

Jennifer L. Lord. *Finding Language and Imagery: Words for Holy Speech*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010. 93 pages. \$12.00.

Every preacher—beginner, expert or somewhere between—must step into the pulpit and bring forth words. Where are those words found, what can they be expected to do, and how are the words for any given sermon tested and chosen? These are the questions Austin Seminary homiletician Jennifer Lord takes on in this compact – but by no means slight – volume in the “Elements of Preaching” series. Lord bids preachers become “custodians of words,” casting a wide net and yet sifting carefully to find, for any sermon, the words and images of “resurrection speech” (9). Such speech, shaped by biblical text and context, is speech that matters, enabling hearers to participate in the life-giving dynamic of resurrection life.

As backdrop to the practical task of choosing words, Lord leads her readers briefly through six theories about the function of language. The language of preaching can be said to communicate a message, persuade, tell truth (“what is real about God”), linguistically structure a worldview, or performatively “bring into being” what it declares. Lord’s discussions of these theories, followed with helpful questions, are remarkably illuminating given their brevity, although readers inexperienced with these theories may struggle with the distinctions. (A comparative chart in the Appendix is a help.)

A highly practical third chapter plunges into the “weekly word work” (29) of moving from biblical text all the way to preaching event. The focus throughout is on the imaginative but disciplined work of harvesting and honing words and images with the preaching event in mind. Lord emphasizes freedom at the first and second stages (*interpreting* and *writing*), in which the goal is to let words and images arise from the text, associative connections, and preaching context. At the *preparing* and *editing* stages, this wealth of words and images is culled until the sermon has emerged.

Lord follows up with a sermon of her own on Isaiah 25:6-9. Offering and testing images of harvest and anti-harvest, Lord leads her listeners to the Lord’s table with its rich and marrow-filled food. This “food from the center of things” (60) enables us to distinguish a worthy harvest from artificiality and glut, and true harvest from the anti-harvest produced by human greed. Lord offers commentary on the sermon’s language, tracing the stages from interpretation through editing that produced Lord’s specific choices of image and language. The book concludes with an alphabetically arranged list of key words and phrases related to the language of sermons. Anyone who has struggled to teach beginning preachers basic homiletical “tact” will appreciate entries on “Irony and Sarcasm” and “Self-Disclosure.”

Some important matters seem to receive slight attention. What is the relation between words and Word, for example? Does language become resurrection speech by virtue of the power of word choices and images, or do well-chosen words serve a Word-seeking expression? One wishes, too, for more of Lord’s succinct wisdom concerning the sermon’s focus or claim. While she alludes several times to sermon focus, when and how it is determined and what role it plays in the disciplined sifting of words and images are undeveloped. And while Lord helpfully suggests free-writing two pages about a theological term such as “grace” in strictly everyday language, one could have wished for examples showing how the theological language of texts may be rendered with integrity in a vivid vernacular. One suspects that space constraints stifled more discussion on certain topics.

Lord succeeds in inviting her readers to embrace the necessary work of crafting preaching language not as a burden, but as an adventure that calls equally for free-flowing

imagination and discipline. Preachers willing to plunge into text and context with eyes and ears wide open to images and words, Lord assures us, will reap a harvest ready for winnowing—one more than sufficient to convey the life-giving claims of the Gospel.

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