Preaching During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa:
A Grounded Theoretical Exploration

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Abstract

Churches have been prompted to rethink the format of preaching and the content of sermons since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and the consequent restrictions on church gatherings. What does preaching look like, or what may it look like in times of crisis? These questions arose, specifically considering the content of sermons in the week before and after the national lockdown was announced in South Africa.

Using Grounded Theory, the content of sermons delivered during this period was examined in order to identify an emerging theory regarding the homiletical content. From these findings, a homiletic praxis theory is formulated for preaching in times like these.

The tension between proximity and distance that is experienced by hearers and proclaimed by preachers is explored. Habits of faith and discernment emerge as core concepts in mitigating this tension and in navigating the thin spaces that are created by liminal times such as these.

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has confronted the modern world with the crisis of health management in a network culture. As part of their response to this crisis, authorities have implemented regulations such as social distancing, national quarantine and, as is the case in South Africa, different levels of lockdown. On 15 March 2020, South African president Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national state of disaster. This entailed the prohibition of gatherings of a hundred people or more. Consequently, the majority of churches across the country had to lock their doors and seek alternative forms of being church and holding worship services. On the following Sunday of 22 March 2020, many churches, including the Dutch Reformed Church[1] entered the relatively unknown territory of hosting e-services through videos, live broadcasts, podcasts, virtual celebrations of the Lord's Supper and other forms of worship and communion made possible by technology.[2]

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[1] The Dutch Reformed Church is the largest mostly Afrikaans speaking Reformed church in South Africa.
[2] Cf. *Nicholas Matthee*, Hoe lyk begrafnisse wanneer daar niemand kan wees nie? in: *Die Kerkbode*, 3 April 2020, https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2020/04/03/hoe-lyk-begrafnisse-wanneer-ander-nie-daar-kan-wees-nie/ [accessed

On 23 March 2020, president Ramaphosa addressed the nation once again, this time announcing a national lockdown, restricting the movement of all citizens, of three weeks. This announcement left many citizens with feelings of uncertainty, fear and panic and it increased the pressure on the church to be a witness. Under the lockdown restrictions and regulations, preachers had to proclaim the gospel from their homes on 29 March 2020, by means of (often unfamiliar) technology.

Aside from the impact these changes had on the liturgical-spatial aspects of the event of preaching, the pandemic has also evoked theological questions that in turn pose challenges to preaching. In the light hereof, questions regarding the content of sermons in times of crises such as these arose, more specifically the question: what was the content of the sermons preached the week before and after the implementation of lockdown in South Africa and in the Dutch Reformed Church? To date, research has been done regarding the format of preaching and liturgy in times of crisis and under movement restrictions such as a lockdown,[3] as well as on pastoral care.[4] This article, however, wants to contribute to the discussion by looking at the content of sermons during this time of crisis − an area that has received little attention to date.

From the above context, the research question arose: What were the core themes of the sermons preached in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and consequent lockdown, and what would a homiletic practice theory for preaching look like in this situation? The purpose of the study is therefore, on the one hand, a substantive analysis of preaching and, on the other hand, an attempt to formulate homiletic route markers in the form of a (preliminary) theory of practice for preaching in comparable times based on the insights gained from the analysis. In order to answer this question and achieve these goals, Grounded Theoretical research has been undertaken.[5]

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09 August 2020]; *Cas Wepener/Nicholas Matthee*, Kubernagmaal in virustyd, in: Die Burger, Volksblad, 17 March 2020, https://www.netwerk24.com/Stemme/Menings/kubernagmaal-in-virustyd-20200317 [accessed 09 AugustMarch 2020]. Idem., Kuberbegraafplase, kuberpelgrimstogte en Korona. in: Vrye Weekblad, 27 March 2020. In this regard also see the work of John Witvliet and the Calvin Institute of Christian Worship at https://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/covid-19-and-worship-resources-for-churches-adapting-to-social-isolation [accessed 09 August 2020].

[3] *Matthee* (note 2); *Wepener/Matthee* (note 2).

[4] *Anandie Greyling*, Wenke vir virtuele pastoraat, in: Die Kerkbode, 6 April 2020, https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2020/04/06/wenke-vir-virtuele-pastoraat/ [accessed 9 August 2020]; *Jan-Albert van den Berg*, Pastorale sleutels vir 'n COVID 19 grendeltyd. Communitas, 17 April 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBBatw1i8uk&t=739s [accessed 9 August 2020). Note that there were also some voices in the media that opposed the use of new technology in liturgy in these days. Cf. *Dieter de Bruin*, COVID-19: Geleenthede en ongemak van 'eredienslose' tyd, in: Die Kerkbode, 13 April 2020. https://kerkbode.christians.co.za/2020/04/13/COVID-19-geleenthede-en-ongemak-van-eredienslose-tyd/ [accessed 9 August 2020]; *Johann Rossouw*, Nagmaal is nie sommer enige ritueel nie, in: Die Volksblad, 24 March 2020. https://www.netwerk24.com/Stemme/Aktueel/nagmaal-is-nie-sommer-net-enige-ritueel-nie-20200324 [accessed 9 August 2020].

[5] This study was carried out as part of a project of the Task Group of Research and Equipment of the Western Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC). The data was collected from pastors who are all pastors in the Dutch Reformed Church. This sample yielded a result that is true to a typically middle-class or wealthier group of people, as the majority of churches in the sample consist of congregations with middle-class or upper middle-class members. According to *Schoeman's* (2020) research among DRC churches in 2019, churches indicated that 98% of their members

2. A Grounded Theoretical Study

In this article, Grounded Theory was used to analyze the contents of sermons. This is the methodology most commonly used for content analysis of documents (such as typed or written sermons) and interviews in the last few decades.[6] It is currently one of the most respected scientific methods for determining the content of documents. It is used worldwide in the social sciences, as well as in theological analysis of sermons. Yet it should not be confused with content analysis which focusses more on the content itself than on the generation of theory out of the content of documents, as is the case in Grounded Theory.

Some researchers use the AtlasTI program for their coding when using Grounded Theory, but for this research, it was done manually. This method was more appropriate for the collaborative approach[7] to coding that was employed for this article and was possible because of the smaller number of sermons (twenty-four sermons) that formed part of the empirical sample.

