

Donna Giver-Johnston. *Writing for the Ear, Preaching from the Heart*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2021. 136 pages. \$19.99.

Donna Giver-Johnston's book is an ode to the power and continuous role of memory, heart, and holistic presence in crafting sermons that engage listeners. She describes her book as "a guide for helping preachers write sermons for the ear so that they can be remembered and preach sermons from the heart, without a manuscript, so that they are memorable" (xix).

She opens chapter 1, "Aching Ears," with a concrete example of the need listeners have for good news by sharing her experience as a Presbyterian church pastor in Pittsburgh during the 2018 Tree of Life Synagogue shootings. She uses the story as a bridge to a discussion of cultural changes that have led to declining church attendance and effected the way people in the United States identify with religion. Noting the limited attention spans and increased noise evident in contemporary culture, Giver-Johnston states that the "result has been a disconnect between church and society, between preacher and listener" (18). She then offers an overview of the ways preaching has and has not changed, including an examination of the New Homiletic, and the ways late 20th and 21st century homiletics has "moved away from the restrictive written word to reclaim the spoken word" (21). Giver-Johnston applauds many of these moves and argues for preachers crafting sermons that offer "a word [listeners] can relate to and remember" (27). She "encourage[s] preachers to lay down the written manuscript and pick up the practice of oral proclamation" (27).

In chapter 2, "Longing Hearts," Giver-Johnston carries forward her emphasis on the oral conveyance of stories and on remembrance. She shares Scripture passages speaking to ways God has communicated in the past, asserting, "Ultimately, God spoke a word of remembrance.... Throughout the biblical story, God remembered the covenant and communicated divine love in different ways, through different spokespersons, so that God would also remember" (37-38). She then focuses on the Incarnation and a God of relationship who continues to communicate in and through the body, including through the church, as the body of Christ, in its rituals and practices. Giver-Johnston observes, "The word of God continues to be made flesh and communicate love to us and through us in preaching. Preaching is...a dynamic encounter between God's word and human words" (53). Preaching can provide what contemporary listeners want, which according to Giver-Johnston, is to "come to know the heart of God, which is always longing to connect with and speak to the hearts of God's people" (56).

Chapter 3, "Writing for the Ear," gives practical tips for developing sermons with few or no notes. She begins with sharing how she analyzed her writing and edited her manuscripts. She states for example, "I found that I did my best editing not sitting at the computer but standing in the pulpit, practicing my sermon, not silently writing down words from my mind but speaking words aloud" (59). Her goal she says was "to communicate in such a way that listeners would remember what was said or how they felt when they heard it and could take with them a word from God" (59). Noting the differences between impromptu, memorized, and extemporaneous sermons, Giver-Johnston shares extemporaneous methods used by other preachers and gives a detailed description of her version of extemporaneous writing for the ear. The chapter includes her weekly process and practices for crafting sermons, exercises, and a sample sermon.

Chapter 4, "Preaching from the Heart," sets forth descriptions of and exercises for spiritual practice and preparation. Giver-Johnston asserts, "Throughout the week, the preacher prepares by attending to prayer and self-care and by asking and seeking God's presence" (102). She also addresses the performance of the sermon, observing that "the preacher who proclaims

the sermon through animation of the mind, body, and spirit and who abides in the present moment brings the sermon to life” (102).

Although there are places in the early chapters with an overabundance of statistics and strung together Scripture passages, Giver-Johnston makes up for them in the last two chapters, where her voice is engaging and her passion for connecting with her congregation, and desire to help other preachers enhance their connections with listeners are evident. She reminds preachers of the benefits to listeners of preaching without a manuscript and offers detailed guidance on how to do so.

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