

VOICING THE VISION: IMAGINATION AND PROPHETIC PREACHING

by Linda Clader (New York: Morehouse Publishing, 2003), Paper, 168 pages, ISBN 0-8192-1932-0

Preaching is at the very center of the church's life. It is essential for the life and unity of the Christian community. The greatest preachers, past and present, are held in high esteem for their eloquence and ability to move their hearers to faith and action. Many of us can remember a preaching that touched us in such a way that we can only describe it as having God as its source. In the words we heard, we experienced the presence of God alive and speaking to our lives. We hope that our preaching will also be open to God's inspiration and touch people's lives in ways we know we cannot do on our own. For this to happen, we need a creative gift from God—we need inspiration. And that is what this book addresses.

While Linda Clader acknowledges the serious nature of her subject, she suggests that a path for the renewal of preaching, for both preacher and church, could lie in preachers' willingness to "play." While VOICING THE VISION is not primarily a workbook, Clader does suggest ways to explore inspiration and imagination, which constitute the necessary predecessors to prophetic speech. Hence the importance of "playfulness," a discipline that can loosen the tight reins we keep on our spirit and open us to God's creative impulses. Preachers must keep a very specific kind of play in mind. This play, rich in creative possibilities, can happen only if we have made some "Sabbath time." Easier said than done since preachers tend to be just as stressed-out and over-scheduled as the people who come to hear us preach. Clader advises that we need to take the Sabbath more seriously and a way to do this is to design empty slots into our day, week, month and year. If the Spirit is going to use us in the work of inspiring and moving others, then keeping some kind of Sabbath is essential for our preaching.

And we know, without that inspiration, preaching becomes merely the routine we have to do--week after week. VOICING THE VISION suggests ways to be more attentive to God's Word and the gifts the Spirit has for us and our congregations. Clader shows us how to keep a Sabbath that will open us to God's inspiration and also renew our own preaching spirits. We preachers have only an incomplete control over the effects preaching will have on our hearers' lives. We hope they will respond to what we say and, to increase the possibility of that happening, Clader suggests our preaching preparation must be a creative process that will open us to the inspiring breath of the Spirit. She stresses that it is important to follow wherever the Spirit leads and to be willing to risk the unexpected results of the divine impulse.

While creative insight can happen at any stage in our preparation process, the first moments are particularly important, and we must be attentive to how we spend our time in these early stages.

Our part is to do what we can to be open to the mystery of the Spirit's activity. We can't make inspiration happen, it is a gift, but we can deliberately design our preaching preparation process in a way that will leave us open and ready, should the Spirit choose to act. After all, Clader reminds us, we are in "Holy Spirit territory," practicing our vocation in an "exciting and uncertain terrain."

The scriptures guide us in our preaching vocation. While there are extraordinary stories of prophets and leaders of the people, the story of Jesus and the early church reveal that there is another way to look at preaching and imagination. The Christian story shows us that through Jesus, God has communicated with humans in the most ordinary ways, as part of their daily lives. Thus, the Spirit's creative gifts are available to us and what we need to do is expand our ways of receiving what God has to say to us---and through us, to the community.

Preaching is one way God's Word becomes present tense. For this to happen for our hearers, we preachers need to experience that eternally new Word ourselves. This is a book that will challenge and feed the spirituality of the preacher. It calls us to examine our preaching conscience: do we include in our preparation process what we believe about preaching, that it is a place where inspiration can happen? If preaching is a vehicle for God's breath of new life both for us and those who will hear us, then we must incorporate ways to be open to that breath to inspire us.

Along the way Clader brings us up to date on contemporary preaching theory and with homileticians dealing with similar topics — creativity, imagination, narrative, prophetic preaching, etc. If you don't already know them, be prepared in this book to also learn from Fred Craddock, Richard Lischer, Eugene Lowry, Sallie Mc Fague, and Patricia Kastner-Wilson. In addition, Clader credits the strong influence Donald Gelpi, SJ has had on her investigations into the Holy Spirit.

Using her own experiences as a preacher Clader shares her quest for inspiration in preaching. We hear about her busy life as a homiletics teacher, writer, wife, Sunday preacher (she is an Episcopal priest) and a special occasion preacher at her seminary and national conferences. Almost all the chapters show how she prepared for a particular preaching, what happened in her daily life that inspired her and what she did to be open to that moment of insight. The chapters end with the resulting homily. These homilies are varied, and they concretize the theory and suggestions made in the book. I admire preachers who write about preaching and then share their homilies with us. It takes courage!

There is nothing gimmicky about this book or the suggestions it makes to help us be inspired and creative preachers. It addresses mainline preachers and our need to reflect on our important ministry. After a while preaching can seem like just part of our "job description," something else we must do in the course of a busy week. We can get in a rut, repeating thoughts, stories and illustrations from long-past preachings. Linda Clader challenges us to rethink our vocation, shake off the cobwebs and take a fresh look at what we preachers are doing and how we do it.

What does Clader hope will happen for those of us who read this book?

My hope is simply that the way we preach will cause some who hear us to ask some new questions, listen a little more willingly, and imagine pictures, smells or tastes that may conjure up a memory of another alternative. (Page 160)

—Reviewed by *Jude Siciliano*, OP
Promoter of Preaching, Southern Dominican Province, USA