Grounded theory works with texts (the sermons in this case) that can be collected by various appropriate means, including approaching preachers or accessing sermons on the internet. Once the data is obtained, the first phase, namely open coding, can begin. During this phase, each section or fragment of the sermon containing distinguishable, unique content is assigned a code.[8] Codes summarize the content thematically or label it using the precise words of the data.[9] A possible category can be written next to each code. A category refers to content that is unique and has its own characteristics. The first set of data is coded throughout using this method. Constant comparisons are important in this process so that all content overlaps can be corrected and assigned to unique categories.[10]

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were white. A white person's average income is approximately R24.646 per month (Statistics South Africa 2019: 61). The results, which focused on seclusion, silence and rituals, among others, speak of this context. Cf. *Kobus Schoeman*, Kerkspieël 2019, in personal correspondence per e-mail, 28 April 2020; Statistics South Africa, Inequality trends in South Africa. A multidimensional diagnostic of inequality, 2019, http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/Report-03-10-19/Report-03-10-192017.pdf [accessed 9 August 2020].

[6] *Kathy Charmaz*, Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis, Thousand Oaks (CA) 2006; *Hennie J.C. Pieterse*, An open coding analytical model of sermons on poverty with Matt 25:31–46 as sermon text, in: Acta Theologica, 31(1), 95–112 (2011); idem, An emerging grounded theory for preaching on poverty in South Africa with Matthew 25:31–46 as sermon text, in: Acta Theologica, 33(1), 175–213 (2013); cf. *Hennie J.C. Pieterse/Cas J. Wepener*, Angry preaching. A grounded theory analysis from South Africa, in: International Journal of Public Theology, 12(3f.), 401–415 (2018); *Marileen Steyn*, A grounded theory analysis of sermons on racism, Unpublished MDiv-dissertation, University of Pretoria 2016; *André Verweij*, Positioning Jesus' suffering. A grounded theory of Lenten preaching in local parishes, Eburon 2014.

[7] The coding was done by one researcher, who is also the first author of this article, and then sent to the other researchers for their input and coding. The results of the coding by the three researchers were compared, in the light of and respect for intersubjectivity and integrated into the final results.

[8] *Melanie Birks/Jane Mills*, Grounded Theory. A practical guide, London 2011, 9.

[9] *Hennie J.C. Pieterse*, The Grounded Theory methodology to conduct content analysis of sermons and interviews. Critique and response, in: HTS Theological Studies, 76(1) (2020) https://hts.org.za/index.php/hts/article/view/5851 [accessed 9 August 2020], 2.

[10] Ibid., 3.

The second phase of analysis is selective coding. For this, the researcher needs a second set of data (sermons). These sermons are coded in the same way as the first, with the possible categories next to the codes. When completed, the open and selective codes are placed side by side and compared. The purpose of the selective coding is to determine whether the new, second set of sermons contains content that can strengthen or expand the open codes and categories. Alternatively, the second set of data can bring forth new codes and categories that can be added in the second phase.[11] In this way, it is then determined whether the data is saturated.[12] This means that new categories will no longer appear at that particular time and in the particular context from adding new content.

The third phase is known as theoretical coding. In this phase, the possible categories that emerged from the total number of codes are compared. Where categories overlap with or strengthen other categories, they are combined so that the result is a small number of categories, each representing a unique example from the total number of sermons. Categories can then be used as theoretical concepts for the identification of an emergent theory. This means that the researcher identifies a central category (concept) that stands in relation to the other categories.[13] A scheme or model must then be made by means of a sketch with back and forth arrows to show the relationships between the theoretical concepts. This theory is called an emerging grounded theory that emerges from the practice of preaching on a particular matter at a particular time.

Criticism[14] of this methodology often comes from quantitative researchers who prefer questionnaires and computer-generated data. These methods often require a hundred or more sermons. However, in Grounded Theory, scope does not determine whether a sample is adequate. Rather, the sample is considered sufficient when the data is saturated and no new categories emerge from new content analyzed. For this reason, smaller sets of data can be used.[15] The smaller sets of data also allow for the identification of finer nuances within the data, more so than in quantitative research.[16]

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[11] *Hennie J.C. Pieterse*, An open coding analytical model of sermons on poverty with Matthew 25:31-46 as sermon text, in: Acta Theologica, 31(1), 95–112 (2011), 124.
[12] Cf. *John W. Creswell/Cheryl N. Poth*, Qualitative inquiry and research design. Choosing among five approaches, Thousand Oaks (CA) ⁴2018, 87–88.
[13] *Birks/Mills* (note 8), 12.
[14] See *Pieterse* (note 9), 4, for a more complete discussion of critical voices of Grounded Theory.
[15] Cf. *Creswell/Poth* (note 12), 88–90.
[16] Cf. *Hennie J. C. Pieterse*, Communicative Preaching, Pretoria 1987 (1991) (1995).

3. Homiletical Content of Sermons

The research formed part of a research project of the Task Group for Research and Equipment of the Western Cape Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church. The research began with the collection of sermons preached on 22 March 2020 in Dutch Reformed Churches. Preachers were asked on Facebook if they were willing to send their online sermons in written format to the researchers. To supplement the data, some sermons were accessed via congregations' websites. Most of the sermons received came from congregations in the Western Cape Synod, with some sermons from other synodical regions. Twelve sermons were gathered in total, six from the Western Cape for the first cycle of coding and six sermons from congregations from other synodal regions for the second cycle of coding. The differentiation in geography was partly due to convenience, but in part because the research did not want to cover only one region, as the research aimed at national and denominational representation. However, as the second round progressed, it became clear that the data was not saturated and that further data was needed.

Consequently, it was decided to use all the sermons from 22 March for the first cycle of coding. This was possible due to the method of theoretical sampling within Grounded Theory that allows for adjustments in empirical data as the research progresses.[17] Once this had been decided, all twelve sermons preached on 22 March 2020 were re-coded as part of the first cycle of open coding. At this point, it was suspected that Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion would emerge as a core category. This was due to the fact that the sermons were preached within this specific time within the liturgical calendar, and thus the sermons were interwoven with this liturgical-theological language. However, no final decisions on categories or core categories could be made at this time.

The second cycle looked at twelve sermons preached on 29 March 2020, in the same congregations as the previous week. The data was coded using selective coding and consequently the preliminary categories were reduced to eleven main categories.[18] These categories were labelled and can be described as follows:[19]

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[17] *Creswell/Poth* (note 12), 318.
[18] Ibid., 84.
[19] The language used in the descriptions is the language derived from the sermons. It is for this reason that the term "we" is used, and that God is referred to as male.

