

Bryan Chapell. *The Hardest Sermons You'll Ever Have to Preach: Help from Trusted Preachers for Tragic Times*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011. 304 pages. \$19.99.

Most seminary-trained preachers have experienced their fair share of preaching courses. The courses are designed to provide training in the fine art of sermon preparation and delivery. This is a good and necessary education that supports and enhances the weekly proclamation of the gospel under *normal* circumstances. But *normal* circumstances are not the only ones that preachers face in their ministries. Inevitably, order gives way to disorder, orientation to disorientation, and preachers are called on to speak in those contexts. Very often a preacher's first encounter with the forces of disorder, namely, suffering and death, come not in the nurturing confines of the seminary classroom, but on the front lines of congregational life and ministry. No amount of course work can adequately prepare the preacher to face these harsh realities of human existence. What a preacher needs then is a wise guide, a mentor who has faithfully proclaimed the gospel in the midst of chaos, who can offer words of instruction and caution.

Bryan Chapell, President and Professor of Practical Theology at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, provides such guidance in *The Hardest Sermons You'll Ever Have to Preach*. Faced with the death of a senior elder only weeks into his first pastorate, Chapell turned to his preaching mentor, Robert G. Rayburn, for a crash course in funeral-conducting. (11) The words of wisdom spoken across Rayburn's breakfast table on that occasion have informed Chapell's lectures to his own preaching students through the years, and have inspired him to produce the present volume "to help other pastors on their path of preparation for some of the hardest sermons they will ever preach." (12)

The Hardest Sermons You'll Ever Have To Preach is comprised of an introduction, twenty-five sermons, and two appendices. The introduction emphasizes two significant perspectives that shape the work. First, all of the sermons arise from a Reformed theological perspective. (12) Although some particular points of doctrine may be challenging for those who do not share the Reformed tradition, they should not be enough to turn one off to the otherwise fine examples. Second, in true Chapell fashion, the story of the cross is the lens through which each tragedy is viewed. Each sermon points the hearer to God's work in Jesus Christ, God's love for humanity displayed at the cross, and God's control over evil demonstrated at the resurrection. While people will always have deep and disturbing questions concerning the purpose and the will of God in the face of suffering and death, one thing is sure: "The cross of Christ is the warrant for confidence in God's promises of ultimate good, despite great heartache." (15) What a comfort it is to know that there is good news to be shared even in the midst of tragedy!

The book's twenty-five sermons appear in five sections. Each section focuses on a particularly difficult preaching setting: "Preaching in Response to Tragedy," "Preaching after the Loss of a Child," "Preaching Funerals with Especially Difficult Causes or Circumstances," "Preaching Funerals for Public Figures," and "Preaching After Suicide." A few things stand out about these sections and these sermons. First, each section offers several sermons addressing a number of unique circumstances. In the section on child loss, there are sermons for special needs children, early and late-term miscarriages, newborns, crib deaths, young children, and conjoined twins. Each offering includes its own brief introduction of the situation, a discussion of the concerns that the preacher had in preparing to address the situation, and an explanation of his approach to the task at hand. In most cases names and details have been changed out of respect for the families involved. Second, twelve different preachers contributed sermons to the volume. Chapell supplies nine of his own, and includes others from such well-known preachers as Tim

Keller and John Piper. The benefit of such a collection is that the preacher is allowed to draw from a deep well of experience. Each sermon is unique, and though not all of equal strength, the collection as a whole makes a noble contribution to homiletical and ministerial studies.

Ministry in the midst of chaos is not something easily taught in a classroom setting. No amount of course work can adequately prepare a preacher to face the harsher realities of human existence. What a preacher needs is to sit down across the table from a seasoned minister and to carefully learn the fine art of speaking the good news into the most difficult situations that he or she will ever have to face. Pick up this book, and pull up a chair.

Phillip Devin Swindle, Harding University, Memphis, TN