

Mike Graves, David J. Schlafer, eds. *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008. 244 pages, \$24.99.

In *What's the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* editors Mike Graves and David J. Schlafer have collected essays from fourteen contributors to honor the jazz piano playing preacher and professor, Eugene Lowry. Recognizing the achievements he has made as preacher, teacher, author, and innovator, the authors celebrate his lifelong commitment to preaching story and offer their own vision for the future of narrative preaching.

The volume is divided into three parts that touch up on the past (Part One), present (Part Two), and future (Part Three) of narrative preaching. Part One begins with Charles Rice's retrospective on some of narrative preaching's forerunners and continues with Ronald J. Allen's essay highlighting ways in which the story speaks to the church and informs its theology and outlining some limitations of narrative preaching. The next two chapters feature perspectives on the compatibility of the narrative style with the rise of women in the pulpit and with African American churches.

The essays in Part Two report on the present state of narrative preaching. Richard L. Eslinger kicks off the section by examining and evaluating the steps of the "Lowry Loop" as they have developed throughout the years. Fred B. Craddock follows with an appeal for preachers to state the church's metanarrative more explicitly from the pulpit. David Buttrick then advises preachers to use stories in the pulpit to create theological meanings for the congregation. The remaining chapters of the section find Thomas G. Long responding to critics of the narrative style of preaching and Robin R. Meyers defending the New Homiletic and using jazz metaphors to suggest a healthy balance between text and rhetoric.

Part Three looks ahead to the future of preaching and offers suggestions for ways in which the narrative style can be most effective. Frank A. Thomas identifies the theme of hope in African American preaching and recommends that preachers (of all ethnicities) tap into its therapeutic value. In the next chapter, Barbara K. Lundblad turns to stories of marginalized women in the Old Testament and encourages the church to interact with and respond to narratives that shock listeners. Mike Graves cites listeners' insatiable thirst for closure in the sermons they hear and suggests that some of Jesus' parables were not meant to be explained, but rather pondered over. He challenges preachers to leave the occasional question unanswered and preach an open-ended sermon every once in a while as a way of getting the members of the congregation to wrestle with the text themselves. In the final two chapters, David J. Schlafer asks how narrative preaching informs the church's sense of moral discernment and Thomas H. Troeger advises preachers to revamp the Lowry Loop and employ creative innovations to narrative preaching as a way of reaching a globalized, multitasking generation.

Rather than just a self-congratulatory gesture written by narrative preachers about narrative preaching, this book is a critical examination of the benefits, limitations, successes, and shortcomings of the plotted sermon. The book provides a broad view of the history of narrative preaching and its fundamental qualities. At the same time the authors focus on creative ways of enhancing its effectiveness.

In one of the more standout chapters, "A Match Made in Heaven," Beverly Zink-Sawyer demonstrates that the narrative preaching style is particularly attractive and effective among women preachers because of their natural proclivity toward narrative communication and shared personal experience. She also shows that the proliferation of narrative preaching and women in the pulpit have complemented one another, saying, "...Women have brought a recognition of the

legitimacy of the narrative quality of experience” (48). Another high point in the collection of essays is “Out of the Loop” where Long skillfully defends the view, also held by Eugene Lowry, that life itself has a narrative structure, countering one particular critic who thinks otherwise. He calls attention to the danger of a future in which the modern churchgoer does not relate to narrative preaching because they do not have “a coherent identity narrative...that shapes, guides, and clarifies their lives and gives them their primary identity” (129). Craddock and Allen also stress the importance of articulating the Christian metanarrative from the pulpit. Without specifying this big picture by which the audience can interpret the narrative elements of a sermon, the message is nothing more than a weekly dose of pleasant ideas.

Overall, *What’s the Shape of Narrative Preaching?* proves to be a valuable contribution to the study and practice of preaching narrative sermons. It offers practical suggestions and caveats for preachers and professors who wish to improve the current state of homiletics. This is an appropriate way to honor a man who has dedicated so many years of his life doing just that. Whether or not readers are familiar with the work of Eugene Lowry, by the end of this book, they not only gain the knowledge of what he has contributed to the discipline of narrative preaching, but also a sense of the profound impact his efforts have made in the field of homiletics.

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