

# What's at Stake in a Preacher's Spirituality of Time?

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## ***Abstract***

*A preacher's spirituality of time may seem like a peripheral issue, but this realm is one where much is at stake. In this article I argue that the preacher's approach to time scaffolds the overall endeavor. I begin by considering the church's unique position in time, arguing that the church is fundamentally an event or a happening rather than an institution. Then, I explore ways preaching can foreground the church's identity as an event. After describing preaching as the narration of a theological moment in the church's life, I turn to practical implications. In addition to homileticsians, my primary interlocutors for this piece include two renowned spirituality scholars, Evelyn Underhill and Abraham Joshua Heschel. I conclude that ecclesiology, pneumatology, and performance are all profoundly shaped by a preacher's appreciation for the holiness of time.*

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Back in 2001, I made a trip to Mbale, Uganda alongside a large group of American missionaries. On our first full day serving I noticed that our stay at a given church was taking longer than expected. Mindful of the additional churches, house visits, hospital visits, and worship services scheduled for the afternoon, I turned to one of my hosts and asked what time we would be leaving for the next church. He smiled and said, "Americans have all the watches but Africans have all the time." That phrase tickled me and refocused my attention to the power of the present moment. More than a decade later, the maxim continues to offer a strong critique of Western hegemony, capitalist accumulation, and acquiescence to the clock and calendar. Even more pointedly, the saying nudges me to be more attentive to the moment for without that full engagement, how is ministry possible? How is it possible to delight in the Holy Spirit, let alone proclaim the Spirit's work among us?

While these questions began as personal ones, they have a broader relevance for the contemporary church as it negotiates periods of rapid transition. A preacher's theological posture towards time shapes the preaching endeavor in significant ways, driving ecclesiology, pneumatology, and performance. Time is not an ancillary dimension of preaching but an essential factor in caring for souls. Abraham Joshua Heschel describes time as "a predominant feature of

prophetic thinking” and notes that “The day of the Lord” is more important to the prophets than “the house of the Lord.”<sup>1</sup>

Yet, too often preachers demonstrate a thin sense of the spirituality of time. Sometimes sermons are cluttered with a preoccupation with the past when God seemed to be doing interesting things or at least seemed more engaged in human affairs. Or, at the other extreme, sermons are absorbed with the future when God will act mightily in the consummation of the ages and listeners are left to tread water until that Great Day. In other instances preachers demonstrate little understanding of how and why time is hallowed, surmising perhaps, that a moment is hallowed because it takes place in liturgy or because a cleric is speaking. But the holiness of a moment hinges on its effect on the soul. A moment can be called holy when it satisfies some aspect of the soul's longing and emboldens God's church in its witness to the world. The preacher who regularly contributes to such moments has a dynamic vision of the church.

### 1. Seeing the Church as an Event

The late twentieth-century theologian, William Stringfellow had it right when he compared the American church to a principality:

“Sometimes the church yields or gravely imperils its integrity as the church by becoming the handmaiden of the ruling principalities of race, class, or commerce. At other times the church becomes so preoccupied with the maintenance and preservation of its own institutional life that it too becomes a principality.”

As Stringfellow continues, his scathing label ends up describing a church that has lost its daring, its curiosity, its willingness to reckon with the depth of the world's brokenness, and its sense of the spiritual dimensions of time.<sup>2</sup> The church-as-principality is not completely bereft of virtue, but its compassion is outmatched by an obsession with safety. The glaring symptom of this diagnosis is the prioritization of its own survival and an insistence on ease. Whether a church is becoming a principality can be determined by the answer to one simple question: Is this congregation more of an institution or more of an event?

