Pandemic homiletics? A South African exploration of preaching during the time of the Covid-19 crisis[1]

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Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic confronted the world and South Africans with the challenges of health care and "Zoomification". From the 29th of March 2020 it was, because of the restriction and ban on gatherings, expected from ministers and faith leaders in South Africa to use online technology to preach their sermons. Many preachers had to rethink the format and content of their preaching. The question arose as to what sermons may look like during these times, and specifically the content and God images of the sermons. This chapter examines the sermon content of a purposive sample of ministers from the combined Stellenbosch circuit of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa. Twenty-four sermons were analysed, making use of a combination of the Heidelberg method of sermon analysis and grounded theory in order to identify the core themes of their preaching and the God images used at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the sermons, the researcher asked three questions: Which texts did the preachers choose? What themes emerged from the sermons? With which God images did the preachers work? Using ATLAS.ti, the sermons were coded, topics were identified, and God images were discerned.

> When I began writing these lines
> it was not, to be sure, inspiration but desperation,
> to be alive, to believe again in the love of God.
> The love of God is not a thing one comprehends
> but that by which—and only by which—one is comprehended.
> It is like the child's time of pre-reflective being,
> and like that time, we learn from its lack.
>
> Christian Wiman, *Survival is a Style*

Keywords

Homiletics; pandemic; Covid-19; homiletical theory; God-images; sermon analysis; Heidelberg method

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic is unlike any other situation we have experienced in the past. The challenges for pastors and the leadership in faith communities are of an immense scope and complexity. The question we are faced with is: How do pastors succeed in leading in these uncharted waters and how can they fulfil their moral obligations to love the neighbour and themselves, to encourage and care for their people, and to preach to the faithful in this unprecedented time of uncertainty and despair as they cling to the hope of the gospel message? This in a time where, according to South African president Cyril Ramaphosa, "distinctions of wealth, poverty, nationality, race and class have been rendered meaningless as infections grow in developed and developing countries alike. The Covid-19 pandemic has served as a stark reminder that in our interconnected world, no country and no nation exist for and of itself. It has affirmed once again that realizing a continent and a world free of hunger, want and disease, requires the collective effort of all" (Ramaphosa 2020:1).

On March 15, 2020, President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a national disaster because of the Covid-19 pandemic and placed a ban on gatherings of one hundred or more people. One week later, on March 23, 2020, our president announced a three-week national quarantine. It made many people anxious and insecure and led to much panic, also among ministers. As part of the authorities' response to the Covid-19 crisis, measures such as social distancing, different levels of lockdown, and a national quarantine have been introduced. One of the consequences was that the majority of churches, including the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA),[2] had to close their doors and start looking for alternative forms of worship services (cf. De Bruin 2020; Rossouw 2020). On March 29, 2020, ministers were asked to

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2   The DRC and URCSA are the largest, mostly Afrikaans-speaking Reformed churches in South Africa.

preach from their homes by offering e-worship services by making use of WhatsApp messages, videos, live streaming of worship services, virtual communion celebrations and other forms made possible by technological developments.

In the light of what was happening in faith communities around the country at the beginning of the lockdown period, a first round of pilot research was conducted by the Task Group of Research and Equipment (Dutch Reformed Synod of the Western Cape, South Africa).[3] The following answers emerged from the question that was asked to a random number of ministers: What lives in your heart amid the coronavirus crisis? Some of the answers were: The extent of the disruption is unprecedented; there is a need for credible leaders; a time like this requires deeper reflection on God; the wonderful gift of technology; solidarity amid isolation and prayer; simplicity and repair; what are we hoping for? These responses gathered using the Delphi method clearly show how preachers find themselves in complicated times of what we can call a "quarantine worship" – worship in which preachers had to find their way in the wilderness of new technologies with members who are looking for hope, comfort, and meaning.

From the answers to the question in the previous paragraph, a number of other questions arose. Some of these questions were also formulated, as part of the invitation to the online conference,[4] by the Executive Committee of the Societas Homiletica in the following way (Societas Homiletica 2020:1):

> What can and should preachers say at a time like this, even as conditions continue to develop and change over time? How can sermons bring hope without losing their connection to the reality of suffering among congregants, communities, nations, and the wider world? How can preachers comfort people without using obscure or irrelevant words from seemingly antiquated religious traditions?

