating.
- Helena appeared very natural and confident in her role of sharing from the heart with us listeners. A message about belonging and exclusion, what defines them. Are there situations when one doesn't belong to "someone/something"? Helena tied her narrative together in a

personal and engaging way with everyday events from her life and others'. I was equally moved by Helena's delivery and the content.

- Abyss, what is it? The deepest deep or resistance to the next step in life? I also remember that Helena lost a thread and that way I experienced it as disjointed and zoned out. I recall being surprised that I was so touched.
- I don't remember any of the content.
- What I remember was the tunnel. And a feeling of hope and new possibilities that linger.
- Standing at the edge of the abyss is not necessarily uncomfortable but also hopeful.

A conclusion can be drawn that the sermon had lasting impact in the lives of the PPG, not necessarily the details of its contents, but in resonance, the sentiment of hope and agency.

5.4 Second Sermon

October 29, the given date for the second sermon of the project, the Church of Sweden lectionary sets forth the topic Societal Responsibility, and the Gospel reading comes from Matt 12:15-21.

5.4.1 Feed-forward Session

When the PPG convened for the third time, after painting while listening to soft music, spontaneous words were gathered collectively.



PPG paintings from the second feed-forward session

Words gathered from paintings: Creativity, dawn, freedom, among others, underwater flow, warmth, jungle, storm, thick, suspension bridge, strong forces, pasture, community, halfway, the world is broken, hope in chaos, confined, endless.

The Lectio Divina Bible study paved the way for a conversation, delving into the following inquiries:

- How are we to understand the conflict in Israel/Palestine?
- It is strange that the text has to say of Jesus that he won't break the bruised reed - of course he won't. Why would anyone? Or at least, for Jesus, that would be so out of character...
- There is so much darkness in the world, where is my safe space?
- Human dignity becomes important. Human value and togetherness.
- Learn to listen for the bruised reed.

The war in Gaza had recently broken out and it was obvious that especially when talking about life near the abyss, this was on top of everyone's minds.

5.4.2 The Choir

Since the largest choir of the congregation, Oratoriekören, comprising approximately 80 retired singers was going to sing in the High Mass on the given Sunday, they were visited during rehearsal a few days before the Church Service. During the short meeting, they were informed of the DMin project, explaining the exploring of preaching on matters that concern the listener. The choir members were asked to write down something that they think of several times a day, responding to the question: "What is an existentially important question that you think of often?" Many of them wrote about the war in Gaza, and the dark situation felt in the world, others about death, health, worry for family members and the future. Among further issues were the climate, time, and things they were thankful for.

5.4.3 Forming and Shaping Sermon

When shaping the sermon material from the feed-forward workshop was used, the pictures that the group had painted, the words, the thoughts and existential questions identified in the Lectio Divina process, as well as the concerns from the choir.¹⁰ Making the choice to preach on the war in Gaza seemed self-evident as this was on every one's mind. Although this could not

¹⁰ Sermon on Matthew 12:15-21 and Youtube-link, see Appendix D.

be considered a mass trauma for the community in Oscar's congregation, the words of Kimberly Wagner provided guidance: "I invite preachers to resist the urge to push toward whole, healing narratives immediately after mass traumatic events."¹¹ The process of narrative fracture focuses on establishing safety and begins the process of naming what has happened before God and one another.

In *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, McClure addresses the "signposts" for the sermon. What necessary themes or roadblocks are there to consider in shaping the sermon? The Israel/Palestine situation was one in need of careful navigation as there could be people strongly for or against either side present.¹² ¹³ McClure also mentions memorable terms or phrases to help grasping where we are in our ethical journey. The image of the bruised reed became such a phrase.¹⁴ No words of a sermon can help solve or understand the intricate issues of the war, the sermon served to embody hope and justice through eschatology and imagination. The story of the brave Gitta found its place immediately, as did the ability of art to allow dreams, visions and existential meaning in the confined space of living in Lajee Camp. The song by beloved icon Lasse Berghagen, a grandparent himself, served to tie the humanness of people there to us, here and now. In multireligious work, awe can be sensed of the common core, the experience and respect of that which is holy.¹⁵ The story of the doves served to unveil some of this. Using a story from a different religious tradition served to show the common ground that we stand on as humans, how we can learn from the Other.¹⁶ The severe question of climate crisis also found its way of becoming part of this common grief and task for humanity.

¹¹ Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 52.

¹² Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines*, 12: "Without thoughtful, faith-informed insight, preaching that tries to engage the issues of the day risks becoming little more than a political stump speech [...]. It succumbs to being an insular message hovering in the clouds."

¹³ No person in church made any comment in terms of taking sides, but a pro-Israel preacher friend saw my sermon on Youtube, and was so occupied with the address "speaking well of both sides," that she had a hard time listening to the sermon.

¹⁴ Reasoning draws from McClure, *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, 69f.

¹⁵ Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines*, 120: "Christian communities of faith perpetuating radical love practices in the world around us require multireligious conversation partners and collaborators. Indeed, we need the mirror of other faith traditions to hold us accountable to what lies at the core of our very own claims."

¹⁶ McClure, *Ethical Approaches to Preaching*, 90f. Hospitality ethic involves listening to others, as everyone you encounter knows something you don't.

5.4.4 Sermon Purpose Statement

Drawing from the feed-forward session with the PPG and the meeting with the choir, the following SPS was outlined:

The Situation: In view of the war in Israel/Palestine, there is a lot of unrest. The world feels dark, divided and incomprehensible. There is a heightened sensitivity among people in the congregation.

The Goal: To embody the feeling of security that comes with the promise that Jesus will not “break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick,”¹⁷ and to encourage the congregation to consider this approach in their own lives, as we are all part of the same creation: God’s sacred creation, a community of bruised reeds.

The Means: The stories of Gitta and Balquees. The three religions that have the same roots, the image of peace doves flying over wounded creation, and creativity that cannot be confined by walls. The song “One Evening in June” by famous Swedish musician singer-song writer Lasse Berghagen who recently passed away aims to embody a warm feeling of hope at the end of the sermon.

5.4.5 Delivery and Response

The sermon was well received. There were tears, there was laughter, there was singing-along, and even applause. Thirty-eight persons from the congregation chose to respond, many of them from the choir. Several of them expressed a special gratefulness feeling connected to the sermon in a special way this Sunday.

The group interview came to evolve around the existential questions of the sermon. However, the members of the PPG seemed to have difficulty staying with the questions. It is unclear if that was because they were so few this time, as several of them were unable to come, or because the subject matter concerned them deeply. The group did still seem to have picked up on the components of the homiletical strategy. Words from the group interview:

- We read the text, talked about bruised reeds, talked about Israel and Palestine, so yes, it corresponded with the preparation.

¹⁷ Matt 12:20 NRSV

- Invitation, identification, transformation. The difficult things in the world, what do you do with them? Sensitivity, a sense of the everyday manifestation of melancholy. Finding something common, that was transformation, and the music and the image of Jesus.
- The homiletic strategy is clear. Invitation: Here we are, picture, place, good. Identification: We are all more sensitive. Transformation: The most difficult.
- The situation was transformed when Gitta spoke up.
- There was hope from past to present. Vienna 1938 to Bethlehem. Horrible, like when they urge people in Gaza to flee south.

The persons that were absent during the church service and the Group Interview looked at the Youtube clip of the sermon and submitted their responses. In this material, it is obvious that there is a difference between sitting in the church, experiencing the sermon live, getting that warm feeling from the end of the sermon, and just seeing the sermon on a screen.

Responses from the congregational questionnaire indicate that there was identification as the responses to question number one were positive. There was hope conveyed, indicated in the second question, specifically mentioned were the doves, the personal address by the preacher preaching without notes, and by the music. Some interesting responses to the third question “Was there a personal address to you in the sermon? Any exhortation or invitation?”

- I felt empowered to make an effort for change
- Try to identify what is good, and don't be fast to judge
- Not to forget the responsibility we have as humans, daring to stand up for justice and not forget our history
- Solidarity in action
- Take care of you neighbor
- Help one another
- Standing up for one's opinion on justice
- To keep fighting for, and trusting in positive signs and good deeds being done.
- The essence of feeling empathy for one's fellow human beings and how important it is to contribute to giving vulnerable people back their human dignity and counteract polarization and dehumanization.
- Keep listening to your inner voice about what feels right.

5.4.6 Reflection

In Oscar's Congregation, people are well educated and up to date on world events. Considering the feed-forward from the PPG and the choir, it would have been wrong not to preach about Israel and Palestine. One person in the PPG would rather have heard a sermon on something else, feeling bothered by the darkness and gloom of the constant reports from this horrible war. This member of the PPG was not present at the feed-forward meeting, where it was obvious that the question of the conflict in Gaza was on everyone's mind.

Reflecting on it some ten days later, when the PPG met for its final meeting, there was already somewhat less urgency and sensitivity when it came to the Israel/Palestine-situation. The group members were still deeply concerned but the emotional vulnerability was not as tangible. UN General Secretary Antonio Guterres had just a few days prior to the sermon made his statement: "We are on the edge of an Abyss, and moving in the wrong direction."¹⁸ In other words, placing the congregation near the Abyss was a gentle movement, it did not take much reminding them. This situation contributed to the nerve that was experienced in the worship service and the strong emotions that the music at the end of the sermon generated.

5.4.7 PPG Recollection of Second Sermon

Recalling the sermon ten days later, the PPG responded:

- The girls in Vienna and the boy in Palestine, his grandfather's key. Berghagen's song. Connection to the war. Nice sermon.
- One person's freedom is another person's limitation. Recognized the adrenaline from my own life to gather the courage to raise my voice. Wonderful to join in song and music at the end. Remembered the doves but not their task.
- The event in Vienna, where the Jewish doctor scrubbed the cobblestones. Anti-Semitism then and now. Hope for peace with clay doves flying over the earth and the war-torn countries. Hope and despair.
- Strong and elegant sermon. Moved by powerful images and symbolism between the big and the small world, between history and the present. Particularly touched by the flying clay doves, which I connected to the Holy Spirit. Also, the conclusion with "An Evening in June."

¹⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEv7VeiK18I>

The reference that Jesus is recognized in several religions was also strong and relevant. Hope, polarization, conflict. But also grace and possibilities in the grand and the everyday.

- Difficult and uncomfortable start, like watching the news. Time to understand and reflect on the world and how people are doing. The discomfort was captured in the beautiful ending with a delightful feeling of joy and hope. Even when the world is on fire, we are all individuals with everyday life, joy and sorrow, regardless of where we are.

