

Preaching in Times of Pestilence – 1918 and 2020

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Abstract — *With the help of sermon manuscripts from the time of the Spanish flu, held within the Church of Sweden, new light is shed on sermons held in the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. The comparison shows, among other things, that a shift has been made in how God is portrayed. It also points to some challenging questions about suffering, hope and the role of eternity in preaching today.*

1. Introduction

When the COVID-19 pandemic spread all over the world in 2020, preachers encountered the difficult task of trying to find words of hope and comfort in a situation completely new both to themselves as well as to their listeners. The situation of being in a pandemic is, however, not new to the world. Preachers in different times have been facing similar challenges. In this article, I compare sermon manuscripts from 1918, the time of the Spanish flu pandemic, with sermon manuscripts from the spring of 2020 in order to see what we can learn from both differences and similarities. Mainly, I have wanted the sermons from 1918 to pose interesting and challenging questions to our time.

My key research question is: What are the main differences and similarities in content between sermons preached in the Church of Sweden during the Spanish flu pandemic and during the COVID-19 pandemic? I have divided my analysis into different sections as shown by the subheadings in this article.

2. Comparing Two Different Eras – Some Background

Comparing sermon manuscripts from two different times, one has to be aware of the many things that separate these times.

First of all, in the early fall of 1918, World War One was still going on. It ended in November. Even though Sweden was not *in* the war, the country still experienced hunger due to a lack of food imports and some years of bad harvests. Times were really hard.

The spring of 2020 was not difficult in the same way. It was a time highly affected by the social distancing ordered by the authorities. For the Church, this meant that it could not open its doors to gather people, as has been the case in many recent times of crisis. Another important difference is that even though the media in 1918 also wrote about the Spanish flu, the media landscape of 2020 was very different and more intense with news of the pandemic from all over the world at all times of the day.

As for the different pandemics, the Spanish flu had a much higher mortality rate than COVID-19 has had so far. More people in Sweden died from the Spanish flu in October 1918 alone than from COVID-19 during the first six months of the pandemic. November 1918 was just as bad. The number of deaths from the Spanish flu is estimated to have been over 37.000 in Sweden during the years 1918-1920. In addition, the Spanish flu killed primarily young people, those aged 20–40 years. Meanwhile, COVID-19 primarily takes

older people's lives. It may also be interesting to note that the Spanish flu in 1918 was not the only lethal infectious disease. Diphtheria and pulmonary tuberculosis amongst others were still causing about a thousand deaths every year in Sweden.¹ Compared to 1918, Sweden in 2020 before the pandemic was a rather safe place to be.

3. Method and Material

In order to shed new light on preaching during the pandemic in 2020, I started a conversation between two different sets of sermons from 1918 and 2020.

My 2020 material consists of sermons held on four days: Annunciation Sunday (22 March) and the Fifth Sunday of Lent (29 March) because this is when the pandemic really started to have an impact on daily life in Sweden and the mortality number was starting to rise, Good Friday and Easter Sunday because of the theological importance of these days. Easter also happened to be when the mortality number was at its highest for the first wave of COVID-19 in Sweden, though still centered around Stockholm and not equally spread over the whole country.² Out of 90 sermon manuscripts gathered, I have chosen 16 that treat the pandemic in some depth. Most of the sermons were held in churches and not only online. The date they were held on and a letter, e.g. 0329A, designate the sermon manuscripts from 2020 in this article.

My 1918 material consists of nine handwritten sermon manuscripts from the archives of Lund University Library and one published sermon. This sermon was written by *Alfred Lysander* and has possibly been adjusted in the process of publishing. Four of the ten sermons are from Thanksgiving Day, one is from New Year's Day and one from New Year's Eve. The reason for focusing on the fall of 1918 is that this is the time when the Spanish flu hit Sweden the hardest.³ The first letter of the preacher's name and a number designates the sermon manuscripts from 1918, e.g. K1.

In writing this article, I have translated the quotes from Swedish into English. I have tried to translate as precisely as possible. Incomplete sentences in Swedish are thus translated into incomplete sentences in English.

Already in searching for material, I discovered a difference between the sermons from 1918 and 2020, namely that in the fall of 1918 the pandemic was not a large topic in sermons, but in the spring of 2020 it certainly was.