	Core Category	Description
1	The disruption caused by COVID-19	The COVID-19 pandemic disrupts the economy, social interaction, safety and church life.
2	Theodicy question	The COVID-19 pandemic raises questions about suffering and God's presence.
3	God's divinity	God is present and in control. He gives life and is the Conqueror over death. Nothing can separate us from His love.
4	Discernment and change	An emphasis on the importance of discernment in faith and change.
5	Serviceability	God calls everyone to serviceability, obedience, discipleship, and the proclamation of the Gospel.
6	Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion	Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion provide a lens through which to understand the current context.
7	Fear	The disruption caused by COVID-19 in turn causes fear which is normal and should not be denied, but must be dealt with.
8	Consolation and hope	We find our comfort and hope not in easy answers, but in our identity in Christ, God's divinity, and love.
9	Habits of faith, rituals and seclusion	At this time, we are called to habits of faith, especially coming to a standstill and practicing seclusion, but also through rituals such as Communion, baptism, and practices such as lament, prayer, fasting and worship.
10	Community and congregation	We are called to fellowship and to serve as the body of Christ in our communities and congregations.
11	Identity	We again become aware of our human nature and we hold on to our identity as children of God.

Table 1: Categories after selective coding

Once the second cycle was completed, the cycle of theoretical coding was started. During this cycle of coding, several categories were tested as core categories. A core category was considered credible if it related to multiple other categories. Although Lent and events surrounding the crucifixion had the most points of contact with other categories, it was decided that this category is not so much a part of the central line of thought, but that it rather forms the context within which the sermons took place and the language through which the theory is expressed.

Rather, discernment in faith and habits of faith have emerged collectively as a core category.[20] Although these two categories form two strong individual categories, the sermons intertwine these two categories so closely, and the categories share so many points of contact with other categories, that it was decided to treat them as a unit. The diagram below provides a graphical representation of the findings.

	CORE CATEGORY	A1	B1	C1	D1	E1	F1	G1	H1	I1	J1	K1	L1
1	The disruption caused by COVID-19	4, 6	8				1, 2, 3, 6		7				5
2	Theodicy question	2		2, 3	1, 2, 4, 7								
3	God's divinity	2, 8, 9, 11, 14	15	9, 10	5, 6, 13		7	1, 5		1, 3, 5	3, 5	3	
4	Discernment and change	1, 10			1, 4, 10				6				
5	Serviceability	13, 15, 17, 20	3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16		11		4, 5, 9	2, 3, 4, 5, 6	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10		4	4	2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12
6	Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion		14, 15	1	13, 14	3, 4, 10, 17							1
7	Fear			3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8	7			1, 5	7	4	2, 8	1	
8	Consolation and hope	3, 5, 8	4, 14	9	3, 5, 8, 14	6, 13	7, 8		6	2, 3, 5	1, 7	2	
9	Habits of faith, rituals and seclusion	1, 10	3	2	12	5, 8, 9, 11, 12, 14, 15, 16	5		8				
10	Community and congregation	16, 18	2								6, 7		7, 11
11	Identity	6, 7, 19		1	15								

	SERMONS: SELECTIVE CODING											
	CORE CATEGORY	A2	B2	C2	D2	E2	F2	G2	H2	I2	J2	K2	L2
1	The disruption caused by COVID-19	13				2, 3	10		1	1	4, 5		
2	Theodicy question	3, 4	1, 4, 8			5						5	
3	God's divinity	5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15	2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 11, 12	2, 5, 9, 12	3, 10	4, 6, 7	1, 2, 3, 4, 12, 16	4, 8	3, 6, 7, 9, 10	5, 7, 8, 9	9	6, 7	6, 10
4	Discernment and change			3, 4, 7, 8, 10, 11	1, 2, 6, 11		9, 13, 14	9	4			6, 7, 8	
5	Serviceability	9, 14			1, 5, 7, 8		13, 17		11		8, 10, 11		3, 4, 5, 8, 11
6	Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion	6				1, 5	3, 5, 10	1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11			6		
7	Fear								10	8			1, 2, 5, 7
8	Consolation and hope		9, 10		11	9	6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 18	11	2, 6	4, 6		4	11
9	Habits of faith, rituals and seclusion	1, 2, 12		1, 3, 4, 6, 10			15		5		3	1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8	9
10	Community and congregation	9								2, 3	1, 2, 7, 8		
11	Identity	13	13	9	4, 9	8, 9							3

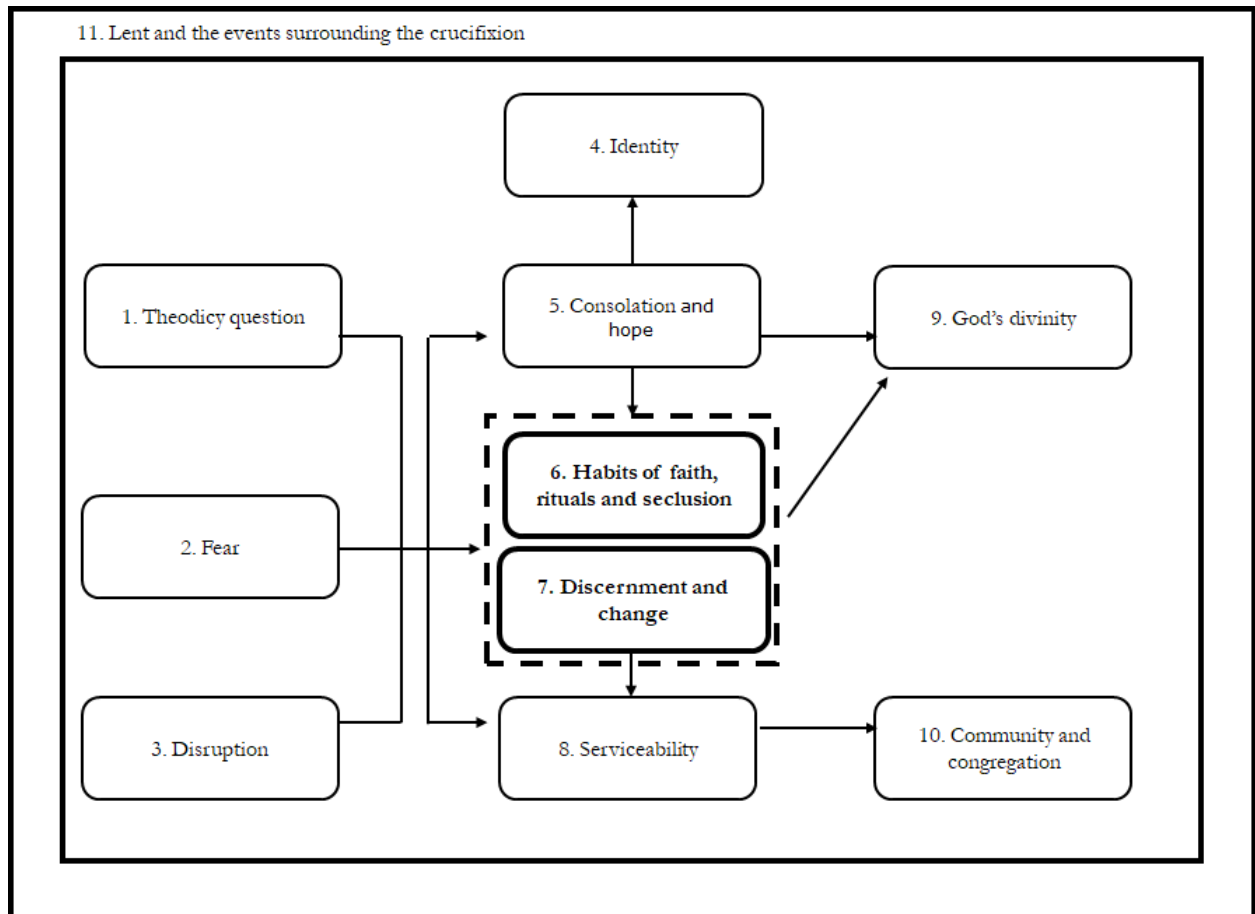*Tables 2 & 3: Open and selective coding of sermons*