5.5 Final Meeting with the PPG

The final meeting with the PPG consisted of a session with music and painting, like the previous ones. This time the grounding was purposed at a conversation on abyss-knowledge and the homiletical strategy. During the painting, a poem was read, *Romanesque Arches*, by Tomas Tranströmer:

*Inside the huge Romanesque church
the tourists jostled in the half darkness.
Vault gaped behind vault, no complete view.
A few candle flames flickered.
An angel with no face embraced me
and whispered through my whole body:
"Don't be ashamed of being human, be proud!
Inside you vault opens behind vault endlessly.
You will never be complete, that's how it's meant to be."
Blind with tears
I was pushed out on the sun-seething piazza
together with Mr and Mrs Jones, Mr Tanaka, and Signora Sabatini,
and inside them all vault opened behind vault endlessly.¹⁹*

Guiding toward remembrance of previous conversations on life's uncertainties, the group was given the following words to associate on: Powerlessness, Uncertainty, Hope, Imagination, Consolation, Justice. These are words derived:

Powerlessness: *disease, darkness, helplessness, frustration, despair, glass-ceiling.*

Uncertainty: *curiosity, possibilities, unable to steer, straw, foggy, now.*

Hope: *future, eternity, candor, trust, promise, heal my heart.*

Imagination: *starlit sky, surprise, dreams, vitality, possible worlds, candor.*

¹⁹ Tomas Tranströmer, "Romanesque Arches," *New Collected Poems* (Bloodaxe Books, 2011). Translated from the original Swedish by Robin Fulton.

Consolation: *elevate human worth, show the way ahead, warmth, wake, need, embrace.*

Justice: *freedom, redemption, power, courage, recognition, liberation.*

Reflections from the group conversation when placing themselves on the edge of the abyss:

- Hearing of concrete actions in the big and small world conveys transformation.
- In the worship service there are hymns and Bible texts, they are given. Additional expressions, such as artistic expressions, give something more. The task of art, rather art has no task, but it has the ability to engage. Free in format, it can depict other aspects.
- We have a truth, knowing what is right, but we can go wrong. Children often portray the true, the undestroyed. How can we find this path?
- One cannot be brave if not afraid. Being brave is not without fear, is not about being fearless. Fear can be a catalyst.
- Creating good without doing violence to oneself. Where is the heart? Where is love? Where is genuine warmth? Who helps me see the glass as half full, providing space, or at least a sense of space?
- Justice. What can I contribute with to bring about change?
- Hope, possibilities exist wherever you are. Help maintain anticipation of future.
- Hope is life, portrayed in the contextual.

Question to the group: *How can transformation be provided in the genre of preaching?*

- Preaching is communication, creativity. It is taking a risk, the risk of friction. You strip yourself of the answers, don't tell me how to think or feel. Rhetorical figure to reach hope. Much like theater.
- The listener expects to be drawn in, to experience something.
- Preaching creates space for conversation, sharing experience rather than opinion.

Chapter 6

Results and Evaluation

6.1 Introduction

This project set out to explore a homiletical strategy for engaging existential questions, suggesting a three-part strategy that could address the uncertainties of life and provide abyss-knowledge. Through the preaching, working closely with the PPG, and the interview with Antje Jackelén, the project also sought to define abyss-knowledge, asserting that this would be language and theology that can embody hope, strengthen, and empower the congregation with agency to join in God's shalom-action.

The strategy was tested in two sermons, as reported in chapter five. The responses will be analyzed in greater detail in this chapter, looking at the different parts of the strategy and reflecting on the effects on the congregation and the preacher. This chapter will also offer findings and discussion on abyss-knowledge.

6.1.1 Homiletical Strategy Near the Abyss

The components of the homiletical strategy near the abyss are not actually parts in a three-step process, but rather qualities or dimensions that intersect with one another, intertwined in the sermon. They operate much like the qualities proposed by Frank Thomas in *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*.¹ The homiletical strategy near the abyss explores the qualities *Invitation*, *Identification*, and *Transformation*.

6.2 Invitation

Using the homiletical strategy near the abyss, the sermon aspires to invite the congregation to experience themselves near the abyss. The aim is to establish a safe relationship, an I-Thou meeting inviting the congregation to come close to that profound sense of the uncertainties in life. In this quality of the sermon, the preacher seeks to gain the trust and the attention of the listener. In the suggested strategy, this approach toward the abyss can be on an individual or community level.

¹ Thomas's qualities are accounted for in section 3.6 of this thesis.

The first sermon of the project dwelt more closely on a personal level of life's uncertainties, where the second sermon dealt with a collective, corporate level of uncertainty. Both sermons had conversational qualities, engaging the voices of the PPG. In the second sermon, the choir was also involved in sermon preparation. These feed-forward practices contributed to an openness experienced in the congregation during the delivery of the sermons. A relationship had been established with a large number of persons present in the church, making the preacher feel more confident, and the congregation curious of the sermon.

6.2.1 Secure Space

In the responses there was much affirmation and recognition. The congregation felt invited and engaged while listening. The PPG commented on the preaching by heart, how the preacher showed vulnerability by stripping herself of the guard that notes constitute. After the first sermon, one person stated "I was equally moved by Helena's delivery and the content." The music that was connected to the sermons was also mentioned as something that added to the sense of an open invitation. This agrees with the hypersensory environment suggested by Gregory C. Ellison, where utilizing imagination, art, phrases, and music, is a way to create a safe space.²

At the third meeting with the PPG, when asked what they remembered from the first sermon, one member said that they did not recall the details, just the feeling. In *Preaching without notes*. Joseph M. Webb accentuates the advantages, the presence, fellowship and credibility created when there is no script between the preacher and the congregation.

Invariably, what people listen to and for in public address are not the words themselves [...]. What they watch for and are most sensitive to are the feelings, the emotions, out of which the words that are spoken arise. They listen for what is behind and under the words.³

The desire of the preacher might be that the words of the sermon should be remembered and make an impact. A positive and warm reception of the address is to be considered superior to that.

² Ellison, *Fear+Less Dialogues*, 43.

³ Webb, *Preaching Without Notes*, 27.

Following the reasoning of Lisa L. Thompson in *Preaching the Headlines*, extending an invitation with open questions is a way to address the postmodern congregation. Empowerment is already present in this kind of invitation. It is an encouragement for people “to claim their agency to think critically about, imagine, and pursue lifesaving transformation of the world at hand.”⁴ Members of the PPG expressed this when reflecting on the feed-forward sessions:

Painting was daring for me. But we just fell into it, and I didn’t mind showing what I had done. [...] I didn’t think, just did it. I recognized this trust in the sermon.⁵

The PPG member’s reflection coheres with the experiences of the transitional space that Winnicott explains. When creating this kind of liminal space, empowerment has begun. Responding to the questions of how transformation can be provided in the genre of preaching, a PPG member said: “Preaching creates space for conversation, sharing experience rather than opinion.”

6.3 Identification

The work of the preacher is similar to that of a museum curator, one of the PPG members noted, reflecting that it is about bringing the artifact, or in this case the biblical text to our context and making it relatable. Becoming relevant is the identification quality of the homiletical strategy near the abyss. Engaging in conversation with biblical text and tradition as well as with people in the congregation, or others, in preparation for shaping the sermon, can guide in this endeavor. In the project, the feed-forward sessions and the meeting with the choir provided material. Seeking to embody, not just proclaim the gospel, the secure space provided in the invitation creates an environment for an I-Thou meeting.

6.3.1 Engaging Emotions

Placing the congregation near the abyss should be a gentle and subtle move. Recognizing the depth of openness within the congregation, as demonstrated by the response to

⁴ Thompson, *Preaching the Headlines*, 18.

⁵ From section 5.3.4 this thesis.

this project, underscores the importance of ensuring that the invitation remains comfortable and inclusive. The kind of response and reaction desired has to do with hope and agency, however there is a fine line when engaging emotions, requiring that the preacher exercises caution. Reflection on how emotions are engaged is a necessary step in seeking identification when creating the sermon. If the image shared generates pictures or experiences that are overwhelming, then the listener will not partake in the rest of the sermon. They will be trapped without hearing the healing, or empowerment, that was meant to follow.

In the first sermon, one member of the PPG became strongly affected by the image of “the day before,” shedding some tears. In this case, the emotion opened the listener for transformation, as they engage closely to the words of the sermon. Another person, a respondent from the congregation, wrote that they got “stuck” in thoughts on “the day before,” but that the overall feeling of the sermon was one of hope.

In the second sermon, a choice was made to address the situation of the war in Gaza. After the sermon, a member of the PPG expressed feelings of discomfort in the beginning of the sermon, “like watching the news.” In this case, the person added that the discomfort was overpowered by “the beautiful ending with a delightful feeling of joy and hope.” This is notable, since the ending was not a solution of a particularly hopeful future. The ending of the sermon was one of moral imagination, using the powerful tool of art and music to convey hope.

Engaging emotions is an important step toward transformation. Identification is about becoming emotionally involved. In *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, Frank Thomas talks about empathy as a catalyst, one of the qualities of moral imagination to make steps toward a better world. An example that he gives is from Robert F. Kennedy’s speech after the death of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, explaining that empathy is “the ability to understand, comprehend, and love.”⁶ The empathy in the speech has to do with the sorrow and grief of losing a brother, something that Kennedy has experienced, a sorrow that people can identify with. Where Thomas suggests empathy as a bridge, the homiletical strategy near the abyss opens up for a wider range of emotions: joy, sadness, longing, love, courage, fear, etc. In dealing with fear of the uncertain, or any kind of fear, there needs to be caution taken not to create overpowering emotions, as mentioned above. The sermons of the project engaged fear, the kind of fear that is

⁶ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, 18.

worry, anxiety or melancholy. The journey through this brought the congregation to a sense of courage. Addressing fear, “the bully”, from the pulpit, DeRay Mckesson writes in *On the Other Side of Freedom*, the preacher can imagine the world we want to see without the bully.⁷

6.3.2 Identifying with the Other

Although identification is the object of the second quality in the strategy, there needs to be awareness of the level of identification possible. Perceiving others in terms of ourselves is an abusive reduction of the Other. It would be to misperceive, do violence to them, Ronald J. Allen writes in *Thinking Theologically*.⁸ Following the reasoning of Sharon Todd in *Att lära av den Andre*, it would be misleading to think that empathy alone will facilitate understanding the Other.⁹ Feelings of guilt and true listening can reduce the gap to a greater extent than empathy according to Todd, acknowledging that there is grief generated in the process as it becomes clear that one can never completely understand the Other. The *Theological Worlds* explained by W. Paul Jones can assist in seeking language and images to broaden the understanding and become relevant when addressing existential questions. This is all part of the transformational process of the preacher, staying open and curious of the Other, and becoming contextual.

6.3.3 Identification in the Sermons

There was strong affirmation of identification in both sermons. The “day before” and the tunnel were both identified as images with strong recognition, as well as “the eternal Thou” from the first sermon. From the second sermon, responses included recognition when it came to experiences of feeling left out or rejected, worry for the world around us, relational problems, and a reminder not to break the bruised reed. Identification also included World War II-stories. One member of the PPG said “the ‘aha-moment,’ the recognition, that is enough for transformation. It starts you thinking how you want to use that insight.”¹⁰

⁷ DeRay Mckesson, *On the Other Side of Freedom. The Case for Hope* (New York: Viking, 2018).

⁸ Allen, *Thinking Theologically*, 62.

⁹ This is accounted for in section 4.3.1 of this thesis.

¹⁰ This is accounted for in section 5.3.4.

6.4 Transformation

The third part of the homiletical strategy is the main goal, the first two parts serving to direct the congregation toward an openness for transformation, receiving abyss-knowledge, and gaining agency to join in God's Shalom-action. When seeking transformation, the wisdom of the ancient texts is accentuated by homileticians, naming the use of confession and lament, ecclesiology in declarative terms, and eschatology.¹¹ In preaching, the use of moral imagination is also emphasized as a transformative tool. Responses from the sermons indicate detailed thoughts and insights on how transformation was experienced. Especially as can be read from the questionnaires after sermon two, many responses emphasize empowerment and a desire to join in the good of the world.

