

Thomas H. Troeger. *Wonder Reborn: Creating Sermons on Hymns, Music and Poetry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. 224 pages. \$24.95.

Of interest to preachers, hymn enthusiasts, liturgical planners, and students of Jewish-Christian heritage, *Wonder Reborn* is a welcome addition to the broadening resources for sermon creation. Thomas H. Troeger offers 18 short sermons as he reflects on scripture in tandem with religious poetry, hymns, and music, always mining the theology of the art presented. He treats such works as *midrashim*, explications of biblical truth, keeping tradition and context in tension.

When we ponder sermons from different decades and circumstances, we encounter different theological understandings of the Word of God. When we encounter music in worship (with or without text) originating in different decades, countries, and authors, we engage a myriad of interpretations of theologies related to gospel, God, Spirit, and Christ.

In his latest volume, *Wonder Reborn*, Troeger explores what he names as our “primal identity as musical creatures,” (Thomas Troeger, 80) and asks who will call us back to this identity.

He cites Eugene L. Lowry who has likened preaching to a work of music in the ear of the listener, moving as it does through time, often progressing “through conflict to resolution.” (84) In a similar way, he draws upon a concept developed by Evans Crawford: homiletical musicality, (85) with reference to the shared attributes of timing, variety in delivery, tonal shading and so on.

These analogies assist Troeger to describe ways in which godly wonder can be reborn through renewed attention to the place of beauty in worship and preaching. He defines godly wonder as “a state of prayerful astonishment awakened by the Spirit of God through the experience of beauty.” (xv)

With colleague Don Saliers, Troeger recalls that “Christian theology has shown a long and studied ambivalence toward human aesthetic capacities, especially towards the relationship between art and religious faith.” (10)

He contends that “the Word of God is far more than ‘message’ . . . the ranking of language and music, one over the other, results in a constricted understanding of the Word of God.” (82) He turns to songs, poetry and instrumental music as resources for the homiletical exercise.

Troeger draws on the ancient tradition of rabbinic *midrash*, a concept rooted in the history of biblical interpretation that allows for multiple readings of scripture in light of contemporary life (32). To regard hymns as *midrashim* supports the notion that what matters to the gathered church is not so much the literal Word, but “the subliminal contact with the holy through hymns and religious music, pictures, bibles, crosses, candles and objects. Thus use of hymns in sermons can connect with people’s spiritual commitments and energies.” (30) God is experienced through symbol and re-presentation. For Troeger, this process invokes the precedents of *Haggadah*, a form of *midrash* that interprets passages of Hebrew scripture that is not legal in character. (33)

Modelling his own template, Troeger includes sermon extracts as he comments on full-scale works as well as solo arias, instrumental music, and, for the most part, well-known hymns. To capture the scope of what is being advocated in preaching based on works of sacred music, he coins the term “theomusical” as applied to homiletics, following the lead of Amos Wilder. (91) Advocating for generous inclusion of all the arts, he writes in his reflection on Rom 8: 26-27:

“To have the experience of being moved beyond language is essential to claiming our full humanity. Language carries with it the dangerous illusion that we can control reality through what we say and write, that if we can just find the perfect words, we will catch in our language the reality we have encountered. . .the church has long had a ‘theology of the Word,’ . . .but we need as well a theology of sighing, a theology of sound...sound is more primordial than language, it is what first reaches the heart.” (88)

Hymn writers and librettists have always responded to the environment in which they write, reinterpreting inherited themes. As such, they handle *midrash*, commenting freely in word and in sound as theological paradigms shift over time. Commenting on the interaction of poetry writing and preaching in *The Hymn* (July, 1998, Vol.49, No. 3), Troeger wrote: “The truth should sound fresh but be resonant with what we know from tradition.”

Ways to disclose truth by including the beauty of the arts is enhanced impressively by the standards detailed by Troeger. By expanding our supply of *midrashim* from the arts, we realize that wonder **can** be reborn. In exploring the ‘soundscape’ of faith, his writing truly lifts the soul.

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