Figure 1: Theoretical coding of sermons preached in the times of COVID-19

The theoretical coding can be explained as follows:

• The COVID-19 pandemic has three consequences: It causes (1) questions about God and suffering (the theodicy question), (2) fear, and (3) disruption.

• These consequences call for three responses: (5) the search for consolation and hope, (6) the use of habits of faith such as rituals and seclusion (accompanied by (7) discernment in faith and change), as well as (8) serviceability.

• (5) Consolation and hope are found in (4) listener's identity as children of God and (9) God's divinity. To see this divinity (6) habits of faith and (7) discernment are needed.

• (8) Serviceability, as a (6) habit of faith, calls for (7) discernment in order to (10) rethink what it means to be a community and a congregation.

• All of these concepts play out within the framework and through the language of (11) Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion and this gives additional meaning to each of the elements involved. This emerging model can also be expressed in the language of Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion as follows:
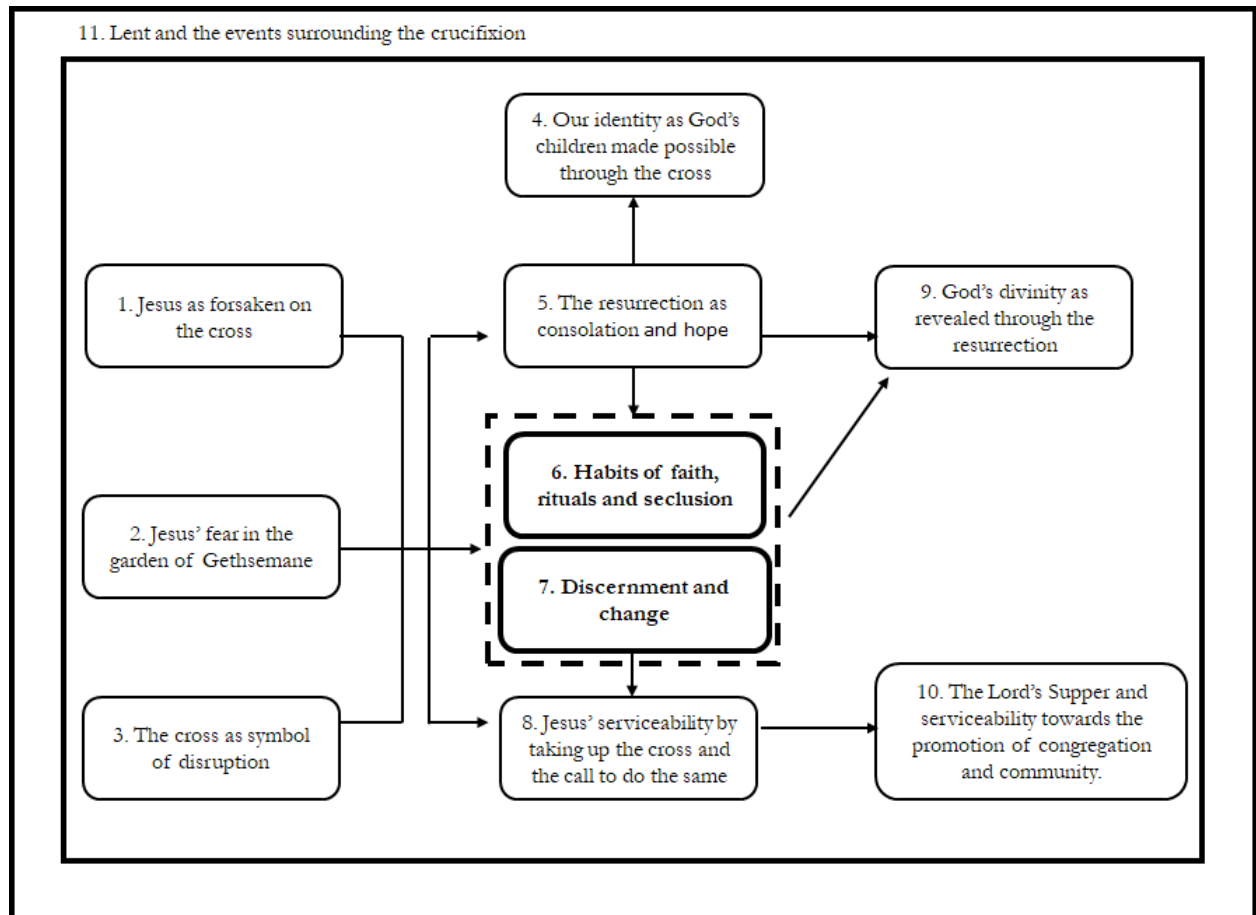
Figure 2: Theoretical coding of sermons preached in the times of COVID-19 in the language of Lent and events surrounding the crucifixion

From the identification of these two concepts as core categories, the following emerging theory of preaching in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic has been identified: amidst the disruption[21] caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the hearers are invited to see God's divinity, with the help of habits of faith and discernment, as comfort and hope and to be serviceable. Here, it is important to point out that not all the categories are explicitly mentioned in this emerging theory, but only those categories that stood out most in the preaching and had the most connections with other categories.

Thus, the first part of the research question of this article was answered, namely that the core themes that brought forth an emerging theory were identified. The second part of the question deals with a preliminary homiletical praxis theory. In this homiletical praxis theory a differentiation is made between the reality experienced by the hearers and the reality proclaimed by the preachers, and the manner in which habits of faith and discernment form a hinge between the two realities.

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[21] In this context, disruption refers to the general disruption caused, but also to the fear and the theodicy question.

The habits of faith that were encouraged in the sermons are then illuminated in the light of the theory. The goal is firstly to understand why relevant categories and habits and faith emerged and how it influences preaching, and secondly to formulate a praxis theory.