6.4.1 Transformation in the First Sermon

In sermon one, the text from the gospel message, where Jesus is praying, was used to illustrate an eschatological borderland of uncertainty. Jesus's prayer stretches time and space, directed at a Thou. The prayer of Jesus, as well as the prayer of Kristina från Duvemåla¹² are prayers of lament, cries for justice, restoration, and consolation in situations near the abyss. Following the discussion of Kimberly R. Wagner, analyzing the prayer of Habakkuk in the First testament, the prayer of lament does not mention exclusion, who's in or not, which was a question raised by the PPG, rather the prayer of lament names brokenness in a cry to God. In this vulnerability, trust and hope become manifested. The mention of the communion meal in the first sermon is also an eschatological space connecting the here and now with Jesus and the disciples as well as the eternal, erasing boundaries.

Responses that indicate transformation in the first sermon include: "It is easy to park oneself in a state of 'before,' afraid to take the leap. You need this liberating power. You have a choice." The planting of seeds and the Thou were also mentioned as transformational: "There is hope in planting, in letting go."

¹¹ Frank Thomas, O. Wesley Allen, Lisa L. Thompson, and Kimberly R. Wagner as accounted for in chapter 3 of this thesis.

¹² The song of Kristina "You must be real" was sung in connection to the first sermon of the project. Lyrics in appendix E.

6.4.2 Transformation in the Second Sermon

The second sermon used the phrase “he will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick” from the gospel reading as a declarative ecclesiological statement. Repeating the statement in a different context became a poetic address that served as moral imagination when mentioned in the childhood illness of Gitta Sereny and mirrored in the speech “on the edge of the abyss” by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterrez. In the latter, the grief over the state of affairs became a catalyst, a quality of moral imagination.¹³ This poetic aesthetic activity was also, in the language of Jonna Bornemark, a way of lifting the situation from ratio to the realm of intellectus, facilitating transformation.

The image of the doves allowed ancient text, although not biblical, to portray hope through moral imagination. Imagining the doves flying over wounded creation engaged emotions of guilt and despair, catalysts for transformation.¹⁴ The description of activities at Lajee Center, the power of art and creativity that cannot be confined by walls, was embodied through the music of Berghagen.

Words of empowerment for change, courage to stand up for justice and solidarity in the responses from the congregation indicate that there was transformation in the reception of the sermon. One person felt reminded of “how important it is to contribute to giving vulnerable people back their human dignity and counteract polarization and dehumanization.” The courage of Gitta Sereny provided a role model. Being brave is not the same as fearless, a PPG member noted, fear can be a catalyst for courage, she added.

6.5 Evaluation of Strategy

A conclusion can be drawn that the qualities of the homiletical strategy near the abyss were effective. Keeping the three qualities in mind when shaping the sermon helped direct preaching toward greater relevance in people’s lives. “So nice, Helena, that you stood on the same level as us in the congregation. Before Jesus, we are all alike.”¹⁵ Empowerment to join in God’s Shalom action was experienced by the congregation.

¹³ In addition to Frank Thomas’s quality of empathy as a catalyst in moral imagination, the homiletical strategy near the abyss suggests other emotions, such as grief.

¹⁴ Andreas Holmberg and the homiletical strategy.

¹⁵ This is accounted for in section 5.3.4 of this thesis.

6.6 Abyss-knowledge

Expressing concern over the state of the world, during the second feed-forward session a PPG member said: “There is so much darkness in the world, where is my safe space?” This is an example of existential sentiment expressed at the edge of the abyss. In this thesis an exploration has been undertaken to discern what resources, words, actions, or rites can address the uncertainties in life, give hope to people, and lead to transformation. In the search for abyss-knowledge, the findings of the thesis would suggest that this knowledge coincides with the wisdom sustained by Christian faith. Approaching the uncertain, abyss-knowledge includes tools of spiritual resilience rooted in Christian tradition that can become a bridge, harbor uncertainty, and provide hope.

Embodying hope is at the core of preaching. “Where hope is present,” Charles Campbell writes, “life becomes possible even in the midst of death.”¹⁶ Hope could be considered the ultimate abyss-knowledge, an approach to life. Consequently, the way toward hope sustains components of resources near the abyss.

6.6.1 Lament

Credible hope must accommodate frustration, sorrow, and anger over all that contradicts the true good and beautiful, according to Antje Jackelén.¹⁷ Such feelings of grief and brokenness are expressed through confession and lament in Christian tradition, exemplified for instance by the prayer of lament in sermon one. Lament is both liturgical and biblical. It gives voice and restores agency to counteract passivity.¹⁸ Engaging emotions that prompt involvement is decisive. Lament includes exposing and naming that which stands in the way of God’s Shalom.¹⁹

¹⁶ Campbell, *The Word before the Powers*, 188.

¹⁷ This is accounted for in section 4.2.3. of this thesis.

¹⁸ This is accounted for in section 3.6.2. Wagner, *Fractured Ground*, 70-71

¹⁹ This is accounted for in section 3.6.2. Lisa L. Thompson quotes Christine Smith.

6.6.2 Eschatology

The uncertainty experienced in life can be harbored with the understanding of eschatology which provides tools to persist in insecurity, Bengt Kristensson Uggla asserts.²⁰ Eschatological language can refer to life after this. It can also envision God's realm here and now and the solidarity with all of creation that this entails. A third understanding of eschatology, Antje Jackelén explains, is a deep dimension of the present, much like a ferment. Eschatology is the language of the interval, the in between-space. This seems to agree with the liminal space experienced by the PPG in painting and through the sermons. A threshold space, transitional space, or crossroad is a recurring image in the understanding of eschatology represented in the works of several of the homiletics, theologians and pedagogues referenced in this thesis. This is a key for transformation. Although the aspects of this intersecting space take on different assertions, the similarities are tangible. Jackelén mentions how humility before the crossroad of human limitations and the responsibility of being created co-creators, is a quality of hope. Campbell suggests a threshold theology where the potency of death and the tokens of resurrection are constantly at work.²¹ Ellison creates a hypersensory environment for "time-bending transformation" based on the works of Winnicott.²² Knutsdotter-Olofsson explains how the transitional space suggested by Winnicott is the area in life where art, creativity and faith dwells.²³ Bornemark points to the in between-space, the intersection of ratio and intellectus for understanding religious language and notions.²⁴ Ben Stewart notes how this both-and understanding can define a human as both dust and created in the image of God.²⁵ Kristensson Uggla argues that eschatology is a resource within the church that intersects understanding and explanation, a hermeneutics of the slash, that can help interpret the world of today.²⁶ Accessing this liminal space, the eschatological understanding is the work of art, aesthetics, imagination.

²⁰ Kristensson Uggla, *Slaget om verkligheten*, 504.

²¹ This threshold theology is accounted for in section 3.2.3 and refers to a lecture by Campbell.

²² This is accounted for in section 3.6.1 of this thesis.

²³ This is accounted for in section 4.6.1.

²⁴ This is accounted for in section 4.6.2

²⁵ This is accounted for in section 4.5.

²⁶ This is accounted for in section 4.6.

6.6.3 Moral Imagination

Moral imagination is a quality sustained by religious faith that touches emotive chords, according to Frank Thomas. The preacher, staying true to the contextual expression of moral imagination inherent in the church, helps people access their imagination, generating wonder, mystery, and hope.²⁷ The sermons in this thesis have given several examples of moral imagination where responses of transformation in the congregation have shown that hope was conveyed. Moral imagination appears to be a tool for providing abyss-knowledge.

6.6.4 Justice and Solidarity

Faith is personal, not just private, Jackelén says in the interview. Actions have consequences. People need to make that connection. Others may suffer greatly from things that you do. Jackelén talks about solidarity and how we are created co-creators. Looking at the material in this thesis, a remarkable number of times togetherness, community, and conversation with others has been part of the transformational response from the PPG and the congregation. The desire to contribute to bring about change toward justice, to participate in God's Shalom action shines through. Being in relationship with others, taking responsibility for others and having a community to lean on, seem to be abyss-resources.

6.6.5 Partial Power

When overwhelmed by powerlessness in life, focus can be directed toward the power that still remains in being able to achieve small things, Hospital Chaplains Lars Björklund and Kerstin Dillmar explain.²⁸ "Who helps me see the glass as half full, providing space, or at least a sense of space," a PPG member said during the final meeting. The agency provided by partial power, is not to be underestimated. The sense that there is empowerment even if it is incremental progress, provides hope.

²⁷ Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*, xxvii. Thomas credits Edmund Burke with coining the expression "moral imagination."

²⁸ The digital lecture on abyss-knowledge by the hospital church in Uppsala is accounted for in section 4.2.6 of this thesis.

6.7 Conclusion

Preaching with the homiletical strategy near the abyss exhibits efficiency in engaging existential questions and eliciting a resonant response from the congregation, as well as a useful tool in crafting the sermon. The three parts, invitation, identification and transformation should not be seen as a three-step process, rather components for shaping the content and the approach of the sermon.

Remaining aware of the components of the strategy during preaching proved helpful in staying on track, remembering the presence, the sought I-Thou connection as an invitation for identification and transformation. Using the method of a Sermon Purpose Statement in combination with the strategy contributed in finding focus and keeping it. The use of art in the crafting process of the sermon helped capture images for the sermon.

In discerning what can be considered abyss-knowledge, material was analyzed from the two sermons as well as the interview with Antje Jackelén. Resources that were found able to provide spiritual resilience near the abyss include lamentation and engaging in emotions, eschatological understanding, moral imagination, justice and solidarity with others, and focus on agency even in partial power. A recurring theme appears to be a window that emerges in the encounter between elements that are generally seen as contradictory or unrelated.

Chapter 7

Homiletical Significance

7.1 Introduction

When in touch with life's uncertainties, people are the most receptive for the treasures of the Christian tradition. In the proximity of the frailty of life, the biblical stories, the words, the rites, the liturgy, and the symbols of the church become abyss-knowledge, tools to hold on to and be guided by. Aspiring to bring hope to the congregation, the homiletical strategy near the abyss was created. This final chapter will discuss the significance of the strategy and its findings in the field of homiletics and the Church of Sweden context from the perspective of the preacher. It will deepen the understanding of preaching near the abyss and suggest *Abyss-theology* as a field for spiritual existential resilience.

7.2 Preaching Near the Abyss

The homiletical strategy near the abyss explored in this study consists of three parts: invitation, identification, and transformation. These components are qualities to contemplate and mold in the process of crafting the sermon, dimensions to facilitate preaching in becoming relevant. The first two components, invitation and identification open up and prepare the ground for the third part, the transformation.

7.2.1 Invitation

This thesis has suggested that moral directives and imperatives when preaching transformation face the danger of becoming moral judgement, causing worshipers to disengage.¹ In the first quality of the homiletical strategy near the abyss, standing with the congregation, the preacher invites them to come close to the profound sense of the uncertainties of life. Standing with the congregation means doing so in every sense of the word. When the preacher places herself near the abyss, preaching becomes a ritual space where transformation can take place. Using the words of a PPG member, the preacher “strips herself of the answers,” embodying hope.

