

HOMILETIC JOURNAL
Vol 48, No 2, (2023)
Table of Contents

Articles

A Teacher's Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletics Students	
Ian Bordenave.....	3

Preaching in Place: Reflections on the Sermons of Oscar Romero, Dislocated Pulpits, and the Dangers of an Incarnate Word	
Matthew D. Love.....	16

Pedagogy for Teachers of Homiletics

Best Practices in Education: Responsibly Teaching the History of Preaching	
The Rev. Caroline P. Smith.....	33

Reviews

Biblical Studies

Jared E. Alcántara, <i>How to Preach Proverbs</i>	
John C. Holbert.....	35

Lewis Brogdon, <i>The Bible in the Ashes of Social Chaos: An Introduction to Problematic Texts</i>	
Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby.....	37

Karoline M. Lewis, <i>Preaching the Word: Contemporary Approaches to the Bible for the Pulpit</i>	
Thomas G. Long.....	39

Media, Culture, and Identity

Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou, <i>Christianity and Critical Race Theory: A Faithful and Constructive Conversation</i>	
Melanie M. Bockmann.....	41

Kimberly R. Wagner, <i>Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma</i>	
Allie Utley.....	43

Practical Theology

Biko Mandela Gray, <i>Black Life Matter: Blackness, Religion, and the Subject</i>	
David Latimore.....	44

Diarmuid O'Murchu, <i>Beyond the Pandemic: Spiritual and Ecological Challenges</i> Samuel Lacher.....	46
--	----

John Roberto, editor, <i>Digital Ministry and Leadership in Today's Church</i> Rob O'Lynn.....	48
---	----

Preaching

Karla J. Bellinger and Michael E. Connors, CSC, <i>Remembering Why We Preach: A Retreat to Renew Your Spirit and Skill</i> Rob O'Lynn.....	50
---	----

R. Khari Brown, Ronald E. Brown, and James S. Jackson, <i>Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics</i> Crystal DesVignes.....	52
--	----

David R. Fields, <i>Preaching and the Mission of God: Faithful Witness after Christendom</i> Michael P. Knowles.....	54
---	----

Leah D. Schade, Jerry L. Sumney, and Emily Askew. <i>Introduction to Preaching: Scripture, Theology, and Sermon Preparation</i> Thomas G. Long.....	56
--	----

Theology

Jawanza Eric Clark, <i>Reclaiming Stolen Earth: An Africana Ecotheology</i> La Ronda D. Barnes.....	58
--	----

Worship

Stephen Burns & HyeRan Kim-Cragg, editors, <i>Conversations about Divine Mystery: Essays in Honor of Gail Ramshaw</i> Katrina J. Olson.....	60
--	----

A Teacher's Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletics Students

Ian Bordenave, OP, D.Min., Chaplain and Director
Fr. Val McInnes, OP, Center for Catholic Life at Tulane University

Abstract: *Fred Craddock in his textbook *Preaching* advised homiletics students to read a short story a week to help them become engaging preachers. He said that by taking the initiative to do so, students would relieve their professor of the contradiction of having to assign such reading. However, since most students will not read short stories on their own, teachers of preaching need to advocate and make room for them in their homiletics courses. Short stories offer instruction in unity, brevity, open-endedness, vocabulary, and difficulty. Also, short story collections can inspire one to preach a sermon series. This article discusses these short story traits and how teachers of preaching can introduce short stories to their students.*

Introduction

In his textbook *Preaching*, Fred Craddock encouraged homiletics students to read at least one short story a week to help them become better sermon designers. He said, "Since the short story is a first cousin of the sermon, the homiletics student could, for example, relieve the professor of the contradiction of having to assign such reading by taking the initiative to read at least one per week."¹ Even though Craddock addressed his comments to students of homiletics, he believed preachers could also benefit from reading short stories because he also said, "The ideal would be to begin in seminary the habit of reading such literature along with one's assignments in history, theology, and biblical studies, and then to maintain the practice through one's ministry."² Why such reading? Craddock expounded:

Reading good literature enlarges one's capacities as a creative human being and has a cumulative effect on one's vocabulary, use of the language, and powers of imagination. Not by conscious imitation but through the subtle influence of these great storytellers and poets, a preacher becomes more adept at arranging the materials of the sermon so that by restraint and thematic control, interest, clarity, and persuasiveness will be served.³

Still, despite these benefits from reading short stories, do not expect students to head to the library to check out books of short stories. Western culture is geared toward reading novels. Even when I talk with preachers about the benefits of reading short stories, most will say they still prefer novels to stories. Why is this? John Beevers, a retired tutor of creative writing at Lancaster University in England, offers this insight:

It may be that the short story is sidelined in the teaching of English in schools. It may simply be that reading in general, as entertainment, has to compete with computer games, TV and film, and that reading requires more effort. Furthermore, modern short stories are at the difficult end of the reading spectrum. The view that the present reading population is orientated towards easy reading is supported by the best-selling fiction lists. The lurid

¹ Fred Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 79.

² Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

and undemanding novel accounts for the majority of sales, so it is not surprising that the demanding modern short story accounts for so few.⁴

Moreover, Beevers says that readers incline toward novels because they become more emotionally invested in them than in short stories because short stories are over before you know it. He says that if there is to be a turnaround with readers taking up the short story as much as they do the novel, then it will take schools inculcating within students a love for the short story.⁵ According to Beevers, “Developing a population with a love of fine literature would be a long term matter. It would probably need to be developed in schools.”⁶ Hence, while I agree with Craddock that reading short stories is a beneficial practice, I disagree with him that homiletics students are going to take up reading short stories on their own. If students are to take up reading short stories, it will mean teachers of preaching will need to introduce the short story to them and help them get started. What follows then are reasons for reading short stories and ways to get students started.

Two Clarifications

Before I go further, however, I would like to clarify two things.

First, when I say that homiletics students should be reading short stories, it is not for the purpose of finding sermon illustrations. Certainly, there is nothing wrong with this. If one wishes to pursue this avenue, Mike Graves has written a wonderful book called *The Story of Narrative Preaching*, in which he pairs short stories with biblical passages to highlight biblical themes.⁷ The book helps in that regard. Nor am I proposing the reading of short stories so that every preacher becomes a storyteller. Not all preachers are meant to be storytellers. Rather, I am proposing homiletics students read short stories so they become adept at forming sermons, whatever their style may be. As Craddock says, by reading short stories, preachers will become versed in restraint and thematic control. They will have greater facility in creating sermons that are clear, interesting, and persuasive. While reading short stories is not meant to turn everyone into a storyteller, I do believe they influence preachers to preach narratively or inductively. By narrative, I mean preaching sermons that move from conflict to resolution, though not necessarily in the form of a story. Eugene Lowry’s Homiletical Loop is a good example of narrative preaching.⁸ By inductive, I mean preaching that moves from particulars to a conclusion. L. Susan Bond’s sermon “Coming Home” in *Patterns of Preaching* is a good example of inductive preaching.⁹ Reading short stories also influences preachers to preach sermons from a literary perspective, in which preachers notice an aspect of the biblical text such as rhetoric or gaps to form the basis of their sermons.¹⁰ Still, Craddock says it is “not by conscious imitation

⁴ John Beevers, “The Short Story: What Is It Exactly, What Do We Want to Do with It, and How Do We Intend to Do It?” in *The Short Story*, ed. Ailsa Cox (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 22.

⁵ Beevers, “The Short Story,” 23-24.

⁶ Beevers, “The Short Story,” 24.

⁷ Mike Graves, *The Story of Narrative Preaching: Experience and Exposition: A Narrative*. (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 3-6, 120-25.

⁸ See Eugene L. Lowry, *The Homiletical Plot: The Sermon as Narrative Art Form*, expanded ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), “Plot Forms.”

