

AQUINAS INSTITUTE OF THEOLOGY

**APOPHATIC PREACHING:
EVOKING THE NOTHING,
SUBVERTING THE IDOLATROUS MIND**

Louis J. Milone, M.A.P.S.

**A Thesis Project Presented to the Faculty of the
Aquinas Institute of Theology, St. Louis, Missouri,
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree Doctor of Ministry in Preaching**

2023

THESIS PROJECT COMMITTEE

Sara Fairbanks, O.P., Ph.D., Associate Professor of Preaching and Theology, Adviser

Mark S. Burrows, Ph.D., Reader

Doctor of Ministry Committee:

Gregory Heille, O.P., D.Min., Professor of Preaching and Evangelization (chair)

Nathan Chase, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of Liturgy and Sacramental Theology

Sara Fairbanks, O.P., Ph.D., Associate Professor of Preaching and Theology

Carolyn Wright, D.Min., Assistant Professor of Pastoral Theology

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: A Tradition Absent from the Pulpit	1
Chapter 2: What is Apophatic Contemplation?	23
Chapter 3: To Speak Nothing: Toward A Negative Theopoetics	65
Chapter 4: An Apophatic Homiletic	101
Chapter 5: <i>Nihil</i> in Homiletic Ministry	151
Appendix 1: Apophatic Sermons from the Ministerial Intervention	185
Appendix 2: Guidelines for Apophatic Preaching	207
Appendix 3: Adapted Celebration of the Word during RCIA Catechesis	208
Appendix 4: Post-Preaching Survey	209
Appendix 5: Post-Intervention Questionnaire	210
Appendix 6: Consent Form	211
Appendix 7: Apophatic Preaching Survey Results	212
Appendix 8: Post-Intervention Questionnaire Results	287
Bibliography	290
Biography of the Author	294

ABSTRACT

APOPHATIC PREACHING: EVOKING THE NOTHING, SUBVERTING THE IDOLATROUS MIND

Milone, Louis J., MA.P.S., D.Min. Aquinas Institute of Theology, 2024.

This thesis concerns the nature and experience of apophatic preaching, which can play a role in revitalizing the practice of contemporary preaching by making space for congregations to encounter the mystery of God. Apophatic preaching can subvert idolatrous concepts, which prevent this encounter. I describe apophatic preaching as preaching nothing (content) in nothing (prayer) with nothing (language).

My thesis aims to test the effectiveness of apophatic preaching in evoking an experience of the mystery of God by negative language inspired by Christian apophatic mystics. To be more specific, I intend for apophatic preaching to help congregations become self-critical of their understanding of God, appreciate that God transcends reasoning, learn the practice of letting go of habits of selfishness and ways of seeing God, and see prayer in terms of interior silence.

I tested apophatic preaching with an RCIA group at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, DC. I tested how this group experienced a series of eight sermons in March and April of 2022. I tested how the group experienced apophatic preaching with a survey the group answered after every sermon. The survey had both “yes or no” and open-ended questions. I then administered a three-question survey to a subset of the RCIA group after the initial preaching series concluded. Finally, I invited an observer to all the sermons and asked for this person’s observations in an informal interview and over email.

This thesis contributes to the field of homiletics by describing apophatic preaching, employing it in preaching, and testing its effectiveness. As a result of this process, I discovered that apophatic preaching could make a congregation pay attention and engage with a message as it both subverts fossilized images of God and evokes the divine mystery present with the congregation.

Chapter 1

A Tradition Absent from The Pulpit

How do we preach God today? As more and more people leave the Church, this becomes a pressing issue. How we proclaim the Gospel may be one dimension of why many faithful have left the church, and fewer on the “outside” are attracted to the Christian faith. For, in and out of the church, people talk about God cheaply: coddling the ego with false comforts, ignoring the world’s all-too-senseless suffering, or turning from the radically subversive reality of transcendence. Catholic preaching often has tended towards moralizing, religious platitudes, or academic doctrinal discourse. Rarely has it focused on what it is like to live the Gospel in real life, how God eludes our understanding, or what it means to pray profoundly. Studies consistently demonstrate the importance congregations place on engaging preaching. Besides the Eucharist, the homily is the only spirituality many Catholics receive. About the homily, Pope Francis states,

We know that the faithful attach great importance to it, and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case. The homily can actually be an intense and happy experience of the Spirit, a consoling encounter with God’s word, a constant source of renewal and growth.¹

I contend that this homiletic suffering arises from a particular problem. A moralizing, insipid, or punishing sermon stems from conceptual idolatry, namely,

¹ Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (24 November 2013), (New York, Image, 2014) 135.

thinking God is the way our ideas say. Regrettably, we have many wrong ideas about God. For instance, we think God is male or that God is a distant judge who punishes us with pain and suffering. Preaching with these bad ideas creates, at best, boring homilies and, at worst, condemnatory homilies. Ultimately, uninspiring preaching often reflects uninspired preachers who demonstrate a lack of divine experience and fall prey to the illusion that our concepts of God are identical to God's actual reality. We have forgotten the “is” and the “is not” of our religious language about God. We are so used to saying what God is that we have forgotten that God really is not, that is, God is not what you or I think. God is love yet this is transcendent love, that is, beyond anything we could ever hope to understand by the word “love.”

I, too, as a lifelong Catholic, can resonate with Pope Francis’ appraisal of preaching, having suffered through countless Sunday, weekday, baptismal, funerary, and marital homilies. Even in my present ministry at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, DC, the preaching often fails to connect with people. Many priests, deacons, seminarians, and bishops pass through the cathedral. We experience many different preachers. While the homilies are not all bad, many are, at least, forgettable. Occasionally, some preachers rise to the occasion. But that is part of the problem. It is notable when I hear a good homily.

St. Matthew’s is the seat of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC. The cathedral parish is close to the White House and other important federal government buildings. As such, the cathedral is in the heart of the city of Washington, DC. The cathedral is an urban parish in location and its modus operandi. Thus, the parish has many scheduled

offerings of Mass and confession daily to accommodate DC residents, those who work in DC, and visitors to the nation's capital.

The parish includes about three-thousand families ranging across economic classes and four generations. Among them is a significant Hispanic population. Nevertheless, the congregation is still predominantly white and middle to upper-middle class. This larger group tends to be young adults (roughly twenty to forty) and older (over sixty). Additionally, the cathedral counts several thousand people as "friends of the cathedral," people who may not be active parishioners but still have some connection to the cathedral. Thus, St. Matthew's has an incredible reach beyond its immediate parish boundaries.

Additionally, I began ministering at the cathedral professionally in late October 2021. Previously, I ministered at a parish in suburban Maryland for fourteen years, doing adult spiritual formation. Therefore, I do not know most of St. Matthew's parishioners. But I am pretty familiar with the regular preachings in the parish.

This is the problem arising in the context of the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle: the community of the cathedral often receives preaching that does not recognize the challenge of "speaking" of God and proclaiming the Word in ways that connect parishioners' lives with the radical message of the Gospel.

An Unlikely Solution

I suggest that the Christian apophatic tradition plays a role in revitalizing Catholic preaching. This might seem like an unlikely suggestion, though it seems that the Church has not often thought of it. Indeed, the Church neglects if it has not altogether forgotten

its apophatic heritage. Of course, this has not always been the case since many through the ages—like Meister Eckhart in the later Middle Ages—championed this tradition.

The apophatic tradition of theology and spirituality rests on the firm conviction that God transcends all names, ideas, thinking, emotions, experience, and, ultimately, being. Through the centuries, Christians such as Pseudo-Dionysius (the Areopagite), Evagrius Ponticus, John Scotus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, Marguerite Porete, Henry Suso, John Tauler, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, and St. John of the Cross held this conviction about the incomprehensible mystery of God. Apophasis or negative theology appears in the writings and lives of various other theologians and mystics, including St. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Rahner, SJ.

Theologians regularly affirm the absolute mystery of God. Yet too few take it as seriously as it deserves. St. Thomas Aquinas states the matter laconically: “But God, whose being is infinite...is infinitely knowable. Now no created intellect can know God infinitely.”² For Aquinas, our minds know through the senses, and the senses cannot reach that which transcends them: “Our natural knowledge begins from sense. Hence our natural knowledge can go as far as it can be led by sensible things. But our mind cannot be led by sense so far as to see the essence of God.”³ So what we say about God is more unlike God than like God since our language is based on what we sense. Nevertheless, Aquinas does allow for positive knowledge of God such that we can know *that God is* but insists that only revelation discloses *how God is toward us*.

² Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*. New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947, ST I, Q. 12, A. 7, *corpus*.

³ *Ibid.*, ST I, Q. 12, A. 12, *corpus*.

Sr. Elizabeth Johnson, a contemporary Professor of Theology at Fordham University, offers a contemporary take on the issue of God's incomprehensibility. In her article "The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female," she discusses the unknowability of God:

God as God—source, redeemer, and goal of all—is illimitable mystery who, while immanently present, cannot be measured or controlled. The doctrine of divine incomprehensibility is a corollary of this divine transcendence. In essence, God's unlikeness to the corporal and spiritual finite world is total; hence we simply cannot understand God. No human concept, word, or image, all of which originate in experience of created reality, can circumscribe the divine reality, nor can any human construct express with any measure of adequacy the mystery of God, who is ineffable. This situation is due not to some reluctance on the part of God to self-reveal in a full way, nor to the sinful condition of the human race making reception of such a revelation impossible, nor even to our contemporary mentality of skepticism in religious matters. Rather, it is proper to God as God to transcend all direct similarity to creatures, and thus never to be known comprehensively or essentially as God.⁴

Johnson unfurls a simple theological datum: God is God and therefore, utterly beyond us. She uses words like "ineffable" and "incomprehensible" to unpack the notion of divine transcendence. The apophatic way takes this theology as central to and conditioning all theological statements, whether in catechisms, encyclicals, academic books, or homilies. Indeed, Johnson brings out the problem facing all theological communication that ignores the divine incomprehensibility: "the need to preach and interpret has resulted in words becoming too clear and ideas too distinct, almost as if they were direct transcripts of divine reality."⁵ I believe this is a core issue facing Catholic preaching, which I will return to shortly.

⁴ Elizabeth Johnson, "The Incomprehensibility of God and The Image of God Male and Female," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 441.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 441-442.

God is unknowable. Yet, we can still preach, talk about God, and theologize. The divine incomprehensibility does not cut off all knowledge and speech but means that we should not restrict ourselves to only certain words, ideas, and images for God. Human communication remains necessary because that is how we receive knowledge of God; it is how we come to experience the Gospel. Thus, the kataphatic way, which positively assigns names to God, is valuable. The apophatic and the kataphatic work together.

But trouble sets in when preaching dwells solely in the kataphatic and forgets the apophatic. For example, Sandra Schneiders, a biblical scholar, notes how “the ‘fatherhood’ of God has been used to justify patriarchy or father-rule, the social system which sacralizes male domination and legitimates virtually all forms of oppression of the weak by the strong.”⁶ Here the kataphatic tradition, when the apophatic does not remind it that God is incomprehensible and so we can use any name for the divine, confuses maleness with God to such an extent that the church believes God can only be a man.

While the category of apophasis developed hundreds of years after the Gospels were written, Jesus displays a crucial apophatic thrust in his preaching. The parables are examples of apophatic “preaching” as they make us question our preconceived ideas about God and open up a new relationship with God. The parables deconstruct barriers in our minds, undermining our everyday assumptions about reality. From an apophatic-mystical perspective, I suggest we can see the parables pushing disciples into deeper levels of paradox and mystery until they break through to the oneness of self and God.

⁶ Sandra M. Schneiders, *Women and the Word: The Gender of God in the New Testament and the Spirituality of Women* (NY: Paulist Press, 1986), 6.

Jesus teaches and shows his disciples how to practice the negative way by losing self, not judging, secret prayer, and poverty of spirit. Furthermore, Jesus calls on God as “heavenly,” a Hebrew way of respecting God’s transcendence. This same God is hidden and secret, as Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount (see Matthew 6:1-8 and Matthew 6:16-18).

For Jesus, apophasis was a way of living; I suggest it is a way of living the cross, letting go, dying to self, and awakening to divine life. This coheres with the “experienced” crucifixion of the apostle Paul: “For I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me...,” etc. (Gal. 2. 19f.).

Beverly Lanzetta, a theologian, and author, boldly claims: “Christ is the ‘emptiness’ of God taken form.”⁷ Christ crucified reveals how God transcends all names, categories, and theologies. In fact, on the cross, we see Jesus showing us the nothingness of God, which means God is not a thing and God transcends being itself. Lanzetta elaborates,

The embodiment of emptiness that Jesus defends is everywhere evident in the Gospel accounts of his life. He incarnates a theistic nothingness, a christocentric nothingness, which opens out into the world and that is the antithesis of every claim and final name. He incarnates in form the emptiness of form. He demonstrates on the cross the sacrifice of theism: the God who dies to God-name. His kenosis expresses the emptying of divinity.... God’s shattering of the revelatory paradigm of divinity on the cross. God dies to God’s names: the intradivine emptiness is imprinted into matter... Christ reveals a God of unnamings, a God who subverts God’s names. Death on the cross is Absolute Unsayings.⁸

⁷ Beverly Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 87.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 88-89.

Jesus gives flesh to the divine emptiness and nothingness. Jesus as the self-emptying of God, of course, finds clear scriptural warrant in the hymn of Philippians 2:6-11, in which one reads, “[Jesus] emptied himself” (Philippians 2:7). Christ crucified, summing up the way of kingdom living Jesus taught throughout his life, demonstrates the centrality of Christian apophasis, even though, again, the category and the specific vocabulary of the apophatic tradition developed later.

St. John of the Cross, a sixteenth-century Christian mystic, is an outstanding example of the Christian apophatic way. In one of his letters, he addresses Maria of Jesus, the prioress of a community of Discalced Carmelite nuns in Cordoba. In this letter, John advises her about the spiritual formation of the sisters in her care. He cuts to the core of the apophatic way, beyond an intellectual discipline, as a contemplative way of following Jesus’ teaching on self-denial:

See to it that they preserve the spirit of poverty and contempt for all things, with the desire to be content with God alone. If they don’t be assured that they will fall into a thousand spiritual and temporal necessities. And keep in mind that they will neither have nor feel any more needs than those to which they desire to submit their hearts. For the poor in spirit are happier and more constant in the midst of want because they have placed their all in nothingness, and in all things they thus find freedom of heart. O happy nothingness, and happy hiding place of the heart! For the heart has such power that it subjects all things to itself; this it does by desiring to be subject to nothing and losing all care so as to burn more in love.⁹

The Christian apophatic way focuses one on God alone. John questions the nuns’ desires. Do they, and by implication do we, want God and only God? Do we desire God as God truly is, beyond all thinking, experience, and being? Near the end of this letter, John exclaims, “O happy nothingness!” He is talking about the soul’s interior and an “inner

⁹ *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, trans. Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1991), 751.

apophasis” in our experience. We discover the unity with the incomprehensible mystery of God in the freedom of a “happy nothingness.” This nothingness means one lets go of attachments and inordinate desires to center on God alone. This is the meaning of his disturbing word, “contempt.” It is not hatred for the world but detachment from all clinging to the things of the world to love the world.

God is mysterious, unknown, yet infinitely knowable. This is the central tenet of a venerable tradition in Christianity: the apophatic tradition. “Apophatic” means negation. It is a way of doing theology by prioritizing divine incomprehensibility and mystery. But it is also a way of spiritual living. Hence, I add another qualifier: it is the apophatic *contemplative* tradition: a form of praying and communing with God characterized by unknowing. The tradition of Christian apophatic contemplation says God is beyond all things, even the human mind. Thus, to enjoy unity with God, one must transcend all attachments, especially the human mind. For, oneness with the Holy Mystery surpassing all existence is the goal.

By detachment from and the transcendence of all attachments, the apophatic tradition says we can love God, others, and oneself most authentically because there is nothing in the way of love. Karl Rahner speaks for the tradition when he affirms, “this mystery is not only an infinitely distant horizon...[the Christian] experiences rather that this holy mystery is also a hidden closeness, a forgiving intimacy, his real home, that it is a love which shares itself.”¹⁰ The infinite and incomprehensible is also our loving and intimate home.

¹⁰ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York, NY: Seabury Press), 131.

Apophasis is an intriguing and transformative possibility for contemporary Catholic preaching. Talk is cheap, but words still have power. We only need to consider how words are used interpersonally. To say “I love you” forms a powerful connection between two people. Similarly, the words we use in preaching and liturgy matter because they have the power to make things happen. The apophatic tradition uses very different words for God and a person’s ongoing encounter with God, such as “nothing,” “darkness,” and “silence.” It also undercuts the tendency to assume our words definitively express the reality of God. This tradition could prove a significant corrective to thinking God is an idea.

Moreover, the apophatic tradition can deepen the spirituality of both preacher and assembly by focusing on prayer that transcends thinking. Hence, I propose a way of apophatic preaching involving apophatic themes (detachment, mystery), apophatic metaphors (nothingness, darkness), and contemplative silence. Leading a congregation into contemplative silence, furthermore, can facilitate inner transformation. Such healing forms a constitutive part of realizing oneness with God. Still, apophatic preaching is not *the* solution to the issue of largely ineffective preaching, but it is *a* solution.

An Absent Yet Popular Tradition

The people of St. Matthew’s do not experience the Christian apophatic tradition in the regular preaching life of the parish. The people hear many homilies but do not hear any preaching influenced by the Christian apophatic contemplative tradition. The people experience much kataphatic preaching. Still, apophasis is absent from preaching at the cathedral.

More broadly, contemporary Catholic congregations do not experience the apophatic contemplative tradition in the preaching of their parishes. This is both curious and detrimental since the apophatic is a venerable, transformative, and central part of Catholic tradition. We can trace the apophatic tradition to Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite of Late Antiquity, or, even further in the past and with a clear emphasis on practice, to the mothers and fathers of the desert in the late third through sixth centuries. Since then, the apophatic tradition has been a vibrant dimension of the Catholic community. Notably, the apophatic tradition flourished in the Middle Ages from John Scotus Eriugena in the ninth century through the mid-seventeenth century when the Quietist controversy erupted. While the tradition includes mystical luminaries like Meister Eckhart and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, other medieval greats like St. Thomas Aquinas and St. Bonaventure also expressed this tradition in their writings.

Furthermore, apophatic contemplation is widespread. Thomas Merton, OCSO, a Trappist monk who lived in Kentucky, popularized the tradition. Through his books, such as *New Seeds of Contemplation* and *Contemplative Prayer*, Merton drew attention to the apophatic contemplative tradition of the Catholic Church. Indeed, many readers of Merton's writings, myself included, encountered apophatic contemplation there, perhaps for the first time. His books set my heart on fire for deepening my relationship with God through interior silence. Passionate for this silence, I discovered Centering Prayer, as later taught by Thomas Keating, OCSO (another Trappist monk). I have been practicing centering prayer for twenty-two years. I have found it liberating! In the silence, I discovered the joy of knowing the incomprehensible mystery of God, and it has

transformed my life. And I am not the only person who has had this experience. I believe this experience of God's mystery can be a rich resource for a renewed approach to preaching.

Several large organizations dedicate themselves to deepening and spreading the Christian contemplative tradition through contemplative prayer practices, retreats, courses, workshops, and residential programs. Three include Contemplative Outreach, the World Community for Christian Meditation, and The Center for Action and Contemplation. Each teaches a practice of apophatic contemplation. The number of people engaged in these practices and their dedication to these communities demonstrates a thirst for a message related to apophatic contemplation.

Contemplative Outreach serves 40,000 practitioners of centering prayer and teaches 15,000 more people yearly.¹¹ I served on the leadership team for the Maryland and Washington, DC, chapter for Contemplative Outreach from 2009 to 2019. During this service, I became aware that more people were practicing centering prayer than those in the thirty-five to forty centering prayer groups officially associated with the chapter (all over Maryland and Washington, DC).

The World Community for Christian Meditation teaches and promotes a Christian contemplative spirituality around a practice called Christian Meditation, developed by Fr. John Main, OSB, and his successor, Fr. Laurence Freeman, OSB, in conversation with sources from the Christian contemplative tradition. Their website describes the organization as

a global spiritual community united in practicing meditation in the Christian tradition. It shares the fruits of this practice widely and inclusively, serving the

¹¹ <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/about-us/>.

unity of all and building understanding between faiths and cultures. Members of WCCM span more than a hundred countries. There are about sixty-seven national coordinators.¹²

The World Community for Christian Meditation, as a movement, serves thousands through its programs, workshops, lectures, and direct outreach.

The Center for Action and Contemplation, founded in Albuquerque, NM, in 1987 by Fr. Richard Rohr, OFM, a worldwide preacher, describes its aim as “introducing seekers to the contemplative Christian path of transformation.”¹³ In an email to me dated January 7, 2022, a staff member of The Center wrote, “There are currently at least 375,000 subscribers to our Daily Meditations emails, and around 2,500 folks from our community attend our conferences.” An article from the *National Catholic Reporter* featuring Richard Rohr documents that mysticism appeals to millennials.¹⁴ A millennial named Anthony Graffagnino “said he’s had his fill with ‘stale and dead expressions of faith that I saw doing nothing to better the people around me or the world around me.’ Discovering the Christian mystical tradition through the work of Franciscan friar Richard Rohr helped change that.” Apophatic contemplation is widespread. Rohr’s center, in particular, creates a strong bond between contemplation and action, which we could say is apophasis engaged in the world. Preaching fits here.

¹² <https://wccm.org/about/>.

¹³ <https://cac.org/about/who-we-are/>.

¹⁴ Cathleen Falsani, “For millennials, mysticism shows a path to their home faiths,” *National Catholic Reporter*, April 24, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/millennials-mysticism-shows-path-their-home-faiths>.

Conceptual Idolatry

The absence of the apophatic is a significant oversight in Catholic and contemporary Christian preaching. For, preaching relies heavily on the kataphatic, that is, on naming God in positive ways: God is life, God is like a mother or a father, Jesus is our friend, and the divine is an ocean of being. Preachers talk about God without the essential qualification that God is not our words or ideas. Out of an overreliance on the kataphatic grows a desire to express the mystery of God in clear, precise language, as may be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Preachers work with images of God as light, life, and love. This is good. But when they become the only ways to talk about God, these ways of naming the divine can degenerate into conceptual idols. As I noted above, male images of God calcify into a sacralization of patriarchy unless we either use feminine images of God or use the apophatic tradition. Nevertheless, kataphatic preaching is a tremendous good insofar as images and metaphors appeal to the hearts and imaginations of congregations. Apophatic preaching needs to balance the kataphatic.

All churches can confuse their words, images, and articulations with God as God is, thus forgetting the mystery of God. In other words, conceptual idolatry is the danger of relying only on the kataphatic in preaching. This term points to Christians rigidly holding to beliefs about God without the awareness that God is a mystery beyond all concepts. Conceptual idolatry occurs when Christians think a Biblical or theological word or image is divine. When this happens, these Christians start worshipping an idea.

This shows up in “fundamentalisms” of all stripes. There is the Westboro Baptist Church’s hatred for LGBTQ people. There can be a near-fanatical concern with “Catholic teaching” or what every part of the Bible says. We can, for instance, observe the

resistance of right-wing groups and even members of the hierarchy in the Catholic Church to Pope Francis' teaching on marriage, divorce, and communion.¹⁵ We can also observe the exclusion of female imagery for God in the Catholic Church.¹⁶

A Pew Forum Study dated April 25, 2018, shows that seven in ten Americans believe God rewards and punishes.¹⁷ Thirty-eight percent of Catholics believe God has punished them.¹⁸ If one believes God punishes, is it a significant step to conclude that God punishes certain types of people? Virginia Villa writes for the Pew Forum, "The religiously unaffiliated (including atheists, agnostics and people who don't identify with any religion) were harassed by governments, private groups or both in 23 countries in 2017, up from 14 the previous year."¹⁹ How we understand God connects to our behavior. If we see God punishing, we are likelier to punish or condone violence toward excluded and supposedly unworthy groups. If we see God as a demanding judge or a heavenly cop, we will become rigid moralists with a need to expel sinners. These attitudes result from conceptual idolatry, which is present in the Bible and its descriptions of divine violence (see Joshua 5-6).

¹⁵ See, for instance, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/04/08/amoris-laetitia-pope-francis-five-years-divorced-remarried-catholics-240412>

¹⁶ See, for instance, Liturgiam Auntheticam, which rejects any translation of scriptural or liturgical texts that do not adhere to the male-preferred Latin, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20010507_liturgi-am-authenticam_en.html

¹⁷ <https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/2-beliefs-about-gods-involvement-in-the-world/>

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/08/12/religiously-unaffiliated-people-face-harassment-in-a-growing-number-of-countries/>

The apophatic contemplative tradition asserts that God is incomprehensible and that no name can ever capture the divine reality. This corrects the tendency toward conceptual idolatry. But this does not mean we cannot talk about God. The prominent representatives of this tradition have used language well and poetically to evoke a sense of divine mystery in their respective audiences. Some of the best examples come from the sermons of apophatic contemplative preachers such as Meister Eckhart and his students, Henry Suso and John Tauler (all Dominican friars, notably). These apophatic Christians use dark metaphors, that is, words like “darkness,” “silence,” and “nothingness,” to talk about God. In the following chapter, I will explore the rationale behind these metaphors.

Finally, the overemphasis on the kataphatic contributes to a disengaged congregation as preachers use specialized theological language. Dr. Karla Bellinger, the Executive Director of the Institute for Homiletics at the University of Dallas, points out how insider language works negatively on a congregation during a homily: “We cannot presume that theological concepts are understood by those who listen to them used in a homily. ‘Churchy words’ have gone flat.... Researchers have found that comprehension (and not entertainment) maintains a listener’s attention.”²⁰ Apophatic contemplation can help Catholic preaching move beyond specialized theological language by embracing the dark metaphors in the tradition. I believe the popularity of Christian contemplative prayer demonstrates that congregations can be receptive to the metaphors of the Christian apophatic tradition—like “darkness” or “emptiness”—because the experience of

²⁰ Karla Bellinger, *Connecting Pulpit and Pew: Breaking Open the Conversation about Catholic Preaching* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press 2014), 82.

contemplative silence suggests these metaphors can name what is going on in people's spiritual lives.

Furthermore, apophatic contemplation in preaching can help congregations develop more elastic or self-critical images and understandings of God. This way of preaching can help to avoid conceptual idolatry or undermine it. This kind of homiletics would aim to help a congregation learn to let go of attachments, experience the healing of trauma, appreciate silence as profound prayer, and gain the ability to be present in the now. Apophatic preaching seeks to help the people become apophatic contemplatives themselves. Thus, the church needs to recover this tradition in contemporary preaching.

Assumptions and Definitions

In this thesis, I have several assumptions. First, I assume preaching can evoke a positive or negative experience. Preaching, then, can elicit or provoke an experience. In this regard, I presume preaching functions like poetry in its use and craft of language.

I assume congregations are impacted by how we name, describe, and express the mystery of God. Relatedly, I think our understanding of God links with our way of prayer and even with our self-understanding.

Although my preaching is to an RCIA group, I assume apophatic preaching can be done in any ministerial context, including the Sunday pulpit.

I also assume the apophatic contemplative experience will be powerful enough to engage the people personally with God. This tradition grounds its approach on the conviction that people are inherently one with God, whether they are aware of it. Theologically, apophatic contemplative preaching has the power to break down conceptual idolatry and awaken the inherent divine unity we already have.

To be clear, I offer the following definitions:

- *Apophatic/Apophasis*: This term refers to negative theology, which is the theology that recognizes and makes central the mystery of God. This tradition reverences God *as God*, that is, as transcendent and unlike anything in the created universe. It holds to the recognition that all language is limited when describing God.
- *Conceptual Idolatry*: The uncritical assumption that ideas and names are identical to God's reality. This phenomenon shows no awareness of God's incomprehensibility or "otherness." Further, conceptual idolatry can appear in any Catholic communication, such as preaching, magazine articles, encyclicals, bishop's letters, or theology books.
- *Contemplation*: This is the process of awakening to oneness with God through interior silence, faith, and detachment.
- *Nothing*: This is a central apophatic word that refers to God as transcendent beyond being and the core transcendent nature of the human person. It also refers to the contemplative practice in that most, if not all, apophatic mystics discuss detachment and prayer as a way of wanting nothing or knowing nothing. My exploration of several medieval apophatic mystics will probe this point.
- *Poetry*: By poetry, I do not mean rhyming poems. I define poetry as a more expansive genre of non-prose speaking and writing. It is the crafting of language through image, metaphor, and symbol to transmit an experience and not purely to communicate information.
- *Preaching*: I understand preaching to be a way of experiencing God. Karl Rahner, one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the twentieth century, says, "Preaching is the awakening and making explicit of what is already there in the depths of man

[sic].”²¹ God is “what is already there in the depths” of people—preaching attempts to awaken the people to the ever-present mystery of God in their hearts and lives.

Indeed, this is the goal of preaching. Preaching is contemplative as it leads us into this silent mystery within us in this present moment. Thus, at that very moment, preaching reminds people that they are one with God.

- *Sermon*: I use this word as a general term for the act of preaching. The Catholic Church reserves the word “homily” for preaching the ordained at the pulpit within a Eucharist or, more generally, a liturgical event. Therefore, I use “sermon” to refer to my preachings as I am a non-ordained person preaching in a Catholic context.

The Goal of This Thesis

My thesis aims to test the effectiveness of apophatic preaching in evoking an experience of the mystery of God through the use of negative language inspired by Christian apophatic mystics. To be more specific, I intend for apophatic preaching to help congregations become self-critical of their current understanding of God, appreciate that God goes beyond our powers of reasoning, learn the practice of detachment or letting go of compulsive habits of selfishness and ways of seeing God, letting go of emotional blockages related to grief and trauma, and see prayer in terms of interior silence. While taking scripture as the starting point, the approach involves preaching apophatic contemplative themes from the apophatic contemplative state using apophatic contemplative language. Or, it is *preaching nothing (themes) from nothing (state) with nothing (language)*, themes that I will explore in this thesis.

²¹ Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 134.

In this thesis, I will test my formula for apophatic preaching. I propose to test how the RCIA group at the Cathedral of St. Matthew experiences a series of sermons that I will preach over eight weeks. I will use scripture in these sermons to preach “nothing from nothing with nothing.” I hope the impact on the RCIA group will be that they become more contemplative, i.e., that they are more comfortable with recognizing God as a mystery beyond all images, more able to let go of their thinking, and more at home with silence, both exterior and interior, and more able to be present in the now. Love happens only now and requires accepting others as they are. To love God, we must take God as God is, which is “no-thing” and beyond all things. To love our neighbor and even ourselves, we must be free of our selfish desires, our past grief, and limited ways of understanding. This will become clearer over the course of the thesis.

I believe apophatic preaching enriches the proclamation of the gospel in four key ways: 1) it can subvert conceptual idolatry through the use of negative or apophatic language; 2) it can evoke an experience of the mystery of God—the divine as beyond our ability to reason—through the use of apophatic language; 3) it can introduce, encourage, and deepen the practice of Gospel self-denial or letting go to make room for authentic love; and 4) it can introduce, encourage, and deepen the practice of silent prayer or contemplation that both facilitates inner transformation and allows for the full realization of oneness with God.

The Plan of This Thesis

This thesis has five chapters. In this first chapter, I have explored the problem of preaching in connection with conceptual idolatry and the absence of the apophatic tradition from contemporary Catholic preaching. I have described conceptual idolatry and

given examples in the Catholic Church and American culture. Additionally, I have noted how the absence of the apophatic tradition impacts preaching. Nevertheless, the apophatic tradition and apophatic preaching are a part of Catholic tradition. In the next chapter, I will discuss this tradition by examining several Christian mystics dedicated to the apophatic way.

Chapter two is titled “What is Apophatic Contemplation?” I will describe what apophatic contemplation means in the Christian tradition. This chapter will examine five critical mystics: Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler, Marguerite Porete, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*. These examinations will provide a working description of apophatic contemplation.

I titled the third chapter “To Speak Nothing: Towards a Negative Theopoetics.” In this chapter, I will examine poetry as a way of evoking and provoking experiences. It will explore the interplay between apophasis and poetry through the work of Wallace Stevens, Jane Hirschfield, and Meister Eckhart.

Chapter four, “An Apophatic Homiletics,” describes my theory of homiletics as *preaching nihil in nihil with nihil*. I will begin by reflecting on vital homiletic insights from Meister Eckhart’s Sermon 30 and Sermon 71 with additional comments from theologian Dr. Joseph Milne. Then, I will synthesize homiletic insights found in several books on homiletics. I will then use these insights to describe a series of guidelines for apophatic preaching.

In chapter five, “*Nihil* in Homiletic Ministry,” I will describe my ministerial intervention as a series of sermons I preach during the RCIA sessions in March and April 2022. I will explain how I set up this series, how I preached to people in the RCIA, the

participants' demographics, and how I handled surveys and consent forms. Additionally, I will include the method or approach I use to proclaim scripture and preaching as part of an RCIA session, as well as a sample sermon. I will also report the findings of my ministerial intervention. I will conclude with what homiletics can learn from apophatic preaching.

Chapter 2

What is Apophatic Contemplation?

To preach in an apophatic way, we require an understanding of the apophatic experience of God. In other words, what is *apophatic* about apophatic preaching? Christian apophatic mystics show us. Several from the medieval era represent the apophatic tradition best: Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler, Marguerite Porete, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Several are preachers. All use the vital language of the apophatic tradition. These mystics, moreover, use apophatic language innovatively. Despite the differences between their era and ours, they offer us both descriptions of apophatic contemplation and examples of the kind of language that an apophatic preacher could use today.

I believe it helps to offer a way to interpret these medieval mystics since their conceptual framework for understanding reality differs significantly from ours. For instance, how do we understand what these medieval mystics describe as the annihilation of the self? Preachers will encounter difficulty if they use this language uncritically. Their congregations will not get it.

Furthermore, a hermeneutic for these mystics will help to understand the questions and data in my ministerial intervention. The women and men whom I surveyed had no knowledge of the Christian apophatic tradition, much less its complex language. In this regard, I want to unpack my definition of apophatic contemplation.

These medieval mystics view unity with God as a gift already given and not something to achieve in the future. Hence, they discuss apophatic contemplation as a state of letting go and interior silence in which a person realizes the oneness with God that they already have. Apophatic contemplation, as these mystics describe it, leads to experiencing the mystery of oneness with God in daily life. Through their preaching and writings, these five mystics seek to turn anyone who listens into a mystic in the marketplace.

We can understand apophatic contemplation to include emphasizing God as supreme mystery, God and the human person being foundationally one—even before the entrance of sin, the need for a constant letting go of attachments or whatever obscures unity with God, and the prayer practice of interior silence and transcending the human mind (with its thinking processes) by faith. Eckhart, Suso, Tauler, Porete, and the anonymous author of *The Cloud* each address these features of apophatic contemplation using a unique vocabulary and set of metaphors.

Apophatic contemplation allows the true self to emerge and the false self to dissolve. The true self, for our mystics, is the soul one with God while the false self is a superficial sense of self cobbled together by means of attachments. Now, when these medieval mystics discuss the self, it is helpful to understand the self that needs annihilation as the false self while allowing for the true self, the Christ self, to emerge from within the soul. This is the self that is one with God. Realizing this self is a goal for those following the way of apophatic contemplation. But the mystics will describe this interchange in highly evocative and disruptive ways so that the soul can let go and be silent before God.

These medieval mystics, in particular, provide radical language for God, the self, and their encounter. Their language baffles and entices. Indeed, their language can be enticing precisely by being baffling. Their vocabulary for God, the self, and prayer can induce awe. Congregations will not always understand preachers. While a laudable goal, clear understanding does not need to be the only goal of preaching. One can leverage the congregation's sense of mystery with the arcane language of these medieval apophatic mystics.

Further, this approach serves to undercut the tendency in Christianity to overexplain spiritual realities. Perhaps the tendency derives from scholastic theology, but Christian theology does tend to overexplain the God-human relationship, Jesus, and the dynamics of salvation. Apophatic preaching uses language similar to the medieval mystics under discussion to evoke awe, wonder, and space around God. Rather than using a sermon or homily to answer a question, apophatic preaching would deepen or contextualize a question so that the assembly might live into an encounter with the mystery of God transcending all knowledge.

For these reasons, the medieval mystics I discuss below constitute a foundation for apophatic preaching. Their focus on the state of prayer that opens to the mystery of God beyond all thinking and their radical language will form the basis for preaching in an apophatic manner. Still, this way of preaching does not exist in isolation. Kataphatic preaching and the liturgy itself are important contexts to apophatic preaching.

First, apophatic preaching serves to balance kataphatic preaching. As I discussed in the last chapter, kataphatic theology uses positive images of God and focuses on what we can know about God. Preaching in the kataphatic mode uses positive images and

traditional, often conventional, themes and language to proclaim the Gospel. Apophatic preaching does use language, paradoxically, to describe God but the goal is to return to God's pure incomprehensibility.

Second, the liturgy contextualizes apophatic preaching. All the mystics presumed a people formed by communal worship, namely the Mass. Several of the mystics I discuss are preachers. Of course, they gave their sermons during the Mass. The liturgy is the church's encounter with God. Each of the mystics invites others to encounter God. As a liturgical act, preaching draws us into the incomprehensible love of God given in Jesus and responded to in the Eucharistic prayers and then leads us to praise God as God in song and response. Preaching is a witness to the mystery at the heart of the liturgy, which transcends thinking but allows for the liturgical practices of praying, singing, and bodily movement. Preaching is sacramental: just as the congregation meets God in bread, wine, oil, and water, the congregation also experiences God through the physical voice and words of the preacher. Indeed, these very words can lead the people of God into the sacrament of silence. Preaching within liturgy functions to open us to God in love. Apophatic preaching hones in on the mysterious nature of this God and how the soul must let go and abide in silence to meet this God within.

Moreover, these medieval apophatic mystics articulate the goals of apophatic preaching: negative God language, letting go, and inner silence. They describe the state of apophatic contemplation using these categories. This is the state into which I invite the preacher to enter as she or he prays with scripture, crafts a message, and delivers a sermon.

For the apophatic mystics I delve into below, apophasis is not merely an academic theological discipline providing a clearer conception of God. It is a spiritual path culminating in the soul's unity with God according to John Jones, an academic philosopher. In an essay on negative theology preceding his own translation of the works of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whom scholars believe to be a sixth-century Syrian monk using the name "Dionysius," Jones describes the goal of negative or apophatic theology. He writes, "The practice of negative (mystical) theology culminates in the unity with (that) beyond all...unity with nothing: beyond all, non-same, and non-other."²² To put the matter more simply, Jones flatly states, "The goal of negative (mystical) theology: nothing."²³ Apophatic theology is not just a linguistic strategy of delimiting all names for and ideas of God. It is also a way of knowing and loving God as the nothing unto unity with this divine nothing.

No understanding or explanation ever accounts for God totally. The divine always eludes our attempts to reify it through a system of explanation. Practicing negative theology means negating everything understandable to discover the mystery of God within the soul.

The enigmatic Dionysius, according to Jones, removes all explanations of God so one is left with nothing: nothing to say, nothing to think to open out onto the nothing beyond divinity. God is not simply a supreme being nor even a mysterious source that powers the universe. Dionysius does not remain content to keep defining or describing

²² John D. Jones, "The Divine Darkness of Unknowing," *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Essays and trans. John D. Jones (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1999), 101.

²³ *Ibid.*

God in relation to existence. Jones reports Dionysius pushing beyond into God *as* God: that the God-ness of God is not a *something* or *a* being or being *at all* but *nothing*. This does not affirm anything of God as much as it keeps space around the divine mystery and clears away all conceptual idolatries.

