

Rosalind Brown. *Can Our Words Express Wonder? Preaching in the Church Today*. Norwich: Canterbury, 2009. 190 pages. \$22.99.

Rosalind Brown, a graduate of Yale Divinity School, currently serves as Canon Residentiary at Durham Cathedral in Durham, England. Brown's purpose is not to break new ground in preaching. Rather it is to provide a primer accessible for beginning students of preaching. She understands the purpose of preaching as enabling people to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. Psalm 137, from which this image comes, is used as a kind of lab along the way to demonstrate different phases of the sermon preparation process.

Chapters Two and Three in the book offer an overview of preaching, devoting brief paragraphs to the major characters in history over the first two millennia. Throughout the first two millennia, rhetoric was the primary discipline upon which preaching depended. Brown identifies the radical shift that began to take place in the seventies when the new homiletic made its debut. The shift moved the sermon from a thesis delivered to a passive audience to a shared journey led by the preacher.

Chapter Four addresses the character of the preacher. The sermon flows out of the life of the preacher. Thus "every sermon is the product of a lifetime" (41). "It is not stretching the point to say that preachers are not called so much to preach sermons as to live lives which nurture and bear witness to the words they say in the pulpit" (44). Since who we are is an essential component of preaching, self-disclosure plays an important role. The question is not whether or not we should disclose but rather the extent to which we should disclose. While we reveal God's grace through our lives, that does not give us "license to drip-feed enough material over the weeks for people to construct our life history" (51). Brown also devotes a chapter to developing creativity and imagination in the sermon and another to understanding preaching in the larger context of liturgy and in the context of a variety of biblical genres that demand different styles or voices of presentation.

Chapters Eight and Nine look at the practical dimensions of sermon preparation and delivery for the beginning preacher. They also serve as good reminders for seasoned preachers. Chapter Eight begins with preparation that starts three weeks in advance and moves to the point of a few days before the sermon. Here Brown uses Psalm 137 as an example of how to walk through the phases of preparing this psalm for a sermon. In Chapter Nine Brown focuses on three major components of the sermon: introductions, conclusions, and illustrations.

Chapter Ten speaks to delivery in the pulpit by giving very practical suggestions about voice, posture, and the use of pulpit. She offers the important advice of seeking the feedback from a friend who, with tact, can honestly reflect on the preacher's delivery. The fundamental characteristic of good delivery is to have confidence in what we say and how we will say it. The book concludes with a manuscript sermon Brown preached on Psalm 137.

Brown speaks to some practical issues along the way over which homileticians often debate. Regarding PowerPoint, she concludes that it "rarely belongs in preaching" (141). The reason: ". . . it distances people from the immediacy of oral communication since both preacher and people focus on the screen rather than each other and thus miss a mutual encounter in the presence of God" (141). I agree preachers misuse PowerPoint more often than not but PowerPoint is not going away anytime soon. Why not teach students how to appropriately use it? She also speaks of the importance of illustrations but appears to have more of a deductive sermon in mind as she describes their purpose: 1) illustrations *serve* the point (167) in contrast to illustrations embodying the message and 2) two illustrations are ample for any sermon and frequently one is

enough (168). A broader understanding of how illustrations can function would better serve readers. She addresses many preachers' fear of using the pulpit, thus the desire to step out from behind it and get closer to the audience (180). She argues that the pulpit can serve an important purpose in the delivery and reception of the sermon.

During the process of writing this book, Brown was surprised to discover that "rhetoric came more and more to the fore as an essential element in preaching" (*xi*). She advocates the need for preachers to have a better understanding of the classical rhetorical tradition (12). I would also add that it would have been helpful for the book to give some attention to how contemporary rhetoric informs our understanding of the decision making process and how humans first filter their reasoning skills through their emotions and experiences.

Brown is to be commended for her desire to address the task of preaching holistically rather than simply as technique. Preaching takes place in the context of the rich preaching tradition we have inherited and under the influential discipline of rhetoric. It is situated in the context of liturgy. It finds its different voices based on the biblical genre out of which one preaches. Ultimately sermon preparation is about the preparation of the preacher's preparation. Her approach brings a new appreciation for and rigor to the task of preaching.

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