⁹ L. Susan Bond, “Coming Home: Isaiah 60:1-6,” in *Patterns of Preaching: Sermon Sampler*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (St. Louis: Chalice, 1998), 65-70.

¹⁰ Robert Kysar and Joseph M. Webb, *Preaching to Postmoderns: New Perspectives for Proclaiming the Message* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 87-96.

but through the subtle influence of these great storytellers” that one becomes more adept at preaching. Measuring that influence is hard, but I believe it is to be had.

Second, teachers of preaching can insert instruction in short stories in any homiletics course, but the ideal would be to insert such instruction in an introductory course to help students break out of trite ways of preaching. Alyce McKenzie writes:

As a teacher of preachers, I notice that some things never seem to change. In introductory preaching classes, the assignment for students to preach their first sermons functions like a tap to the knee with a doctor’s mallet. Many students still reflexively preach a three-point sermon of concepts boiled down from a historical-critical approach to the text, or a two-part background-application sermon based on the same exegetical approach.¹¹

McKenzie implies these sermons are lifeless. Reading short stories, then, inspires students to preach creatively. Nevertheless, the topic of short stories could be revisited in subsequent homiletics courses to encourage their continued reading. As noted earlier, according to Craddock, “The ideal would be to begin in seminary the habit of reading such literature along with one’s assignments in history, theology, and biblical studies, and then to maintain the practice through one’s ministry.”¹² Reading short stories is like vocal warmups: it is not something meant to be done once and for all but something meant to be done repeatedly to prepare for the more serious task at hand.

Figure 1 is an excerpt from an introductory preaching course syllabus, showing how teachers of preaching could introduce short stories at that level. I introduce short stories during the fourth week of the course to allow for more preliminary matters to take place in the preceding weeks like introductions, course orientation, and a discussion of theologies of preaching. Still, if teachers of preaching wanted to introduce short stories sooner, that would be fine. Introducing short stories later in the course would be all right too, although the greater the passage of time, the lesser the influence short stories will have on students’ preaching.

Returning to figure 1, I introduce short stories during that part of the course which considers study and prayer in the life of the preacher. Reading short stories would form a part of the preacher’s life of study. Before introducing short stories, it would help to have students read chapter four of Craddock’s *Preaching*, which espouses the idea of reading short stories to help one’s preaching. This would be followed by the actual introduction of short stories, which I will discuss later in this essay in the section called, “A Teacher’s Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletics Students.” Finally, students would read one or more short stories outside of class and then discuss them in class before being encouraged by the teacher to continue the practice in one of several ways. These ways will also be discussed in “A Teacher’s Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletic Students.” In subsequent preaching courses, teachers could judge for themselves how to best introduce or revisit the topic of short stories.

¹¹ Alyce M. McKenzie, “At the Intersection of *Actio Divina* and *Homo Performans*: Embodiment and Evocation,” in *Performance in Preaching: Bringing the Sermon to Life*, ed. Jana Childers and Clayton J. Schmit (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), chap. 3.

¹² Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

III. STUDY AND PRAYER IN THE PREACHER'S LIFE		
Week 4	13-Feb	Discussion of Craddock's <i>Preaching</i> , chapter four Discussion of Alcántara's <i>The Practices of Christian Preaching</i> , chapter two
	15-Feb	Introduction to the Short Story Read James Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues" in Charters's <i>The Story and Its Writer</i> , pp. 105-33
Week 5	20-Feb	Discussion of Baldwin's "Sonny's Blues"

Figure 1. Excerpt from an introductory preaching course syllabus showing the introduction of short stories¹³

Reasons for Reading Short Stories

Let us then consider reasons for reading short stories.

