

Ellen F. Davis with Austin McIver Dennis. *Preaching the Luminous Word: Biblical Sermons and Homiletical Essays*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016. 356 pages. \$33.

This volume contains fifty sermons collected by Austin Dennis and preached by Ellen Davis from 1985 to 2015. The book also contains five essays by Davis: 1) Witnessing to God in the Midst of Life: Old Testament Preaching, 2) Holy Preaching: Ethical Interpretation and the Practical Imagination, 3) Surprised by Wisdom: Preaching Proverbs, 4) “Here I Am”: Preaching Isaiah as a Book of Vocation, 5) Preaching in Witness to the Triune God. Four of these five essays were previously published in other journals or books. The fifth essay introduces the last thirteen sermons that are from New Testament texts and describes how preaching from the Old Testament and the New Testament are not “distinct activities” for Davis (245). She reads texts in their larger canonical context as they deal with the biblical story of “creation and new creation; suffering and death, redemption and resurrection; . . .” (246).

Most of the fifty sermons come from Old Testament texts. Thirteen of the fifty come from New Testament texts. Dennis selected the sermons out of a collection of several hundred and writes a brief introduction to each one. Twenty of the sermons were preached in a church context, seventeen in various seminary chapels, and six at different convocation, commencement, and bachelorette occasions. Three wedding sermons and one funeral sermon are included. One sermon was preached to a church in Sudan. Three sermons were delivered at different conferences. The sermons represent a variety of preaching contexts which adds to the strength of this collection.

Davis identifies her sermon style as “biblical preaching” which means that her preaching “takes its primary impetus from scriptural texts” (xxii). Her philosophy and theology of preaching causes her to “make light use of sermon illustrations” (xxii). She was influenced by the preaching of John Donne and the theological imagination that informed his sermons. When she uses illustrations, they are brief. Davis believes the greatest challenge facing preachers today is the “shallow readings of Scripture” (xii and xvi).

In the foreword, Stanley Hauerwas maintains that Davis does not need homiletical theory. Her sermons are not theory driven because her sermons are more art form than skills based. Her sermons are primarily informed by “the text and her exegetically informed imagination” (xvi). Hauerwas affirms Davis’ belief that illustrations contribute to sentimental and superficial sermons (xvii). She is committed to “exegetical sermons” (xvii). Influenced at Yale by Hans Frei and George Lindbeck, her preaching is characterized by a strong post-liberal theology. She wants to bring listeners into the world of Scripture. She uses the biblical text to “‘absorb’ the world rather than the world the text” (xix).

An ecological theme runs through many of Davis’ sermons. She addressed this topic in more detail in her 2009 work, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (Cambridge UP). In the current volume, the reader gets a glimpse into how she incorporates ecological concerns in her sermons. In one of her sermons, Davis speaks of a “deep ecology” which is a phrase she uses to affirm that the ecological crisis is not primarily related to technology but to sin that isolates humans from the rest of creation. It is the sin that privileges humans over the rest of creation (301). In the afterword, Dennis observes this thread weaving through her sermons and refers to it as an “ecological homiletic” (317, 324). It is a double-pronged homiletic that expresses Scripture’s concern for creation and for the recreation of God’s world.

Davis honors Scripture not dismissing too quickly those passages that rub us the wrong way because of our cultural values. For example, against the preference of many preachers and theologians, she does not excise the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. Rather she preaches it as a story for people who already believe and who face a most difficult experience (6–7). It is a story more about trust than obedience.

Davis says she does not allow theory to drive her sermons but instead theology is the lead dance partner. This is made clear when she says she always preaches texts in their larger canonical context of both Old and New Testament (245–249). This is an important model for preachers to follow today.

Hauerwas, however, takes it a step further and concludes that Davis' "sermonic practice is blessedly free of theory" (xv). It is one thing to say that theory does not drive the sermon; it is another thing to say that the sermon is "blessedly free of theory." Homiletic theory is not without value. Theory plays an important role, if only in a supportive way, in enabling preachers to understand what homileticians identify as effective means of communicating Scripture. Theory opens up options and allows preachers to broaden their perspective. As an aid, however, it disappears into the background of the process. A well thought-out post-liberal theory does lie in the background of Davis' sermons whether or not it is stated.

One more observation in this regard: Davis' emphasis on the use of imagination in preaching is reminiscent of Gadamer's concept of "play" as the preacher encounters the text. Play involves a dialectical movement between preacher, imagination, and text. In this process, a good preacher will be quite aware of theory but will not impose it on the text or the sermon; it remains subservient. This book is an excellent collection of sermons and essays that I highly recommend and plan to use as a textbook.

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