In *The Divine Names*, Dionysius tersely declares of God: “it is cause of all, but itself: nothing.”²⁴ The word “itself” is important; for Dionysius “nothing” refers to God as God is in Godself. This is the God-ness of God. Stripped of reference to beings, to creatures, God stops being God in relation to existence and simply is the nothing. Jones attests, “Beyond all, the divinity is not a supreme essence or being beyond all other things. Beyond all, the divinity is not the ultimate source or cause of all that is. Beyond all [the] divinity: nothing (οὐδέν)—beyond source and beyond cause.”²⁵ He keeps using the word “beyond” to communicate the utterly incomprehensible transcendence of God. God as nothing does not simply mean God is not a thing. Jones explains how God is

not a supreme being which is be-ing in itself apart from all other beings; beyond all: nothing (οὐδέν). We must not understand nothing simply as no-thing or no-being, so that we understand nothing as be-ing itself (*ipsum esse*), or as simply and unlimitedly be-ing. Rather, nothing: beyond be-ing and hence, beyond cause.²⁶

The divine transcends the dynamic, indeed, the structure, of Creator and creature, of sameness and difference. Unity with this is the nothing, a unity as mysterious as the divine, is the goal of negative theology. I refer to this experience of unity with the divine

²⁴ *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, 113.

²⁵ Jones, 90.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

nothing as apophatic contemplation. Apophatic preaching proceeds from and seeks to return listeners to this very end.

In this chapter, I will investigate the nature of Christian apophatic contemplation by examining the mystical spiritualities of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler, Marguerite Porete, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*. These five medieval Christian mystics show a special concern for apophatic theology and practice. Not all of these medieval mystics use the word “contemplation” as a central category, but they all discuss the soul’s deep encounter with God towards which the word “contemplation” points. How do these mystics understand the encounter with God and the practice implied?

The mystics I discuss, to a greater or lesser extent, share the goal of negative theology as Jones describes it, that is, *nothing*. They would agree that the goal of the Christian life lies in the mystery of God whom they frequently refer to as *nothing* even as they affirm the Trinity. This conditions the encounter with God and spiritual practice. The encounter with God is nothing, that is, unfelt and beyond the mind. The practice is nothing, which involves detachment from all the soul’s operations. These medieval mystics, with varying emphases, agree on these points.

Considering the above, we can understand apophatic contemplation as the encounter with, the undergoing of, and the spiritual practice by which the soul becomes nothing. The soul is reduced to nothing, namely, the divine nothing. For some of these mystics, the nothing beyond God remains indistinct from the soul’s deepest reality. Although different apophatic mystics have different vocabularies and use the word “nothing” with varying degrees of frequency, this remains the essential message of

apophatic contemplation. All share epistemological negation and ontological negation as critical aspects of their negative ways.

Apophatic contemplation is the paradoxical coincidence of the loss of self and divine unity in the moment of encounter. As Beverly Lanzetta says, the nothingness of the Christian apophatic mystics is “a complete breakthrough to the emptiness of both self and deity.”²⁷ Apophatic theology has corresponding apophatic anthropology that leads to a unique emphasis in mystical practice: simply nothingness. Apophatic contemplation, then, is an entrance into Godly nothingness by the practice of detachment from the self and its operations. As “nothing,” apophatic contemplation is not so much something the soul does, controls, initiates, or objectifies. Rather, apophatic contemplation, as the five medieval mystics below demonstrate, is a state into which the soul enters. Or, as Lanzetta laconically puts it, “Uniting not with *God*, but in *contemplative silence: nothingness*.”²⁸

Meister Eckhart

Popular preacher, respected academic, and wise spiritual guide, Meister Eckhart (1260-1328)²⁹ was a German Dominican friar. In addition to his preaching and academic duties, he served ably in several administrative posts for the Dominicans in Germany. The end of his life was marked by a trial under the Papal Inquisition even though the pope never declared him to be a heretic. Today, we remember him for his bold mystical sermons.

²⁷ Lanzetta, 8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany* (Crossroad: New York, NY, 2005), 94, 106.

While scholars have called the mystical way of Meister Eckhart a mysticism of being and a mysticism of the ground, we may also call it a mysticism of nothingness. If one reads the sermons and treatises of Meister Eckhart the following themes will appear with frequency: detachment, the birth of the Word in the soul, the breakthrough, living without a why, the ground, and indistinct unity. Although, Eckhart's thorough commitment to apophasis conditions all of these themes.

A poem from the Dominican nuns of the early fourteenth century tells us what Meister Eckhart was known for in his teaching and preaching: "*Der wise meister Hechard / Wil uns von nihte sagen.*" Translated this means, "Eckhart, the wise master / Will talk to us about Nothing."³⁰ Freimut Loser notes, "True wisdom is teaching about nothing, teaching nothing: to want nothing, to know nothing, to have nothing."³¹ In his own time, then, people remembered Eckhart preaching about *nothing*. Loser's comment alludes to one of Eckhart's most common themes, detachment. In many of his sermons, he describes the way and practice of detachment by using the word, "nothing." But Eckhart loads other weighty meanings onto this word.

For the homiletically gifted Meister, *nothing* equals transcendence, indistinction, and spiritual practice. Eckhart fuses divine transcendence and divine immanence, the practice of detachment, and both divine and human identity into his mystical concept of nothingness. Indeed, he *collapses* divine transcendence and divine immanence, indistinction, into nothing.

³⁰ Freimut Loser, "Poor Eckhart?", *Medieval Mystical Theology* (Volume 21.2, 2012), 195.

³¹ *Ibid.*

A clear and classic example of this collapsing of divine transcendence and indistinction occurs in the opening paragraph of Eckhart's Sermon 71:

The words that I have spoken in Latin were written by St. Luke in the Acts concerning St. Paul, and they mean: "Paul rose from the ground and with eyes open he saw nothing." It seems to me that this little word [i.e., nothing] has four meanings. One meaning is: When he got up from the ground, with eyes open he saw nothing, and the nothing was God; for when he saw God, he [Luke] calls this a nothing. The second: When he got up he saw nothing but God. The third: In all things he saw nothing but God. The fourth: When he saw God, he viewed all things as nothing.³²

Eckhart equates all things with the God who is nothing. Even though one meaning of nothing is that creation would not exist without God, Eckhart highlights this theme: there is nothing but *the nothing*. The incomprehensibly transcendent mystery is the very reality of all things; there is a collapsing of divine transcendence and divine immanence into *the nothing*. In the above sermon, Eckhart is preaching the nothingness of self and deity that constitutes ontological negation.

In Sermon 23, Eckhart denies the classic names for God and then asks, "But if God is neither goodness nor being nor truth nor one, what then is He? He is pure nothing; he is neither this nor that."³³ God is pure nothing, indistinct and transcending being itself. God is so mysterious and transcendent that *being* does not apply to God, much less truth or goodness. Further, using the designation "neither this nor that," Eckhart points to God's indistinction. God is not one more thing, and so God is all things. While God is not

³² *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn, Frank Tobin, and Elvira Borgstadt (New York, NY: Paulist, 1986), Sermon 71, 320.

³³ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O'Connell Walshe, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2009), Sermon 54, 287.

distinct from anything whatsoever, God remains God and creature remains creature. Divine nothingness combines both infinite transcendence and unimaginable immanence.

How, then, does the soul unite with God, the divine nothing? How does one practice apophatic contemplation? This is the Meister's pervasive teaching on detachment: the way to realize indistinct oneness with the divine nothing is to become nothing, too. Only when the soul reduces to nothing is there oneness with the divine nothing. With this theme, the Meister proffers paradoxical instructions: "all our being consists in nothing but becoming nothing."³⁴ Charlotte Radler affirms, "Through detachment, God is realized as an absolute transcendent nothingness; The soul flows into this same nothingness and becomes a perfect nothing just as God is nothing."³⁵ Detachment means imitating and even *being* the divine nature: "you should be as empty as that nothing is empty which is neither here nor there."³⁶

Jesus Christ is central to detachment. First, Eckhart relies heavily on Jesus' central teaching on self-denial and losing one's life (cf. Mark 8:34-35). The Meister regularly cites and reflects on this passage and its parallel passages in Matthew and Luke. He even takes John as the theme for a whole sermon. Second, Eckhart connects awakening to divine oneness and detachment to the incarnation and crucifixion in one breathless move: "Why did God become man? So that I might be born the same. God died so that I might die to the whole world and to all created things."³⁷ God became

³⁴ *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York, NY: Paulist, 1981), Counsel 23, 281.

³⁵ Charlotte Radler, "Living from the Divine Ground: Meister Eckhart's Praxis of Detachment," *Spiritus* (Vol.6 Issue 1, Spring 2006), 33.

³⁶ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 1, 240.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, Sermon 29, 289.

human in Jesus so we might experience the birth—the realization—of divine oneness. Jesus was crucified so we might learn detachment. Eckhart models his main practice, his version of apophatic contemplation, on Jesus incarnate and crucified.

Regarding the how of this apophatic practice, Eckhart preaches that the soul should “enter a state of pure nothingness.”³⁸ This is a state of mind in which the soul is detached from thinking in a transcendent silence. In this state, the soul is “wholly still and detached from all images and from all forms.”³⁹ It is a state in which the soul’s faculties of reason, will, and even its very distinction are negated. Beyond thinking and beyond God, the state of nothingness is, according to Eckhart, “the right state of mind.”⁴⁰ He tells his congregation to remain in this state as much as possible: “be sure of this. Absolute stillness for as long as possible is best of all for you. You cannot exchange this state for any other without harm.”⁴¹ This is apophatic contemplation.

Eckhart describes how the soul might enter the state of nothingness in sermon 83:

You should love God mindlessly, that is, your soul should be without mind and stripped of all mental activities...your soul must be bare of all mind, and must remain without mind; for if you love God as he is God, as he is spirit, as he is person and as he is image—all this must go! “Then how should I love him?” You should love him as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure, unmixed bright “One,” separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of something into nothing.”⁴²

³⁸ *Meister Eckhart: Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin, 1994), Sermon 25, 225.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, Sermon 18, 187.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, Talk of Instruction 6, 9.

⁴¹ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, Sermon 4, 58.

⁴² *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*, Sermon 83, 208.

The Meister's understanding of God as nothing implies a prayer of nothingness: sinking down out of mind, self, and being while simultaneously sinking into the divine nothing.

Famously, Eckhart preaches the way of willing nothing, knowing nothing, and having nothing as the way to realize identity not only with the divine nothing but also with the nothing beyond God. We find this triple formula in Sermon 52, which is an Eckhartian masterpiece ruminating on the divine indistinction and the God beyond God. He takes spiritual poverty as his biblical theme and defines the truly poor person as the one who "wants nothing, knows nothing, and has nothing."⁴³ When the soul wills, knows, and has nothing it reduces to the pre-created state "as he was when he was not," that is, the nothing beyond God.⁴⁴

For Eckhart, God and the soul are identically one even as they remain distinct. He locates the soul's identity with God in the ground, the placeless place of indistinction. As nothing, God transcends the "this and that" of creatures. So, if it is God's nature to be indistinct, "neither this nor that," then it follows that God is indistinct from the soul. Divine indistinction, and the identity of the human and divine that follows from it, is fundamentally the divine nothing.

The message Eckhart preaches and performs with his language is that *the soul is the divine nothing*. Reflecting on Eckhart's message as a whole, Radler says, "the self's only true existence is the divine nothingness."⁴⁵ The soul realizes this core truth by

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Sermon 52, 199.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁵ Charlotte Radler, "Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and Its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* (Volume 26, 2006), 112.

detachment: “When the soul comes into the One...it finds God as in a nothing.”⁴⁶

Detached, the soul knows the divine nothing is the essence of all created things: “in God there is nothing but God. When I know all creatures in God, I know nothing.”⁴⁷

Moreover, Eckhart locates this indistinct unity in Christ. Indeed, he identifies this unity as our having the nature of the Son of God. Eckhart argues this based on the divine knowing:

God causes us to know him and makes us know him...and his being is his knowing. His causing me to know and my knowing are the same thing. Hence his knowing is mine...because his knowing is mine and because his substance, his nature, and his being are his knowing, it follows that his being, his substance, and his nature are mine. And because his substance, his nature, and his being are mine, I am the Son of God. “See, brothers, what love God has given us, that we are called and are the Son of God” (Cf. 1 Jn 3:1).⁴⁸

Eckhart’s understanding of indistinct unity straddles several paradoxes: identity with God and difference from God, sameness with the divine nothing beyond the Trinity yet necessitating the Trinity and locating our indistinct unity in the Son, identifying totally with the being of the Son of God while remaining a creature.

Commenting on an excerpt from Meister Eckhart’s Sermon 6, “Those who are equal to nothing, they alone are equal to God,”⁴⁹ Daniel Barber notes that Eckhart describes God as equal to nothing, so nothingness “is what the soul and God already have *in common*.”⁵⁰ Barber continues, “Nothingness, as Eckhart articulates it is not what

⁴⁶ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 71, 323.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 323.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, Sermon 76, 328-329.

⁴⁹ *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*, Sermon 6, 187.

⁵⁰ Daniel Barber, “Commentarial Nothingness,” *Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary, Volume 7: The Mystical Text*, ed. Nicola Masciandaro and Eugene Thacker (New York, NY: City University of New York, 2013), 51.

separates us from God, it is what identifies us with God.”⁵¹ One fascinating aspect of Eckhart’s mysticism of nothingness is “the conceptual priority he grants it over the distinction between God and all other beings” and “the explicitness with which Eckhart insists on a ‘commonality’ or univocity of nothingness.”⁵² Here, Barber notes what Lanzetta notes, namely, the emphasis Eckhart gives to ontological negation. All things are the divine nothing because there is nothing but God. Negating human knowing as well as divine being, Eckhart preaches “the ‘nothing’ whose light is all lights, whose being is all beings.”⁵³

Charlotte Radler summarizes Meister Eckhart’s mysticism of nothingness in terms of apophatic practice and identity: “a detached human being removes layer after layer of its constructed pseudo-self until it uncovers the true core of itself, that is, the transcendent nothingness which is also God, and only then can it become this same transcendent nothingness.”⁵⁴ The gradual dissolution of the pseudo-self, the self that blocks love and awareness of God in daily life, occurs in the state of nothingness. This is the state of prayer, letting go, and interior silence. Through this practice, Eckhart’s mysticism involves the soul being reduced to nothing in detachment so that the nothing beyond God becomes real (the birth) to the soul. His mysticism plays with epistemological as well as ontological negation to great effect. Realizing the nothing

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 71, 324.

⁵⁴ Radler, “Losing the Self,” 113.

beyond God is the soul's deepest reality by entering a state of detachment or nothingness is what I call apophatic contemplation according to Meister Eckhart.

Henry Suso

Henry Suso was both a Dominican friar and a student of Meister Eckhart who lived during the years 1295-1366.⁵⁵ Though not a highly regarded academic like his teacher, Eckhart, Suso was a prodigious preacher and served women's communities as a confessor and spiritual director. His major work is titled *The Exemplar*, which contains four distinct writings: *The Life*, *The Little Book of Eternal Wisdom*, *The Little Book of Truth*, and *The Little Book of Letters*. In this work, Suso presents himself as the example to follow in living the Christian mystical life, but only insofar as he is the servant of Wisdom—the one who totally surrenders to the merciful mystery of God embodied in Jesus Christ.⁵⁶ Suso understands the encounter with God and spiritual practice as being lost in the nothing. This is a clear expression of one of the pillars of ontological negation: referring to God as nothing.

In *The Little Book of Truth*, Suso unfurls an apophatic theology: "God is nonbeing or a nothing...one could call him an eternal nothing."⁵⁷ God is the eternal nothing who transcends being and who is absolutely one.⁵⁸ Appearing to take a cue from Eckhart, Suso describes God as having a ground beyond the Triune Trinity: "In the Godhead or ground of this nothing where darkness beyond all light pervades, all multiplicity—even

⁵⁵ McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 195.

⁵⁶ Bernard McGinn, "Preface," *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, trans. and ed. Frank Tobin (NY: Paulist Press, 1989), 5.

⁵⁷ *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, 309.

⁵⁸ Frank Tobin, "Introduction," *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, 29.

that of the divine Persons—is somehow lost.”⁵⁹ Yet the very oneness of God allows for the Trinity of divine person. Bernard McGinn explains that Suso sees the Trinity as the wanton excess of divine goodness but also as identical with the nameless nothing beyond all distinction.⁶⁰ For Suso, the oneness and threeness of God come together in the divine nothingness. While Suso may speak of a God beyond God, he still identifies the Trinity with “the ground of this nothing.”⁶¹ He does not conceive two separate “gods” but notes a distinction from the perspective of reason: while God is Trinity the divine Persons sink into oneness in the ground of the nothing.

Suso provides the way to mystical unity in considering detachment through Christ: the soul’s journey involves “breaking-through Christ’s suffering humanity to attain the Son’s being in the naked Trinitarian Godhead.”⁶² Following Christ Crucified, the soul leaves self behind to be transported into the eternal nothing. The soul’s part is to practice detachment as a participation in the death of Christ: “You shall be led out with me along the desolate way of the cross, as you withdraw from your own willing, give up yourself and all creatures.”⁶³ The soul leaves self by withdrawing into Christ. Practically, this means free surrender to God and letting go of all possessiveness. Here, Suso describes the encounter between God and the soul and in doing so emphasizes how inwardness and silence are vital for practicing releasement. Even more, Suso teaches the

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 233.

⁶¹ *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, 321.

⁶² McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 212.

⁶³ *Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, 214.

soul to identify with the divine nothing: “Keep yourself within and be like the (divine) Nothing. Otherwise you shall suffer.”⁶⁴This is a compact statement of how Suso understands the encounter between God and the soul. It occurs in the spaceless space, the where that is the nowhere of nothingness. Once again, we meet the practice of apophatic contemplation.

While distinction remains between God and the soul, in the ground of the nothing the soul is lost. In chapter 5 of *The Little book of Truth*, Suso returns several times to the theme of the soul being “lost in the nothing.” This is Suso’s answer to the question, what is apophatic contemplation? He says that when the soul is one with the nothing, the soul loses all self-awareness and “inhabits” divine nothingness. The soul is

lost in the nothing...in the ground that lies hidden in the previously mentioned nothing. There one knows nothing about anything. There nothing is. There is not even a “there.” Whatever one says of it is sheer mockery. Nevertheless, such a person is his own nothing in which all this remains.... For when a person has been so taken from himself that he knows neither anything about himself nor anything else and is in complete repose in the ground of the eternal nothing, then he is certainly lost to himself.⁶⁵

This passage represents well Suso’s understanding of the deep encounter with God. “Lost in the nothing”: in this compact phrase coincide oneness with the divine nothing as well as the practice of the soul leading to a permanent divine unity. It is the practice of releasement unto the oneness of the eternal nothing. For Suso, apophatic contemplation is characterized by nothing. That this nothingness is a state one can observe from the following passage:

As [the soul] is thus engaged in gazing, it knows nothing about knowing or love or anything else. It is at rest completely and exclusively in the nothing and knows

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 321, 324.

nothing.... But when it knows and recognizes that it knows, sees and recognizes the nothing, this is a departure from and a reflecting upon the earlier state and a return to oneself in the natural order.”⁶⁶

The soul gazing is the soul at prayer, gazing upon God. It is one of Suso’s many terms for the soul relating to God. The soul is also at rest in the nothing that is God, resting beyond the thinking mind. He combines two different types of activity, gazing and resting, to communicate the encounter with God. Still, this gazing and resting happen without the soul’s awareness; there is no self-conscious thought. For when the soul becomes self-aware, recognizing that it is at rest in the nothing, i.e., thinking about it, then the soul returns to its normal mental state.

The nothingness of God, the soul, and their encounter is also the “where” of the Son:

Where I am, my servant shall also be. The person who has not avoided following the harsh “where” that the Son took upon himself in his humanity in dying on the cross—according to Christ’s commandment it is certainly possible that such a person experiences the delightful “where” of the naked divinity of the Son, enjoying it in spiritual joy both in time and in eternity.... Now where is this “where” of the pure divinity of the Son? It is in the brilliant light of divine unity, and this is according to his nameless name a nothingness...in the darkness beyond distinct manners of existing, all multiplicity disappears and the spirit loses what is its own. It disappears with regard to its own activity. This is the highest goal and the “where” beyond boundaries. In this the spirituality of all spirits ends. Here to lose oneself forever is eternal happiness.⁶⁷

If the soul follows Jesus in his passion by practicing releasement, the soul will come to the “where” of the Son. This “where” Suso describes as “a nothingness...the darkness beyond distinct manners of existing.” This is the ontological negation that involves the nothingness of God and soul even as Suso claims it is also the nothingness of Jesus

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 321-322.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

Christ. Way and goal coincide. For, Christ Crucified is crucial to the soul's entering into the nothingness of itself and God. That nothingness is also the "place" or "where" of Jesus the Son of God. When the soul is lost in the eternal nothing, it is also lost in Christ. The soul losing itself in the eternal nothing through a process of releasement patterned on Christ's death is what I would describe as apophatic contemplation according to Henry Suso.

John Tauler

John Tauler, like Henry Suso, was both a Dominican friar and a student of Meister Eckhart. He lived, roughly, 1300-1361.⁶⁸ He achieved fame in his day as a gifted preacher while ministering in Strassburg. Further details about his life are scant. His mysticism is found exclusively in his sermons, which have a distinctively practical emphasis.

Tauler proclaims a way to and deep encounter with God involving the soul's pure negation of itself. His is a gospel teaching about complete self-emptying "to attain the inner ground of God and human expressed in Christ's saying, 'the kingdom of God is within you' (Luke 17:21)."⁶⁹ This practical approach builds on his understanding of God as abyss, ground, desert, and nothingness.

Tauler sees God as hidden "in the soul's ground, hidden to all feeling and totally unknown in the ground."⁷⁰ He also uses the divine desert motif: "the divine desert in silent solitude."⁷¹ Tauler calls God, in accord with Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, the

⁶⁸ McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 240.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁷⁰ Quoted in McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 249.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

divine darkness transcending being. Additionally, he refers to divine incomprehensibility through his use of the term “abyss.” He calls on the soul:

It is there that you must bring your own abyssal darkness, bereft of all true light and lacking all light, admitting that the abyss of divine darkness is known to itself alone and unknown to all else. That abyss, the unknown and unnamed, the holy, is more loved and more enticing to souls than all that can be known about the divine being in eternal blessedness.⁷²

This beautifully crafted sermonic exhortation makes use of epistemological and ontological negation. The abyss belongs to God and the soul. There is a mutual abyss that undermines solid notions of both human and divine being. Crucially, and in keeping with the tradition of ontological negation as well as what he learned from Eckhart, Tauler also speaks of God as the divine nothing. Finally, he keeps God as Trinity in view throughout his homiletic corpus.

Regarding mystical practice, or apophatic contemplation, Tauler emphasizes prayer and fundamental attitudes to cultivate. First, Tauler sees prayer as turning to God without any in-betweens, an abiding in the abyss of nothingness. The soul prays by turning within beyond its powers and sinking into the divine ground. But there is more. Prayer as encounter with God involves diving into the abyssal nothingness of God.

Second, Tauler provides us with three attitudes to develop along the mystical journey: turning, releasing, and receiving. Turning means conversion, that is, turning away from all creatures and returning to God: “a totally true turning away from everything that is not God and a totally true turning toward the pure true good that is called and is God.”⁷³ This conversion is a turning within to the ground, which involves

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 267.

coming to terms with one's created nothingness and, therefore, dependence on God. Turning gives way to releasing possessiveness and the self. In Sermon 25, Tauler reflects on how the Spirit acts to empty and fill the soul for "The measure of our emptiness is the measure of our receptivity.... If God is to go in, the creature of necessity must get out."⁷⁴ The soul must lose the self and "even the losing of self ought to be let go of."⁷⁵ Releasement flourishes in the soul's coming to the pure nothingness of poverty of spirit, which allows God to transform it. Receiving, or empty passivity, is the soul's utter freedom for God: "If God is really to perform his works in you, you must be in empty passivity, and all your powers must abandon all their own activities and preoccupations and stand in pure self-denial."⁷⁶

According to Tauler, Christ is the overriding principle of the soul's journey into the divine abyss. His sermons reflect a functional Christology by emphasizing Christ's role as savior and example. Tauler relies on the patristic adage, "God became human that we might become God." McGinn summarizes: "[Tauler's] concern is...with making present the saving action of Jesus as both effective cause of redemption and model for imitation in his hearers' path to God."⁷⁷ In Sermon 55, Tauler announces, "Everything rests in this: in a bottomless sinking into the bottomless nothing."⁷⁸ The soul sinks into

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 268.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 269-70.

⁷⁷ McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 271.

⁷⁸ Quoted in McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism*, 273.

the “unknown and unnamed abyss beyond all modes [of being], images, and forms.”⁷⁹ Here is Tauler’s description of the soul’s deep encounter with the mystery of God. This bottomless sinking into nothing is apophatic contemplation for John Tauler. And there is a deep Christological dimension to it. For, in the last part of the sermon, Tauler connects this apophatic encounter with God to Christ: “The road that leads to this goal must be through the adorable life and suffering of Our Lord Jesus Christ.”⁸⁰

Tauler does not want the soul to meditate on the events of Christ’s life only. He wants the soul to *become* Christ by sinking into nothing. In Sermon 31, Tauler interprets Paul’s command to proclaim Christ’s death until he comes by saying, “You do not make this proclamation with words and thoughts, but with dying and unbecoming in the power of his death.”⁸¹ The bottomless sinking into the divine nothing is a death to self, a dying with Christ. In Sermon 76, Tauler interprets Christ’s promise to the apostles at the Ascension that it is better for him to leave as a promise of apophatic love, which is unknowing, beyond being, identical with the divine darkness, yet also “the day of Jesus Christ.”⁸² And it is the fruit of the crucifixion and death of Christ. Tauler connects the apophatic way he learned from Meister Eckhart to the incarnate and crucified Word of God.

In preaching about mystical unity, Tauler deliberates on the inexplicable identity between God and soul as “the fusion of the divine and human.”⁸³ The soul gets absorbed

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁸² *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, trans. Maria Shradly (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985), 172.

⁸³ McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 262.

in the abyssal nothingness of God. In Sermon 54, the abyss of the creature forces the divine abyss to possess it: “The created abyss draws its depth within for this purpose. Its depth and its recognition of its nothingness draws the uncreated open Abyss into itself, and there the one abyss flows into the other abyss and there is a Single One—one nothing in the other nothing.”⁸⁴ The “nothing” refers to both creature and God. Indistinct unity involves our abyssal annihilation in divine nothingness. It is as if the soul falls forever into the nothing, leaving everything behind.

In this indistinction, the soul becomes unaware of self through God’s grace. In Sermon 11 Tauler says the soul “will be led into a hidden desert far beyond his natural faculties. Words cannot describe it, for it is the unfathomable darkness where the divine Goodness reigns above all distinctions.... For in this unity all multiplicity is lost.”⁸⁵ While the end of the journey, this is also a description of the deep encounter with God the soul undergoes in prayer. It is the soul’s finite nothingness fusing with the divine nothingness: “so sinks the created nothing in the Uncreated Nothing.”⁸⁶

The following passage from Sermon 28 expresses well Tauler’s notion of apophatic contemplation:

the purified and clarified spirit sinks completely into the divine darkness, into a still silence and an inconceivable unity. In this absorption all like and unlike is lost. In this abyss the spirit loses itself and knows neither God nor itself, neither like nor unlike. It knows nothing, for it is engulfed in the oneness of God and has lost all differences.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Quoted in McGinn, *Harvest of Mysticism*, 254.

⁸⁵ *Johannes Tauler: Sermons*, 59.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁸⁷ Quoted in Dennis Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, (NY: Paulist Press, 1996), 117.

This passage contains classic Christian apophatic terms such as “divine darkness” and “knows nothing.” It is also a deep epistemological and ontological negation: the soul transcends knowledge of self and God, losing itself so completely in the divine darkness that there is no separate knowing. The soul “engulfed in the oneness of God” and lost to all difference suggests the kind of ontological negation that takes the soul beyond being (distinct essences or separate beings) to the nothingness of God and of apophatic contemplation. Tauler, then, is clear about spiritual practice and the encounter with God: both are nothing. The way to encounter God involves letting go of all epistemological operations. The actual meeting of the soul and God—what I call apophatic contemplation—is the incomprehensible abyss of nothingness in which the soul is one with God.

Marguerite Porete

Marguerite Porete, who died in 1310, was a beguine, a lay woman living a contemplative lifestyle in the world with other lay women in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries. We know next to nothing about her life. Still, we can affirm that she wrote a mystical treatise titled *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Her teaching, challenging and uncomfortable to the male ecclesiastical hierarchy, became suspect. Inquisitors eventually denounced it as heretical. On June 1, 1310, the bishop of Paris ordered her burning at the stake as punishment for heresy. Today, though, we must realize that the inquisitors who denounced her took supposedly heretical statements out of context and without understanding what she meant. Indeed, her meaning eludes many, but her mystical theology is absolutely clear about one thing, at least, namely, the centrality of nothingness. This is what I call her understanding of apophatic contemplation.

Porete's work, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, brings together apophatic discourse and the language of courtly love. Her apophasis results in a radical annihilation of reason and will, a state of total selflessness that occurs not through our efforts but through Love. Porete conceives of falling in love with God as falling from love into nothingness, reflecting the gospel theme of the loss of self (cf. Mark 8:34-35).

The Mirror of Simple Souls is one-hundred and forty short chapters consisting of a dialogue between a Love and the Soul, which includes other interlocutors such as "Reason" and "FarNear" (the divine lover of the annihilated soul and the only male character). Maria Lichtmann reflects, "Marguerite's entire treatise is in the form of a dialogue primarily between Love and the Soul.... The response to Love is an increasing clarification and simplification, the soul's...annihilation."⁸⁸ Through Love, the soul wills nothing and knows nothing. Such a soul "has become nothing."⁸⁹ Her theme of the "Annihilated Soul"⁹⁰ who wills and knows nothing highlights a deep ontological negation that opens out into unity with the divine nothing. This is the "essence" of apophatic contemplation.

Porete has given the Christian tradition a wonderful piece of apophatic literature. The purpose of *The Mirror* is to lead souls into nothing by willing and knowing nothing, that is, into apophatic contemplation. She brings her great gifts as a writer to bear on this goal. Lichtmann asserts, "Marguerite uses all the linguistic means at her disposal,

⁸⁸ Maria Lichtmann, "Marguerite Porete and Meister Eckhart: *The Mirror for Simple Souls* Mirrored," *Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*, ed. Bernard McGinn (Continuum: New York, NY: 1994), 73.

⁸⁹ *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, trans. Ellen Babinsky (Paulist Press, Mahwah: NJ, 1993), 85.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.

particularly those of paradox and contradiction, to annihilate in language as in reality all understanding, will, love, and even the self itself.”⁹¹

While Porete describes God as God is Lady Love and Far-Near—“Far-Near” means God is infinitely distant and unknown and for that very reason more here in the divine absence—she does not *define* God as either. Her theology commits to an epistemological negation that recognizes the insufficiency of all divine names. Still, for Porete, God is overflowing goodness and self-giving love, “which tends, by the nature of charity, to give and overflow His total goodness.”⁹² The whole journey of annihilation runs on love. Thus, God is both love and nothingness: “‘God,’ the bountiful outpouring of a manifest Love, belongs to an unmanifest nothingness, which can be reached only by ‘knowing nothing,’ ‘willing nothing,’ and having no space for God.”⁹³

Reflecting a clear ontological negation, Porete declares that God is the “nothingness...” that “gives her [the soul] the All.”⁹⁴ The soul meets the divine nothing in a deep encounter of willing, knowing nothing, and having no place for God. These are her words for apophatic contemplation. Although she outlines these three dimensions to the practice of nothingness, she tends to focus on willing nothing. Near the end of *The Mirror*, for instance, Porete exclaims, “Willing-Nothing has lordship!”⁹⁵ She has this focus because she thinks the will is the last vestige of the self. Therefore, she counsels

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 72.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹³ Lichtmann, 73.

⁹⁴ *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 156.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 216.

annihilation regarding the will or willing-nothing—not even to will to do the will of God.

Lichtmann elaborates,

Marguerite's *Mirror*...[insists] on the nothingness of God and of the soul brought to nothing in God. Marguerite's theology in its emphasis on "knowing nothing" as the way to the unknowable God may be considered a classic instance of the apophatic program of Dionysius. Yet, her mysticism might be said to assume the *cognitive* apophaticism of Dionysius and to concentrate more on a conative apophaticism aimed at "willing-nothing."⁹⁶

To will nothing means God wills for the Soul who no longer has a will. It is as if the soul's will disappears in the divine will. The soul does not will to do God's will. Rather, "it is the will of God which wills it in her."⁹⁷ The "it" is the accomplishing of God's will. The will holds the soul back from being free: "the Soul wills nothing, says Love, since she is free; for one is not free who wills something by the will within him, whatever he might will."⁹⁸

In connection with willing nothing, Jesus Christ plays a central role in annihilation. He is the exemplar of willing nothing. His obedience to the Father's will, Christ's absolute surrender on the cross, is our model for annihilation. Indeed, Porete knows annihilation is possible only because of the incarnation.⁹⁹ Jesus is the model for willing nothing in his annihilating surrender to the Father.¹⁰⁰ Following Jesus in his

⁹⁶ Lichtmann, 72.

⁹⁷ Marguerite Porete: *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 92.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

⁹⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism: 1200-1350* (Crossroad: New York, NY, 1998), 261.

¹⁰⁰ Marguerite Porete: *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 208-209.

annihilation, the soul realizes the transcendent consequence of willing nothing is the transformation into the divine nothing.¹⁰¹

This consequence of willing nothing like Jesus unfolds, according to Porete, along seven stages, which culminate in the fall into the nothingness of God. These are the stages by which the soul becomes nothing, the goal of negative theology and apophatic contemplation. First, there is a death to sin through the soul obeying commandments; second, there is a death to nature by imitating Christ, that is, following the evangelical counsels; third, there is a death to the inordinate desires of the will through obedience; fourth, the soul is drawn into “the touch of the pure delight of love,” feeling divine union, though the sweetness can be deceiving; fifth, there is a beginning of true annihilation: God’s overflowing into the soul causes death to the spirit and a start of willing nothing yet there is still a lingering “I” perspective; sixth, the divine perspective predominates: God sees God in her, for her, without her, further drawing into annihilation; and, seventh, the last stage is the glorification of heaven. These stages demonstrate the process of becoming nothing, of the soul becoming an Annihilated Soul.

The sixth stage, particularly, shows Porete’s understanding of unity with God. Lichtmann states, “In the sixth state the soul no longer sees herself or God, but rather God sees God in her so that she sees that none is but God.... At this point the terms of the dialectic disappear into a nothingness that has become All, and all that has become Nothingness.”¹⁰² The soul is dissolved by annihilation and melted into the divine.¹⁰³ It is

¹⁰¹ Lichtmann, 78.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 81-82.

¹⁰³ See *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 219.

the soul losing her own nature as a created something by the gift of God to return to the divine abyss where there is no difference between God and the soul. Annihilation is the state of nothingness-in-God, the soul is brought to nothing in God. Marguerite's goal is an "I" without a me. Her whole book is meant to help the soul become nothing in the will, the mind, and its status as a distinct being. The meaning of love is willing nothing, knowing nothing, and having no place for God. Everything disappears into primordial oneness with God.

The Annihilated Soul falls from love into nothingness. The soul no longer sees herself or God, but rather God sees God in her so that she sees that there is nothing but God. In fact, the soul also transcends God, at least as the object which opposes the subject that is the soul:

When it is no longer possible to "have" God by way of ownership, possession, or place, then one has entered into the deepest poverty of spirit.... The deeply experiential nothingness of Love does not cling to the names, modes, or attributes of a rational theology.... One loses God and the way to God to be brought to nothing-in-God.¹⁰⁴

The soul disappears into the Nothingness that is All. It is the state of apophatic contemplation. More specifically, Porete puts it like this: "the soul dwells in pure nothingness without thought."¹⁰⁵ This is a state beyond the mind and its operations. To dwell in nothingness is to stop thinking and enjoy God. The Annihilated Soul also sings, "Thought is no longer of worth to me, / Nor work, nor speech." Willing nothing—along with knowing nothing and having no place for God, but emphasizing the willing—frees

¹⁰⁴ Licthmann, 78.

¹⁰⁵ *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 172.

the soul of every encumbrance: “The soul becomes more and more free as it comes to know nothing and to will nothing, not even to will to do the will of God!”¹⁰⁶

Indeed, apophatic contemplation for Porete transcends not only the mind but also the very distinction between God and soul. Speaking of the Annihilated Soul, Porete writes, “Such a Soul is so transparent in understanding that she sees herself to be nothing in God and God nothing in her.”¹⁰⁷ Like Eckhart, Porete sees nothingness as what God and the soul have in common. Such nothingness disrupts every attempt to grasp God by means of rationalized ontologies as much as aiming to reduce the soul to the bliss and love of divine nothingness.

Bernard McGinn attests to the role of nothingness, the end of apophatic contemplation, in the mysticism of Marguerite Porete:

Apophatic language, as Michael Sells has shown, strives not to create systems or express ontologies but rather to break down systems and to subvert ontologies that threaten to make God another ‘reality.’ Like all apophatic mystics, Marguerite insists that there is no coming to terms with God, but only the constant effort, the performance, of the process of negating the works of intellect and will in order to attain the annihilation in which God and the Soul become absolutely One once more. Therefore, nothingness (nihil) is central to Marguerite Porete. Her mystical thought may be said to be founded on two apophatic pillars: (1) God is totally incomprehensible and therefore ‘nothing’ from the perspective of human categories; (2) the Soul must become nothing by willing nothing in order to attain the God who is nothing and therefore all.¹⁰⁸

Porete gives expression to a fascinating and deep epistemological as well as ontological negation. Throughout *The Mirror*, she pushes the soul beyond knowing by presenting the path to God as knowing nothing. She pushes the soul further into the nothingness of God

¹⁰⁶ Liethmann, 77.

¹⁰⁷ Marguerite Porete: *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 108.

¹⁰⁸ McGinn, *The Flowering of Mysticism*, 257.

by emphasizing the path as willing nothing. In line with Lichtmann and Lanzetta, we could call this a conative negation. Still, she pushes further, beyond being into the Nothing transcending God. McGinn's acknowledgement of nothingness as central to Porete points to her project as being one of apophatic contemplation. There is a subversion of categories of being as well as categories of virtue. Further, this subversion of being and virtue ties in with the encounter with the nothingness of God: "the understanding of my nothingness, says this Soul, has given me the All, and the nothingness of this All, says the Soul, has taken me from prayer, and I pray nothing."¹⁰⁹ The "nothingness of the All" refers to God. The soul, enjoying this gift of this divine nothing, prays nothing. There is no more spoken prayer or prayer made of thoughts and feelings. In truth, the spiritual practice she describes is not a practice anymore. The soul loses all practices to enjoy, in simplicity and unity, the divine nothing: "you who have lost all your practices...through this loss have the practice of doing nothing...this practice and this loss is accomplished in the nothingness of your Lover."¹¹⁰ Porete's annihilation leaves the soul bereft of all so that it realizes the Nothing who is the soul's infinite love. This is what apophatic contemplation is for Marguerite Porete.

The Cloud of Unknowing

The anonymous fourteenth-century English author of *The Cloud of Unknowing* makes the encounter with the incomprehensible God the center of his mystical project. Although there is great uncertainty about the dates this author lived, McGinn attests that the author's writings were "composed in the 1380s-1390s."¹¹¹ The unknown author

¹⁰⁹ *Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*, 129.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

would have us enter the “cloud of unknowing” to know God beyond knowledge and to love God as God. This author believed in the divine mystery, which is darkness to our rational minds. He understood prayer, therefore, as an entrance into the dark mystery of God. He called it contemplation. Clearly, the whole of the anonymous author’s treatise concerns apophatic contemplation. Bernard McGinn elaborates on the centerpiece of *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

[T]here is a sophisticated treatment of apophatic language: how to understand speaking about God.... The effect of understanding the limits of language implies a double effacement, even annihilation: the suppression and erasure of the self...and the correlative annihilating of the God of positive attributes to strive toward the unknown ‘naked being of God,’ the Nothing that is in reality everything.¹¹²

By practicing the prayer of *The Cloud*, the soul disappears in the Nothing that is All.