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3   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 DRC. The data were collected from pastors in the DRC. 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 consisted of congregations with middle-class or upper middle-class members.

4   As an alternative to meeting physically in Budapest, we decided to host a shorter virtual conference with the theme "Words in a Time of Crisis: Preaching during the COVID-19 Pandemic" on August 10–12, 2020.

> Is lament a possible language for sermons? Should we offer answers
> and reassurance, or should sermons raise open-ended questions?
> When do we provide each or any of these? Which Biblical passages
> offer healing words to wounded people, and which hermeneutical
> strategies are appropriate?

From these questions the central research question of this study was
formulated as follows: What were the texts, the core themes in preaching,
and the God images that came to the fore in the sermons at the start of the
Covid-19 pandemic?

The aim of the study was therefore, on the one hand, to do a substantive
analysis of the texts and the content of the preaching and, on the other
hand, based on the insights gained from the analysis, to discern the God
images that the preachers used in their sermons. In order to answer this
question and achieve the goals, sound theoretical research was undertaken.

2. Methodology

According to Cilliers (2020), there are a variety of methods for sermon
analysis, for example the hermeneutic model developed by Vaessen (1997),
the combination of the Heidelberg model and the Stark model by De Klerk,
De Wet, and Letsosa (2011), and the grounded theory model for inductive
analysis of sermons in order to develop a theory from the data (Pleizier
2010).

The methodology used in the sermon analysis for this study was a
combination of certain elements of the grounded theory model (Charmaz
2006; Pieterse 2011, 2013) (with the administrative support of ATLAS.ti)
and the Heidelberg method. The ATLAS.ti[5] program was initially used to
identify certain key concepts in the texts of the sermons. The grounded
theory model offers an inductive methodology that helps us to group
keywords, themes, and phrases that occur in the sermons into certain
categories or families, binding them together as hermeneutic units. Pieterse

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5   "While ATLAS.ti is a tool primarily used for performing qualitative data analysis, where
     researchers apply codes to collections of unstructured text, it provides functionality for
     identifying and visualizing content that can be used for basic text analysis" (ATLAS.ti
     2020).

(2011, 124) describes the process of grounded theory analysis of sermons as a bottom-up approach that develops in three cycles: "(1) open coding as an inductive exercise, initial identifying of categories and the development of an open coding analytical model; (2) selective coding that is a deductive exercise in which sermons are selectively chosen for analysis on the basis of the hypotheses that are developed in the open coding analytical model; (3) theoretical coding and the construction of a theory of preaching on the theme of the analysis". Pieterse (2011, 124) further describes open coding is "an inductive analysis of what the preacher says, teaches, admonishes, appeals, etc. in the segments […] coded in short sentences. The idea is to move from the code as linguistic designator to concepts in the sense that the codes are treated as indicator for larger conceptual categories." In this chapter, I restrict myself to the first and second cycle, i.e. open coding, and selective coding.

The Heidelberg method can be described as a method derived from research conducted by a homiletic study group at the Practical Theological Seminar of the Karl Rupprecht University of Heidelberg, Germany, during the late 1970s. The Swiss practical theologian Rudolf Bohren, the German writer Gerd Debus, and others had a share in the development of the method. The method makes use of careful reading of sermons, and through the application of rhetorical and theological criteria the method aims to disclose the fundamental hermeneutical structures of sermons (Cilliers 2013).

Put simply, this method asks to what extent the proclaimed Word articulates the Word of God. As a hermeneutic and analytical method, it is, of course, a framework of interpretation. The intention, therefore, is not to be the final word on specific sermons, but rather to open a dialogue about these sermons. Therefore, the researcher sought to understand the preachers' words truly and to understand the crucial and often subconscious hermeneutical decisions that underlie their sermons. The method asks the most basic questions, such as: How is the Bible text implemented in the sermon? Which congregation is supposed? What role does the preacher play? And of particular importance to this chapter: What image of God is represented in the sermon?

3. The texts and core themes

The researcher began by collecting sermons preached during the first month of the lockdown period.[6] The first sermons collected were preached on Sunday, March 22, 2020 and the last sermon on Sunday, May 3, 2020. The collection of sermons forms part of a larger research project for which the researcher obtained permission from the Ethics Committee of Stellenbosch University.[7] The researcher decided to approach the joint Stellenbosch Presbytery of the ministers of the DRC and URCSA as a population.

