

Ruthanna B. Hooke. *Transforming Preaching*. New York: Church Publishing, 2010. 152 pages. \$16.

*Transforming Preaching* is written with Episcopalians in mind: it is for lay and ordained preachers and persons preparing to be preachers in the Episcopal Church. Yet this book is also a gentle and important offering for all preachers, teachers of preaching, and those entering the preaching life. Through this book Ruthanna B. Hooke contributes the volume on preaching for a new series, *Transformations: The Episcopal Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, James Lemler, Series Editor. Also included in this series are volumes on vocation, evangelism, congregational life, getting to know the Bible, leadership, Christian formation, worship and stewardship (*viii*). Hooke has the aims of the series in mind when she says that she writes to address “the sense of crisis in the church today, a crisis that challenges the church’s life and practices in ways that have not been challenged before” (2). Hooke also aims to speak to what she calls the “perennial” serious difficulties that preachers face. Both current challenges to and perennial difficulties of preaching are not limited to any one denomination.

In the five chapters of *Transforming Preaching* Hooke essentially works in three movements. The first movement extends through the first two chapters and is focused on questions around authority, authenticity, transparency, and performance of the preacher and the sacramentality of the preaching act. Because of this focus readers can place this book in the same cluster of homiletical works of the past decade that focus on incarnational aspects of preaching: the preacher’s voice and body in service of the preaching event.

In this first movement Hooke lingers over different fears of preaching. She names what is always named, the fear of public speaking, but shifts perspective to examine fears as they exist in relation to the weighty claims the church has held and does hold about preaching: it teaches faith, it is a means of grace, it serves the church. Then she spends time with homiletical fears in relation to self-disclosure, authenticity, and authority. These sections are full of care, grace, and insight. For instance she challenges the debates about self-disclosure in preaching that focus on whether or not it is appropriate for the preacher to tell personal stories. She instead moves preachers to question whether or not personal stories “reveal or mask the preacher’s true self” (11). With similar insight Hooke spends time teasing apart the notion of authenticity noting, for instance, “authenticity is something that is within us, but it is also established relationally” (14). In the last part of this movement Hooke explores how God is present in the preaching act by comparing preaching to the sacraments. In this section she takes up concepts of transparency, presence, and performance. The reader senses that she is lifting these concepts up to a light to see what else can be said of them.

The second movement of the book is a section that profiles preachers in the Episcopal Church. Hooke interviewed these preachers who differ from each other “in race, gender, geographical location, and types of congregations served” (47). We hear about members of one congregation who tell their preacher not to focus so much on God, we hear about one preacher who positions himself for one or two forty-five minute sessions of meditation for “spiritual readiness,” and we hear about a preacher who does not think that God is active and present in preaching. Eight accounts support Hooke’s claim that we need not be alike in our approach to or manner of preaching.

The third movement of the book is a movement back to the body. Hooke spends time exploring recent methods for vocal training that emphasize freedom of breath in order to free one’s voice. The reader then moves to a section on yoga in which Hooke makes associations between asanas (postures) and bodily expressiveness in preaching. Hooke then describes ways to

perform Scripture texts and practice improvisation as means of creating connections with texts, insights for sermons, and exploring the practice of being present and responsive to the demands of the preaching moment. The book concludes with a set of questions for each of the five chapters.

The gift of this book rests on Hooke's obvious care with all that is at stake in learning to preach, with having courage to preach, and with all that keeps one able to preach. Hooke lifts up aspects of preaching and turns them slowly and mindfully in order to find what needs to be said. And so we find a gentle and steady engagement with our preaching fears, our creative processes, and the importance of our bodily selves for this sacramental act.

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