Unity

One reason for reading short stories is to learn unity. Edgar Allan Poe was the first to say that short stories (called "tales" in the nineteenth century) possessed unity because authors chose a single technique to employ within their tales to achieve a certain effect within readers.¹⁴ For example, that single technique could be suspense whereby readers become frightened or it could be repetition whereby readers become impressed with an idea. Other literary critics after Poe agreed with him that a trait of short stories is "singleness" but did not limit singleness to technique. They said that singleness could arise from a single emotion, a single crisis, or a single character.¹⁵ It is this "singleness" that gives rise to unity, which in turn creates interest. Unity is also an essential feature within preaching. Sermons that have a clear focus help congregations to stay tuned in and to remember the message. Sermons lacking a clear focus task the congregation with trying to discern what the preacher is saying. If they are tasked long enough, they will simply give up and stop listening. If they continue listening, the message they take away may be different from the one intended. Tom Long developed focus and function statements to help preachers stay on track when preaching.¹⁶ Reading short stories will also influence preachers to stay on track.

Brevity

Another reason for reading short stories is their brevity. Short stories can range anywhere from Ernest Hemingway's six-word story "Baby boots for sale: never worn" to upwards of twenty

¹³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 69-83; Jared E. Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 41-71; James Baldwin, "Sonny's Blues [1957]," in *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, 10th ed., ed. Ann Charters (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2019), 105-33. I will discuss Ann Charters's *The Story and Its Writer* later in this essay.

¹⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, 1809-1849, "Nathaniel Hawthorne: *Twice-Told Tales* [May 1842]," in *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 572.

¹⁵ Brander Matthews, "The Philosophy of the Short-Story," in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. Charles E. May (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1994), 73; Mary Louise Pratt, "The Short Story: The Long and Short of It," *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media, and the Arts* 10, no. 2-3 (June 1981): 182, 184.

¹⁶ Thomas G. Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2016), 127.

thousand words, with seven thousand words being the average length.¹⁷ Still, brevity is more often defined in terms of a story getting to the point. Whereas novels can afford to take “detours,” stories must stay on course if there is to be a story within a short space. Also, since stories must say a lot in a short space, they must economize on language, making every word count. Says Charles May, emeritus professor of English at California State University, Long Beach: “The kind of complexity that fascinates masters of the short story is not captured by using more and more words but by using just the right ones.”¹⁸

Sermons should also be brief. Listening requires a great deal of energy. Thus, people can burn out quickly from listening especially if the subject matter is of no interest to them or the speaker is talking aimlessly. Hence, brevity within sermons is about staying on message. Since people are expending energy to listen, sermons that lack a clear focus or are unnecessarily repetitive quickly exhaust the congregation and leave them wishing the preacher would just stop preaching. Reading short stories can train preachers to stay on message and get the sermon said in a short time.

Open-endedness

Another reason for reading short stories is that they are often open-ended and lack a definitive conclusion. Rather, they leave it to the reader to guess what happened next. They either end at the story’s climax or shortly thereafter. This contrasts with novels, which often have lengthy endings that tie up all the loose ends. Instead, stories are philosophic: they make a statement about the truth, and once they have done that, they are over. They leave it to the reader to apply the truth.¹⁹

Preachers would also do well to imitate the open-endedness of short stories. Rather than pin everything down for their listeners, preachers would do well to leave some of their sermons open-ended with listeners drawing their own conclusions. Theologian Paul Lakeland says,

Fiction can be enormously helpful in ... the rehabilitation of the wounded imaginations of our present day. The incapacity to grasp any sense of transcendence is simply a failure of imagination, one that has all but emptied the churches and that goes a long way toward explaining the anomie of our world. The churches have opted for moralizing in the guise of

¹⁷ Tania Hershman, “The Shorter End of Short Stories—Boundaries with Poetry,” in *Writing Short Stories: A Writers’ and Artists’ Companion*, ed. Courtia Newland and Tania Hershman (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 41; Romesh Gunsekera, “The Art of the Short Story: A Risky Business,” *Wasafiri: The Magazine of International Contemporary Writing*, March 2016, 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690055.2016.1112556>; Ian Reid, *The Short Story* (London: Routledge, 1977), 9.

