

Alyce M. McKenzie. *Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010. 180 pages. \$16.95.

In her latest work, Alyce McKenzie combines the insights of creative writers and teachers of preaching and then applies them to the task of preaching. She uses their observations to fuse together two homiletic horizons - reason and experience - that are typically pitted against each other. For McKenzie the two should not be considered opponents but partners in the practice of preaching. This volume is about cultivating the discipline of imagination in a way that brings reason and experience together in order to create synergy in the sermon. The book itself witnesses to the power of imagination as McKenzie invites her readers to imagine attending a writers' conference (chapters one through four) and later a chefs' convention (Chapter Five) as a means of gleaning fresh insights into the art of sermon preparation. She divides the book into two parts with three chapters each. Part One, "Cultivating the Imagination," investigates the art and discipline of attentiveness. Part Two, "Shaping the Sermon" implements the principles discovered in Part One to the task of sermon writing.

Chapters One and Two are primarily devoted to developing the habit of attentiveness, what McKenzie calls a "Knack for Noticing" (16). She imagines us as readers attending a writers' conference. One of the goals of the novelist is to observe life and people. The novelist takes what he or she sees and shapes it into a coherent whole for people whose identities are fragmented by social media, like Facebook, and who are accustomed only to thinking in episodic terms. Preachers can learn much from novelists about helping congregations fashion a cogent Christian narrative of their lives.

Fiction writers enable preachers to better notice people, events, and experiences around them, seeing them through fresh eyes. From them preachers learn to pay attention to random images, thoughts, and insights that enter their minds. McKenzie calls these "floaters," stray impressions and casual thoughts (19). A preacher's job is not to find ideas; it is to recognize them when they show up. Novelists let stories emerge from the raw material and experiences of life rather than create them (14).

The last half of Chapter One and all of Chapter Two are devoted to identifying and describing nine types of floaters. McKenzie assigns Chapter Three to offering suggestions for heightening attentiveness, learning how to observe, and the practice of journaling.

Part Two focuses on shaping the sermon. Initially McKenzie offers advice from creative writers about how they structure narratives. She imagines asking them how they would advise preachers in the weekly struggles of writing sermons and how they would go about overcoming four fundamental obstacles preachers typically face each week. These four obstacles include 1) "The sermon that is *coherent and entertaining but lacks depth*," 2) "The sermon that *tries to teach, but is incoherent*," 3) "The sermon that is *coherent but boring*," 4) "The sermon that, while it may be interesting and teaches people something, *offers false teaching*" (48).

After listening to advice from fiction writers, McKenzie takes us to a "Sermon Chefs Cooking Convention" where we sample eighteen different sermon forms (Chapter Five). She sets each sermon form in the context of a chef displaying his or her cooking tools, ingredients, and recipes. We listen to the tips each sermon chef has to offer. As we do so we are listening to homileticians summarize their models through McKenzie's eyes and words. We sample sermon shapes from chefs like Fred Craddock, Tom Long, David Buttrick, Linda Clader, Frank Thomas, Eunjoo Mary Kim, and Patricia Wilson-Kastner. While a good overview of sermonic forms, the

limitation of this chapter is that there are so many to choose from and the samples of each are so small that it is difficult for readers to digest all of them.

McKenzie concludes the book by letting the reader feast on a sumptuous meal of a few samples of her own sermons, eight in all, six of them preached between 2003 and 2007. These are sermons preached “without benefit of the specific insights of this book” (117). While they do offer good examples of a number of the insights she gleans from fiction writers and contemporary preachers, it would have been helpful to include two or three sermons that intentionally implemented those insights.

McKenzie is at her best as she integrates into the craft of preaching insights from novelists and teachers of preaching. These insights are undergirded by a healthy worldview from wisdom, which emphasizes the value of observation and experience. The imagination she employs brings an invigorating freshness to the practice of preaching that generates enthusiasm for what preachers do. McKenzie continues to produce quality resources for preachers and teachers of preaching. The present volume is proof of that quality.

Dave Bland
Harding University Graduate School of Religion
Memphis, TN