Stringfellow sees the church as an event that happens “wherever there are no longer any separations in any separations in any dimension of creation, whether within one's self, or with others, or with any things, or between and among any of them.”<sup>3</sup> He envisions a mystical community that flares up and flashes with divine light, though sometimes just for an hour.<sup>4</sup> When

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<sup>1</sup> *Abraham Joshua Heschel*, *The Sabbath: Its Meaning for Modern Man*. Introduction by Susannah Heschel, New York 1951; 2005, 79.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *William Stringfellow*, *Essential Writings*. Selected with Introduction by Bill Wylie-Kellermann, Maryknoll, NY 2013, 127.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 124–125. Stringfellow's views here are compatible with Barth's understanding of the sermon as God's event. Stringfellow

the church happens it has the character of a movement and “breaks through time, transcends time, anticipates within time the abolition of time.”<sup>5</sup> Though Stringfellow has a high view of the church, he recognizes it as intrinsically flawed. He sees the Bride of Christ as one with pimples on her face as well as deep-seated personality flaws (including paralyzing timidity and unchecked self-absorption). These shortcomings may hinder her ministry but they do not disqualify her.

I sense that Stringfellow is right on an even more fundamental level. The church is an event because, as Christ's very body, the church is alive. Further, the church lives in the very bowels of the world. In this providential position, the church proclaims life in the midst of death. The church is itself a continual utterance above and beyond whatever may be said in its liturgies. So, while the church has an institutional dimension, this character is secondary to its identity as an event, a happening, a movement. Ironically, this aspect of the church's identity may be most obvious during periods of transition. As a congregation experiences the destabilization of the church's institutional status, this true life as an event becomes clearer. In these cases, what emerges is a community of people who are trying desperately to reach out to God, to one another, and to the world.<sup>6</sup> Though members of a congregation may shudder at the magnitude of the world's brokenness, they do not retreat from the world, try to control it, or silence its moaning.<sup>7</sup> Instead, by the power of the Holy Spirit, they embrace and befriend the world. The church's primary gesture, then, is one of opening, unblocking, and clearing paths for God's slow work of healing and renewal.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, preaching and liturgies are dimensions of time wherein a person “becomes aware that every instant is an act of creation, a Beginning, opening up new roads for ultimate realizations.”<sup>9</sup> The church's posture toward time is critical because “time is the presence of God in the world of space, and it is within time that we are able to sense the unity of all beings.”<sup>10</sup>

Since the true church is an event, something is at stake in its proclamation. There is a tenor of urgency that cannot be reduced to dramatic effect. Instead, this urgency surfaces organically as the community witnesses the depth of the world's suffering. With the goal of helping the church reckon with this horror, preaching becomes less pristine, less self-conscious, and includes provisional nuggets of truth offered to the community for reflection, dissent, and refining.<sup>11</sup> The preacher also

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had a strong appreciation for much of Barth's theology.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Evelyn Underhill*, *Life as Prayer and Other Writings of Evelyn Underhill*, ed. Lucy Menzies, London 1946; Harrisburg, PA, 1991, 56.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *Dorothee Soelle*, *Essential Writings*. Selected with an Introduction by Dianne L. Oliver, Maryknoll, NY 2006, 33–38.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Mark Lewis Taylor*, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World*, Minneapolis, 2011, 135.

<sup>9</sup> *Heschel* (note 1), 100.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. *Lucy Atkinson Rose*, *Sharing the Word: Preaching in the Roundtable Church*, Louisville 1997, 100–101. “Proposal” and “wager” are the key terms Rose uses to discuss the need for provisionality in preaching.

manages to enter spiritual territory inaccessible to those who refuse to address the ways people are caught in the grip of the powers and principalities.<sup>12</sup>

The Black Church is instructive here on at least two levels. First, the Black Church offers a long history of activism and has from its genesis linked Christianity with social justice. The preacher articulates the community's dissent with the structures of oppression and holds out both a history of suffering and the conviction of black agency. Indeed, this dissent is even cultivated within the preaching moment itself as listeners openly dialogue with the preacher through call and response.<sup>13</sup> The sermonic space is understood as a sphere in which evil is named, resisted, and challenged. In the best cases, this space is also one in which varying perspectives are accommodated even as a common Christian identity is affirmed.