An email was sent to all the ministers of the Joint Stellenbosch Presbytery, requesting one or two sermons that they preached during the first month of lockdown. Twelve of the ministers responded to the request. In the process, the researcher was able to gather 24 sermons, which consisted of 20 sermons (80%) from DRC ministers and four (20%) from URCSA ministers. Four of the preachers (i.e. 20%) were women. Below is a summary in tabular form (Table 1) of the date of the sermon, the gender of the preacher, the denomination, the text, and the theme, as indicated by the preachers.

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6   The research in this contribution forms part of a larger research project under the working title "Covid-19, Congregations and Communities: A South African Exploration of the Influence of the Coronavirus Pandemic on Congregational and Community Life" in the Department of Practical Theology and Missiology, Stellenbosch University.

7   Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research and Ethics Committee: Social, Behavioural and Education Research, May 26, 2020, Project number: 14996.

Table 1: Denomination, text, and central metaphor

	Date	M/F	Denomi-nation	Text	Theme (central image or metaphor)
1	22-03	F	DRC	1 Sam 16:1–13	Pride and prejudice
2	22-03	M	DRC	Ezek 37:1–14	The blessing of the virus
3	22-03	M	DRC	Mt 6:25–34	Trust amid uncertainty
4	29-03	F	DRC	Rom 8:37–39	God is with God's children amid the crisis
5	29-03	M	URCSA	1 Kings 19:1–12	When expectation and reality are not on par
6	05-04	M	DRC	Mt 21:1–11	Who is this man and what can we expect of him?
7	10-04	M	DRC	Mt 21:1–11	Who is this man and what is his story?
8	10-04	M	DRC	Mt 21:1–11	Who is this man amid the pandemic?
9	10-04	F	DRC	Mt 20:17–28	The cup of our lives and Jesus' cup
10	10-04	M	DRC	Isa 52:13–53:12	Beautiful pain?
11	10-04	F	DRC	Jn 19:28–42	Something frightening about the cross
12	10-04	M	URCSA	Jn 8:31–38	Lock out forever––on freedom
13	10-04	M	DRC	Mt 27:46	He was Godforsaken, we never!
14	12-04	F	DRC	Jn 20:1–18	Turnaround people
15	10-04	M	URCSA	Jn 19:28–30	Tetelestai––it is finished
16	12-04	M	DRC	Jn 20:1–18	Celebrating hope
17	12-04	M	DRC	Lk 24:13–49	Faith without seeing
18	12-04	F	DRC	Jn 20:1–18	When the mist clears up
19	12-04	F	DRC	Lk 24:13–35	Because He lives
20	12-04	M	DRC	Jn 20:15–16	Different reactions
21	19-04	M	DRC	1 Pet 1:3–9	The birth of hope
22	19-04	M	DRC	Col 3:12–17	Love binds us together

| 23 | 26-04 | M | URCSA | Zach 2:1–13 | I am going to live inside you, says the Lord |
| 24 | 03-05 | F | DRC | Rom 12:1–2 | Delivered to the virus |

Four of the sermons were from the Old Testament. Fourteen sermons were preached on Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday. Most of the preachers followed the Revised Common Lectionary, which explains the repetitive use of the same passages.

4.   Coding and analysis

All 24 sermons were coded as part of the first cycle of open coding. At this point it already became clear that two major themes emerged as core networks: first, the pandemic and the accompanying disruption, fear, and anxiety; and second, the Passion and the crucifixion events during which the sermons were preached. It is therefore clear that the sermons were interwoven with this liturgical-theological language. The data were coded in the first round using selective coding and were initially set out as shown in the table below. The researcher first looked at the problem, conflict, or need that the sermons addressed and then paid attention to the hermeneutical strategy used to address the listeners' world and emerging God images. By way of example, only the first eight sermons are tabulated below.

Table 2: The problem and hermeneutic strategy

	Problem, conflict, or need	**Hermeneutic strategy and emerging God images**
1	Pride and prejudice–– we tend to value people on grounds of pedigree and qualifications.	We work and judge according to human conventions, but God looks and acts differently.
		God sees and God works through his Son. Jesus sacrificed his life for us.
2	Could the virus perhaps be a blessing?	The virus stopped us in our tracks and forced us to think about and reflect on our God images. Can God be trusted? Does he worry about us?
		The God image depends on our acts.

