

Stanley P. Saunders. *Preaching the Gospel of Matthew: Proclaiming God's Presence*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010. 312 pages. \$24.95.

This commentary on Matthew completes a fine series on the gospels by Westminster John Knox Press. The author seeks to unpack an extended narrative originally performed by an inspiring storyteller and heard by listeners susceptible to its spell. Our text is a dried up transcript, not a living narrative. An oral performer must breathe life back into it if it is to draw the listener into a new experience of the world as well as instruct the mind. (xiv)

The Gospel of Matthew was first told in a time of upheaval not very different from our own. In a time when people are desperately trying to secure traditions and institutions that are slipping out of our grasp, this gospel draws us into a marginal world and into the presence of a man who points us to a God who is at work in surprising people and reconfigured structures, restoring creation even while powerful forces are tearing it apart, uniting people in the midst of divisive violence. (5) How can Christian communities today offer themselves to be trained into a trusting faith in a God who reveals to us a new vision for and a new perception of what appears to be a broken and hostile creation? That is the challenge extended by the Gospel according to Matthew to every Christian lectionary preacher when Year A stretches out ahead of us. (34-35) And Saunders' guidebook to this gospel consistently and incisively calls us to and assists us in this vital task.

The vitality of the Gospel of Matthew lies in the questions it raises that engage listeners and readers in messy but adventuresome dialogue. The foreignness of the particulars, combined with years of familiarity, often fog the images and muffle the penetrating rhetoric that can stun us once again when the atmosphere clears. Saunders' exegesis restores the Gospel to its original vividness and power through a combination of standard exegetical resources skillfully employed and critical questions raised with the help of apt analogies between our world and the world of the Evangelist.

The major question Saunders keeps pointing to through the entire commentary is the question of power. The question is raised by the permeating motif of the "kingdom of heaven," explicitly or implicitly sounded throughout the Gospel. For modern readers the translation "kingdom" for *basileia* obfuscates the macro target of Jesus' mission and message. This target is not the private world of the individual seeking escape from the rough and tumble life stirred up by the powers of this world (47), as is often the goal of Christian readers, but the very public world of the Roman Empire that structured the day-to-day struggles of the people of Jesus' day. (xviii) Regrettably the powers of empire continue to generate and structure the turmoil and struggles of people in our own day. The "kingdom of heaven," more appropriately translated "empire of heaven," that is the center of Jesus' preaching and work, is a direct and comprehensive challenge to those powers. Saunders calls Jesus "the poet laureate of God's empire." (30) Throughout this gospel Jesus opens for the reader a response to those powers radically different from the response they seek and demand through "its power to free its auditors' imaginations from the limitations of their everyday assumptions about the world and to open eyes and ears to the reality and nature of God's reign." (30) In the Beatitudes, for example, Jesus "describes the subjects of God's empire, their experiences and stations in life, and the ways they are affected by and engage the broken world around them." (31-32) The key to preaching these words of Jesus, which in the eyes even of many Christians are "impossible, impractical, and foolish," is "to discern what kind of community these blessings call into being. . . They are rooted in a radically different perception of the world." (34) A second and very

different kind of example is the story of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem. Saunders describes this as "a form of 'street theater'" by which Jesus is parodying the grand processions of every empire from Roman victory parades to the Soviet-era May Day reviews to U.S. inaugural celebrations, all of which call out the military as symbols of national pride and power. Jesus' Palm Sunday procession mocks these political rituals "by which rulers paint their empires in divine hues." (209) Matthew's absurd picturing of Jesus riding both the donkey and the "colt of a pack animal" is Matthew's way of imaging Jesus' messiahship – the donkey being associated with the coronation of kings – as a messiahship exercised in his identification with the lowly – the pack animal being a beast of burden.(208)

This theme of "empire," that is, of the comprehensive world system that claims our loyalty and within which we order our everyday lives, is the bedrock of Saunder's interpretation of Matthew's gospel. It is not a tiresome ideological framework into which he presses every text. It is rather the broad horizon of Jesus' mission in the light of which the entire Gospel makes most sense. Jesus came to challenge the empires of this world with the empire of God, which much of the time functions with a very different system of values. The Gospel as a whole "explores and maps these 'in-between' times and places for subsequent generations of disciples" (5) – like ours!

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