On a second level, the Black Church provides insight on the cosmic nature of the preaching task. Sermons are not only occasions to reckon with good and evil, but occasions to reckon with good and evil in ways that challenge Western notions of temporality. Black Church ecclesiology often relies on an African cosmology in which the worshippers are understood to be not only those physically seated in the pews but also the dead and those yet to be born. This sharing of rhetorical space resembles the gathering of the church, saints, and angels at the Eucharist.

The impact of this understanding of sermonic space is exemplified in a *New Yorker* cartoon of Rev. Jeremiah Wright, Pastor Emeritus of Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago, President Barack Obama's former church. The cartoon grows out of the media scrutiny directed toward excerpts from two of his sermons, "The Day of Jerusalem's Fall" and "Confusing God and Government."<sup>14</sup> In the image, Wright speaks to a congregation that includes figures of Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King, Jr.<sup>15</sup> Though these men have long since died, their continuing influence is so profound that black preachers like Wright tend to engage scripture in a way that honors their legacies.<sup>16</sup> Addressing the cosmic influence of the powers and principalities is an essential aspect of the preaching task.

In keeping with the Black Church tradition, the broader church is called to engage the world as well as the cosmos. This dual orientation has a long history. Christianity is comparable to Judaism in its respect for the aesthetics of time. As Heschel explains:

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. Charles L. Campbell, *The Word Before the Powers: An Ethic of Preaching*, Louisville 2002, 92. Other helpful homiletical reflections on the ways people are constrained by oppression can be found in *Milhaven's Sermons Seldom Heard* and *John McClure and Nancy Ramsay's Telling the Truth*: Annie Lally Milhaven, ed., *Sermons Seldom Heard: Women Proclaim Their Lives*, New York 1991; *John S. McClure/Nancy J. Ramsay, Telling the Truth: Preaching Against Sexual and Domestic Violence*, Cleveland, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* Boston 1989, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Keleja Sanneh, *Project Trinity: The Perilous Mission of Obama's Church*, in: *The New Yorker*, April 7, 2008.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. *ibid.* While not portrayed in the cartoon, the imagined listeners would have also included the likes of Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, and Chicago's own Ida B. Wells-Barnett.

<sup>16</sup> Of course, another figure present is Christ, who as Bonhoeffer suggests, walks through the congregation as the Living Word. *Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Worldly Preaching: Lectures on Homiletics*. Edited and translated by Clyde E. Fant, New York 1991, 101.

“Judaism is a *religion of time* aiming at the *sanctification of time*. Unlike the space-minded man to whom time is unvaried, iterative, homogeneous, to whom all hours are alike, qualitiless, empty shells, the Bible senses the diversified character of time. There are no two hours alike. Every hour is unique and the only one given at the moment, exclusive and endlessly precious.”<sup>17</sup>

The preacher needs to know how to read time, to distinguish the mood, color, and spiritual flavor of one moment from another.<sup>18</sup> On a phenomenological level, it helps to think of the liturgy as “the conversion of time.”<sup>19</sup> Fueled by memory, liturgy draws past and future together and magnifies the present. The gathered community experiences the present as a space of heightened vitality, a space where Christ cradles temporality and is proclaimed Lord of Time.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the congregation experiences Sunday, the eighth day, as a “radical beginning” in which time is renewed, no longer defined by its fragmented divisions.<sup>21</sup> The mutability of the created order is pronounced good and the inevitable changes and transitions of contemporary life are reframed as part of the God’s design. This understanding of time raises fundamental questions about the role of the sermon in liturgy.