4. The Preachers

The material from 2020 has been anonymized, but for 12 out of 16 preachers I do have some information. I know that at least eight of the preachers are women and at least four are men and that the geographical spread is wide as well as the spread in age. Individual differences in style and theology are clearly discernible.

¹ Cf. *Margareta Åman*, *Spanska sjukan. Den svenska epidemin 1918–1920 och dess internationella bakgrund*. Uppsala 1990, 60–68.

² Cf. the webpage of Folkhälsomyndigheten (public health authority) in Sweden:

<https://experience.arcgis.com/experience/09f821667ce64bf7be6f9f87457ed9aa> (13 August 2020).

³ Cf. *ibid.*, 58f.

The preachers from 1918 are five. All five are men, unsurprisingly, and all of them lived in the southern part of Sweden in the diocese of Lund. According to biographical information, they were not considered controversial. A few of them are said to have been appreciated for their preaching. One, *Albert Lysander*, was even elected court chaplain later on. As seen in the sermon manuscripts as well as in what has been written about the preachers, they differ from each other in style of preaching. One of them, *Martin Blomstergren*, is described as preaching about practical life⁴ while another, *Alfred Wihlborg*, is very solemn in the pulpit yet also has a simple, heartfelt approach to preaching.⁵ The preacher *Nils Gillén* is described as conservative and poetic.⁶ *Carl Krook* is initially described as liberal but later seen as more old-fashioned and Bible-centered.⁷ Finally, *Albert Lysander* is good at combining biblical preaching with a clear understanding of his time.⁸ One could elaborate more on the different preachers here, but the main point is that there is a variation between them and that none of them stood out as strange in their own time.

5. How the Disease Itself and the Situation is Described

Fear is an important word in the sermons from 2020. Half the manuscripts from this year describe the situation as frightening. The pandemic is also described as something that affects the whole of society and as something that is beyond our control. This quote illustrates all of these aspects: “Many people are afraid, worried and bewildered before that which is now happening in our society. Afraid not only of a virus that science and the doctors don’t have much knowledge about, but also worried about what is happening to our society and the economy.”⁹ Another preacher gives us these words to describe the situation: “Pandemic, disease and death. Economic collapse – unemployment and a society that stops functioning. There are always good reasons to be afraid – because we cannot be sure of anything.”¹⁰

As seen in the second quote, death is sometimes part of the description, but more prevalent and emphasized is fear. In the 1918 material, the situation is reversed. Only a few preachers refer to worry or fear. Instead, all of them mention the large number of deaths caused by the disease. Very often, they describe death in a rather poetic manner: “The number, by which we reckon our deceased neighbors, is on this New Year’s Day larger than it has been before. This means that the angel of death has come more often to visit us.”

Another difference is that in 2020 the pandemic is often depicted as something that stands out. Admittedly, it is sometimes said that pandemics have happened before and will happen again, but for the most part it is treated like something very different from

⁴ *Hilmer Wentz*, Präster, professorer, pedagoger. Minnesteckningar till prästmötet i Lund hösten 1950, in: Handlingar rörande prästmötet i Lund den 19, 20 och 21 september 1950, Lund 1961, 59.

⁵ *Hilmer Wentz*, Från Lundastiftet. Personteckningar till prästmötet i Lund hösten 1956, in: Handlingar rörande prästmötet i Lund den 18, 19 och 20 september 1956, Lund 1961, 86.

⁶ *Wentz* (note 4), 110f.

⁷ Cf. *Albert Lysander*, De bortgångnes minne. Minnestal över präster i Lunds stift 1932–1938. Lund 1938, 47.

⁸ *Christian Callmer*, *Albert Lysander*, in: Svenskt Biografiskt Lexikon, band 24. Stockholm 1982–1984, 456. ⁹ 0322H.

¹⁰ Cf. 0322D.

normal circumstances. It is different and it changes everything. This can be compared to how in the sermons from 1918, the pandemic is often mentioned among other “misfortunes” or “trials.” The best example is sermon L1, where the introduction of the sermon is centered on the question “How may one give thanks during such a rainfall of accidents?”¹¹ The preacher goes on to list the war, the famine, a major train accident in Sweden earlier that fall and then, finally, the pandemic. This shows how the circumstances *around* the pandemic affect the way it is perceived and described in the sermons of its time.

