

Sunggu Yang. *King's Speech: Preaching Reconciliation in a World of Violence and Chasm*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019. 101 pp. \$17.00

Sunggu Yang has written a splendid study of the theology operative in the sermons of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., which will handsomely reward preachers of all stripes who read it. Dr. Yang is assistant professor of Christian ministries at the College of Christian Studies at Portland Seminary, George Fox University, and has written on various aspects of homiletics.

Yang's slim volume accomplishes his goal in four chapters. The first and longest (5-37) reviews the sources from which Dr. King drew to create his distinct theology. Yang briefly surveys King's black church liberation motif that suffused the hearers' lives, worship, and preaching practices, and scriptural interpretive tools like allegory and typology. A second influence was theological: King's home church's emphasis on an all-powerful God and ethical concern for social oppressions, black theologies of liberation and reconciliation, his college and seminary formation, the Boston Personalism that he learned at Boston University, and then the theologies of both Tillich and Barth. A final formative influence on King's preaching was, according to Yang, the violent reality of American society in which he lived. King noted both the social violence and the spiritual violence it impressed upon victims and perpetrators. In particular, Gandhi's nonviolent *satyagraha* ("soul force") powerfully affected King's theological development, as did Walter Rauschenbusch's emphasis on the relevance of the gospel for the whole person in her/his social and economic conditions. Yang does a fine job marshaling an extensive cast of characters and their positions, building the case for King's creative synthesis of their ideas in his preaching. Strangely missing in action in Yang's story, though, are two figures that were also formative influences on King: Reinhold Niebuhr and Howard Thurman, whose contribution to King's development was particularly significant (Yang does provide a suggestive footnote on Thurman, which leaves one wanting more).

The second chapter is the beating heart of the book, explicating King's theology revealed through his sermons. For King, God is revealed in both nature and human history, takes the initiative to transform this violent reality, and is sublimely personal toward beloved human creations, with power to effect the redemption of even enemies. King's sermons reveal the stamp of his Boston Personalist studies, for they posit the innate worth of every human being—even oppressors. Directly as a result, if one claims to be empowered by this all-powerful God, "any form of violence must be denied and resisted" (42). Jesus is the "most tangible" example for us of the personal loving God, who "practices social justice and liberates his people from oppression and violence" (44). Further, God's universal love shown in Jesus can transform not only the lives of individuals, but also entire societies. How? For King, evil was the socio-economic and political situation that will finally be defeated in human history by the "powerful, inexorable forces of good" (44–45). The vision that drove King was his particular version of the Reign of God, the "beloved community," through which God resists the world's evil with our cooperation. King's preaching celebrated God's victory over evil, and also the universal reconciliation of God and humans, and oppressed with oppressor. Thus King, Yang claims, is best viewed as a prophetic mediator who stood in the midst of a conflicted people and proclaimed God's reconciliation.

Yang's third chapter explores the display of King's theology in one particular sermon, "The Death of Evil upon the Seashore." King's sermon, he demonstrates, attempts to free *both* oppressed and oppressor through an "exorcism" of the cosmic evil operating in both society at

large, and the evil actions of individual oppressors; God thus effecting universal—and nonviolent—reconciliation.

In a brief final chapter, Yang suggests ways contemporary preachers might apply King's theology and methods to the present world in which preachers and their hearers unveil and deny the cultural ethos of violence, and participate in God's transforming work here on earth. The preacher thus takes on a new mediating role in which the sermon is both a pastoral message to the total person, and necessarily socially prophetic. Yang offers a concluding sermon as one example of a contemporary appropriation of King's theological insights.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. exemplified and influenced African American preaching. Yang's exposition of the theological heart of King's preaching is rich fare for contemporary homilists.

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