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Preaching After a Mass Shooting

8 strategies for crafting a pastoral response to mass violence.

We live in an era when the next mass shooting is looming around the corner. If you have never addressed this issue before in the pulpit, know that the day may soon be approaching. It is only a matter of time until the bloodshed hits too close to home that you can't not address it.

Indeed, for many, given the frequency of gun violence across our nation, this day has already long since passed. For myself, when I first learned about the mass shooting at the Allen, Texas shopping mall, the terror reverberated deep within my soul. It had only been a few months since my wife and I had taken our three children there to shop for school clothes. Furthermore, learning that a family of four had been reduced to one, leaving behind a six-year-old boy as the sole survivor of his family, left us speechless, infuriated, and heartbroken.

In such moments, pastors are expected, as we ought, to enter the pulpit on Sunday morning with a word from the Lord. The task, however, can feel insurmountable. Paul Scott Wilson poignantly frames the challenge laid before us: "How do we preach good news in the face of traumatic events, offering words that are authentic and substantial, not just nice words that skip like flat stones across the surface of a pond?"^[1] In other words, how do we preach to those whose lives have been profoundly disrupted by the trauma of mass violence?

As we wrestle over these matters with our leadership teams and elder boards, below are eight strategies for us to consider before entering the pulpit. While the list is not exhaustive by any means, may it serve as a starting point for crafting a pastoral response to mass violence.

Explain the Situation

No matter how widespread the news reports may seem, there will always be some in the pews who have yet to hear about the tragedy at hand. For this reason, it is important to provide a brief explanation rather than to assume that everyone knows what happened.

Explaining the situation, however, requires a level of discretion. To begin with, it is critical that we do our research so that we only convey facts rather than speculations. Additionally, as we begin to share details, it is important that we avoid graphic descriptions, especially those that may be too mature for children or distressing for sensitive listeners.

One related consideration may be to offer a content warning prior to speaking. This is when a speaker forewarns his or her listeners about potentially disturbing information before it is disclosed. This enables listeners to prepare themselves and decide whether they are ready to receive the news in the first place.

Watch Your Tone

As we address our congregations, it is also important to keep a close watch on our tone. One common tendency for preachers is to “balance out” the serious moments in our sermons by overcompensating in the other direction. This often results in haphazard humor, smiling at the wrong time, or downplaying the sorrowfulness of a tragedy through our gestures and mannerisms. Sometimes this also occurs through the use of religious platitudes in a way that is simply tone-deaf: “You are not a *victim* but a *victor*.”

With this in mind, it is worth noting that the opposite response also holds true for some of us. Because of our heightened emotions and personal anguish, sometimes our preaching can come across as angry and heated. This took place some years ago when I was serving as a pastor in an inner-city context. After a young man had been shot and killed in the neighborhood, my sermon that Sunday sounded more like a fuming rant than a pastoral word.

While understandable, both of these aforementioned responses are inappropriate given the vulnerability of our listeners. Yes, being authentically emotive is important. However, conveying an aura of calmness and safety takes precedence. Therefore, in general, our posture and demeanor should be gentle. Moreover, embodying a sense of anguish and solemnity is also appropriate given the gravity of what has transpired.

Welcome the Pain

In the aftermath of mass violence, peoples’ emotions are often intensified and disjointed. The church, however, is often the last place people go to be vulnerable with others. For this reason, it is vital to convey the following message early on to our listeners: “Your pain and suffering is welcome here.” Matthew Kim, in his book *Preaching to People in Pain*, writes, “One of the ways that preachers can assist others in their pain is to foster a trusted, shame-free environment where over time parishioners and listeners can acknowledge their suffering and pray for each other during the worship service and beyond.”^[2]

One tool we can employ to help establish this kind of safety in our pews is the use of self-disclosure. In short, it is okay for us as preachers to be honest about how we are doing. While maintaining healthy pastoral boundaries, expressing sadness, disorientation, and grief may be the very key that enables listeners to hear the preached Word.

Address the Polarization

As with most other topics, addressing gun violence in the pulpit immediately gets interpreted through the lens of our listeners’ experiences, perspectives, and political leanings. In other words, many of our listeners wonder to themselves: “Which side are you on, preacher?” This polarized response is most evident in the way we see repeating cycles of protests and counterprotests in the aftermath of mass shootings. This is usually followed by a brief period of “normalcy” until another shooting starts the cycle all over again.

As we enter the pulpit, it is important for us to understand these patterns and recognize the political divide within our own pews. Moreover, we must pray for sober eyes that are able to discern the ways in which we ourselves *and* our listeners may be confiding too heavily in our political allegiances.

On a practical note, preachers should remain non-partisan in their sermons while faithfully heralding the whole counsel of God. This requires a level of courage and tact as we renounce the evil of gun violence, call for change, but also contextualize our sermons in a way that listeners with differing views are valued. For the preacher, this is almost a sure guarantee that not everyone will be happy. However, it is also an indispensable step to safeguard the

integrity of our pulpit ministry.

