

Jacob D. Myers. *Preaching Must Die!: Troubling Homiletical Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018. 220 pages. \$24.

Jacob D. Myers, an assistant professor at Columbia Theological Seminary, presents a thought-provoking but somewhat troubling book—perhaps the title itself for some homileticians, the book’s density for others. Myers is hoping to “change the game” in the guild of homiletics, which he understands as moving in the direction of developing homiletical theologies (xiv-1). The issue for Myers is twofold: first, the central features of preaching are not simply theological but deeply *philosophical* (2). Second, preaching and homiletics mostly paired with theology and rhetoric are always in a troubling/tensional relationship (3). Myers seeks to “think through the possibility of subverting homiletics *through* preaching” and to “(re)orient homiletics *as* trouble for preaching” by philosophically (mostly feminist and poststructuralist) interrogating the homiletically-established constitutive elements of preaching: *language*, the *preacher*, *scripture*, and *God* (4).

Why must preaching die? Indicating that homiletics has strived to keep preaching alive to ensure its own survival (7-12), the author argues that a certain death/deconstruction is always already at work within homiletics and preaching: troubling them from within, attending to otherness, and pointing toward an alternative way (14-15). Myers asserts that homiletics must help preaching die a good death in order for preaching to meet its Maker, God. For this aim, he tries to submit homiletical theologies to the deconstruction already at work within them.

In chapter one, he examines *language* with a deconstructive lens, inviting readers to use already troubled language to trouble preaching. How is language troubled? According to Myers, language constituted by a socio-symbolic structure of power relations is not neutral but arbitrary and value-laden, producing different meanings and ways of thinking (29-30). It is therefore crucial to embrace the sheer reality of language as trouble in our preaching to disturb thought from within, allowing that which has been occluded and silenced by language to be seen and heard (40-41). Specifically, he suggests that deconstruction unveils the constructed reality of language, power, and history by attending to the mutually interconnected social, economic, cultural, political, and intellectual factors playing across time and space (43-50). A preacher must open to and welcome the other beyond sexual, racial and ethnic binaries (51).

In the second chapter, Myers deals with the *preacher’s* selfhood (rather than identity), describing how one opens to and welcomes the other by crossing over the other side of identity. After explaining that selfhood/individuality is, like thought, constructed from language out of identity and difference, sameness and otherness, (58) Myers asserts that a preacher’s selfhood should be deconstructed; “There is no ‘I’ preacher” (60) because identities are not fixed in the socio-political location, but are troubled, floating and transient (62). He further insists that preachers’ selfhood as a singular, unified subject is to decrease so that modes of identity increase, along with a deep sensitivity to the intersectional and diachronic complexities of identity (66, 71). Then, “how... may the preacher participate in the trouble always already at work with/in their identity?” (79). Myers claims a preacher should embrace the death of one’s selfhood by risking the self on behalf of the other—that is, listening to/for the other and identifying with the world (81-86). To preach is to die for those whom we love (91).

Chapter three begins with Myer’s lament on the economic (masculine) appropriation and consumption of *scripture* in various *telois* of homiletical theologies: “Scripture is in trouble for preaching because of how it is valued and regulated by homiletical theologies” (120). While acknowledging their inextricability from a certain economy, he presents a feminine economy of

scripture, designated as a homiletic *echognomic*, drawing on a feminist philosopher, Hélène Cixous, who suggests “the paradoxical logic of an economy without reserve” (135). The core argument is that a preacher should approach scripture being mindful of one’s own changing, spatio-temporal configuration with the foci of gift, hospitality, democracy, justice and friendship rather than with those of economy, rationality and logic (136-7).

The last chapter directly confronts homiletical theologies by engaging *God* in/as trouble. Labeling contemporary homiletics as a homiletic of God’s presence (147), Myers resists its privileging of speech over writing and rebuts its preoccupation with sameness, presence, and life, along with its fear of otherness, absence, and death (148-158). He argues that preaching paired with homiletical theologies is itself the death of God because it necessarily places conditions on God, restricting God’s fullness (160). Drawing on John Caputo, Myers offers a radical homiletics that haunts every homiletic by substituting theology and rhetoric with *theopoetics* and opening a discursive space for the im/possibility of encountering God (162). Moreover, Myers insists that because God always already troubles/haunts preaching and every homiletical ontology, they must be exposed to the radical o/Other irreducible to sameness (164-174).

I found this book groundbreaking in many ways, including two specific contributions. First, the author invites the guild to rethink the relatively neglected fact that preaching and homiletics have always been influenced by diverse philosophies, which necessitates a more active engagement with them. I appreciate that the author explicates multiple philosophical concepts, and his suggestions from feminist and poststructuralist perspectives are necessary and timely for our context. Second, in deconstructing four elements of preaching, Myers points to many resources, old and new—gesturing toward many junior scholars whose fine works are unnoticed in our homiletical discourse—to engage more fruitful future dialogue.

This book has several issues, however. First, its uneven structure (Ch. 2 and Ch. 4) can be dense and difficult to follow, and it includes scattered and sometimes excessive philosophical explications, redundancies that undermine the flow, and philosophical depth. Second, while I understand Myers’ overall concept (differentiating his radical homiletics from other homiletical theologies), I do not fully agree with the sometimes too strong binaries by which he characterizes contemporary homileticians. Many will be puzzled by Myers’ caricature of homileticians as operating in a certain economy of scripture (Ch. 3) and his differentiation from them, because his *echognomic* of scripture is not free from that economy. Additionally, other homileticians do not completely lack his *echognomic* elements (such as gift, hospitality, democracy, justice, and friendship). The author tends to evaluate homileticians to fit into his pre-established categories, which I think must be under deconstructive erasure. Third, while Myer’s troubling of homiletical theology and rhetoric (Ch. 1 and Ch. 4) invites some homileticians to actively employ the notion of ambience and uncertainty with “bold humility” in their homiletical models (188), others, unlike his characterization, are already struggling with deconstructive trouble in their own ways.

Despite these issues, I recommend this book to any homileticians and students who are ready to join the homiletical journey of deconstruction toward many in-between spaces, grappling with issues around language, the preacher, scripture, and God. I hope this deconstructive voice will continue to check preaching and homiletics in a more constructive way.

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