3	Worry as preoccupation with the future	Too much fear and anxiety paralyze us and steal our energy. Therefore, we have to trust amid anxiety.
		God acts in the background. The physical is on the foreground and the spiritual in the background.
4	The fear of dying and the fear of loss of income	There are many things that people fear at this time depending on their circumstances, but it is especially death and loss of income.
		Through the lockdown God gives us new opportunities.
5	The fear of expectations not realized	We are not in control (like Elijah), so disappointment sets in and we fall into depression.
		God might/can be of help, also amid the Covid-19 crisis.
6	Who is this man (Jesus) and what can we expect of Him?	Amid the pandemic we ask, what can Jesus do to our situation? In what ways can He help us?
		Jesus was fully human and identified with fear and anxiety. He was radical and did not conform to the system.
7	Can we trust the story of this man? Is it not all fake news?	We live from stories. It is important to decide which story we choose to live from.
		We must discern who this unknown Jesus (God) is––what is his story?
8	Who is this man amid the pandemic?	We hailed Jesus as King, but shortly thereafter we crucified Him.
		Jesus sacrificed his life for us.

It is clear that most of the sermons were determined, or at least influenced, by the reality of the Covid-19 pandemic. In almost every single sermon there were references to the pandemic and concepts related to the pandemic, such as fear and anxiety. One could even say that the pandemic (first column) is the *heuristic principle* in these sermons. The pandemic therefore calls forth certain *hermeneutic strategies* (the second column) that emerged in the sermons and gave birth to certain images of God.

5.   Fear and desire as hermeneutic key

Looking at this basic structure of the sermons through the lens of Helmut Rosa's (2019) distinction between two approaches or relationships to life, namely fear (alienation) and desire (resonance), helps one to understand what is happening in the sermons from a sociological perspective.

According to Rosa (2019:174), human fear and anxiety lead to different forms of alienation, which he describes in the following way: "Alienation denotes a specific form of relationship to the world in which subject and world confront each other with indifference or hostility (repulsion) and thus without any inner connection … Alienation thus indicates a state in which the world cannot be "adaptively transformed" and so always appears cold, rigid, repulsive, and non-responsive". One could say this is exactly what the Covid-19 pandemic did to all of us.

On the other hand, we find desire, which leads to different forms of resonance. Rosa (2019:164) writes: "Resonance therefore constitutes the "other" of alienation – its antithesis … human beings are existentially shaped by their longing for resonant relationships. Human desire can thus be interpreted as desire for resonance." Although Rosa (2019:168) develops a "sociology of our relationship to the world", it does not take much imagination to make the theological link to the fact that our "desire for resonance" as people of faith is ultimately linked with our desire for God. In fact, he also refers to it when he writes: "something appeals to us or makes demands on us, and this "something" can take on highly different forms depending on our underlying cognitive map or the prevailing cultural interpretation of the self. It can be God (or a god) or history, reason, class, or even nature or art. In every case, however, it functions as a "constitutive good", as it defines our value-directed relationship to the world" (Rosa 2019:133–134). What was therefore of special interest to the researcher was the way the God images function in the sermons as forms of resonance. These God images are discussed in the next section as part of an emerging theory of God images in the sermons.

6. Analysing the God images in the sermons

With a better understanding of the content of most of the sermons in terms of fear (alienation) and desire (resonance), the next step was to analyse the God images found in the sermons. Here the researcher used the Heidelberg method. One of the aims of this method is to reveal the underlying hermeneutic structures that form the core of the sermons.

In the interplay between Christian spirituality, preaching, and the existential realities of life, it becomes clear that the quality of faith is

fundamentally determined by the content of faith and the metaphorical value of prevailing conceptualizations about God. Preachers and believers make choices every day and must take responsibility for the quality of their lives. In this respect, images of God are formed within the interplay between preaching, the content of faith, and different religious, philosophical, and cultural contexts. The encoding and decoding of the significance, meaning, and value of God images is one of the greatest challenges to preaching, as is the deconstruction of those same images. The basic assumption is that an integrated theory for preaching is determined by appropriate or inappropriate God images. God images can heal human beings, but they can also lead to moralism and an unhealthy spirituality (Louw 2016).

