

BOOK REVIEW

TEN STRATEGIES FOR PREACHING IN A MULTI MEDIA CULTURE.

Thomas H. Troeger. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996. (125 pages, \$12.95)

Thomas Troeger is a well-known homiletician who has written and lectured on art and imagination in preaching. He begins this book with a childhood memory of his father and him in a sailboat. When they were sailing and becalmed, his father would look for the slightest ripple on the surface of the water and then start tracking to that point, adjust the sails to the best angle to take maximum advantage of the wind when it would hit the sails. This metaphor describes for him the work of the preacher. Just as his father could not cause the wind to blow, nor can we cause the Spirit to entice our preaching. But he insists, we can formulate strategies in our preaching that open us to any of the Spirit's stirrings. Such preaching strategies will combine openness to the Spirit and the hard work of thought and creation.

From the beginning, when the imaginative evangelists first committed the Gospel message to writing, preachers have always used strategies to present the Word of God. These strategies have involved "a complex relationship between the Holy Spirit, faith and culture" (p. 8). That, he says, is what the contemporary preacher needs to do: formulate new strategies for preaching the Word in an "audiovisual language." Trusting in the power of the Gospel that is "infinitely translatable", Troeger encourages his readers to try using his strategies for preaching to a multimedia culture.

Troeger presents 10 strategies for preaching. But before presenting them, he cautions against new preaching strategies that are manipulative, merely attractive and entertaining. He advises the preacher to test our perceptions and responses with others and to evaluate what we have done by the fruits they yield. Each strategy is introduced with a brief theoretical explanation of what it is and how to use it. Then he presents a biblically based sermon to illustrate the strategy. His strategies include the use of story, sound, flashback, mime, ritual, etc. The explanations and the illustrations put his suggestions within our grasp, and give the preacher a sense, "Hey, I can do this." That's what I liked best about this book, it stimulated my own imagination and made me think about my current style of preaching and how I might use his ideas.

For example, "strategy 1" suggests imagining there is more to the biblical story than we find in the biblical text. He says that this kind of imagining can "deepen and extend the spirit of the biblical narrative". (p. 23) He draws from generations of

African-American preaching and its tradition of elaborating upon the text. He insists these elaborations are not flights of fancy but are “theologically disciplined acts of imagination that seek to honor the spirit of the text while they draw upon the larger perspectives of the whole gospel, upon the traditions and experience of the church that extends throughout Christian history.” (p. 24) For this exercise he draws his sermon from the Cana story and imagines the wedding couple saving the leftover wine for special occasions through their wedded life.

Another strategy shows how a story can be created by expanding on a scriptural text. In his explanation of this strategy, he discusses the obstacles to receiving the Word of God and suggests that direct argument seldom works in preaching because it feels like an intrusive guest “telling us how to rearrange the furniture in our mental house. We resent it, and we resist it.” (p. 30) Using a story can feel less immediately threatening to our hearers and still have a deeper impact on their lives.

Some of us are already using media for preaching--radio, tv. video, the internet, etc. Troeger is not writing about preaching in this way. Rather, since our hearers are so influenced by media, he is showing how, in our usual form of preaching, we can speak to an “audiovisual culture.” His strategies are an attempt to show us how to make our preaching more visual and dramatic so as to engage a culture that has been conditioned by the mass media. He is suggesting we vary our strategies and get out of the rut of our usual form of preaching that, for many of us, has been learned in another cultural period. His suggestions are just that, suggestions. He insists that media is at work all the time to capture our imaginations; but so is God. Our goal in preaching is to participate in God’s efforts to win the human imagination for God. He sums up his premise by quoting Garrett Green:

Proclamation, formulated in terms of the present argument, can be described as an appeal to the imagination of the hearers through the images of scriptures. The preacher’s task is to mediate and facilitate that encounter by engaging his or her own imagination, which becomes the link between scripture and congregation. (p.118)

This practical book reminds us that imaginative preaching is neither gimmicky nor reserved to a few “artistic preachers”. Rather, it shows each of us who work hard on our preaching, how to use our imaginations to proclaim the Word and “participate in winning the human imagination for God.”

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Quotable

It is a mistake to overlook the popular appeal of the parables. Jesus was too great a preacher to make the bogus distinction between narrative and hard (rationalist) theology. He used wonderfully intriguing stories to draw people into a consideration of the deepest matters of God and grace. To a certain degree, Jesus' parables worked in his culture in the way movies do for us today: They provided a memorable narrative that could be passed on and retold again and again just as in the present-day people will talk about their favorite scenes from a popular movie.

Thomas Troeger in Ten Strategies for Preaching in a Multi Media Culture. (page 48)