

Susan Durber. *Preaching Like a Woman*. London: SPCK Press, 2007. 191 pages. \$24.95

The Rev. Dr. Susan Durber, author of *Preaching Like a Woman*, is a minister of St. Columba's United Reformed Church, Oxford and Cumnor United Reformed Church and also Joint Reformed Chaplain to the University of Oxford. She will soon become Principal of Westminster College, Cambridge.

In 1994 Durber co-edited, with Heather Walton, *Silence in Heaven: a Book of Women's Preaching* (SCM Press, 1994). In that book they sought to call women to use their voices in the pulpit to bring about change in the Church, creating a new preaching language (1). They hoped to encourage women to speak from the experiences of a woman's body, to draw on the wisdom of women of faith of the past, and to preach in a way that took into account the insights that feminist and womanist criticism had brought to biblical criticism. Almost fifteen years have passed since that book's publication. Durber's assessment of her British context in 2007 is that, despite the greater number of women in pulpits, there is a declining confidence in preaching as a communicative space that women can use to reform the Church. Many women in feminist circles view preaching as "outmoded, authoritarian and irretrievably male" (6). Others, both men and women beyond such circles, feel it cannot compete with "the more interactive styles of contemporary learning, let alone entertainment" (3).

In *Preaching Like a Woman*, Durber draws energy and inspiration from the recent insights of American homiletics, both male and female, as well as the homiletical and theological traditions of African American and Latin American women. There she finds a basis for a defense of preaching's potential to be poetic, interactive, culturally relevant and transformative (8). She is able to meet what she deems a "general depression about and suspicion of preaching" with a ringing statement of faith in preaching's continued relevance. "I would argue that, instead of letting preaching fade from the scene or casting it off as an outdated or even irredeemable form, women could be and should be proactive in using it and reshaping it as one place where the Christian faith is being made today" (5-6).

Preaching Like a Woman is divided into three parts. Each has an introductory essay that introduces the topic for that part of the book followed by several sermons. The three topics are "The Bible in a Woman's Hands," "A Woman Uses the Lectionary," and "A Woman as Creative Theologian."

In her essay, "The Bible in a Woman's Hands," Durber summarizes the by now familiar approaches of Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, Phyllis Trible, and Rosemary Radford Reuther. Perhaps less familiar to American preachers are Alicia Suskin Ostriker who approaches texts through the medium of Midrash, and Latin American contextual theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid. Althaus-Reid is concerned that too many feminist approaches are "overly anxious to fit the living woman to the text" (23). She seeks to tell the stories that are not told in the Bible, turning to "women's writing, novels, and poems for an alternative place where women's lives can find meaning and expression" (23).

Durber's format, presenting a brief accounting of various feminist approaches followed by several sermons that embody them, is a helpful pedagogical tool. I would have liked to hear from a broader array of womanist and two-thirds world approaches to Scripture in this essay.

In Part Two, "A Woman Uses the Lectionary," Durber warns that many lectionaries have worked to intensify the androcentric bias of the biblical texts. She urges women to subvert that bias by "preaching from their experience of living life as a woman, with a woman's body...a powerful place from which to speak, and a place of resourcefulness for new ways of

understanding” (68). She encourages male preachers to be attentive to a wider range of human experience, including that of women (71).

Durber begins Part Three with a brief essay entitled, “A Woman as a Creative Theologian.” Here she encourages women preachers to resist the “old separations in the casting of knowledge...to resist the separations of head and heart, of mind and body, that have characterized much theology of the past” (128), and to boldly speak of God in ways that break out of the box of male metaphors and language.

The introduction’s presentation of American homiletics would have benefited from a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the New Homiletic. As an American homiletician, I had the feeling I was visiting familiar ideas and authors in the company of someone to whom they were not so familiar. I found myself reflecting on why just these authors were selected and not others. That said, however, I can see pedagogical potential in the book – concise essays paired with sermons. I appreciated the fact that the sermons spanned the canonical spectrum. It was instructive to read an analysis of the current state of preaching through the eyes of a sensitive, accomplished, and passionate practitioner from another country and culture.

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