4. Emerging Homiletical Praxis Theory

The content of sermons preached in the first two weeks since the imposition of restrictions in South Africa, can thus homiletically be described as follows: amidst the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the hearers are invited by the preachers to see, with the help of habits of faith and discernment, God's divinity as a comfort and hope, and to be serviceable.

This theory consists of three parts. The first has to do with the hearers' experienced reality (the disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic). The second section deals with the reality proclaimed by the preachers (God's divinity as comfort and hope). Between these two realities there exists a third section, namely habits of faith and discernment. This third section forms a hinge between the experienced and proclaimed reality. Serviceability can be said to flow out of this intersection between the two realities.

A discussion of each of these parts, and how they deal with the spatial tension between *near* and *far* follows.[22] Habits of faith and discernment are then described as creating a thin space, a liminal threshold, which carries the tension that exist between *near* and *far,* and facilitates interaction between these two poles of proximity and distance.

4.1 A Near-Far Experience of the COVID-19 Pandemic

In the sermons studied, three perceived facets of the hearers' experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic emerged, namely disruption, fear and the theodicy question. These experiences can each be understood in terms of the concept of spatial distance (to be far). People's lives were disrupted because many people had to start living *far* away from each other due to social distancing and the lockdown.[23] Fear and anxiety arise when what people experience is *far* removed from what they know or from what makes them feel safe. In turn, these feelings of being *far* or *far from* raises questions about God's presence and the suspicion or fear that God too may be *far-off.* Therefore, the question "Where is God?" emerged. Thus, this experience of *far-removed*, of being distant, flows

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[22] For a study of spatiality and preaching, see *Johan Cilliers*, A space for grace. Towards an aesthetics of preaching, Stellenbosch 2016.

[23] It is important to note that in many South African contexts, families live in close quarters, with many people sharing a few rooms. In these times, these families are not living far away from one another. Nevertheless, people in these contexts are also asked to live removed from other family and friends.

from the physical sphere into the psychological and on to the spiritual sphere. After all, the three spheres cannot be separated and therefore an experience of being distant in one sphere also affects the others.

However, disruption, fear and the theodicy question are not only signs of what is distant, but also of what is nearby. Examination of the functioning of trauma provides insight into how distance is experienced.[24] Trauma is not an external event, but rather a person's physiological response when the capacity for adaptation of the individual or community is overwhelmed.[25] Therefore, it is not possible to say that everyone, without exclusion, is traumatized by the COVID-19 pandemic. It can be said that everyone is asked to make adjustments (due to disruption) and that some people's capacity may be exceeded. What could have exacerbated the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is the extent of the adjustment required, the removal of agency due to major decisions being made by central leadership, and the way in which many coping mechanisms (which includes activities such as jogging, smoking, going out and socializing) were restricted or prohibited.

All of these factors could contribute to fear, which can be a symptom of trauma. Trauma can, in turn, lead to what South African pastoral Theologian Riaan van der Merwe (2013) refers to as the "winter season of the soul." It refers to the times in one's life when the believer feels stuck and removed from God.[26] It is in times like these when there is an increased need to "find God in darkness" and "experience God …".[27] This is in line with theory that posits that the re-establishment of a coherent image of God and the world is one of the primary tasks of the traumatized individual or community (theodicy issue).[28] These insights into trauma can be valuable for preaching amidst a pandemic and lockdown period.

Despite the experiences of *far*, there is thus also the experience that fear and spatial alienation are *near*. It is comparable to trauma that is so nearby and intimate that it sits within the human body. Trauma is primarily a physiological reaction and the process, as well as the effects of trauma,

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[24] Whether it can reasonably be said that the hearers had already experienced trauma at the time of the sermons is hard to say. However, themes that are often associated with trauma have emerged and for this reason trauma is being looked at. The argument could also be made that the hearers' access to international news regarding COVID-19 could already be traumatizing in that it could cause of have already caused secondary trauma. Cf. *Jan-Albert van den Berg*, Pastorale sleutels vir ' n COVID-19 grendeltyd. Communitas, 17 April 2020:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SBBatw1i8uk&t=739s [accessed 9 August 2020]; cf. *Kathy Weingarten*, Common shock. Witnessing violence every day. How we are armed. How we can heal, New York (NY) 2003.
[25] Cf. *Megan Warner/Christopher Southgate/Carla A. Grosch-Miller/Hilary Ison* (eds.), Tragedies and Christian Congregations (Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology), Oxon 2020.
[26] *Riaan Van der Merwe*, Seisoene van die siel: Natuurlike geloofsgewoontes vir organiese geestelike groei, Stellenbosch 2013, 44.
[27] Ibid., 42.
[28] *Warner* et al. (note 25), 1.

settles in the brain and body.[29] After all, people do not *have* bodies, but *are* bodies, as the Dutch theologian Gerardus van der Leeuw remarked already more than seventy years ago.[30] COVID-19 is threatening because it threatens not only the human body in terms of life or death, but also the body's everyday functioning and rhythms. An example of this is the way in which trauma, as it comes nearer, breaks people's connections with themselves, with others, with resources, as well as with their frame of reference, thereby reinforcing the sense of distance.[31]

All three of these elements of disruption, fear and the theodicy question thus indicate that the preachers recognize this near-far context of the hearers and that they respond to it. This calls for reflection on how preaching can function within this paradox. However, the near-far paradox is not only present in the experienced reality of the hearers, but also in the reality proclaimed by the preachers.

4.2 A Near-Far Proclamation of Comfort and Hope

In their response to this near-far experience of the COVID-19 pandemic, preachers offer consolation and hope by proclaiming the reality of God as a *near*. Where preachers focused on the hearers' experience of distance, they spoke of God as nearby. The proclaimed reality pointed to God's presence in humanity's suffering. God makes people His children (language of proximity).[32] God is almighty and nothing can separate (distance) people from God's love (eternal nearness). The message is thus not only that God is there and exists, but that God is near.

Coupled with the message that nothing can separate people from God's love, is the message that death is far away. Here it is not meant that Christians will escape death, but that death's impact on the proximity of God is far removed. Accompanying this message is the proclamation of God's creating of new life out of the old – a strong emerging theme.[33] Again, it creates the image of God who moves death (which, in the context of the sermons also referred to hopelessness) far away to make room for life to draw near. Preacher H's words from the second cycle are a good example of this near-far language where he proclaims: "Where they felt that God was turning his back on them, they now felt that God was with them. Where they felt dead in exile, there is again new energy and new plans."

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[29] *Hilary Ison*, Working with an embodied and systemic approach to trauma and tragedy, in: *Warner* et al. (note 25); *Karen O' Donnell*, Eucharist and trauma. Healing in the B/body, in: *Warner* et al. (note 25).

