

Karyn L. Wiseman. *I Refuse to Preach a Boring Sermon! Engaging the 21st Century Listener*. Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2013. 128 pages. \$17.

In this volume Karyn Wiseman explores different ways preachers can enable their preaching to connect with the congregation. She identifies several resources one can develop including the integration of storytelling, the development of creativity, the use of images, and employing the constructive use of social media and technology.

In chapter one Wiseman reminds preachers once again of the power of storytelling. Storytelling enables sermons to connect emotionally with listeners. She offers several suggestions for enhancing the telling of stories. One is to work at telling stories in a non-linear manner. For example, tell the story from forward to backward or use flashbacks “. . . allowing our listeners glimpses of where our stories are going and then leading them back to the beginning . . .” (26). Other suggestions include contemporizing biblical stories and creating participatory stories that encourage listeners to fill in the details.

Chapter two investigates ways of enhancing the preacher’s creative abilities. Creativity often lies dormant within the preacher. Wiseman gives several suggestions for activating those creative juices such as avoiding perfectionism, taking risks, finding a sacred space in which to work (a walk in the woods, listening to music, etc.), giving oneself permission to fail, and giving oneself permission to feel frustrated. She also offers creative suggestions for rewriting a text or a biblical narrative.

Chapter three explores the value of images. Images, she maintains, must be concrete. In addition, preachers must use images appropriately. Don’t develop a “kitchen sink” sermon where the sermon is cluttered with images (71). To make sure preachers appropriately use images, Wiseman calls on them to ask important questions like does it make sense with the text you are using? Does it make sense to listeners? Is it legal to use it? Could it be offensive to anyone? One key is to identify concrete images within a text and then ask: Which ones would work in your context? With which one would your congregation most easily identify?

Chapter four looks at the roles social media plays in enhancing the preaching and worship event. Wiseman refers to Leonard Sweet’s acronym, EPIC (Experience, Participation, Images, and Connection, 83). These are four ways of engaging the congregation. Social media can assist in activating these four avenues. Wiseman, however, also acknowledges that social media can leave out some members. Looking for ways to include these members is important.

Chapter five addresses the use of visual technology. She traces how her congregation managed the pros and cons of using a screen in worship and negotiated the resistance they faced through the process. She concludes the chapter by sharing websites where one can go to find helpful video clips (108). Each chapter, except for chapter five, ends with a section she calls “Things to Try on Your Own.”

In this book, Wiseman taps into her experiences as a preacher, pastor, teacher of preaching, and family member to provide practical advice and wonderful examples of the principles she sets forth. She invites us into her family experiences to demonstrate how she created imaginary stories about Fred the Duck for her nieces. She discloses many exercises she conducted in classes with her students. And she reveals the conflicts she experienced in the local parish to enable her sermons to connect with the congregation.

I would choose a different title for the book. Initially it caused me to approach it with reservation. Refusing to preach boring sermons left the impression that the preacher’s primary job is to entertain. Even though I may do all I can to refuse to preach a boring sermon, I have little control over listeners’ responses. They are the ones, not I, who decide whether or not the sermon is boring. Wiseman acknowledges that boredom is often in the eye

of the beholder and the ear of the listener (13). So is the ultimate goal of preaching to avoid boring the audience? Actually Wiseman expresses it best when she speaks of the need for preaching to “connect” with the audience (14). At the end of the book she also emphasizes this perspective when she exhorts preachers to, “Help your listeners hear your sermons better by engaging them concretely . . .” (115). Wiseman writes in a way that engages the reader, offers creative insights, and provides concrete exercises and examples of the ideas she shares. Wiseman does what she wants preachers to do, and that is to connect with their listeners. This book connects with both preachers and teachers of preaching.

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