## 2. Preaching as the Narration of a Theological Moment

A sermon narrates a theological moment. The preacher’s first task is to recognize the weight of the moment and the way the Holy Spirit is flooding that moment with meaning in order to help listeners dwell within it faithfully.<sup>22</sup> By describing preaching as the narration of a theological moment, I also intend to de-emphasize the ends of scriptural exposition and pastoral care.<sup>23</sup> These play a vital role in helping the preacher unlock the vibrancy of the moment but they do not become ends in themselves. They remain tools for marking the theological significance of a given moment and imparting spiritual meaning to the present.

The idea of preaching as the narration of a theological moment may raise eyebrows but the approach has a long history. We might, for instance, point to the preaching of martyrs who re-narrated Roman spectacles into moments of proclamation. The martyrs awakened listeners to

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<sup>17</sup> Heschel (note 1), 8.

<sup>18</sup> Heschel speaks to this idea when he asks, “Everyone will admit that the Grand Canyon is more awe-inspiring than a trench. Everyone knows the difference between a worm and an eagle. But how many of us have a similar sense of discretion for the diversity of time? [...] A special consciousness is required to recognize the ultimate significance of time.” Ibid., 96.

<sup>19</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann, 1973–1983*, Crestwood, NY 2000, 78.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. ibid., 78; cf. Brandon Gallagher, *Chalice of Eternity: An Orthodox Theology of Time*, in: *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, 57.1 (2013), 23–24.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Schmemmann (note 19), 78.

<sup>22</sup> Admittedly, I am influenced by the transformational school of preaching, the idea that preaching’s “primary purpose is to facilitate an experience, an event, a meeting, or a happening for the worshipers.” Rose (note 11), 60. My concerns, however, are rooted in the spirituality of time. It is also important to note that Heschel alludes to the spirituality of time when he suggests that the “higher goal of spiritual living” is to “face sacred moments.” Heschel (note 1), 6.

<sup>23</sup> This is not to say, that there is never a case in which a preacher might center a sermon on comforting the congregation or explaining a specific passage of scripture but that generally the preacher’s task is a more integrated one.

God's active presence, thereby transforming an occasion devoted to Caesar's sovereignty into one that disclosed Christ's. In a much less dramatic way, occasional sermons rely heavily on the narration of a given moment such as a wedding, a funeral, a baccalaureate. In early New England, this list would have also included public executions or perhaps the ground-breaking of a municipal building.<sup>24</sup> In each case, the preacher relies on a heightened sense of the time and occasion. In the best cases, the preached word will break open a sense of union with God. Worshippers will experience the mutual longing between Christ and the church and gain an increased sense of the freedom inherent in Christian identity.

This assertion that the sermon is the narration of a theological moment rests on the premise that God is found in time and that a moment can be sanctified by an act of the will.<sup>25</sup> The critical issue for the preacher, then, is how to shape sacred time.<sup>26</sup> How might the preacher shape sacred time so as to proclaim God's sovereignty over time? How might the preacher shape sacred time so as to deepen the experience of unity among the listeners? Can the preacher orchestrate a moment that will affirm the congregation's agency or christen them to ask embarrassing questions of powerful people and institutions?<sup>27</sup> Can the preacher fashion the moment in such a way that listeners leave with enough pluck and grit to speak truths that desperately need to be heard—even at the risk of being insulted or misunderstood?<sup>28</sup> Ultimately, the sacred moment of the sermon ought to unify and embolden the congregation to act on the gospel's ethical imperatives. The goal here is not mere action in the world but “democratized” mysticism, the extension of holy time beyond the Sunday liturgy.<sup>29</sup> In essence, the goal might be more directly described as “union with God.”

The concept of union with God tends to be reduced to a feeling of bliss that emerges from a pious moment. Yet, the renowned scholar of mysticism, Evelyn Underhill, urges a different view. She speaks of the fundamental “awfulness” of union and this awfulness is more of what I have in mind here.<sup>30</sup> Underhill describes union with God as “entire self-giving to the Divine Charity, such identification with its interests, that the whole of our human nature is transformed in God, irradiated by His absolute light, His sanctifying grace.”<sup>31</sup> This kind of self-offering or oblation forms

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Scott D. Seay*, *Hanging Between Heaven and Earth: Capital Crime, Execution Preaching, and Theology in Early New England*, DeKalb, IL 2009, 14.

