

Kate Hanch. *Storied Witness: The Theology of Black Women Preachers in 19th Century America*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2022. 196 pages. \$28.

Kate Hanch's book *Storied Witness: The Theology of Black Women Preachers in 19th Century America* offers a resource for introductory preaching and theology classes. Hanch's approachable writing style and succinct descriptions of the 19th century socio-economic landscape also renders the book helpful for expanding congregations' understanding of the importance of sharing their own stories and the potential spiritual impact of doing so.

Hanch, a self-identified White middle-class woman, joins a growing chorus of works extolling the contributions of 18th, 19th, and early 20th century Black women preachers and writers. Hanch focuses on three of these women: Zilpha Elaw, Julia Foote, and Sojourner Truth. Using their sermons, autobiographies, and life experiences, Hanch articulates their theologies and the ways their bodies and lived experiences served as authoritative texts for understanding Christian theology and praxis.

Hanch begins by summarizing why the stories of these women are important for our individual and communal well-being. In chapter 1, "Learning from Subverted Stories: The Wisdom of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Preachers," Hanch claims that Elaw, Foote, and Truth were called to preach and theologize through spoken and written words as well as through their bodies. Hanch states, "the witness they leave behind are works of theology that resonate with twenty-first-century concerns. Their theologies honored bodiliness, practiced relational empathy, and are mystically contemplative" (3).

In chapter 2, "Zilpha Elaw: Following the Spirit's Foolish Call," Hanch explores the concept of God's wisdom as foolishness to the world through the vocational discernment and ministry of Elaw. Hanch compares Elaw to Jesus and the apostle Paul in her willingness to follow God's call wherever it led, including into the Southern United States where Elaw could easily have been captured and sold into slavery. Hanch observes that Elaw's memoir "subtly reveals a foolish theology that exposes the weaknesses of the dominant society and presents a liberating God who especially calls her as a Black woman" (20). Elaw preached to slaveholders in the U.S. and misogynistic Methodists in England using their claims to superiority as evidence of their spiritual weakness. Hanch notes that Elaw turned the restrictions on her Black body into strengths by creatively crossing boundaries in language and presence as well as embracing a mysticism that gave her spiritual authority through that same body. Elaw's documentation of her encounters as an itinerant preacher offer evidence of how Christ can work through the most disparaged of bodies in inhospitable and even hostile spaces. Through the Spirit and Elaw's ability to discern the Spirit's guidance, Elaw's liminality generates spaces of opportunity and of challenge to oppressive forces.

Unlike Elaw, Julia Foote saw welcome as a key to discernment. In chapter 3, "Julia Foote: Bodying the Word," Hanch observes that Foote would only occupy pulpits in which she was fully welcomed and where all listeners were welcomed to enter and to sit where they pleased. Hanch states, "By loving and advocating for herself, [Foote] simultaneously advocates and loves her neighbors, particularly her Black neighbors" (79). Foote also discerned a need to put her theology in writing, creating an autobiography that simultaneously served as a documentation of her sermons. Referring to Foote's book, *A Brand Plucked from the Fire: An Autobiographical Sketch*, Hanch states, "Foote writes like a preacher would preach, addressing her audience directly, switching between narrative and sermonizing. Thus, for her, to body the Word is to express herself as a sermonic event and established spiritual authority" (71).

According to Hanch, these theological and spiritual expressions or bodying the Word represented a more expansive and holistic process than what is often referred to as embodiment. Foote, for example, understood and communicated her spirituality and theological positions through engagement with a variety of texts, including the Christian Scriptures, her own lived experiences and those of other contemporary and historical figures, and 19th century legal and cultural writings.

In chapter 4 "Sojourner Truth: The Spirit's Witness," Hanch refers to Truth's relationship with the Holy Spirit as a "witness." She states, "The Holy Spirit as witness allows [Truth] to celebrate her Black body throughout her life, despite the numerous struggles she faced" (112). This "witness" carried forth in her actions on behalf of her family and community and in her engagement with Scripture. Hanch avers, "[T]he Spirit within [Truth] enabled her to discern the character of God through the witness of Scripture" (132). Hanch characterizes Truth as a preacher who believed that the Holy Spirit was within her, she bore witness to the Holy Spirit, and her ability to bear witness demonstrated that the Holy Spirit was "continually working in her life" (132).

In chapter 5, "Black Women Preachers as Exemplars of a Prophetic Pastoral Theology," Hanch highlights the ways Elaw, Foote, and Truth lived the theologies they preached. This included honing the ability to value self and empathize with others while challenging oppressive individuals and systems. Hanch avers, "As the women preached a word of comfort to the oppressed, the privileged would have heard judgment in their voices" (150). Hanch also examines how contemplation and mysticism helped them to continually grow in their theological perspectives, vocational discernment, and relationships with God.

The theologies of preaching espoused by Elaw, Foote, and Truth can inspire and instruct 21st century preachers and homileticians. In their often disregarded and demeaned 19th century Black female bodies, they proclaimed a God who loved and called them not in spite of their bodies but because of them. Their bodies were created in God's image and their physical presence mediated the Divine. Through sharing their stories and their spiritual "witness," Hanch's book provides an insightful introduction to their theologies of preaching and the ways in which every being's physical presence can mediate the Divine when there is the courage and spiritual discernment to make it so.

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