¹⁸ Charles E. May, “Why Teaching the Short Story Today is a Thankless Task,” in *Teaching the Short Story*, ed. Ailsa Cox (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 157.

¹⁹ Jenn Ashworth, “On Being Brief,” in Newland and Hershman, 87-88; Flannery O’Connor, “Writing Short Stories,” in *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, ed. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1969); Edith Pearlman, “On Short Stories,” in Newland and Hershman, 107; Olive Senior, “The Short Story,” in Newland and Hershman, 113; Rust Hills, *Writing in General and the Short Story in Particular: An Informal Textbook*, rev. ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), 106-7; Valerie Trueblood, “What’s the Story? Aspects of the Form,” *American Poetry Review* 30, no. 4 (July-August 2001): 41; Mary Rohrberger, “Where Do We Go from Here? The Future of the Short Story,” in *The Tales We Tell: Perspectives on the Short Story*, ed. Barbara Lounsberry, Susan Lohafer, Mary Rohrberger, Stephen Pett, and R. C. Feddersen (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1998), 205.

preaching, paying less and less attention to the celebration of mystery in the liturgy and the urgency to heal the pain of the world that is incumbent upon the eucharistic community.²⁰

Craddock would agree:

She who preaches inductively will need to be prepared for frequent comments from the congregation to the effect that her sermons seem to be long introductions with a point stated or implied at the end.... She may ... detect that for which she had hoped: The congregation cannot shake off the finished sermon by shaking the minister's hand. The sermon, not finished yet, lingers beyond the benediction, with conclusions to be reached, decisions made, actions taken, and brothers sought while gifts lie waiting at the altar. Those who had ears heard, and what they heard was the Word of God.²¹

Open-ended sermons are especially good when preaching parables since parables themselves are open-ended. It is the open-endedness of sermons that provokes further thought and makes them memorable.²² Short stories then can teach preachers how to preach open-endedly.

Short Story Collections

Another reason for reading short stories is they are sometimes published as collections based on things like place, ethnicity, or subject. For example, Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio*, and James Joyce's *Dubliners* are collections of short stories based on place. Edward Jones's *Lost in the City* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* are collections of short stories based on ethnicity—African Americans and Bengalis and Bengali Americans, respectively. Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* and W. P. Kinsella's *The Further Adventures of Slugger McBatt* are collections of short stories based on subject. O'Brien's collection is based on the Vietnam War and Kinsella's collection is based on baseball. The nice thing about short story collections is that they are a fusion of the short story and novel genres. They give the quick satisfaction of a short story and the sustained reflection of a novel. Each story is independent and yet the stories may interrelate by employing some of the same characters or some of the same themes.²³

Reading short story collections can inspire preachers to preach a sermon series. Sermon series are sermons delivered in sequence and based on things like a book of the Bible, a liturgical season, or a subject. For example, a sermon series could be given on the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans, on Lent, or on prayer. The options are practically limitless on which a sermon series could be given. The nice thing about a sermon series is that each sermon is self-contained, that is,

²⁰ Paul Lakeland, *The Wounded Angel: Fiction and the Religious Imagination* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2017), chap. 3, "So What About the Imagination?"

²¹ Fred B. Craddock, *As One Without Authority*, rev. ed. (St. Louis: Chalice, 2001), 125.

²² Amy-Jill Levine, *Short Stories by Jesus: The Enigmatic Parables of a Controversial Rabbi* (New York: HarperOne, 2014), 3; Edward Schillebeeckx, *The Collected Works of Edward Schillebeeckx*, ed. Ted Mark Schoof, Carl Sterkens, Erik Borgman, and Robert J. Schreiter, vol. 6, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 146–47; Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, Harcourt, 2019), 34.