We do not know who wrote *The Cloud of Unknowing*. We do know when, in England in the late fourteenth century, and we can surmise who. The author never gives his name, but most scholars believe it was a Carthusian monk, probably an older monk; *The Cloud of Unknowing* is addressed to a younger monk. The anonymous author also wrote other, minor, works such as *The Book of Privy Counseling*, *A Letter on Prayer*, a translation of a classic called *Denis' Hid Divinity*, and *A Letter of Discernment*. In *The Cloud of Unknowing*, the author speaks plainly. He does not write as an academic theologian, as a scholar from the university. With common sense and some humor, he uses earthy metaphors, such as clouds. He writes as a spiritual director introducing aspects of the mystical life to a spiritual directee. Like a good spiritual director, he

¹¹¹ McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 396-397.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 401.

advises readers to read the whole book before making any judgments. If we don't understand what he is saying, then he asks us to read it again.

God, who is love, calls forth love from us through Jesus. For the author, this divine love is central. Intention is central. *The Cloud* author recognizes that our minds cannot grasp God, but we can still love God. In fact, he is quite absolute about this, for "it is love alone that can reach God."¹¹³ The author describes a method or way of being present to God intentionally, that is, with a simple desire for God. He instructs us on the priority of love: "lift up your heart to God by a humble impulse of...a simple reaching out directly towards God."¹¹⁴ Intentional presence to God, seeking only God, is an act of love. Love is what carries the soul through the contemplative work he is going to teach. It is, truly, the heart of contemplation. Hence, anyone can do the practice he teaches because it is not a practice based on skill as much as on love: "All these should give themselves to this grace and to this exercise, whoever they are."¹¹⁵ All the soul needs is a simple, naked, direct, desire for God.

The author uses the title image of the cloud to great effect. He is famous for it. The cloud conveys the darkness and obscurity of loving God beyond thinking. He describes two different clouds with respect to contemplative practice. One cloud is the cloud of forgetting; the other of unknowing. He tells the soul to let everything go by placing all things, including thoughts, beneath a cloud of forgetting. He then advises the soul to attend to God alone in the cloud of unknowing.

¹¹³ *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. James Walsh (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981), 139.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175.

The cloud of forgetting is his image of letting go of all thinking. Forgetting means abandoning the desire for such thoughts, to think about what we want. Thinking, the author frequently repeats, cannot get God; whatever the soul thinks about stands between it and God. “Insofar as there is anything in your mind except God alone, in that far you are further from God.”¹¹⁶ As the soul gives its attention to thinking and becomes preoccupied with it, it loses awareness of God. “Therefore, it is my wish to leave everything that I can think of and choose for my love the thing that I cannot think.”¹¹⁷ He is talking about single-minded attention to God in interior silence. The image of a cloud suggests that thinking becomes lost to the soul as it encounters the One beyond all thinking.

The soul meets this God of mystery in a “cloud of unknowing.” He says, “when you first begin to undertake it, all that you find is a darkness a...cloud of unknowing... This darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding.... So set yourself to rest in this darkness.”¹¹⁸ The darkness and unknowing are a kind of blankness in the mind because thinking is not in use and the soul is simply being. He tells the soul that it will not feel anything; it is best to accept the dark unknowing and learn to rest in it. The cloud of unknowing never lifts, for it is the cloud of encounter with the Unknowable God. The mind will never grasp God by thinking.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

The whole of *The Cloud of Unknowing* is about the “work” of apophatic contemplation. But the author does not mean willful effort. Rather, this word, *work*, in his vocabulary refers to practice or method. “Whoever hears this exercise read or spoken of may think that he can or ought to achieve it by intellectual labor; and so he sits and racks his brains how it can be achieved...so as to fashion a false way of working.”¹¹⁹ The practice of contemplation goes beyond the mind. It goes into unknowing. The author is insistent on this point. The mind cannot grasp God, because God is transcendent mystery. Therefore, the soul has to pray beyond the thinking mind.

The Cloud author recommends forgetting created things and being present to God in the cloud of unknowing. To help be present in the cloud of unknowing, he advises the soul to choose a short monosyllabic word that represents one’s love for God: “If you like, you can have this reaching out, wrapped up and enfolded in a single word...take just a little word, of one syllable rather than of two.... Such a one is the word ‘God’ or the word ‘love’.... Fasten this word to your heart.”¹²⁰ The word represents intention, that is, a naked desire for God alone.

The representative word is how the soul steers itself back to God when caught up in the thinking mind. Part of the work of contemplative prayer is to return to the word as a gentle thought in one’s mind when thinking gets between the soul and God. The other part of the work of contemplation is to stay in the nothingness or unknowing silence of the prayer. He says, “though all your bodily faculties can find there nothing to feed on, because they think that what you are doing is nothing, carry on, then, with that nothing,

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 133-134.

as long as you are doing it for God's love. Do leave off, but press on earnestly in that nothing with an alert desire in your will to have God, whom no man [*sic*] can know."¹²¹ Whenever the mind focuses on anything, it's not engaged with the unknowable God. The word helps the soul to return to God and to plumb the depths of nothingness to discover the divine nothingness. According to the author, when the mind is not occupied with either material or spiritual things, it is engaged with the very reality of God.

Thoughts during contemplative prayer can be incredibly sticky. No matter how often the soul lets them go, they return. They stick to the soul. Even if the soul patiently waits out these thoughts as they pass out of the mind, they can return and be even stickier. While attention wanders easily, this is not a problem for the work of *The Cloud*. Rather, the issue is that interesting thoughts catch the soul's desire and attentiveness. With the voice of an experienced contemplative, the author states, "if any living person, man or woman, comes to mind, or any bodily or worldly thing whatever.... A simple thought of any of these which comes up against your will and your consciousness" is "beyond your control."¹²²

The Cloud author has great advice for handling these thoughts. The main way to deal with them is to repeat the word within, to come back to it as an expression of one's naked desire for God. He offers further teaching: (1) to ignore the distracting thoughts while keeping a naked intent directed to God and (2) to admit defeat and surrender to God. In other words, the soul should not worry about distracting thoughts but train itself to seek God alone, even when it feels hopeless. The author reflects, "give yourself up to

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 251-252.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 141.

God; feel as though you were hopelessly defeated...it is nothing else but a true knowledge and experience of yourself as you are.”¹²³ Contemplation enables the soul to accept itself, sticky thoughts included.

The anonymous author savors the apophatic contemplative experience of the nothing that is nowhere. He declares, “I would rather be in this way nowhere bodily, wrestling with this blind nothing, than to have such power that I could be everywhere bodily whenever I would, happily engaged with all this ‘something’ like a lord with his possessions.”¹²⁴ No amount of playing with the world’s somethings compares with knowing by unknowing the nothing that is nowhere. He urges the soul to “Leave aside this everywhere and this everything, in exchange for this nowhere and this nothing.”¹²⁵ The author exhorts the reader to practice ontological negation.

The anonymous author relates how contemplatives stop treating the world or people as objects for use and abuse because they know reality through the nothing that is nowhere. He says, “A man’s [*sic*] affection is remarkably changed in the spiritual experience of this nothing when it is achieved nowhere.”¹²⁶ The contemplative soul can love the world without seeing it as an object if the love emerges from the nothing that is nowhere.

Also, the author wants to make sure people are not understanding this contemplative practice crudely or only in literal, physical terms. He wants his readers to

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 181.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 252.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 253.

understand how to talk about God and spirituality because it affects the practice. “So for the love of God, take care in this exercise and do not labor with your senses or with your imagination...this exercise cannot be achieved by their labor; so leave them and do not work with them.”¹²⁷ If one thinks of God and prayer more physically and literally, it will lead to great difficulties with the nothing that is nowhere of contemplation. The author does not mince words: “our exercise is a spiritual exercise, and not a physical one, nor is it to be performed in a physical way.”¹²⁸

The contemplative practice of the treatise is to abide in the “cloud of unknowing,” and this practice is to remain in “the nowhere that is nothing.” *The Cloud* practice is to enter into and abide in the state of nothingness unto unity with God, “the nothing” who is “all.” The soul enters the cloud of unknowing as it releases its grip on everything created in the cloud of forgetting. The soul is nowhere as it abides in the clouds of unknowing and forgetting. Let us recall, though, that to be nowhere is to be everywhere spiritually. “In the ‘nowhere’ of spiritual freedom the soul finds ‘nothing’ to feed on, ‘nothing’ to support it—and that is precisely the point. Pressing onward into this nothing for God’s sake brings one ever closer to the God who cannot be known: ‘Leave this everywhere and this something in exchange for this nowhere and this nothing.’”¹²⁹ For this anonymous author, the practice of loving God beyond the mind is an apophatic practice resting on the soul’s encounter with the nothing, God, in the nowhere of the cloud of unknowing. This practice, I contend, is apophatic contemplation.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 127.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹²⁹ McGinn, *Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*, 417.

Conclusion

Based on readings of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, John Tauler, Marguerite Porete, and *The Cloud of Unknowing*, we can state that apophatic contemplation is a process of releasing and letting go into the mystery of love occurring in the soul that ends in a reduction to or unity with the divine nothing. This is a negation of the soul and its operations (thinking, feeling) as well as its very status as a distinct being and an abiding in an inner nothing, which results in the soul realizing its deepest reality is *the nothing*. Apophatic contemplation leads to realizing oneness with the divine nothing in daily life. The soul lives the Nothing by loving freely and by letting go of anything that obstructs love.

Even more, apophatic contemplation is the process of realizing the nothing beyond God and self that is, paradoxically, the depth of God and self. Their vocabulary and use of language, in general, may differ, and their conceptions of unity with God or identity with God may be different, but each agrees that a mystical encounter with God is primarily characterized by nothing, bareness, unknowing, or an abyss of indistinction. Their writings display a language and a message, the language is negative. The message concerns our already given oneness with God, letting go, and interior silence or a state of mind in which the soul is not thinking. In other words, the message is apophatic contemplation. Apophatic preachers use this language, proclaim this message, and practice apophatic contemplation.

For each mystic *nothingness* is the coincidence of the loss of self and divine unity in the moment of encounter. It is more a shedding of every obstacle getting between God and the soul. Rather than climbing up to a state of oneness that the soul does not possess,

the soul realizes what it always has been, namely the divine *nihil*. The soul's practice of apophatic contemplation, the actual encounter with God, is, purely and simply, nothing.

Hence, apophatic preaching is preaching arising from the experience of the nothing beyond God that, paradoxically, one accesses within. Apophatic preaching arises from this experience insofar as the preacher abides in a state of nothingness. With the language and message of the apophatic mystics, the apophatic preacher, abiding in the state of nothingness, leads a congregation into oneness with the incomprehensible mystery of God through a sermon. To do so, this preacher must enjoy, through interior silence and letting go, unity with the divine nothing. This is not an unrealistic expectation if we remember that anyone can realize unity with the divine nothing, albeit momentarily, by the practice of interior silence and letting go. Further, this description of certain medieval apophatic mystics issues a vocabulary, a set of preferred apophatic terms for the preacher. Some of these include, "silence," "darkness," "abyss," "emptiness," "unknowing," and "nothing." Finally, the way to and the message about the divine nothing—letting go, interior silence, and present oneness with the mystery of God—constitutes the content of the apophatic tradition.

This understanding of apophatic preaching intersects with a sacramental vision. Whether within or outside of the church's liturgy, apophatic preaching creates the space to encounter God in ordinary life. Apophatic preaching builds on a sacramental vision of the world, which sees the reality as graced, as inhabited by God. To preach apophatically is to aim for a loving opening to God both within the soul and in the world. The emphasis lies in the direction of God's mystery, inner silence, and letting go as the soul's means to awaken to the divine presence.

As my reading of the mystics makes clear, apophatic preaching involves the vocabulary of the apophatic mystics. But what does it mean to use negative words like “nothing” or “darkness” to describe God and the soul’s encounter with God? How does this language work and what might it do in the event of preaching? This is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3

To Speak Nothing: Toward A Negative Theopoetics

Apophatic preaching is a resource the Church can use to revitalize contemporary preaching. The apophatic mystics I discussed in the previous chapter show us what apophasis means. Still, they all preached using positive assertions about God grounded in scripture and tradition. The kataphatic remained a part of their unique mysticisms. At the same time, they drew deeply on the apophatic mystical tradition to draw people into an all-encompassing participation in the mystery of God.

To preach apophatically means proclaiming the message of ever-present oneness with the divine, recognizing that this depends upon letting go of our ideas of God. By entering the inner silence where that oneness dwells, we find ourselves invited to relinquish the language we use for God and rest in the divine mystery. The point is to participate in God's mystery, here and now. The apophatic mystics were focused on the question of how not to speak of God to allow this. This question and language, more broadly, are crucial for the event of preaching. Apophatic preaching has a unique approach to homiletic language, which it uses to invite congregations to a deep participation in mystery. In this chapter, I will focus on this approach to language.

How does one put into language that which defies language? How do we speak of God, indeed, even *speak God*? This question, which has occupied the more significant part of Christian theology for a long time, is at its core also a poetic question. How does

one speak of the unspeakable? After all, there are other ways to name the divine. Such is the testimony of the apophatic mystics. However, apophatic mystics and poets are not concerned with questions of language only. Mystics and poets use language to convey an experience. Better said, they use language to *evoke* an experience based on their experience.

In preaching, we need a way of language that both emerges from and evokes an experience. Poetic language provides an eminently helpful approach. Suppose we combine poetry with apophasis, the negative way of the mystics. In that case, we may have a way of using language to speak God, that not only evokes an experience of God but also invites congregants to allow room for the *mystery* of God. This is what I intend to explore in this chapter: using language to evoke, provoke, and empty the mind for the encounter with divine mystery. To this end, I will propose a negative theoetics after examining poetry and negative theology.

“Negative theoetics” appears to be a curious term. But we can understand it easily. In this term, two parts combine. These are poetics and negative theology. What do I mean by poetics and negative theology? Poetics points to how language functions and how it is used in terms of its figurative or imaginative powers. Negative theology means understanding that God is beyond all words, thinking, and being. Negative and negating words and metaphoric devices are used to communicate this truth. Here, I will describe negative theoetics as an understanding of *the apophatic* in theology and poetry that grounds negative theological and poetic language in preaching.

Because God transcends all words, it is fitting to use outrageous words when we speak of God. And we can outrageously use outrageous words. Words that seem

counterintuitive or too abstract can be excessive. Using such words as “nothing” or “godless” about the divine and then combining them with words like “love,” “mercy,” “infinite,” or “beyond” is to use outrageous words outrageously, as poetry tends to do.

Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite enacts this apophatic move. It is the move of being excessive: using speech in an excessive manner to evoke, simultaneously, the superabundance and the mystery of the divine. The apophatic move exceeds regular speech, which aims for clear and precise communication. Such language asks whether the hearer or audience understood the intended point. And such language leans towards brevity. Not so with apophatic speech.

At the end of *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius sings, “the divinity beyond all is celebrated as one and trinity; it is neither unity or trinity, or what is conceived by us.”¹³⁰ He even proclaims, “That we may truly celebrate...we name the beyond being by beings.”¹³¹ Throughout *The Divine Names*, Pseudo-Dionysius piles up outrageous descriptors of the divine. He calls us to celebrate the Holy Mystery with extravagant and outrageous words, which break language and become nearly nonsensical. Consider this line: “the beyond-divinity beyond be-ing beyond beingly beyond all. There is neither name nor logos of it.”¹³²

For Pseudo-Dionysius, language fails to communicate God, yet this failure may be a breakthrough. It may be the most significant advantage of language. This breakthrough has to do with fully accepting this to use the most outrageous words to

¹³⁰ “The Divine Names,” *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones, 205.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

communicate God and prepare the heart for prayer. This may be the shock required, the necessary subversion, for the human mind to break out of the prison of thought—which cannot grasp God—and break open to the transcendent that remains incomprehensibly intimate to us, which happens through the silence of prayer.

We tend to enclose God in patterns of thinking and accepted metaphors such as God being all-powerful or God as Father. The problem is not the particular theology or metaphor but the tendency to trap our understanding of God in only certain ideas or images, often forgetting that these ideas and images are metaphors and not literal descriptions. In regular Catholic liturgical and theological practice, for instance, we pray to God the Father but never to God the Mother. Both are metaphors but Catholic tradition tends to cling to male metaphors and exclude female metaphors. Even more problematically, using exclusive images and doing so literally cuts off the experience of God's mystery.

Furthermore, the human mind cannot think *the infinite*. God is unthinkable or, to put it differently, infinitely knowable—our knowing of God never comes to an end. Language cannot capture the divine. But it can point to and evoke the divine. Language can help us see the tendency to restrict God in conceptual idols. We can use language to shock our minds into seeing this truth by unsettling our staid assumptions and beliefs. Indeed, outrageous language can make us sit up straight, so to speak, and pay attention because such language is transgressive. For instance, calling God “nothing” is a transgressive and outrageous claim. If God has no limits, then language for God has no limits. We cannot rule out any way of speaking or understanding God because of God's mystery.

John Jones comments that the end of practicing negative theology is “to experience unity with nothing.”¹³³ I seek to describe negative theopoetics as a way of approaching language and speaking that is both poetic and apophatic—outrageous—to lead others into the divine oneness beyond all things. Negative theopoetics uses language to break open the mind and evoke the experience of the Nothing *already within us*.

Metaphor must be central to its strategy. Metaphor is meant to carry us (-phor) into the beyond (meta-). In this way, negative theopoetics serves preaching, which means to carry a congregation into the Beyond of God through the here and now of Christ. Here lies a vital connection to the excessive language I have been discussing. Transgression means to pass beyond, which is precisely the function of a metaphor. Extreme and outrageous language is necessarily transgressive in that such language moves us beyond conventional patterns of understanding. Such language can dislodge reified patterns of thinking about God to allow for more unknowability and the invitation to participate in the mystery of God by prayer that moves beyond both conventional images of and ways of relating to God.

Poetry and poetics are vital to developing negative theopoetics. We will require a sense of how poetry communicates an experience and what characteristics of poetry help in this regard. To understand how poetry functions and communicates an experience through evocation and provocation, I will reflect on the vital characteristics of poetry with the help of contemporary poet Jane Hirshfield. Then, I will offer readings of several poems by Wallace Stevens: “An Ordinary Evening in New Haven,” “To An Old Philosopher in Rome,” “The Snow Man,” “Lebensweisheitspielerei,” and “This Vast

¹³³ John D. Jones, “Introduction Essay,” *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, 101.

Inelegance.” A linguistic analysis of negative theology and a description of negative theopoetics follows.

Jane Hirshfield

Jane Hirshfield, a contemporary poet and essayist, gets to the mystery of truth as she tackles poetry from what I could only call slightly different “apophatic” angles: hiddenness, uncertainty, surprise, indirection, and the threshold. She writes, “Perceptibility is a kind of attentiveness: the way that you look at a thing and who you are determine what you will see.”¹³⁴ She names a connection between consciousness and reality, a connection we will see Stevens play with in his poetry. Hirshfield notes, “The poet must learn from what dwells outside her conceptions, capacities, and even language: from exile and silence...expose that [narrow] self to the unmapped and uncontrolled.”¹³⁵ In the poetic experience, there is exposure to mystery and a deep stripping away of ways of thinking, of thought itself. She explores this insight by reflecting on various poets, from Basho to Gerard Manley Hopkins.

Hirshfield intones, “It is the nature of riddles, and metaphors, to exceed their apparent terrain, to teach us also to exceed the apparent.”¹³⁶ Apophysis practiced seeks to break open and break through the mind with its old habits of thinking. It seems, from reading Hirshfield, that poetry can do this, too. Poetry awakens! Hirshfield says as much: “good poetry doesn’t in fact allay anxiety with answers—it startles its reader out of the

¹³⁴ Jane Hirshfield, *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1997), 118.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 121.

¹³⁶ Jane Hirshfield, *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2008), 14.

general trance, awakening an enlarged reality by means of a close-paid attention to its own ground.”¹³⁷ If this names how good poetry emerges, it has everything to do with apophasis, staying put in the state of mystery and un-self-awareness. Indeed, Hirshfield asserts, “art...makes of our encounter with the uncertain a thing to be sought.”¹³⁸ She celebrates a wondrous discovery of the unfathomable and incomprehensible at the heart of life.

Poetry transfers a new vision to the reader even as it subverts the conditioned mind. Hirshfield affirms that “what we think ‘real’ is instead the construct of an assembling consciousness...awakened understanding remains aware of the provisionality of that existence, taking the points of view of the made and Unmade at the same time.”¹³⁹ This new perception is the very subversion, which is dangerous because “a great poem, like a great love, challenges our solitude, our conceptions, the very ground of being.”¹⁴⁰ This new perception is the gift of a new experience, which poetry evokes from within us.

Perhaps we can say a good poem “educates us.” And this is in the etymological sense of “education.” A good poem draws out a new vision from within us. It acts as a midwife in the birth of a new quality of attentiveness and perception. Hirshfield notes, “Metaphor is the way language carries itself past its own powers, to enter new realms.”¹⁴¹ Images and descriptions, weird phrases, and arresting grammar all serve to reshape the

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³⁹ Hirshfield, *Nine Gates*, 110.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 111.

mind. Hirshfield sings, “This altered vision is the secret happiness of poems, of poets. It is as if the poem encounters the world and finds in it a hidden language, a Braille unreadable except when raised by the awakened imaginative mind.”¹⁴² It is a new experience, one we had buried within us the whole time but which poetry releases from our interior.

From the reflections of Hirshfield, we can understand that reading and writing poetry gets one into a state of congruence with the incomprehensibility of the Real. This state is a threshold “about stepping past what we already think we know and into an entirely new relationship...with the ultimately singular and limitless mystery of being.”¹⁴³ Poetry can alter our relationship with the Real by instilling a sense of mystery, employing a unique vocabulary, and writing with a different syntax that forces new perceptions.

We are after a negative theopoetics, a way of using and understanding poetry and negative theology that provokes, evokes, and clears space for a divine experience. Language is critical here. Hirshfield speaks to this: “Poems speak in a language invented by mixed and untethered modes of perception, in grammars and textures that instruct first writer, then reader, in how to see, hear, and feel through poetry’s own senses and terms. Those terms include the communicative elements of content, craft, and form.”¹⁴⁴ Poetry uses strange syntax, language untethered from conventionality, to teach us how to see, experience, and, ultimately, revel in the Real. We now turn to how Wallace Stevens

¹⁴² Jane Hirshfield, *Ten Windows: How Great Poems Transform the World* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017), Kindle Edition, 9.

¹⁴³ Hirshfield, *Nine Gates*, 224.

¹⁴⁴ Hirshfield, *Ten Windows*, 10-11.

evokes and provokes the poetic experience, to which Hirshfield attests in poetry more broadly.

Wallace Stevens

Wallace Stevens hails from Reading, Pennsylvania, where he was born in 1879. He studied at Harvard, though he left before earning a degree. He went to law school and eventually became an insurance executive. He settled in Hartford, Connecticut. But he spent his free time writing poetry. He is one of America's quintessential poets of the twentieth century. He died in August 1955.

As a poet, Stevens would not have explained any of his poems but query us, "How does this poem make meaning, and then, what do you think it means?" He rarely commented on his poems. Instead, he invites our musings and reflections when engaging in his poetry. He stimulates the imagination and, in doing so, offers a new vision. For Stevens, there appears to be no definitive interpretation of his poetry. Let us proceed, then, with readings of some of his poems.

"An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" appears in the collection *Auroras of Autumn*. It is a long poem of thirty-one cantos with six stanzas per canto. While the title gives away the poem's occasion, a walk through a typical evening in New Haven, Stevens plays with syntax, metaphor, and an excess of images that open vistas for us. These vistas are expansions of the way we see reality.

The major dynamic question of this poem regards whether we see reality *as it is* or see reality *as we are*. The opening line suggests this: "The eye's plain version is a thing apart, / The vulgate of experience."¹⁴⁵ Is what we physically see the actual

¹⁴⁵ Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose* (New York, NY: Library of America, 1997), 397.

experience? Do we genuinely encounter reality as it is through sight—or sound, smell, taste, touch—through the senses? Do the senses give us the “vulgate of experience,” that is, the authentic apprehension of the real? Or does reality get filtered through our minds?

Stevens almost seems to lament our need for the Real: “We keep coming back and coming back / To the real.”¹⁴⁶ Walking along this typical twilight time in New Haven, he muses over “metaphysical streets” and “physical streets.”¹⁴⁷ As he strolls, he grasps that we do long for a clear vision of life:

The eye made clear of uncertainty, with the sight
Of simple seeing, without reflection. We seek
Nothing beyond reality. Within it,
Everything, the spirit’s alchemicana
Included, the spirit that goes roundabout
And through included, not merely the visible,
The solid, but the movable, the moment,
The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
The pattern of the heavens and the high, night air.¹⁴⁸

These lines sing. They sing of our desire for “Nothing beyond reality” and that “Within it” lies “everything.” It is as if the “visible,” the “movable,” and the “moment” give flesh to the superessential nothingness, which is to use a Dionysian-like term. There is a musicality in both his vocabulary and his syntax. That repetitious comma bears unique phrases that soar into heaven but with that question about reality.

As the poem progresses to an ending, Stevens appears to vacillate between searching for the Real, lampooning the search for the Real, and questioning what the Real

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 402.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 403.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 402.

is. His excessive descriptions puncture an all-too-easy acceptance of the mind's congruence with the Real:

If it should be true that reality exists
In the mind: the tin plate, the loaf of bread on it,
The long-bladed knife, the little to drink and her
Misericordia, it follows that
Real and unreal are two in one....¹⁴⁹

These lines are thrilling. They appear to be grasping at, perhaps reveling in, the sheer mystery of life. He describes commonplace items: a knife, a plate, and bread. But he teases us with their apparent reality. A question lies behind them. The stanza, after all, begins with the word "if." Here we see how poetry can subvert our minds. And, lest we think Stevens resolves our anxious questions about what we take to be real, he ends his poem this way:

It is not in the premise that reality
Is a solid. It may be a shade that traverses
A dust, a force that traverses a shade.¹⁵⁰

Stevens unclasps our tight mental grip on reality with his "maybe" and his images of reality as subtle and fleeting as shade alighting dust, as a force alighting a shadow.

The poem "To an Old Philosopher in Rome" appears in Stevens' collection titled *The Rock*. Stevens unfolds a vision of the city of Rome in sixteen stanzas. It is, perhaps, a double vision. For Stevens describes the physical city and the state of mind into which the city brings one. We see Rome with our physical eyes and perceive the city with our souls.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 414.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 417.

The threshold, Rome, and that more merciful Rome
Beyond, the two alike in the make of mind....
...Two parallels become one, a perspective....¹⁵¹

Stevens describes how perception vacillates from the physical to the soul. He tells of how the human spirit reaches beyond itself through the things it knows:

How easily the blown banners change to wings....
Things dark on the horizons of perception,
Become accompaniments of fortune, but
Of the fortune of the spirit, beyond the eye,
Not of its sphere, and yet not far beyond,

The human end in the spirit's greatest reach,
The extreme of the known in the presence of the extreme
Of the unknown. The newsboys' muttering
Becomes another murmuring; the smell
Of medicine, a fragrantness not to be spoiled....¹⁵²

These two stanzas start in the streets of Rome but lead the reader through the streets to the Unknown. He utilizes excessive and strange vocabulary altering perception from the known to the unknown. The Unknown becomes present, as it were, through the "newsboy's muttering" and "the smell / Of medicine." Stevens plays with language in an incarnational manner. The Unknown is here and now through what we can hear and smell. Yet, he notes a dissonance in Rome:

The bells keep on repeating solemn names
In choruses and choirs of choruses,
Unwilling that mercy should be a mystery
Of silence.¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 432.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 434.

The bells ringing are church bells. But what do they toll? Their ringing draws one into the cherished names for the Unknown that choruses have repeated and maybe hoarded down through the centuries. It seems he is alluding to the divine names the church holds sacred to the exclusion of all other names. He suggests that we tend to keep ourselves locked in language and fixed in specific ideas while wholly unwilling to break into mercy and mystery. It is sad and intriguing that we tend to restrict ourselves to specific patterns of thinking and feeling. Of course, our past may condition this tendency, but nevertheless, we often choose familiar ways of perceiving the world when other, different, and outrageous ways confront us. Nowhere is this truer than in theology. We use only specific names and metaphors in the liturgy: Father, light, and all-powerful. To suggest we use the opposite metaphors could amount to heresy. But that suggestion belies our idolatrous tendencies, that is, our sacralizing of conventional ideas for God.

“The Snow Man” is an early poem found in Stevens’ first collection, which is titled *Harmonium*. It is a lovely, brief poem set in winter. He seems to say that to appreciate the cold, the ice, and the snow, we must be in a wintertime state of mind: “One must have a mind of winter. / To regard the frost and the boughs.”¹⁵⁴ He portrays the coldest season with wildly concrete words: “junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter.”¹⁵⁵ In a winter mindset, one perceives these astonishing realities abounding in the snow. But this state of mind penetrates beyond the ice, the cold. There is more at work in the poem besides snow:

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

For the listener, who listens in the snow,
And, nothing himself, beholds
Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is.¹⁵⁶

Winter gives way to nothingness. The barrenness, quiet, and startling oblivion of a frozen landscape opens one up to an inner nothingness that connects to a nothingness beyond.

Stevens appears to be provoking his reader into an experience of transcendence.

In the collection of poems titled “The Rock,” *Lebensweisheitspielerei* appears to be a poem about people with homes retiring for the night but leaving the homeless, vagabonds, and, more generally, the poor behind. He writes, “Those that are left are the unaccomplished.”¹⁵⁷ But it may also be an end-of-life poem—he wrote it in his twilight years—in which he realizes the truth of letting go, poverty, and the delusion of pride and strength. “Their indigence is an indigence / That is an indigence of the light,” celebrates Stevens.¹⁵⁸ These “unaccomplished,” though they are wrapped in indigence (note he repeats this word three times within the space of a dozen words), are the “finally human.”¹⁵⁹ Stevens shows us strange syntax in action and an excessive description: “Little by little, the poverty / Of autumnal space becomes / A look.”¹⁶⁰ It is a poem of those left behind who, in being forgotten, experience “the stale grandeur of annihilation” that nevertheless allows for real intimacy.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 429.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 430.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

Finally, Wallace Stevens wrote an enigmatic poem sometime in 1921-1922: “This Vast Inelegance.” It mystifies more than most of his poetry. The poem’s vocabulary alone electrifies one’s mind. And yet he combines these electric words in ways that defy regular syntax. He opens with these lines: “This vast inelegance may seem the blankest desolation, / Beginning of a green Cockaigne to be, disliked, abandoned.”¹⁶² The first few words offer examples of negative theopoetic vocabulary in how he plays with vastness, inelegance, blankness, and desolation.

Further on, he describes a “vexed, autumnal exhalation” and “marauding ennui.”¹⁶³ He could be talking about an inner emptiness he feels. There may be some indifference, some depression behind these expressions. A bleakness haunts the reader. It is as if Stevens brings the reader into his oceanic barrenness: “sweeping irradiation of a sea-night, / Piercing the tide by which it moves, is constantly within us?”¹⁶⁴ The poem flows through oblique phrases even as the reader asks whether the phrases he strings together are related. Perhaps he recreates his experience of being confused, apathetic, and wrapped in darkness.

In *The Necessary Angel*, a collection of essays on poetics, Stevens discusses the connection between imagination and reality. In the first essay, he notes, “The Imagination loses its vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real.”¹⁶⁵ Stevens explores this idea by reflecting on Plato’s figure of a charioteer corralling a pair of winged horses. While Plato

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 553.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 645.

uses the figure to express the nobility of the soul, Stevens observes that this figure has lost all significance for us because we do not participate in it. Plato's figure disconnects the imagination from reality. Stevens elaborates, "Its first effect, its effect at first reading, is its maximum effect, when the imagination, being moved, puts us in the place of the charioteer, before the reason checks us. The case is, then, that we concede that the figure is all imagination. At the same time, we say that it has not the slightest meaning for us, except for its nobility."¹⁶⁶ It is a metaphor that we grasp but that does not move us. Or, as Stevens laconically opines, "we understand it rather than participate in it."¹⁶⁷ We theorize and intellectualize but fail to experience Reality. We get lost in our thoughts and miss the immediate encounter with Mystery, which is one of the significant points the apophatic mystics make.

Some vital connection has been lost. The imagination, untethered from the actual, has ceased to evoke an experience for us. "The reason why this particular figure has lost its vitality is that, in it, the imagination adheres to what is unreal. What happened, as we were traversing the whole of heaven, is that imagination lost its power to sustain us. It has the strength of reality or none at all."¹⁶⁸ Poetry must keep to the mysterious Real; it must birth the beyond being nothingness through its outrageous language.

Further on, Stevens describes poetic truth as an "agreement with reality" that perceives the truth of fact beyond what is typically sensed and perceived.¹⁶⁹ Stevens

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 645-646.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 676.

seems to describe a state that sees the truth beyond what the mind *thinks* is true. From the above reading of a few of Wallace Stevens' poems, we can begin to see that he gets to the truth, the "Nothing beyond reality," using his excessive, language-breaking poetry.

To summarize these reflections on Jane Hirschfield and Wallace Stevens, I want to highlight several characteristics of poetry. First, poetry uses imagination, metaphor, vocabulary, and syntax in excessive ways. Second, with these linguistic strategies, poetry subverts the mind. And third, poetry brings forth a new way of seeing. From within the self, it expands and deepens one's perception and experience. The way poetry utilizes language draws out new ways of experiencing reality. Poetry evokes, provokes, and vacates the interior for a new way of perceiving reality.

Negative Theology and Poetics

We come now to the other vital piece of negative theopoetics, namely, negative theology. I get my definition of apophatic theology from John D. Jones's essay on the apophasis of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: "The goal of negative (mystical) theology: nothing."¹⁷⁰ Jones cites a key line in Pseudo-Dionysius' *Divine Names* that refers to God as "cause of all, but itself: nothing."¹⁷¹ This line exemplifies the nature of negative theology, which is to transcend language by using negative words to "define" God and thereby deny names for God. For, Pseudo-Dionysius says God is nothing. William Franke, professor of comparative literature and religious studies, writes,

For negative theologies, it is possible to say only what God is not. These attempts to devise and, at the same time, disqualify ways of talking about God as ultimate reality, or rather ultra-reality, beyond the reach of language, are juxtaposed (and

¹⁷⁰ John D. Jones, "Introduction," *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones, 101.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 113.

interpenetrate with) philosophical meditations that exhibit infirmities endemic to language in its endeavor to comprehend and express all that is together with the grounds of all that is.¹⁷²

The word “apophasis” means “speaking away from” or “unsaying.” For Pseudo-Dionysius, apophasis is speaking of what God is not, or negating the affirmations made about God, and it leads to silence. And this silence is not simply in service of language. It is its own reality, indeed, the very language of God, which beckons our participation and not so much our intellectual understanding. Apophasis is a theological tradition that employs “languages that cancel, interrupt, or undo discourse, languages that operate, paradoxically, by annulling or *unsaying* themselves.”¹⁷³ It is a subversive way in that any theology, any discourse or language about God, is rendered suspect unless there are apophatic boundaries drawn. And the apophatic mystic draws these boundaries by stretching language to its limit, by inventing new words or phrases, and by an endless undoing of positive statements about God.

Apophasis operates for pseudo-Dionysius—linguistically—in ways that create new terms and phrases, in sharp delineations, and in using negative words. He writes, “God neither was, nor will be, nor has come to be, nor is come to be nor will come to be, nor, indeed, is not.”¹⁷⁴ Referring to the divine, Pseudo-Dionysius says, “For it is not this but not that; it is not in some way but not in some other way.”¹⁷⁵ He creates terms that

¹⁷² William Franke, *On What Cannot Be Said*, Vol. 1: Classic Formulations (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007), 1.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁴ “The Divine Names,” *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. Jones, 165.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

stretch and cancel language even as they enrich language, as in the phrase: “beyond being-beyond-beingly-before-all.”¹⁷⁶ He affirms something of God only to take it back, only to overturn his last statement and make the whole business even more mystifying:

God is
Not known, not spoken, not named,
Not something among beings.
God is
All in all,
Nothing in none,
Known to all in reference to all, and
Known to no one in reference to nothing.¹⁷⁷

This negative theology that Pseudo-Dionysius ushers into Christian tradition uses “words that negate themselves in order to evoke what is beyond words.”¹⁷⁸ We cannot know God as God, so we must be clear about what God is not:

It is not soul or mind, nor does it possess imagination, conviction, speech, or understanding. Nor is it speech per se, understanding per se. It cannot be spoken of and it cannot be grasped by the understanding. It is not number or order, greatness or smallness, equality or inequality, similarity or dissimilarity. It is not immovable, moving or at rest. It has no power, it is not power, nor is it light. It does not live nor is it life. It is not a substance, nor is it eternity or time. It cannot be grasped by the understanding since it is neither knowledge nor truth. It is not kingship. It is not wisdom. It is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being. Existent beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it. Darkness and light, error and truth—it is none of these. It is beyond every assertion and denial. We make assertions and denials of what is next to it, but never of it, for it is both beyond every assertion, being the perfect and unique cause of all things, and, by virtue of its preeminently simple and absolute nature, free of every limitation, beyond every limitation; it is also beyond every denial.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 179.

¹⁷⁸ Franke, 2.

¹⁷⁹ “The Mystical Theology,” *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite*, trans. Colm Luibheid, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 141.

This catalog of “nots” frees the divine from our idol-making minds, from the tendency of the human heart to reify and fix certain names and experiences when it comes to God. For, Pseudo-Dionysius leaves no room for the mind to ascribe any definitive name for God. He cuts off every avenue of thought. This passage lauds the divine nothingness, namely, that God so transcends everything and all being that we are reduced to admitting God is nothing of the things we know and experience. The beyond that Pseudo-Dionysius repeats signals a transcendence so transcendent we cannot express it even though we keep *trying* to express “it.”

And here we come to a unique feature of apophasis: its dynamism. There is no end to apophasis since every statement one makes about God requires an unsaying.

Michael Sells explains this dynamism:

That mode of discourse begins with the *aporia*—the unresolvable dilemma—of transcendence. The transcendent must be beyond names, ineffable. In order to claim that the transcendent is beyond names, however, I must give it a name...Each statement I make—positive or ‘negative’—reveals itself as in need of correction. The correcting statement must then itself be corrected, ad infinitum.... The regress is harnessed and becomes the guiding semantic force, the *dynamis*, of a new kind of language.¹⁸⁰

The apophatic mystic does not admit defeat and gives up language altogether. Rather, she or he harnesses this dynamic of endless unsaying to forge a new language that is inherently unstable, that not only asserts divine mystery but enacts it: “Unnameability is not only asserted but performed.”¹⁸¹ The performance happens through strange syntax,

¹⁸⁰ Michael Sells, *Mystical Languages of Unsaying* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 2.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

excessive descriptions, the piling up of elaborate names for God, negative and more negative vocabulary, and through dissolving the reference in terms of pronouns. Negative theology is a vastly creative language!

