

## Thoughts on Worship & Preaching from Rev. Sally Brown

Here is some gathered wisdom, both from working pastor/preachers and lay worshipers:

1. In some cases, worship staged in the sanctuary is working. That said, trying to do worship in the empty sanctuary, as if that would make people feel more as if they are "in church," *may* be neither necessary nor helpful. Some worshipers whose pastors are undertaking that approach said it only made them sad to see the empty space and exacerbated their sense of separation instead of closing the gap.
2. Several whose pastors are leading worship from their homes pointed out these things:
  - a. It made them feel as if their pastor was identified with their own, shelter-in-place reality. ("This is NOT normal; why try to pretend it is?")
  - b. This tends to emphasize that the life of the church, and its sacredness, is its Spirit-inspired people, not its "sacred" space, however beloved it may be.
  - c. Seeing just how ordinary we all are, in dressed down clothes, with dogs barking, etc. brought a realism to what it is to "be" church in our time.
3. If the pastor does not have a professional Zoom account, it is worth the investment. It is flexible and can accommodate a whole lot of people, face to face. Prompt all attendees to mute their mics to tamp down background noise.
4. Some musicians are pre-recording preludes, postludes, and hymns at the instrument in the church. Where this isn't possible, creative use of home-made videos by lay members, or carefully chosen YouTube pieces work. Smooth transitions from one thing to the next help, but wonkiness isn't all bad, either. We are who we are.
5. One pastor encouraged everyone to devise palm-like celebratory things to wave, and the whole congregation did a virtual Palm Sunday processional, singing together. Another prerecorded had children in all different settings waving their home-made palms and shouting Hosanna. Delightful especially to older adults isolated from kids.
6. Some congregations' attendance has markedly increased online. Distant members at their winter homes tune in, as do strangers who hear about a good service from friends.
7. Having lay persons write sections of the intercessory prayers and incorporating prayer joys/concerns collected in the open Zoom chatroom before and during the service, empowers the praying voices of the congregation.

On preaching in particular:

1. The fact preachers are isolated from their congregations can make sermon-preparation tougher. The back-and-forth normal involvement with the congregation and its ongoing committees may be less. One lacks the exposure to human experience in general of normal life, which feeds the homiletical imagination, can make sermon work feel like silent, monastic isolation.

2. The intense, relentless focus on the Covid-19 emergency can be mind-numbing. That said, the Lenten lectionary has been remarkably eloquent. Eastertide may be more challenging!
3. Convening a Zoom group of church members to discuss the chosen upcoming preaching text in advance can help, as can an open-ended exploration of the text with other preachers who will be using the same text.
4. Wise incorporation of psalms of lament, and preaching about the legitimacy of being frustrated, angry, and weary, is a good practice.
5. Set up your manuscript or notes for the prayers and sermon in such a way that you are *not looking down*, or down at the screen itself, to access these things. Set them upright, even just *above* the top of your laptop screen or iPad and look into the camera spot at the top of your screen to achieve eye contact with your viewers.

The confrontation with human frailty and death could not be more poignantly real this Holy Week.

Adapting a prayer the church has long prayed:

*Keep watch, dear Lord, with those who work, or watch, or weep [in this Holy Week]. Give your angels charge over those who tend the sick, Lord Christ. Give rest to the weary, bless and accompany the dying, soothe the suffering, embrace those who grieve, and shield the joyous; and all for your love's sake. Amen*

May each be given the stamina, endurance, compassion, imagination and hope they need to lead their flock in this time.

Sally