²³ Sherwood Anderson, 1876–1941, *Winesburg, Ohio* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996); Joyce, James, 1882–1941, *Dubliners* (New York: Modern Library, 1993); Edward P. Jones, *Lost in the City: Stories* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1993); Jhumpa Lahiri, *Interpreter of Maladies* (London: HarperCollins, 2000); Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2009); W. P. Kinsella, *The Further Adventures of Slugger McBatt: Baseball Stories* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988); Beevers, "The Short Story," 25.

able to be understood and appreciated in and of itself, while the series provides an in-depth view of the subject.²⁴ I have found sermon series a satisfying way to preach. With the congregation, I learn about a biblical book or a topic like covenants. Again, reading short story collections could inspire preachers to preach a sermon series.

Difficulty

Still, another reason for reading short stories is to become aware of how difficult it is to come up with an engaging story. Even famous writers can write a riveting story only to follow it with one that falls flat. Or they may write several stories that end up being rejected before having one that is finally published. Still, once they have published a story it does not mean that every story thereafter will be a success. Irish short-story writer and critic Sean O’Faolain posted as the epigraph to his book *The Short Story* this quote from Gustave Flaubert: “One is not at all free to write this or that. One does not choose one’s subject. That is what the public and the critics do not understand. The secret of masterpieces lies in the concordance between the subject and the temperament of the author.”²⁵ Masterpieces, then, are not something that can be produced through skill alone. As Flaubert points out and as O’Faolain agrees, masterpieces happen when there is a convergence between the subject matter and the author’s mood. Those convergences can be far and few between. In the meantime, writers must continue writing in the hope of happening upon that convergence.

If masterpieces in writing short stories happen only when there is a convergence between subject and author, how much less are they likely to occur in preaching? Far less in my opinion.

Preachers often do not have free reign in choosing the scriptures on which they will preach, especially if they belong to a tradition that uses a lectionary. Nor do they often get to choose the occasion on which they will preach. If they are a regular minister at a church, they may have to preach Sunday after Sunday. It can be hard to preach a masterpiece that often. Also, preachers often do not get to choose to whom they will preach. If they are called on to preach at a funeral, they must preach even though they may have scant knowledge of the deceased and the mourners. These circumstances, therefore, reveal the difficulty of preaching inspiring sermons. As Harry Emerson Fosdick once put it: “Preaching is like standing on the edge of the roof of a ten-story building with an eyedropper, trying to aim the medicine so that it lands in the eye of one who needs it below!”²⁶ Nevertheless, preaching must go on “whether the time is favorable or unfavorable” (2 Tim 4:2), whether there is a masterpiece or no masterpiece. Reading short stories, therefore, can console preachers by showing them how equally hard it is for writers to produce an engaging short story.

²⁴ Ronald J. Allen, “Lectio Continua,” and Michael Duduit, “Sermon Series,” in *The New Interpreter’s Handbook of Preaching*, ed. Paul Scott Wilson (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008); Long, *The Witness of Preaching*, 80.

²⁵ Gustave Flaubert, epigraph to *The Short Story*, by Sean O’Faolain (Cork: Mercier, 1972). The original quote can be found in Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1880, *The Letters of Gustave Flaubert 1857-1880* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 20. It reads:

A good subject for a novel is one that comes all at once, in a single spurt. It is a matrix idea, from which all the others derive. An author is not at all free to write this or that. He does not choose his subject. That is what the public and the critics do not understand. Therein lies the secret of masterpieces—in the concordance of the subject and the author’s temperament.

Still, I quote Flaubert as quoted by O’Faolain to show that though Flaubert is speaking about the writing of novels, O’Faolain believes his quote equally applies to short stories.

²⁶ Jean Halligan Vandergrift, “Let It Fall on Me: Isaiah 55:10-13 & Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23,” *Journal of Family Ministry* 19, no. 4 (Winter 2005): 46, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost.