¹ Section 1.2 of this thesis.

7.2.2 Identification

The feed-forward sessions of this project, with the Parish Project Group (PPG) and for the second sermon, also with the choir, created a relationship through the joint undertaking of identifying the contextual abyss and encountering the biblical text. The connection remained in the preaching moment, providing strength to the preacher and an experience of openness in the congregation. It created a transitional space in relationship to the feed-forward group, the context and the biblical text.

The first sermon uncovered the situational prayer of uncertainty, focusing on Jesus in Gethsemane and Kristina från Duvemåla. Surrendering the control that one cannot have into the hands of God was a topic of conversation in the PPG. It was also something that was commented on in the sermon. This prayer of uncertainty, expressed as a strong image for the congregation, provided a foundational image for the preacher as well. The naked vulnerability of the preaching situation requires surrendering to God.

7.2.3 Transformation

Standing with the congregation in preparation and while preaching requires openness. The I-thou connection sought is not only about creating a safe space for the congregation to receive the words of the sermon. It is also about the preacher, standing there as an “I” in full vulnerability, reaching toward the eternal “Thou” and inviting the congregation to do the same. This invitation bears transformational qualities for the preacher.

7.3 Findings of Abyss-knowledge

Within the component of transformation, this thesis sought to explore the contents of abyss-knowledge, resources in the Christian tradition, words, actions, rites that can embody hope and strength, providing a sense of agency to join in God’s shalom action. Hope, being at the core of the purpose of preaching, could be considered the ultimate abyss-knowledge, an approach to life. Resources that sustain hope, components of abyss-knowledge identified in chapter six of this thesis were lament, eschatology, moral imagination, partial power, justice and solidarity.²

² As discussed in chapter six, section 6.6f.

7.3.1 Lament

The use of lament involves naming and exposing the abyss. Pausing at fractured ground, it is the movement from kyrie to gloria in the worship service including the necessary tears to be able to gain agency. It is an expression of acquaintance with the abyss, a threshold in the doorway toward hope. This aspect of the Christian tradition became evident in this project. The naming and exposing of grievous and uncertain situations gave way for tears and hope, as expressed in the evaluations. Joining in the communal direction that sorrow takes, creates a sense of togetherness, and a desire to join in God's shalom.

7.3.2 Eschatology

Although identified as separate resources in abyss-knowledge, eschatology is at the same time a quality of moral imagination. The tool of eschatology inherent in the Christian tradition provides language and understanding for transitional, liminal space. Able to harbor the already here and not yet, it is the intersectional encounter between elements that are generally seen as contradictory or unrelated. With the examples used in the sermons of this thesis, eschatology appears to be integral to abyss-knowledge. The understanding of eschatology provides a tool for abiding in uncertainty. It becomes a hermeneutic for life, a fundamental stance.

7.3.3 Moral Imagination

In the sermons of the thesis, the use of moral imagination generated a positive response. In the second sermon, it was the use of moral imagination that caused the congregation to experience hope in the end, despite a disheartening situation. The use of music and the mention of dance and creativity engaged the listener on a level uniquely attainable by art.

7.3.4 Justice and Solidarity

The thesis set out to explore if the sermon could instill "a sense of agency to join in God's shalom-action." As a resource near the abyss, community was mentioned in the responses to the sermons, with specific answers naming solidarity and justice. This is a particularly notable finding, coinciding with God's transforming justice being at the core of preaching, as accounted

for in chapter three.³ Near the abyss, Swedes, generally known to be individualists recognize the power of community and express a longing for togetherness wanting to take responsibility for the common good. This serves as a reminder in times when privatization seems to erect walls between people.

7.4 Sermon Preparation

When using the homiletical strategy near the abyss, the preacher stands with the congregation, not only while preaching but also in preparation. When crafting the sermon, there is an element of defining what the abyss is in the particular context. In order to become relevant in preaching, the abyss-knowledge preached needs to be in conversation with the abyss addressed. In this project, the Sermon Purpose Statement (SPS) was a useful tool in this endeavor.⁴ Considering the *situation*, the first part of the SPS, the question becomes: what abyss needs to be addressed? What existential question is at hand? In the first sermon, the abyss was identified as fear of the uncertain. The second sermon addressed the war in Gaza, a situation causing sadness and unrest. The homiletical strategy near the abyss and the SPS complement each other.

7.4.1 The Use of Art

The use of art in the crafting process can help capture images for the sermon. As explained in the initial chapters of this thesis, the use of art in sermon preparation was identified as a positive experience and a useful tool through the project SKAPA.⁵ Creativity as a means for existential dialogue was affirmed in the study for this thesis, mirroring the SKAPA “Bible studio” in the feed-forward sessions with the PPG. Not only did the art ground the PPG and provide images of contextual affects, continued painting also accompanied the process of shaping the sermon after the feed-forward session.

³ This is accounted for in section 3.4.2.

⁴ The SPS is explained in section 3.3.1. There is an SPS crafted for each of the sermons of the project, sections 5.3.5 and 5.4.4.

⁵ This is accounted for in section 1.4.4 in this thesis.



Pictures shaped by researcher from initial draft in feed-forward session with PPG, part of the process in crafting the sermons.

7.4.2 Theological Worlds Near the Abyss

A tool in exposing and addressing the abyss are the theological worlds explained by W. Paul Jones, focusing on different rhythms of Christian belief in a congregation. Existential hurt takes on different faces, as does longing, justice, restitution, and salvation depending on personality and identity. Justice, for example, can be sought because there's evil in the world, or because it disrupts God's shalom. One of the PPG members initially had trouble taking in the second sermon, the one focusing on the conflict in Gaza.⁶ Engaging emotions is an important part of the identification in the homiletical strategy, even emotions of anger and rage. However, dystopic images stand at risk of narrowing the field of interpretation, or cause the listener to disengage, as opposed to moral imagination that embodies hope. Some of the homileticians studied in this thesis suggest images of war and battle in preaching against that which disrupts life.⁷ This kind of language, that originates in a dichotomy of good and evil can be

⁶ This is accounted for in section 6.3.1 in this thesis.

⁷ Campbell, *The Word before the Powers*, 69. Campbell uses images of cosmic battle and terms such as "the sword of the spirit" in preaching against powers and principalities.

counterproductive, disrupting the connection to the Other. The language of Shalom, on the other hand, provides healing.

7.5 Preaching without Notes

A positive response was generated in this project by the preaching without notes. The first component of the strategy, the invitation, was experienced strongly by the congregation, especially mentioning the courage of the preacher to strip herself of notes. Although a useful tool when inviting the congregation to join in the vulnerability that approaching the abyss means, the homiletical strategy near the abyss provides tools for preaching with notes as well. Words and images of the sermon, abyss-resources, also serve to create that secure space, the I-Thou situation that will empower the congregation to imagine themselves near the abyss. Non-verbal aspects, tone of voice, gestures, pauses and language speed also help resonate a genuine expression in the sermon.

7.5.1 In the Field of Homiletics

The strategy for preaching near the abyss explored in this thesis with its three components invitation, identification, and transformation shows similarities with the qualities of moral imagination proposed by Frank Thomas in *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon*. As accounted for in chapter six, where Thomas proposes empathy as a catalyst or bridge, the homiletical strategy near the abyss opens up for other emotions as well.⁸ Where Thomas' identification step focuses on equality, the strategy has a broader definition of identification. Adding a dimension in relation to the qualities of moral imagination presented by Thomas, the homiletical strategy near the abyss acknowledges the sensitivity of the uncertain, the abyss. Providing this space for the fragility of life, the strategy serves to create a stronger connection between the preacher, the message and the congregation.

7.6 Spiritual Resilience

As the final chapter of this thesis is written, Sweden has just been accepted to the NATO union. With the war in a neighboring country, the Ukraine, and increased levels of security

⁸ This is accounted for in section 6.3.1 of this thesis. *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* is surveyed in section 3.6.

risk, there is much talk in society about how to become resilient, how to prepare for an attack from a foreign power or other disaster. Most Swedes of today have not experienced war and are unaccustomed to that danger. Economic, as well as social, and ecological sustainability have been identified as areas in need of resilience. However, there is rarely any mention of spiritual resilience in these kinds of situations. Without the tools to handle uncertainty in life, abyss-knowledge, economic, social or ecological resilience will not have full bearing in society or on the lives of its inhabitants. A good society needs existential resilience as well. When difficulties occur, it becomes evident that people grasp for the words and the rites of the church. That's when the need for abyss-knowledge is apparent. Preaching near the abyss places the congregation and the preacher near the uncertainties of life where the experience of how fragile life can be is tangible. This study indicates that connecting people with the vulnerability and the existential questions of life promotes openness and prompts the quest for spiritual existential resilience.

7.6.1 Identifying the Abyss

Naming the abyss is a way of placing the demons, the powers, the bullies in the light and gaining agency when uncertainty is overpowering. In this thesis, the abyss has been understood not only as tragedy, evil or death, but also as the diffuse unknown, the lack of solid ground and predictable future, that which makes a person tremble. In search of abyss-knowledge, this thesis has been directed toward identifying tools and resources for life near the abyss, more than exploring the abyss itself.

7.7 Conclusion: Abyss-theology

Engaging existential questions by preaching near the abyss has generated a new awareness. In the experience of life near the abyss, there is an openness for the words, the rites and the images of the church. In this state of vulnerability, the power of the tools available in the Christian tradition can transform people from fear to hope. Hope being at the core of the purpose of preaching, this study has discovered how it is also at the core of spiritual resilience. It is the ultimate abyss-knowledge.

Examining the word abyss-knowledge, knowledge of the abyss would perhaps be the proper definition, with an understanding that it would include a deeper exploration of the abyss. This shoots somewhat to the side of the contents of abyss-knowledge as understood in this

thesis, where focus has been examining the resources available through the treasure chest that is the tradition of the church and preaching this. The word *abyss-theology* might better describe the contents of this undertaking, considering that it has dealt with relating to the divine and the existential questions near the abyss.⁹

Abyss-theology would be a field that puts spiritual resilience on the agenda with potential in the post-modern world at hand. Exploring a deeper comprehension of this field would be intriguing as it would render further understanding of the potential of the Christian tradition when facing life's uncertainties. The field of abyss-theology, in itself a liminal space between awe and despair, would identify sustainable spiritual existential resilience.

⁹ "Theology is the study of religious faith, practice, and experience; especially the study of God and of God's relation to the world." <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/theology>

Epilogue: The Old Rugged Cross

My friend tells me about her father's last hours in life. Sitting by his bedside, the melody and words of the hymn That Old Rugged Cross came to her. Her father's lips moved and they sang together. Growing up she was raised in a strict Christian tradition and as an adult she has battled with the ideals and context of this upbringing, searching for her own spiritual way. The word "God," in her thinking, so closely related to that narrow definition of faith she grew up with, will not do justice to that larger something that she experiences in her heart. But now, the song that they used to sing in her childhood somehow made sense. It was something that united her and her father, singing together in this borderland situation the words of the old hymn. Yes, she says to me with tears rolling down her face, that old rugged cross, what an image. I will spend my lifetime discovering what that can mean. Battling, struggling, and sometimes surrendering in love and awe. Whatever insufficiencies her childhood had brought, she carries a treasure in the melodies and words of the old hymn. Tools that helped her endure life near the abyss.