In respect of God images, Cilliers (2020:92) writes:

> It also calls for a certain humility when we speak about God. We should resist our tendency to proclaim "The Truth" as if we have it in our grips. We should be careful not to construct fixed and fixated God-images. Many of these images are constructed to fit into our agendas. Of course, we cannot do without God-images; likewise as theologians we are constantly called upon to create God-images. We are simultaneously called to dismantle them. We are called to create God-images, to break them down; to imagine God-images, so that we can re-imagine them; to set up God-images, knowing that these images cannot be controlled, secured, or encapsulated in time.

If you read the Bible, you soon realize that it is impossible to find one metaphor or single image for God that is all-inclusive. Each of the various images of God is embedded in a variety of narratives that one finds in both testaments, which are considered the canon of the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, if one works with a theological-hermeneutical point of departure, the question is not whether there are false or true images of God. It is rather a case of whether one can link the images of God to people's (the preachers') sincere search for the meaning and purpose of life and their critical reflection on them by taking into consideration, on the one hand, the different metaphors for God and, on the other hand, people's existential need in suffering (as during the Covid-19 pandemic).

The sermons that were preached during the first month of lockdown by ministers of the Presbytery of Stellenbosch can be described by using the

following metaphors: The researcher found that some sermons had an image of *God's immediacy*, or of a God who is actively working (Sermon 1: Seeing God; God is active at work), therefore a realistic God image (*Deus realis*). Often, this active, real image of God was also presented as an alternative ("different"); so an *active, real, alternative* God.

Sermon 6, for example, spoke of the "radical otherness", which calls for a different attitude towards life during the pandemic. A good example of this "otherness" of God speaks of the "beautiful pain" of Good Friday (Sermon 10). The "life" that Jesus offers is opposed to the restriction of "lockdown" (sermons 14 and 19). So real are the actions of this God that salvation is already a completed reality ("accomplished", Sermon 18).

Some sermons had more of a *mediated image* of God: (Sermon 2: Our "actions" determine our God images, especially during the pandemic period). Our "actions" (first word in Sermon 2) therefore mediate the God images. Some sermons dualistically distinguished between foreground and background, with the "spiritual" in the background and the "physical" in the foreground, with God mainly in the background. In this sense, this is perhaps a kind of moving away from the "earthly things" during the pandemic (Sermon 3).

Some sermons saw the "lockdown" as opportunities, which are given as *gifts from God*, for example sermons 20 and 21 (new search for "sense"); Sermon 22 (new opportunity to bond in love); Sermon 24 (new opportunity to change your mind / mind). Indeed, many sermons reckon that things in the "foreground" (everything surrounding the pandemic) should be seen as positive, and not escaped, but rather be seen as the point of departure for new possibilities (Sermon 4). Many of the resurrection sermons also fell into this category. Here and there, the image of God is so strongly determined by this that God becomes a potential (*Deus potentialis*), who "wants to" do things, but it is not yet clear whether this is reality (Sermon 5)

Many sermons worked with the call that we should "look" deeper, and "see" more, but not so that the image of God shifts to the background (out of life), but rather so that it brings the reality of life itself in relation to this God. God is within these realities (Sermon 23), but as *Deus incognito*, which must be distinguished. "Fake news" must therefore be distinguished (sermons 7,

8, 17). One sermon explicitly related the "seeing" to the sensory/bodily, that is to say in the foreground (Sermon 16), even if this body is restricted.

Some sermons had an *underlying tension* between gospel and law, rather than integration. The "cup" that Jesus drinks is, for example, presented as gospel/liberation, but also as "law", with the (impossible) question: Are we "willing" to drink this cup? (Sermon 9). The term "cup" becomes a kind of rhetorical code throughout the sermon, somewhat detached from the rest of the text. The same could be said of a sermon that uses the term "lockdown" to speak of "total lockout" as liberation (gospel), but then also as a question: Are you truly free? And, do you set other people free? This tension was also found in Sermon 15, with sentences such as, "Do you believe this? Whether we truly believe it depends on how we live". The preacher named this hope "faith", which is constituted by the quality of our lifestyle. Later he turned it around again: Jesus rose so that we can live with hope.

Some sermons had a strong *compassionate image of God*: God himself is the suffering God, although we can only speak with hesitation about this (Sermon 11). Even the loneliest person during lockdown is not as lonely as Jesus was (Sermon 13).