And negative theology creatively subverts conventional theological statements and understandings. Consider this excerpt from Meister Eckhart's Sermon 83:

God is nameless, because no one can say anything or understand anything about him. Therefore a pagan teacher says: "Whatever we understand or say about the First Cause, that is far more ourselves than it is the First Cause, for it is beyond all saying and understanding." So if I say: "God is good," that is not true. I am good, but God is not good. I can even say: "I am better than God," for whatever is good can become better, and whatever can become better can become best of all. But since God is not good, he cannot become better. And since he cannot become better, he cannot be best of all. For these three degrees are alien to God: "good," "better," and "best," for he is superior to them all. And if I say: "God is wise," that is not true. I am wiser than he. If I say: "God is a being," it is not true; he is a being transcending being and a transcending nothingness.¹⁸²

How can we say we are better than God? For Eckhart, it is obvious. Good, better, and best are categories that distinguish creatures. God far transcends these categories. But, in a deviously creative move, Eckhart does not simply say that but boldly declares, "I am better than God!" This is an apophatic performance. More than asserting divine ineffability, Eckhart acts it out with his game of "good, better, best." At the same time, this performance gives us a glimpse of the divine mystery through its progressive unsaying. He evokes the divine as he provokes the mind.

Thus, apophasis does not remain a discourse. It is also, and for the mystics much more, a spiritual path rooted in the biblical tradition of God's transcendence. Jones claims that the point of negative theology is "to experience unity with nothing: beyond all, non-

¹⁸² *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, Sermon 83, 206-207.

same, and non-other.”¹⁸³ Pseudo-Dionysius begins *The Mystical Theology* with a prayer to the incomprehensible Trinity, then exhorts his disciple, “Timothy, in the earnest exercise of mystical contemplation, abandon all sensation and all intellectual activities, all that is sensed and intelligible, and all non-beings and all beings. Thus, you will unknowingly be elevated, as far as possible, to the unity with that beyond all being and knowledge.”¹⁸⁴ The goal of apophysis does not lie in discursive expression but in oneness with the divine. Yet, language is one of negative theology’s strategies to induce this unity. Franke explains, “Language must unsay or annul itself in order to let this unsayable something, which is nothing, no *thing* at any rate, somehow register in its very evasion of all attempts to say it. Only the *unsaying* of language can ‘say’ what cannot be said.”¹⁸⁵ In the very enactment of the divine incomprehensibility, one opens to encountering the divine.

Jones concludes his essay on the negative theology of Dionysius with his own poetic verses in celebration of the divinity:

The divinity is all that is,
Apart from all that is: nothing.
Divinity: nothing.¹⁸⁶

I see this poem as a parabolic torpedo to the mind. Aligned with the negative theology of Pseudo-Dionysius and Meister Eckhart, Jones evokes the divine as the innermost reality

¹⁸³ John D. Jones, “Introduction,” *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones, 101.

¹⁸⁴ “The Mystical Theology,” *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite*, *Classics of Western Spirituality*, 135.

¹⁸⁵ Franke, 2.

¹⁸⁶ John D. Jones, “Introduction,” *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Divine Names and The Mystical Theology*, trans. John D. Jones, 101., 103.

and provokes the mind by repeating the divine nothing that transcends all things. This poem incarnates negative theopoetics.

Towards a Negative Theopoetics

We can gain a more profound sense of negative theopoetics in two ways. First, we will examine a sermon from one of the Christian apophatic mystics, Meister Eckhart. Second, we will probe what is happening when we call God “nothing.”

The sermons of Meister Eckhart are apophatic discourse in a heightened form. While we can say his sermons are excessive in both an apophatic and a poetic sense—and here, his works coincide with the excessive, outrageous language of poets such as Wallace Stevens—we can also adjust our vision ever-so-slightly to see the sermons as poetry and parable. Here, I would like to approach Meister Eckhart’s Sermon 71 as both poetry and parable, for each share something fundamental with apophysis: a subversion of the mind as well as beckoning the soul into divine mystery. In this regard, I will use the insights of Jane Hirshfield and John Dominic Crossan.

In Sermon 71, Meister Eckhart preaches on a line from the Acts of the Apostles: “Paul rose from the ground and with eyes open he saw nothing.”¹⁸⁷ He continues, “It seems to me that this little word [i.e., nothing] has four meanings. One meaning is: When he got up from the ground, with eyes open he saw nothing, and the nothing was God; for when he saw God, he [Luke] calls this a nothing. The second: When he got up he saw nothing but God. The third: In all things he saw nothing but God. The fourth: When he saw God, he viewed all things as nothing.”¹⁸⁸ These opening lines do not so much lead us

¹⁸⁷ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 71, 320.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

into mystery as shove us over the cliffs of knowing into the abyss of incomprehensibility. Nothingness emerges from the heart of his sermon, and its various meanings give an apophatic structure to the preaching. Even as Eckhart praises the human mind and revels in God as love, he adamantly affirms that one must speak of God by nothingness. Playing with the various meanings of nothingness, he weaves each into his main spiritual advice about detachment to realize unity with the mystery. In doing so, he displays aspects of poetry: hiddenness, uncertainty, and surprise.

Here, we turn to Jane Hirshfield, who unfurls three significant depths to poetry: hiddenness, uncertainty, and surprise. She writes, “hiddenness itself gives weight.”¹⁸⁹ Even as a poet describes something for us, the meaning or truth of the description can remain elusive. Good poetry neither completely obfuscates the intent nor does it force an interpretation on the reader. There remains a delightful indiscernibility.

Further, poetry, “jokes, teaching tales, and koans share a similar intention: to dismantle all certainties concerning a person’s place in the world.”¹⁹⁰ The very construction of a poem can leave a reader unclear about its meaning or even life in general. And she notes a poem’s surprise “is the signal of strongly shifted knowledge.”¹⁹¹ Further, “the most profound discoveries...are ones...that revise our most daily, unquestioned assumptions.”¹⁹² The kind of poetry that shifts knowledge does not dance

¹⁸⁹ Hirshfield, *Hiddenness*, 17.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 47-48.

around in trivialities. Instead, this poetry confronts the reader with newness: fresh perspectives and awakened language.

Sermon 71 hides the truth in the interplay between nothing, light, love, and being. Each of these divine “namings” and “unnamings” cloaks the sacred more than they clarify, for Eckhart does not leave us settled on one definitively. Eckhart plunges us into uncertainty from his opening words as he delves into the meaning of “nothing.” The Meister, apophatic through and through, startles our knowledge and leads us to discover truth where we might not have looked, namely, in “nothingness.” Even as he exalts the power of our minds— “How far [thoughts] reach and how limitless they are is a marvel”—he denies and transcends it.¹⁹³ For, “if you perceive [God] as a light or as being or as goodness, if you know the least little bit of him, that is not God.”¹⁹⁴ Through hiddenness, uncertainty, and surprise, Eckhart defies our expectations regarding God. If we think God is being, he denies it. If we assume God is light, he overturns it. If we believe God is separate, he subverts the very notion. In this way, his sermon is also parabolic.

Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan offers critical insights into the nature of parables. For Crossan, transcendence is found at the edges of language and story when the mind is overthrown. He sees that our conventional minds rest on myth. And myth is built on the opposition between two realities such as good and bad: “myth performs the specific task of mediating irreducible opposites.”¹⁹⁵ Myths are stories by which we all

¹⁹³ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 71, 321.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 322.

¹⁹⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *This Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1988), 35.

choose to live. They constitute the worldviews of mass consciousness. But parables show us the edges of our conventional stories. Hence, they turn myth upside down. The parable undermines assumptions, expectations, worldviews, and even the foundational myths by which we live. An example of a myth by which we live is that God is the Supreme Being, the great foundation of law, order, and society. By playing with the divine nothing in Sermon 71, Eckhart subverts this myth.

As one progresses through Sermon 71, one feels uneasy because Eckhart keeps returning to nothingness. And “nothing” is an uncomfortable word applied to God. Crossan notes, “Parable is always a somewhat unnerving experience. You can usually recognize a parable because your immediate reaction will be self-contradictory: ‘I don’t know what you mean by that story but I’m certain I don’t like it.’ To be human and to remain open to transcendental experience demands a willingness to be ‘parabled.’”¹⁹⁶ I imagine not a few members of Eckhart’s congregation were parabled by Sermon 71 when he first preached it. How could they not be? Referring to God as nothing must unsettle any congregation because it seems to question God’s very existence. That cannot help but unsettle a contemporary church group, never mind a medieval congregation.

Eckhart keeps pushing into uncomfortable theological territory until one has to give up and allow the Dominican preacher to lead one into the unknown. Crossan quotes Ben Belitt as saying, “parables serve what might be called an epistemology of loss. Their value, as knowledge, is to enhance our ‘consciousness of ignorance.’”¹⁹⁷ Eckhart enacts a

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 60.

“knowledge that is completely beyond limitation and manner” by bringing us into ignorance and blindness.¹⁹⁸

Besides the opening, here are some vital parabolic moments in Sermon 71:

“When the soul comes into the One and there enters into a pure rejection of itself, it finds God as in a nothing. It seemed to a man as though in a dream—it was a waking dream—that he became pregnant with nothing as a woman does with child, and in this nothing God was born; he was the fruit of the nothing. God was born in the nothing.”¹⁹⁹ Finding God in nothing and as nothing, beyond light or being, undoes the ego’s certain knowledge of God. But this is more than finding God. Eckhart states that God comes from nothing as its fruit, as the offspring of nothing. At the very least, this causes one to pay attention! Is Eckhart asserting that nothingness is greater than God? Rejecting oneself and finding God in nothingness connect for Eckhart. So, it seems he is talking about God being born from an inner state of nothingness. Also, he speaks of a man. But is he recollecting his own experience? He may be describing how one awakens to God through nothingness, a nothingness he enacts through this very preaching. In other words, by enacting nothingness, Eckhart beckons the congregation to join him in the oneness of God’s God-ness.

The wily Meister does not stop his sermon parable there. He proclaims, “Whatever I know of creatures in God, nothing enters in but God alone; for in God there is nothing but God. When I know all creatures in God, I know nothing. He saw God,

¹⁹⁸ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 71, 325.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 323.

where all creatures are nothing.”²⁰⁰ While we get a clue about the nothingness Eckhart intends in this selection from the phrase, “in God there is nothing but God,” the following line remains ambiguous. Is he talking about the nothingness of creatures compared to the infinite God or creatures *as* the nothingness of God? Perhaps it is both? Discovering the divine nothing as the reality of all things negates any separation between God and creation. Indeed, it collapses distinctions in the desert of the God-ness of God, as Eckhart would put it.

Eckhart then overturns our notion of divine light by playing with the opposites of seeing and blindness without reconciling them: “This light means simply that with eyes open he saw nothing. In seeing nothing he saw the divine nothing.”²⁰¹ But before we discard either being or light, Eckhart unsays any distinction between light and being on the one hand and nothingness on the other with the phrase: “the ‘nothing’ whose light is all lights, whose being is all beings.”²⁰² Instead of throwing away “light” or “being,” he subsumes them into the divine nothing, allowing indistinction to explode any notions of separateness or distinction in our minds.

In each of these sermonic moves, Meister Eckhart undoes the conventional names of God as light and being with their respective moral and scholastic traditions. God transcends our morals and our intellects. Morality and theology are relative. But equally so is the everyday person’s quest for God as “Someone out there.” The various meanings of nothing collapse into each other and enact the unity that Eckhart preaches: the very

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 324.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

reality of all beings is the Nothing. Yet, there is no positive content to this word. What is the Nothing? This Nothing is, paradoxically, “the light of all lights and the being of all beings”—a poetic and parabolic line that does what Sermon 71 does: subvert conventional religious myths.

We turn now to probing the negative theopoetic statement “God is nothing.” The “goal” of apophasis: nothing. God: nothing. We do not even use the word “is” to equate God with nothingness. That might reduce God to being. The word “nothing” serves as a focusing metaphor/term for apophasis. Yet, it also allows for a wide array of semantic possibilities, for which Sermon 71 gives evidence. Even more, “nothing” stands for a more extensive apophatic vocabulary. Alois Haas, a scholar of German mysticism, remarks, “God is inexpressible, and for this reason Christian tradition has often used the term ‘nothing’ to refer to him. As a preliminary definition it could be regarded as the nothingness of any statement that restricts God or focuses too exclusively on any of his attributes.”²⁰³

Michael Sells raises a crucial issue, however. All names, all ideas for God lock the divine into thing-like categories: “in the view of apophatic mystics all names reify.”²⁰⁴ If we say, “God is nothing,” we limit God to a name. “In the very act of asserting the nothingness (no-thingness) of the subject of discourse, apophasis cannot help but posit it as a “thing” or “being,” a being it must then unsay, while positing yet more entities that must be unsaid in turn. The result is an open-ended dynamic that strains

²⁰³ Alois Haas, “The Nothing of God and its Explosive Images,” *The Eckhart Review*, (No. 8, Spring 1999), 6.

²⁰⁴ Sells, 8.

against its own reifications and ontologies—a language of *disontology*.”²⁰⁵ The word *nothing* remains a part of the discourse subject to unsaying and then further unsaying.

This is not simply an academic issue. Language can limit our experience of God; it can make us expect God to be a certain way, to act a certain way, and when it does not happen as we hope, we may lose faith. The apophatic mystic knows that language shapes experience, just as experience exceeds the finite function of language. What we say about God structures how we meet God. Language can be very limiting both to God and to ourselves. Our God language can reduce God to something we can understand and use to confirm our agendas as an ultimate authority for our opinions and views. God language then serves as the ultimate validation for our egos. Language shaping our experience of God can lead to believing in a God of experiences, thoughts, and feelings, to a God who is an object. The very act of writing God limits God and turns God into an idol. For example, when we speak about God as a person, we develop subconscious expectations and assumptions regarding this God—that this God exists as we do, is separate from us and must act as we know a good person to act. Can you see how this imprisons God? When we imprison God, we limit our participation in God’s God-ness, the whole point of apophatic preaching.

To unpack the linguistic power of the word “nothing” and the statement “God is nothing,” I turn to the insights of German philosopher Hans Blumenberg and a giant in the fields of recent philosophy and theology, the Canadian Jesuit Bernard Lonergan. Blumenberg articulated the concept of an explosive metaphor. Lonergan noted the idea of an inverse insight. Let us explore each in turn.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

An explosive metaphor is a metaphor that explodes the mind and opens one up to an experience. He uses the example of a famous definition of God found in an anonymously authored medieval book of Neoplatonic philosophy and theology called the Book of the Twenty-Four Philosophers: “God is an infinite sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere.”²⁰⁶ This line acts as an explosive metaphor because “it draws intuition into a *process* in which it can keep up at first (for example, by mentally doubling and then continuously redoubling a circle’s radius), only to be compelled to give up—and that is understood as meaning to give itself up—at a certain point (for example, by thinking a circle with the greatest possible radius, a radius of infinite magnitude).”²⁰⁷ Blumenberg makes it clear that the explosive metaphor makes “transcendence something that can be ‘experienced’ as the limit of theoretical apprehension” since the “‘blasting agent’ in this metaphoric is the concept of infinity.”²⁰⁸

Bernard McGinn describes an explosive metaphor as one that “breaks through previous categories of mystical speech to create new ways of presenting a direct encounter with God.”²⁰⁹ These are metaphors that “are meant to transform, or overturn, ordinary limited forms of consciousness through the process of making the inner meaning of the metaphor one’s own in everyday life.”²¹⁰ An explosive metaphor both subverts and

²⁰⁶ Hans Blumenberg, *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*, trans. Robert Savage (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), Kindle Edition, 123.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁹ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2001), 38.

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*

gives. According to Alois M. Haas, it is a metaphor that undoes itself: “By allowing the metaphor to deconstruct itself through paradox, it allows for the possibility of perceiving oneness and eternity.”²¹¹ The paradoxical, excessive nature of the metaphor tied in with the very concept of mystery’s incomprehensibility and infinity explodes the mind out of conventional thought patterns, thinking itself, and *into* divine oneness. Haas writes, “The explosive metaphor is a means of transfer to the dimension of eternity.”²¹² And, for Haas, it is clear that “the nothing of God can be expressed no other way except through its ‘explosive metaphors.’”²¹³

Let us add another dimension of thought: Bernard Lonergan’s idea of the inverse insight. He writes, “inverse insight apprehends that in some fashion the point is that there is no point, or that the solution is to deny a solution, or that the reason is that the rationality of the real admits distinctions and qualifications.”²¹⁴ It is the realization that there is nothing to grasp. It is knowing that “the point to be grasped by insight is merely that there is no point.”²¹⁵ Looking at all available evidence, one admits there is nothing to know. Whatever the question or issue is, the expectation of intelligibility is frustrated because the question cannot be answered. That is an inverse insight. And, when it comes to God, all we can expect are inverse insights.

²¹¹ Haas, 16.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

²¹⁴ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), Kindle Edition, Chapter 1.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*

About God, we grasp that there is nothing to grasp. And the word *nothing* serves as a reminder of this inverse insight. Jones notes that when we talk about the divine nothing, this is “not a supreme being which is be-ing in itself apart from all other beings; beyond all: nothing (ουδεν). We must not understand nothing simply as no-thing or no-being, so that we understand nothing as be-ing itself (ipsum esse), or as simply and unlimitedly be-ing. Rather, nothing: beyond be-ing and hence, beyond cause.”²¹⁶

“God is nothing” is a paradoxical statement because this proposition locks the divinity into being categories. The structure of language makes nothing into something. However, the force of “nothing” unsays and subverts these very linguistic structures. *Nothing* has no meaning! Thus, “God is nothing” is a supreme parable that provides no final say about the divine. In effect, there is *no* closure, no ultimate name, and no answer to theological questions but a fundamental openness and a refusal to give pat answers to deep queries about reality and spirit. Instead, there is a genuine acceptance of mystery. Then, apophasis is not just a linguistic strategy but a pathless path of recognizing and resting in the nothing. In other words, the point of stating “God is nothing” is to invite others to rest in the mystery of God within.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the poetry of Wallace Stevens, the reflections of Jane Hirshfield, the treatises of Pseudo-Dionysius, Meister Eckhart’s Sermon 71, and our excursus on the apophatic statement “God is nothing,” negative theopoetics employs negative vocabulary, strange syntax, paradox, and questions to evoke an encounter with the Transcendent. These various employments have implications for preaching. A full

²¹⁶ Jones, 91.

practical examination of these strategies awaits us in the following chapter on homiletics. For now, it is enough to note these poetic strategies. But I would not recommend using any of these poetic devices exclusively in a sermon. In other words, these devices might dot a sermon that uses positive language, normal syntax, and straightforward, linear statements. Furthermore, each device can become an opening for prayer. Apophatic preaching, essentially, means inviting the congregation to experience the God-ness of God, the unknowable mystery. So, the preacher can pair each device with a specific call to silence, thanksgiving, awe, confession, or praise.

First, Christian preaching could expand its vocabulary for God and the encounter with the divine. Normally, Christian sermons employ a restricted set of words for God and humanity's relationship with God. These are words like God, love, faith, salvation, sin, and grace. Negative theopoetics invites the preacher to expand this vocabulary into new linguistic territories.

Here are some examples of a negative vocabulary: Nothing, nihil, nihility, none, oblivion, void, absence, nonbeing, nonexistent, nil, nullify, blank, zero, zip, zilch, arid, waste, extinction, emptiness, naught, zippo, nobody, no one, nugatory, negative, vacant, nix, barren, obscurity, null, and vacuity.

Second, preaching could benefit from stronger syntax. Wallace Stevens shows us strange syntax in action. His poems contain unusual sentence structures. And he is not the only poet to write unusual syntax. This dovetails with a critical aspect of apophysis. To perform the apophysis in a decidedly negative theopoetics requires one to think outside the box of standard grammar and rules for sentence structure. The syntax can instill a different mood by surprising the congregation with unique turns of phrase or

accumulating negative descriptions of God. The idea is to exploit the congregation's expectation of normal syntax without overdoing it. How? The preacher can express the central idea of a sermon using strange syntax and then elaborate on the theme using normal syntax. I suggest this expression be brief—one or two sentences. Preachers would need to be cautious about using strange syntax more than this.

Third, Christian homiletics would not only honor the divine but also better appreciate people's lives by incorporating paradox into preaching. Paradoxes occur when two seemingly opposing things are true simultaneously. The idea of a paradox is not foreign to Christian speech as dogmas such as one God in Three Persons demonstrate. Teasing out the paradoxes of everyday existence—how can one be a sinner yet still loved by God?—as well as the paradoxes involved in loving God would add an acknowledgment of the paradoxes of people's real lives to preaching. Christian Preaching can instill a “negative capability, which, according to Keats, is ‘when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.’”²¹⁷ To help the congregations bear mysteries and uncertainty is the very stuff of Gospel faith. Faith thrives in someone with a negative capability since life presents us with many unresolvable difficulties. Even more, negative theopoetics offers homiletics the opportunity to share the liberating “experience” of the divine nothing, which one accesses through the “unknowing” of hiddenness, uncertainty, and surprise.

Fourth, the use of paradox in preaching leads to the homiletic importance of leaning into questions. Negative theopoetics invites the preacher to engage the parabolic, to revel in questions and mysteries. It beckons the preacher to be comfortable leaving the

²¹⁷ Hirshfield, *Hiddenness*, 27.

people experiencing a sermon in a measure of uncertainty, but in uncertainty that teases the mind into more exciting questions—ones that lead beyond conventional images of God. The apophatic preacher, then, works to lead a congregation into participation in the incomprehensible mystery of God, that is, he or she intends to open a space for contemplative silence in the hearts and minds of the people in the pews. Through negative theopoetics, the apophatic preacher revels in the play of mystery and feels the necessity of startling language to communicate the God beyond God.

Negative theopoetics provokes the mind and evokes the divine nothing that is always already one with the soul by various poetic strategies. We have learned from poetry that syntax and wild description can lead to expanded knowledge. Negative theopoetics takes this insight seriously and applies it to things divine. What would it be like for preachers to leave the congregation unsettled and without closure on a given theological question? What would it be like to use a negative vocabulary, an excessive and outrageous set of terms, to describe God in a sermon? Are there times we can abandon routine syntax and normal speech patterns to engage an apophatic rhapsody delighting in the incomprehensible nothingness through strange syntax and unusual ways of speaking, through negative words and subversive parables, and through the explosive unknowing of the divine *nihil*? Might this be how we can speak God? I explore these questions in the context of sermon craft in the next chapter on apophatic homiletics.

Chapter 4

An Apophatic Homiletic

God is nothing. Apophatic contemplation is sinking into the divine nothing. These statements point to the subversive and deeply immediate character of knowing God in love according to the revelation of Jesus. The apophatic mystics use their own negative theopoetics to communicate this “experience” of God, but they also communicate this experience in kataphatic language. Their preaching utilizes the traditional images and terms of scripture and Catholic theology. Apophatic preaching, because it is a language event and builds on traditional theological discourse, always occurs in a kataphatic context. The church, though, has neglected the tradition of apophatic preaching, and, so, kataphatic preaching can skew towards conceptual idolatry. Even though apophatic preaching is not immune to conceptual idolatry, the shock of negative images and words for God can trigger an awareness of images of God as simply images. God is and is not nothing. God is and is not darkness. Religious language, as metaphor, has a dialectical structure. Thus, one can fall into assuming the concept is God even when the concept is darkness or silence. But preaching rarely ever uses negative images of God. Thus, these negative images might be more effective in evoking mystery and subverting the mind.

How might we preach apophatically today? How do we use the “dark knowledge” from the previous two chapters in the craft of preaching? In this chapter, I will reflect on these questions. I will sketch an approach to what I call apophatic homiletics.

Apophatic preaching is *preaching nihil in nihil with nihil*. “Nihil” is Latin for “nothing.” This formula for apophatic preaching has three dimensions: (1) preach apophatic contemplative themes, (2) while in a state of contemplative prayer (or, nothingness), and (3) utilize apophatic-poetic language to evoke the contemplative experience—the congregants’ already-given participation in the God-ness of God’s mystery—and subvert the mind conditioned by conceptual idolatry. Apophatic preaching invites the congregation to experience God’s mystery; the formula serves this purpose.

In apophatic preaching, the message unpacks deep, contemplative themes. The apophatic preacher abides in what the apophatic mystics call “a state of nothingness,” which is a contemplative state of resting in God beyond thinking while preparing for the sermon as well as during the delivery of the sermon. This state is about both naked faith and clarity of consciousness. In this state, which I will explore further below, one can use and recall words while maintaining a silent presence within. The words the preacher uses, the homiletic language, are that of negative theopoetics. In other words, the language uses dark metaphors and negative words in a theological and poetic register. I recommend the following: Preach the nothing (content) from the nothing (spiritual state) with words of the nothing (negative theopoetics): Preach *nihil in nihil with nihil*.

With this formula in practice, one starts to preach the nothing, that is, communicate God on a transcendent level. The mystics seek to communicate God so others may experience God within yet beyond images. I believe the application of this formula can help preachers approach their preaching as an apophatic spiritual practice, as a way of opening space in their minds as in the minds of the congregation to the God who can wake up all to the divine mystery.

Historically, preachers such as Meister Eckhart, John Tauler, and Henry Suso did not preach in an exclusively apophatic way. Their sermons often contained traditional religious language with moments of apophasis. Today's preacher, therefore, does not need to shed all positive language about God. A sermon does not need to use negative language for God exclusively. Rather, apophatic preaching means evoking the divine within as well as provoking the mind's literalistic attachment to certain ideas of God. The preacher can enact this by means of poetic devices, and preaching strategies that serve to help congregants to participate in the mystery of God. Below, I will share examples of how these preachers do this.

Again, the purpose is to usher the people gathered into an experience of the mystery of God. The poetic devices I discussed in the previous chapter—apophatic vocabulary, strange syntax, paradox, and questions—merge into a major homiletic recommendation: a condensed apophatic thought, statement, or phrase that forms the heart of a sermon. I call this device a *mashal ayin*. *Mashal* is Hebrew for a proverb or parable. And *ayin* is Hebrew for nothingness. I combine these words to form my own term: *mashal ayin*. This is a parable or a proverb of nothingness; we may also call it an apophatic aphorism. It is a phrase that highlights and evokes the mystery of God. It also serves to subvert the conventional understanding of God. An example of a *mashal ayin* is found in Henry Suso's treatise *The Little Book of Truth*: "Here on earth a man can reach the point that he sees himself as one in that which is the nothing of all things that one can conceive or put into words. This nothing is called by common agreement 'God.'"²¹⁸ Suso refers to God as "the nothing of all things." It is an example of a negative image of God.

²¹⁸ Henry Suso: *The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, trans. and ed. Frank Tobin (NY: Paulist Press, 1989), 318-319.

But it can be a straightforward challenge, as Meister Eckhart preaches in Sermon 39 on the text, “The just will live forever and their reward is with the Lord” (Wisdom 5:16):

The just person seeks nothing in his works. Those that seek something in their works or those who work because of a “why” are servants and hired hands. And so, if you want to be informed and transformed into justice, have no specific intention in your works and strive for no “why” in yourself, either in time or in eternity. Do not aim at reward or happiness, neither this nor that. Such works are, in fact, dead. Even if you form God within yourself, whatever works you perform for a specific purpose are all dead, and you ruin good works. You do not just ruin good works; you also commit sin because you act just like a gardener who is supposed to plant a garden but only pulls out the trees and expects to get paid for it. This is how you ruin good works. And so, if you want to live and want your works to live, you must be dead to all things and have become nothing.²¹⁹

The *mashal ayin* is the last line about being dead to all things and becoming nothing.

Thus, as we will discuss more below, the *mashal ayin* can be a directive, an image, or just a plain point. The idea is that it is an apophatic point.

An apophatic sermon can still use many positive and conventional words for God even as it creates room around God to allow for mystery. The preacher can accomplish this goal by means of moments of apophasis, that is, by using a *mashal ayin*. I will return to this device at the end of this chapter.

Before I unpack the three dimensions of the formula, I will ground this approach to apophatic preaching by reflecting on the connections between apophatic contemplation and Christ Crucified. Then, I will explore each dimension of the formula. I will reflect on “preaching *Nihil*” (content), making connections between scripture and the tradition of apophatic mysticism. For the section on “preaching *in Nihil*,” I will discuss the mystical

²¹⁹ Meister Eckhart: *Teacher and Preacher*, ed. Bernard McGinn, Frank Tobin, and Elvira Borgstadt (New York, NY: Paulist, 1986), Sermon 39, 296.

experience of Meister Eckhart and how preaching requires a life centered on God for apophatic preaching emerges from the preacher's experience of God. Then, I will expand on "preaching *with Nihil*" by reflecting on how to use language to evoke the experience of the divine nothing. I will conclude by offering preachers a set of guidelines to implement the formula for apophatic preaching.

Preaching Christ Crucified

St. Paul writes, "we proclaim Christ Crucified" (1 Corinthians 1:23). Genuine Christian preaching revolves around Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified. While we understand the crucifixion as the way God saves us from sin and reconciles us to God's own self, we rarely consider the cross as an apophatic event that subverts our minds and, especially, our ideas of God. Indeed, the cross is the historical source of all theological negation. The eschatological darkness present in Mark's description of the crucifixion gives a biblical basis to an apophatic interpretation of the event of the cross: "At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon" (Mark 15:33). Eschatological darkness, here, means God-as-God is present and revealing Godself in a definitive way. Who is this God?

Hanging on the cross, Jesus experiences the absence, disappearance, and nothingness of God: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) This desperate cry suggests that in his passion and death, Jesus had no god. He had no conventional god drawn according to the measure of human pride and cruelty as the Greek gods were drawn. He did not have the God most people assume God to be. As he hung on the cross, the religious leaders, passers-by, and even the criminals being executed next to Jesus mocked him. They remarked that he should save himself by

getting off the cross, which would show everyone he is the Messiah of Israel. (Mark 15:29-32). Thus, the crucifixion is the unqualified negation of God. The broken, naked body of Christ Crucified Christ reveals there is no such “thing” as God but only MYSTERY. As Herbert McCabe, an English Dominican theologian, writes,

The Jewish discovery that God is not a god but Creator is the discovery of absolute *Mystery* behind and underpinning reality. Those who share it (either in its Judaic or its Christian form) are not monotheists who have reduced the number of gods to one. They, we, have abolished the gods; there is only the Mystery sustaining all that is. The Mystery is unfathomable, but it is not *remote* as the gods are remote. The gods live somewhere else, on Olympus or above the starry sky. The Mystery is everywhere and always, in every grain of sand and every flash of color, every hint of flavor in a wine, keeping all these things in existence every microsecond. We could not literally approach God or get nearer to God for God is already nearer to us than we are to ourselves. God is at the ultimate depth of our beings making us to be ourselves.²²⁰

Christ Crucified radically deepens even as he reveals the Mystery: the cross shows us who God is, but this God is unlike anything anyone has experienced before. All our notions of God are crucified on the cross. The divine being is crucified and gives way to absolute mystery, and utter incomprehensibility. Jesus crucified reveals God as the divine nothing that surpasses existence itself yet submits to the vicissitudes of history out of concrete love for creation. Beverly Lanzetta says Christ Crucified reveals the negation of God:

In breaking through the emptiness above his divine name, Christ reveals a God of unnamings, a God who subverts God’s names. Death on the cross is the Absolute Unsayings, and therefore an Apophatic God, a God who frees us from God...this God who is not God offers Godself and lays the mystery bare.²²¹

²²⁰ Herbert McCabe, *God Still Matters*, ed. Brian Davies, OP, (New York, NY: Continuum, 2002), 59.

²²¹ Beverly Lanzetta, *The Other Side of Nothingness* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001), 88-89.

The ultimate negation of the cross is the negation of the divine being. The crucified shows us that God is not what we think God is—even *that* God is. The distinguished French philosopher Jean-Luc Marion writes, “We are speaking of the GXD who is crossed by a cross because he reveals himself by his placement on the cross, the GXD revealed by, in, and as the Christ.” God is crossed out by the cross. The crucified explodes all understandings of God and overturns our notion of what it means to affirm the existence of God for only definite beings exist or “stand forth” in the universe. But as the Mystery underneath, within, and beyond all that exists, God remains utterly nothing: so transcendent that not even existence contains the divine, much less our images, words, or thoughts.

Jesus’ shocking death and the suffering he endured leading up to his demise show Jesus being reduced to nothing. St. John of the Cross describes Jesus’ death on the cross as “the most marvelous work of his whole life...he brought about the reconciliation and union of the human race with God through grace.” St. John writes that Jesus did this “at the moment in which he was most annihilated in all things: in his reputation before people...in his human nature, by dying; and in spiritual help and consolation from his Father, for he was forsaken by his Father at that time, annihilated and reduced to nothing, so as to...bring people to union with God.” He recognizes how the followers of Jesus must suffer what he suffered. The disciples of Jesus must also be reduced to nothing. St. John continues, “When they are reduced to nothing, the highest degree of humility, the spiritual union between their souls and God will be an accomplished fact.... The journey, then, does not consist in consolations, delights, and spiritual feelings, but in the living death of the cross, sensory and spiritual, exterior and interior.” John identifies the

nothingness of contemplation with Jesus dying on the cross. Or, in Meister Eckhart's laconic phrase: "God died so that we might die." One purpose of the cross, according to Eckhart, lies in our being able to practice detachment, the supreme apophatic virtue. Other apophatic mystics connect the nothingness of contemplation to the nothingness of God. Thus, to preach the divine nothing is to preach Christ Crucified.

Preaching *Nihil*: Content

I begin unpacking the formula for apophatic preaching by elaborating on the first aspect, namely preaching *nihil*. Preaching *nihil*, first, means the transmission of the divine nothing from the preaching itself. It is the communication of the mystery of God through the event of preaching, an awakening to God in the people listening to the preaching.

What is the essence of the Gospel? While we can answer this question in numerous ways, the apophatic way of summarizing the Gospel might be this: the incomprehensible mystery of God—the mystery some apophatic mystics preach as the nothing that transcends all we understand to be divine—is dynamically present in all of creation. This same mystery communicates the divine self to humanity over the course of the history of salvation. And, finally, the mystery has become embodied in Jesus and in those who are in Christ. Scripture testifies to this: the divine descends into what we are and then opens us to its mercy from within us. The apophatic mystics refer to God using negative as well as positive terms. Hence, they might say the divine void (as much as divine love or mercy) embraces the whole universe in the incarnation and then in the continuous history of incarnation. From the moment of the enfleshment in Christ, the

divine oneness and nothingness became embodied and particularized to share in all the dimensions of human life.

Secondly, preaching *Nihil* refers to the message and the content of the preaching. The Christian revelation witnessed to in scripture is, of course, the prime content of any Christian preaching. Yet, the content of apophatic preaching also comes from the typical themes of Christian apophatic mystics. The preacher reads scripture in light of these themes: letting go or detachment, present unity with God, the divine as mystery beyond human comprehension, prayer and inner silence, and simple trust in God (pure faith). While the apophatic mystics also focus on the problem of suffering, the cross, divine love, and other essential Christian themes, they tend to highlight detachment, mystery, prayer as inner silence, and present unity with God more than other Christian preachers.

In *The Mystical Theology*, Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite presents a summary of apophatic themes about which one could preach. Here he encourages Christians toward divine union through absolute self-emptying.

my advice to you as you look for a sight of the mysterious things, is to leave behind you everything perceived and understood, everything perceptible and understandable, all that is not and all that is, and, with your understanding laid aside, to strive upward as much as you can toward union with him [*sic*] who is beyond all being and knowledge. By an undivided and absolute abandonment of yourself and everything, shedding all and freed from all, you will be uplifted to the ray of the divine shadow, which is above everything.²²²

Further on in *The Mystical Theology*, Dionysius gives us Moses as the figure of pure mystical knowing, which always happens through unknowing:

The holiest and highest things perceived with the eye of the body or the mind are but the rationale which presupposes all that lies below the Transcendent One. Through, them, however, his [God's] unimaginable presence is shown, walking

²²² "The Mystical Theology," *Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite*, trans. Colm Luibheid, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1987), 133.

the heights of those holy places to which the mind at least can rise. But then he [Moses] breaks free of them, away from what sees and is seen, and he plunges into the truly mysterious darkness of unknowing. Here, renouncing all that the mind may conceive, wrapped entirely in the intangible and invisible, he belongs completely to him [*sic*] who is beyond everything. Here, being neither oneself nor someone else, one is supremely united to the completely unknown by an inactivity of all knowledge, and knows beyond the mind by knowing nothing.²²³

In both selections from Pseudo-Dionysius, unknowing or transcending the mind is a central apophatic theme. Negative images such as darkness communicate both the mystery of God and the way to meet God, a way of darkness to the mind. Abandoning the mind's activities to allow God to be God in us and to open to union with the divine darkness name the radicality of the apophatic way.

We have a taste of the content one could use in preaching *nihil*. But, of course, the material is as inexhaustible as the Word itself. While we are focusing on themes present in the apophatic mystics, the preacher must remember that the Word is present in all reality. Indeed, every apophatic mystic sees the Word as the starting point for the journey into the darkness of unknowing. But they have their own way of reading and interpreting the Word.

The scriptures remain the main reference for apophatic preaching. We must ask, though, are the scriptures being mined for their mystically enlightening teachings? Or are preachers using the scriptures to mime the Catechism, to moralize, or to demonize? Here, we can describe mystical hermeneutics in the service of preaching. Bernard McGinn suggests there is such a hermeneutics in Meister Eckhart's use of scripture.

Besides his apophatic sermons, Meister Eckhart bequeaths an apophatic hermeneutical approach to the Bible. Indeed, his way of interpreting scripture might

²²³ *Ibid.*, 137.

mystify us modern hermeneuts. Precise translations, questions of historicity, or even attention to narrative context do not occupy the Meister. Bernard McGinn elaborates on this apophatic hermeneutics:

Eckhart believed that the goal of attaining true ‘subjectivity,’ that is, mystical union, was best realized within a hermeneutical situation in which the exegete-preacher and the attentive hearer ‘break through’ the surface of the biblical word to reach the hidden inner meaning that negates ordinary reason and the created self.²²⁴

The apophatic preaching of the Meister breaks through the letter of scripture to uncover the mystery within it. McGinn notes, “To seek for the truth of the Bible in the divine spirit is the first principle of Eckhart’s hermeneutics. That ‘truth’ is the Truth, that is, the Divine Word himself [*sic*].”²²⁵ And the Divine Word is the great reminder or awakening to the divine mystery with whom all things are one. This is the major content of his sermons: announcing this oneness and the way to enjoy it via detachment or “letting-be-ness.”

His hermeneutics revolve around breaking through the surface meaning of scripture, playing with the scripture at hand to bring out the interior meaning of a passage: “Eckhart also often employs expansions, repunctuations, and interpretive translations or rewritings in order to bring out the inner meaning of a passage.”²²⁶ Generally, Eckhart preaches on a single line from scripture, even to the point of commenting on only a single word. Sermon 77 is an excellent example. He takes Malachi 3:1 and Luke 7:21 as his scriptures, for they are the nearly same exact text: “Behold, I

²²⁴ Bernard McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2001), 24-25.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 26-27.

send my angel.” Although, in the Latin Bible he used, Eckhart notes that Malachi reads, “*Ecce ego mitto angelum meum.*”²²⁷ Luke 7:27 reads, “*Ecce mitto angelum meum.*”²²⁸

The word “ego” or “I” does not appear in the text from Luke. Eckhart makes much of this omission:

What is the point of this omission in one text of the word “I”? It denotes, firstly, God’s ineffability, for God is unnamable and transcends speech in the purity of His [*sic*] ground, where God can have no speech or utterance, being ineffable and wordless to all creatures. Secondly it means that the soul is ineffable and wordless: in her own ground she is wordless and nameless and without words, for there she is above all names and words. That is why the word “I” is suppressed, for there she has neither word nor speech. The third reason is that God and the soul are so entirely one that God cannot have a single distinctive feature separating Him [*sic*] from the soul and making Him [*sic*] different, so that He [*sic*] cannot say, “I send my angel,” thus making Him [*sic*] out to be different from the soul.²²⁹

Most of the sermon revolves around the meaning of the word, “I.” He plays with the apophatic identity of God and the soul. Both are a mystery and a single mystery. But he plays with the scripture texts and even uses an omission in Latin to bring forth a powerful negative theological point: the soul is one with God and, hence, shares in God’s incomprehensible mystery.