6. How God is Described

One question I brought into the conversation between the two sets of sermons was how the preachers would explain the pandemic theologically and how they would understand God’s role in the situation. I was quite surprised to find that none of the sermons in 2020 explicitly tries to explain the pandemic. In 1918 explanations are scarce, but words like “chastisement” and “the Lord’s plague” let us know that the pandemic is seen as a tool for God to teach God’s people. Sermon B1 investigates what God wants humans to learn in times of disease, and preacher G2 urges his listeners not only to reflect on their own sin but also their participation in “the sins of our people.”¹² But far more weight is put on explaining all the ways God is helping God’s people. This is especially so on Thanksgiving Day, the day in the liturgical year when thanks are given traditionally to God for all blessings received. This shows the role of the liturgical year and the lectionary. On Thanksgiving Day, the preachers in 1918 clearly state that times are hard, but then they all turn to emphasize what God *has* done to spare people from further suffering.

Looking at God’s role in the situation and comparing the two different sets of sermons, it is also clear that a shift has taken place, one that can be described as a shift in the image of God. This does not mean that everything changes. For instance, in both sets there are sermons that refer to the strength one can get from God. In 2020, one preacher puts it this way: “God is close to us in order to be the strength in our lives.”¹³ In 1918, one of the preachers wrote: “The love of the Lord is generous. And what one gets to receive thereof, becomes a strength also for what is to come.”¹⁴ This, however, is not how God is mostly portrayed. Other images of God play larger roles in the sermons, and that is where a shift can be observed.

6.1 Holding Our Lives in God’s Hands or Standing by Our Side

In 1918, according to the sermons, life is clearly in the hands of God. Manuscript G2 provides an example: “The days of our life may thus rest in the almighty and loving hands of the Lord. The days shall not end before their measure is filled. But the Eternal One metes out that measure.”¹⁵ God as the one holding life in hand – for both good and bad – is the most prevalent and dominating image in the sermons from 1918. It also occurs in

¹¹ L1.

¹² G2.

¹³ 0322D.

¹⁴ G3.

¹⁵ G2.

the 2020 manuscripts. One preacher writes, “The future rests in God’s hands. From our future Christ comes to meet us. We don’t need to be afraid.”¹⁶ But it is not at all as common nor as dominating as another image in 2020: that God is on our side or that God is with us. We are not alone. Illustrations of this are legion, but here are just a few examples: “God is no neutral God. God takes sides with him who fights for what is good and right.”¹⁷ “God tells us today and all days to come: Do not be afraid, I am with [you]!”¹⁸ “You are not alone. We are not alone. God is by our side. Nothing can separate us from him.”¹⁹ “[...] no matter what difficulties we humans meet, Jesus has been there. He has himself experienced the pain.”²⁰

As these examples show, the connotation varies. Sometimes the point is that we are not alone, that God is here *with* us. At other times, the point is that God is on *our side* when we struggle against evil. Other times again the point is that God *also suffers* when we suffer; God is with us in our suffering. But the main idea is that God is with us. There is certainly a difference between this image and the image of God holding our lives in hand. They are not opposite images, but there has definitely been a shift.

One way to understand this shift is by looking at the theology produced in the twentieth century. For example, liberation theology emphasizes a liberating God who takes sides with the oppressed. Or consider feminist theology, which presents the image of God the friend as a balance to the image of God the Father. Or, one can consider the theology produced in response to World War II, where e.g. *Moltmann* argues that any theology done needs to have the suffering Christ at its center. Hence, there are many good arguments for such a shift, but one critical question to ponder is what kind of power God is perceived to have in this kind of preaching.

6.2 God With the People of Sweden

In the sermons from 1918, God is acting with *Sweden*. Times are hard with food rationing and the Spanish flu, but according to the sermons in this study, it could have been a lot worse if God had not saved Sweden from the war or if God had not saved the latest harvest. One preacher writes: “God has shown our people ineffable goodness. He has averted the flames of war from our borders, he has suppressed the waves of rebelliousness, he has averted real famine.”²¹ A little later the same preacher continues:

The people of Sweden have indeed been in narrow straits, referred, as we have been, to our own assets, but it cannot be denied, that our country in comparison to most has been one of the luckiest in the world. A miracle it is, so great that it cannot be grasped by human thought, that our people, in spite of their ungratefulness, have been so wonderfully protected behind the shield of God’s love! Who has helped us, if not G[od]. Who has been our strength and shield, if not He.²²

¹⁶ 0322C.