7. The impact of God images through presencing

Within the homiletic event and processes, the theological and hermeneutical question at stake is: How is God understood, interpreted, and applied from the perspective of the Christian faith tradition? In this respect, the confessions of the different ecclesial traditions play a decisive role. Fundamental in homiletics is therefore the systematic or dogmatic premises that shape the cognitive (dimension of reason), conative (the dimension of decision making, intention, motivation, willpower), affective (the dimension of experiencing, feeling, sensing), and being (the ontic dimension of disposition and existential orientation in life as well as the meaning dimension of vocation, calling, signifying, and hoping) dimensions (Louw 2016).

In order to put the previous assumptions over into a diagnosis regarding the quality and impact of preaching (keeping in mind that the communication processes are in terms of the discipline of practical theology about a praxis

of encountering and sensing of God in terms of the challenges of existential life events), the study had to deal with what can be called the "presencing" of God in the happenstances of life, very specifically in settings of suffering that shape faith experiences and can be called a kind of spiritual testing of the quality of faith engagements and faith behaviour.

"Presencing" forms a central category in this regard and by that is meant an encounter in which the past, present, and future intersect in such a way that sensation and the present moment coincide. This sensation then creates the experience of purposefulness and meaningfulness.[8] The whole idea of using "presencing" rather than merely the "presence of God" is that God's presence or "being-there" is now portrayed in terms of existential networks and through relational categories. By this is meant categories in which people acknowledge that God is faithful and just and that involve not only the people's thoughts and minds, but also all the different dimensions and functions of being human. Sensuality itself is part of the "how of God" in people's different life circumstances. Therefore, where people trust God and reflect on the meaning of everyday events through theological reflection (a hermeneutics of purposefulness), the awareness of the richness and variety of divine intervention coincides. This further results in a linear understanding of time also giving way to a spiral interpretation and circularity.

Assessing the impact of God images on human and faith behaviour is indeed complex. The first step is not to try to make a moral and ethical assessment, i.e. whether the God image is right or wrong (the problem of ecclesial orthodoxy). In fact, there is no right or wrong God image. Within a homiletic and paracletic hermeneutics, it is about the question whether the God image is appropriate or inappropriate, i.e. contributing to meaning giving and hoping or to disintegration of behaviour in terms of spiritual pathology (dread, fear, manipulation, depression, despair, anxiety). The

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8   According to Kempen (2015:140–141), "presencing" shifts the place of observation to a future possibility that is emerging, a so-called 'emerging future. Presencing is a blended word combining sensing (feeling the future possibility) and presence (the state of being in the present moment) … the boundaries between three types of presence collapse: the presence of the past (current field), the presence of the future (the emerging field of the future), and the presence of one's authentic Self. When this co-presence, or merging of the three types of presence, begins to resonate, we experience a profound shift, a change of the place from which we operate.

second step is to develop a kind of spiritual and theological chart that can serve as directive for making a spiritual assessment of a homiletic and paracletic praxis of wording God in terms of the existential challenges in life. For this reason, a diagnostic tool has been developed and is presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Theological chart of God images

	A	B	C	D	E	F
Metaphor	Philosophical tradition God as: Architect Creator (sermons 1, 14, 19)	Monarchical tradition God as: King Emperor Ruler (sermons 5, 23)	Judicial and military tradition God as: Judge Warrior Guard (sermons 2, 3, 9)	Family tradition God as: Parent Mother Father (sermon 4)	Covenantal tradition God as: Confidant Host Partner for life (sermons 18, 20, 21, 22, 24)	Intimate tradition God as: Soul friend Comforter Counsellor (sermons 6, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17)
Theo-logical principle	Ontology: being of God Cosmic plan/will of God Meta-realm of destiny/teleology	Power of God Omnipotence Authority	Justice Order Judgement (Torah as codex)	Discipline Edification Pedagogy	Faithfulness Intervention	Grace Atonement Sacrifice
God's involve-ment	Providence	Empowerment Presence or absence	Punishment Restoration Protection	Transformation Guidance Directing	Hospitality Embracement Acknowledgement	Co-suffering Vicariousness
Human experience of suffering and comfort	Caring presence Determinism	Awe Devotion Piety Rejection	Guilt Shame Guilt feelings	Growth Change Spiritual maturity	Affirmation Sense of belonging	Consolation Compassion
Psycho-spiritual impact	Trust as well-being Isolation Loneliness Helplessness Dependency Victim	Awareness of safety Trust Sense of belongingness Anxiety Resistance Anger	Self-understanding Confession Reconciliation Forgiveness Peace Liberation	Endurance Resilience Courage Spiritual growth	Commitment Trusting	Gratitude Joy Hope Lament

