

Phil Snider. *Preaching After God: Derrida, Caputo, and the Language of Postmodern Homiletics*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2012. 227 pages. \$26.

Phil Snider, who is Senior Minister at Brentwood Christian Church in Springfield Mo. and author of two previous books, here offers a way through an impasse that, he discerns, besets many pastors of progressive churches: how to preach transformatively about God to congregants who neither believe in the supernatural being, nor respond positively to the exclusively ethical exhortation that, from the pulpit, substitutes for God-talk? Snider identifies this impasse as “the modern homiletical crisis” (3). In this book, he traces the crisis back to the 18th century Enlightenment and modern theologies derived from it. Surprisingly and engagingly, he finds a solution in postmodern theory, especially Jacques Derrida as interpreted through the work of Syracuse University’s professor emeritus, John Caputo. The goal is to open a way persuasively to address the spiritual longing that brings folk to church in the first place, without recourse to what reduces in the end, for progressive congregations, to either magic or ethics.

Postmodern theory is an improbable friend on this homiletic quest. Snider knows how suspicious of it many of his colleagues in the clergy are. The chief critique is that it is wildly relativistic and indeed nihilistic. Friedrich Nietzsche, often identified by critics of postmodern theory as its source and inspiration, turns tutor here, at least in Snider’s hands. By dramatically announcing the death of God, Nietzsche simply reveals for us what is already implicit in Enlightenment reductions of religion to ethics. If God is merely godly human behavior, then God is effectively gone. This predicament supplies the book with its wittily ambiguous title. We are *after* God in two senses, both temporally, in that we postdate universal belief in a transcendent divine person, and affectively, in that we still continue to long for (pine after) the divine.

The book—dedicated to John Caputo—drinks deeply of his writing. The insight Snider draws from Caputo, who has it from Derrida, is that the path back to spiritual life quite literally rests on the tips of our tongues in our very capacity for language. Words are not mere marks on a page or airy vocalizations. They bear charges within them in both senses of that term—energy and call. Some words especially, such as “God,” charge us with a longing for a content they indicate but cannot contain, what Snider calls “the event” in them. This event is neither thing nor substance, but more an act that “stirs” in the word that “harbors” it. This event is not of our making, and so transcends us, but not supernaturally. As Snider puts it, “the event harbored in the name of God doesn’t exist, it insists” (77). And so it turns out that language performs a task philosophical humanity previously expected of ontological being—to ground spiritual life. Language is more potent than we know. Poets have been saying this all along; but it took postmodern philosophers to formulate this for us more discursively in terms of the event that stirs in the word.

The postmodern sermon plumbs for the event stirring most especially in the word, “God.” The preacher cannot present the event, for that would domesticate it. She can only register its call for the congregation and invite their response. Insofar as the call of God never transposes to the presence of God, postmodern preaching is ineluctably expectant, indeed eschatological and messianic. We are always waiting for what the postmodern sermon preaches. “A homiletic of the event prays and hopes and dreams and weeps” (121). The task is more easily instanced than described and so Snider helpfully concludes the book with several examples of postmodern sermons he himself delivered.

Snider concedes that the audience for his message is most likely limited by the felt need among clergy like himself. “If it is *not* difficult for you to . . . preach about the activity and agency of God in a post-Enlightenment context . . . then this book may not be of much interest to you” (15). But the book will hopefully draw a larger readership than that! It is a very instructive illustration of the interdependence between philosophy, theology, and preaching. It may not domesticate God, but it does put some very difficult thinkers on speaking terms with readers untutored in the higher reaches of postmodern theory. And for all its focus on what never quite arrives of the divine, it strangely reassures—God is somehow with us even without so being.

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