





Long: This reframes our understanding of the material world. We are replacing so many physical experiences over Zoom. There is a yearning for the place that we have now lost (Proverbs). That is a powerful spiritual theme. Graham Hughes has a wonderful book in which he talks about condensed and dispersed sacramentality. Protestants have a dispersed sacramentality. The forest is as holy as the sanctuary. Catholics tend toward a condensed sacramentality. I think we are now finding out how much we miss the material sacramentality.

Ramsey: What have we lost and what have we gained?

Long: We have lost the capacity to gather together. Telling the story of those experiences, what we remember in our holy memory, is important. Instead of remember your baptism and be thankful, we decided to have older adults stand up, point to a child, and say “I remember your baptism, and I am grateful.” We need to tell stories of when we were together. Memories will be important.

McCray: Ritual itself has a different power right now, when we are not in a shared room. How do we consecrate bread and wine right now? There is an opportunity to talk about consecrated vision. How do we think about what it means to see and perceive right now. There is also a great longing for blessing because this feels like a curse. It is such an estranged, disenchanted, disheartening, disillusioning moment. I want to hear words of blessing now, of us as a people.

Long: I hear in Barth what I missed in my father, confidence. There is the confident voice of the gospel that needs to be heard now. We are hearing people streaming their worship services are finding larger congregations than they found in normal worship. What do you think that means? Is it a post 9-11 virtual congregation because of the crisis?

McCray: For one, I think there is a sense in which congregations are more permeable now. A pastor in Boston (following the marathon bombing) shared that after the bombing, the congregations became more permeable. In other words, the higher numbers aren't a stable number but reflect the moment. I also think internalizing that congregations might be permeable is valuable because we have the opportunity to talk to different people. One thing about streaming is... the likelihood that people are entering the space in a holy way is much lower (people aren't dressing up, aren't setting a worship space in their home, etc.) People might be streaming a service with the TV on or with their phone. They might be streaming worship while eating a bowl of cereal. I think that informality has important implications for how we engage. We no longer have that cushion of the ritual. People have always tuned preachers in and out, but now you truly can manipulate that experience.

Long: There is an accessibility and informality now. Now there might be more opportunities for folks to overhear what we do, as there is no commitment involved with streaming a service. I remember when some students at Candler created a church in second life, and people started



showing up at this virtual church. Students asked avatars why they were showing up to church, and they said they were looking for a safe place to encounter the holy without showing their faces or taking the risk of attendance.

Long: I think the virus is trying to command the master narrative of our society. The story it wants to tell is a story of division, fear, and death. The Gospel is an arrival narrative. Easter is the time to preach it. One of the main themes of Matthew is the story the world thinks it's telling and then there's the story that the Gospel is telling. A contested narrative here is useful for preaching. How does the Gospel say do not be afraid? There is also a narrative of happy optimism that is dangerous. Think about this experience as one of divine judgment. That is a touchy topic because we have drained judgment out of our narrative. We do not want to preach judgment. Is God shaking the powers? I do not believe that God has sent us a disease to teach us a lesson, but is God shaking our idolatrous powers? We are seeing the supposed power of global capitalism be shaken. It is being dethroned. People have a tendency to misunderstand that. We do see some things happening that are calling into judgment.

McCray: What do you think about the tone in which we preach the Gospel in this moment? I recently read a Gardner Taylor — the hush when talking about the resurrection. I felt that in a new way right now. I think there is a role for preaching with passion and conviction, but also this change of landscape has been so overwhelming. We are not even completely into the worst of this yet. We need a hesitation about what we believe because we should have wonder and awe right now. I think about Revelations in which there is a scroll that cannot be unsealed. I am nervous about the preacher who says, "I got this". There needs to be a sense of awe and hush about what we are going to say. I feel like what we are experiencing is that a false center is giving way. I am comforted by the fact that it is false, but the false centers are still scary because they were centers.