Vocabulary

A sixth reason for reading short stories is for the sake of enhancing vocabulary. Short stories are made up of concrete words. Seldom does one find abstract words within them. Concrete words make it easy to imagine what the author is saying. Images create interest because one can visualize what the author is talking about. On the other hand, abstract words make it difficult for the reader to ascertain the author's meaning. They also make it difficult to create images in one's mind. This difficulty can set one adrift to think about other things while the author is speaking. Assuredly, concrete words make up the bulk of poetry and novels, also. But if one is already reading short stories, the benefit of the authors' use of vocabulary is evident there as well. Likewise, preaching bodes well when preachers use concrete words. The congregation can follow the sermon more easily, which in turn means they are more likely to stay tuned-in. Seldom do the four gospels portray Jesus using abstract language while preaching. Righteousness, salvation, and Paraclete may be the only abstract words used by Jesus as portrayed in the Gospels. Otherwise, Jesus's preaching is replete with words like sheep, goats, vines, branches, stewards, and virgins. These were the type of words that drew me in when I was a boy going to Mass with my family. While so much of the Mass was lost on me because I could not understand it, the Gospel reading often drew me in because I could understand it. The stories and the images drew me in. It is no surprise, then, that David Buttrick advised preachers to avoid abstract words like "soteriology" and "kerygma" in favor of concrete words that could be easily visualized.²⁷ Likewise, Kathleen Norris in her book *Amazing Grace* says so much of Christian language loses her. She even confesses having trouble understanding what the word "Christ" means. Instead, her book attempts to define and describe abstract words such as "eschatology" and "righteous" with real life examples to help readers better understand them.²⁸ Again, reading short stories will help preachers speak of inaccessible things in more accessible ways.

A Teacher's Guide to Introducing the Short Story to Homiletics Students

Having considered several reasons for reading short stories, let us turn to how teachers of preaching can introduce short stories to their students.

Getting Started

As teachers of preaching invite students of homiletics to take up reading short stories, they can do several things to facilitate the process.

Teachers may suggest that students begin reading one or more short stories a week using the latest edition of *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, which is an anthology of short stories edited by Ann Charters. At the time of this article, the anthology is in its tenth edition.²⁹ Charters is professor emerita of American literature at the University of Connecticut at Storrs. She spent her career compiling a reader of short stories that spans from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries. The tenth edition comprises one hundred twelve stories along with fifty commentaries, six case studies, and six appendices. The appendices guide students in reading short stories and define commonly-used terms in discussing and writing about fiction.

²⁷ David Buttrick, *Homiletic: Moves and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), "13. Style and Preaching," "Some General Guidelines"; "12. The Language of Preaching," "The Vocabulary of Preaching."

²⁸ Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith* (New York: Riverhead, 1998), 2, 6-8, 11-13, 96-97.

²⁹ Ann Charters, ed., *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*, 10th ed. (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2019).

The book is a treasure. It is the kind of literature that Craddock recommended that homiletics students read; namely, literature that “has stood the test of time and remains on the list of recommended reading in literature classes.”³⁰

Teachers of preaching can also inform students that most short stories lack a fast-moving plot. Often plot is “subordinated to elements such as character, theme, or atmosphere.”³¹ Or the plot may advance by suggestion rather than through clearly-stated actions. Experts of the short-story form advise beginning short-story writers to concentrate on characterization rather than plot when writing. The focus on characterization may not produce a story that is as riveting as an action-packed story. On the other hand, such a story will usually have greater substance and ring truer to life than one in which the writer has focused on plot. In any event, Craddock said that the purpose of reading short stories was mainly for study, not pleasure.³²

Teachers of preaching can also help students understand that short stories are a dense form of writing. They share a closer kinship with poetry than with novels. This density often results in stories being open-ended and metaphorical.³³ It also means stories will often be difficult to understand. Recognition of this difficulty will not increase the enjoyment of reading but it may give students the perseverance to continue when they might otherwise give up. As they continue, they may find greater facility in understanding subsequent stories.

