

One New Book for the Preacher

Thomas G. Long
Cambridge, Maryland

Leah D. Schade, Jerry Sumney, and Emily Askew, *A Preaching Primer: Theology, Scripture and Sermon Preparation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, forthcoming 2022)

Fred Craddock, who in his socks stood barely above five feet, used to quip that he was well over six feet tall before he started teaching preaching. Teaching budding pastors how to preach cogent sermons, difficult enough in Craddock's day, has become even more vexed recently. When I began teaching homiletics in the 1970s, I at least had the advantage of operating with what seemed at least like a common purpose and a unified student audience: a homogeneous group of mostly Presbyterians, all of whom were headed toward parish ministry and who were eager to learn how to be effective preachers.

Not so today. Many seminarians have little interest in congregational ministry, are indifferent at best to the whole enterprise of preaching sermons, and possess a Twitter-age touchiness, often ready to go to the mat over fine distinctions of identity and diversity. Small wonder that many homiletics classrooms, in an attempt to meet the many needs of a multiple constituency, have fragmented into a Golden Corral buffet of bewildering pedagogical choices.

One piece of collateral damage of this Balkanization has been the basic preaching textbook. Who would assume that a single text could serve the needs of all students? Who would dare write such a monolithic thing? Who would assume the authority to speak for this multiplicity of identities? What could an African American Baptist homiletician possibly have to say to an Episcopal student, a Methodist female author to a male Church of God in Christ seminarian? Many teachers of preaching have long ago scratched textbooks from their syllabi in favor of a cacophony of diversity-driven readings, blogs, and video sermons.

The current partitioning, and perhaps even confusion, has a history. Years ago, the Academy of Homiletics, the oldest American guild for teachers of preaching, assembled a task force to study how preaching should be taught in the contemporary classroom. After analyzing the current context, the task force eventually advocated for a radical student-centered approach. Don't try to teach a classroom, they advised. Instead, teach each student one-by-one. Within every student, they argued, was a little preacher ready to be summoned, eager to come out. Instead of teaching monolithic classes, homileticians were encouraged to realize that they were teaching discrete and unique individuals and should tailor instruction around each student's gifts and proclivities.

This was all well-intentioned, of course, and it did soften and take some of the terror out of preaching classes, but it also led to pedagogical madness. Would any self-respecting law school assume that inside each student is a little litigator eager to emerge? Would any medical school professor look out at a class and see the room filled with little neurosurgeons in embryonic form? No, in preaching as well as in law or medicine, there are time-honored traditions and disciplines to be learned. There are accepted ways to do kidney surgery, to cross examine hostile witnesses, or to engage scripture in sermons. The goal is to stretch students, to introduce them to best practices, not to whittle complex practices down to the crevices of an isolated student's unchallenged capacities.

Now, three professors from Lexington Theological Seminary—Leah D. Shade, who teaches preaching; Jerry Sumney, a biblical scholar; and Emily Askew, an emeritus theologian—have accomplished an amazing feat. With full attention to the new pluralism in the preaching classroom, they have nevertheless been bold enough to produce for a new generation a basic textbook for preachers, *A Preaching Primer: Theology, Scripture, and Sermon Preparation*. And a wise and thoughtful text it is, useful not only for beginners but also for experienced preachers.

The secret in their sauce is that they focus on sermon infrastructure. All sermons, regardless of whether they are Lutheran Advent homilies or extemporaneous messages whooped in a Chicago storefront, must have design, structure, and purpose if they are to be heard by listeners. And it is to these essentials that the three Lexington scholars attend. After a lucid section on biblical exegesis and a refreshing discussion of the theological heart of biblical texts and sermons (one that, characteristic of the current climate in biblical interpretation, is alert to the ideologies and social biases found in both texts and traditional interpretations), they turn to the structural essentials of sermons, which they name “the central question,” “the central claim,” and “the central purpose.”

The central question is “the compelling inquiry that is driving the congregation to want to listen and the reason they should want to respond to the sermon.” When this central question is brought close enough to the sermon’s chosen biblical text for sparks to fly, the result is “the central claim,” namely, “the main point you are making that should mean something for our listener’s lives, for our neighbors near and far, and for all in God’s Creation.” Preachers preach to effect change, of course, and “the central purpose” of the sermon is “what this sermon intends to do and what it will accomplish,” that is, the “so what” of the sermon.

The beauty in these three categories is that the authors never lose sight of the fact that preaching is, after all, a form of human communication. Theologically, it may be more than that, but certainly not less. Paul Ricoeur once reminded us with elegant simplicity that in human communication, “someone says something to someone else about something.” The authors of *A Preaching Primer* guide preachers to attend to the various components of the something said to someone else

about something. The clearer preachers are about these factors, the better chance the sermon has of hitting home.

There is a lot of acquired wisdom in these pages, but the writers convey it in conversational language, presenting themselves not as professors from on high but as companions of the reader in a journey of learning. The volume is punctuated by carefully curated sermons, annotated by the authors, that helpfully embody the key insights of the book. A series of classroom exercises and a glossary of major terms is included at the end of the volume.

A Preaching Primer will no doubt be embraced by the current generation of teachers of preaching and also by pastors looking to strengthen their pulpit ministry.