

Luke A. Powery. *Dem Dry Bones: Preaching, Death, and Hope*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012. 153 pages. \$18.

Imagine a dreary Monday morning. In three different offices a Baptist preacher, a UMC minister of music, and an Assemblies of God pastoral counselor decide to go net surfing on *Amazon* for something that will take the chill out of the air, and/or their ministries. What book might breathe new life into bodies of Christ that sometimes resemble zombies? *Dem Dry Bones* is the answer that Powery offers to those charged with the task of preaching, music, and pastoral care. This is the second in a series that Powery calls “traces of the Spirit”(ix) and the promise that this book offers is to hear the stirring of the bones, as he leads the reader into the valley of the shadow of Ezekiel 37 through “imaginative spiritual exegesis”(126). This valley of dry bones is a root metaphor for those who witness physical, spiritual, cultural destruction and yet hear the Spirit say, “Live.” This book explores a deep grammar in African American history, music, and preaching through spirituals and sermons of those who stand at the edge of the grave and praise God.

Here are voices stirring in the shadows of prosperity preaching’s whitewashed mausoleum. Powery uses the words of “unknown, black-bard musical preachers” to articulate hope, and celebrate the Light of Light through preaching a Christology that must be in intimate relationship to Death in order for resurrection to be fully realized. He positions the reader/believer at the edge of the chaos and destruction that is razing the church’s once-firm foundations, yet often goes unnamed on Sunday morning. Powery uses African diasporan cultural resources to demonstrate how an Ezekiel community can faithfully preach and sing and bring the bones to life through loving attention, imaginative relationship with scripture, and resurrection intentions. He structures old songs into “textual hermeneutical bridges” that offer connections to music and theology, pastoral care, and preaching. His writing enables those who appreciate the musical inheritance of spirituals to recognize also the ethical challenge they offer to a death-denying culture. The sung sermon, the preached song is presented as a powerful means of grace for singing, proclaiming, and embodying the word of resurrection in this deadly time.

Powery defines the task of preaching hope as central to the preaching the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. “Spiritual preaching is unashamed of a Christocentric gospel (Rom. 1:16) that preaches the dying of Jesus and his rising . . .” (91). Hope is the song that the church sings and the preacher preaches. It is a joyful response to the tension-filled truth of our lives, which is always limited and broken, and nonetheless bears the imprint of the holy. In this spiritual preaching we are sustained by the Word of a living God, and the Spirit. Hope becomes a call and response sung by humans to God and to each other, sustained by the communion of saints and all creation.

Powery’s fourth chapter focuses on the sermon preparation process and his approach critically examines *how* scripture is used in crafting a hermeneutics of hope. He dismantles a literalism that leads to bibliolatry. “Clearly, declaring ‘the Bible says’ is not enough to proclaim hope to those who are dying in the valley of life” (106). This is an unapologetic argument that the gospel that liberates requires preaching based on the Story, not literally tied to the text. It is here that Powery’s guided discussion questions will be most helpful to use in congregational or academic settings.

In the concluding chapter, Power reinforces his reliance on Christian musical theology as the power for proclaiming hope at the edge of the grave. He writes specifically for preachers, but

also for the wider Christian community of the baptized. He confesses that writing the book emerged out of a cemetery and ends in the same location, the edge of a grave, but the funeral is now for Death. Death is personified, dressed out in the fashion of our time, yet ultimately expressed in Pauline theology. Powery reframes Tom Long's second use of death, the capital-D Death, "a mythic force, the enemy of all that God wills for life" (135), to express his understanding of the "little deaths" that we suffer communally, socially, personally in our lives. These are the deaths that create the zombie zones, the communities of the walking dead, but Powery does not question that spiritual preaching has the power to alter that condition. "The hope of preaching is death, the death of Death Thus, whenever a preacher enters the pulpit, he or she is preaching Death's funeral" (134). May this be so!

His opening affirmation of the importance of the listening to the voices of unknown black-bards that continue to prophesy to our own time stirs a question to be explored by those who read this text searching for the resurrection he surveys. What of those congregations, those communities where preaching is not formed by this core of musical theology? Can it be learned? Is it right to "borrow"? Is it a practice that can be learned by spiritual discipline? The gathering force of world music from indigenous Christian communities brings theological and ethical dimensions to the discussion. In the ancient songs inscribed in Paul's writings we can hear again this affirmation of preaching, death, and hope expressed in the sound of the faithful: "Alleluia"!

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