

# *One New Book for the Preacher*

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Marilynne Robinson, *What Are We Doing Here? Essays* (New York, Farrer, Straus and Giroux), 2018

An inordinate timeliness hovers over this review. We read regularly of the decline and fall of the Western Alliance and the liberal, humanistic, and mostly democratic culture that has triumphed for the last seventy years.<sup>1</sup> What will be upon us as we prepare Advent sermons is anyone's guess. We cannot possibly know what new outrages "slouch toward (Washington, Moscow, or Phoenix) to be born." Indeed, "things fall apart; the center cannot hold; the falcon cannot hear the falconer."<sup>2</sup>

These images from W.B. Yeats's poem "The Second Coming" offer an entry into Robinson's latest book of essays, *What Are We Doing Here?* The title is taken from the second of fourteen essays. There she laments the tendency in higher education to ignore, if not denigrate, the study of what we have traditionally known as "the Humanities," and to put in their place a materialist view of human life which describes our capacity for noble sentiments, for faith, for beauty, and for wonder as merely random events in the evolution of the universe and the human species. A consequence of this widespread understanding of human nature undergirds a persistent movement to turn the great institutions of higher learning into production facilities for "useful and practical workers," people who know how to crunch the numbers and make the deal, to build the submarine and create an app. Increasingly then, there is little place for learning which is good for building moral and ethical muscle, for ennobling the human spirit, and for enlarging human understanding. In this essay, Robinson argues that "what we are doing here," especially in education, is nothing less than continuing a project—a human enterprise—that began at least 500 years ago with the Renaissance, continued through the Enlightenment and Protestant Reformation, and gave us the open, liberal, and inquiring society which we value and the benefits of which we enjoy. Of preeminent importance, this same project gave birth to the revered institutions of higher learning (many of which were founded for training ministers and preachers) and helped develop and sustain the political institutions which have made their continuance possible.

This title is profoundly suggestive for preachers. That same question might blessedly trouble us every week as we prepare to enact the great liturgy of Word and Sacrament, as we prepare a sermon on sacred texts, as we face the congregation in worship or join them in prayer and praise. What are we doing here? As we explore the text, encourage faith and obedience, "preach liberty to the captives and announce good news to the poor," are we inviting our congregations to see themselves and God—even the entire cosmos—through the truth and beauty, humility and wonder, suffering and glory that we have discovered in the sacred text and that has been graciously revealed to us in Jesus Christ?

This is Robinson's fourth collection of essays, and this, no less than the others, together with her novels, further establishes her as an internationally known and

sought after public intellectual. *What Are We Doing Here?* is mostly a collection of lectures given at universities from Lund, Sweden to Princeton and Stanford, from Brigham Young to the University of Virginia. There is an address at Westminster Abbey and a searing meditation, “Slander,” given at Trinity Cathedral in Little Rock based on James 3:5-10 about the dangerous power of destructive speech: “How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire. And the tongue is a fire” (5b-6a). So how might preachers benefit from these essays? First, Robinson repeatedly demonstrates the nature of faith: that believing is a corporate act and has common as well as individual consequence. This act of faith is not primarily about my right to believe what I chose, my freedom of religion—or me. Faith involves the community, the society, and the church that we intend to convene, then to nurture and build, and finally to sustain. That is how congregations and institutions are created and how they endure, not only to perpetuate themselves, but as generators of the values that make common life good and worthwhile.

“When your children ask you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the decrees and the statutes and the ordinances that the Lord our God has commanded you?’ then you shall say to your children, ‘We were Pharaoh’s slaves in Egypt...’” (Deut. 6:20-21a). Here is perpetuity, but also blessing.

In one essay Robinson catalogues what she calls a “dark view of the world,” not only in order to pose the inevitable question of what is to be done, but also to respond “in terms that are now more or less precluded by the practical urgency of these problems” (38).

The response I propose is that we preserve as best we can the heritage we have received and that we enlarge it and enrich it for the sake of coming generations. For a long time I assumed this was simply a thing civilizations did, a practical definition of the word civilization. Now I see that wealthy countries are stepping away from ancient commitments to humanist education.... In the West it was theology and its consequences that built these great institutions, and the ebbing away of theology that has made them seem to many to be anomalies, anachronisms, and burdens... (38-9).

So I argue that each sermon, each bible class, each anthem, together with the prayers and liturgies we offer up every week are the church’s small efforts (even at times very large contributions) to keeping alive understandings of God and the universe, of Jesus Christ and his enduring impact on history, all with the aid of the Spirit herself in the preaching, interpreting, singing, and the hearing of the Word.

Second, these essays, carefully attended to, provide historical examples and habits of mind (ways of thinking, reflecting, and shaping convictions) that will undergird the preaching of the Word. Consistent biblical and theological preaching, especially over a number of years, builds a congregational understanding of itself and gives people a way of abiding from generation to generation in the community in which a congregation goes about its public and individual witness. This does not require continual “prophetic” preaching about whatever outrages are being done in our world. Rather such preaching and teaching inculcates faith and understanding (not only in the preacher, but in the leadership of the church) so that when a crisis comes, we who believe and live in faith will be prepared to give our own witness, to act in faith, and

to be authentically who we have been formed to be (by water, Word, bread and wine, and by the Spirit.

I read this book first as part of a study group. In the conversation that day, I raised a question about Robinson's purpose here, as well as in her other books of essays. From different angles and with different historical and biblical/theological reference points, she makes much the same argument: that the Western project is imperiled because we have lost our theological, moral, historical memory—our underpinnings and especially our understanding of God as Creator of a cosmos filled with wonder, mystery, and majesty—not the least of which is human existence and the human enterprise itself. For Robinson, that we are at all is providential (divinely intentional in the best sense) and not mere evolutionary happenstance in a random universe.

In that study group, I raised this question: Is the body of her work nostalgia—beautifully written and argued, but nonetheless nostalgia, a loving lament for what has been lost? Or is it a prognosis and prescription, a call to right thinking and right action for recovery and restoration? Perhaps it is both. Whatever her intention, Robinson's work recalls powerfully for me T.S. Eliot's haunting queries in "Choruses from the Rock," a pageant-play written in 1934:

Do you think that Faith has conquered the World  
And that lions no longer need keepers?  
Do you need to be told that whatever has been, can still be?  
Do you need to be told that even such modest attainments  
As you boast in the way of polite society  
Will hardly survive the Faith to which they owe their significance?  
Why should men love the Church? Why should they love her laws?  
She tells them of life and death and all they would like to forget...  
They constantly try to escape  
From the darkness outside and within  
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be good.

In these increasingly difficult days, when we have so few modest attainments left in the increasingly hostile, even nihilistic, public square, the call to preach and teach has never been more urgent, more compelling, or more capable of bearing fruit—fruit that shall last. "All flesh is grass. The grass withers, and the flower fades... but the word of our God endures forever" (Isa. 40). That is "what we are doing here."

#### Notes

1 Three columns: David Brooks, *New York Times*, "The Murder-Suicide of the West," 6/16/18; Robert Kagan, *Washington Post*, "The West spent a decade playing into Putin's hands," 8/8/18; Ross Douthat, *New York Times*, "Oh, the Humanities," 8/8/18.

2 W.B. Yeates, "The Second Coming." The Poetry Foundation (internet).

3 T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York, Harcourt, Brace, and World, Inc., 1958), 105-6.