

## Ten Suggestions for Preaching After a Catastrophe

Preaching takes the time and occasion seriously. The preacher exercises a public ministry; it is expected that the sermon will address common crises, desolation, and grief with the Work of God. Catastrophes come in all sizes; some, like the burning of a church or the wreck of a church school bus, are local and have a direct impact on the congregation; others, like war or the assassination of a president, are national or global. Some events, like hurricanes, have regularly recurring precedents; others, like the destruction of the World Trade Center and the attack on the Pentagon, are without precedent.

1. Don't try to encompass *the* meaning of the event. Although you are expected to reflect upon it by means of God's Word, you aren't expected to explain it or to have mastered its significance.
2. Don't be too quick to extrapolate on the implication of the event. Here the preacher is merely relying on TV analysis and conventional wisdom, both of which are available outside the church.
3. Don't get caught up in the heat of the moment – an anger or fear – or lose yourself in the powerful emotions generated by the catastrophe. Try to be the “non-anxious presence” of which pastoral counselors speak.
4. Theodicy – “to justify the ways of God to man,” as Milton put it in *Paradise Lost* is not easily or wisely done in the midst of a crisis. You don't have to know everything and explain it from God's point of view. There will be time for such discussions to be carried out in a spirit of humility.
5. To say too quickly that “good will come from this” may inadvertently dilute the tragedy and cheapen the suffering of the survivors. Joseph said to his brothers, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good” only after an interval of many years.
6. Try to do pastoral care from the pulpit. Reflect the needs of the community; don't express your won grief, fear, or anger before thoroughly and compassionately engaging that of your listeners. Avoid the ironic mode entirely. Shun sentimentality or the artificial enhancement or exaggeration of emotion. Swell on the hope and comfort of the gospel. Your congregation already has found its focus; avoid extraneous illustrations.
7. Preach the incarnate Jesus Christ, God's definitive identification with the suffering of the world. Like those who perished this week, he was not granted a “good death” free of torture and terror. The death and resurrection of Jesus mark both the groaning of the old creation and the beginning of the new.
8. Preach the bridge of God over the chasms of history. Jesus said, “I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end.” The psalmist says, “Be still and know that I am God” (Ps 46)
9. Preach the God who does not forget us or forsake us, the One who has graven our names in the palms of his hands and who eternally seeks out and preserves his children. Providentially, the common lectionary Gospel of Pentecost XV is the parable of the lost sheep and lost coin (Luke 15:1-10). The Psalm (51) is a prayer for purity. It contains the ultimate petition for transformation. “Let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.” “Do not cast [any of your precious people] away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from [us]. Restore me to the joy for your salvation and sustain in me a willing spirit.” Let the plain works of Scripture meditate the power of God through the sermon.

10. Let the sermon model, or, at least, adumbrate or foreshadow, the distinctively Christian way of life in a dangerous and conflicted world; service, ministry, witness, comfort, forgiveness, reconciliation. Let the sermon serve the overarching purpose for which we have been given our holy vocation – the ministry of reconciliation. Despite the violence and ambiguities of history, that calling never changes. It never dissolves into specialized ministries. “In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself...and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.”

*Richard Lischer, the Cleland professor of preaching, addressed these remarks to the Forum on Ministry During Crisis at Duke Divinity School, Sept. 14, 2001.*