

John L. Thomas, Jr. *Voices in the Wilderness: Why Black Preaching Still Matters*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2018. 196 pages. \$26.

Drawing from the deep wells within the black religious experience, John L. Thomas, Jr., in this inaugural work, uses the metaphor of wilderness as he follows the contours of the historical landscape that formed and influenced what we know as black preaching. Using the dialectical method “which interprets the church as juxtaposed within polar opposite tensions” (9), Thomas wanders through various historical time periods, holding past and present in dialogue as he charts a new and more enduring path forward for black preaching. *Voice in the Wilderness* contains nine chapters, some of which include personal anecdotes and sermon excerpts from *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present* by Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas, which adds moments of black church/preaching practicality to an otherwise scholarly endeavor.

The journey begins with a fundamental question, listed as the title of his first chapter, “What Makes Black Preaching Black?” (19). Responding to the question, Thomas list several characteristics that identify black preaching. He notes that black preaching is that which takes place in the context of the African American struggle to exist. It is preaching focused on the needs, experiences, and histories of African Americans. It is also preaching that privileges those shared experiences. Additionally, Thomas writes, black preaching is relational; it is an event that shares the embedded knowledge of the community. It involves introducing new information, confirming the older narrative, and offering redactions when needed (19-22). A critical aspect of black preaching is the black hermeneutic, a unique method of biblical interpretation that takes the experiences of the people and the authority of Scripture seriously (26).

Chapters 2 and 3 examine the context and theology of black preaching, emphasizing the complexity of and therefore the required attentiveness to context (39-50), and the centrality of Jesus’ suffering as a core theological resource (58). Chapters 4 and 5 survey the shaping mechanisms of the wilderness. These pivotal chapters provide in-depth examination of several wilderness loci, namely the wilderness of slavery and emancipation, the slave preacher, the great migration, black radicalism, the urban plantation, and the sociological shifts complementing them. Chapter 6 identifies four theological streams that Thomas suggests flow through black sermons: the traditionalist, which privileges Scripture while focused on repentance; the spiritualist, which emphasizes God’s power through the movement of the Holy Spirit; here-and-now, which views God as a co-laborer and is also focused on self-reliance; and radical-prophetic, often viewed as a threat to the status quo due to its call and demand for change in unjust practices. In chapters 7 and 8, Thomas highlights exemplars of wilderness preaching, providing concrete examples of not only their sermons, but more importantly the effects of their wilderness shaping. The exemplars are Martin Luther King, Jr. Malcolm X, Jesse Jackson, Sojourner Truth, Prathia Hall, and Shirley Caesar.

Thomas concludes the book just as he began, and asks, “Where should we be headed?” (171). He asks the question in light of what Dr. William Barber calls the Third Reconstruction context (179). In doing so, Thomas challenges black preaching to remain faithful even as the environment in which the church exists continues to shift. Thomas further challenges black preaching to take more of a leadership role beyond its ecclesial confines. This can only be done if preachers are actively reading the moral compass of the current conditions.

This book brings together past and present as it looks to the future. On the one hand, it is an insightful and scholarly history of black preaching. On the other, it is a desk reference for

preachers and pastors. Written in an easy-to-read yet academic style, *Voices in the Wilderness* extends the conversations on black preaching begun by Henry Mitchell, Cleophus LaRue, Teresa Fry Brown, Kenyatta Gilbert, Paula McGee and others. Not only does Thomas extend the dialogue, but he adds a different level of depth and nuance through the use of the wilderness motif, a motif that brings the book to life. This book is required reading for both the academy and the pew. It is a much needed bridge between the two.

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