¹⁷ 0322C.

¹⁸ 0322H.

¹⁹ 0322K.

²⁰ 0410C.

²¹ K1.

²² Ibid.

In the material from 2020, Sweden is not an entity with which God deals. Sometimes “society” is mentioned, but then mostly to describe the effects of the pandemic. God seems to be acting either with individuals or with humanity, not with individual countries. This difference is probably best understood in the light of the nationalistic trends of the first decades of the twentieth century. The nationalistic ideas of the time did not only influence art, literature and architecture, but also theology.²³

7. Major Themes in the Sermons

The variation between individual preachers is large. There certainly is no single theme that is prominent in every sermon from 1918 or 2020. Yet, one can discern a few interesting differences as some themes occur frequently in one year and not in the other. I shall now present the most obvious of these.

7.1 Death and Suffering – and the Horizon of Eternity

As already mentioned, in 1918 life and death are depicted as resting in God’s hands. God measures our life span and decides when it is time for someone to die. In the 2020 material, this image is rare. Another difference is that death is closer and more concrete in the 1918 material. One preacher begins his sermon this way:

To “do thanksgiving” – that is an old expression in our Swedish Church for the announcement from the pulpit every Sunday about the deaths of the week. We shall “do thanksgiving” today, as in hundreds of years before, for those who have died during the week. They are, as we know, more now than perhaps ever before in this church. When cholera raged here in the 1850s and dysentery in the 1880s, the congregation was not so big. Today there are 20 thanksgivings, in the previous weeks 11 and 12, compared to a normal average of 3–4.²⁴

Another preacher writes: “Out there in Sofielund, death has during the last 2 weeks visited no less than 16 homes.²⁵ What if it had been your father or mother, your husband or wife, your son or daughter?”²⁶ In contrast, when the 2020 preachers speak of death it is mainly about Jesus’ death and suffering. Or about life’s victory over death through Jesus. And sometimes the preachers in 2020 talk about our fear of death. One preacher writes: “We experience, together with Jesus, all that life can hold: expectations and community, fear and anxiety, suffering and death.”²⁷ Another preacher in 2020 talks about death in this way: “And the symbol of God’s love for humanity is the cross. The cross where Jesus gave his own life. The cross that makes it possible for Jesus to walk the whole way together with every suffering person. Through the suffering, all the way to death.”²⁸

Death seems more abstract and not as close in the sermons from 2020. This difference is perhaps explained by the different circumstances. In 1918, more people were dying, and younger people. No one sitting in the pews knew who would be next (which some of the preachers also pointed out). In the spring of 2020, not all parts of Sweden were equally struck by the pandemic. Stockholm and a few other regions had the most deaths. For the

²³ *Ingmar Brohed*, *Sveriges kyrkohistoria. Religionsfrihetens och ekumenikens tid*, Stockholm 2013, 29f.

²⁴ L1.

²⁵ Sofielund is a neighboring congregation.

²⁶ W1.

²⁷ 0412C.

²⁸ 0410G.

rest of the country, the deaths were perhaps less concrete, mere numbers in the news rather than actual neighbors and friends. It may also have something to do with the fact that in 2020, many of the deaths took place in retirement homes or in hospitals. And not only the deaths by COVID-19, but deaths in general. Death has a more secluded place in society in 2020.

Another difference noted in the material is how death, and also suffering, is treated. In 1918 death and suffering are not all bad. Some preachers express that you can learn something from death or from suffering. And one preacher discusses the question: “Is suffering and death from all perspectives really something evil?”²⁹ The preacher argues in this sermon that we should not only give thanks to God in spite of death and suffering but we should also give thanks *for* death and suffering. Another preacher builds his sermon around what we can learn from times of disease. He writes,

When the Lord lets the cross weigh heavily on us and our surroundings, may we then make room for seriousness in our soul. May we then ponder, [xxx]³⁰ the Lord G[od] speaking to us about the cross and may we ask him: Lord, how do you want, what do you want to teach us if you lay such chastisement upon us.³¹

The preacher then goes on to explain that times of disease can teach us to pray, to trust in the Lord, to receive help from the Lord and to confess.