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Appendix A

Interview with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén

What do I want to find out? How Abyss-knowledge has been used. What she means by it and what she thinks this will lead to. What will this kind of learning, knowledge provide people with. How will this help people?

1. I explain my project, the context etc.
2. You've been talking about Abyss-knowledge for a long time. When did you first come-up with the word? Or had you heard it before? (I first heard you mention it in 2014).
3. What do you mean by the word? Has this changed since you first started talking about it?
4. What will this kind of learning, knowledge provide people with. How will this help people?
5. The word Abyss-knowledge is being used by the Hospital Church in Uppsala, with your permission. What do you know about the way that they have developed the understanding of it? What do you think about it?
6. Is there anyone else using the term in practice or research that you know of?
7. Is there anything you would like to tell me that I did not already ask?

Uppsala

August 26, 2023

Interview with Archbishop Emerita Antje Jackelén

H: My project is about abyss-knowledge, not funeral speeches or tragedy. Working pedagogically, examining: What entry points are there, what questions exist among the people in the congregation? In disasters, the church becomes requested and significant. How can one, in a sermon, evoke the feeling that we are close to the abyss and the uncertainty of life? What do we need there?

I'm curious about your term "abyss-knowledge." Where does it come from?

A: I think the word originated in the writing process of the book "God is Greater." I had also thought about what children take with them from school. Basic knowledge about life, but you

also need abyss-knowledge. Several threads come together there. Have you heard the story of being "peace-injured"? Georg Klein, a cancer doctor from Hungary who survived concentration camps and escaped the Nazis. He was interviewed at one point. The journalist asked, "Are you war-wounded?" No, he replied, it is you who are peace-injured. What could he mean? What we discovered when the pandemic came, for example, was that Finland, as a country, had a different preparedness than Sweden. They have gone through something completely different, gained abyss-knowledge, and it stays with them in a different way than in Sweden. We have been blessed with a long period of peace. We assume it will continue to be that way. We have not valued abyss-knowledge much. You have also been a priest for a long time. I remember that already in the 80s, we joked that funeral cars should be pink, and children should not be present at funerals. "Protect them from the difficult." How wrong it felt from a pastoral perspective. Jesus put the child in the center. We know that in grief, children can teach adults a lot, be a support for adults. At the same time, adults should not abandon the child in grief – there is a togetherness that is very meaningful. And all that, we joked, that ideally, you want to build an amusement park on the cemetery. That time was an expression of the fact that we don't need abyss-knowledge, it's safe.

When the disaster is a fact, then the church doors should be opened and so on. It has always bothered me that the state and the public count on the church in an obvious way, while at the same time undermining trust in the church. I think, for example, about school graduations. They signal to both parents and children that there's something fishy; you'd better go to the sports hall. I have written about it in a debate article; the state is shooting itself in the foot. They count on the church being there in a crisis situation. But the church can only be there if trust is also cultivated in peacetime. It lacks abyss-knowledge - not seeing that the connection needs to be there even when everything is fine.

H: If one were to say what the content of abyss-knowledge can be, if I should give it to my child?

A: It depends on the child's age – in general, consider the thought that abyss-knowledge is needed. It hurts me a lot that we leave entire generations, children and young people, without access to existential tools. We know that sooner or later, the existential abyss opens in front of the

teenager's feet. It can happen very quickly. Then the teenager should carry all their meaningfulness themselves. It becomes a very heavy backpack, it doesn't always work. Björn Wiman said from the stage today – and I have also said it sometime: "We talk about religion as something that the others have, those who are not as modern as we are." That's the layer that lies between giving children both basic and abyss-knowledge about life. As long as we have that attitude, we don't even reach the question of what are we're supposed to give them then.

H: In my class, they were surprised when I said that in Sweden, the word God doesn't have any authority. In American society, the word God has a clear authority.

A: So far, yes... There must be many answers to how to give children abyss-knowledge. Give them the stories; the Old Testament stories have cruelty in them. They have been told to children for all times, so why not for our children? Sensitivity to children's existential questions! It's been a few years since someone wrote in Dagens Nyheter - someone who had finished school and said, "I have many hours of math and Swedish, have learned a lot about many things, but haven't learned anything about life." I think, what do children need to learn about life? I think of this somewhat carefree, or naive belief, that as long as we have a decent school, and the children are materially okay - and we have some values, then they automatically become mature, democratically minded, helpful, tolerant adults. And that's not the case. Someone said from the stage today [Existential Literature Festival]: "We still have remnants - words like character-forming, they used to stand for something."

H: Yes, in all its ruggedness.

A: And it's not about moralism, but helping the child form strong morals.

H: I find that difficult. Bishop Andreas in the Diocese of Stockholm urges us to preach about the climate – it's important, I agree. It's an abyssal question, but how do you do it without it becoming moral pointers? What is good morality so that it comes from the heart?

A: The bishop's letter begins in "awe and wonder," but it's a path where we as a church have gone astray quite a bit. When it comes to the theology of creation, we've landed a bit in the ditches – either "we are the crown of creation" and thus legitimized exploitation. Or we've preached about the beautiful nature, the lovely butterfly... and kept silent about ongoing evolution, which is quite brutal. Realistic awe of creation, which doesn't legitimize exploitation or exoticize, romanticize. That's where stories and literature can be helpful in shaping it. Then I think, regarding Chicago, about Philip Hefner, my predecessor, who formulated the idea of humans as "creative co-creator," created co-creator. It has entered the bishop's letter. Andreas has it in his writing about the climate too. Now it doesn't say that it comes from Haeffner.

H: I usually think, what makes humans unique? Our ability to create as well. In the act of creation, we are like God. Much of prophetic preaching talks about Imagination. Imagination should be there. Then you move in the area that is the domain of creative power, the third space...

A: What I love about "created co-creator," is that it thematizes this tension: We are created, in every moment absolutely dependent – acknowledge your mortality. At the same time, we are co-creators, as in Psalm 8: "What is a human being that you think of her...". It's also a way to open up to say wow, acknowledge my mortality and at the same time discover the power. I think it was Mikael Kurkiala who said here: Responsibility, free to take responsibility. Response-able. Capable of responding to the emergency. Empowering – fits well with Lutheran theology. You are empowered. As Lutherans, we are marinated in dialectics. You don't need to flee your powerlessness, but you shouldn't stay in it either. Acknowledge it but also see that you have power in your weakness. You should stay.

H: Lars Björklund and the Hospital Church in Uppsala, who also use the term abyss-knowledge, talk about "partial power," powerless in one's own life, but still there is some power in small things.

A: It has led me further. In "Impatient in hope," I write that hope has three ingredients:

- Credible hope must accommodate frustration, anger, sorrow - all that negative. There must be room for it.

- The second - humility, realism, to wisely relate to duality; weakness and strength, immense strength. There is so much creativity that we can destroy ourselves and the whole planet. Also, our mortality - this is also part of abyss-knowledge, the knowledge of mortality – we no longer die of mortality, but because of the failure of healthcare.
- The third is that there usually still is a choice. Those who have hope choose the braver path.

Concrete things that I believe can matter in a Swedish context. We are known for not daring. An American says, I jumped into the pool first, "I take credit for that." Swedes hold hands and jump together.

H: What is the fundamental purpose of the sermon? It is hope, right? Or what would you say?

A: Regarding Hope, it's like this. I will have the main lecture on hope at the Lutheran World Federation General Assembly. The theme is "One body, one spirit, one hope." And I will talk about hope. There is a mix of theologians and others from around the world. Most are familiar with Greta Thunberg and her words: "I don't want you to have hope, I want you to panic." What is right and wrong about this? On one hand – it will work out, it always has. We don't need repentance. Hope is deceptive. It is also not right to fall into despair if it leads to paralysis. Or if it leads to stress reactions - which are completely counterproductive. Luther says: God hates both presumption and despair. The presumptive – and this despair. Really working towards a credible hope. It is both a gift – everything is a gift before it becomes a task. It is also a muscle, a virtue, a muscle that can be trained. Celebrating a worship service is such training.

H: Yes, the ritual and liturgy are also part of the knowledge of the abyss?

A: Yes, one could say that every Mass goes from Kyrie to Gloria. It is also an expression of knowledge of the abyss.

H: The Hospital chaplaincy that uses the term abyss-knowledge – do you know anything about it? Does it align with how you think?

A: No, I don't know.

H: They talk about Identity, relationship, and meaning. Something every person needs. Care, perspective, trust, and belonging are also words they use.

A: Yes, but it's really about opening the entire existential treasure chest for children and young people, but also for adults. They are equally lost without this access, and I believe that the collective abyss that opens up in connection with the climate crisis does something to people - when it is no longer possible to deny it, then the reaction must come, and the longing for tools must emerge.

H: It was odd, Gröna Lund [the amusement park]. Several fell "towards the abyss" – a woman died. They said we thought it was safe, what should we believe in now...? There are no guarantees.

A: No, there aren't. We only die one day. Most days, we don't die.

H: Then it gets close – can you bring the congregation to the edge of the abyss in the sermon?

A: It requires a lot - the constant challenge that the congregation is in different places in their faith journey. When I look back at my own preaching, for example, in the 90s. The high mass, then you preached to the believers, at baptism, where there is no one who believes... But that's not necessarily the case. It's difficult too. Part of it is to awaken people's appetite for more solid food. You can't do that alone. What you mentioned – it shouldn't turn into moralism. Maybe let someone in the congregation who works with these issues speak? Then it's not the priest who speaks, but someone in the congregation who shares.

H: Then you end up with “doing.” Can you end up a step before that, that the sermon opens the collective abyss, reminds of it, makes it visible? It needs to be a safe environment, and there remind the congregation that we are mortal? The globe...

A: That we are in a mass extinction period, it has never been as warm as this summer, in 120,000 years or whatever it is. Conveying that - at the same time, we can't do that every Sunday. Every Sunday, the priest nags about it...

H: Transformation, the change, needs to happen gradually. In Oscar's, you never know who will come. But the congregation should be part of something each time that touches them.

A: Can it be carried by different groups in the congregation? Reflect and bring back? Also an interaction, preaching and liturgy, how it is shaped.

H: The choirs, there is openness, an opportunity for conversation...

A: Yes, at the Parliament of the World's Religions, our group did a Climate Repentance Ceremony. It's recorded, not sure if it can be watched? My contribution was the climate prayer from the Bishop's letter. And in Stockholm Cathedral, there was a memorial service for extinct species.

H: I found a TV service that Martin Lönnebo held at the landfill. That was a form of portraying.

A: Yes, liturgical expressions created from this are needed.

H: Course literature in Chicago: Preaching in the Era of Trump. Where is the USA heading? When we become a church on a mission field: Lamentation, Proclaiming, not moral pointers, tell stories. And Eschatology, imagination.

A: There we also have a lesson to learn, perhaps we can make that connection, there is no need for abyss-knowledge, nor for eschatology? In the first draft of the new handbook,¹ there was practically zero eschatology, nor ecclesiology – just me and my God. It's not strange that a handbook reflects its church and its time, but it must also lead forward. I was very puzzled when

¹ The most recent Church of Sweden liturgical handbook was put into use in 2018.

I saw the first drafts. We must talk about the church as a community, also a global community. Not just me and my God, we are fine with each other, not letting eschatology completely disappear, even if...

