

One New Book for the Preacher

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Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss, Meditations of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013)

In “A Conversation with Christian Wiman” in *Image*,¹ Wiman says that he has been obsessed with “religious” experience all his life and that it’s everywhere in poems and prose he has written but something he only understood as he looked back upon his work from the perspective of faith. “I was led to God by joy, but led to words, you might say, by grief. It was meeting my wife that first made me—made us—want to acknowledge the love that our own seemed to imply and include. It was the threat of death that made me want to give my inchoate feelings of faith some definite form.”²

The overarching compass and subterranean depths of Wiman’s memoir of coming to faith has tempted me to string together a series of quotations from the book, first because I cannot “do it justice,” and second, because it is so rich with insights that a reader can keep it beside her Bible or other devotional book of the moment and return to it day after day—for a lifetime. I have read it twice, not long after it was published in 2013 and then a few months ago to prepare for a seminar. I was surprised how fresh it seemed the second time. It cascades and soars in a poetically written prose for which one longs, something to savor in heart and soul and mind, something of which you never tire, like the poetry of George Herbert (a favorite of Wiman’s) or G. M. Hopkins or T. S. Eliot.

It helps, of course, that Wiman is himself an accomplished poet and essayist, educated at Washington and Lee and at Stanford as a Wallace Stegner Fellow. He also taught at Stanford and at Northwestern and Lynchburg College. He has travelled widely and, in addition to his own published works, is the translator of the Polish-Jewish poet Osip Mandelstam. In 2003 he became editor of the influential Poetry magazine, which under his leadership began including prose and tripled its readership. In 2013 he left the magazine to teach at Yale Institute of Sacred Music and Yale Divinity School.³

The first reason to recommend this book to preachers is that it requires a depth of cogitating, thinking, meditating on one’s own faith, one’s own personal and pastoral experience that transcends the normal activity of sermon and teaching preparation, administration, and moderatorial/administrative duties. It engages our souls and leads us to depths of exploration that often get lost in the sometimes necessary busyness and ADHD flavor of parish life, or of programmatic commitments to institutional maintenance, evangelistic techniques, and social justice. Wiman is searingly honest about the pitfalls of the American church. He writes that “we need to be shocked out of our easy acceptance of—or our facile resistance to—propositional language of God.”⁴ I would add that we need to be shocked out of our easy acceptance of recurring religious clichés—both liberal and conservative— and of self-constructed worship that references mostly our own needs and feelings rather than calling us into

the presence of the living God, the Maker of heaven and earth, who for Wiman is the elusive, unknown one, the great Abyss whose power and love in this world (even the universe) can only be known through the crucifixion (contingency) of Jesus Christ. After his diagnosis with incurable, unpredictable cancer, Wiman wrote:

Contingency. Meaning subject to chance, not absolute. Meaning uncertain, as reality, right down to the molecular level, is uncertain. As all of human life is uncertain. I suppose to think of God in those terms might seem for some people deeply troubling (not to mention heretical), but I find it a comfort. It is akin to the notion of God entering and understanding (“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”) human suffering. If Christianity is going to mean anything at all for us now, then the humanity of God cannot be a half measure. He can’t float over the chaos of pain and particles in which we’re mired...⁵

My God my bright abyss
Into which all my longing will not go
Once more I come to the edge of all I know
And believing nothing believe in this.⁶

That poem fragment begins a series of essays which form a loose narrative in *My Bright Abyss*. Wiman begins by saying that what he craves “at this point in his life is to speak more clearly what it is that I believe.”⁷

The second reason to recommend this book to preachers is that it is the witness of a layman, who has more to say to us preachers than we do to each other about the acids of modernity and our congregations. Wiman’s experience and erudition (He refers to and calls upon not only poets to speak his truth, but also Kierkegaard and Kafka, Bonhoeffer and George Linbeck, and others.) are the stuff of classic devotional books. Thus he evades or blessedly sidesteps the therapeutic, organizational, and even social righteousness models of presenting the faith. Rather this book, like Augustine’s *Confessions*, invites, even demands, that we confront the God whom we worship and adore (or not) through the lens of our own personal experience, our own joys and grief, sufferings, and mundanities. Wiman’s invitation and demand (and revelation) come wrought with such beauty and precision sometimes that he takes your breath away.

The third reason to recommend this book comes from a conversation last spring that I cannot shake. A friend, pastor of a large and faithful congregation, told me that he often struggled with “what’s next?”—not for himself, but for his congregation: urban, large, socially engaged, liturgically rich, educationally sound and powerful, homiletically grounded, a church that unflinchingly faces the issues of the city in which it worships and to which it ministers. My friend seemed to be asking, “Where are we going; what is the next faithful witness to which God is calling us?”

None of us knows, but Wiman’s little book suggests that it’s depth of faith and groundedness we need, not just we preachers, but preachers and congregational leaders together. Without it we will not withstand the depredations of our current political crisis, which is a crisis of language, of truth (human and revealed), and of the foundations of this republic. The answer to William Butler Yeats’s searing question after WWI,

what rough beast “slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?”⁸ is being revealed before our eyes in every news cycle. The leaders of nations, all but one or two, tremble, and Tillich’s foundations crumble, in reality, not in homiletical imagery. After the massacre at Mother Emmanuel Church and the response of that congregation to terrorist horror, what do we have to say? Who are we in our witness?

A Bright Abyss suggests that the appropriate question to ask leads us, personally and corporately, away from superficial expressions of Christianity and opens our hearts and eyes of faith to what is true, good, beautiful—and everlasting. Might it not be that what we have next—and urgently—to do is to cultivate among ourselves a hunger for God? Only then will we draw the attention of those who see nothing of interest in our faith or in our churches.

Notes

1 *Image*, “Art, Faith, Mystery, Winter 2013, Number 76, 51.

2 *Ibid.*, 51–2.

3 *Ibid.*

4 Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss, Meditations of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

5 *Ibid.*, 16, 17.

6 *Ibid.*, 3.

7 *Ibid.*

8 “The Second Coming,” on the Web: PotW.org, Poem of the Week, founded August 1996.