Six metaphorical categories are identified:

a) Metaphors that refer to the philosophical tradition. Due to its close connection to philosophy and very specifically the Hellenistic tradition, God has been interpreted as the *Architect* of life. God the *Creator* of the cosmos is in control of life and can be rendered as the origin of life. In terms of metaphysics, God is the Great Beyond and the source of all being

b) Metaphors that refer to the monarchical tradition wherein God is viewed as *King* and *Ruler/Emperor* of the universe

c) Metaphors that link God to ethical and moral issues within a judicial and military framework of interpretation, hence the reference to God as *Judge*, even as *Warrior* and Guard in the Old Testament (see the wrath of God)

d) Metaphors that associate God with gender and patriarchal categories stemming from the family tradition: God as *Father, Mother,* or *Parent*

e) Metaphors that are closely linked to the covenantal tradition (the promise "I will be your God"): God as *Confidant, Host,* and *Partner for Life*

f) Metaphors that indicate a very close and intimate relationship with God: God as *Soul Friend* and *Comforter/Counsellor*. The latter can lead to encouragement when for example one discovers hospitality as a core issue in the covenantal encounter between God and Human beings (Louw 2016).

From this categorization several things become clear. Firstly, the assessment of the God images is not about right or wrong, but about the appropriateness of God's presence or absence, intimate care, or remote ignorance. Secondly, due to the notion of the *passio Dei* and the reflection on the coming festivity of Passover, the most prominent God images – God as Host and Guide of life (affirmation and sense of belonging) and God as Co-sufferer and Comforter (compassion and consolation) – were quite dominant throughout most of the sermons. Thirdly, it is clear that the human experience of suffering and the need for care and comfort (because of the Covid-19 pandemic) are met by affirmation, a sense of belonging, commitment, trust as well as consolation, compassion, gratitude, joy, hope, and lament. All of these aspects were found in the sermons. Fourthly, although the sermons were categorized according to the main metaphor

in the different groupings above, it is also a case that many of the preachers used more than one God image in the same sermon, moving between God as judge to God as comforter (sermons 2 and 9). There were indeed a fluidity and a flexible use of God images. Fifthly, spiritual disciplines, rituals, and contemplation help the listeners to discover a new identity as children of God and calls forth service and discipleship, flowing over to serve the body of Christ in congregations and communities.

8. Theological reflection on pandemic preaching

In a last round of theological reflection, it became clear in the light of the discussion in the previous section that meta- and omni-categories are not appropriate to articulate the "presencing" of God anymore. What is most needed is the challenge of dealing with multi-dimensionality. This challenge turns to the different encountering narratives in the biblical account regarding the multifaceted countenance of God. Instead of the traditional *missio Dei*, the emphasis is therefore on the *passio Dei*, hence the importance of *theopaschitic thinking* rather than *metaphysical thinking*. The latter also implies a paradigm shift from analytical causative thinking to integrative circular thinking (Louw 2016).

As early as the 1980s, Moltmann (1980) already pointed out the need to reinterpret the categories used by many ecclesiastical creeds and systematic theology. He wanted to do this in order to revisit and re-describe the dynamics of the Divine Entity, about "Being God". In the 20th century, it gradually became clear that meta- and omni-categories were no longer suitable for articulating the "presencing" of God into words. The Godhead is mostly defined in terms of strictly ontic categories and many prescriptive dogmatic characteristics. In other words, God was described as a Supreme Being and from this developed all sorts of abstract definitions about the essence of God and the so-called divine attributes such as the omnipotence and omniscience of God. Language was used that described the "what" of God in substantial categories in terms of the ontology or essence of God. On the other hand, there is the challenge the so-called network society with its contemporary functional and global thinking poses to theology, namely, to concentrate instead on the "how" of God (God being there where humans are and therefore God's presencing).