H: In the course, I discovered that many African Americans' understanding of eschatology is often: "Pie in the sky when you die." That's how their focus has needed to be, but they don't like it. I think eschatology is a lot about here and now?

A: In "Gathering Around Hope," I write a chapter on eschatology. The development from *Ta Eschata* - What happens when the calendar ends, the end of the world." I'm not sure of the order in the book, but it also deals with *Ho Eschatos* – the first and the last, and the one who lives, Christ. And *Ton Eschaton* - the deep dimension of the present. Everything has its justification. There is a tendency to sell out one at the expense of the other. Clearly, an impending climate catastrophe raises the question: What happens when the world ends? We don't have many words for it; we have to trust that when everything ends – we can never fall out of God's hands. But what does it mean for an entire planet? Eschatology, looking at what theologians have written about eschatology, often goes very quickly from humans – the whole universe, as if there wasn't much in between, in terms of size. I think natural science sharpens the gaze; wait a minute, there is a scale in between. You can't just ignore that. Surely, more work will be done on eschatology.

H: Your connection with natural science. The order of creation, the individualistic society, it is connected to eschatology.

A: Of course, people thought differently about heaven when they died at 30 - how one understands time and the relationship between time and eternity.

H: Anything else I should have asked...?

A (laughs): Yes... After this long day. We've touched on the individual and collective. The planetary, eschatology. The pastoral – you already have material on that. Something that also relates to abyss-knowledge is breaking privatization. Nagging about how faith is personal, not

just private. There, we can share faith in a way that enriches both. The situation with the Quran burnings is based on the argument: "It's private, it can't be violated. If I bought a Quran, I can do whatever I want with it - see it as a commodity." Any book is a symbol of freedom of speech. To burn a symbol of freedom of speech in the name of freedom of speech is tricky. But a book like the Quran is also very symbolically charged. Destroying it is an attack on ideas and a community. "Faith is something that others have" is private, period. Then you can't handle it.

H: It's an expression of ignorance, a lack of willingness to understand the other.

A: And a lack of abyss-knowledge. They don't make the connection that others suffer because of it. I spoke with the Archbishop in Nigeria. The drawings of Mohammed; "We had to struggle to explain and calm down. Our congregation was in danger because Muslims were upset." And here it's just "We shouldn't bow to dictatorships."

H: Lack of understanding for the sacred. A summer speaker described a terrible pedophile – everyone wanted to kill the person who had committed a crime against a child. It's something sacred to us. Understand the Quran being sacred for Muslims from that perspective.

A: It has also been argued that Muslims must learn to be offended, that believers must endure being mocked. We would never say that children must learn to be offended, to be mocked. However, it will happen even to my beloved child, that they may be bullied, mocked. You can prepare the child or be there when it happens and strengthen them, not tell them they must endure this. Or people with disabilities. But the believers, they must endure. Why?

H: It's so fundamental – you have to reverse the perspectives.

A: And then they call it criticism of religion. How stupid is that? The government mocks: Here we have freedom of speech. But when Erdogan starts to appear, then they start to think... People will see through this, and then they have no authority.

Abyss-knowledge is also about being able to handle shame. Dagens Nyheter asked me to write about shame a few weeks ago. I realized the connections, it's part of being human to learn to handle shame.

H: The child – being able to handle offense, having an awareness of their own value, the relationship with God.

A: Exactly. I wrote about misplaced shame, the victim blaming themselves instead of placing it on the perpetrator. But also that baptism is the "work surface that is indestructible." You are baptized, you have value. Based on that, take responsibility for deserved shame that tells me: "Hey, you've done something you need to apologize for and make right." But if you don't have that knowledge, then it becomes "It wasn't me, it was him who made me do it."

H: And to distinguish between guilt and shame.

A: Abyss-knowledge – not just knowledge of how deep the abyss is, what can happen if you fall, and how to get up. But also what the bridges across are.

H: Exactly – how deep it is may not be as important as the bridges. And the trembling at the edge.

A: Something that has led me to abyss-knowledge is Kierkegaard's: "The one who has learned to live with anxiety has learned the greatest thing." I have written about it in "God is Greater."

Appendix B

Questions used in Lectio Divina Bible Reading:

1. After the first reading: What word do you remember?
2. After the second reading: What did you feel in your body, when listening to the text?
3. After the third reading: What speaks to you, here and now? Is there a pertinent issue that speaks to you? Is there an exhortation or invitation for you in your life?

Appendix C

Questionnaire to Congregation

Questionnaire for members of the congregation present:

1. Did the sermon remind you of memories, experiences from your own life? What thoughts came to mind? Please share.
2. Did you experience hope being portrayed in the sermon? If so, how was it expressed? What feeling did it evoke in you?
3. Was there a personal address to you in the sermon? Any exhortation or invitation?

Appendix D

Group Interview Questions

Group Interview Questions:

1. What did you hear? What did you see? (What thoughts came to mind?)
2. What happened within yourself? How did it “feel”?
3. How did the sermon correspond to the group preparation?
4. Did you notice the homiletical strategy at work? How?

Appendix E

First Sermon

Sermon on John 17:18-23

We meet Jesus when he is deeply immersed in prayer. It's the evening before he will be brought to trial. It's before his arrest. The moment before he will be betrayed. He has had his last meal with friends, his disciples. He has spoken to them, his farewell speech; now he prays to God. As if in a kind of borderland of time and space. The moment before what will happen is about to happen will happen. A borderland of uncertainty.

In this moment, Jesus is as much a human as you and I. His prayer is a person's innermost desire at the edge of uncertainty's hour. The moment before, the day before what is about to happen will happen. At the shore of a sea of uncertainty. At the cliff edge of an unknown future. In the same borderland where we all live our lives.

The day before. The day before the surgery, the move, the journey, or the new school. The day before meeting the great love. The day before the pandemic outbreak, the flood, the storm. A reminder that we are constantly on the brink of uncertainty. Somewhere in a borderland. Which is both possibilities and worries, but above all, uncertainty.

I drove into the tunnel, as I had done many times. This morning, it was completely dark. All the lights were out. I drove straight into a dense darkness. For a moment, I thought, what if this tunnel doesn't go where I think it goes? I'm driving toward something unknown and hoping I'll come out right.

Dystopian thoughts filled me. Is this how it feels during war, occupation, or terrorist attacks? In the darkness, I have to rely on other senses, follow the taillights of the cars in front of me. I wouldn't be able to see if a sinkhole suddenly opened up in the road. I'm left to my own trust that I'll come out on the other side.

Unfortunately, these thoughts are not entirely unfounded. The risk level of terror threats has been raised for our country, the culture of suspicion has crept in. Tomorrow is always uncertain - now it is colored by dystopian images of war preparations, justified climate anxiety, terrorist threats, and economic crisis. A divided, uncertain world.

Jesus prays, words of unity and fellowship. Jesus' prayer, there in the borderland, stretches across time and space, including us. The poetic words when the evangelist John tells the story cradle a warm and inclusive feeling.

Yet, it's easy to think about a community - who is in, who is out? The legitimate questions of suspicion are also here: *I want to be invited, I want to be part of the community, but is it imposed? Can I participate in planning? Is this a community that wants to own me, define me, limit me? Must one be a certain way? Must one believe in a certain way?*

“The thought is dizzying, an abyss yawns before me.” Kristina from Duvemåla's song is her prayer to God, the God she sometimes doubts. "You must exist," she sings.

(Thanks, Hanna for the song.) This song from the musical about Kristina, who, together with Karl-Oskar, left everything behind at home in Duvemåla to emigrate to America. The story by Vilhelm Moberg.

The most stripped-down of prayers directed at a Thou, a You. You who have known me since the day I was born, even before I was born. You who have followed me through all the difficulties, departures, betrayals, and love. Beyond the word God. The You who knows my thoughts. The hand I will hold the day I cross the abyss. “Without you, I am a fragment on a dark and stormy sea.” And she surrenders to this You. She lets go of the control she can never have.

Because - the prayer at the edge of uncertainty does not seem to consider boundaries. Jesus doesn't mention exclusion, doesn't mention borders - here are the poetic words: “Just as you are in me and I in you, may they also be in us.” A common direction towards a core.

We constantly live in the Day before - the borderland. I don't know what tomorrow looks like. Yet, I will plant my apple tree, plant the tomatoes and sweet peas. Trust is, no matter how uncertain tomorrow feels, to think that in the future, I will enjoy picking and eating sun-ripened tomatoes.

Just as the promise from God through the prophet Amos' words in the Old Testament reading, about a time when they will “plant vineyards and drink their wine, establish gardens and eat their fruits”.

We depend on everything around us. Nature, the whole creation, each other. The prayer Jesus prays, the unity he asks for, is about the togetherness in diversity - precisely because we share the same premises - uncertainty. The prayer that stretches across time and space is not about limiting, delimiting, or uniformity - it is about an I in relation to an eternal Thou. A direction toward a core that is love and fellowship.

In a moment, we will celebrate communion. The bread and wine with connections to the meal Jesus has just eaten - the moment before. Which has its direction towards the eternal Thou, and which tears down walls rather than setting boundaries. And you are invited - here, it's not about whether you are religious, here, your humanity is sought after. Because you are a human being, among human beings in Creation.

Link to Youtube video of sermon: <https://youtu.be/fwuCV2i7yZI?si=v3HwtUp29VKjV5CA>

Lyrics to Kristina från Duvemåla's song "Du måste finnas". Translated by Newkid
<https://lyricstranslate.com>:

You have to be real

Who would help me endure life out here?

Who would grant me the strength that I need?

Who would comfort me? So small in the world

If you don't exist, what ought I do?

You must be real, you have to. I live my life through you
Without you I'm merely debris on a dark and stormy sea
You must be real, you must. Then how can you forsake me?
I'd be nowhere,
I'd be nothing if you didn't exist

Who would sense my remorse only to forgive me?
Peace for my soul, yes who'd provide that for me?
At the end, who'd be there to guide me after passing?
If not for you, who would care for me then?

You must be real, you have to. I live my life through you
Without you I'm merely debris on a dark and stormy sea
You must be real, you must. Then how can you forsake me?
I'd be nowhere,
I'd be nothing if you didn't exist

I can no longer see a purpose
Without you, what ought I do?

I live my life through you
Without you I'm merely debris on a dark and stormy sea
You must be real, you must. Then how can you forsake me?
I'd be nowhere,
I'd be nothing if you didn't exist

If you do not exist
I'd be nothing if you didn't exist
I'd be nowhere
I'd be nothing if you didn't exist

Appendix F

Response to Questionnaire First Sermon

September 10, 2023

Nine persons responded to the Questionnaire offered the congregation (focus group) after church service. The questions were:

Questionnaire for members of the congregation present:

1. Did the sermon remind you of memories, experiences from your own life? What thoughts came to mind? Please share.
2. Did you experience hope being portrayed in the sermon? If so, how was it expressed? What feeling did it evoke in you?
3. Was there a personal address to you in the sermon? Any exhortation or invitation?

Answers

1. Everyone writes that they identified experiences in their own lives.
2. Everyone felt that hope was conveyed.
3. The answers here varied. The word Invitation came up in two questionnaires, two persons wrote things of a transformational nature.