<sup>25</sup> Heschel says we find God's presence in time rather than in space and asserts that the Judaism is concerned with the holiness in time. Cf. *Heschel* (note 1), xiii-iv, 8. He goes on to note that sanctity is a quality “we create.” *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>26</sup> This question was first posed by *Heschel*, *ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Edward W. Said*, *Representations of the Intellectual: The Reith Lectures*, New York 1996, 11; Underhill urges continuity between the inward life of oblation and the outward life of cooperation with God's work in the world. *Underhill* (note 6), 127.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *Andre Lorde*, *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, in: *Sister Outsider*, Freedom, CA 1984), 40–41.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *Soelle* (note 7), 33–34.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *Evelyn Underhill*, *The School of Charity: Meditations on the Christian Creed*, London: Longmans, 1934; Harrisburg, PA 1991, 49.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*



the substance of union, weaving the church into God's creative and redemptive activity in the world.<sup>32</sup> Union, then, means being entangled in God's free-flowing love for humankind and becoming attuned to the Spirit's work of unblocking the institutional and psychic barriers that prevent human thriving.<sup>33</sup> Union with God immerses the church in the ugliness of the world and yields a holiness that is "most at home in the slum, the street, the hospital ward."<sup>34</sup> If sermons in a parish regularly bear the fruit of union and oblation, the preacher is probably on the right track.

### 3. Practical Implications

#### 3.1 Affirming Communal Identity

Thus far I have argued that the church is not merely an institution but an event that witnesses to God's action in the world and, that preaching involves the narration of a theological moment in the church's life. I now turn to a few practical implications and the first concerns audience. The preacher should envision his or her audience as one listening community rather than a group of individuals.<sup>35</sup> Evelyn Underhill speaks to this issue by saying the church prays "as an organism, not as a mere crowd of souls."<sup>36</sup> When this communal identity is underscored it becomes much easier for the church to recognize itself as an event. Only in community can the members of the church face the depth of the world's suffering without being overwhelmed.<sup>37</sup> Without this communal identity, the church cannot maintain its prophetic voice or thrive on the social and spiritual frontier.

Along this line, preachers may find a particularly helpful resource in the Desert Tradition of Christian spirituality. Preachers are called to the daring task of beckoning entire congregations into the wild life of the Spirit and this approach begins on the frontier with John the Baptist's "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."<sup>38</sup> John the Baptist's model was adapted and improvised by preachers like Simeon Stylites who fashioned a metaphorical desert on an elevated platform and later by the medieval English anchoress Julian of Norwich who performed a desert through her anchoritic enclosure. Despite their vocations of withdrawal, these desert preachers continually emphasized communal identity and demonstrated sensitivity to the spirituality of time.

Narrative almost always provides an opportunity to follow the desert preaching model. A narrative can speak to a community of listeners and carry the group into a different experiential

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<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Underhill alludes to God penetrating the tangled world and using the church as channels for love. *Ibid.*, 64, 71. *Mark Lewis Taylor* describes this activity of unblocking in his discussion of Jean-Luc Nancy's "transimmanence." Taylor (note 8), 135. Taylor also sees unblocking as resisting homogeneity; *ibid.*, 138.

<sup>34</sup> *Underhill* (note 30), 67.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. *Charles L. Campbell*, *Preaching Jesus: New Directions for Homiletics in Hans Frei's Postliberal Theology*, Grand Rapids 1997, 221–224.

<sup>36</sup> *Underhill* (note 30), 92.

<sup>37</sup> *Campbell* (note 12), 3.

