

Veronice Miles. *Embodied Hope: A Homiletical Theology Reflection*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021. 268 pages. \$32.

Veronice Miles' *Embodied Hope: A Homiletical Theology Reflection* uses an interdisciplinary approach to address questions of how debilitating despair arises for Christians in spite of the gospel proclamation of hope and how the embodiment of hope can combat despair and engender transformation. For Miles, embodying hope includes adherence to theological principles of love and justice rooted in the *imago Dei* and God's desire for *shalom* as well as their connection to individual and communal praxis.

Miles opens with a reflection on the need she and other clergy felt in July 2016, after several traumatic events in the U.S., to speak to their congregations in ways that acknowledged the warranted grief and despair while encouraging hope and ongoing action for social justice. This book in essence sets forth Miles' guide to doing so in ways that are beneficial to scholars, clergy, and anyone interested in the theological connection of hope to Christian history and proclamation.

In chapter 1, "Toward an Embodied Theology of Hope," Miles defines embodied hope as a "conceptual metaphor for Hope's presence in our lives" and "a language for describing *that which creates in each human being yearning for wholeness and well-being, the always-speaking voice of God's Spirit assuring us of God's presence, power, and fidelity and calling us toward loving, just, and restorative action.*" (19; emphasis and capitalization in original). She asserts that while humans have the capacity to act as partners with God in working toward God's *shalom*, we often do not believe we can influence the world around us or, due to deceptive messaging, fail to acknowledge the need for transformation. According to Miles, lack of imagination and individual and communal despair can limit our ability to practice an embodied theology of hope.

In the next two chapters, Miles sets forth nine channels through which society induces despair and disperses deceptive and debilitating messages. Miles begins in chapter 2, "Culturally Induced Despair Revealed," with four of the channels: colloquial expressions, idioms of exasperation, cultural assumptions or social conventions, and constituent elements of our known world. Each channel is addressed after an overview of how culture is being defined and used in the book.

In chapter 3, "Disclosing the Dangers of Culturally Induced Despair," Miles meticulously examines the ways in which imaginative capacity and engagement can be limited by five channels: negating and dehumanizing images, myths, ideologies, theologies, and ecclesial commitments. She begins by exploring the positive and negative roles played by human imagination. Looking at the works of Paul Ricoeur, Maxine Green, Paulo Freire, bell hooks, and other theologians and philosophers, Miles concludes that "imaginative dearth fueled by the deceptive language of despair [is] the primary threat to our ability to live with Hope and imagine our world anew" (63). Miles then explains the ways negating and dehumanizing images, myths, and ideologies can lead to imaginative dearth. She also avers that "[r]esisting imaginative dearth...requires us to maintain a necessary tension between critical thought and imaginative abundance by permitting critical thought to inform imaginative abundance and vice versa" (70). Miles asserts that "[w]hen critical thought, imaginative abundance, and concrete action coalesce in service to God's *shalom*, we can indeed resist imaginative dearth" (71).

In addressing theologies and ecclesial commitments that lead to the promulgation of deceptive language and the acceptance of social injustices, Miles reminds Christians of the teachings of the canonized scriptures with regard to love of God and love of neighbor. She

observes that "not unlike our predecessors, we live within the tension of our desire to live and proclaim the gospel and competing interests that call into question the gospel's efficacy for our ability to survive and thrive in our world today" (87).

Miles then gives a poignant summary of Christian history from the early church through the Crusades. This summary includes an examination of the impact on Jesus' followers of the delay of the Parousia, the persecution of Christians by Nero, and the founding of the Muslim faith and Muslim territorial expansion. She also notes the institutional church's increasing alignment with the rulers of empire, material wealth, and military power. According to Miles, this alignment perpetuates the tension for believers and the related "theological and ecclesial distortion co-opts our imaginative potential, preventing us from imagining and actualizing new possibilities for our lives together" (109).

In chapter 4, "The Anticipatory Language of Hope," Miles turns to the ways in which messages of despair may be countered and life-enriching imagination increased. She explores specific gospel passages demonstrating why Jesus' gospel proclamation is "the archetypal reservoir from which Hope's anticipatory language flows" (132).

Miles speaks most directly to the task of preaching in chapter 5, "The Disruptive and Energizing Power of Proclamation." She examines the ways in which the message of the gospel and its messengers can disrupt deceptive cultural messaging and energize forces for justice. To assist preachers in these endeavors, Miles concludes the chapter with a description of "four homiletical values and practices [including] embracing empathy proofed by compassion, eliminating distortion, amplifying Hope's assurance and call, and cultivating imaginative abundance and purposeful, Hope-filled action" (151).

In chapter 6, "The Courageously Audacious Practice of Hope," Miles discusses ways preaching impacts the development of imagination and courage. She does so through an examination of the work of preachers and other leaders in movements for social justice and civil rights in the U.S.

In an appendix, Miles includes a three-page critical analysis of preaching for use during sermon preparation. The analysis consists of questions for reflection on potential distortions that impede the congregation's ability to fully embody a hope-filled homiletic, on the perceived positive and negative ways in which those distortions impact members of the congregation, and on ways to invoke a faithful response from the congregation.

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