[30] *Gerardus Van der Leeuw*, Sacramentstheologie, Nijkerk 1949, 9.

[31] Ibid., 47.

[32] Although a parent and child do not necessarily have a close relationship, it is clear in the context of the sermons that a close relationship is implied.

[33] The occurrence of this theme was strengthened by the fact that the lectionary text of the week was Ezekiel 37.

The contents of the sermons thus form a chiasm. Where the experience of distance is known, God's proximity is proclaimed. Where there is talk of fear and hopelessness, the removal of death is proclaimed.

Experienced reality	Proclaimed reality
Everyone is *far*	Death is *far*
Fear is *near*	God is *near*
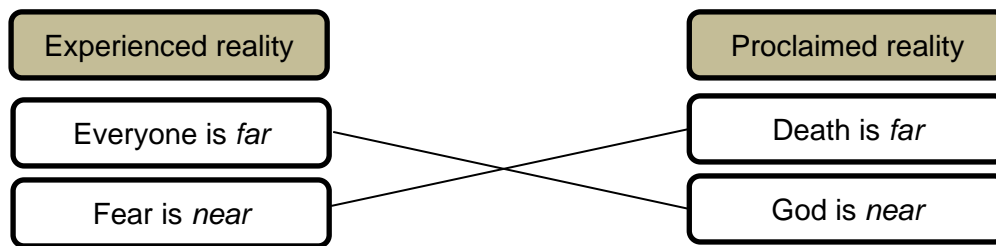
This depiction is not a rule. Where there was preaching about the proximity of fear and disruption, there was sometimes also the proclamation about God's nearness. What does become clear from the content of the sermons is a continuous inclination by the preachers to work with this *near-far* tension.

At this point it is interesting to briefly look at the two fictional sermons of Father Paneloux, offered by the philosopher and writer Albert Camus in his novel, *The Plague*. In the novel,[34] a plague breaks out in the city of Oran. One of the characters in the book, a Jesuit priest named Father Paneloux, gives a sermon in the local church shortly after the outbreak of the plague and again at the end of the plague. Between the two sermons several months pass during which the inhabitants experience unprecedented misery.

With Paneloux's first sermon, the church is packed. For the most part, the worshipers are told that the plague is a punishment that the people of Oran deserve. Nearer the end of the sermon, however, Paneloux focuses his attention on hope. He refers to Mathieu Marais who felt helpless and hopeless during the plague in Marseille. However, unlike Marais, Paneloux says, he has never experienced the help of God and Christian hope more intensely than he did then. The narrator ends his description of the first sermon as follows: "He hoped, against all hope, that, despite the horror of these days and the cries of dying, was the word of love. God would do the rest." In this sermon, Paneloux presents what the preachers in this research described in their sermons as easy answers – words of the plague as God's punishment. Yet Paneloux also speaks of the Christian hope that he is now experiencing more strongly than ever before. For Paneloux, comfort and hope are *near* at the beginning of the plague.

The second sermon, preached after experiencing much misery, depicts a completely different approach, although there are strong similarities to the first sermon. Paneloux talks softly during the second sermon and he also hesitates often. Camus further writes: "… he no longer said 'you' but

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[34] *Albert Camus*, The Plague (translated by Robin Buss), London 2001 [1947].

'we.'" The narrator then informs the reader that, contrary to what the hearers would expect, the preacher did not say anything about the eternal happiness that awaits and which would compensate for the suffering. There is no definitive message of comfort or hope that is nearby. People are simply encouraged to continue in the dark, to try and do good, and to put themselves in God's hands. There is no island in the plague, there is no middle ground. He then concludes by saying that it is difficult to love God, because it involves a total surrender of yourself. This is the hard lesson, according to the preacher. This is faith. In this sermon, the message of comfort and hope has lost its proximity and Paneloux no longer preaches that death is far away.

Camus's work shows that while the content of a sermon may remain partly the same, it will inevitably change as the preachers are directly affected by the circumstances. Saying that God is near and death is far away is the proclaimed reality of the sermons studied and it may be appropriate for the contexts of those sermons at those times. From the analysed sermons, it seems as though the preachers themselves experienced a liminal time themselves which is reflected in the content of their preaching. Therefore, it is necessary to ask what can be preached when the preacher no longer experiences God as *near* and when death moves closer and closer.

4.3 Habits of Faith and Discernment Amidst Near-Far Experiences

In the sermons under discussion, the proclaimed reality is offered as one that could become the hearers' experienced reality if they engage in habits of faith and practice discernment. In the middle of the *near-far* chiasm formed between the experienced reality and the proclaimed reality lies a tension. Preachers encourage hearers to see the proclaimed reality with the help of discernment brought about by faith habits. In the context of the sermons, discernment is to discover that that which seems *far*, is in fact *near*. It is to be sensitive to where God is at work. However, to see this, it is necessary to learn how to look, how to listen, how to experience in and with the body, and it is for this reason that habits of faith are discussed together with discernment.

The preachers refer to various habits of faith. The most common are servitude and seclusion, but lament and the sacraments as liturgical rituals also emerge. In this regard, the focus of this section now turns towards silence, ritual, lament and lastly servitude.
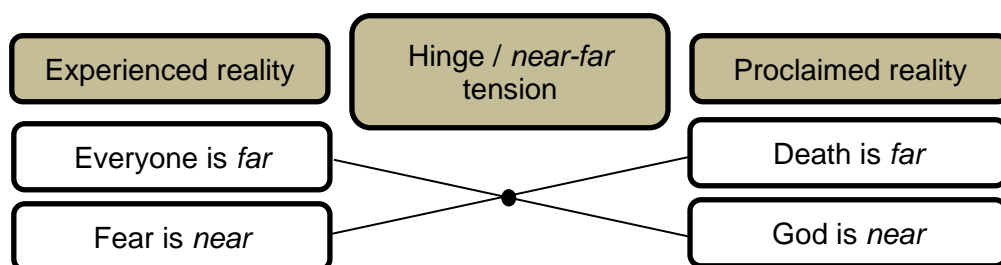
The purpose of seclusion is often to discern God's presence and work. Seclusion involves the intentional *distancing* from others in order to become aware of the *nearness* of God. Silence as a habit of faith can also be included in discussions on seclusion because this too is closely linked to discernment. Many of the preachers and hearers were immersed in silence during the period of lockdown. Although silence can be threatening to some, silence is viewed positively within the Christian tradition, for example when Elijah experienced God in the whispering of silence in 1Kings 19. Silence, therefore, serves the word – specifically the most ideal Word – and thus it serves discernment, and as such, preaching. Peeters points out that "… in the liturgy one sees that silence is not an end in itself."[35] Furthermore, silence is also closely linked to habits of faith such as rituals.