<sup>38</sup> Matt 3:2 NRSV.

realm. As Margaret Atwood explains, "Going into a narrative is a dark road."<sup>39</sup> Narrative also tends to operate on a fairly sophisticated understanding of time. Through story, preachers honor the holiness of time and enable listeners to inhabit multiple dimensions of time at once. Further, the unitive power of narrative rests in its penchant for uniting the living and the dead and in doing so in such a way that the dead make a claim on the living in the present moment. As Atwood explains, the dead "want the blood of the living, or at least they want that blood put at risk on behalf of their own cause."<sup>40</sup>

Literary masters like Atwood also know that narrating a moment is spiritual work and rides on a current of desire. Preachers likewise do their best work when they understand the church as a community that longs for God. The church gathers in the hope that a mystical moment will break open and in it the preacher will offer a credible testimony of God's movement in the world, whether at the edge of the world's brokenness or at its epicenter. This narration of God's active presence is manna, encouragement, consolation, and most of all, a love token, a sign of God's reciprocal desire for the church. This narration also carries the invitation to continue discerning the Spirit's voice.

### 3.2 Providing a Posture of Discernment

And here again, the preacher's spirituality of time is central. The preacher's primary offering to the congregation is a posture of discernment.<sup>41</sup> This posture is far more important than the preacher's homiletical method or hermeneutical skill, however snazzy it may be. The church is in a historical moment when it needs preachers who are less slick and more available in heart, mind, and body. In other words, the church needs preachers who are spiritually and emotionally engaged in the moment. Sermon preparation, then, is akin to preparation for the celebration of the Eucharist in that both roles require bringing a certain gravitas to the moment.

Ironically, that gravitas might emerge most clearly through play. Playfulness requires a certain investment in the moment. Play often indicates the preacher's appreciation for the beauty of a given moment and a refusal to rush through it.<sup>42</sup> Time and again, this embrace of holy time is accompanied by speaking in a fresh and lively way and imparts a palpable spark of energy to the congregation. As a result, the congregation may suddenly find itself dwelling in the "spiritual wonderland of time."<sup>43</sup> This delightful experience carries an immediate bliss and is thus distinct

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<sup>39</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor (note 8), citing Atwood, 157.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Evelyn Underhill understands this modeling as more of a requirement of congregational leadership than an offering; cf. *Underhill* (note 6), 140.

<sup>42</sup> Underhill notes this significance when she says, "The spirit of Joy and the spirit of Hurry cannot live in the same house. But Joy, not Hurry is an earnest of the Presence of God; an attribute of the creative life." *Underhill, The House of the Soul and Concerning the Inner Life*, London 1947/Minneapolis 1990, 46.

<sup>43</sup> *Heschel* (note 1), 18.



from an experience of hope in the eschaton.<sup>44</sup> A playful sermon yields a healthy restlessness with time and serves as a joyful reminder of Christ's lordship over time. Play also interrupts routine and opens up new possibilities and perspectives.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.3 Offering Language and Images

Language and images go a long way in affirming the church's identity as an event and shaping the preaching moment. The preacher's mode of describing divine action has particular significance in shaping theology. Surprisingly, it may help to speak of God as an event. Dorothee Soelle explains:

"In the narratives of the New Testament God appears, God happens. If we tell stories of God and are concerned about the narrative method, we are telling what God does or how God conceals himself, how God acts. And in prayer we ask God to do something worth telling of, to appear, to show power for good, to change us. In these two linguistic forms we talk of God more as an event than as a substance. We speak from and to God, instead of 'about' him."<sup>46</sup>

Speaking of God as an event seems to underscore the fullness of God's personality and communicate the depth of God's engagement in the world. Recognition of both these attributes strengthens the church's identity as an event.