Long: In post Enlightenment society, science is our God and management is our sacrament. This will end at some point, and we will go back to the old us, but we have seen how fragile we are. Psalm 82. The overconfidence of preachers is important to recognize too. The glib, cheerful that we sometimes bring to the pulpit. The only appropriate attitude for a preacher to have is embarrassment.,

Ramsey: We went by two words that I want to return to. Exile and blessing. Can we return to that for a minute and reflect on the relationship between the two?

McCray: The exile right now is an exile of time. We have come out of the regimented schedule that we had before. We have moved into this hidden will of God in which our time has been disrupted. On the one hand, we are trying to do everything that we can to have our normal life in a digital version. We are not good at having disruption. Exile means we do not know what we are going to have or who we are going to be on the other side of this. There is a gift that this is a reminder that we are creatures of the visible and the invisible worlds. When people lose their



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sense of place, people have a deeper sense of belonging to God in a way that wasn't discernible beforehand. Christians are amphibious creatures in that we move in each worlds. How do we wrestle with that? **Exile is both painful and an experience of the numinous at its best.**

Long: There is a danger in exile, and there is a deep theological lesson in exile. The danger is assimilation. The lesson is that we really are deprived, for a time, of things that give us life, which makes us weep and yearn for those things again. We took those things for granted. We sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. That experience is not one that American Christians can normally have. That develops a deep hunger within us, and that is a good thing. Preaching is a good way to point that out.

McCray: Those Christians vocations of purposeful withdraw. I am thinking of hermits and Julian of Norwich. People who feel called to step back from life. When I think about my own life, the role of intercession seems to be more central. That's all we can do! I have a friend in a Texas hospital right now, and I ordered flowers not remembering that hospitals will not accept deliveries. The experience of exile is, at its best, an invitation. It is a call to pray. We need to imagine the church as a people who pray together. We are longing for God and praying.

Long: I want to revisit the conversation about tone in the pulpit. We are seeing a lot of streaming services, in which people replicate what they do on Sunday morning. That is fine. Others are experimenting with the medium and doing fireside chat sermons. They are taking advantage of the intimacy of the television screen, so to speak. Theologically, I just listening to Nicholas Harnencourt (spelling). He just released a version of Handel's Messiah that is much more modest. When the singers sing "The glory of the Lord is upon us", the tone is as if they cannot believe it. It is striking that a different Easter tone is embodied in that recording. There should be an amazement about Easter, that it could happen to us in this moment in our history.

Maxell: As we think about new narratives or newly imagined narratives and strip away the pageantry of this moment. Could you talk about some of the ways that we can re envision our narrative?

Long: We are seeing little Easter stories cropping up all around us right now. My daughter lives in Manhattan with her husband. Folks are cheering hospital workers as they leave the hospital to go home. That is not JUST appreciation; it is also a hunger for salvation and healing. We are looking for the hint of the resurrection in the stories of courage and sacrifice and devotion all around us. I would tell those stories. We do not tell stories of our saints enough.

McCray: There are saints in our communities. We need to think about Easter as a moment disheveling. Things are not reordered but thrown apart. There is this opportunity for improvisation and a looseness and lightness in the way that the message comes forth. There can be no rigid or strict reordering. When we have that sense of disheveling, there is room for a deep



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joy that is not triumphalist glee. It is a deeper consciousness. Easter is God's doing, not our doing. It is God's gift not our achievement or work.

Long: The John Easter section is so rich, and I am thinking about it in two ways. John 20, you have four vignettes of people who come to believe in the resurrection, almost like an encyclopedia of ways to come to believe. Then in John 21, everyone has forgotten that John 20 happened. The disciples don't seem to know that Jesus has risen. John almost deconstructs any attempt to end the Easter story. When it looks like things cannot keep going, Easter says no, this is going to keep going.

