

David Schnasa Jacobsen and Robert Allen Kelly. *Kairos Preaching: Speaking Gospel to the Situation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009. 176 pages. \$18.00

The title is entirely too modest. Far more than a bag of tricks or even a rite-by-rite list of tactics and techniques for preaching at various situations, a.k.a. “special occasions,” it is, as the authors themselves suggest, a *kairos theology* which has serious and lasting implications for preaching. In their words, “Our goal here is to help you to understand the gospel that you preach theologically.” Maybe more than helping us to understand the theology we preach, they propose and work from their own theology. This does not mean they do not allow readers room for different points of view, but this is not a theology-neutral book. The authors want preachers to be thoughtful theologians, not people who merely crank out an endless stream of shallow reflections for popular consumption. It is not until the Appendix, however, that the authors begin to look at the actual construction of the sermon or homily.

The opening two chapters introduce the reader to the undergirding theology that will inform the rest of the book; first their understanding of the gospel and then, in chapter 2, their understanding of context (“enduring social, cultural, and political features”) and situation (“a moment of crisis that evokes a sense of limit/finitude or calls forth a decision”). It is a through-going, unabashed “Lutheran” (both teach at a Lutheran seminary, although one is not Lutheran) approach with occasional references to non-Lutheran but relevant and resonant sources. The gospel, they insist, is not a “problem/solution plotline” but a “promise from God that always invites us into a faithful hope that requires theological reflection.” Critical theological presuppositions include first, that “the doctrine of justification offer a word of radical grace in any context and situation;” second, that the word of the gospel is *extra nos* or “outside of us;” third, that “justification by grace through faith is a matter of divine promise and always has an eschatological shape;” and finally that the doctrine is not just *pro me* (“for me”) but *pro nobis* (“for us”) and *pro aliis* (“for others”). As an aside, the frequent use of Latin theological phrases does little to help make the authors’ case, although it might accrue greater pedagogical merit in, for example, a systematic theology class.

The remaining chapters examine several situations for preaching and follow a similar structure with a theological discussion, followed by one or more “commonplaces” or *topoi* that one might employ, which are further delineated with implications of each commonplace. Chapter 3, on preaching at funerals, will be pretty familiar stuff for most seasoned pastors/preachers but a fine and deeply thoughtful introduction for seminarians. The rest of the chapters are far more provocative and would be excellent reading for those desiring a deeper, more global, considered theological approach to preaching for weddings, stewardship, injustice, and public crises, with a chapter on each. The chapter on weddings, for example, discusses social and cultural issues around concepts of marriage. They enter the risky realms of same-sex marriages, which are legal in Canada where they teach, and the common but unexamined concepts of marriage that have been shaped by the consumerism that pervades our culture. The final chapter is more open-ended. Here the authors really push the preacher to not settle for the thin veneer or overused clichés that one often hears on these occasions. There is a distinct prophetic slant to their discussion.

I can imagine the book being essential reading for a seminary class learning about preaching at the several occasions addressed in the book. It would also be a beneficial read even for veteran preachers who may have inadvertently settled for a thin veneer of trite theology manifested in fervorism and moralisms, which fail to equip assemblies to move forward in their

relationship with God. The authors are not bashful about specifying their theology, a theology with its implications that, I suspect, not all readers would agree with. Fair enough. If readers are at least pushed to examine and then become more conscious, conscientious, and precise about the theology which informs their preaching, that may well be good enough. At least it would be a good start.

Rick Stern
Saint Meinrad School of Theology
Saint Meinrad, IN