

Fleming Rutledge. *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament*. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 2011. 421 pages. \$30.

I admit to a certain reluctance easily to embrace books of collected sermons. My reasons for this are complex. Sermons are after all a kind of “throw-away art,” speaking to a certain time and place and to a very particular assembly. None of these factors are ever repeatable; hence, these addresses, however potent and eloquent, run the risk of irrelevance in new times and locations. Indeed, some of the sermons in this book are fully forty years old. Also, as a preacher I might either be jealous of the greatness of the sermons or furious at their inadequacies, thus tempted to steal or trash them as the mood strikes. But that may be no bad thing . . . the stealing, I mean, (with credit publically offered of course!), less so the trashing, of which I propose to do little. Finally, having published a few of my own sermons, I genuinely admire someone willing to share a near lifetime of proclamation, knowing that on occasion the dud will surely show up.

Fleming Rutledge has published several books like this one over the long years of her preaching ministry, both as parish pastor and as free-lancer in ministry. She has long been recognized as a premier purveyor of the spoken pulpit word, and a reading of this new book will do nothing to minimize that reputation. Here we find fifty-five sermons, based directly, or sometimes less so, on texts from the Hebrew Bible (she on the other hand prefers the traditional “Old Testament,” after consulting “several leading Old Testament scholars from our major seminaries” who “unanimously expressed preference” for that terminology [11]. I would suggest that other scholars of the Hebrew Bible would demure.) She introduces the collection with a very brief series of answers to serious questions about the use of the Hebrew Bible in a Christian pulpit, focusing on the “significance of the Old Testament,” the “theology of the Old Testament,” the “necessity of knowing the Old Testament for knowing God,” concerns about “divine agency,” “fear and love,” among a few other topics. This introduction comprises only twenty-six pages, so the insights are necessarily minimal, yet valuable in the main.

The meat is however in the sermons, and as one can always expect the collection is mixed in quality. Rest assured, however, the duds are decidedly few. I found the sermon, loosely based on Exod 3:1-6, “Does God Need a Name,” peculiar, since it really does not speak of that great passage much and heads off toward a rather diffuse discussion of the names of God. This is to this reviewer ironic, since I find the announcement of YHWH to Moses from the bush less of a gift of God’s name than a refusal to give Moses one at all. But that may be my own idiosyncratic reading of the famous text.

On the other hand, “The Bloody Passageway,” based on Gen 15:1-18, is beautifully lyrical in language, and deeply insightful theologically, as Rutledge finds here a sign of God’s own vulnerability in entering into this covenant with Abram alone, while Abram does nothing to earn it but has merely to witness and accept it. I did, however, find the ending of this sermon overly traditional with its talk of “Christ’s blood” leading us to “the promise of eternal life and a celestial inheritance” (53). Given the serious theological work that is being done on the problematic notion of the “atonement in the blood,” I wonder how she might preach this text now.

Two sermons offered on Job back-to-back are attempts to deal with natural disasters, one preached in New Orleans some eighteen months after hurricane Katrina and a second preached on Nantucket Island, the scene of centuries of weather and sea-related disasters. The first, “What Job Saw,” does a good job of removing any sense that the ancient book tries to answer questions about the origins of evil, whether natural or human, and focuses sharply and lyrically on God’s

revelation to Job and the changes that wrought in him and can bring to us. The second, “The God of Hurricanes,” I found less successful, claiming again and again that what we learn from Psalm 29 and Job is that God is a God of power and that what we must do when we learn that is to “put your hand in the hand of the man from Galilee,” the final line of the sermon (174). I found this deeply unsatisfying, both theologically and pastorally. One can learn much more from Job than the simple fact that God is powerful. No one, Job nor his friends, ever deny that. The question is just what sort of God this is and how is that God’s power deployed. Rutledge quotes Bill McKibben’s small study, *The Comforting Whirlwind*, in both of these sermons. A more careful reading of that book, and others, could have taught her that God reveals to Job that the universe is not quite as he and his friends (and we) imagined it to be, and it is that fact, more than the sheer fact of God’s power, that brings Job to his speech in 42:1-6. Oddly, Rutledge calls McKibben’s book “marvelous (though admittedly tendentious)” in the first sermon (166) and a “wonderful little book” in the second (167). Can a book be both marvelous and wonderful and tendentious at the same time?

Rutledge is definitely worth reading, and she surely can write excellent prose. I have spent my own scholarly life reflecting on the use of the Hebrew Bible in the Christian pulpit. It is a pleasure to read someone who has actually tried to do this and has done it with grace and imagination. I commend these sermons to you and urge you to follow her lead into the rich fields of the First Testament (or whatever you prefer to call it).

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