I have also found this perspective of wanting to learn from both death and suffering in other sources from around 1918 outside of the sermon manuscripts. A Swedish preacher called *Martin Liljeblad*, who was working in a congregation in Helsingborg at the time of the Spanish flu, two years later published a small pamphlet called “Livets mening. Dödens härlighet. Evighetens verklighet” (“The Meaning of Life. The Glory of Death. The Reality of Eternity”). In this pamphlet, Liljeblad describes that not only is suffering an unavoidable part of human existence, it is also a part of our development. He even writes: “But woe to us, if we are not made to suffer,” and explains that suffering, when received in the right way, can be a blessing. It can make people grow and teach them to rise above the small concerns of daily life.³²

Along the same lines, the non-ordained preacher *Natanael Beskow* in October 1918 gave a lecture on death. The lecture was held on Birkagårdens Folkhögskola, a school where someone had recently died from the Spanish flu. In this solemn lecture that resembles a long sermon he calls death, “the great, healthy earnestness in life.”³³ Death, writes Beskow, helps one to appreciate one’s loved ones, reminds one to ask for forgiveness where one has done harm, and guides people to ask the important questions of life and to use life while it is still there.³⁴

In the 2020 material, there is one example of a preacher who talks about how to prepare for one’s own death and there is also one preacher who says that suffering is not

²⁹ L1.

³⁰ The hand written manuscripts are sometimes difficult to decipher. [xxx] stands for a word I cannot read.

³¹ B1.

³² Cf. *Martin Liljeblad*, *Livets mening. Dödens härlighet. Evighetens verklighet*, Helsingborg 1920, 9f.

³³ *Natanael Beskow*. *Dö den – ett föredrag*, Stockholm 1920, 5.

³⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 4f.

all bad since it can bring people closer to one another.³⁵ But for the most part, the upsides of death and suffering are reserved for 1918.

Connected to death and suffering is also what I have chosen to call “the horizon of eternity.” Eternity is not the theme for any of the sermons, but it is sometimes there in the background, as a horizon towards which life is held up. This is the case for some sermons from 1918, but not for the ones from 2020. Hence, it creates a difference in perspective on death and suffering between the two different materials. It is seen in quotes like these: “Suffering – as well as our whole life and even our death – is merely a part, a small part of life eternal.”³⁶ And, “Perhaps you felt in some such weary moment a breeze of the Lord’s love touching your heart with its solace. The content of the moment then became another, richer, for something of eternity that was introduced into it. The Lord showed the strength of His love.”³⁷

It is also seen in this quote, where the preacher describes how it would be if God would take God’s gift of grace away from us: “[...] we would grow old and die without the hope of eternal life, our dead would be buried and the survivors stand grieving by the grave without the consolation that hope of reunion can provide.”³⁸

Again, there are exceptions to this, and eternity *is* mentioned a few times in 2020 as well, but even when it is mentioned, it does not play a major role and does not change the perspective as much as it does in 1918. It never becomes a horizon in 2020, it is more like a dot. One preacher, however, stands out. In his sermon, he quotes a column written by theologian *Joel Halldorf*, who in his turn begins with a quote from *Karen Blixen*. He writes:

‘You can carry all your sorrows if you are able to place them within a story.’ [...] This even goes for the sorrow over my own death – but for it to be able to be meaningful, I have to be part of a story that does not end there, but that is bigger than myself. [...] In the Christian tradition, the word trust (*förtröstan*, in Swedish) describes a belief that the God of history leads everything towards a good ending. We are all a part of God’s story, and God does not write a tragedy. Thus, trust does not only mean that I in particular shall be spared from suffering and death – surely not – but that evil will not have the last word. When the book is finally closed, all tears will have been wept.³⁹

This quote is obviously not about eternity, yet it seems to play a somewhat similar role in the sermon: it offers a horizon against which life, death and suffering can be held up and seen from a broader perspective and also, perhaps, be given a meaning.

In his book “The Heart of Christianity”, *Marcus J. Borg* argues that there is today what he calls an “earlier paradigm” and an “emerging paradigm” in understanding Christianity. One difference he puts forward is that while the earlier paradigm has an emphasis on afterlife, the emerging paradigm is about a relationship with God here and now.⁴⁰ This might explain the differences between 1918 and 2020, but the question is, does the

³⁵ Cf. 0329C and 0329A.

³⁶ L1.

³⁷ G1.

³⁸ W1.

