

Thomas G. Long. *Preaching from Memory to Hope*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009. 152 pages. \$19.95

In his most recent book, Thomas Long announces that preaching is suffering from a nervous breakdown. Preachers approach the task of preaching with anxiety about the latest trends in the use of power point, moving away from the pulpit, preaching without notes, and other issues of technique. His purpose in writing this volume is to bring a sense of calmness about these concerns and lead preachers to focus on more substantive theological issues.

Long chooses to focus on issues such as narrative preaching, the need for preachers to name where God is currently working in the world, the need to address the shallow spirituality of our day, and the need to announce God's culminating eschatological work. Chapters 1, 2, and 5 are his 2006 Lyman Beecher Lectures expanded. Chapters 3 and 4 springboard out of an interest he has held for many years in the development of a neo-gnostic impulse in contemporary spirituality.

The opening chapter, "A Likely Story," critiques the critique of narrative preaching. Long concludes that much of the criticism of narrative preaching is legitimate. But by no means is he ready to perform an autopsy on it. There remains a fundamental dimension of narrative that is vital to the proclamation of the gospel. A portion of this chapter is an expansion of an earlier article Long wrote on "What Happened to Narrative Preaching?" in *Journal for Preachers* (vol. 28 no 4, 2005: 9-14).

In the next chapter, "No News is Bad News," Long describes our tendency to eliminate or "subtract" the work of the supernatural in this life (31). We tend to assign a psychological or scientific explanation to our emotions and experiences and soft-pedal the transcendent dimension that breaks into our lives. This results in preachers shying away from naming where God is working in this world. Instead they take a safer more acceptable route and assume a sage type posture that gravitates toward a life skills approach to preaching. Because of this sage type posture, preachers have no news to share that could not be heard in other contexts outside church.

Rather than just simply sharing sagacious pieces of advice, Long urges preachers to announce that which is newsworthy: the presence of God working in this world. To do this faithfully and not as some all-knowing "press secretary" for God (36), Long proposes preachers consider Ricoeur's narrative hermeneutics and the practice of *mimesis*. With this model, preachers take the bits and pieces of human experiences and dialogue with them through the lens of Scripture, which leads to a new understanding of the world. The preacher must ask, is what we witness God doing in Scripture being reenacted anywhere in our world today?

In the following two chapters (3 and 4) Long probes a significant force in culture that impacts the church and Christianity. Many well-read Christians sitting in pews today are suspicious of traditional Christianity. Being more informed about historical and critical issues surrounding Scripture, they wonder, is the church engaged in some major cover-up of history and the facts about Christianity in order to preserve its structure and power? Preaching needs to address these "conspiracy theories" from time to time. It needs to deal honestly with questions listeners have about the nature and character of contemporary spirituality that appeals to so many in the pew.

Related to the more informed understanding of listeners in the pew, Long speaks of their desire to seek authentic spirituality which he labels the "gnostic impulse." The gnostic impulse has no interest in the past or future of God's work but only in what is going on in the present.

The gnostic impulse understands redemption taking place on a very small stage: the inner self (95). The focus is not out there on what God is doing in the world but “in here what God is doing in our hearts” (80).

In the final chapter, Long describes the task of preaching as pointing listeners to what God is doing to bring about the culmination of God’s kingdom. “Eschatological preaching brings the finished work of God to bear on an unfinished world, summoning it to completion” (125). Preaching eschatologically is “a way of seeing the present in the light of hope” (129).

Even though Long’s overall purpose is to draw preachers’ attention to more important theological issues pressing in on the life of the church, there is not a clear connection between the chapters. Along with this, the meaning of the title of the book “Preaching From Memory to Hope” is not evident. It may have to do with reading the work of God in this world through the lens of Scripture.

In spite of the loose connection of the chapters, this book still makes a vital contribution to the task of preaching. In a day when it is so easy to get caught up in popular preaching trends, it is a breath of fresh air to hear preachers called to address the more serious matters that shape the spiritual life and welfare of the church.

Dave Bland
Harding University Graduate School of Religion
Memphis, TN