This identity is similarly bolstered by utilizing different images for God and the church. For many mainline and evangelical denominations in the U.S., the foundational images of God and the church are king/vassal, shepherd/sheep, and father/child.<sup>47</sup> The power dynamics associated with these duos call for new anchoring images. One might consider, for example, the synergy of God the Potter who gently nudges the clay and does not become discouraged by the clay's flaws.<sup>48</sup> Foundational images for the church as event might also include the figure of God as midwife (and the church as mother), God as pregnant woman (and the church as midwife or doula), God as nursing mother (and the church as growing child).<sup>49</sup> Other images might include the figure of God as Cloud and Pillar or of Christ as Way.<sup>50</sup> In different ways, these images invite the church to see itself as an evolving community in need of continual cooperation with the Spirit.

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<sup>44</sup> Luke Powery offers a compelling argument about the centrality of hope in preaching. *Luke A. Powery, Dem Dry Bones: Preaching Death, and Hope*, Minneapolis 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *Charles L. Campbell/Johan H. Cilliers, Preaching Fools: The Gospel as a Rhetoric of Folly*, Waco, TX 2012, 163–165.

<sup>46</sup> Soelle (note 7), 39.

<sup>47</sup> Lauren Winner criticizes such limited images and suggests alternatives. *Lauren F. Winner, Wearing God: Clothing, Laughter, Fire, and Other Overlooked Ways of Meeting God*, New York 2015, 5.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Jer 18:1–6; Evelyn Underhill alludes to this idea of the Potter and clay when she describes the Spirit as "indwelling and moving Creation." *Underhill* (note 6), 89.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. Ps 22:9; Isa 42:14, 49:15.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Ex 13:21–22; John 14:6.

### 3.4 Attending to Culture

Finally, as preachers reflect on their theologies of time, it helps to remember that time is culturally construed. The cultural dimensions of time often seem invisible but they play a pivotal role. Consider, for instance, the way William Stringfellow links time to the Fall:

“The Fall is not, as the biblical literalists have supposed, an event in time, the Fall is the era of time as such—the Fall is the time of time, as it were. Human knowledge is temporal, fallen, and, as Saint Paul emphasizes, in bondage to death. Time is the realm of death.”<sup>51</sup>

The reign of empire with its accompanying acceleration of time, multitasking, and consumerist frenzy would certainly seem to underscore the fallen nature of time.<sup>52</sup> While Stringfellow's argument is a compelling one, his perspective bears a strong Western imprint. In contrast, John Mbiti, a Kenyan theologian, demonstrates a far less pejorative understanding of time. In his work he focuses on cultures that celebrate the “vividness of now” and hold an elastic sense of the present.<sup>53</sup> The result is a striking comfort with time. While they come to different conclusions, both Stringfellow and Mbiti see time as providing a grammar for understanding who God is, how God is known, and what it means to be human-- three issues that propel much of the theological content of preaching. The cultural predispositions that inform their theologies should not be overlooked.

### Conclusion

For good or ill, preaching is undergirded by the spirituality of time. When preachers grasp the holiness of time, they can more effectively reinforce the church's character as a movement or witnessing event. They also become more intentional about orchestrating moments in the sermon to deepen spirituality. The ultimate result is a church that recognizes its true identity and chimes in with Dorothee Soelle's edgy “Credo:”

“I believe in god  
who did not create an immutable world  
a thing incapable of change  
who does not govern according to eternal laws  
that remain inviolate

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<sup>51</sup> *Stringfellow* (note 3), 32.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Cf. *John S. Mbiti*, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Portsmouth, NH 21990, 16, 22. Mbiti recognizes the great cultural diversity in Africa. He deliberately uses a broad brush in this project in order to delineate patterns of thinking that persist across Christianity, Islam, and various indigenous African religions.

or according to a natural order

of rich and poor

of the expert and the ignorant

of rulers and subjects

I believe in god

who willed conflict in life

and wanted us to change the status quo

through our work

through our politics.”<sup>54</sup>

The church that proclaims this creed holds a sense of its own agency, a stake in the world's redemption, and an appreciation for the holiness of time.

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<sup>54</sup> Soelle (note 7), 167.