On 29 March 2020, the crux of the preachers' messages was habits of faith and discernment. During the lockdown period, this discernment, according to the preachers, is about much more than just a rational, mentally oriented discernment. In isolation and in the midst of silence, it also becomes a physical affair. This is what Kearney and Treanor call carnal hermeneutics which prioritizes other senses, especially touch and taste.[36] Thirty years ago Lukken had already stressed the importance of physicality in liturgy , saying that the human body is the hub of every ritual and that we can only gain access to mystery through our bodies.[37] In this regard, Kearney shows that while "touch is something we do to the world, it is also something the world does to us."[38] He also points to Merleau-Ponty, who defined flesh as a chiasm, a chiasm between the person and the world, "… a reversible crossing which precedes all analytic and transcendental divisions between subject and object, consciousness and thing."[39]

During the period of social distancing and lockdown, the preachers confirmed that preaching and liturgy cannot be separated from each other at this time and that one serves the other. The discernment of the right word, and the hearing of the sermon and its appropriation, are served during lockdown by the silence and by the physical hermeneutics that takes root at home through liturgical rituals. The performance of liturgical rituals at home are encouraged and supported in the sermons and these involve multiple senses such as touch, taste, and smell, instead of just hearing the sermon and seeing the preacher.

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[35] *B. Peeters*, Zwijgen, in: Marcel Barnard and Paul Post (eds.), Ritueel bestek. Antropologische kernwoorden van de liturgie. Zoetermeer 2001, 160.
[36] *Richard Kearney/Brian Treanor* (eds.), Carnal Hermeneutics, New York (NY) 2015.
[37] *Gerard Lukken*, Liturgie en Zintuiglijkheid. Over de betekenis van lichamelijkheid in de liturgie, Hilversum 1990, 5.
[38] *Richard Kearney*, The wager of carnal hermeneutics., in: *Kearney/Treanor* (note 36), 21.
[39] Ibid, 37.

In this regard, it was significant that many Dutch Reformed churches continued to celebrate the Lord's Supper on Holy Thursday. Hearers were encouraged to use bread and wine at home and, in so doing, become involved in the preaching in a bodily and sensual way. In the sermons studied, the baptism and Lord's Supper was also referred to as bodily reminders of the hearers' identity as children of God and as part of the body of Christ.

Liminal spaces are so-called "thin" spaces where the distance between people and God often feels smaller.[40] Therefore, liminal times are the ideal opportunities to establish or strengthen habits of faith and discernment. However, to do this, people must be helped to see the value of liminality and to know what to do with their fear.[41] Thus, in this context it is important to appreciate the close relationship between preaching and liturgy in the lockdown period.

Torvend, however, questions the church's propensity to focus only on the sacraments and liturgy and advocates the reconsideration of the place of everyday bodily practices and actions in faith formation.[42] He pleads that the church not only focus on liturgy, but also use gatherings to promote practices and actions that honor and celebrate people's physicality.[43] For it is precisely in these sacramental as well as non-sacramental acts and practices where God meets people and where people are transformed.[44]

Lament, which is a common habit of faith in many Christian traditions, again moves between the experience of being far away from God, as well as the nearness of death or chaos, and then towards the assurance that God is near and death far away. This is an essential habit, because as Allen rightly points out: "… church services can be uncomfortable and unsatisfying for the one who grieves, for these services may reflect an aversion to sorrow that takes no account of the gloomy realities of life."[45]

O'Connor further makes a connection between the practice of lament and witnessing.[46] According to her, the lament found in Lamentations calls for a witness who can see suffering. "The witness sees suffering for what it is, without denying it, twisting it into a story of endurance, or

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[40] *Susan Beaumont*, How to lead when you don't know where you're going. Leading in a liminal season, Mary-Land 2019, 16.
[41] Ibid., 13. See also: *Gerald Arbuckle*, Grieving for change, London 1991; *Coenie Burger*, Gemeentes in Transito, Cape Town 1995; *Cas Wepener*, Burning incense for a focus group discussion. A spirituality of liminality for doing liturgical research in an African context from an emic perspective, in: IJPT 19(2), 271–291 (2015); idem, Kookpunt! 'n Gelowige reaksie van 'n ontnugterde nasie: Christelike nadenke oor woede, Wellington 2015.
[42] *Samuel Torvend*, Touch me and see: A resurrection of the body in the church?, in: Institute of Liturgical Studies Occasional Papers, http://scholar.valpo.edu/ils_papers/124 [accessed 9 Augusʰ 2020] 2013, 124.
[43] Cf., ibid., 6.
[44] Ibid., 9
[45] *Leslie Allen*, A liturgy of grief. A pastoral commentary on Lamentations, Grand Rapids (MI) 2011, 5.
[46] *Kathleen O' Connor*, The book of Lamentations, in: Leander Keck (ed.), The New Interpreter's Bible, Volume 6, Nashville (TN) 2002, 100.

giving it a happy ending. The witness has a profound and rare human capacity to give reverent attention to sufferers and reflect their truth back to them." This is also the strong argument that Katongole makes in his book *Born from Lament*.[47] The key question he asks and answers is inspired by 1Peter 3:15. He tries to give an explanation for the hope that lives in people. The answer he offers is the deep complaint that resounds from parts of Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo and Uganda, where people have experienced unprecedented misery. According to him, hope takes the form of wrestling and fighting with God. To complain and to lament is an expression of hope. To lament and to complain to God is to enter that near-far space of tension with hope.

Service in the context of COVID-19 is discussed in the sermons as a way to bring the community close, despite the experience of distance. It is encouraged in several ways. Ironically, one of the facets of servitude spoken of is the need to stay far away from others during the pandemic, for their protection. Several preachers made a distinction between physical and social distance and advocated for keeping contact and social proximity despite the physical distance. Some preachers also asked their hearers to renounce the spreading of fake news, while others asked them to spread and proclaim the Gospel in these times. In other sermons, hearers were encouraged to stay close to others by becoming aware of how far their own context is removed from that of many others who are less-privileged in the country, and by becoming involved in these contexts. Underlying the segments dealing with service in the sermons is the *near-far* tension. On the one hand, hearers were called to be of service and remain near the misery of others and the world in need. On the other hand, hearers were restricted in doing so through traditional ways, being called upon to practice social distancing.