Draw Attention to the Word

While this should go without saying, the most critical step in our response to mass violence is directing our listeners to hear the preached word. A common temptation for some pastors is to do away with preaching and turn to alternate forms of ministry (e.g., holding a prayer vigil, attending a community event). While these things certainly have their time and place, the people of God desperately need to hear from God's Word.

One reason this is so important is that trauma has been found to cause narrative fracturing. In brief, trauma victims are often left with gaping holes in their story. In other words, they are left in a state of disorientation in which they wonder if they will ever make sense of their lives again. This is where we as preachers have the strategic opportunity to reinvite our listeners into the narrative of God's redemptive story. Moreover, as we exposit the Bible and convey the beauty of its narrative arc—creation, fall, redemption, and new creation—our listeners are led to remember that God is not through with them.

This is why staying tethered to the Scriptures is so important when preaching in the wake of mass trauma. Biblical preaching invites our listeners to rescript their lives as they grow further enmeshed with the story of Christ's redemption.

Create Space for Lament

As we begin to uplift the Word of God amid the trauma of mass violence, it is also imperative that we avoid prematurely jumping to happy endings. Sarah Travis, in her book *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology*, refers to this as “getting to the gospel too soon.”^[3]

This is when we gloss over the pain of our listeners with success-oriented and triumphalist jargon: “I'm gonna see a victory for the battle belongs to You, Lord.”

Nevertheless, incorporating lament into our sermons offers a helpful counternarrative. This is when we carve out intentional time in our sermons for our parishioners to sit, feel, grieve, and cry out to God in anguish. Rather than diminishing the pain of our listeners, preaching on lament honors the experiences of the wounded and empowers them to honestly engage with God.

On a practical note, it is important that we give our congregants ample time. After preaching a sermon when I incorporated a moment of lament, several listeners expressed the need for more time. Generally, what may feel long for the preacher is often too short for the listener. For this reason, as we invite our listeners to engage in lament, setting a timer for at least two minutes may help our parishioners participate as they feel led.

Preach Hope to the Darkness

As we finish leading our church communities through the practice of lament, it is time to unswervingly preach the hope of the gospel. During moments of painful tragedy, there is often a pull towards preaching sermons of lament without hope. This, however, is an incomplete story.

Therefore, it is important for us to consider intentional ways to uplift the salvific work of God during this period of the “already but not yet.” To begin with, we can remind our listeners who they are in Christ—children of God (John

1:12-13) who are safe in their Father's hands (John 10:29).

Furthermore, we can also remind our listeners about the character of God in the midst of suffering—the God of all comfort (2 Cor. 1:3), our refuge and strength (Psalm 46:1), whose Spirit helps us in our weakness (Rom. 8:26).

Another powerful image to consider is the suffering of Christ himself. Not only did Jesus resurrect from the grave, but he also reappeared to his disciples—still bearing the marks of the Cross—as one who could empathize with their weaknesses but also bring peace (John 20:19-23).

Finally, we can also preach about the second coming of Christ—the day when Jesus will return to wipe away every tear and the senseless killing of people by gun violence will be no more (Rev. 21:4). Preachers, no matter how grim the darkness before us may seem, let us hold fast to this confession of our hope without wavering (Heb. 10:23).

Provide Resources for Follow-Up

At some point in our sermons, it will be important to communicate different resources through which our parishioners can find additional support after the worship gathering. In short, our pastoring must extend beyond the confines of our pulpits.

This, of course, will look different based on the availability of resources and context of our churches. For some, this may take on the form of making ourselves available for pastoral visitations. In other settings, this may entail forming a crisis group in the church, comprised of mental health professionals, who can provide emergency care for those experiencing grief. Furthermore, some churches may choose to share contact information for recommended counselors and therapists who can address deeper instances of traumatic wounding.

On a related note, one additional way to resource our listeners is by communicating tangible ways in which they can respond in Christian service. This may entail creating meal trains, scheduling hospital visits, or partnering with organizations in the community to mobilize around the issues of gun-violence and public safety.

Conclusion

These suggestions are intended only to serve as a starting point in our efforts to pastor the flock of God in the wake of a mass shooting. Given the breadth of trauma caused by mass violence and the unique needs of every church, standing up to deliver a sermon is simply overwhelming.

Nevertheless, may the impossibility of such a preaching task spur us to rely more heavily on the Holy Spirit. Let us be diligent in stewarding our pulpits by preparing to the best of our abilities. As we address our congregations, let us speak with grace, welcome the hurting, and establish an aura of safety to help our listeners meet with God amid their darkest valleys.

By the grace of God, may we be found faithful in proclaiming the good news of the gospel during the grimmest of situations. In doing so, may our sermons be used to bridge the despair of death with the living hope of Christ our Savior.

[1] Paul Scott Wilson, foreword to *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology*, by Sarah Travis (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2021), IX.

[2] Matthew D. Kim, *Preaching to People in Pain: How Suffering Can Shape Your Sermons and Connect with Your Congregation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2021), 40.

[3] Sarah Travis, *Unspeakable: Preaching and Trauma-Informed Theology* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 49.

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Topics: [Darkness](#); [Hope](#); [Lament](#); [Lamentation](#); [Pain](#); [Preacher](#); [Preaching](#); [Suffering](#); [Tragedy](#); [Violence](#)

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