Eckhart does not show much concern for the historicity of biblical texts but focuses on hidden meanings lying beneath the surface “letter.” McGinn notes the implication of such an approach to the Bible:

If the main concern of Eckhart’s exegesis, as we have seen, is to ‘break through the shell’ of literalism to reach the infinite inner understandings that become a new ‘letter,’ exegesis of necessity explodes upon itself. It is the very nature of the

²²⁷ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, trans. Maurice O’Connell Walshe, ed. Bernard McGinn (New York, NY: Crossroad, 2009), 265.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, Sermon 49 (77), 263.

Dominican's exegesis and his biblical preaching to encourage such a 'breaking through,' which 'explodes' both the text and the self into divine indistinction.²³⁰

The Meister draws out contemplative themes from scripture. "'Breaking through' and 'penetrating into indistinction in the Single One,' fundamental motifs of all Eckhart's mystical teaching, are therefore also the essence of his hermeneutics. Eckhart is an apophatic exegete."²³¹ Sermon 83 is a great example. In sermon 83, Eckhart takes Ephesians 4:23 as his scripture: "Be renewed in your spirit" (Ephesians 4:23). He then closes his sermon this way:

You should love God unspiritually, that is, your soul should be unspiritual and stripped of all spirituality, for so long as your soul has a spirit's form, it has images, and so long as it has images, it has a medium, and so long as it has a medium, it has not unity or simplicity. Therefore your soul must be unspiritual, free of all spirit, and must remain spiritless; for if you love God as he [sic] is God, as he is spirit, as he is person and as he is image—all this must go! "Then how should I love him?" You should love him as he is a non-God, a non-spirit, a non-person, a non-image, but as he is a pure, unmixed bright "One," separated from all duality; and in that One we should eternally sink down, out of something into nothing. May God help us to do this. Amen.²³²

How might this apophatic hermeneutics play out in preaching today? In my preaching life, there is a discernible set of themes and a conscious choice in messaging. I preach the Gospel in a unique way. I preach that we are always already one with the mystery of God, but we do not realize it. This divine oneness is made real for us by letting go. In other words, we realize the new life of the Risen Jesus in us, which is

²³⁰ McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 28.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²³² *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*, trans. Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (New York, NY: Paulist, 1981), Sermon 83, 208.

oneness with the Triune God, by the way of the cross, which means letting go of attachments.

Oneness realized is the new life of resurrection and dying to self-centered thinking and desires is being crucified with Christ. Letting go happens by not thinking in silent prayer, detachment, and self-sacrificing love. In this way, we live into that primal oneness that already is. We allow God to be the center of our being. Contemplation is identifying with Christ Crucified unto the breakthrough of the resurrection. This message is the contemplative dimension of the Gospel; apophatic preaching makes space for this message to take root as I realize divine oneness in my contemplative life.

The apophatic themes I outline above do not represent all Christian themes. It is not my intention to restrict the topic of a sermon. But when preaching in an apophatic vein, the preacher could look for these themes in the scriptures as well as the more conventional themes of love, hope, or forgiveness, for example. They are present in the Word. The preacher does not need to force a passage to fit apophatic themes, nor should a preacher do that for any type of preaching.

Preaching in *Nihil*: Contemplative Prayer

In this section, I elaborate on preaching *in nihil*. First, I will briefly discuss an important existential point from Meister Eckhart. Then, I will employ the central insight from *We Speak Because We Have First Been Spoken* by Michael Pasquarello, the Director of the Robert Smith Jr. Preaching Institute at Beeson Divinity School, namely, the preaching life, to discuss the need for preaching that emerges from the preacher's experience of God. Finally, I will use *Connecting Pulpit and Pew* by Dr. Karla Bellinger, the founding Executive Director of the Institute for Homiletics at the University of

Dallas, to supplement this aim. Bellinger and Pasquarello speak to the need for preaching to be contemplative and to connect congregations to God so that faith becomes real for them. Indeed, Bellinger's book can also support the need to preach contemplative themes insofar as she emphasizes a preacher's vital interest in making connections with a congregation; of course, the most critical relationship is between God and the community.

First, Meister Eckhart's preaching depends on God-talk being grounded in the experience of God. For him, the preacher must be in the state of nothingness before, during, and after the preaching. He opens Sermon 30 with these words: "One reads a phrase today and tomorrow concerning my master St. Dominic. St. Paul writes it in the epistle and in German it means: 'Speak the word, speak it externally, speak it forth, bring it forth, give birth to the Word!'"²³³ Speaking the Word means awakening to God within and speaking of God in the world. If speaking is birthing for Eckhart, then birthing means preaching. No one can seek to communicate God in preaching unless they begin by waking up to the divine within. Dr. Joseph Milne, English theologian and fellow of the Temenos Academy, expands upon this notion of preaching as speaking from within God:

Eckhart calls upon us to *be* in a different manner in order to grasp what he says about God—because talk of God is unlike talk of any other thing and because for man [*sic*] to speak of God meaningfully requires that man [*sic*] exists in a completely new manner. Thus all ordinary talk about God is not talk about God at all. It is talk about a second-hand concept, a mere notion ungrounded in God Himself [*sic*]. And in such speaking it is not really a self that speaks but only a conceiving mind. If I may put it strongly, the only right speaking of God is a speaking which arises within God and is God...speaking. There is no talk of God from *outside*. To rephrase Tillich, God is not an entity among other entities, a thing among things, an idea among ideas. And so the manner of knowing God is not similar to the manner of knowing any other thing. This is a given of every religion. What is unique to Christianity is that God has spoken Himself [*sic*]

²³³ Meister Eckhart: *Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 30, 292.

through His [*sic*] Son.... Thus for man [*sic*] to be born in Christ is for man [*sic*] to unite in God's own saying of Himself [*sic*].²³⁴

Preaching is authentic only when it arises from within God. Preaching, for Eckhart, is the birth of the Word in and through the soul. Eckhart could not remain faithful to his mission of leading people in any congregation into oneness with the divine nothing if he spoke God without being connected to and awake to God. He proclaims this birth in a unique way in Sermon 71:

It seemed to a man [*sic*] as though in a dream—it was a waking dream—that he [*sic*] became pregnant with nothing as a woman does with child, and in this nothing God was born; he [*sic*] was the fruit of the nothing. God was born in the nothing.²³⁵

It appears the Meister is referring to himself, that is, he is reporting his own experience of awakening to the divine nothing, specifically with this phrase: “God was born in the nothing.” Eckhart attests, in commenting on scripture and from his own experience, that nothingness is crucial to waking up to God's presence. The nothing here can mean both the state of inner nothingness as well as the nothing that God is.

God comes to life in us when we are nothing. God and our oneness with God become vitally real when we are nothing: when contemplative prayer is effortless nothingness and self-reflection vanishes—all due to God's self-gift. When God frees us from being attached to our thoughts, agendas, feelings, and our very sense of self, nothingness-realization happens. Why when we are nothing? Because God is nothing. The birth—divine transformation—happens in nothingness.

²³⁴ Joseph Milne, “Eckhart and the Question of Human Nature,” *Eckhart Review* No. 8 Spring 1999, 20.

²³⁵ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 71, 323.

“God was born in the nothing.” To give birth is to preach as well as to wake up to the divine within. God emerges from the nothing. God is preached mystically from the state of nothing. The preacher communicates the experience of God while in the state of nothingness.

The preacher evokes the “experience” of the divine mystery. To give birth is to preach as well as to wake up to the divine within. God emerges from the nothing. God is preached truly and mystically from the state of nothing. This requires a life devoted to the divine mystery; preaching rooted in the divine mystery.

Here, I turn to Michael Pasquarello’s idea of the preaching life. The preaching life is a theocentric life, ordered to contemplation of the Holy Trinity in silent prayer, meditation, and study of the Word.²³⁶ The preaching life is one in which the preacher enjoys God for God’s sake.²³⁷ So, the preaching life is the contemplative life. Preacher and contemplative are one vocation. The preaching contemplative intends to love God gladly and lead others into divine love through proclaiming the good news of oneness with God. Pasquarello says, “The formation of preachers occurs through contemplation, or prayerful attentiveness.”²³⁸ This is prayerful attentiveness to the mystery of God who is one with us. The primary way one attends to the mystery of God is through silent prayer. But this connects to the Word as well. Surrounding a reading of scripture with silent prayer can help the preacher attend to the mystery of God in a scripture passage, for instance.

²³⁶ Michael Pasquarello, III, *We Speak Because We Have First Been Spoken: A Grammar of the Preaching Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2009), 85.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 56.

Additionally, the preacher focuses on prayerful attention to the Word. Behind this lies a theology of grace. Each of us is one with God, but we have not fully realized it. We are called to be at home in the mystery of God and to lead other people into the very same mystery. As God's mystery confronts the human condition, there will be a stripping away of multiple layers of falsehood and idolatry. The preaching contemplative must consent to the holy mystery ripping through egocentricity with the truth of divine oneness and mystery.

Preaching and contemplation are intertwined. There are three points following this. First, preaching emerges from and returns to contemplation. Second, preaching is a contemplative experience of God. Third, preaching invites people into an awakening to their oneness with God.

First, preaching is birthed by and leads us back into contemplation. Preaching leads people into their relationship with the Triune God. Pasquarello says, "Speaking of God cannot be reduced to saying things about God; rather, speaking of God will draw us into a relationship with God, in union with Christ, so that prayer and preaching are inseparable."²³⁹ When preaching and prayer unite in the preacher, a homiletic interpretation of a congregation's experience through the good news of Jesus Christ can open minds and hearts to seeking God in contemplative prayer. Mary Catherine Hilbert summarizes for us: "The preacher interprets the human story in light of the story of Jesus in such a way that people can recognize and respond to the mystery of God in their lives and world."²⁴⁰

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁴⁰ Mary Catherine Hilbert, *Naming Grace: Preaching and the Sacramental Imagination* (New York: Continuum, 2005), 56.

Second, preaching is a contemplative experience of God. The act of preaching announces the truth of the mystery of God within and beckons people into this experience. While I agree that a goal of preaching is to point to God in our experience, I believe preaching does more than point. It can be a contemplative encounter with God. Preaching can be a place of encounter with God, a contemplative experience bridging Word and Table. Preaching can be this encounter by leading a congregation into the silent mystery of God within.

Third, preaching invites people into an awakening to divine oneness. Apophatic preaching makes one God-centered since “in contemplation...the whole person is elevated from a life centered in self to a God-centered life that alone is capable of satisfying human activity and desire.”²⁴¹ Preaching serves as a contemplative awakening to the God who is one with us. The awakening occurs because proclaiming the Word means detachment from the human ego’s idols. While detachment takes a lifetime of grace and human cooperation, the apophatic mystics declare that detachment can occur in but a moment. Preaching awakens the preacher to God insofar as she or he rests in God and sees that their own words are simply words and not God. Further, this detachment as preaching confronts a congregation with the truth of God as mystery always one with them. Karl Rahner says, “Preaching is the awakening and making explicit of what is already there in the depths of man [*sic*].”²⁴² The goal of preaching is to make the mystery of God real in people’s lives. Preaching is contemplative insofar as it leads us into this

²⁴¹ Pasquarello, 77.

²⁴² Karl Rahner, *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964), 134.

silent mystery in the present moment through an interplay of words and silence. Thus, in that very moment, preaching reminds people that they are always already one with God.

Preaching emerges from and leads to contemplation. It is a contemplative experience and an awakening to the divine grace always within us insofar as the preacher and congregation remain open to God in a simple faith that does not require ideas or feelings. Additionally, the preacher needs to focus on her or his contemplative practice so that the message of any single sermon remains anchored in God's incomprehensible mystery in actuality before and after using any particular words. Commenting on St. Paul, Pasquarello writes, "Paul makes the startling claim that authority to speak and be heard is found in the visible relationship between the mode of speaking, the character of the speaker, and the wisdom that is spoken."²⁴³ Contemplative preaching unifies the preacher, the message, and the preaching. The preaching life is about knowing God.²⁴⁴ Contemplative preaching happens when the preacher, message, and event of preaching are concerned with experiencing the mystery of God within.

The preacher needs to be a contemplative, that is, a person of deep prayer. A pastoral minister can overlook this reality when occupied with the ups and downs of parish life. Yet, it is the vital hook upon which hangs true Gospel preaching. No sermon or homily communicates God without the preacher consciously relating to God. Pasquarello makes a valid point when he writes, "Rather than asking what kind of style we should use or what methods are most effective for producing results, the preacher

²⁴³ Pasquarello, 46.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 150.

should more fittingly ask: ‘What kind of power do I worship, and what kind of power informs my life and shapes my speech?’”²⁴⁵

Preachers speak authentically when they delight in God for God’s own sake by believing in, hoping in, and loving God. To preach one *must* dwell in God:

Speaking truthfully requires that we inhabit a world in which God dwells, speaks, and acts. Speaking of God cannot be reduced to saying things about God; rather, speaking of God will draw us into a relationship with God, in union with Christ, so that prayer and preaching are inseparable.²⁴⁶

Preaching well absolutely necessitates knowing God, which is a contemplative issue.

Preaching, simply put, is a form of prayer.

In *Connecting Pulpit and Pew*, Karla Bellinger shows through comments from everyday Catholics how preaching makes a difference when it connects with them. She highlights the incredible need listeners have to be inspired by a homiletic message: “listeners hunger for inspiration; they want to hear a message that gives them life. Clergy told me that they thirst for their people to encounter Jesus Christ; they want to inspire their people; they want to see the fruit of a Christian life.”²⁴⁷ Encounter stands out as the main factor in not only inspired preaching but also fruitful preaching. What else is preaching but a way “to bring people into an encounter with God as an integral element within the overall purpose of the liturgy?”²⁴⁸ Liturgy is, essentially, the people’s work of opening up in God. Does preaching serve this? Bellinger sounds a hopeful note: “When

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 148.

²⁴⁷ Karla J. Bellinger, *Connecting Pulpit and Pew: Breaking Open the Conversation about Catholic Preaching* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014), 6.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

our people have encountered God through the Sunday preaching as an interchange of love, this will bear fruit and fire the faithful to glorify the Lord by their lives.”²⁴⁹

Fruitful preaching, though, depends on whether the preacher has an active, vital relationship with God: “The inner vitality of a preacher rubs off on his [*sic*] people. If he [*sic*] is worn out or weary or bored or ill-prepared, it shows.”²⁵⁰ The people in the pews pick up on this. If they sense the preacher is talking about a God he or she knows nothing about, they will check out. Boring homilies and insipid sermons arise from many sources, but this lack of loving connection to God is high on that list.

Now, Bellinger takes us through several categories of people who might be in the pews Sunday morning and how important preaching could be to them. The Sunday homily affects committed disciples, people on the edge, detractors, and the “nones.”²⁵¹ For all but committed disciples—those attending Mass regularly and committed to some parish ministry—the homily has significant weight: “If to encounter God is the goal of Sunday preaching within the eucharistic liturgy, then that homily is like a lifeline. If that lifeline does not hold, they drop.”²⁵² Bellinger presents a stark choice. Positively, preaching can be “a ‘tipping point’—the place where a focused effort for improvement could cascade into an epidemic of growth among the faithful, leading them to a

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

²⁵¹ The “nones” are those people who do not identify with any specific religious tradition.

²⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

personally ‘profound experience of God.’”²⁵³ Negatively, preaching could become a very bad experience that people remember for far too long.

Psychologists say that it takes at least twelve good memories to make up for one memorably bad one. To bore or to ramble or to offend or to yell at the folks who come once a year to Christmas Mass simply supports their belief that people are bored or offended or get yelled at in this building every Sunday for the whole year, so why in the world would you *ever* want to come here?²⁵⁴

Do we want Catholic preaching to chase people away or to transform the people?

Obviously, condemnation has little to no place in homilies attempting to proclaim the love of God. Still, homilists who mean well might yet bore or offend. An unpleasant or dull homily stays with a congregation, repelling committed and marginal Catholics alike.

A sobering and hopeful conclusion follows for Bellinger: “The homiletical human bond matters more than ever. Preaching can make a difference. It has the potential to draw us into an encounter with the invisible God through the words and actions of a visible human being.”²⁵⁵ Preaching being so important ought to sober those who do it regularly. Yet the potential for life-giving encounter with the mystery of God lifts the spirit.

Bellinger offers a precise homiletical equation: “spiritual formation + homiletical skill = holy preaching.”²⁵⁶ Holy preaching is the goal, and not simply effective communication or inspiring message. Holy preaching ignites a passion for God in the hearts of the people. Holy Preaching flares up through a preacher who roots himself or

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 63.

herself in the divine by prayer. “The source of the message plays a role in facilitating the encounter of the receiver.”²⁵⁷

The homiletical insights of Eckhart, Pasquarello, and Bellinger lead me to affirm the great need for preachers to pray contemplatively in their daily lives. Additionally, preparing to preach in an apophatic way requires time for silent prayer that transcends thinking. And, even more, preachers must practice contemplative prayer while preaching. This is the meaning of preaching *in nihil*. The preacher speaks God while in a state of prayer and detachment that apophatic mystics call “a state of nothingness.”

I am speaking, here, of our personal contact with God in prayer, specifically, a state of resting in God in love and faith beyond the mind. The state of nothingness is a way to practice contemplative prayer. We open to God already within us. We set aside our preoccupations to be present to God. In this way of prayer, we stop thinking and enjoy the divine in silence. We allow ourselves to be reduced to silence to discover our oneness with divine love.

The state of nothingness is the spiritual state in which we rest from thinking and rest in God by simple and naked faith. It is the contemplative state: pure presence and interior silence. We are present in the here and now. We allow our minds to become silent. We stop thinking. Various contemplative practices aim for this one state. Centering Prayer, Christian Meditation, the Jesus Prayer, and Lectio Divina can bring us into this state. We can also pray with devotional practices such as the Rosary or the Chaplet of Divine Mercy and enter the state of nothingness as long as we simplify these

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

practices and allow for spaces of non-thinking silence. Such practices are ways to approach preaching *in nihil*, which is to preach while in the contemplative state.

Preparing to preach requires research, exegesis, writing, editing, and rehearsing one's delivery. Apophatic preaching requires substantially the same preparation. I recommend three additions to the preparation process: significant time spent in the state of nothingness, practiced through one of the methods I listed above, reading the apophatic mystics, and reflecting on the images of God the preacher prefers to use. Being aware of preferred images of God can help the preacher avoid both presuming the words literally mean God and a repetitive dullness.

To preach *in nihil*, the preacher needs to be in the state of nothingness. The state of nothingness is to be present without actively thinking, without engaging in the conversation we have with ourselves all day long. One may assume preaching requires thinking, but preaching, communicating with a congregation through words, requires presence most of all. There may be immediate attention to what one is saying but not self-talk. It is the simple, clear, and direct act of preaching without any interference from active thinking. Simply put, it is to be present as one is preaching but without thinking about it. Such is the state of nothingness.

Preaching with *Nihil*: Homiletic Language

In this section, I expand on the third aspect of my formula for apophatic preaching, namely, preaching *with nihil*. Two homiletic books help formulate preparatory sermon practices and homiletic aims to aid the preacher who chooses to preach *Nihil in Nihil with Nihil*. *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists* by Ken Untener, a former professor of homiletics and the Catholic bishop of Saginaw, Michigan, gives

excellent practical suggestions for homilists focusing on finding a pearl, a kind of core message that has depth. I will combine this insight with the core idea of *Preaching in Pictures* by Peter Jonker, the Minister of Preaching and Worship at LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, focusing a sermon on an image or symbol.

Elizabeth Johnson, Distinguished Professor Emerita of Theology at Fordham University, has done work on the incomprehensibility of God. She claims this incomprehensibility necessitates an explosion of metaphors that adds theological depth and creates a way beyond opposing apophatic and kataphatic modes of theological discourse. Her insights create a bridge from the homiletics of Untener and Jonker to those of Jennifer Lord, Walter Brueggemann, and James Wallace. While I would not characterize these homileticians as apophatic preachers, their insights can help flesh out apophatic preaching.

Thus, next, I will utilize insights from *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech* by Jennifer L. Lord, Associate Professor of Homiletics and Dean of the Chapel at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, and *Finally Comes the Poet* by Walter Brueggemann, prolific author and William Marcellus McPheeters professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia, to flesh out the use of negative theo-poetics in preaching. Brueggemann's homiletic work speaks to preaching as a subversion through poetry. The preacher-poet offers an alternative reality to the one dominating life today. Here, the power of poetic language can be harnessed to undermine a mindset both disengaged and conceptually idolatrous. Preaching can subvert this mindset through the poetry of Christian apophatic mysticism. Apophasis is shock language, the shock of God

beyond language, experience, and being. Putting this language to homiletic use requires finding good apophatic words.

Finally, James Wallace, professor of homiletics and part of the Redemptorist New Evangelization team, in *Imaginal Preaching: An Archetypal Perspective*, proves helpful insofar as he reflects on how preaching with symbols and images affects a congregation in multiple ways. His theories will help refine preaching *with Nihil* insofar as preaching with negative or dark metaphors does something to a community.

I aim to bring out the practical implication of negative theopoetics for Catholic preaching. Indeed, per the negative theopoetics I describe above, apophatic preaching evokes unity with the divine nothing as it provokes awareness of attachment to ideas for God. In short, apophatic preaching communicates oneness with God and subverts conceptual idolatry. How might preachers do so? What are some homiletic practices that achieve these goals? In addition to choosing contemplative themes and preaching in the state of nothingness, apophatic preaching depends a great deal on how one uses the negative language of the apophatic mystics.

Bishop Ken Untener's *Preaching Better* arose from the author's recognition of the need for improved homilies in his own diocese of Saginaw, Michigan. His book offers key insights for apophatic preaching. The first and most important note Untener has for all preachers consists of his idea of the pearl. Overall, Untener provides a great deal of homiletic wisdom in the short chapters of his book. Here, I want to explore, briefly, his comments on creating a pearl, taking control of the material, going deep, connecting, and ditching jargon.

Untener does not mince words: “‘Too many thoughts’ is the most frequently voiced complaint about homilies, a runaway for first place.”²⁵⁸ The preacher needs to focus on one thought, one message crystallized in what Untener calls a “pearl.” Untener elaborates, “A pearl need not contain something new or extraordinary; it simply conveys a profound truth in a way that we all *realize* it with a clarity we didn't have before.”²⁵⁹ Such a pearl compresses the message into a single point and brings unity to the preaching.

We find a good example of a pearl functioning in an apophatic sermon in Meister Eckhart’s sermon 52 on the first beatitude, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for the kingdom of heaven is theirs” (Matthew 5:3). The central message and organizing thought is that “A poor man [*sic*] wants nothing, and knows nothing, and has nothing.”²⁶⁰ Eckhart proceeds to discuss what it means to want nothing, know nothing, and have nothing. This pearl allows Eckhart to explode categories of God and self to reduce both to the essential reality they were when they were not, that is when both God and soul were one in the divine nothing beyond God understood as Creator.

The pearl helps the preacher gain control over the content of the homily. According to Untener, this means one knows the main content of the preaching so well, the preacher could rehearse the main message in a conversation with a parishioner. “Taking control of our material means being fully at home with it so that we can speak

²⁵⁸ Ken Untener, *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1999), 42.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁶⁰ *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*, 199.

personally and with a certain amount of freedom. It means having the *whole* so well in hand that we don't have to be preoccupied with scattered *parts*.”²⁶¹ Rather than strict memorization of the edited final version of a homily, one gets the major points and flow of the preaching clear. Untener advises, “list on a blank sheet of paper a short sentence (or phrase) for each of the major sections.... You should end up with only three or four (not many more) sentences/phrases.”²⁶² But he is quite emphatic: “Too many homilists mistakenly worry more about the words and phrases than the core thought. Take hold of the thought and you take hold of your homily.”²⁶³

Pearls help with depth and connection. The key insight of any single preaching must have depth and it must connect to people’s lives. “Depth will make up for many things, but nothing will make up for a lack of depth.”²⁶⁴ The people in the pews are more varied and diverse than ever before. Untener recognizes this reality:

Homilists frequently wonder: How can we reach all the different people in the congregation...? The answer is depth. No homilist, whether married, single, man, woman, rich, or poor can hit upon all the varied circumstances of people's lives. What we can do is to reach a certain level of truth that connects with everyone. The greater the depth, the more it connects.²⁶⁵

Apropos my emphasis on preaching in the contemplative state, Untener states with a note of lament: “The truth is that unless we have depth in our lives, we can't have depth in our homilies. Whether we intend it or not, the inner quality of our lives will show in our

²⁶¹ Untener, 59-60.

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 60-61.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

homilies! If we don't have depth, our homilies won't either."²⁶⁶ A pearl must be a connector between the Word and the everyday lives of the people. "Every homily has to have some perceptible connection with what is going on in the joys, hopes, grief, and anxieties of the people listening."²⁶⁷

And, when crafting not only the pearls but the whole of the preaching, the preacher needs to ditch any and, perhaps, all jargon. Untener clarifies, "I use *jargon* in a broad sense to mean words that are abstract, overused, or 'church-speak.'"²⁶⁸ Theological terms, ritual acronyms, the language found in official church documents all represent what Untener calls jargon. His counsel is simply to avoid using these words.

Preaching in Pictures: Using Images for Sermons that Connect, by Peter Jonker, helps us shape the major insight of Untener, namely, the pearl. Jonker affirms "controlling images effectively is central to the craft of preaching."²⁶⁹ Like Untener's pearl, Jonker encourages preachers to choose a central or controlling image to form the heart of their preaching. He defines a central or controlling image as "an evocative picture or scene that shows up repeatedly in a sermon and communicates either the trouble or the grace of the sermon theme."²⁷⁰ And this image helps the preacher achieve the goal of the homily or sermon. It is a summary and a guide for the preacher.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 68.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

²⁶⁹ Peter Jonker, *Preaching in Pictures: Using Images for Sermons that Connect* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2015), 3.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

The controlling image serves as a significant connection between the scripture and the congregation. Working with a core image allows a preacher to move the hearers of the sermon or homily. Indeed, the image helps the preacher create the preaching:

Have your image clearly identified at the beginning of the sermonic process and the writing will be more sharply focused right from the beginning, your listener will be able to track with you in heart as well as mind, and you will be ready to make a vibrant sermon out of the beautiful mess.²⁷¹

Jonker writes of the process of preparing a preaching as a “beautiful mess.”²⁷² The mess comes from all the notes, associations, experiences, and theology a preacher would like to fit into a preaching. The image, like Untener’s pearl, brings focus and connection: “controlling images allow the preacher to turn a propositional theme statement into a vibrant sermon that speaks to the imagination as well as the rational mind.”²⁷³ A controlling image helps a preacher to inspire passion.

Across a series of four sermons, Meister Eckhart uses a unifying image for transformation, namely, birthing. The birth of the Word in the soul acts as a controlling image for Eckhart in this series of sermons that he delivered during the Christmas season. In sermon 101, the first of the series, Eckhart begins,

Here, in time, we are celebrating the eternal birth which God the Father unceasingly bore and bears unceasingly in eternity, because this same birth is now born in time, in human nature. St. Augustine says: “What does it avail me that this birth is always happening, if it does not happen in me? That it should happen in me is what matters.” We shall therefore speak of this birth, of how it may take place in us and be consummated in the virtuous soul, whenever God the Father speaks His eternal Word in the perfect soul.²⁷⁴

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 25.

²⁷⁴ *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, Sermon 1 (101), 29.

Bernard McGinn remarks, “Eckhart explodes the distinction of births by claiming that the eternal birth of the Word from the Father is actually ‘*now born in time, in human nature.*’”²⁷⁵ Eckhart uses the image of birthing to fuse God the Father bearing the Eternal Word and the human soul giving birth to the Eternal Word. Birthing becomes a strong metaphor across the series of Christmas sermons for awakening to the divine mystery present within the soul and yet beyond the soul.

At this point, we need clarification concerning the relationship between images and apophasis. For, preaching, as Jonker and Untener show, works with images of depth and connection. But the apophatic mystics tell us God transcends all images. What then do we do in preaching? The solution is that God remains present in our use of images as well as beyond images. In other words, images do not prevent God from being with us. Rather, they play a positive role in affirming divine transcendence. Elizabeth Johnson, in her article “The Incomprehensibility of God and the Image of God Male and Female,” writes, “It would be a serious mistake to think that God's self-revelation through.... Jesus Christ...removes the ultimate unknowability of God.”²⁷⁶ Jesus Christ, the Word of God, does not dispel the Divine Darkness but, rather, deepens it. This allows Johnson to affirm both the unknowability of God and the plethora of images one could use to communicate God, who is endlessly knowable. She notes,

One of the clearest signs of the unknowability of God in the Scriptures is the plethora of images, metaphors, and names for the Holy One. This very multiplicity signifies that the mystery surrounding our lives cannot be grasped by

²⁷⁵ McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 55.

²⁷⁶ Elizabeth Johnson, “The Incomprehensibility of God and The Image of God Male and Female,” *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 441-442.

any one image or even in all taken together. What is significant for our purposes here is the fact that female as well as male images are used.²⁷⁷

The abundance of images for God is a sign of God's incomprehensibility. We can use images to great effect in preaching. Indeed, so many names for the divine show us that we cannot adequately name the divine. And this is good, for relying too heavily on any image can lead to idolatry. Focusing on only one or several images while utterly ignoring others—such as the use of male language versus female language for God—nearly guarantees our confusing images for reality. Hence the necessity for the image-breaking tradition of apophysis:

Image-breaking is a part of religious traditions, because focusing on a fixed image not only compromises the transcendence of God, but petrifies and stultifies human beings into the likeness of the image worshiped, inhibiting growth by preventing further searching for knowledge of God.²⁷⁸

The preacher does not need to cling to positive images or ideas for God. The preacher can use negative images and dark metaphors because the very unknowability of God demands the widest use of language possible. The preacher can use both positive and negative images of God and even combine them in creative ways. Some examples include “the crucified God of love,” “the divine silence,” “the Great Void who wraps us in compassion,” or “the merciful nothingness.”

In *Finding Language*, Jennifer Lord discusses the importance of language, especially images, for homiletics. She describes preachers as “custodians of holy speech” who carefully consider the words they use when speaking to any group of people.²⁷⁹ She

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 446.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 464.

²⁷⁹ Jennifer Lord, *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 4.

tells preachers to use a “speech that causes us to see and live in the world in a new way.”²⁸⁰ Language matters. And in preaching, the kind of language that matters most is imagery. For,

Imagery is the type of speech that elicits an experiential connection, a sensory memory, or recognition. We can use it interchangeably with *evocative language*, which is the umbrella that has gathered under it metaphors, similes, personification, analogy, synecdoche, allusion, metonymy, and even stories and illustrations.²⁸¹

Imagery is connecting language. A good image arouses feelings, memories, sensations, and other intuitive associations in us. Lord contrasts imagery as a language with the language we all know so well, namely, “informational language”: “Imagery...is language that evokes emotion and aesthetic response...Imagery, compared to informational language, is not a lesser form of language but is a different form of language.”²⁸² If imagery is a different language than our technical or informational speech, then preaching means speaking a different language than the one our congregations use in their daily lives.

Now, treating preaching as a different language does not mean it will not connect with people. Preaching speaks differently to evoke spiritual realities, experiences, and concepts. Imagery, which lies at the heart of preaching, “strives to show what these concepts look like in our lives so that we connect with their realities.”²⁸³ The way that

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 13-14.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 14.

Lord writes about imagery and preaching as alternate languages suggest homiletics is about presenting and communicating a new world and a new experience.

A great example of an apophatic image that is drawn from daily life and can connect with a congregation in an immediate way is Meister Eckhart's image of taking God naked in God's dressing room, which is found in sermon 40: "strip everything from God that clothes him [*sic*] and take him [*sic*] bare in the dressing room where he [*sic*] is uncovered and naked in himself [*sic*]."²⁸⁴ Taking God naked means to encounter God beyond all names and ideas in the nakedness of God's reality—as a mystery. The image presents the new experience of meeting God without the "clothing" of ideas and metaphors.

Walter Brueggemann, in *Finally Comes the Poet*, presents preaching as a poetic construal of an alternative world where justice flourishes, love abounds, and God is the center. Preaching needs to be speech that evokes, provokes, and shatters unquestioned absolutes. He sees this need due to the problematic climate in which preaching takes place. He opines,

In fact it is precisely the problem for the proclamation of the gospel that the great claims of the gospel do not seem to be problematic or in question. The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁴ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 40, 300.

²⁸⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989), 1.

Obviously, Brueggemann sees this as a grave situation. Our world cannot hear the Gospel as it would mean the utter ruin of the way we are doing things. So, according to

Brueggemann, we surround the Gospel with ideology:

ideology-by which I mean closed, managed, useful truth-destroys the power and claim of the gospel. When we embrace ideology uncritically, it is assumed that the Bible squares easily with capitalist ideology, or narcissistic psychology, or revolutionary politics, or conformist morality, or romantic liberalism. There is then no danger, no energy, no possibility, no opening for newness!²⁸⁶

When we cannot hear the Gospel, we are left with conventionalism. And, as Brueggemann laments, any possibility for transformation or passion dies.

Thus, preaching must be dangerous and able to break through the dismissive conventional mores of our society. Preaching can be and needs to be dangerous!

Otherwise, it simply reinforces the settled and unquestioned absolutes of a society that is deaf to the Gospel. Thus, Brueggemann writes,

To address the issue of a truth greatly reduced requires us to be *poets that speak against a prose world*. The terms of that phrase are readily misunderstood. By prose I refer to a world that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos. By poetry, I do not mean rhyme, rhythm, or meter, but language that moves...that jumps at the right moment, that breaks open old worlds with surprise, abrasion, and pace. Poetic speech is the only proclamation worth doing in a situation of reductionism, the only proclamation, I submit, that is worthy of the name *preaching*.²⁸⁷

Poetic language—language that moves and evokes and provokes—is dangerous.

Preaching will be effective only if it becomes a whole new way of speaking, that is, a way of provoking congregations so they can hear and live the Gospel. In this way,

Brueggemann describes preaching as “a poetic construal of an alternative world.”²⁸⁸

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

Poetic preaching becomes Brueggemann's goal. And this is dangerous speech that also evokes a new reality while shattering the old reality. "The poetic speech of text and of sermon is a prophetic construal of a world beyond the one taken for granted."²⁸⁹ By the very language of the poetic sermon preaching metamorphosizes into "shattering, evocative speech that breaks fixed conclusions and presses us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities."²⁹⁰ Some of these fixed conclusions, perhaps the most dangerous, are those ideas of God sanctifying our unjust social structures. Preachers can serve the toppling of these unjust social structures through poetic preaching.

But Brueggemann does not seek slight changes to contemporary homiletics. He wants to rupture from previous ways of preaching precisely because the poetic, "artful speech" of preaching "serves to break the ideologies that rob us of power for living."²⁹¹ He imagines this preaching breaking through staid patterns of sermonic thinking and settled ways of interpreting scripture. This will give preaching the power to invite a fresh hearing of the Gospel in an assembly. "The fresh hearing must be in new, artistic forms, so that the speaking and the hearing are done with fresh imagination, with new power, and with authorizing energy that takes us by surprise."²⁹² Preaching, in other words, needs the new and transformational language of poetry and imagery to connect with

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, 138.

congregations and shatter their unquestioned absolutes, widening narrowing images, shattering formulaic assumptions, opening people to the radicality of the Gospel.

Brueggemann dovetails with the apophatic project well. His own preaching reflects this dangerous kind of preaching. In a sermon delivered on April 5, 2009, at Duke University Chapel, Brueggemann proclaims,

I thought I would draw the passion narrative close to our own life by telling you about an older teenager who sits across the church from me every Sunday. She sits in a wheelchair close to the pulpit. She cannot control the movement of her legs and mostly not her arms either. She groans and she shrieks and she wails...she is only fed by a feeding tube.... I do not know what this young woman thinks in her wheelchair when she sits there on Sunday morning, but I have thought perhaps she is reciting Psalm 31.... It is a complaint about the experience of unbearable suffering and a sense of social isolation.... Be gracious to me for I am distressed....²⁹³

He imagines this young woman praying Psalm 31, complaining to God about her own candid account of unbearable suffering. She represents unthinkable agony in the world. This kind of suffering disrupts our conventional story of what life is meant to be. And yet, she is ultimately an icon of grace because Psalm 31 leads to trust amidst and through the pain. This is dangerous preaching because the opening image interrupts what polite society might think about God.

Eckhart, too, preaches dangerously. He preaches about equality in sermon 6, which takes Wisdom 5:16, “The just will live forever” as its topic:

“The just will live”...What is life? God’s being is my life. If my life is God’s being, then God’s existence must be my existence and God’s is-ness is my is-ness, neither less nor more. They [the just] live eternally “with God,” directly close to God, not beneath or above. They perform all their works with God, and God with them. Saint John says: “The Word was with God” (Jn.1:1). It was wholly equal, and it was close beside, not beneath there or above there, but just equal. When God made man, he made woman from man’s side, so that she might

²⁹³ Walter Brueggemann, “Continuing Through The Disruptive Conjunction,” Duke University Chapel, April 5, 2009, YouTube video, 18:59, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IwPhn546uQs>.

be equal to him. He [*sic*] did not make her out of man's head or his feet, so that she would be neither woman nor man for him, but so that she might be equal. So should the just soul be equal with God... Who are those who are thus equal? Those who are equal to nothing, they alone are equal to God. The divine being is equal to nothing, and in it there is neither image nor form.²⁹⁴

Near the end of the sermon, Eckhart reflects on John 15:14:

Our Lord said to his disciples: "I have not called you servants, but friends" (Jn.15:14). Whoever asks for something from someone else is a servant, and he who grants it is a master. Recently I considered whether there was anything I would take or ask from God. I shall take careful thought about this, because if I were accepting anything from God, I should be subject to him as a servant, and he in giving would be as a master. We shall not be so in life everlasting.... Some simple people think that they will see God as if he were standing there and they here. It is not so. God and I, we are one.²⁹⁵

Eckhart discusses the soul's equality with God and even equality between the sexes. This shatters medieval images of God and the relationship between the genders. He does not succumb to the image of God as master and the soul as servant. God and the just person—both equal to nothing—are equal in mystical oneness. Such a drastic shattering of a commonplace medieval image of God reverberates down to us with all the radicality of a God wholly committed to the liberation of the poor and oppressed by bringing down the rich and mighty.

But how? How might preachers use poetry and images in their homiletic practice? James Wallace provides guidance. He rounds out this discussion of preaching with *Nihil* with attention to the use of images. First, in *Imaginal Preaching*, James Wallace offers homiletic directives regarding images, which he bases on the work of archetypal psychologist James Hillman.

²⁹⁴ *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*, 186-187.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

First, Wallace tells preachers to “*stick to the image.*”²⁹⁶ And for Wallace “this involves a refusal to translate an image into a set meaning.”²⁹⁷ Preachers tend to take images or metaphors and draw out many meanings from them. Too often, preachers fix the meaning of a metaphor such as light or life instead of giving the metaphor room to breathe in the hearing of the congregation. For, according to Wallace, the depth of an image is to be “found in its very being and that being is inexhaustible and bottomless.”²⁹⁸ Preachers can discuss an image without overexplaining it. An image has a great depth that cannot be captured in one fixed meaning. This depth can allow preachers to “consider all the details and the particular context and mood of an image.”²⁹⁹

Second, Wallace advises preachers to “*twist the image.*”³⁰⁰ Because of an image’s depth and evocative power, preachers can play with an image by considering it from different angles. For instance, a preacher could consider water from the perspective of John the Baptist using it to baptize, Jesus’ experience of being immersed in the Jordan at his own baptism, or, more generally, how water flows and how water takes different forms (ice, water, vapor). Depending on the context, “the inherent multiplicity of meaning” found in any particular image allows the preacher to twist it and offer it to congregations from another perspective.³⁰¹

²⁹⁶ James A. Wallace, *Imaginal Preaching: An Archetypal Perspective* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1995), 30.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Third, Wallace counsels preachers to “*craft the image.*”³⁰² Here, the preacher can craft a poetic take on an image or metaphor. Wallace writes, “We are invited to take part in an act of *poesis*, a making or shaping of an imaginal reality through carefully chosen words.”³⁰³ Under the guidance of the Spirit and in prayer over a scriptural text, a preacher can describe water or life or any other metaphor in any way that she or he wants. The preacher can add adjectives, adverbs, or relationships to the image. While this crafting plays in the imaginal associations of a particular image, preachers can bring in spiritual words, too. For instance, a preacher can speak of the “infinite waters flowing from the great ocean of God’s love” when preaching about the Samaritan woman (John 4:4-42) drawing water and how Jesus offers her a deeper experience to satisfy her thirst or existential longing. Wallace asserts, “An image, well crafted, can draw others into its world and encourage their own crafting.”³⁰⁴ Such crafting gives people permission to make the image their own and to play and craft the image on their terms.