³⁹ Cf. 0410F. The quote is from *Expressen* 2020-03-27.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Marcus J. Borg*, *Kristendomens hjärta. Att återupptäcka den kristna tron och leva ett helhjärtat liv*. Helsingfors 2015, 37–42.

emphasis on here and now leave the preachers empty-handed when trying to put suffering and death in a wider perspective?

In her book on theology in the course of the pandemic, theologian and Swedish archbishop *Antje Jackelén*, writes that when it comes to eternity, what is important is not how we define it. The important thing is to assume that there is something other than time and that time in general, and also our specific life time, stands in relation to this other, which we call eternity. She adds that “the one who assumes there is something other than time – an eternity to which time stands in relation – has more ways of handling the uncertainty of the future than the one for whom time is everything.”⁴¹

7.2 Do Not Be Afraid

When describing the COVID-19 pandemic many preachers use words for fear, anxiety and uneasiness. Let us now take a closer look at this. In the Gospel texts for two of the Sundays represented in the 2020 material, the words “Do not be afraid” are found. On Annunciation Sunday the angel says to Mary, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” (Luke 1:30). On Easter Sunday an angel says to the women by the grave: “Do not be afraid” (Matt 28:5). These two quotes are picked up by the preachers and the phrase “do not be afraid” is a central part of many sermons. One preacher writes on Annunciation Sunday, “We do not know what the future holds, but God has a purpose for Mary’s life – and God has a purpose for my life and for yours! To get to live for others. And in all that is, the angel’s words for Mary and for us sound: ‘Do not be afraid.’”⁴² And another preacher writes for Easter Sunday: “Today we get to linger with the words “do not be afraid,” whisper them to ourselves as a greeting from God.”⁴³

This message is not only about calming people in a worrying time. Some preachers also make it clear that fear itself is a danger. This is especially so on the Fifth Sunday of Lent, when one of the readings is from Num 21, about Moses putting a bronze serpent on a pole for everyone to see so that those who look at it are healed from their lethal snake bites. The gospel reading is from John 3, which repeats the episode in Numbers and then points to Jesus as the one to be lifted up so that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. Based on these two readings, the preachers present the message that in times of fear and disease one needs to focus on God not to go astray: “That many people are afraid now is not so strange. It is human to be afraid. But if we let our fear guide us, then that is more dangerous than the danger we are afraid of. Because then we move away from love and from God.”⁴⁴

Fear is more of a theme in 2020 than in 1918. One reason for this is that the words “do not be afraid” are found in the readings. Another factor may be that the sermons from 2020 are from the beginning of the pandemic and, as one preacher puts it, “Fear is not the same as suffering. Fear is about what could happen. Suffering is about what happens here and now.”⁴⁵ But then again, the preachers in 1918 clearly state that no one can know who will die next from the Spanish flu. No one is safe. There certainly must have been a

⁴¹ *Antje Jackelén*, *Otålig i hoppet. Teologiska frågor i pandemins skugga*, Stockholm 2020, 111f.

⁴² 0322H.

⁴³ Cf. 0412C.

⁴⁴ 0329A.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

possibility for fear to take hold of people in 1918 as well. The book “Tänk om. En studie i oro” by Swedish sociologist *Roland Paulsen* presents statistics to show that the percentage of people living in Sweden with anxiety and disquiet has doubled in just the last decade.⁴⁶ This affects both adults and children and the same goes for many other countries in the world. Paulsen then shows in a variety of ways that worry and disquiet have become parts of our culture, parts of our “normal.” Perhaps this is part of the reason why fear and disquiet are more prevalent in the 2020 sermons.

8. Hope – Same but Different

It is difficult, if not impossible, to analyze the hope engendered by a sermon. Something that brings hope to one person does not affect another at all. And speaking *about* hope certainly is not the same as *conveying* hope. The following investigation into what the preachers say about hope explicitly and what images they use therefore tells us something about their ambitions but little about their success.

