

One New Book for the Preacher

Katie Nakamura Rengers

Office of Church Planting for the Episcopal Church, Birmingham, Alabama

Matthew D. Kim and Daniel L. Wong, *Finding our Voice: A Vision for Asian North American Preaching* (Bellingham, Washington: Lexham Press, 2020)

In *Finding our Voice: A Vision for Asian North American Preaching*, authors Matthew D. Kim and Daniel L. Wong pose a simple question: “Do ANA preachers have a preaching voice?” By this they mean, could one read or hear a sermon and intuitively sense that its hermeneutics, theology, and style flow out from a church leader of Asian descent? It was this question that drew me into the book, inspiring the sobering realization that despite being *Sansei* (third generation Japanese American), and despite having been an ordained Episcopal priest for a decade, I had never before heard it asked aloud and had never personally considered my own answer. Kim and Wong begin with the premise that it is spiritually necessary for ANA (Asian North American) preachers to develop our “unique homiletical voice akin to other minority groups such as African American and Hispanic American preaching traditions.”

A common stereotype of Asian Americans is that of the “perpetual foreigner.” The uniqueness of this book is that it focuses instead on post-immigrant generations of ANA preachers, with whom Kim and Wong themselves identify. If the authors’ first question drew me in, it was this focus that kept me reading—finally a book that acknowledges the second, third, and fourth generations’ stories, and insists on the value of bringing those experiences into the pulpit!

For Kim and Wong, a preacher’s “homiletical voice” means far more than just its tone and delivery. In this book, they ask how ANA church leaders interpret scripture, how we exegete ourselves and our own experience of identity, and how we then turn those things into a proclamation of how God acts in our lives and in the world. The ANA preaching voice is critical because there are certain human experiences that Americans of Asian ancestry are especially prepared to speak to. Kim and Wong point out that because of our sense of living “in-between” traditional Black, White, and Latino American definitions, we are particularly tuned to address deep questions of identity and belonging. For reasons of physical appearance and/or feelings of internal aberration from the cultural norm, the authors say that ANAs often struggle “to love themselves as people made in the *imago Dei*.” Preachers who have experienced this struggle for themselves can offer a counter-message of hope and belonging.

I also heard a personal challenge from Kim and Wong. Like most of the ANA leaders they describe, I learned a White style of preaching. I learned to preach primarily from observing the preachers who were most influential on me, and from pastoring majority-White churches for almost the entirety of my 10 years as an Episcopal priest. As I reflect on my preaching, I can recall many moments when I’ve diminished my own experience as an ANA person in favor of stories and spiritual explanations that felt more “relevant” to my White audience. As I read this book, I was compelled to ask “What voice, what perspective on God’s love, do I have as a Japanese-American that I’ve thus far been withholding?”

For example, perhaps ANA pastors are well positioned to help our established churches respond to the dissonance that many post-pandemic Americans feel between mainline church culture and their own identity as spiritual beings. Christians tend to forget that our way of gathering and worshiping is itself a cultural phenomenon and should be adapted to reach people who aren't already part of the church. Kim and Wong approach this from the viewpoint of scriptural hermeneutics, offering a discussion of what they see as Evangelical Christians' tendency to dismiss cultural contextualization of Scripture and to see ethnic and cultural identity as secondary to a person's "identity in Christ." Though progressive denominations usually have a more favorable view of contextual theology, liturgical traditions like mine can harbor an equally large blind spot when it comes to contextualizing practice. Episcopalians are taught to love the beauty, transcendence, predictability, and commonality of *The Book of Common Prayer*, a text rooted in the very specific language and culture of the Church of England. ANA leaders, most of whom have experienced some degree of dissonance in a church setting, can model new possibilities for how we invite people to bring their whole selves to a spiritual community.

ANA preachers, Kim and Wong say, also bring a voice of hope to themes such as marginalization, pilgrimage, and "home." As they describe the cultural "liminality" many ANAs find ourselves in—"a feeling of being between two cultures while not fitting in to either one"—I found myself thinking of Jeremiah 29, in which the prophet exhorts the people to "seek the good of the city in which you are in exile, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." What does it look like to understand that people may never completely find belonging, yet are willing to commit anyway to seeking the good of the place and people around them? A sermon on this topic would speak not only to people of minority ancestry, but also to communities wrestling with socioeconomic diversity or struggling to communicate and love across generations.

The sequel I'm longing for is a lengthier reflection on how ANA preachers might use our unique voices to preach to majority White and multi-cultural churches. Kim and Wong give this a brief nod in Chapter 5 ("The Future of Asian North American Preaching"); the reality, however, for many Mainline ANA preachers is that we are often the only persons of Asian descent in our congregation, if not one of the only people of color at all. This is, of course, at the heart of why so many of us assimilate to a White style of preaching—we are attempting to be pastoral, to meet our White congregations where they are, and (like Jesus) to speak to them in imagery and theologies that are relevant to their lives. The danger is that we then deny ourselves and our congregations the gift of bringing our fullest selves into the pulpit; we speak about the things that we think matter greatly to the people in the pews, but we neglect the issues that are most critical to us. Such self-censorship is disempowering to the preacher, and more importantly, it may prevent us from connecting to some of the deep issues present in our congregations. After all, it isn't only ANAs who struggle with identity, belonging, and seeing ourselves in the *imago Dei*!

I once heard a Black preacher say "You can't preach what you don't know any more than you can come back from where you ain't been." *Finding our Voice* encourages ANA preachers to wonder "where have I been that I can return from, for the sake of uplifting others on their journey of faith?" I would only add that regardless of our ethnicity, this is the kind of vulnerable and courageous question *all* preachers should continually be asking.