Meister Eckhart sticks with, twists, and crafts an image across many sermons: the ground. Sermon 15 is a good example, which is on Luke 19:12: ““There was a noble man who went out into a strange land...and came home again richer.””³⁰⁵ At the end of sermon 15, Eckhart preaches,

The final goal of being is the darkness or the unknowability of the hidden divinity, which is that light that shines “but the darkness has not comprehended it” (John 1:15). Therefore Moses said: “He [*sic*] who is there has sent me” (Exodus

³⁰² *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰³ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons*, 189.

3:14), he [*sic*] who is without name and is the denial of all names and who has never been given a name. And therefore the prophet said: “You are truly a hidden God” (Isaiah 45:15) in the ground of the soul where the ground of God and the ground of the soul are one ground. The more one seeks you, the less we find you. You should seek him [*sic*] in such a way that you never find him [*sic*]. For it is when you do not seek him [*sic*] that you find him [*sic*]. May God help us to seek him [*sic*] in such a way that we may remain with him [*sic*] forever.³⁰⁶

For Eckhart, both God and the soul have a ground. And they are connected. Indeed, they are one. Thus, the image of the ground is a metaphorical way for Eckhart to describe our absolute oneness with God as maintain our distinction from God.

But Eckhart does not cease his imagistic play with the image of the ground. He continues twisting and crafting images with the image of seeking. As he concludes sermon 15, he becomes poetic in his play with the image of seeking. If we seek God, we lose God. Seeking God means never finding God and yet remaining with God forever.

Untener’s pearl with depth and Jonker’s central image that takes control of the homiletic material point to a central, controlling statement, phrase, or image for a sermon. Then, Lord’s idea of preaching as imagery language that evokes and connects pairs with Brueggemann’s vision of preaching as dangerous, shattering, and rupturing speech to underline preaching as a poetic event that evokes an experience while provoking rigid thoughts. A sermon’s central phrase or image can be dangerous even as it connects. Further, when James Wallace suggests a preacher can stick to, twist, and craft an image, the preacher can implement these guidelines by negative vocabulary, strange syntax, and paradox. Such image work can produce outrageous language for God, that is, language for God that disrupts and exceeds the normal way of talking about the divine. These homiletic reflections suggest a robust use of apophasis in a sermon by means of a central

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 192.

thought or image that takes control of the material, directs it, and creates a space for unusual language while allowing for positive language and even explanation around such an apophatic center for the sermon. The *mashal ayin*—a dangerous, evocative, connecting, central image or phrase—appears as a strategy for apophatic preaching.

Guidelines for Apophatic Preaching

To help implement preaching *nihil in nihil with nihil*, I turn to describe specific guidelines. I organize these guidelines under each aspect of the formula for apophatic preaching. We begin with guidelines to implement the first phrase of my formula for apophatic preaching: preach *nihil*. Here are guidelines for preaching *nihil*. First, invite people into brief moments of contemplative silence while preaching. The preacher can invite the congregation into God’s hidden closeness with a direct appeal or with a long pause. Second, go deep with one message: mine a passage for its spiritual depth regarding God’s unsurpassable love for all creation and the practice of detachment, which a person practices by letting go of thoughts and feelings to pay more attention to God. Third, preach on topics like detachment, mystery, prayer, or the core of the Gospel as oneness with God. Fourth, make sure to read some sermons from the apophatic contemplative tradition, i.e., the sermons of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, or John Tauler. Walter Brueggemann is an example of a contemporary apophatic preacher, but he tends not to use negative phrases like “divine darkness,” “silence,” or “nothingness,” to describe God.

The themes and language of the Christian apophatic contemplative tradition distinguish apophatic preaching from other styles or types of preaching. The language includes images and metaphors for God that are meta-personal; they transcend personal

images of God such as Father or Mother and the use of personal pronouns. Now, the preacher can still use personal metaphors and even mix them with the language of apophasis. But using words like “nothing,” “emptiness,” “silence,” “void,” and “nullity” sets apophatic preaching apart.

This language corresponds to themes of detachment, prayer as interior silence, and simple or receptive faith. Apophatic mystics, for instance, call God “divine darkness,” so they will describe the way to God as a way of darkness to the mind. The apophatic understanding of God ties in with the apophatic understanding of spiritual practice. The apophatic tradition does not ignore the more traditional content of Christian preaching such as the love commands in the Gospels. Love, for example, often appears in the writings of apophatic mystics. The mystics tie those traditional themes into negative language for God and the practice of silent prayer.

Now we turn to guidelines based on the second phrase in my formula for apophatic preaching: preach *in nihil*. Here there are three guidelines, but they can be as difficult as they are simple. First, choose a contemplative prayer practice and do it every day. Second, immediately before preaching, enter the contemplative state and attempt to remain in the contemplative state of inner silence and simple faith while preaching. Now, the preacher will not remain fixed there, for the mind will wander. But, more pressingly for the preacher, she or he will also be using thought to preach. Thus, the preacher may experience an alternation between inner silence and using the mind’s powers to preach. This does not guarantee anyone in the congregation will experience God. But it does represent a way to bridge contemplative prayer practice and preaching. Third, incorporate silence or momentary pauses into preaching. This allows for the communication of

mystery as well as giving some space to the congregation so they can apprehend the message.

Finally, we turn to guidelines based on the third phrase in my formula for apophatic preaching: preach *with nihil*. The only guideline is to create a *mashal ayin*. Apophatic preaching evokes unity with the divine nothing while it provokes all attachment to ideas of and names for God. The apophatic mystics' teachings, the negative theopoetics I have outlined, and the preachers I have reflected on come together to suggest the use of a central image and message sealed together in what I call a "mashal ayin." This phrase emerges from the Hebrew Wisdom tradition and from Jesus' own style of teaching and preaching. Although *mashal*

is not an English word but simply the transliteration of a Hebrew noun, it is used in biblical studies because there is no adequate equivalent for this literary genre, which appears very frequently in the Wisdom literature as well as the rest of the Bible...may have one or more of the following meanings: "proverb, saying, aphorism, adage, maxim; comparison, similitude, ruling word, paradigm, model, exemplar; by-word; word play; taunt song; allegory; didactic poem."³⁰⁷

A *mashal* is a proverb, aphorism, parable, metaphor, simile, or riddle. *Ayin*, moreover, is Hebrew for "nothing." The *mashal ayin* is a compact sentence or phrase using the negative language of the apophatic mystics.

The preacher crafts a message based on this *mashal ayin*, this compact apophatic saying. "God is nothing" is an example of a *mashal ayin*, which the preacher could use for any scripture text that highlights God's incomprehensibility. After time for apophatic contemplation and sitting with the scripture being preached, I suggest the preacher

³⁰⁷ Alexander A. Di Lella, "Introduction," *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, vol. 39, *The Anchor Yale Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987), 21.

identify the *mashal ayin*. I suggest she or he write it out and consider how one can express it in alternate ways. In other words, I recommend playing with the *mashal ayin*, allowing the imagination to run free in loose or strong associations, because this exercise will help crystallize the message to be preached.

A *mashal ayin*, a homiletic negation, through its use of apophatic language, deepens, unfolds, widens, awakens us to see and enjoy what is already here. Just as poetry utilizes language draws out new ways of experiencing reality, the homiletic negation opens new vistas of God experience. Furthermore, a *mashal* “sounds a responsive chord...stretches the mind, expands horizons, captivates the imagination...is memorable, quotable, teachable...heightens awareness, excites admiration, and prompts acceptance.”³⁰⁸ The *mashal ayin* acts like a splinter from the cross of Jesus in the grasping fingers of the egoic mind.

Apophysis, like poetry, startles, amazes, puzzles, opens space for uncertainty and offers hidden meanings. In short, the use of a *mashal ayin* can both evoke and provoke. In fact, the provocation may be the evocation of the divine in a congregation. Indeed, this is the way of Meister Eckhart, our model apophatic preacher. To communicate the truth of the divine nothing, Eckhart spoke subversively. McGinn deepens this insight: “The Dominican deliberately adopted a strategy designed to shock the reader.”³⁰⁹ The shock of a *mashal ayin* may be what the congregation truly needs if the homiletic situation is as bad as Brueggemann suggests. The shock will not only subvert expected images but all images of God. Bellinger notes something relevant: “attention is selective. People are

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 22

³⁰⁹ McGinn, *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*, 26.

most alert to things that are new, unique, or novel.”³¹⁰ The *mashal ayin* will make people sit up and pay attention. It may even arouse passion.

Furthermore, the poetic devices I discussed in chapter three—namely, negative vocabulary, strange syntax, paradox, and questions—merge in the *mashal ayin*. In this compact phrase, the preacher can employ the vocabulary of the apophatic mystics and the strange syntax of poets to create a homiletic pearl that disrupts conventional, conceptually idolatrous thinking even as it opens space to perceive the Mystery. It can be a question, an image, a paradoxical statement, or a name for God the preacher intones rhythmically throughout the sermon. Referring to God as the divine darkness in scriptures that have God speaking out of a cloud (the Transfiguration in Mark 9:2-8), the story of a saint who made a major mistake as a way to talk about Jesus pleading with God to forgive us because we do not know what we are doing (Luke 23:34), the image of someone experiencing their weakness as a way to tease out the parable of the barren fig tree (Luke 13:6-9), and centering on the incomprehensibility of divine love in the parable of the workers who show up at the last hour (Matthew 20:1-16) stand out as good examples of a *mashal ayin*.

It is important to play with the *mashal ayin*. A preacher can twist it, rephrase it, add words to it or subtract words from it, pile on other words, or rephrase a line from one of the mystics. Whatever apophatic saying the preacher lands on, it is also important to memorize the *mashal ayin*. Play with negative words like “darkness,” “emptiness,” “silence,” “nothingness,” and “oblivion.” Secondly, allow for pause and slow pace

³¹⁰ Bellinger, 83.

because the language is different. And, thirdly, repeat the message due to the unique nature of the language you are using.

A well-placed *mashal ayin*, which may use different syntax or outrageous language, can disrupt a congregation's expectations about God and the preaching event. Rather than a whole sermon using strange syntax or outrageous language, the judicious application of such linguistic strategies may serve to invite congregations to perk up, listen for, and open up to the mystery. In this way, the *mashal ayin* serves as both a reminder of mystery and a call to plunge into the mystery, in sermons that otherwise employ quite conventional theological language. It can be an apophatic and pointed call to prayer in the middle of a sermon, that is, an invitation to participate in the Mystery the people have gathered to celebrate and worship.

Here are a few examples of a *mashal ayin*: “Disappear into the infinite bliss of the nothingness beyond God” for a scripture text about prayer; “The tender nothingness of God melts then liquifies the icy egoself” for a text about mercy; “Oneness with the God beyond God is an abandonment to the divine darkness of unknowing” for a biblical passage about faith; “The searing vacuum of divine mercy decompresses the ego self, extracting every last illusion” could be used in a sermon about one of Jesus' parables; and, “The Void ripples with delight over us,” which could describe God's pleasure in Jesus and, by extension, us in Jesus' baptism.

Conclusion

The preacher communicates the experience of God while in the state of nothingness. The preacher evokes the divine, provokes, and vacates the mind in the state of nothingness and with the language of negative theopoetics. In apophatic preaching, we

can present congregations with a new experience that is also ancient: the encounter with the incomprehensible mystery of God.

Apophatic preaching is a recovery of a tradition of preaching. Meister Eckhart and John Tauler might be the model apophatic preachers. In Sermon 71, Meister Eckhart preaches, “It seemed to a man as though in a dream—it was a waking dream—that he became pregnant with nothing as a woman does with child, and in this nothing God was born; he [*sic*] was the fruit of the nothing. God was born in the nothing. Hence he [St. Luke about St. Paul] says: ‘He rose from the ground and with eyes open saw nothing.’”³¹¹ The scripture is Acts 9:8. In the same sermon Eckhart calls God “the nothing whose light is all lights, whose being is all beings,” which is an excellent example of a *mashal ayin*. John Tauler, the medieval Dominican friar and student of Meister Eckhart, in a sermon for Trinity Sunday on John 3:1, preaches,

the purified and clarified spirit sinks completely into the divine darkness, into a still silence and an inconceivable unity. In this absorption all like and unlike is lost. In this abyss the spirit loses itself and knows neither God nor itself, neither like nor unlike. It knows nothing, for it is engulfed in the oneness of God and has lost all differences.³¹²

Far from being extraordinary, Bernard McGinn shows a tradition of preaching in an apophatic mode in the Middle Ages, especially among the Dominicans and Franciscans.³¹³

Faithful to the apophatic preaching tradition, I recommend we preach the nothing in the state of nothingness by using poetically negative language that evokes this mystery.

³¹¹ *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*, Sermon 71, 323.

³¹² Quoted in Dennis Tamburello, *Ordinary Mysticism*, (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1996), 117.

³¹³ See Bernard McGinn, *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*, (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2005), 320-340.

Pray and read the scriptures with a mystical eye, that is, with an eye to how any biblical passage reveals God's mystery and leads one to encounter the divine mystery by letting go, inner silence, and pure faith. Read the apophatic mystics. Get to know their message, their themes, and their language. Pray contemplatively. Find a method that appeals to you and works for you, then commit to regular periods of contemplative practice. Create your own versions of a *mashal ayin* to focus your apophatic preaching. Play with negative words and images to encapsulate the message of a particular apophatic homily or sermon. Then, use the *mashal ayin* in a preaching to evoke the divine nothing from within the congregation. Use the *mashal ayin* to provoke and subvert the understanding of the congregation regarding God. Preach *Nihil in Nihil with Nihil*. To give the reader a better understanding of apophatic preaching and to show what it looks like, in practice, I have included eight apophatic preachings in the Appendix.

What might an event of apophatic preaching do to a congregation? In the next chapter, I describe my ministerial intervention as a series of apophatic sermons I gave to a small congregation, namely, the RCIA group at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, DC. My description of this ministerial intervention will show what apophatic preaching looks like. Then, I will analyze the responses the RCIA group had to apophatic preaching. That chapter will demonstrate what apophatic preaching does to a congregation.

Chapter 5

Nihil in Homiletic Ministry

What does apophatic preaching look like in ministerial practice? What are the benefits of apophatic preaching? As a lay ecclesial minister in the Catholic Church, I do not preach at the Sunday Eucharist. So, I set out to answer these questions by preaching a series of apophatic sermons in my weekly RCIA catechetical sessions. My hope is that apophatic preaching can contribute to the renewal of preaching by the ordained whether on Sundays or weekdays.

I will describe my ministerial intervention as a series of sermons I delivered during sessions for people becoming Roman Catholic through the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (the RCIA) in March and April 2022 at the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, DC. Then, I will analyze data collected from this series of apophatic preachings. I will conclude the chapter and this thesis by offering guidance regarding how to refine apophatic preaching.

In this chapter, I include the method I used to prepare for preaching, proclaiming scripture, and preaching as part of a series of eight sessions of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (the RCIA). These eight preachings served to test my formula for apophatic preaching, namely, the preach *nihil in nihil with nihil* formula. I used this formula and the guidelines I discussed in the previous chapter to craft the eight sermons of this ministerial intervention.

I preached these eight sermons at eight consecutive RCIA sessions. These sessions were catechetical in nature. They were classes designed to impart the basics of the Church's teaching to those becoming Roman Catholic. The preachings served as an extended opening prayer before the catechetical sessions began. These sessions were held from 7:00 PM to 8:00 PM on Wednesdays in Lent 2022 and the Wednesday following Easter Sunday.

I chose to do eight sermons over eight RCIA sessions because seven of these sessions correspond to Lent and one to Easter. The sequence began on Ash Wednesday, March 2, 2022. I chose Gospel and Epistle readings from the Lectionary for Lent and Easter. The sessions concluded on Wednesday, April 20, 2022. The sessions were held on Zoom due to precautions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic.

The RCIA at the Cathedral: Demographics, Ethical Procedures

The RCIA group is the group I used to collect data. I had between twenty and twenty-five people in this group. They took part in catechetical sessions for the 2021-2022 year to celebrate the sacraments and to become Roman Catholic at the Easter Vigil.

The RCIA is a subset of the parish of St. Matthew's Cathedral, which is the mother church of the Archdiocese of Washington, DC. There were approximately twenty-five people in the RCIA who aspire to become Roman Catholic. Some sought the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist. The church calls this group catechumens. There were several seeking Confirmation and Eucharist. The church refers to this group as candidates for full communion. There were also several Catholics seeking to complete their initiation by celebrating confirmation. Finally, three to five adult catechists were present for each catechetical session.

The RCIA people were in their late twenties and early to mid-thirties. Only two were over forty years old. They were a diverse group: African American, Asian, Latino, and Caucasian. The group had eight men and eight women. Their jobs depend on a high level of education. They are, for example, lawyers working with the federal government, accountants working with the Congressional Budget Office, and real estate brokers. They are busy, overworked, and stressed. Only one person was married. Three were engaged to be married. The rest were single. In terms of education, all the participants had, at least, a master's degree.

I have a relationship with the RCIA group as the Director of Faith Formation. I am the one who directs the formation of the people in the RCIA. This process involves two weekly meetings: a dismissal from Sunday Mass before the Liturgy of the Eucharist to reflect on the scripture readings and a catechetical session on Wednesday evening. Both weekly sessions consist of the participants deepening their own spiritual lives through reflection on the Gospel, experiencing prayer practices, learning the basics of Catholic belief, and discovering how to live the Gospel in daily life.

I asked the RCIA people to sign a consent form regarding ethical procedures. This form permitted me to use their survey responses in this thesis. To be transparent with them, I announced that I would use their answers in an anonymous fashion.

Timeline

Before preaching on Ash Wednesday, I informed participants about the ministerial intervention and its use for my thesis. I informed them two weeks prior to the start date for the ministerial intervention. One week before the intervention, I led the RCIA group in a reflective exercise around their images of God and I explained the

doctrine of God as a mystery. I asked them to share their different images of God to begin to see how theological language is metaphorical. I facilitated a discussion about images of God and how these images might develop with adult maturation. We noted how when we are young, we receive images of God from our parents. Their attitudes shape how we think of God. Even more, the simple parenting strategy of rewarding good behavior and punishing bad behavior gets applied to God. Furthermore, children receive metaphors differently, more literally, than the adults who teach them. Many adults still see God through the eyes of their younger selves. This can lead to a distorted image of a God who is sometimes pictured, in books and church buildings, as an old man looking down from his perch on a cloud in the sky, will damn sinners to hell but overlook the unimaginable divine mercy. God is a harsh judge in the sky who has his favorites (saints) because they, as one example, follow the rules. In essence, this is a picture of God as an angry father. This prepared them to reflect on their understanding of God throughout the intervention.

Also, I discussed the nature of apophatic preaching at this same RCIA session, which aided their sense of apophatic preaching and its purpose. I facilitated a discussion about images of God. We discussed how through our families, sermons, and popular understandings of religion, we tend to hear only certain images of God: ways of conceiving or imagining God based on metaphors like love, life, and light. Getting more subtle, we discussed these approaches to metaphor as kataphatic. Then, I introduced the apophatic way. Apophatic images are metaphors like darkness, silence, void, and emptiness. Further, we noted that kataphatic images of God alone can distort our understanding of God. For instance, male-exclusive language for God gives the false impression God is a man. I delineated the goals of apophatic preaching to cultivate a

sense of God as an incomprehensible mystery by exploring apophatic contemplative themes, such as detachment, and apophatic language, such as divine nothingness. I also explained that my hope is that the preachings deepen their ability to let go of their thoughts and trust in God, their ability to be present in the present moment, and their understanding of God as a mystery beyond the human mind.

Finally, a month prior to the start of the ministerial intervention, I asked an observer—a former parishioner and friend—to be present for the preachings.

Everyone involved was used to meeting on the Zoom platform because the RCIA had been using Zoom for its weekly catechetical sessions.

Preparing Apophatic Sermons

These sermons used negative theopoetics to proclaim contemplative themes from seven biblical texts. In order of use for the preachings, the biblical texts were Mark 8:34-35, Matthew 5:3-12, Luke 14:25-33, 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Philippians 2:5-11, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Mark 15:22-39, and Mark 16:1-8.

I prepared for each apophatic sermon with several practices. First, I did Centering Prayer; that is, I prayed in contemplative silence. As I stated briefly above, my primary practice is to pray for thirty minutes twice a day. These periods are in the morning and in the late afternoon.

Second, I did an exegesis on the scripture passage I chose for the preaching. Since these preachings were not part of a liturgy, I only had one biblical passage per sermon to research. Typically, I would start to read a commentary, sink into contemplative silence at times while reading, and then return to reading. I would also read some of the writings

of the apophatic mystics if there were a particular sermon or treatise that specifically dealt with the scripture passage under scrutiny.

Third, I searched for a *mashal ayin*. I started writing by playing with different words and phrases for the *mashal ayin*. Once I had the *mashal ayin*, I worked to develop key points from it. Then, I organized the key points. More writing and editing followed until I finished the sermon.

I took notes at every step of this process, which I put into one document. Once I finished the above three-step process, I organized my notes into different subject headings. I would read through my notes, pray in silence, meditate on the reading some more, and refer to works by the apophatic mystics to come up with my main message and *mashal ayin*. Then, once I settled on a central message and a *mashal ayin*, I would reorganize the subject headings in my notes around them.

At this point, I had a working sermon. I would then read through my notes and find a good place in the sermon for the *mashal ayin*. More reorganizing of the material followed. Once my outline was in place, I read through these notes and removed repetitive or superfluous material. I would also refine the message by saying it differently. I corrected the grammar and spelling. Then, I read it out loud to refine the material for speaking. I might add, change, or delete something. Once I was satisfied, the sermon was finished.

What Happened at Each Preaching

Functionally, my intervention served as an opening prayer for each RCIA catechetical session. There was no inherent or planned connection between the apophatic preaching and the RCIA catechetical session that followed. I began with silence. Then, I

proclaimed the scripture passage I had chosen for the occasion—I chose the scriptures to align with Lent, and one to align with Easter. I paused for a few more moments of silence; then, I preached for seven to ten minutes. A moment of silence followed the homily. Finally, I asked the participants to fill out the survey they will have access to through SurveyMonkey (see Data Collection below). The total time for this opening or extended prayer was approximately twenty minutes. Here is the breakdown of the opening prayer with apophatic preaching as a schedule:

Silence

Proclamation of the Word

Silence

Apophatic Sermon

Silence

Filling out Survey

The Experience of Apophatic Preaching

As the preacher, I sank into and returned to the state of nothingness—the state of inner silence and pure faith in God that characterizes the prayer that apophatic contemplatives preach—before, during, and after the preachings. I practice Centering Prayer. I had two thirty-minute periods of Centering Prayer each day that I preached. Then, immediately before preaching, I would take a deep breath, allow my mind to be clear, and sink into God’s mystery.

Nevertheless, I discovered a critical practical issue: I needed to keep returning to the state of nothing throughout the preaching. Often, my mind would wander away from being present to God in silence. I felt afraid that the sermons might be misunderstood,

unsure of what I was saying, and concerned with what the participants were thinking. The return, which I practiced by repeating my sacred word from Centering Prayer or taking a deep breath, allowed my mind to settle, focus on the preaching, and enjoy it.

The experience of doing apophatic preaching is an experience of engaged prayer. It was paradoxical: I used my mind to preach the words I had written and yet I took time—during the preachings—to transcend my mind by naked faith and inner silence. This time was mere seconds, but it dotted my preaching.

It is a direct way to proclaim the Good News, which means I felt I was talking to people about what mattered, namely, connecting with the Mystery of God in their own lives. While preaching, I felt grounded and at home in the present moment. This led me to feel like each preaching was fresh. And yet, I settled into a routine of preparing, praying, and preaching in an apophatic register. As I experienced it, apophatic preaching holds together the opposites of being in a state of faith and not thinking (state of nothingness) and using my mind to preach.

I conducted the ministerial intervention on Zoom, an online platform allowing simultaneous video conferencing. Preaching on Zoom was difficult. The energy present during in-person preaching was absent for the ministerial intervention. Further, Zoom does not encourage participants to pay attention to the preacher. Often, many participants turned off their cameras, whether because they were eating, caring for a child, or simply did not want to be seen. Those who had their cameras on would look at me while preaching but for me to maintain artificial eye contact, I had to look at my camera and not the people. Thus, I could not maintain eye contact during any preaching.

The Cathedral of St. Matthew conducted the RCIA process over Zoom because of COVID protocols. This was the policy before I began working at the Cathedral in October 2021. Thus, I inherited the policy regarding the RCIA. Attendance at the Zoom catechetical sessions was not good. Five to seven people attended no catechetical sessions, even before the ministerial intervention. The few times I tried to gather the RCIA for sessions or even an in-person retreat, attendance was minimal.

Data Collection

Data collection is a significant part of my ministerial intervention. I will detail the procedures I followed in this section. First, I asked the RCIA group to fill out a survey immediately after listening to each homily. I used the online survey website SurveyMonkey to administer the surveys. The participants submitted their survey responses anonymously. Thus, I received responses to the surveys before the RCIA session ended. I did not, however, know the identity of anyone behind any particular response. I repeated this approach to collecting data for all eight preachings. These are the questions in the survey I asked each participant to answer about the preachings:

1. Did the preaching help you to experience God as a mystery beyond your power to reason? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
2. Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
3. Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
4. Did the preaching lead you to question how you understand God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

5. What was it like to hear the negative language (“nothing”) and negative images in the preaching?

After the eighth RCIA catechetical session, I emailed the RCIA group a link to a questionnaire on SurveyMonkey, which, again, allowed for anonymity. The questionnaire was an opportunity to collect another set of data and see how all the preachings impacted the group. This approach allowed for multiple thoughtful responses. And by using a questionnaire, I did not take up any more of their faith formation and RCIA preparation with the ministerial intervention.

The questionnaire had three questions focusing on how the preachings impacted the participants’ understanding of and relationship with God. These are the questions:

1. How would you describe your relationship with God currently?
2. What impact did the apophatic preachings have on your relationship with God?
3. What difference does understanding God as the divine nothing make to your relationship with God?

I expected only some of the participants to respond, but I expected to receive, at least, five to ten replies to the questionnaire. I asked the RCIA group to complete the questionnaire by April 27, 2022. This allowed for time to process the sermons. In the end, I received only two responses to the survey.

Finally, I asked a former parishioner—one who has worked for churches before—to triangulate the data by being an observer. This person observed the preachings I did during the RCIA sessions on Zoom. Because the preachings occurred over Zoom, the observer was limited. This person could not attend to the energy in the group or even

observe all the reactions of the participants because often the other participants had their cameras turned off.

Nevertheless, I asked the observer to note the quality of each preaching. Additionally, I asked the observer to attend to their own personal experience of each preaching. Finally, despite the limitations of Zoom, I asked the observer to note the reactions of the participants as best as possible.

Once the whole series of eight preachings concluded, I interviewed this person. Further, the observer wrote me an email to discuss their feedback.

Data Analysis: The Reception of *Nihil*

I move to report the findings of my ministerial intervention. Then, I will offer conclusions based on the results. The data comes from responses to the survey I administered to the twenty-five people in the RCIA group after I preached in an apophatic mode. Throughout the series, I asked the RCIA participants to fill out their responses to the same five survey questions (see Appendix 4).

Of the twenty-five people who make up the RCIA group, the maximum number of participants at an individual preaching was sixteen while the minimum number was eight. Attendance was sporadic. Five of the group were catechists; I did not require the catechists to be present at every session.

In the summary section below, I report the number of survey responses I received for each preaching. The number of responses for each preaching equals the number of participants who attended the preaching and RCIA catechetical session.

Furthermore, I did not track participants, as one might by assigning them a code, since not all attended every one of the series. Since I tracked the overall development of the group, I was not concerned about tracking individual participants.

First, I will summarize each individual apophatic sermon. Then, I will give a count of how many positive and negative answers I received to each question. Then, I will offer examples of responses to the open-ended question. Finally, I will offer a general summary of all the responses to the series of eight apophatic preachings. I have included all eight sermons in the Appendix. Additionally, I will summarize the responses to the post-series survey, that is, the unique survey I administered to a few of the RCIA participants after the entire series concluded. Finally, I will summarize the response of my observer.

After summarizing the various responses, I will analyze the data in several ways, First, I will examine whether there was any growth or development in the participants. Then, I will look at both consistent and new comments throughout.

I will conclude this chapter and my thesis by offering general comments on apophatic preaching based on the results of the survey responses. These comments will help clarify how to do and address concerns about apophatic preaching.

Summaries

First, I turn to a general summary of the responses to the eight apophatic preachings. Overall, the RCIA participants enjoyed the preaching series and found it helpful and challenging. At times, the participants felt confused and startled by the negative language I used to talk about God. Still, the majority found the messages

impactful insofar as their prayer shifted, they understood letting go more, and, importantly, they could see their own ideas of God as well as the need to transcend them.

Now, I will summarize each of the eight apophatic preachings and their unique responses. In the first preaching, I reflected on Mark 8:34-35, Jesus commanding the disciples to deny themselves and lose their lives. The central message was that Jesus commands us to become nothing because he reveals the divine nothing: God transcends space, time, and being. The unifying *mashal ayin* was “God is nothing.” The faith response I sought to elicit was to surrender to the Mystery in faith.

The first preaching and the participants responding to its survey occurred on March 2, 2022. There were sixteen out of sixteen responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as mystery in the preaching: one replied unsure. Fifteen replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: one person replied unsure. Fifteen replied yes. The third question, regarding whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: four replied no. Eleven replied yes. The fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: five replied no. One was unsure. Nine replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: three felt confused. Thirteen found it impactful.

Beyond answering yes or no, the participants offered expanded answers for each survey question elicited open-ended answers. Here, I offer some examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the first apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant wrote, “It helped me connect with God in a very personal way

that was beyond just a cognitive understanding.” To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant said they now see “nothingness as a way to connect with God.” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “Yes because it allows us to see beyond what we want or think what we want here and now and put complete faith and devotion into God and what he wants as a far greater calling than anything on Earth. Also filling out this survey helps a lot too because it allows for a different relationship with these thoughts than talking. Writing seems to be the most beneficial for me personally.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “It made me think that the image of God in my mind is just an image, not actually God.” To the fifth question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said it was “a bit jarring at first, but I was able to get into it.”

Generally, the RCIA participants responded to the first apophatic preaching positively. They recognized that their own images of God are just that, images. They wrestled fruitfully with the divine nothingness. Some called it “jarring” while others “appreciated the new perspective” on God. Indeed, the theme of nothingness helped them appreciate the depth of letting go Jesus calls us to practice in Mark 8:34-35. Nearly everyone found the apophatic or negative language helpful, albeit shocking. It forced them to go deeper in their reflections on who God is. This data set started a trend: while many describe a different notion of God, some (not a majority) do not say the sermon led them to question their understanding of God. Further, a few (4) were familiar with silent prayer, so their understanding of prayer did not change significantly.

In the second preaching, I reflected on the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12. I focused on Matthew 5:3, the first beatitude: poverty of spirit. The central message was that the poor in spirit are those in the contemplative state of pure nothingness. The unifying image or *mashal ayin* was the poverty of inner nothingness. The faith response I sought to elicit was the practice of contemplative prayer.

The second preaching and the participants responding to its survey occurred on March 9, 2022. There were eight out of eight responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as a mystery in the preaching: one replied no. Seven replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: one replied no. Seven replied yes. The third question, regarding whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: one replied no. Seven replied yes. The fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: six replied no. Two replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: one felt confused. Seven found it impactful. One person replied no to all the questions.

Now follows some examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the second apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant wrote, “the nothingness subject really resonated with me as far as meditation goes.” To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant said, “Yes. LJ did a great job coaching the mental process of letting go of thoughts and anxieties.” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “Yes,

to appreciate silence.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “Yes. It helped me understand that I do not understand God! To some extent all of my images of God are my own projections and could be untrustworthy or unhelpful if I am projecting my own expectations onto God.” To the fifth question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said it was “very helpful today. Not challenging like last time.”

Generally, the RCIA participants responded to the second apophatic preaching positively. The divine nothingness resonated with most. A majority found their understanding of letting go and prayer broadening. They noted how silence is key to prayer. Again, there is a trend of people describing different notions of God received and yet answering no to the question about a change in their understanding of God. While some found the negative language regarding God and prayer jarring, they still responded positively to the negativity! One person said the negative language was “realistic and humanizing.”

In the third preaching, I reflected on Luke 14:25-27, 33, in which Jesus tells the disciples to hate their families and their own lives. The central message was that we will never know the good and gracious divine oblivion unless we let go of our conventional lives, which is symbolized by the family. The unifying image or *mashal ayin* was the opening story about a man named Trevor who is trapped in a conventional life. The faith response I sought to elicit was to see conventional values in one’s life and to give way to the divine oblivion in their prayer so God could shatter conventional thinking and free them.

The third preaching and the participants responding to its survey occurred on March 16, 2022. There were twelve out of twelve responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as a mystery in the preaching: one replied unsure. Eleven replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: all twelve replied yes. The third question, regarding whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: Four replied no. Eight replied yes. The fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: five replied no. Seven replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: four felt shocked and uncomfortable. Eight found it jarring but appreciated it.

We turn to examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the third apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant replied, “Yes, by showing that my preconceptions and my own perceptions and attachments were limiting my access to God.” To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant responded, “Absolutely, I appreciated the allegory and the connection to the interpretation of the passage from Luke.” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “Yes, instead of praying for wants such as new clothes or a new car, I need to remember to pray only to become closer to God.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “Not quite question, but gave me a fresh take on a held belief; i.e., God as nothing/everything.” To the fifth

question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said it was “good because it was against materialism which is distracting when pursuing God.”

Once again, generally, the RCIA participants responded positively to the third apophatic preaching. They felt impacted by the idea of going beyond a material quest for happiness. They found the nothingness of God easier to grasp even though the negative language was still unusual to their ears. They report a change in understanding God, prayer, and letting go even as some deny there is a change. Those who answered no to these questions contradict themselves with their other comments.

In the fourth preaching, I reflected on 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, in which God tells St. Paul that grace is all he needs in his weakness. The central message was that we discover the humble God in our failures when we use them as opportunities to fall into a state of nothingness. The unifying image or *mashal ayin* was the divine weakness. The faith response I sought to elicit was to help them use the experience of weakness to lose themselves in the divine nothing.

The fourth preaching and the participants responding to its survey occurred on March 23, 2022. There were eleven out of eleven responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as a mystery in the preaching: one replied no. Ten replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: all eleven replied yes. The third question, regarding whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: Six replied no. Five replied yes. In the fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: eight replied no. Three replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: two did not like it. Nine found it impactful.

Now, I offer some examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the fourth apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant replied, “It reminded me how God is beyond knowing; God is incomprehensible.” To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant responded, “Yes, by suggesting to let go by embracing weakness and failure.” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “Yes. Praying as resting in faith requires complete surrender. Hard to feel the feelings...without getting hooked.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “Yes - I see Him as a king, as all-powerful, as the contingency for being, so the idea that he is powerless and nothing is confusing.” To the fifth question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said it was “a little confusing; a little enlightening - definitely helps to let go of distractions of this world that get in the way of happiness.”

Again, generally, the RCIA experienced the sermon positively. They gained a deeper awareness of the divine incomprehensibility. They found the idea of God’s weakness interesting, even if unusual. More consistent reporting of changes in their understanding of God: wrestling with the paradox of God being weak and omnipotent. Though dazzled by the negative language, it was a good dazzling. It led them to appreciate God’s mystery more deeply.

In the fifth preaching, I reflected on Philippians 2:5-11, which describes the kenosis of Christ. The central message was that real happiness is found only in the

mystery of God. The unifying image or *mashal ayin* was strewn across several aphorisms: the treasures and pleasures of the world do not compare to the Holy Mystery. The faith response I sought to elicit was to surrender everything—all the world cares about—for the delirious joy of God.

The fifth preaching and the participants responding to its survey occurred on March 30, 2022. There were fourteen out of fourteen responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as a mystery in the preaching: three replied no. Eleven replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: two replied no. Twelve replied yes. The third question, regarding whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: Nine replied no. Five replied yes. The fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: seven replied no. Seven replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: two felt confused. Twelve found it illuminating.

Here, I offer some examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the fifth apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant replied, “Yes! It’s always a good reminder to understand that nothing here on earth we are taking or promised in heaven.” To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant responded, “Yes - the comparison of the trajectory of the gospel to that of our culture (material ascent).” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “It seems that much of prayer is an act of letting go, going

beyond physical, material, emotional needs to connect with what my soul yearns for.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “Yes, because he is so infinite, I don't think we will ever really understand Him but we need to put all our focus on Him..” To the fifth question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said, “I felt somewhat uncomfortable, because I feel like if God is just emptiness then what do we gain? I feel like He has to be more than that.”

Again, overall, the RCIA participants had a good experience with the fifth apophatic preaching. Their comments were terse in this data set. For the first time, a majority reported no change in their understanding of prayer. Generally, they found the negative language to be good, but some said it was confusing and impersonal.

In the sixth preaching, I reflected on 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, in which St. Paul states how God chose those who are nothing to reduce to nothing those who are something. The central message was that the divine plan is to reduce us to nothing so that our inherent oneness with God can be insuppressibly real for us. As Jesus was reduced to nothing on the cross, we also must be reduced to nothing. The unifying image or *mashal ayin* was being reduced to nothing. The faith response I sought to elicit was to decide to give the self to mindless oblivion and detach. It was to let the self be reduced to nothing.

The sixth preaching and the participants responding to its survey occurred on April 6, 2022. There were nine out of nine responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as a mystery in the preaching: one replied no. Eight replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: one replied no. Eight replied yes. The third question, regarding

whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: four replied no. Five replied yes. The fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: six replied no. Three replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: one felt confused. Eight found it jarring, challenging, and impactful.

Now follows some examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the sixth apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant replied, “Yes. Nice meditation about being reduced to nothing.” To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant responded, “Yes...fear keeps us from letting go...letting go helps us get rid of fear.” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “Yes, by it being more about meditation and not just dialogue.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “Yes, but I still don’t understand Him. It is so simple to let go and put all my trust in Him but I still know so little about Him.” To the fifth question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said it was “Challenging because I think of God in more positive terms.”

Yet again, the RCIA participants, overall, enjoyed the sixth apophatic preaching. Their responses were more of the same: a growing appreciation of the divine mystery and nothingness even as they find it challenging. They liked how even the Bible uses negative language for God. Nevertheless, one or two found the negative language abstract and confusing.

In the seventh preaching, I reflected on Mark 15:22-39, in which Jesus cries out to God, asking if he has been abandoned. In this sermon, I paused and became silent several times throughout. The central message was that the crucified Jesus' cry of abandonment reveals God as Absolute Mystery, neither a god nor a thing we can manipulate. The unifying image or *mashal ayin* was the godless nothingness. The faith response I sought to elicit was to lose self in the divine nothing as Jesus did on the cross. And to do this by contemplative prayer, which involves not thinking and resting in God in silence.