The New Testament scholar Tom Wright, in a very recent contribution (2020), also points to the suffering of Jesus (*passio Dei*) and therefore *theopaschitic thinking* as the pivotal insight in terms of understanding God. According to Wright (2020), it is very clear in the New Testament that Jesus is placed at the centre of everything and that one should work from Him to the outside. Therefore, it is also very dangerous to look at the world around us and come to conclusions about God's involvement in a pandemic, but to leave Jesus out of the picture. There are indeed many discussions about what God is doing in and through the Covid-19 pandemic and people then accept that God is "sovereign" and work on the assumption that everyone knows what is meant by this sovereignty. Jesus, on the other hand, reveals a different meaning of sovereignty – a sovereignty revealed in the way Jesus treats a leper and acquits a woman caught in adultery (Wright 2020).

Jesus' followers, especially in the Gospel of John, saw Jesus' death and resurrection as the ultimate "sign", and to conclude what God is saying about a pandemic or anything else without going through the story of the gospel is to deduce something about God behind Jesus' back. So, what God wants to say to us about the pandemic will come to us Jesus-shaped, and therefore Jesus' call to salvation has redefined authority and power for all times. Therefore, it is not for nothing that when Jesus speaks of God exercising control over and being in charge of the world, He helps us to rethink the concepts of "kingdom, control, and sovereignty" in light of his death on the cross. We expect God to be in charge and to take control and get things done, but the God we see in Jesus is the God who weeps at the tomb of his friend Lazarus. Therefore, it is also our calling, to be in prayer, prayers without words at the place where the world is in pain (Wright 2020).

It is interesting to find in an analysis done in another part of the world similar echoes of what was discussed in the previous section. Linder (2020), who conducted a survey of 24 congregations whose services or sermons were posted online in the USA, is not specifically referring to God images, but sees the vulnerability of the preachers and even in the preaching context. She writes (Linder 2020:1):

> These sermons revealed a wide array of approaches to pandemic
> preaching. Pastors and rabbis presided in *empty worship spaces*
> in order to offer continuity and the comfort of place, while others

preached in front of altars constructed in dining rooms, rec rooms that double as recording studios, or in their backyards. In both the cavernous public spaces and the intimate home settings, *these speakers appeared unusually small, vulnerable, poignantly human*. Their messages were rooted deep in text and tradition, rehearsing ancient narratives word for word, while at the same time reaching wide to embrace the hard truths of our context. Enduring truths of the traditions were tested yet again by the shadow of *contemporary suffering*. There was *little of the congratulatory triumphalism* that high production values and packed pews can lend a holiday celebration in ordinary time. Instead, the *humbling gravity* of the historical moment was the occasion for attentive preachers and teachers to find surprising insight in familiar texts – to discover new wisdom in the *pauses and hesitations*, the *uncertainty and anxiety* that were always present in these accounts, but easily lost in the glare of sunnier seasons and over-confident preachers (own emphasis).

To conclude this section, I would like to return to the thoughts of Moltmann, which help us to understand the idea of a compassionate God who is with us and moves into the weakness and vulnerability of human suffering. This image of God also plays a crucial role in terms of understanding what is meant by divine hospitality. Therefore, according to him, one finds a paradigm shift in the Trinitarian thinking from authoritative domination to togetherness and community (*koinonia*) where victory makes place for participation and production for empathic listening. In this way, the influence of positivist thinking (metaphysical thinking) on our images of God is left behind and spaces are opened up for the dynamics of network thinking (theopaschitic thinking) that can help us find new ways to address the issues of inhuman suffering and the destruction and destabilization of the cosmos.

9. Conclusion

The study discussed in this chapter was based on the following research question: What were the texts, the core themes in preaching, and the God images that came to the fore in the sermons at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic? In order to answer the research question, 24 sermons gathered

from ministers in the Stellenbosch Presbytery were coded as part of the first cycle of open coding. At this point it already became clear that two major themes emerged as core networks: first, the pandemic and the accompanying disruption, fear, and anxiety; and second, the Passion and the crucifixion events during which the sermons were preached. The next step was to analyse the God images the researcher found in the sermons by making use of the Heidelberg method of sermon analysis. Different images came to the fore revolving around God's immediacy, God who is active at work, mediated images of God, and even images of God as absent. Thereafter, the impact of God images through presencing was discussed by making use of a diagnostic tool for the analysis of God images. Finally, the strings were brought together by looking at some theological reflections on pandemic preaching.

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