A difference between the sermons from 2020 and those from 1918 is that the former mention the word hope more often and talk more explicitly about it. A similarity is that in both sets, God is where (most) hope comes from. In the 2020 sermons, we find this quote: “No matter what we experience right now, no matter how things are, God is close to each and every one of us and wants to give us hope and courage this Easter!”⁴⁷ In 1918, hope coming from God is expressed in this way: “It may go slowly. The Prince of Peace has mighty enemies and strong powers to overcome. There may even come major setbacks, times when it seems as if His struggle with the evil in human nature were in vain. But by and large, it still moves forward.”⁴⁸

Despite the different images of God already discussed above, we can see that both in 1918 and in 2020 one expects God to bring hope for the future. Two differences are, however, noticeable. First, hope in 1918 is the concrete expectation that God will create peace while in 2020 hope is more of a *feeling* that people, according to the sermons, need to have. Second, in 2020 hope *also* comes from human beings. In some of the sermons from 1918, the preachers say that people are only concerned with their own gain, that humanity is sick or that people complain too much.⁴⁹ There are exceptions to this, but for the most part, the five preachers in 1918 do not rely on people to bring hope. In the 2020 material on the other hand, the preachers present examples of people doing beautiful things in the time of the pandemic, to inspire hope. “On social media there are many who do what they can to give people hope. Isolated neighbors who did not talk to each other before are now gathering on the balconies and talk and play music to each other at designated times.”⁵⁰ One preacher attempts to inspire the congregation to spread hope by placing post cards in the pews and encouraging the listeners to send greetings “to further spread hope and the love of God.”⁵¹ Hope is thus also found in real examples of what

⁴⁶ Cf. *Roland Paulsen*, *Tänk om. En studie i oro*. Stockholm, 2020, 42.

⁴⁷ 0412C.

⁴⁸ W3.

⁴⁹ Cf. K1 and G2.

⁵⁰ 0329A.

⁵¹ 0322I.

people have done and in what the people in the congregation can do. In the 2020 material humans are seen as active agents in spreading hope.

The differences found in how hope appears in the two sets of the material calls for a further investigation of the anatomy of hope. What does hope consist of? How is hope related to faith and trust? A full analysis will not be possible in this article, but I will suggest some preliminary observations. In homiletics, hope is a central theme. *Paul Scott Wilson* writes that “hope is not the theme per se of every sermon any more than the sun is the theme of every daytime conversation. Rather, hope is the nature and tenor of the gospel, thus hope is the ultimate nature and tenor of each sermon.”⁵² In comparison, Jesus does not talk much about hope. He talks about the Kingdom of God and that seems to bring people hope.

From the perspective of prophetic preaching, *Walter Brueggemann* highlights that “what the prophetic tradition knows is that it could be different, and the difference can be enacted.”⁵³ This clearly points to the difference between a well-anchored hope and a more general optimism: the former does not entice into passivity, but leads to participation in the realization of what one hopes for.

Archbishop Jackelén writes that hope uses the past as a basic experience of grace. “We all live more by what we receive than by what we do. We live by grace.”⁵⁴ But, Jackelén continues, when asked what we can hope for, the answer will always be intermingled with the unknown. In this intermingling, hope resembles faith.⁵⁵

These observations all show that hope is more than a mere feeling, and to take seriously the work of conveying hope we might need to deepen our reflection on what hope really is.

9. Summary and Final Reflection

This study shows that there are both similarities and differences in preaching in times of pestilence between 1918 and 2020. Some of the main differences are seen in how the disease itself is depicted, how God is described and in the major themes found in the sermons. A lot has happened in the years between 1918 and 2020, in the world as well as in theology. Many hard lessons have been learnt. In this particular study, the aim has been to use the 1918 material to pose challenging questions to our time. Obviously, the opposite could also be done. The 2020 material could very well challenge ideas from 1918, such as naïve nationalism. But I think that has already been done. Perhaps it is precisely a continuous reflection and critique that has led us step by step from the 1918 to the 2020 preaching, often on good grounds. What this study offers is the possibility to look back over the last century and ask what has been lost along the way. Three things stand out to me in this regard: the horizon of eternity, the view that suffering is not always entirely bad, and the insight that hope is not primarily a feeling but the result of trusting God to be able to bring about real change. In light of this study, one needs to consider: if these things have been lost, what needs to be regained and how?

⁵² *Paul Scott Wilson*, *The Practice of Preaching*, Nashville (TN) 2007, 49.

⁵³ *Walter Brueggemann*, *The Prophetic Imagination* (40th Anniversary Edition), Minneapolis (MN) 2018, xxxv.

⁵⁴ *Jackelén* (note 41), 111.

⁵⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 112.

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