The seventh preaching and the participants responding to its survey occurred on April 13, 2022. There were eleven out of eleven responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as a mystery in the preaching: one did not answer. One replied no. Nine replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: one did not answer. One replied no. Nine replied yes. The third question, regarding whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: two did not answer. Three replied no. Six replied yes. The fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: one did not answer. Five replied no. Five replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: five found it jarring in a bad sense. Six found it very jarring but appreciated it.

Here, I offer some examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the seventh apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant replied, "Yes, he is in the quiet." To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant responded, "The...preaching does

help me understand the practice of letting go because it pushes me to think about the nothing.” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “Yes, prayer doesn't have to be so formal. It can be silence and meditating.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “Yes. Made me think about coming to prayer in a certain mental and spiritual state.” To the fifth question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said, “I found that it made me feel gratitude for Jesus, I didn't feel that the negative language made me feel negative.”

While the RCIA participants had a good experience with the seventh apophatic preaching, they were also disturbed by it. The central issue was the term “godless nothingness” being used for God. Even those reporting good changes in their understandings of God, prayer, and letting go, felt shocked by this term.

In the eighth preaching, I reflected on Mark 16:1-8 when the women find an angel in Jesus’ tomb who says Jesus is not there but has been raised from the dead. Again, I paused for silence several times throughout the sermon. The central message was that the empty tomb testifies to the void of godless nothing as our very life, our very reality. The Resurrection is about realizing this truth and living it. The unifying image or *mashal ayin* was the empty tomb. The faith response I sought to elicit was to identify with the Mystery as the Risen Jesus does.

The eighth preaching and the participants responding to the survey occurred on April 20, 2022. There were thirteen out of thirteen responses. The first question, regarding whether they experienced God as a mystery in the preaching: two replied no.

Eleven replied yes. The second question, regarding whether the preaching helped them understand letting go: two replied no. Eleven replied yes. In the third question, regarding whether the message changed their understanding of prayer: nine replied no. Four replied yes. The fourth question, regarding whether their understanding of God changed because of the preaching: five replied no. Eight replied yes. The fifth question, regarding what it was like to hear negative language in a sermon: one did not answer. Three found it confusing. Nine found it honest, warm, and helpful.

We turn to some examples of what participants wrote for each question of the survey for the eighth apophatic preaching. To the first question, about whether the preaching helped the participant to experience God as mystery, one participant replied, “Yes, reminded me of God as greater than the greatest of all.” To the second question, about whether the preaching helped one understand the practice of letting go, one participant responded, “Yes, leave everything behind and bask in his nothingness.” To the third question, about whether the message of the sermon changed the participants’ understanding of prayer, one person replied, “Yes, I see prayer differently now.” To the fourth question, about whether the preaching led the person to question their understanding of God, one participant replied, “Yes - the "godless nothing" caused me to question my understanding of God as a presence.” To the fifth question, about hearing negative images for God, one participant said, “I liked how he closed the circle tonight, brought it all home by explaining how his message about the divine nothing and emptiness relates to the crucifixion and resurrection.”

The RCIA participants enjoyed the eighth apophatic preaching, in general. They found awe in the Resurrection through a deeper awareness of divine mystery. A majority

reported no change in their understanding of prayer. But they also wrote about prayer as emptying the mind of thoughts. So, they appear to have understood the message about prayer over all of the sermons. The majority described how they grew in their practice and understanding of letting go. Again, there was more wrestling with God as nothing, even as they found it “helpful and spiritual.”

I turn, now, to a summary of the responses I received from a questionnaire composed of three questions, which I administered after the preaching series concluded. I emailed this questionnaire to five members of the RCIA group. I received two responses to this questionnaire.

One respondent submitted responses on April 25, 2022. The other submitted responses on April 29, 2022. Thus, they had at least five days to process their experience of the whole series. The first question asked them to describe their current relationship with God. One said it was “great and growing.” The other person feels connected to God through other people, creation, the liturgy, and the faith of the community. This person feels “disillusioned and angry at God when...prayers are not answered” and when suffering is observed in the world. This person sometimes questions God’s existence and yet discovers ways to affirm God’s existence.

The second question asked them what impact the preaching series had on their relationship with God. One simply answered, “Profound.” The second respondent, “The preaching helped me practice letting go of worldly anxiety that interferes with my relationship with God.”

The third question asked what the difference God as nothing made to their relationship with God. One replied, “He created all things and is thus not a thing...is to

understand I am beyond anything that can separate me from the Love of God.” The second respondent, reflecting on how divine nothingness impacted their relationship with God, wrote, “God is not just an affirmative presence...but...infinite...the preaching destabilized my ingrained understanding of God as resembling us (i.e., the white-bearded man in the sky).” In fact, the second respondent reported that the divine nothingness made God “more accessible in all moments.”

Finally, I summarize the comments offered by my observer of the ministerial intervention. In my interview with the observer, the person expressed how authentic my preaching was. Further, this person noted the participants that could be seen (had their cameras turned on) seemed engaged. The observer added that the preachings were personally meaningful.

In an email sent on April 28, 2022, the observer said, “in the conviction and quiet passion you bring to your preaching I sense that you are as fully engaged in what you share and help us to strive for.” Thus, the observer recognized how the quality of the preacher’s spirit and presence affects the preaching. The observer noted that divine nothingness, letting go, and contemplative prayer require the preacher to repeat each theme and be vigilant about how each theme is communicated.

The observer mentions, “The messages were consistent and drew on fitting scripture readings as well as examples of attachments (some as idolatries) in our day-to-day lives. It was extremely helpful that you used examples of ways in which our lifestyles, climbing the "success" ladder, etc., get in the way of a union with God.”

Regarding the negative language, the observer noted how appropriate it was to encounter this language during Lent. The observer astutely observed how such “language

and images are mostly absent from much preaching. This has perhaps made me even more comfortable with avoiding experiences of ‘dark night,’ of praying without words.” Thus, when preaching generally avoids these topics, the people in the pews avoid them as well.

In these apophatic preachings, the observer experienced “contemplation as...a reliable doorway to the goal of union with God as the path to true freedom and joy.” The observer, in other words, experienced the mystery of God through the preachings.

Development, Consistency, Uniqueness

In this section, I reflect on the data through the three lenses of development, consistency, and uniqueness. Was there any growth or development reported across the data? Were there any consistent comments? Were there any unique comments?

Throughout the preaching series, the participants grew in several ways. Most of all, the participants reported a deepening awareness of divine mystery. Although they may have felt confused, shocked, or jarred by negative images of God, they also deeply appreciated the negative language. And they grew in this appreciation by allowing that language to shape their way of letting go, their prayer, and their experience of God.

Often, the participants responded no to the third question, which was about whether their understanding of prayer grew. Thirty-two replied no to this question out of the ninety-four responses, which is thirty-four percent. Still, their understanding of prayer did not remain stagnant. Rather, they reported grasping the idea that apophatic prayer involves no thinking and resting in God very early in the series, even though understanding God as a mystery beyond our minds does require reason. This was a consistent part of the data: little to no major changes in their understanding of prayer

because they understood the point of apophatic theology for prayer, namely, to stop thinking and be silent in the divine presence.

Out of the sixteen responses to the first preaching, only three replied that their understanding of prayer did not grow, which is about nineteen percent. But the rest of the respondents, thirteen, described understanding prayer as more apophatic or contemplative after the first preaching, which is about eighty-one percent. Of the eight responses to the second preaching, which dealt with prayer specifically, one reported no change in their understanding of prayer (twelve percent), while seven (eighty-eight percent) did. The participants described their understanding of prayer as changed to allowing more “silence,” “negative space,” and resting from thinking. Since the rest of the preachings in the series did not alter this initial understanding of prayer, I suspect the participants’ understanding of prayer as contemplative remained steady for the rest of the series.

The RCIA participants consistently reported a deepening awareness of God’s mystery. Of the ninety-four responses to the first question, which asked about whether the preaching helped to experience the divine mystery, only twelve responses (about thirteen percent) gave an answer of no or unsure. Eighty-two responses indicated the person did experience God as a mystery in one of the sermons, which is about eighty-seven percent. This was a very steady comment throughout the preaching series.

The RCIA group reported becoming aware of how their own ideas and images of God are principally ideas and images. Although not as consistent as a growing experience of divine mystery, many participants displayed an understanding of how limited their own understanding of God truly is. One person wrote that the preaching “made me think that the image of God in my mind is just an image, not actually God.” While only ten

responses were mentioning this idea, the majority (eighty-two of ninety-four responses or eighty-seven percent) reported they experienced God as a mystery suggesting there was some implicit understanding of one's ideas as limited regarding God.

Oddly, a consistent response was no to question four, which asked whether the preaching led the participant to question their understanding of God. Forty-eight out of ninety-four responded no to question four, which is fifty-one percent. This is the highest number of no's for any question in the survey. The question asked for a yes or no response, then some elaboration if they answered yes, but no elaboration for a response of no. But the previous two findings suggest that the participants did question their understanding of God.

The respondents consistently reported being shocked or jarred by the idea of divine nothingness. A comment from the first preaching, on March 2, 2022, represents most responses: "A bit jarring at first, but I was able to get into it." At the same time, they integrated it into their view of God and even enjoyed it more and more. Regularly, many of the participants did not find negative theological language to be confusing but appreciated its challenge. Seventy-seven of the ninety-four responses to the fifth question about the experience of negative theological language were answered in a positive fashion, which is eighty-two percent. And those who did find it confusing also appreciated it and found it drew them deeper into God's mystery. One wrote, "I think I automatically resisted the negative language but leaned in to listen to it and felt it was useful to push me to consider the paradox further." And another wrote, "Kept my attention. My first impulse was to disagree, and I think there may be valid disagreements. But in the end the message made good sense." Finally, a third wrote, "different than my

image of God that I have construed in my mind. Something to ponder more. God is nothing and also everything.”

There were only a few unique comments. One person made an immediate connection between God as nothing and contemplative prayer: “the nothingness really resonated with me as far as meditation goes.” Another respondent acclaimed the negative theological language as “realistic and humanizing.” One respondent reflected a consumer-like mindset regarding negative language for God: “I felt somewhat uncomfortable, because I feel like if God is just emptiness then what do we gain? I feel like He has to be more than that.” Although not unique, one comment shows a participant got the experience of apophatic preaching as subverting the mind by inviting letting go around the concept of God: “The whole tact of preaching does help me understand the practice of letting go because it pushes me to think about the nothing.”

Take Aways

The responses to apophatic preaching suggest to me five concluding ideas. First, apophatic preaching can challenge people’s understanding of God and even subvert idolatrous notions of God. The RCIA participants consistently reported a deepening awareness of God’s mystery and how their own ideas and images of God are principally ideas and images.

Second, repetition was key. I returned to similar themes often and this helped clarify and contextualize apophatic language for God, the soul, and the spiritual journey. The participants’ growth in understanding the mystery, letting go, and apophatic prayer occurred by means of the repetition of these themes in different ways across the eight sermons. If a preacher wants to do an apophatic sermon in a congregation, she or he

would do well to repeat apophatic themes. But she or he would also do well to avoid mechanical repetition by creatively circling back to themes in new and unexpected ways.

Third, negative language and apophatic vocabulary were not a hindrance for the majority of the RCIA participants. Often, there was one participant who answered no to most of the questions and had a bad experience with the apophatic imagery and terms. A preacher should expect this kind of resistance to apophatic terms. But it was a minor reaction in this RCIA group.

Still, the RCIA participants responded well to minimal negative language in a sermon. When I leaned into several negative terms, they reported a bit more confusion and abstractness. Some of the participants reacted badly to phrases like “mindless oblivion” in the sixth sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:18-31 or “godless nothingness” in the seventh sermon on Mark 15:22-39. Nevertheless, these reports were relatively minor compared to the benefit they derived from the negative language, namely, deeper prayer lives and greater skill at letting go. Thus, I believe, at first, that apophatic preaching should stick to the *mashal ayin*, a short negative term or phrase, and not refer to God with too much negative language in a sermon. A preacher could do so once a congregation has experienced several apophatic sermons.

Fourth, one great advantage of my ministerial intervention was the nature of a preaching series. The RCIA participants heard eight apophatic sermons over eight weeks in a row. Several times in the surveys, the participants commented how their understanding of letting go, prayer, or God deepened over time. In other words, their understanding of a particular theme was built on the sermons they had heard in previous

weeks. Thus, I recommend introducing apophatic preaching to a parish through a preaching series of at least five sermons over five Sundays.

Finally, the participants described the negative language I used for God, the soul, and the spiritual journey as jarring, challenging, impactful, helpful, honest, and even warm. Those who found the language unhelpful used similar words at times. But all the participants noticed the negative language in each preaching. The negative theological language shocked them and caused them to pay attention and then engage with the message more. Apophatic vocabulary, the negative language I used for God, stimulated the attentiveness of the participants. It also led to a fuller engagement with my preaching. Apophatic preaching is a kind of preaching that can engage a person's attention.

Conclusion

Apophatic preaching has a discernible effect on a congregation. The participants of the RCIA group testify to this point in various ways. Overall, the effect is positive. Apophatic preaching can make a congregation pay attention and engage with a message as it both subverts images of God and evokes the divine mystery present with the congregation. I believe the data supports this.

I began my thesis with this question: how do we preach God today? The answers to this question are as varied as the homileticians answering it. Apophatic preaching emerges as one answer among many. While no preacher uses the apophatic approach exclusively, it can help a congregation experience the mystery of God within their souls and in their daily lives. Apophatic language, content, and prayer all contribute to preaching that can help a congregation awaken to God. Evoking this experience can also overturn rigid notions about God, softening the heart to welcome the Good News. When

any congregation—including its clergy—gets too attached to any notion of God, they tend to collapse their notions and God’s reality into one, there is no awareness that notions of God are simply that, notions. This dims the dazzling awareness of God’s incomprehensible mystery. Worse, this rigid thinking about God often leads to rigid behavior, a trait most unwelcome in religious people today. Preaching needs mystery. To this end, I heartily recommend that preachers encounter the apophatic tradition and attempt to preach apophatically. It holds great promise to revitalize preaching and usher a congregation into a life-giving relationship with the God revealed in Jesus. This God is love and invites us into a mysterious loving relationship through contemplative prayer, worship, and love of neighbor. As one element in Catholic life, preaching spreads this divine invitation. But these positive theological statements need balance. God is merciful Father and compassionate Mother, but we can refer to God with apophatic words as well. To use the most radical and challenging statement of the apophatic mystics, God is nothing. Contemplation is sinking into this divine nothing. Even though preaching concerns the proclamation of the Good News of God’s love for us in Jesus, we can also say that preaching can evoke the divine nothing and subvert the idolatrous mind.

Appendix 1

Apophatic Sermons from the Ministerial Intervention

Apophatic Sermon 1: March 2, 2022—Mark 8:34-35

Mark 8:34-35 is found in the readings for the twenty-fourth Sunday of Ordinary Time Year B. There are also parallels to Mark 8:34-35 in the weekday gospel readings during Lent.

Jesus summoned the crowd with his disciples and said to them, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”

Everyone has their own god. Well, the ego has its own gods, and the ego is the self we THINK we are. Every ego has its own wholly fictitious god. We all have a focus, a goal, an ultimate reality for our lives that shapes our attitudes and behaviors. Our lifestyle and self-image have a strong connection to our image of God. Some want a God who is the ultimate safety net making sure no bad things happen to his worshippers. Fantasy! Some want the God of order, who’s in charge of the cosmos and always squashes chaos. Illusion! Some want a tender God of love to comfort them, make them feel good, and stroke their egos with assurances. Nope! That’s not God!

We think our understanding, our view, our image of God is the divine itself. But this is a lie! It may be one of the ego’s foundational lies. Because the ego forgets about

Mystery: God transcends our minds and our experiences. Words and images fail to express fully the divine reality. God is beyond thinking, feeling, experience, and being. And the ego cannot see that a true understanding of God comes through the cross, our own spiritual practice of taking up the cross of Jesus, which we do by letting go, surrender. To let go of the self is to let go of one's understanding of God; this is what it means to take up our cross.

But we should “remember that people who carried crosses in Jesus' day...were people on their way to a gruesome execution-their own. To ‘take up the cross’ is to choose death.”—Bonnie B. Thurston. Taking up your cross, denying self, losing your life all amount to becoming NOTHING. “Whoever becomes nothing for me discovers who they really are.”

Jesus commands us to deny self and lose our lives, to consent to becoming nothing because that is the God he reveals: the divine nothing. God transcends space. God transcends time. God transcends being. This is the God beyond God who is no particular thing. God is no-thing; God is nothing.

Close your eyes, be silent within, and listen: “God is nothing; God is nothing; God is nothing.”

A disciple came to a wise spiritual teacher and asked, “What is God?” The wise man replied, “Close your eyes and see for yourself.” Skeptical, the disciple shut his eyes. “But, I see nothing.” With a wild ferocity, the spiritual teacher whispered, “Exactly.” The divine darkness is superessential and beyond being: the mystery behind mystery, the mystery within mystery, the mystery beyond mystery. The mystery of the darkness of the

infinite Godhead is unknown and never was known and never will be known. God is unknown to Godself.

“God is Nothing” signifies: 1) God transcends existence and Being. 2) God is neither this nor that; God is indistinct. So, since God is Nothing, God is All. God is not a thing of this world but is indistinct from—identical with—all of creation. We are already one with God, but we do not know it. This is the good news: we are one with God. We are mystery at the core, too. The divine nothing is our very reality, but we don’t know it because we’re tied up with our own ideas, our thoughts; we are identified with our thinking.

God is nothing, way to God is nothing, daily dying and letting go. The way to the divine nothing is the way of nothingness. We let go, walk the path of nothingness, the cross to know oneness; since God is God, the nothing, the path is detachment from all that is not God, from everything.; let go of your ego—self-image and god-image—by surrendering to the unknown God in pure faith.

Dying to self lies at the heart of Jesus’ teaching. It is an oddly gentle invitation: let yourself go into God; relax into the warm mystery within you; let your very self dissolve into the void of godless nothing. Die, dissolve, disappear. It is actually rather simple - dare I say easy! In silence, in solitude, I let go of all thinking, all emotion, and all desire. I just drop the whole of it, allowing every psychological perception to fade away. It may still be there as background noise. That’s ok. All I do is let myself sink into the nothingness beneath ego, mental habits, fear, anxiety, depression, attachments, and even happiness. The mystery lies beneath all that, beneath my very self.

Release expectations, assumptions, the drive for perfection, any fixed ideas that stop the flow of divine love, relax your heart and let go of preconceived notions about how everything should be. Like clouds parting, revealing crystal clear blue sky, the divine nothing becomes real in ordinary, chaotic life as we let go of our ego.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Mk 8:34

Let yourself go, Free-fall into divinity.

No thought. No word. No feeling. No object.

Nowhere.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Mk 8:34

In the spacious expanse of God's nullifying Silence

Lies eternal bliss: Self dissolved—God reigning.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Mk 8:34

Surrendered in naked faith And barren love,

My "me" is erased; God's "his" dies.

All is vacuumed Into the divine void.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Mk 8:34

Now, infinite happiness!

The Negation of separation: Neither self nor God.

The two have become One Single One:

The Nothing.

Deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. Mk 8:34

Drop the I with all its labels, feelings, thoughts, identities; Let the who-you-think-you-are disappear in the divine nothing.

Apophatic Sermon 2: March 9, 2022—Matthew 5:3-10

Matthew 5:3-10 is found in the readings for the Solemnity of All Saints.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are they who

mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the land.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the clean of heart, for

they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are they who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Most of our interactions with reality—people, nature, the objects and experiences in our personal orbit—are filtered through self-talk. We are relating to our mental screen of concepts about someone instead of the real person before us. Our problems are almost always about our near-total identification with self-talk. We suffer from compulsive thinking. Addictive self-talk is a bunch of stories we create in our minds, which harden into an ego-knot. We continuously relive these mental stories, and they are unconscious. Self-talk: the conditioned content of my mind. It is self-hypnosis: unconsciously believing illusions. Fixated on our often-distressing thoughts and mental stories, we are prone to putting ourselves first and forgetting others—spreading our own unhappiness in the process.

The Gospel we just heard is the beatitudes, the start of the Sermon on the Mount. The first beatitude is an antidote to our addiction to thinking and a virtual summary of the whole of Jesus' teaching. Essentially, the blessedness of spiritual poverty means that happiness is the state of interior nowhere-ness, the spiritual state of nothingness. Blessed

(happy) are the poor in spirit (those who are in the state of nothingness), for theirs is the kingdom (the realization of the ultimate happiness of oneness with God). Here is the biblical background to *ptoches*—poverty, lowest poverty, those who literally have nothing.

Happy are those in the state of nothingness for theirs is the realization of oneness with God. *Jesus invites us to enter the state of nothing, a spiritual state of simple faith and not thinking.* We stop thinking and enjoy the bliss of the Nothing within. We drop our mental and emotional commentary and let ourselves go into the God beyond God.

When Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with “Blessed are the poor in spirit” he is saying that inner nothingness is key to living what his message. The ones who are nothing within already have the kingdom—in fact, they are the kingdom. The inner nothingness of spiritual poverty is absolutely essential for the teachings to follow on non-resistance, loving one’s enemies, letting go of anger, dropping fantasy, and being simple, humble, honest, open, and compassionate. From the infinite inner space, we can love our enemies, turn the other cheek in response to anger and conflict, set our hearts and our vision on nothing but God, see through our own motivations, be salt and light for the world.

In the middle of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches this way of silent prayer, the state of nothingness. He says, *Enter your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Abba in secret (Mt. 6:6).* Jesus invites us into an absolute silence: the silence of not thinking. We enter our inner room by letting go of our surface feelings and fleeting thoughts. We close the door to our inner room by letting go of self-talk. We pray to our heavenly Abba in secret by resting in nothingness by faith.

We close our eyes and simply let everything in our minds fall away, dropping all thinking. We relax into the divine silence. We let all thinking, all effort, all possessiveness dissolve effortlessly. This is, simply, very simply, nothing. You will be highly alert and aware but not thinking. Try it now...be silent within, stop all mental activity, rest in God....

This is to really accept God as Mystery—in the poverty of this little moment.

Transformation follows.

A busy corporate lawyer complained to a hermit that he was too busy to pray for even five minutes. The hermit sat in silence for a while. The lawyer started to get impatient, and then downright angry that the hermit wasn't replying. He had a meeting scheduled in a few minutes. Time is money, after all! Seeing that the hermit was not responding, the lawyer starts berating him. Insults and profanities fly out of the lawyer's mouth. Through it all, the hermit remains calm, eyes closed, silent, and smiling. Eventually, the lawyer notices the hermit's smile and stops his fury. He sits down and closes his eyes. After a few moments, he becomes silent within. Then, miracle of miracles, he smiles, too.

Essentially, this is contemplation, or what our culture calls "meditation"; It is a discipline we can practice at specific times, sitting. We sit up straight, close our eyes and sink into the Mystery for a few minutes. We can also practice the state of nothing as we go about our day. In this case, we never have to be concerned about always doing—that brings us into the future and out of the present moment. No, we only ever abide in the state of nothing, sink into the divine nothing NOW.

We gently release our thoughts and feelings until the Holy Mystery alone remains. It is a subtraction of everything particular and distinct: ego, self-reference, even distinction from God. By releasing our thoughts and resting in silence we are draining our minds of every mental attachment thing until there is nothing left but the divine nothing. All our thinking disappears. Recall: self-talk is mental identification with our thoughts, feelings, and stories—it is who I believe I am. Letting go of thinking, we discover true identity. For, in this spiritual state, the soul is one with the divine nothing. That is who we truly are.

And it is practiced with extreme gentleness. We let go of our interior dialogue as effortlessly as ice melts in the warmth of the sun. Our egos are evaporating like the melted water on an even warmer day, until, like Jesus, we are giving flesh to the radical self-emptying of divinity.

To pray contemplatively means sharing in the death and resurrection of Jesus as we remain silent in the incomprehensible mystery. For, contemplation is disidentifying with everything, all our addictive self-talk especially, while identifying with the Nothing. This is the deepest meaning of the cross: *When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I AM* (Jn 8:28). We identify with Christ Crucified by practicing spiritual poverty, by abiding in contemplative silence: nothingness. Then we will know absolute beatitude, the deep peace and pure happiness of being poor in spirit.

Apophatic Sermon 3: March 16—Luke 14:25-27, 33

Luke 14:25-27, 33, is found in the readings for the twenty-third Sunday of Ordinary Time Year C.

Great crowds were traveling with him, and he turned and addressed them, “If any one comes to me without hating his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple... everyone of you who does not renounce all his possessions cannot be my disciple.” Lk 14:25-27, 33

He made it. Trevor sat down in his chair of hand-crafted Corinthian leather, leaned back, and smiled. The CEO had just promoted him to vice-president. His career had finally paid off. Now he would make triple what he made as an associate, which was already in the six-figure range. Reveling in his new position and dreaming of the money he would be making, Trevor glanced at a photo of his family on his desk. He smiled again. His wife, Patricia, was a gorgeous woman who modeled to put herself through medical school. Currently, she was serving as the chief surgeon at the city's most prestigious hospital. Their children, Sally and Charlie, were constantly at the top of their classes. He felt tremendously proud of his family. He couldn't wait to tell them he was promoted and that they would be spending three weeks in Monaco to celebrate. Truly, Trevor thought, this is happiness. Hidden from sight, Jesus looked on, shaking his head over the sadness of Trevor completely missing the point.

The way our families raised us; the way everybody does it; the things everybody's craving; whatever captures the attention of the crowd—all this is called the conventional life; it's the satisfaction Trevor experienced in getting what he wanted.

But we will never know God—the good and gracious Oblivion of incomprehensible Love—unless we allow the conventional to fade away into nothing. Jesus is clear, give up what appears to us as so incredibly good—family, love, our life—because it can blind us and keep us narrowly concentrating on ephemeral realities.

God is nothing so the way to God is nothing, a way practiced by inhabiting the state of nothing, a state of not thinking and pure faith.

In our story, Trevor is enslaved; he's trapped in the way everybody does life: career, family, success. And Jesus looks on sad because life is not about that. And when we're preoccupied with the views and values of the crowds, we miss oneness with the infinite and absolute nothingness of God.

Conventional America is generally free of strife and hardship. Our comfort depends on what we cherish. Our lives take shape around values like success, achievement, stability, competition, and strength. Family values loom large. We are dazzled by celebrities. Perhaps the greatest value is economic, and at its core is the uncontrollable urge to make more money, to get more stuff, and to consume (the earth's resources and the poor be damned!). These are all unquestioned assumptions in our society. They are values we take for granted, deep-seated, entrenched possessions. But...

The inexhaustible nihility beyond all divinities surprises our conventional minds with its utter indifference to traditions we consider so important.

We bring this conventional mind into daily life: success-obsessed, oppositional, fearful, vexed by what others think of us.

When you find yourself trapped in this mind, this way of thinking, Jesus offers us a way out, a way into unimaginable freedom: Surrender! In prayer, give way to the divine oblivion, giving God a chance to shatter our staid, circular thinking and...

In the moment of gracious excess,

The mind is broken open

And is completely transpierced by

THE NOTHINGNESS WHO ABSOLUTELY IS NOT.

Apophatic Sermon 4: March 23, 2022—2 Corinthians 12:7-10

2 Corinthians 12:7-10 is found in the weekday readings for Saturday of the eleventh week of Ordinary Time Year II.

Therefore, that I might not become too elated, a thorn in the flesh was given to me, an angel of Satan, to beat me, to keep me from being too elated. Three times I begged the Lord about this, that it might leave me, but he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness." I will rather boast most gladly of my weaknesses, in order that the power of Christ may dwell with me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ; for when I am weak, then I am strong.

Humble, poor God, at home in littleness. I discover you in my mistakes, my failures, even my sins. I feel like weakness itself sometimes. But loved by you, humble God, beyond all calculation, all judgment. Is there anyone who is not all weakness? Therefore...

In failure, fall into the nothing, that is, stop thinking and rest in God in faith. Choose to fall back into nothing when frustrating situations happen, impatience arises, anger surfaces.

And rather than Almighty, God is revealed as the divine weakness.

This does not mean repressing negative feelings. FEEL them; accept them. But without identifying with them, which happens by sinking into nothing. It is inevitable that we mess up. Amazingly, God ever-so-tenderly rejoices in us even as we are stumbling and acting selfishly. Only descend into THE NOTHINGNESS THAT ABSOLUTELY IS NOT.

All is forgiven, wrapped in compassion. Just plunge into the endless mercy and abyssal love of the dazzlingly mysterious Trinity. After God tells St Paul the grace and love of the dark mystery is all he needs, St. Paul glories, “Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ” (2 Corinthians 12:10). Weakness is an experience of the nothing. Unbelievably, our brokenness can birth joy insofar as we lose ourselves in the nothing. In frailty, failure, and when everything is falling apart, the divine oblivion breaks through us.

The experience of feebleness and catastrophe is this breaking through and breaking down, wrangling ego from us to uncover the majestic barren spaciousness we are. We join the poor, weak God at the bottom, in the nothingness of pure poverty. Infinite Tenderness stoops to frailty, experiencing it along with us.

Don't listen to the many fallacious voices perseverating on success. There is wisdom in failure that only saints know. All praise to the Divine Darkness whose chaotic powerlessness disrupts the calculating, security-obsessed self-sufficiency of ego.

Prefer the small, the little—Become a little nothing, a weak nobody. The annihilated fool, celebrating his weakness, slides down his failures into the nothing.

Crib and Cross whisper into every heart

The secret lying exposed for centuries

But willfully cast aside by the mighty,

God is poor and weak, humble and lowly.

And rejected, beaten and humiliated.

No one wants the dilapidated divinity.

Hence the gospel begs us to become no one,

Unimportant and derelict.

But will we surrender and be

Debased in the poverty of the Holy One

Who ever-so-delicately implores us to

Glory in our inferiority?

The poverty of God:

Pure terror from which we recoil

As we claw for whatever portends strength,

As we greedily clutch at seductive power.

The cross, enduring it all, testifies,

Go down into lowliness and namelessness,

Be devoured by the weakness of God

In the eternal nothingness

Sparkling at the bottom of the soul.

Apophatic Sermon 5: March 30, 2022—Philippians 2:5-11

Philippians 2:5-11 is found in the readings for Passion Sunday Year B.

Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. Because of this, God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, of those in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Grow! Make more! Expand! Get bigger, better, bolder! Up! Ascend! Everything in our culture amplifies this message: climb the ladder of success, work hard, do it yourself, make something of yourself. This is the opposite movement of the Gospel, for Jesus did not climb a ladder of success but was nailed to a cross in weakness, failure, and godlessness.

Crucified and Risen, Christ models our spiritual journey: The self must vanish into the mystery of the Godhead. What does it take to follow the self-emptied Jesus?

Begin here...What do you deeply, frothily desire? Naught will give you fullness. Fanatical appetites desecrate the soul.

What do you cherish? Success and strength are no help, no gain. What do you treasure? Set your heart on the divine nothing.

You want fame, power, money? Garbage! Those who seek comfortable, privileged lives condemn themselves to ruin.

Cravings for wealth and power and status are as rotten as a putrefied corpse.
Ravenous greed, hollow and excruciating, horrifically twists the soul's infinite yearning.

Seeking a sterling reputation, the regard of those considered noble, blocks the knowledge of the infinite nihil.

Even if the heart still twists toward the paltry, intend the divine to jostle loose calcified desire. Smitten with more everyday concerns or desires small, one's spirit is equally drained.

Be eager, then, to surrender everything—all the world cares about for the delirious joy of realizing Luminous Nihilicity, which is the truest bliss, found within, the splendiferous silence of the God beyond God.

And there.... Just oneness with the Mystery, no cares or troubles, no preoccupations or concerns.

Unfazed by the ephemeral, the soul who has realized Luminous Nihilicity joyfully abandons the futile quest for happiness in things. Jewels, pearls, rubies, diamonds do not compare to the Eden of Emptiness discovered within. Yes, whoever enjoys the sweetness of the divine nothing within, drunk with joy, deserts all possessions.

So...do you think you've let go? You always have more relinquishing to do. Every now: descend; Consent to dying in the nullity, wanton in depth and regularity; unrelenting self-emptying in Christ. This is the trajectory of the life of Jesus: down, empty, annihilate, empty of all cravings and miseries and only the spaceless, timeless, immeasurable void remains.

Apophatic Sermon 6: April 6, 2022—1 Corinthians 1:18-31

1 Corinthians 1:18-31 is found in two consecutive weekday readings: Friday and Saturday of the twenty-first week of Ordinary Time Year I.

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the learning of the learned I will set aside." Where is the wise one? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made the wisdom of the world foolish? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not come to know God through wisdom, it was the will of God through the foolishness of the proclamation to save those who have faith. For Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, Jews and Greeks alike, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength. Consider your own calling, brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. Rather, God chose the foolish of the world to shame the wise, and God chose the weak of the world to shame the strong, and God chose the lowly and despised of the world, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who are something, so that no human being might boast before God. It is due to him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, so that, as it is written, "Whoever boasts, should boast in the Lord."

The divine plan is to reduce us to nothing so that our inherent oneness with God can be insuppressibly real for us. As Jesus was reduced to nothing on the cross, we also

must be reduced to nothing. We experience this reduction to nothing when faced with situations not of our choosing. In trials, disappointments, and weakness, will we be detached, rooted in the Divine Darkness? Without thinking of himself, Jesus submitted to his death on the cross. He knew his death was coming and, for God, with God, in God, he surrendered.

Keep in mind: this is an inner transformation; it does NOT mean accepting situations of abuse and then doing nothing to change them. Rather, we let our thinking dissolve and we remain in mindless oblivion. And, in moments of trial, defeat, weakness, when we are most prone to think of self, we fall back into the divine void, losing ourselves in its dark abyss.

It is in the messiness of plans going awry, dashed expectations, and things going wrong that oneness with God is realized. It all depends on whether or not I release myself into the divine right in the middle of these experiences.

So, the only thing that truly matters is to release the ego and simultaneously discover the divine nothing. This is what it means to walk the way of the cross. And it requires practice every single day, even every single moment. We have to let go, lose, as much as possible.

Now, neurologically, reacting to something, especially reacting negatively, reinforces neural pathways to the amygdala, which is the most primitive part of our brains controlling fight or flight responses. It's the fear center of the brain.

Detachment, however, reinforces neural pathways to the most evolved parts of the brain. Research shows that long-term meditators, pros at detachment, have smaller

amygdalas, which means fear does not control them. Even biology confirms those who lose, let go, detach are freer and more joyful.

The Gospel challenge, then, remains clear: We will allow ourselves to be reduced to nothing? For this to happen, we must find all our bliss in the nothing available right now, within me, my deepest me.

Apophatic Sermon 7: April 13, 2022—Mark 15:22-39

Mark 15:22-39 is found in the readings for Passion Sunday Year B.

They brought him to the place of Golgotha (which is translated Place of the Skull). They gave him wine drugged with myrrh, but he did not take it. Then they crucified him and divided his garments by casting lots for them to see what each should take. It was nine o'clock in the morning when they crucified him. The inscription of the charge against him read, "The King of the Jews." With him they crucified two revolutionaries, one on his right and one on his left. Those passing by reviled him, shaking their heads and saying, "Aha! You who would destroy the temple and rebuild it in three days, save yourself by coming down from the cross." Likewise the chief priests, with the scribes, mocked him among themselves and said, "He saved others; he cannot save himself. Let the Messiah, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe." Those who were crucified with him also kept abusing him. At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon. And at three o'clock Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?" which is translated, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Some of the bystanders who heard it said, "Look, he is calling Elijah." One of them ran, soaked a sponge with wine, put it on a reed, and gave it to him to drink, saying, "Wait, let us see if Elijah comes to take him

down.” Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last. The veil of the sanctuary was torn in two from top to bottom. When the centurion who stood facing him saw how he breathed his last he said, “Truly this man was the Son of God!”

After beatings, humiliation, execution, and divine abandonment, Jesus was left with nothing. No consolation, no assurances, no Abba in heaven. Here lies the dangerous memory of the Gospel.

SILENCE

As he dies, Jesus cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” This cry and its resulting death - shockingly - reveal God as *the godless nothingness*. The crucifixion is the unqualified negation of God. The broken, naked, dead body of Christ Crucified reveals there is no such “thing” as God. The cross unveils the godless nothingness. Jesus crucified is dangerous. For in the cross all our gods die.

SILENCE

Throughout history, the powerful have used God to bless war, greed, racism, sexism, and the sinful neglect of one’s neighbor. Not God! The cross radiates the godless nothing: God is not a thing we can manipulate to serve our own selfish interests. By knowing and even rejoicing in the godless nothingness, the ego’s various gods in need of appeasement—the gods of violence, greed, racism, sexism, perfectionism, legalism—disappear. Even more, our egos disappear, too.

SILENCE

Even more! There is no God as well as no self in the silence emitting from the cross. Both the separate God and the separate self die with Jesus on the cross. In truth and in practice, this means letting go of our thinking for that is where our false gods appear,

where both the ego and the separate God reside. In the silence one loses all sense of a separate self or a separate God: there is only godless nullity.

SILENCE

You must lose yourself in the nothing just as Jesus Crucified did. And, losing oneself in the mystery is best practiced by contemplative silence in which there is no thinking and only faith. Do it now. Close your eyes, let go of your thinking and rest in the love of the divine nullity.

To be crucified is to be reduced to the nothing beyond God as we disidentify with all mental content. With Jesus on the cross, we disappear into the nothing; we dissolve in the godless oblivion.

Apophatic Sermon 8: April 20, 2022—Mark 16:1-8

Mark 16:1-8, minus the eighth verse, is found in the readings for the Easter Vigil in Year B.

When the sabbath was over, Mary Magdalene, Mary, the mother of James, and Salome bought spices so that they might go and anoint him. Very early when the sun had risen, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb. They were saying to one another, “Who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance to the tomb?” When they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back; it was very large. On entering the tomb they saw a young man sitting on the right side, clothed in a white robe, and they were utterly amazed. He said to them, “Do not be amazed! You seek Jesus of Nazareth, the crucified. He has been raised; he is not here. Behold, the place where they laid him. But go and tell his disciples and Peter, ‘He is going before you to Galilee; there you will

see him, as he told you.’” Then they went out and fled from the tomb, seized with trembling and bewilderment. They said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.

Our faith rests on emptiness—the emptiness of the tomb in which Christ was laid. His body disappeared. No Jesus. Nothing. Even more, the Gospels never portray the most amazing, wondrous, and miraculous part of the story: The resurrection is never actually described! The Great Easter Proclamation: “He has been raised; he is not here.” Voided grave, the utter mystery about how Jesus was raised.

SILENCE

The emptiness of the tomb and the silence around the resurrection are very revealing. The empty tomb testifies to the void of godless nothing as our very life, our very reality. The silence around the Resurrection praises the glorious Nothing who raised the innocent victim Jesus. And yet.... The Risen Jesus appears to the disciples, and they are overwhelmed beyond measure with the mystery: an excessive presence within an incomprehensible vacuum.

SILENCE

The presence of the Risen Jesus so overwhelms the disciples because he is the Eschaton, a Greek word meaning “The End.” The Risen Jesus is the end or purpose of the whole universe; he is what life looks like fully consumed by, absorbed in, identified with the divine nothing.

SILENCE

The Resurrection means life is nothing but God. And the life we enjoy now shares in the resurrection when we let go, dying with Jesus, allowing ourselves to be reduced to

nothing. Like Jesus, we discover the nothingness to which we are reduced is the God beyond God.

SILENCE

The cross gives way to the ultimate truth: God is all in all. And then...and then! Everything becomes sacred. We see there is no secular, no world, not even a part of the world, that does not BURN with the incomprehensible glow of the divine gratuity. The Risen Jesus is the good news of God, the nothing, as all.