Some of the comments:

There was hope portrayed, but I was personally blocked by the “day before,” when everything is still as usual.

God holds our hand as we cross the depths of the Abyss.

Daring to stay in the uncomfortable, trusting that God is there.

So nice, Helena, that you stood on the same level as us in the congregation. Before Jesus, we are all alike.

Appendix G

Group Interview First Sermon

September 10, 2023

PPG Group Interview

You can see Jesus speaking to the disciples

Everyday-poetic language that appeals to many.

The image of the tunnel was spot on.

Helena gave hope in her way of preaching. Touches me in my place in life positively and hopefully.

Let go of what you cannot control.

It gets me thinking of community as security.

Addresses the feeling of being alone and anxious – feeling besieged and exposed. Dare to take other perspectives, then you get more hope.

It comes when you let go of control. I'm a control freak. The sermon resonated with me: "Life happens."

Humility in the face of the fact that uncertainty is something you live with.

A call to presence. I got upset when Helena started talking. I get teary-eyed now. Not in a bad way, but in a positive way. It was the words: "Before..."

You can park yourself in a state of "before" when you're afraid to take the leap. Transformation? A liberating force that you need.

The sermon gave me the calmness I need to be in the "before."

We got to do things, paint – dare. Then just fall down – and show what I've done. Not an abyss, but uncertainty. Didn't think, just did it. Recognized this trust in the sermon.

The community - am I allowed to be part of it? Am I invited? I recognized myself and my questions in the sermon.

The seeds, tomatoes = transformation. The Thou is the self. We have a choice, Rhetorically skillful, posing questions, kept you waiting for an answer. I zoomed for a short while, lost a bit

I was like a sponge, heard every word.

transformation: The day before, tomatoes

Invitation: community

Identification: the tunnel

Transformation: The day before, tomatoes

Invitation: Community Identification: The tunnel

Old texts (like a museum) – a great distance. Historical event, no one remembers – far away.

Helena manages to portray it so people recognize themselves. Accessible

Invitation to feel that I can come as I am. Hope in planting, letting go. Invitation to transformation.

Challenge, open up

Without a script, vulnerable, something happens. A priest who dares, a well-thought-out sermon without notes – that's an invitation."

Appendix H

Second Sermon

Sermon on Matthew 12:15-21

He will not break a bruised reed or quench a smoldering wick. The words of Isaiah, reiterated by Matthew. But who does that? Who would really do that? Is there really anyone who would actually kick the one lying down?

Two 15-year-old girls cross the main street in Vienna. They see a crowd a little further ahead, a group of men in brown military uniforms with swastikas on their sleeves. A large group of people, laughing, has joined them, pointing towards the center of the crowd. As the girls get closer, they see that in the middle of the street, there are several people on their knees with toothbrushes in hand. They are Jewish citizens forced by the uniformed Nazi guards to scrub the cobblestone street with toothbrushes.

One of the girls, Gitta Sereny, recognizes a man among those kneeling on the street. It's Dr. Berggrün, the family's pediatrician; the one who saved her when she, at the age of 4, had diphtheria, and her life was just *a smoldering wick*. She remembers his caring hands - how he wrapped her in cool wet sheets that night. And the voice, his warm voice at dawn: *You will live, my child*.

This takes place in 1938, a few months before the infamous Kristallnacht, the worst pogroms to affect Europe's Jewish population in modern times. And after World War II, the state of Israel was established - the hope, the dream, the vision of living. In safety, in freedom.

Balquees is 11 years old. When he visits his grandfather, he usually gets to look at the key. Balquees lives in Aida camp, the large refugee camp outside Bethlehem. He was born here and has lived here all his life, just like his parents. But his grandfather was not born here. "I was about your age," says the grandfather when they look at the key that belonged to his childhood home.

Balquees' Grandfather talks about the vast green fields and how his family along with all the other families were forced to leave the village and move to the refugee camp. For a long time, they believed they would soon be able to go back home, but the tents were replaced with concrete houses, and a high wall surrounds the camp. Anyone who wants to leave the camp needs the right documentation to pass through the carefully guarded gates in the wall. Aida Camp is like a kind of prison.

What became a well-deserved fresh start, and freedom for Israelis became limited freedom and oppression for Palestinians. Gitta and Balquees - just two faces, two life stories among the millions affected in this deep and complex situation. In the area where there is now full-blown war. And where the only thing that can be understood is that one understands nothing. Airstrikes, tanks, and gunfire. And kicks aimed at people already down.

"We are on the edge of an abyss," says the General Secretary of the UN, Antonio Guterrez. A cascade of crises:

- A world filled with suspicion, distrust and despair.
- Covid-19 left us with greater divides than ever.
- Escalating climate crisis.
- Human rights in the crosshairs.
- Solidarity - missing in action

How should one relate to these reports? The whole world feels wounded. And with that, it's as if we ourselves, on a personal level, become more sensitive, even in our own lives and daily routines. Life's questions come a bit closer. Melancholy, sorrow. The essence of loneliness and worry for the future. Vibrant fragility. *A world full of smoldering wicks. Bruised reeds.*

It is into this that the prophecy becomes powerful. The words from the prophet Isaiah used about Jesus. The promise *not to break the bruised reed, not to extinguish the smoldering wick*. The humble attitude of Jesus. He, who in our tradition is called the Messiah, Son of God, in Jewish tradition is called Rabbi, and in Muslim tradition is called Prophet. We share so much with each other.

There is a story about Jesus in Muslim tradition (NOTE: It is not in the Bible or the Qu'ran, it is an oral tradition). It is said that Jesus, or Isa, as they call him, made objects from clay, and once when he had made a pair of clay doves, a person with enormous feet came and wanted to step on the clay doves. Then Jesus prayed to God, and the doves flew away.

I see the doves. How they fly over the world, over sea and land, over deserts and melting glaciers. Over Ukraine and Gaza. Peace doves, sanctioned by three religions that seek peace and have the same roots. Peace, love, holiness.

This is how God's good spirit works throughout the world. A gentle warm movement that whispers: You will live, my child. And makes every person see themselves as a human among humans. It does not force us beyond ourselves; on the contrary, we are invited to follow along. To join the chorus: We do not kick the one who is down!

Because it is the dehumanization of others that enables people to commit atrocities against each other. In Nazi Germany, SS guards were indoctrinated to believe that the prisoners in the concentration camps were not human. They were considered parasites and pests in society.

Gitta and her friend do not hesitate. They approach the uniformed men and ask what they are doing. This time, their courage is sufficient. The startled guards and the crowd disperse. Dr. Berggrün can stand up.

After school, Balqees and his friends usually go to Lajee Center in Aida Camp. It is a cultural center for children, where they work on collecting their stories. Writing, painting, and photography are part of the activities. Along with some friends, Balqees has written a book with his own photographs. His grandfather's key is pictured in the book.

At Lajee Center, they organize photo exhibits, showcase their films, and sing their songs. No walls can contain dreams and creativity. One evening, there is a dance performance. Balqees's

older sister Sara and her friends dance. Grandfather is there. Perhaps something sparks in him. Perhaps he goes up to Sara. Perhaps he says:

Yes, you should have seen your grandmother; she was as beautiful as you. When she danced in the grass, just like you are doing now. Her hair was bleached by the sun, her mouth strawberry red. She was lovely like a lily. Her love was like a glow. So I took off my jacket, kicked off both shoes, and then I spat out the snuff, said, "My beautiful, may I..."

[Music starts – the melody of this famous Swedish song, by a much loved singer-song writer who just passed away.]

Matthew 12:15-21 (New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition)

¹⁵ When Jesus became aware of this, he departed. Many^[a] followed him, and he cured all of them, ¹⁶ and he ordered them not to make him known. ¹⁷ This was to fulfill what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah:

¹⁸ "Here is my servant, whom I have chosen,
my beloved, with whom my soul is well pleased.

I will put my Spirit upon him,
and he will proclaim justice to the gentiles.

¹⁹ He will not wrangle or cry aloud,
nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets.

²⁰ He will not break a bruised reed
or quench a smoldering wick
until he brings justice to victory.

²¹ And in his name the gentiles will hope."

Youtube link to sermon (in Swedish)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=49kU7xO0fPw>

Appendix I

Response to Questionnaire Second Sermon

October 29, 2023

Congregational Response to Questionnaire Second Sermon

38 persons responded anonymously to the questionnaire offered the congregation (focus group) after church service.

One person was doubtful if hope was conveyed. All the others said yes. Here are some of the responses (my selection):

Question 1. Did the sermon remind you of memories, experiences from your own life? What thoughts came to mind? Please share.

- Everyone has an experience of feeling left outside, rejected.
- From grief to love of your neighbor.
- Current topics are addressed, but without apportioning blame.
- Yes, the worry for the world around us.
- About problems that can occur in close relationships.
- Reminded me of my own bad temper, that one should not break the bruised reed.

Question 2. Did you experience hope being portrayed in the sermon? If so, how was it expressed? What feeling did it evoke in you?

- There was a feeling of hope, even if it is far away.
- It ended that way
- Togetherness with all religions
- Yes there is hope, if we remember to remain human.
- Hope consists in us talking about the things that have happened.
- Finally someone addressing peace.
- Believing that one's voice can matter
- That it is possible to live in unity.

- Through the music.
- Yes, it reminded me of the importance of the interpersonal

Question 3. Was there a personal address to you in the sermon? Any exhortation or invitation?

- You invited us with your mode of speaking.
- With your way of preaching, you invite us to become part of the sermon. I was touched. You surprised us by linking the song by Lasse Berghagen.
- You truly speak to each and every one of us.
- No [two persons stated this, however, they had written a lot on the previous two questions, indicating that the sermon had touched them. One person added that they were not “finished thinking.”]
- Empowered to make an effort for change
- Try to identify what is good, and don’t be fast to judge
- Not to forget the responsibility we have as humans, daring to stand up for justice and not forget our history
- Solidarity in action
- Take care of you neighbor
- Help one another
- Standing up for one’s opinion on justice.

PPG Response to Questionnaire

Question 1. Did the sermon remind you of memories, experiences from your own life? What thoughts came to mind? Please share.

- My grandfather had to flee after WW1 and my father after WW2, both at the age of seven, so my interest in these issues and history in general has always been great.

Question 2. Did you experience hope being portrayed in the sermon? If so, how was it expressed? What feeling did it evoke in you?

- Hope was conveyed by the peace doves

- The girls and the doves
- The crowd scattered
- There was also hope in the fact that we [different religions] had used the same person (Jesus) to depict moral and ethical dilemmas in humanity.
- The piece from the song *An Evening in June* - often played at the children's summer graduations. They were so excited for the summer holidays and happy when they sang, which filled me with joy and hope.

Question 3. Was there a personal address to you in the sermon? Any exhortation or invitation?

- To keep fighting for, and trust in positive signs and good deeds being done.
- The essence of feeling empathy for one's fellow human beings and how important it is to contribute to giving vulnerable people back their human dignity and counteract polarization and dehumanization.
- Keep listening to your inner voice about what feels right.

Appendix J

Group Interview Second Sermon

October 29, 2023

PPG Group Interview

Before the Group interview begins, I repeat the homiletic strategy near the abyss:

Invitation – to feel involved, invited to stand at the edge of the abyss

Identification – with the people in the biblical text and images in the sermon

Transformation – transformative power in the sermon

Question 1. What did you hear, what did you see?