McCray: I also think of Exercises in Style (book). One of them is telling a story through color, or touch. In this particular moment when we have these walls around us that separate us from other human beings, the way of tactility in the way that we tell the story seems to come to the forefront. The physical sensations of the story seem to demand to be talked about, tapping into the desire for touching and tenderness.

Borneman: How does this change the way we think about who we are preaching to? What do we need to be mindful of right now?

Long: I am thinking of someone who had 90 folks on Sundays and now has 900. I am guessing that many people do not know the story. We live in a culture that has never been told our story. This is an opportunity to spend some time telling the Easter story, as we might tell a child who has never heard it before.

McCray: I think that child component is important. This is a hyper cognitive moment. There is an emphasis on thinking and problem solving. Sheer tenderness, human connection, incarnating emotions and ideas should be central.

Long: Wendell Barry - the art of loading brush - one chapter in that book is a long letter to a scientifically skeptical friend. One of the worst things that has happened to our culture is the temptation to predict the future. We think we can control and manage the future, but we have a God of surprises. The confidence that we have when we preach... we do not know how God will bring life and hope out of our present, but we are confident that it will happen because it has happened so many times. We hope that the God of life will surprise us again.

Ramsey: Let's talk about funerals. Many of us have more funerals than we can bear.

Long: We are no longer going to be able to have funerals in sanctuaries or funeral homes, and they will be attended by few people. We should do a full committal graveside services, but when we gather again finally, we should have memorial services. I could imagine communal memorial services for all who have died in this time. Then, someone present at the graveside funeral could tell the story of the burial. They could tell that story for the imagination of the congregation. In



some places, it is illegal to have funerals. I do not think we should let people be cremated or buried alone. I think we can safely have two or three people. In some cases, we simply might have to wait until we can gather to have funeral services.

Ramsey: I have a strong conviction that, when we emerge from this, this will be an opportunity for church to reintroduce itself to culture. We are starved for depth and connection. What word is needed about how to reintroduce ourselves to culture? What do each of you need that might be instructive?

Long: Poyser (spelling?) said that in a counseling session when a therapist ends a session, there is always an awkward moment when the two people want a blessing. People want a hand placed on their head with blessing. I was checking online about my local grocery store. If I come at 600am, I can shop with other seniors. They asked me not to touch any at the store, and I won't. However, we want touch at a deep level. When we gather together again, touching will be one of the most meaningful experiences that we have. I want the blessing "This is my son. This is my daughter. I am delighted in her, and I am well pleased."

McCray: There is a history in the church of the sermon itself being a kind of blessing. The message itself can bless the hearers. That is an opportunity for now. The blessing that I want to hear is one that says, "You are a new creation." The blessing of being touched and told you are a new creation provides liberation and assurance. How do we reintroduce ourselves? I do not know who we are going to be. It is hard to think about how we are going to reintroduce ourselves after we have been changed in ways that we cannot imagine. I want to think that we reintroduce ourselves as yeast and love and light at work in the world, not fix-it oriented or achievement oriented. We should be gentle and humble in recognizing how hurt the world is.

Long: The woman who came back from the tomb preached the sermon, "Something has happened. Everything has changed!" I wonder if this ordeal is going to reintroduce that the church is in the news business. I have been asking, is there anything in here that proclaims that something has happened, and everything has changed. We need to have the newsworthiness of the Gospel front and center.

Long: I am immersed in a project of writing about parables. Christopher Morris' *The Difference Heaven Makes*. In that book, he goes through the NT and finds references to heaven, and he tries to understand what heaven is. Heaven is not a place where we go. Heaven is the place from which God communicates with us. He ends the book saying, the task of the disciple is to be on hand for that which is at hand but not in hand.

McCray: Evelyn Underhill writings from the war. Tony Morrison. What is really speaking to me is not texts but quilts. There is something about looking at color and pattern and juxtaposition. That is feeding me right now. Harriet Powers quilted and called her quilts her sermons. How is meaning being expressed and how are those tactile things that we are doing bearing life?