SILENCE

This is our destiny, our purpose, our Eschaton: A whole new existence erupts from within once the mind unfurls from thought to rest in the relaxed, released, unrestricted Vacant Silence alight with heavenly resplendence. The glory of the Eternal One wells up in the now of the resurrection, freeing us for a life brimming with bliss.

SILENCE

Disappear in the nothing and you will know peace, freedom, joy—nothing but God, nothing but the nothing. Such is the new creation: enjoying the divine nothing in everything and passing on this joy in love.

Appendix 2

Guidelines for Apophatic Preaching

1. Invite people into brief moments of contemplative silence while preaching
2. Go deep with one message: mine a passage for its spiritual depth regarding God as a mystery beyond the human mind and the practice of detachment, which a person practices by letting go of thoughts and feelings to pay more attention to God.
3. Preach apophatic themes such as detachment and mystery.
4. Read some sermons from the apophatic contemplative tradition, i.e., the sermons of Meister Eckhart, Henry Suso, or John Tauler.
5. Choose a contemplative prayer practice and do it every day.
6. Immediately before preaching, enter the contemplative state and be in the contemplative state while preaching.
7. Incorporate silence and pauses into the sermon.
8. Create a *mashal ayin*.
 - a. Use the *mashal ayin* to play with negative words, which are the favored words of the apophatic contemplatives. These are words like “darkness,” “emptiness,” “silence,” “nothingness,” and “oblivion.”
 - b. Repeat the *mashal ayin* throughout the message due to the unique language.

Appendix 3

Adapted Celebration of the Word during RCIA Catechesis

Silence

Proclamation of the Word

Silence

Apophatic Homily

Silence

Filling out Survey

Catechetical Topic of the Day

Appendix 4

Post-Preaching Survey

Survey for Apophatic Preaching

1. Did the preaching help you to experience God as a mystery beyond your power to reason? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
2. Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
3. Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
4. Did the preaching lead you to question how you understand God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
5. What was it like to hear the negative language (“nothing”) and negative images in the preaching?

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/QDJ32JQ>

Appendix 5

Post-Intervention Questionnaire

1. How would you describe your relationship with God currently?
2. What impact did the apophatic preachings have on your relationship with God?
3. What difference does understanding God as the divine nothing make to your relationship with God?

Appendix 6

Consent Form

I hereby grant permission to Louis J. Milone to publish my written and oral responses to the preachings during the RCIA classes held on Wednesday evenings in March and April 2022 on Zoom through the Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle in Washington, DC.

I understand that my responses will be used in a thesis for educational purposes. I also understand that my answers will be used anonymously. Additionally, I understand that my participation in the surveys will not affect my becoming Catholic. I further state that I have the right to grant or refuse this permission.

Participant Name (printed):

Participant Signature:

Appendix 7

Apophatic Preaching Survey Results

March 2, 2022—Apophatic Sermon 1: Mark 8:34-35

1 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It helped me connect with God in a very personal way that was beyond just a cognitive understanding...helping to see how God is there in a relationship for us

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Via understanding that this the cares of this world is passing away and to focus on the eternal not the empty worries of our flesh.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It was profound to realize that prayer has more than just a singular function but can serve a multitude of purposes such as letting go our burdens that we allow to keep of from focusing on Him.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. To understand that there is always a continued growth in Christ...not to be stale or lukewarm and except a stagnant understanding of God but to continue in understanding who the Father is.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was helpful. A contrast helps to understand what it is to be free. There is sin but the Good News is that we are saved and freed from sin through the Grace, the unwarranted love and mercy, of the blood of Christ. As where we should be condemned we are instead saved.

2 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, and it spoke to a thought/feeling I had been dwelling on recently.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

A bit jarring at first, but I was able to get into it

3 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by introducing a new perspective on God, the divine nothing.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, because God is nothing/everything.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

A little. I've had some experience with apophatic prayer.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Uncommon, but welcome.

4 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it helped me think about exploring the paradox of God as nothing and everything.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I particularly liked the thought of "putting aside the ego and taking up the cross" to become part of the divine nothing- letting go of the earthly concerns to be closer to God.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I would not say it changed as much as deepened themes I am already exploring.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I think I automatically resisted the negative language but leaned in to listen to it and felt it was useful to push me to consider the paradox further.

5 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No, but only because I already perceived God as such. It was good to have this concept put in perspective.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

N/A

6 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, going beyond things, and seeing nothingness as holiness.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, nothingness as a way to connect with God.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, that just feeling can be a connection with God. It doesn't have to be a logical thought building thing.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Kept my attention. My first impulse was to disagree, and I think there may be valid disagreements. But in the end the message made good sense.

7 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, that God is mystery beyond what we imagine God to be

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

yes. discipleship is following taking up our cross. of letting go of our egos

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Just emphasis on emptying ourselves

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching? different than my image of God that I have construed in my mind. Something to ponder more. God is nothing and also everything.

8 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - particularly the parts where you asked us to close our eyes and experience what you were talking about.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes! This is the first time i've heard that god is nothing. it reminded me of a guided meditation that i did last night

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No, I can't say i thought about prayer that much during it

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

no not really, but definitely liked the focus on letting go

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I like the juxtaposition of if God is nothing, he is also everything or all. I didn't really understand the "deny me" part though, I guess I would have wanted mor explanation there.

9 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It explored the mystery of God by showing the apparent contradictions on how to get closer to God: we need to die and let ourselves go in order to live a full life with God.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. The preaching contained concrete actions we can adopt: not identifying ourselves with our thoughts, desires, grudges; not holding on to our identities.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It made me think that the image of God in my mind is just an image, not actually God.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching? It was impactful.

10 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. By comparing my own actual notion of what God is and isn't against the divine mystery of God, the contrast became stark.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. The concept of the separation of my own ego as well as my notions of what I want God to be

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. I don't think prayer itself was a central focus but it certainly gave me things to reflect on regarding it

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It helped me realize that no matter what descriptors I give to God, they fall far short. He is indescribable.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
Counterintuitive at first, but they ultimately served the purposes well.

11 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, the idea of God being nothing is something I've never thought of, furthering the mystery of God.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It's tough to say if it has helped, but the preaching has given me a different perspective that I will need to think through more.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, my idea of God has never been crystal clear, but did find value in this preaching.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
Interesting - forces you to think about what you "know" in another light.

12 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Nothingness is certainly the greatest mystery that I think we have a handle on conceptualizing as part of the tangible world, and it helps to conceptualize the greatest mystery of all - God.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It helped me let go of my attachments and conceive of being connected to nothingness, which was liberating.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No, sorry if I missed something!

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. I conceive of God as a positive (affirmative) presence, not an absence, so this was different. I questioned whether, if God was nothingness, God could possess the affirmative qualities like being loving or wanting the best for us that I've always been told are a central part of who/what God is.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

This was hard. It made me feel scared and alone. It's hard to believe there's a person or presence that is God if God is nothing.

13 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I felt somewhat at ease knowing that God is a mystery

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I was feeling especially stressed when I joined the call from the car- I found it soothing and was able to “let go”

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes- that moment gave me stress release and reminded me how powerful prayer can be

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It was a gentle reminder of the mystery that is God

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I missed that part

14 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes! Discussion on letting go of mindset and things that define us as human.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

10000% by stripping us of our human mindset and application of who we think we are and how we define ourselves in such a limited and worldly way.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes because it allows us to see beyond what we want or think what we want here and now and put complete faith and devotion into God and what he wants as a far greater

calling than anything on Earth. Also filling out this survey helps a lot too because it allows for a different relationship with these thoughts than talking. Writing seems to be the most beneficial for me personally.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I think negative is human and natural. I think that hope is positive and through the negative we have to understand that through hope and faith in God... the negative is a human flaw.

15 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I am not sure. This type of preaching is a challenge for me. I haven't heard much of it.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, but this is the start of the start for me on this.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, this is a different form of prayer than I am used to. Seems more meditative.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I think I was more trying to find the chink in your armor.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
It is a bit jarring for me. Difficult to form opinions about nothing.

16 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It did. Sometimes it's hard to drop long-held images of God. That our lives are connected to how we see God and how we relate to each other, that we are also mystery because we share God's divinity provides much to ponder in understanding God as mystery

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It certainly did. The themes of dying daily, of dropping labels of self image, embracing the cross, dying to self require profound letting go. This is daily work, for sure.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. To go beyond words, thoughts, and even feelings to completely rest in the diving nothing can be challenging. However, the experience is richly rewarding.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. God as nothing (and yet everything) means I have to wrestle with paradox. Helpful points: God transcends space and time; image of the cross as both a vertical and horizontal; to see nothing when I close my eyes to picture God is "perfect" as the teacher in the story says.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It isn't new but it is a jarring reminder that carrying the cross, even for one's own crucifixion (at times), is a call to follow Jesus, to really BE in God.

March 9, 2022: Apophatic Sermon 2: Matthew 5:3-12

17 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, the nothingness subject really resonated with me as far as meditation goes.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It broadened the concept that I had of prayer.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Respondent skipped this question

18 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it made me realize that committing to go can mean praying in silence and not always typical prayers.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Letting go is important and goes along with mindfulness. In letting go, we are able to detach ourselves.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I used to think that prayer only meant bible reading and rosary.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

A deep realization in being more mindful and letting go.

19 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

not exactly.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

not exactly. I need to discern some more

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

not exactly

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not exactly. divine nothingness is a concept to contemplate

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
it is confusing and again to contemplate and meditate some more

20 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, God as silence

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, embracing silence

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, to appreciate silence

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not really

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Healthy for me

21 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Emptying my mind of affirmative thoughts helped me understand God as a mystery.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. LJ did a great job coaching the mental process of letting go of thoughts and anxieties.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It is extremely helpful to have a "negative space" available as a form of prayer when words or images are too distracting or as a starting point for that kind of prayer.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It helped me understand that I do not understand God! To some extent all of my images of God are my own projections and could be untrustworthy or unhelpful if I am projecting my own expectations onto God.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Very helpful today. Not challenging like last time.

22 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. I think because of the complexity within the preaching at certain points and our own history within our lifetime. For example the discussion regarding blessed are the meek,

for they will receive the Earth. The first thing that came to mind was the holocaust and the creation of modern day Israel.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes! I always have a history class right before coming to confirmation class and the history class tends to be taxing on me. The professor and students tend to be critical of conservative viewpoints, which oftentimes are the result of being pious or attempting to be moral and live to the standards of my faith. (I fail everyday)

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. I think that again breaking down the context and meaning of what the bible is saying in Matthew was helpful. Each morning I do a daily bible journal prompt and today it was about competition and comparison. Ultimately it discussed envy and jealousy, which is natural but can also be a sin depending on how you act on those emotions. Again, my history class highlights those behaviors throughout history, but also even in the behavior of classmates. Also, the journal prompt talked about being cognitive of having a grandiose idea of yourself and your life and that it is also a sin to make others feel less than because you feel you have a great life. I think that writing is always a great way for me to pray. I don't think that you need to just have thought or talk, but actually writing out prayers and then looking back at what you were struggling with and seeing where you are today can often times be proof of his guidance and miracles that are overlooked.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Because one thing that we often times look over especially when struggling with others is that they are children of God. I think it has also allowed me to let go over frustrations because being frustrated with someone else is being frustrated with something God created. So this goes back to the earlier question of letting go.

23 / 98

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
Realistic and humanizing.

24 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It is helpful to reflect on the beatitudes as a message about interior nothingness — and as an act of accepting God as mystery.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. New understanding of being poor in spirit as having nothing. The challenge is to let go of everything, even thoughts and even more challenging, to learn how to do so in going about my day.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I am reminded that silence, dropping all attachments, is what Jesus advises as the way to pray. What does it mean for me to go to my “inner room” to really rest in God’s love?

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It led me to question my understanding of the beatitudes which summarize the essence of who God is in relation to us.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Because I am guilty of addictive thinking, it can be difficult to accept that much of that thinking is not rooted in reality, that this compulsive pattern is really shutting God out.

The beatitudes also draw me to some of the harsher truths of life. But it's helpful to ponder that they are antidote to addictive thinking.

March 16, 2022: Apophatic Sermon 3: Luke 14:25-33

25 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
It can be jarring at first, but it taps into something I had already been thinking about.

26 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by removing materialism

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by leaving the material behind

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
Good because it was against materialism which is distracting when pursuing God

27 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by showing that my preconceptions and my own perceptions and attachments were limiting my access to God.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, the breathing exercise at the beginning and the scripture reading

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not today

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - it was helpful to think about God as not doling out material rewards for different efforts but rather as wanting us to renounce the pursuit of those rewards

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It made sense - but I didn't notice lot of negative images / language today.

28 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, because not following worldly success is against any logic by modern societal rules

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it remind me of the importance of God over all else

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

The negativity of going against worldly success was really impactful

29 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Each time I hear the concept of God as nothingness, it becomes easier to comprehend and internalize.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Absolutely, I appreciated the allegory and the connection to the interpretation of the passage from Luke

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It is building on how I am beginning to see prayer.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It underscores the concept that is already taking shape with each session.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It is becoming more comfortable because I am seeing the nothingness and everything as the same thing.

30 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by reminding me of God as nothing and all things at once.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, because in detachment and letting go there is freedom.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

The message reinforced some ideas previously held.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not quite question, but gave me a fresh take on a held belief; i.e., God as nothing/everything.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It's unusual to my ears, especially "God as nothing."

31 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not sure

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes would like some techniques if possible

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Respondent skipped this question

32 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. I liked the emphasis on God's indifference to so many of the markers of success we attach ourselves to.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It's easy to think about letting go of our sin and our hate, because we don't want those in our lives. Financial success and status are not so easily parted with.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, if tangentially. It provided a good and underrepresented topic of prayer but didn't discuss it directly.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, a bit. It can be easy to forget that the human understanding of success is quite different than God's definition of it.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I think the contrast between the 'perfect life' as we see it and what it can mean spiritually was an uncomfortable but necessary truth.

33 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I think the perspective puts us outside our normal experiences.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, but I think this is a mental exercise that I'm not used to.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. I am still questioning or making analogies to what I understand as prayer, however.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it is a bit different than the way that I usually think about God. I usually think of God as at least a voice.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

For now, it's new and a bit difficult to make sense of.

34 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it reminds me that God is above everything even what I think in my mind is most important to me.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I have a difficult time with caring what people think of me and this reminds me to let other's opinions of me go and focus on what God thinks of me.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, instead of praying for wants such as new clothes or a new car, I need to remember to pray only to become closer to God.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I understand and know God is everything and all I need- I just have to keep reminding myself of that.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It can be difficult- especially when I am forced to look inward and think about the negative practices I do that keep me away from God.

35 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, the mystery of God's nothingness pushed my understanding of God.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it helped me to let go slightly, but I would be more willing to let go of a lot more if I knew what it means to grab onto God in my own spiritual life.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It caused me to reflect on prayer as an openness or receiving of God in a new and radical way.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Definitely! I felt that by emphasizing the sort of vacancy in God was challenging because I normally see Him as overflowing.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was somewhat shocking. I thought that it could also be balanced out by adding positive images and language a bit more.

36 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

For sure, yes. Jesus' words sound harsh about what it takes to be his disciple.

Surrendering into nothingness is embracing mystery.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Hard to let go of the conventional values with which we have been raised and that dominate our societal values. To accept that these values cannot bring true happiness means a conviction that they are not God.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

To pray is to not bring my attachment to material and other forms of "success" into my time with God. I can be trapped in my mind and not really let go in order to experience God.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. God is separate from many of the things and values that we come to treasure and can treat as God. God requires complete emptying.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
Jarring but also familiar. Worth hearing again and again.

37 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Hard to explain how.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It did and it tied into some other things I've been trying to work on lately in terms of my thinking and prayer.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, in that expanded the ways I could approach prayer and incorporate it into my daily life.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No. I acknowledge that the messaging and imagery utilized with this preaching can be a little jarring at first, but I was able to "let go" and grow to appreciate it.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It seemed odd a first, but I was able to get into it, as it tied into some other thoughts I've been having.

38 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It puts God as a priority.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Putting God first will let it all go.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No....but it helped to remind me...very helpful

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No....but it did help to bring me back to focus on God

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It's good to contrast to help understand

March 23, 2022—Apophatic Sermon 4: 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

39 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It reminded me how God is beyond knowing; God is incomprehensible.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, looking inward and seeing the abyss.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

The message added to my understanding of prayer.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Unusual.

40 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, the mystery of nothing - what is beyond our reasoning

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by stopping thinking

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If

yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Good. It helps me realize, that in a way that I am not articulate enough to express,
nothing is something.

41 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or

no? If yes, how?

Yes, by exploring the importance of weakness

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If

yes, how?

Yes, by suggesting to let go by embracing weakness and failure

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No, but it made me think of how I see life

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If

yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was interesting to hear Weakness associated with God

42 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Somewhat, yes

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Deep breathing exercise with wording does help me let go

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I'm learning that prayer can be worded in modern ways that can be more relatable

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding

of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Respondent skipped this question

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I didn't care for the part about being small and a nobody (although I do understand how minute I am!)

43 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - my mind instructs me to seek to be more, not to diminish

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - images of letting go, surrender, oblivion

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - I see Him as a king, as all-powerful, as the contingency for being, so the idea that he is powerless and nothing is confusing

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

A little confusing; a little enlightening - definitely helps to let go of distractions of this world that get in the way of happiness

44 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. What is nothingness? It means becoming that very real something absent our ego...pride

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It's helpful to focus on the reality of issues that one faces...focus in the Light of God's answers

45 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, God is something that isn't physical, and we don't know what He looks like. He is a mystery.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, letting go of our earthly desires that cannot go with us into the Kingdom of Heaven.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, each time I hear scripture I understand him more.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It isn't a great feeling to look at ourselves and realize we are desiring things that are not God. We don't need anything except God.

Once we realize that, we become free and it is a great feeling.

46 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Made me dwell on the need to get outside my own thoughts and emotions, let them go, and bask in God's grace

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Made me think about the need to get outside my own head, let go of thoughts and emotions, acknowledge them and move to be calm by giving it up to God.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Can incorporate some of the positive aspects of meditation.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I've gotten used to it.

47 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, gave me a different view and way of letting go.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It is weird to hear a prayer with that type of language.

48 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, as always. The mystery of the trinity, if finding the “sparkle” at the bottom of nothingness

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Takes profound letting go to not focus in hallmarks of success, to release the needs of the ego.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Praying as resting in faith requires complete surrender. Hard to feel the feelings of a without getting hooked

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Good to be reminded through teaching and life if Paul that we can be content with weakness.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

That Id has "been there" in weakness, rejection, etc

49 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I am trying to understand god even more so on a spiritual and mental sense.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I would say so as I am currently working through things at work and interviewing for new roles. With rejection comes the idea of trying to let go and sink into the "nothingness". Also comes with gratitude.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it is emphasizing that sometimes closing your eyes and seeking "nothing" can be the best form of prayer.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I believe that God is innately born with the ability to let go and be unbothered by nothing. I believe having the ability to do this, is in a sense doing God's work.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

No negative language or images this time.

March 30, 2022—Apophatic Sermon 5: Philippians 2:5-11

50 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

N/A

51 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not tonight

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - the comparison of the trajectory of the gospel to that of our culture (material ascent)

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

A little stressful but illuminating

52 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, to stop caring about material rewards

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Good, it made me think about not holding material goods in such high regard.

53 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it was a good reflection on priorities.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, more not focusing on worldly success to such an extent.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I got a different message.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Respondent skipped this question

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I think it is important to be aware of the negative to know what we are saved from

54 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes! It's always a good reminder to understand that nothing here on earth we are taking or promised in heaven.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Understand yes...but this is something I continue to work on daily as it's easier said than done.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not necessarily.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No. I think in other conversations we have had and this is not a new conversation that essentially suggests that God doesn't care how much you have but more so who you are

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I think it's always good from a realist perspective!

55 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes,

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I didn't hear much negative language in this preaching

56 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it is always a great reminder to hear how infinite He is.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I need to remember to let go of my worldly desires and just focus on God

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not really this week.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, because he is so infinite, I don't think we will ever really understand Him but we need to put all our focus on Him.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Hearing that success and money will get us nowhere is true but always hard to hear. That is what everyone is striving for, but it is meaningless.

57 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

somewhat. God emptied himself completely and died on the cross for us. yes.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It is about being detached. you can practice a vow of poverty and hold on to a pen. or can be rich but detached to ones wealth

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?
no. Ultimately as we journey -- it is understanding and letting go of our self will/ our egos. so we say our fiat.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

no not exactly.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
confusing frankly.

58 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It challenged me to see God as a mystery which makes us gain even when it seems like we are loosing.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Perhaps not so much as it was focused more on the theoretical rather than the concrete practical ways to let go.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It could have helped me to focus more on concrete aspects of prayer by challenging me more.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It did by the comparison of gain and loss and how in God this is more complex than an equation.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I felt somewhat uncomfortable, because I feel like if God is just emptiness then what do we gain? I feel like He has to be more than that.

59 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I think so. Or at least, it helps contrast with the tangible world.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, but this meditative format is still new to me and it's a little difficult to adjust.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

The message about leaving aside desires is helpful in thinking about my life right now.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, but questions were popping into my head about what are good and proper desires versus desires that should be left aside.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It's calming, but maybe not yet very comforting. It seems like a God that is a bit impersonal.

60 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It did, as always. The way of Jesus doesn't seem to fit life as I often experience it.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Letting go for me requires continual work/ helpful to be asked what I treasure and what it will take to be like Jesus.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It seems that much of prayer is an act of letting go, going beyond physical, material, emotional needs to connect with what my soul yearns for.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

These preachings have reminded me to go beyond my earlier and even ongoing understanding of God — as self-emptying, redefining “success.”

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Always troubling to hear that there is such a high standard for truly letting go.

61 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Helped to remind me that God is all

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Letting go means becoming more one with God

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Reminded me to give my concerns to God

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes...in that my understanding can be based on my understanding when God wants me to get his understanding

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Good question...it helped me understand the contrast of the things we chase after and the better has for us. I think the idea, I think you said nihilism...what do you mean?

62 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

No

63 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. The concept of the “Divine Nothing” as you put it, but I think there is something to your hypothesis. Parts of it resonate with thoughts I have been having.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It’s a practice I’m familiar with, but this is the first time I’ve heard the concept of applying it to prayer.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Helped me understand very new (to me at least) approaches to prayer that I’d like to explore

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I wouldn't say it changed my understanding of God, but expanded the way in which I can better communicate with God through prayer and my thought process.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
Jarring at first but I've gotten used to it.

April 6—Apophatic Sermon 6: 1 Corinthians 1:18-31

64 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Nice meditation about being reduced to nothing.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, in that God is beyond understanding

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

A bit confusing.

65 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by letting go and being grateful for it

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by comparing letting go to being my true self with God

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by it being more about meditation and not just dialogue

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Good, allowed me to appreciate letting go.

66 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I like the idea of detachment.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not necessarily - I think it will help me focus and try to make sure I am detached when I pray.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
It helps give a different perspective.

67 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - the idea of dissolving into God in times of stress, drawing strength from the absence of an ego that can be wounded

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - encouragement to meditate with fact on the size of amygdalas in "pros at detachment"

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Very interesting to hear the negative language from the Bible (Corinthians) - helpful to understanding what is worth accumulating in this life

68 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. God is omnipresent thus is always there to be connected to

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes...fear keeps us from letting go...letting go helps us get rid of fear...

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes...or a reminder that prayer is a letting go...giving my burdens to God...

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was helpful

69 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I think all these are helpful. However, my wife was breaking up so I did not (sadly) get to reflect like I normally would

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it made me think about the power of prayer more

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It built on my current understanding

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not specifically

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Respondent skipped this question

70 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I found it challenging because it was so abstract.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

There were a couple of practical examples

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not so much

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Respondent skipped this question

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Challenging because I think of God in more positive terms

71 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I need to learn to let go and put my trust in Him which is scary because He is a mystery.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, like meditating, I need to focus on trusting God and letting everything else go.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, prayer can be silent, meditative but it can also be actions. Simply letting fear and anxiety go can be a form of prayer.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, but I still don't understand Him. It is so simple to let go and put all my trust in Him but I still know so little about Him.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It makes me question at what time did we all favor the wealthy and those with material goods versus the needy that Jesus favored.

72 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Sure did. To become lowly, reduces to nothing in order to be one with God through my inherent divinity is hard

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Sounds like it's an everyday thing that requires practice.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

If like Jesus I could see the differing ahead and pray in such a way that I am anchored in God, does require a different level of praying

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

How to find bliss as you describe it does challenge my understanding of God

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

To be in "mindless oblivion" is a challenge

73 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Sure did. To become lowly, reduces to nothing in order to be one with God through my inherent divinity is hard

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Sounds like it's an everyday thing that requires practice.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

If like Jesus I could see the differing ahead and pray in such a way that I am anchored in God, does require a different level of praying

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

How to find bliss as you describe it does challenge my understanding of God

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

To be in "mindless oblivion" is a challenge

April 13—Apophatic Sermon 7: Mark 15:22-39

74 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Respondent skipped this question

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Respondent skipped this question

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer?

Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Respondent skipped this question

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Respondent skipped this question

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was very startling to hear God discussed in negative terms.

75 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, he is in the quiet

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, to appreciate letting go

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it doesnt have to be a diologue/monologue

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Not sure it resonated. Saying Godless and there is no God was not affirming.

76 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Thinking "beyond the events and worries of the past day," practicing letting go ahead of the preaching

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - breathing/meditation exercises

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - someone who is not there (???)

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I don't know that I was on board for the disappearance into "Godless oblivion" or the idea that God is not there (even though tied to the idea of no separation, it makes sense)

77 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, it does help me experience God as a mystery beyond my own understanding because it makes me think more deeply.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

The whole tact of preaching does help me understand the practice of letting go because it pushes me to think about the nothing.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, the call for contemplative prayer is helpful and the practice is useful

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No, because I think of God as "everything" rather than nothing

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was hard for me tonight to hear the negative language because I have been thinking so much about the fullness of faith in God and the concept of nothingness feels more like a world without God

78 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, meditating and focusing on God always helps me understand Him a little bit more.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, letting go of false gods and earthly desires to focus on God, the only thing that matters.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, prayer doesn't have to be so formal. It can be silence and meditating.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Hearing about Jesus being crucified is always sad because I know he died for our sins and yet I still sin.

79 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I was about confused about how God was being referenced to the cross.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It's different. I was having trouble following how God was portrayed throughout the preaching.

80 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. It helped to actualize God in my life by letting my worldly concerns go

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes...God wants us to let go to go to Him

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No but it helped me to remember where my focus should be

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

NO

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was convicting...Christ died for me.

81 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. By focusing on letting my thoughts go, it allowed me to just feel my surroundings and sit in my space which I found took me to a

place of gratitude - like how crazy it is that I am even here, that God created me.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - it made me feel a sense of calm. I still slipped a bit and started thinking about other things here and there and think you could

throw in some other tactics like a body scan to help with

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If

yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I found that it made me feel gratitude for Jesus, I didn't feel that the negative language made me feel negative

82 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or

no? If yes, how?

For sure. To go beyond a sense of abandonment to experience rest in God's love is mystery.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If

yes, how?

To let go as Jesus had to do on the cross — no Abba—that is letting go that requires practice.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

To pray that all the self serving gods that rule my days be replaced with a God of nothingness is a new way of praying.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If

yes, how?

Yes. I have work to do.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

No Abba. Complete separation. Hard message.

83 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes! Because the preaching talked about how God had left Jesus in the context of his abuse and crucifixion.... I think in this case it was more of the Holy Spirit because of betrayal. I have a hard time thinking that God wasn't present because God is always present, we choose whether or not to engage or see him.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

By letting go to surrender yes.... to surrender my attempts to control situations and to have faith in God to show me the path. To also let go of others behaviors and actions

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

NA

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes in terms of the holy trinity. I think sometimes personally I feel that one is stronger than the other at times but that they're all one in the same and they're inextricably

connected. I think when we say the Lord's Prayer this is amplified too because we talk about how Jesus descended into hell and rose. Hell was his torture here on earth and in that...he couldn't see God which is why I think tonight's passage talks about how God left him

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?
I'm an optimistic person who happens to live in Washington DC. It doesn't bother me.

84 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Language used made me think about creating a mental vacuum consisting of nothing except faith.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Made me think about a new form of prayer that entails emptying my mind

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Made me think about coming to prayer in a certain mental and spiritual state.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was even more jarring this time than in previous sessions. I think it was because the imagery involved the crucifixion, which wasn't the case before

85 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Language used made me think about creating a mental vacuum consisting of nothing except faith.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Made me think about a new form of prayer that entails emptying my mind

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. Made me think about coming to prayer in a certain mental and spiritual state.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was even more jarring this time than in previous sessions. I think it was because the imagery involved the crucifixion, which wasn't the case before

April 20—Apophatic Sermon 8: Mark 16:1-8

86 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

yes by invoking thought

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

yes, by being relaxing

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

no

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

no

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

honest

87 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by letting go

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, by putting it in biblical context

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, in letting go

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It was helpful and more spiritual

88 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I knew God was everything, but I didn't think of Him as nothing as well

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, leave everything behind and bask in his nothingness

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, meditation can be a form of prayer

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, see my answer to question 1

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Good, it always makes me question God more which brings me closer to Him

89 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

The idea of nothing is something I am conflicted over, that will require a deeper reflection.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

It's always challenging, but in a good way that forces you to think in another perspective.

90 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, reminded me of God as greater than the greatest of all.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, hearing the words 'nothing' and 'nothingness' repeated helped drive home the idea of letting go.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Uncomfortable.

91 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

yes I found myself questioning the awe of the resurrection, and feeling the mystery, what those who entered the tomb must have felt

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

yes, the idea that this is our purpose or this is our end, that this is exactly what we're supposed to be doing, helped me feel at ease with letting go

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

no

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

no

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I didn't really pick up on much negative language in this one

92 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - through the idea of the eschaton (the end) - interesting to think of apocalypses as the final and complete joining with God, instead of something to fear

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - through the breathing exercises and the instructions to let go

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes - the "godless nothing" caused me to question my understanding of God as a presence

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I did not enjoy the phrase "godless nothing"! It was scary and lonely. It's probably not how I will think of God in the future.

93 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Confusing and I question it.

94 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

yes. It helped me feel more connected to God. Nice job, LJ.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I really enjoyed this one, LJ. Letting go and being one with Jesus. This one really clicked with me tonight as I was entering the class with a bit of anxiety. this one really helped me relax.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

yes, the language really spoke to me.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

The preaching strengthen my understanding of God.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I must have missed the negative language as I was a little late.

95 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I understand that letting go help shed new light and the practice helps.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, I see prayer differently now.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, in many ways.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I understand the concepts.

96 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It is helpful because it encourages me to think in a different way about God.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

After several preaching segments, I am understanding the practice a little better. It is still difficult for me.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

It continues to be more meditative. I do not think about any particular point, so afterward I don't go back and ponder on any particular point.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

I tend to think of God in concrete terms, so this preaching does lead me to question or to evaluate more closely my assumptions about God.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I find the negative language to be peaceful, but not very warm and loving.

97 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes, the concept of nothingness

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

No

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

Respondent skipped this question

98 / 98

Q1 Did the preaching help you experience God as a mystery beyond your mind? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes.

Q2 Did the preaching help you to understand the practice of letting go? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. I'm now trying prayer in which I empty my head of all thoughts and feelings about anything else other than God.

Q3 Did the message change the way you understand prayer? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Yes. As I noted in my answer to #2, I'm now trying out prayer in which I empty my head of all thoughts and feelings about anything else other than God.

Q4 Did the preaching lead you to question your understanding of God? Yes, or no? If yes, how?

Not tonight.

Q5 What was it like to hear the negative language and negative images in the preaching?

I liked how he closed the circle tonight, brought it all home by explaining how his message about the divine nothing and emptiness relates to the crucifixion and resurrection.

Appendix 8

Post-Intervention Questionnaire Results

1 / 1—April 25

Q1 How would you describe your relationship with God currently?

Great and growing...because of Him. All glory to the father.

Q2 What impact did the preachings have on your relationship with God?

Profound.

Q3 What difference does understanding God as the divine nothing make to your relationship with God?

Understanding God as a not a thing...He created all things and is thus not a thing. . .is to understand I am beyond anything that can separate me from the Love of God. And God being omnipresent, is always there "in the still small voice" that is never blocked by a thing.

1 / 1—April 29

Q1 How would you describe your relationship with God currently?

I see God as a parental figure and a friend. I feel God's presence in other people and in the beauty of the rest of creation. I speak to God and think of Him/Her listening and caring. At church, I feel particularly connected to God through the support of the faith of the community and through the formality and activity of the liturgy. I feel disillusioned

and angry at God when I feel my prayers are not answered and when I see evil and suffering in the world. I question sometimes whether God exists and feel He/She helps me answer that question in the affirmative over and over through different ways (guidance from mentors/spiritual leaders, reason/logic and scholarship of the Church, music, charismatic encounters).

Q2 What impact did the preachings have on your relationship with God?

The preaching helped me practice letting go of worldly anxiety that interferes with my relationship with God or that God wishes me to let go. The preaching gave me concrete strategies to, on a more regular basis, "have no anxiety at all" and approach "the peace surpassing all understanding." The descriptions of God as weak, powerless, and wounded helped me build on an important insight from the last year, learned from St. Francis of Assisi: not only do I not need to be anxious about worldly successes (health, glory, wealth) to have a meaningful life, but I follow the example of God when I disregard those things. The preaching also helped me conceptualize that God is not just an affirmative presence, but, if He/She is infinite, He/She may contain nothing as well as something. In this way, the preaching destabilized my ingrained understanding of God as resembling us (i.e., the white-bearded man in the sky), which was both scary and liberating. It made me desire a new understanding of the way in which we are "made in his image and likeness."

Q3 What difference does understanding God as the divine nothing make to your relationship with God?

See answer to number 2. God feels more accessible in all moments because I may get closer to Him/Her simply by breathing deeply and sloughing off my anxiety-- a practice that is also just good for my wellbeing! This gives me another way to answer yes to the

question of God's existence, since Zen-like practices of letting go fulfill some of the promises of the Bible. On the other hand, I feel I understand a little less what God looks like and worry I am entering nihilism when I think of God as an absence rather than a presence. I am less sure of the existence of an afterlife when I conceptualize God as the divine nothing.

Bibliography

- “About Us,” Contemplative Outreach, <https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/about-us/>.
- “About the WCCM,” World Community for Christian Meditation, <https://wccm.org/about/>.
- Anonymous. *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Edited by James Walsh, SJ. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1981.
- Barber, Daniel. “Commentarial Nothingness.” In *Glossator: Practice and Theory of the Commentary, Volume 7: The Mystical Text*. Edited by Nicola Masciandaro and Eugene Thacker, 47-71, New York, NY: City University of New York, 2013.
- Bellinger, Karla. *Connecting Pulpit and Pew: Breaking Open the Conversation about Catholic Preaching*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014.
- Blumenberg, Hans. *Paradigms for a Metaphorology*. Translated by Robert Savage, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Crossan, John Dominic. *This Dark Interval: Towards a Theology of Story*. Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 1988.
- Eckhart, Meister. *Meister Eckhart: Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises, and Defense*. Translated by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn. NY: Paulist, 1981.
- _____. *Meister Eckhart: Teacher and Preacher*. Edited by Bernard McGinn with the collaboration of Frank Tobin and Elvira Borgstadt. NY: Paulist, 1986.
- _____. *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*. Translated by Maurice O’Connell Walshe and Bernard McGinn, New York, NY: Crossroad, 2009.
- Falsani, Cathleen, “For millennials, mysticism shows a path to their home faiths,” National Catholic Reporter, April 24, 2019, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/millennials-mysticism-shows-path-their-home-faiths>

- Franke, William. *On What Cannot Be Said Vol. 1: Classic Formulations*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007.
- Gaunt, Thomas P., S.J., Mark M. Gray, and Michael J. Kramarek. "Faith and Spiritual Life of Catholics in the United States." Georgetown University, Washington, DC: Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, November 2021.
- Haas, Alois. "The Nothing of God and its Explosive Images." *The Eckhart Review* 8 (Spring 1999): 6-17.
- Henry Suso: The Exemplar with Two German Sermons*, Translated and edited by Frank Tobin, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1989.
- Hirshfield, Jane. *Nine Gates: Entering the Mind of Poetry*. NY: HarperCollins, 1997.
- _____. *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry*. Newcastle: Bloodaxe, 2008.
- Johannes Tauler: Sermons*. Translated by Maria Shradly, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1985.
- Johnson, Elizabeth. "The Incomprehensibility of God and The Image of God Male and Female." *Theological Studies* 45 (1984): 441-465
- Jonker, Peter. *Preaching in Pictures: Using Images for Sermons that Connect*. Abingdon Press: Nashville, TN, 2015.
- Lanzetta, Beverly. *The Other Side of Nothingness*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2001.
- Lord, Jennifer L. *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech*. "Elements of Preaching," Edited by O. Wesley Allen, Jr. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010.
- Loser, Freimut. "Poor Eckhart?" *Medieval Mystical Theology* 21.2 (2012): 193-213.
- Marguerite Porete: The Mirror of Simple Souls*. Translated by Ellen Babinsky, New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1993.
- McCabe, Herbert. *God Still Matters*. Edited by Brian Davies, OP, New York, NY: Continuum, 2002.
- McGinn, Bernard. *The Flowering of Mysticism: Men and Women in the New Mysticism: 1200-1350*, New York, NY: Crossroad, 1998.
- _____. *The Mystical Thought of Meister Eckhart*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001.

- _____. *The Harvest of Mysticism in Medieval Germany*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2005.
- _____. *The Varieties of Vernacular Mysticism*. New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2012.
- Meister Eckhart and the Beguine Mystics: Hadewijch of Brabant, Mechthild of Magdeburg, and Marguerite Porete*. Edited by Bernard McGinn, 65-86. New York, NY: Continuum, 1994.
- Milne, Joseph. "Eckhart and the Question of Human Nature." *Eckhart Review* 8 (Spring 1999): 17-28.
- Pasquarello, III, Michael. *We Speak Because We Have First Been Spoken: A Grammar of the Preaching Life*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009.
- Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite*. Translated by Colm Lubheid. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1987.
- Pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite: The Divine Names and Mystical Theology*. Essays and translated by John D. Jones. Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1999.
- Radler, Charlotte, "Living from the Divine Ground: Meister Eckhart's Praxis of Detachment." *Spiritus* 6, Issue 1 (Spring 2006): 25-47.
- _____. "Losing the Self: Detachment in Meister Eckhart and Its Significance for Buddhist-Christian Dialogue." *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006): 111-117.
- Rahner, Karl. *Nature and Grace: Dilemmas in the Modern Church*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1964.
- Sells, Michael. *Mystical Languages of Unsayings*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1994.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poetry and Prose*. New York, NY: Library of America, 1997.
- Tamburello, Dennis. *Ordinary Mysticism*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1996.
- Turner, Denys. *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Untener, Ken. *Preaching Better: Practical Suggestions for Homilists*. New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1999.
- Wallace, James. *Imaginal Preaching: An Archetypal Perspective*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995.

“Who We Are,” Center for Action and Contemplation, <https://cac.org/about/who-we-are/>.

Wisdom of Ben Sira. Translated by Patrick W. Skehan. Introduction and commentary by Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Anchor Yale Bible* 39, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE AUTHOR

NAME	Louis J. Milone	
BORN:	4 April 1981, Rockville Centre, NY	
EDUCATION:	Chaminade (NY) High School	1995–1999
	Siena College, Loudonville, NY —B.A., Religious Studies	1999–2003
	Washington Theological Union, Washington, DC —M.A.P.S.	2005–2007
	Aquinas Institute of Theology, Saint Louis, MO —D.Min.	2018–2022
MINISTRY:	Director of Faith Formation St. John the Baptist Catholic Church Silver Spring, MD	2007–21
	Director of Faith Formation Cathedral of St. Matthew the Apostle Washington, DC	2021 –
PRESENT CHURCH RELATIONSHIPS:	Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Washington, DC	