- Words turned into music. I saw a large choir with a high average age.
- A sermon without a concept. No stumbling, flowing this time as well.
- Much body language that radiates engagement. Presence. Desire to communicate. A feeling that it is important to connect with the audience.
- The sermon is a completely different address, a contrast to the liturgy, an interruption – it feels more relational than the rest of the service. It is clear when it begins and ends. It is by far the most engaging part of the worship service.

Question 2. What happened within yourself? How did it “feel?”

- Difficult to step out of my role as a part of the project group. I keep reflecting on what we have gone through and talked about. It went better than last time. The sermon tied together the beginning and the end – came back to where it started.
- The story of the key – not as hopeful. The art project, a way of processing not coming back home. The ending was fun. A funny twist, never experienced that before in a sermon. Lasse Berghagen! So lovely and hopeful.
- It makes me think, how can we gather around what is common? How to unite around the doves that fly over the world? The desire to come together in a song. What if we could all sing "We shall overcome." But there are so many obstacles in the way. What if it could come true?
- It all relates to Israel/Palestine, the only thing on one's mind.

- A feeling of triumph

Conversation about Israel/Palestine

Discussion on media and information

Conversation about individualism/solidarity today compared to when we were growing up

Conversation on making a difference

Question 3. Does the sermon correspond to sermon preparation?

- We read the text, talked about bruised reeds, talked about Israel and Palestine – so, yes.
- This text was easier than the previous one.
- Johan¹ had a "lecture" last time, about the history of Israel. What it stems from - that Jews have been persecuted. Where does the conflict start? It goes far back. They were immigrants in Egypt – back to Canaan.

Question 4. The homiletic strategy

- Invitation, identification, transformation. The difficult things in the world, what do you do with them? Sensitivity, a sense of the everyday manifestation of melancholy. Transformation – music and the image of Jesus. Finding something common, that was transformation.
- Something happened to me this week, connecting to this. I had been on a bad date and felt rejected. As I was washing my hands at work one day, in that very ugly restroom, it occurred to me: "What if everything is okay as it is, even if it's uncomfortable." It was a special feeling: Everything is fine. Letting go, otherwise one becomes hateful, sarcastically contemptuous, narcissistic. I want to eliminate that part. Can that part be part of this - transformation by letting things be as they are? I went to bed and was completely calm for the first time in several years. Found myself at ease in myself. I'm in God's waiting room. It can happen when you look in the mirror at the ugly community restroom, things fall into place. I know now how to absorb, instead of pushing away that feeling. Standing near the abyss can be when you're rejected by a loser, it can be like being threatened to life.
- "Leave it in God's hands, I can't control it - let it go!" That could have been included in the sermon, as part of the transformation: "Now I wash my hands of it."

¹ A group member who was absent for the Group Interview.

- Bono (1985) brings it up, can't help but admit that I love the song "Let them know it's Christmas time." And the line: "Thank God it's them instead of us." I get teary-eyed. Now there's more worry for Sweden. Feels like a collective perception of how things are when you don't know enough yourself. Drug trafficking – that is a tangible crime, not good of course. But infiltration in banks and health centers, that is societal decay. I want us to be a country with high trust.
- Transformation, something in you?
- What could I do? What can I handle, what can I manage? I could have done... But stay comfortable. One is an accomplice all the time.
- Agree.
- If you're not afraid to be afraid, for example, to take a conflict, etc., then you can do yourself justice. Help yourself to be brave in what you find important.
- The homiletic strategy is clear: Invitation – here we are, picture place, good. Identification – we are all more sensitive. Transformation – the most difficult
- The situation was transformed when Gitta spoke up.
- There was hope from past to present. Vienna 1938 to Bethlehem. Horrible – like when they urge people in Gaza to flee south.
- I can't understand what they are doing. Don't understand. We don't get it, can't understand.²
- In stress, the hate situation is not rational, strategically inconsistent.

Written responses from PPG members absent during the church service

One member:

This is a very powerful, warm, and elegant sermon with extremely high relevance.

The invitation, as I perceive it, comes through the connection to the victims of the Holocaust and the very current consequences of the emergence of the modern state of Israel. The question is, of course, polarized and charged. The sermon handles this by highlighting similarities, that is, how the Jews at the end of the 1930s and during WW2 increasingly became confined and dehumanized, drawing parallels with what the inhabitants of Gaza and the West Bank experience today. It is an invitation that transitions into a strong connection to what is burning in the Middle

² This is interesting, since this exact line "the only thing that can be understood is that one understands nothing" from my script was one that I missed. But they seem to have "heard" it anyway.

East today. As it was formulated, what was supposed to be freedom for one group became oppression for another.

The example of the youths encountering a mob in 1938, where one of the victims is their doctor from many years earlier, introduces a concrete event that also partially connects to the dehumanized, violent crime growing in Sweden today.

The sermon also highlights the consequences for those of us who follow this from a distance: worry, increased sensitivity, sometimes loneliness, and more. Implicitly, it also points to the danger of increased polarization and diminishing empathy, especially considering the growing concern about climate impact, which the sermon also emphasizes.

The transformation, as I interpret it, occurs by first de-dramatizing the foundation of the conflict and how Jesus is recognized by Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike. Then the sermon shifts to emphasize the central importance of feeling empathy for fellow human beings and how crucial it is to contribute to restoring the human dignity of vulnerable people and counteract polarized dehumanization.

In this way, even smaller everyday efforts become important, especially in times of unrest. Another metaphor is Jesus' clay doves flying away with a similar call and message. This also provides a metaphor for the, perhaps challenging for many, part of the Trinity, namely the Holy Spirit. I found this to be an extra elegant touch in the sermon.

The connection and transformation collaborate in the rhetorically brilliant conclusion, where Berghagen's One Evening in June frames the sermon in a metaphor familiar to all Swedes, with extra high relevance as Berghagen has recently completed his journey on earth.

For my part, the sermon is also very powerful, especially since I have made similar reflections on the situation of Jews in Europe before and during WW2 and the people in Gaza and the West Bank. The world allowed dehumanization to continue, and we have not been able to offer people leaving conflict zones and oppression the opportunity to build a new, safer future. It is a sad paradox that when Jews were allowed to move, a situation in many ways similar arose for their

fellow human beings in the Middle East. We likely all have a role to play in trying to counteract the lamentable polarization resulting from contemporary developments.

Another member:

I miss a conclusion to tie together Helena's message that balances the colorful and emotionally charged introduction and the bridge. On the other hand, I think it is very powerful to use another medium, music and poetry, to underline both emotions and some form of action, i.e., to act – the only question is whether it came across. Perhaps it's just a matter of tempo; it went faster towards the end.

APPENDIX K: Human Resource Consent forms

HSR CONSENT FORM: Antje Jackelén

Basic Information

Student name: Helena Ekhem

Project title: A Homiletical Strategy Near the Abyss

Project description and purpose: This project will explore if preaching can provide Abyss-knowledge.

Explanation of selection criteria: The interviewee will be asked about Abyss-knowledge.

Description of how research will be used/reported: The results from this interview will be used in the understanding of the make-up of Abyss-knowledge.

Expected duration of participation: One hour

Recording

The researcher will be recording participation by means of iPhone dictation. By signing this consent form, you are indicating your consent to be recorded. Recordings will be securely stored as described under “risks of participation.” Recordings will be used by researcher for memory and correct transcription of quotes.

Mandatory Reporting

The student conducting this research will comply with all mandatory reporting requirements for the state of Illinois or the state in which this research occurs.

Confidentiality

Records for this study will be kept confidential. During this project, all data will be kept secured in researcher’s home or work office, or on a password protected computer. After the completion of this project, any data associated with this project will continue to be kept secured.

Study Participation and Early Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to withdraw at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential.

Risks of Participation

Participants in this research should be aware of the following risks of participation:

- Research may include information that is protected under the Swedish law of GDPR, such as age and religious belongings.
- All data will be kept secured in researcher’s home or work office, or on a password protected computer. After the completion of this project, any data associated with this project will continue to be kept secured and discarded after two years.

Benefits of Participation

Participants in this research can expect the following benefits:

- Contribute to scholarship and practice of preaching in Helena Ekhem's ministry context.
- Participate in ongoing conversation among Christians about the theory and practice of preaching in this particular context.
- Know that your voice is included in conversation about the theory and practice of preaching in this particular context.
- Contribute to the vitality of ministry—including but not limited to preaching—in this particular ministry context.

Contact

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If you have questions or concerns regarding the research, either now or at any time in the future, please contact me, Helena Ekhem. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Anne Miner-Pearson.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Dean of the ACTS DMin Program actsdmin@garrett.edu for contact information for a representative of the review board.

Statement of Consent

I have read the information in this consent form including risks and possible benefits. I have been given the chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in the study.

Signatures:

Student Researcher

Date

Research Participant

Date

HSR CONSENT FORM: Members of Parish Project Group

Basic Information

Student name: Helena Ekhem

Project title: A Homiletical Strategy Near the Abyss

Project description and purpose: This project will explore if preaching can provide Abyss-knowledge.

Explanation of selection criteria: Members of the Parish Project group will assist student in preparing sermon, exploring Abyss-knowledge, collecting data and reflecting on progress.

Description of how research will be used/reported: The work of the Parish Project Group will be used in the developing of the thesis and will provide a base for analyzing results.

Expected duration of participation: Approximately five sessions lasting three to five hours each time.

Mandatory Reporting

The student conducting this research will comply with all mandatory reporting requirements for the state of Illinois or the state in which this research occurs.

Confidentiality

Records for this study will be kept confidential. During this project, all data will be kept secured in researcher's home or work office, or on a password protected computer. After the completion of this project, any data associated with this project will continue to be kept secured.

Study Participation and Early Withdrawal

Taking part in this study is your choice. You are free not to take part or to withdraw at any time for any reason. No matter what you decide, there will be no penalty or loss of benefit to which you are entitled. If you decide to withdraw from this study, the information that you have already provided will be kept confidential.

Risks of Participation

Participants in this research should be aware of the following risks of participation:

- Research may include information that is protected under the Swedish law of GDPR, such as age and religious belongings.
- All data will be kept secured in researcher's home or work office, or on a password protected computer. After the completion of this project, any data associated with this project will continue to be kept secured and discarded after two years.

Benefits of Participation

Participants in this research can expect the following benefits:

- Contribute to scholarship and practice of preaching in Helena Ekhem's ministry context.
- Participate in ongoing conversation among Christians about the theory and practice of preaching in this particular context.
- Know that your voice is included in conversation about the theory and practice of preaching in this particular context.
- Contribute to the vitality of ministry—including but not limited to preaching—in this particular ministry context.

Contact

Student contact:

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If you have questions or concerns regarding the research, either now or at any time in the future, please contact me, Helena Ekhem. You may also contact my faculty advisor, Anne Miner-Pearson.

If you have questions about your rights as a research subject or want to speak with someone independent of the research team, you may contact the Dean of the ACTS DMin Program actsdmin@garrett.edu for contact information for a representative of the review board.

Statement of Consent

I have read the information in this consent form including risks and possible benefits. I have been given the chance to ask questions. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in the study.

Signatures:

Student Researcher

Date

Research Participant

Date