

Paul Scott Wilson. *Preaching as Poetry: Beauty, Goodness, and Truth in Every Sermon*. Nashville: Abingdon, 2014. 157 pages. \$18.99.

Nowadays it is hard to imagine a preaching book not addressing postmodernism and its radical impact on society as a whole and the church in particular. The world has changed, rightly note the pundits. Only according to Paul Scott Wilson, so common is this message that perhaps it takes a more radical image to get the message across, namely poetry. Contrary to math, which is about logic and proofs, poetry is content with mystery and imagery. For example, consider Wilson's reference to Pontius Pilate who infamously asked, "What is truth?" Wilson shakes up that image—one of the marks of homiletical poetry—when he reminds us that these days Pilate doesn't just represent cynics who might stay away from church, or even skeptics who sit in the pews, but "Pilate is now enrolled as a student in the seminary, and is teaching some classes" (105).

Poetry and math are two ways of knowing, writes Wilson, the former more akin to developments in the New Homiletic. And while both are still needed, information as well as experiential (7, 15), he clearly lobbies on behalf of preachers as "God's poets-in-residence" (3). One hears resonances with Craig Barnes, *The Pastor as Minor Poet* (2008), which Wilson cites, as well as Walter Brueggemann's *Finally Comes the Poet* (1989). But Wilson's unique contribution to the subject comes as he chooses to address three classical virtues, around which the book is organized: beauty, goodness, and truth. This is also where some math enters the picture, in particular, the number three. Each of the three virtues spans three chapters (theory, homiletics, and practice). And each of the three virtues is also tied to one of the persons of the Trinity, as well as three seasons of the Christian year (Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost).

While this multi-layered organization of threes is somewhat hard to follow at times (another possible hallmark of postmodernism?), the contributions in each section are clear and helpful. Beauty, for example, is "the experience of God and God's purposes, the in-breaking of the future now" (7). This is what Wilson calls "beauty 2," an explicit connection with God as opposed to "beauty 1" and its more popular cultural notions (30–31). Preaching attuned to beauty 2 speaks about God in more experiential terms than abstractions (10), and may need to portray its opposite from time to time (20). A well-honed theme sentence is also the hallmark of a sermon's beauty, its elegant clarity (33–34).

Wilson defines goodness as "what is desired or of benefit," the "moral or ethical" (51). As with each of the virtues, postmodernism is not the problem, but rather modernism. The fact that goodness (as with beauty, he distinguishes between "goodness 1" and "goodness 2") is up for debate is a recognition of the complexities of life. Drawing on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure and Jacques Derrida, Wilson notes that binaries often lead to privileging one thing over another, one group over another. For instance, "A man might preach about the equality of men and women, yet tell stories only of men" (56). Therefore, preachers should consider using more phrases such as "From my perspective," or "One way of thinking about this," acknowledging one perspective among many (61). Preachers must also think about four good practices (67–89): good news (a stress on God); good grammar (an elaboration of his earlier work on law and gospel, *The Four Pages of the Sermon* [1999]); good form (creative sermon shapes); and good acts (by which he means stories that evidence the gospel at work in people's daily lives).

Finally, Wilson points readers toward truth, by which he means that which is "real, authentic" (105). He names ten claims about truth in our time, including what Stephen Colbert

coined “truthiness” (107–08). (Wilson’s citing of Derrida and Colbert is a good example of the book’s eclectic nature.) Rather than choose between an authoritative “fixed worldview” and a “cynicism that dismisses meaning and truth,” Wilson invites us to embrace mystery (113). He writes, “Anselm said theology is faith seeking understanding. Theopoetic sermons are faith seeking God” (115). This theopoetic approach, however, while offered from a position of honesty and integrity, does not guarantee results. In an age of indifference, Wilson notes that “even if preachers were to stand on their heads and juggle flaming torches on the pulpit, there is no guarantee it would attract those indifferent to the church” (132).

Perhaps the same can be said for preaching books on postmodernism. Is there really anything new to say? Should authors resort to sensationalism in order to guarantee a reading? The answer of course is no. As Wilson rightly reminds us, in theopoetics, sometimes the math is quite different: $1 + 1 = 3$ (38–39). Will the world and church receive this message? Maybe, maybe not; but reconceived, these three virtues are what preachers offer (144).

Mike Graves, Saint Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, MO