The functional nature of the sermons is thus not limited to the promotion of discernment through individual habits of faith, but it is also extended to the call for concrete acts of service. This habit of faith is not so much about seeing God's presence (though there is one preacher who describes it in this way), but rather to show God's presence to others. The proclaimed reality thus becomes part of people's experienced reality because of servitude. This preaching becomes a form of prophetic preaching that does not confine faith to a private, spiritual cause, but which also looks at and hears the context of the hearers and their environment.[48] It is a reminder that care for human dignity in the time of COVID-19 not only asks the preacher to be a pastor, but also a prophet.[49]

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[47] *Emmanuel Katongole*, Born from lament. The theology and politics of hope in Africa, Grand Rapids (MI) 2017.
[48] *Hennie J.C. Pieterse*, Prophetic preaching in the contemporary context of South Africa, in: In Luce Verbi, 47(1) (2013), https://indieskriflig.org.za/index.php/skriflig/article/view/114 [accessed 9 August 2020], 4.
[49] *Nico Koopman*, COVID-19 and human dignity. Theology in the time of COVID-19, Communitas, April, 29 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z2SeOufaPQ4 [accessed 9 August 2020].

However, prophetic preaching is more than just preaching to the context. It also calls for the preacher to evaluate critically society's thinking and ideologies about that context and to look at it deliberately from more perspectives than that of the middle-class person.[50] This is very important when speaking of service that is aimed at the poor in society. Van Aarde points out that South Africa's need for service is precisely the result of colonialization and Apartheid.[51] In this regard, Villanueva writes about the "human colonial virus" that is in mankind and that is known by people's management of wealth.[52] He argues that the roots of philanthropy are colonialism, that altruism, generosity and servitude can speak of a savior mentality, and that it can exacerbate the separation of races and cultures.[53] According to this reasoning, people's ill-considered movement towards others in service could inadvertently promote even more socio-economic distance.

Thus, in the tension between near and far, the preachers used and encouraged habits of faith to act as a hinge between the experienced and proclaimed realities. These habits of faith retain the near-far tension and thereby give the hearer the opportunity to see God's divinity in the thin spaces of liminality.

5. Concluding Remarks: Preaching Silent Saturday Amidst Lockdown

Underlying the sermons studied lies a particular theology that is articulated within the larger context and framework of Lent and the events surrounding the crucifixion. This is a message that discusses the disruption of COVID-19 in light of the disruption of the cross, the fear within Jesus and his disciples, and Jesus' feeling of abandonment in the midst of his suffering on the cross. The experienced reality of the hearers is thus defined in the language of Good Friday. Similarly, God's victory over death and God's life-giving nature and works are proclaimed on the basis of the message of Resurrection Sunday.

The sermons analyzed, as already pointed out, center on habits of faith and discernment as a hinge between the experienced and proclaimed realities. This emphasis indicates an underlying theology that is aware that there is progression from Good Friday towards Resurrection Sunday. Although none of the preachers explicitly focused on Holy Saturday, this article suggests that the preachers, in their focus on near-far liminality, open the way for the development of a homiletic

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[50] *Pieterse* (note 48), 4f.
[51] *Botha van Aarde*, Franciscus van Assisi: sy betekenis vir vandag! Verbum et Ecclessia, 25(2) (2004) https://verbumetecclesia.org.za/index.php/ve/article/view/296 [accessed 9 August 2020), 740.
[52] *Edgar Villanueva*, Decolonizing wealth. Indigenous wisdom to heal divides and restore balance, Oakland (CA) 2018, loc. 144.
[53] *Villanueva*, loc. 150.

theology of Holy Saturday for preaching in the midst of a crisis. This can be indicated by this diagram:[54]
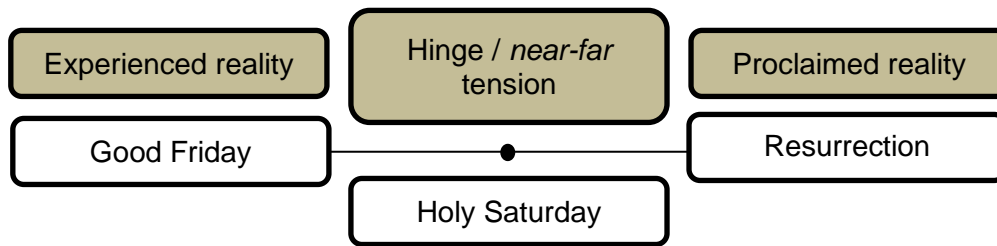
The names given for Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday are names that contain the crux of the preaching proclamation, namely the cross and resurrection. Quiet Saturday, alternatively known as Silent Saturday, on the other hand, uses language that refers to a habit of faith, namely seclusion and silence. On the liturgical calendar, Silent Saturday is the day for seclusion, silence and lament. Silent Saturday thinks of the occupied grave and thereby becomes an empty day, a day of waiting, a day of absence − a day of *far*. It is a day that is often ignored on the liturgical calendar of traditions such as the Dutch Reformed Church. Silent Saturday gives importance to acknowledged suffering that is freely and openly lamented.

It also specifically indicates an awareness of the spatial distance both preachers and hearers are experiencing during the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact that this distance has on physicality amid restrictions. As preachers move closer to the cameras, they may experience the spatial and emotional distance between them and their hearers. One could argue that e-services themselves are liminal spaces where preachers are close to, yet far from, their hearers. This spatial *near-far* tension between preacher and hearer is not new to the church. Paul's letters were virtual communications reminding the church that the Body of Christ's nearness extends beyond physical proximity.[55] After all, Philippians and Philemon were written from Paul's time of confinement (captivity). It is from Paul's own Silent Saturday that he was able to write intimate letters across miles for communities that had experienced limitations, hardship and liminality.[56]

In this virtual space, preachers are invited, whether in Lent or Easter, to remain in a sermon mode of Silent Saturday, to rest in a homiletic spirituality of liminality that holds on to both cross and resurrection, as long as lockdown, at whatever level, continues.

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[54] See also *Cas Wepener*, Stil Saterdag 2020. God is 'n gat om 'n gat, LitNet, 10 April 2020, https://www.litnet.co.za/stil-saterdag-2020-god-is-n-gat-om-n-gat/ [accessed 9 August 2020].
[55] *Warner* et al. (note 25), 19.
[56] Philippians' theme of eschatological expectation can serve as a reminder that the liminality of Holy Saturday lies not only in the moment between Christ's death and resurrection, but that the church also lives in the liminality between Christ's ascension and return.

At the heart of preachers' sermons on the Sundays a week before and after South Africa's lockdown was announced, were habits of faith and discernment that could help the hearers, amid the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, to see God's divinity as comfort and hope, and to be serviceable. On the basis of this, a homiletic praxis theory has been formulated which centers on the near-far tension in the experienced, as well as the proclaimed realities, and which offers habits of faith and discernment as the space that can hold this liminal tension. The foundation on which such a theory of practice rests is the theology of Silent Saturday, a threshold time that both preacher and hearer feel in his/her own body. As such, it is a hopeful theology that, while all involved in the sermon events are imprisoned and confined within their own bodies, holds on to both suffering and victory.

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