Teachers of preaching should also inform students that some if not many of the stories they read may offend them due to language, situation, or both. An example is Flannery O'Connor's “The Artificial Nigger,” whose title alone is offensive. In such cases, teachers of preaching need to carefully inform their students of the historical context within which such stories were written and direct them to the substantive content of what they are reading while warning them of the dangers of perpetuating offensive terms and stereotypes from the pulpit. As for the brevity of short stories, teachers can inform students that they are learning how to say profound things briefly yet in a way that captivates people and urges them to think.³⁴ When students resist such lessons, teachers of preaching can offer their students this insight from May:

Some ... nowadays have nothing but scorn for what they term ‘the so-called aesthetic’, insisting that the proper aim of literary education is righting old wrongs. For them, literature is not the mysterious exploration of the complexity that makes us human; it is sociology; it is limited by history; it is Eurocentric, phallogentric and logocentric. Originality is mere self-indulgence. Exploration of the self is narcissism ...

I can only hope that the current trend is a fad that will pass – merely a reflection of those who are bored or baffled by literature and who wish to tame it by limiting it to historical moments or social movements. After 45 years of passion for reading and teaching, I still believe that true

³⁰ Craddock, *Preaching*, 78.

³¹ A. L. Bader, “The Structure of the Modern Short Story,” *College English* 7, no. 2 (November 1945): 87, <https://doi.org/10.2307/371089>.

³² Bader, “The Structure of the Modern Short Story,” 87-92; Kenneth Payson Kempton, *The Short Story* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1947), 231-38; O'Connor, “Writing Short Stories”; Craddock, *Preaching*, 78.

³³ Grace Paley, “A Conversation with Ann Charters [1986],” in Charters, 1368; Charles E. May, “Why Short Stories are Essential and Why They Are Seldom Read” in *The Art of Brevity: Excursions in Short Fiction Theory and Analysis*, ed. Per Winther, Jakob Lothe, and Hans H. Skei (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2004), 14-25.

³⁴ Flannery O'Connor, “The Artificial Nigger,” in *The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971), 249-270; May, “Why Teaching the Short Story Today is a Thankless Task,” 147-52, 156-58.

literature – those works that we come back to again and again because, in their beauty and complexity, they refuse to become part of our disposable society – will continue to challenge us in spite of all efforts to tame it or toss it into the dustbin of literary history.³⁵

Recent Collections

Ann Charters's *The Story and Its Writer* is by far the best available primer for adults who are new to the genre of short fiction. Many of the stories are engaging and time-tested. But what happens after one finishes reading *The Story and Its Writer*? What does one read next? One could locate and read more stories from favorite authors found in *The Story and Its Writer*. One could also search for more short stories using the subject heading "Short Stories" in a library catalog. Still, if one finds the stories in *The Story and Its Writer* too stilted or if one is looking for short stories in a more contemporary idiom, one could choose to read one or more of several annually published collections of short stories such as *The Best American Short Stories*, *The Best American Mystery and Suspense*, *The Best Short Stories: The O. Henry Prize Winners*, and *Coolest American Stories*.³⁶ The problem is that these stories tend to be more of the "thrill stuff that depends on a murder and a rape on each page to sustain the reader's attention," which Craddock deplored.³⁷ Also, it is not uncommon for these collections to make use of profanities which some people may find off-putting. At a time when many schools, faculty, and libraries are debating which materials are to be made available to students, it is important for teachers of preaching to assist their students in determining which story collections are of greatest benefit and how to assess their relative merits.

Audiobooks

Another way to get students to read is by getting them to listen to recordings of written materials. An English professor once told me that if I was short on time to read, to listen to an audiobook of the work if one was available. Listening can happen practically anywhere, anytime—while one is driving, eating, cleaning, walking, and so on. Craddock himself says, "The practice is not study in the heavy-browed, note-taking sense, but if the person whose primary business is communicating [namely, the preacher] spends time each day with someone who has proven skills at that very point, it qualifies."³⁸ In other words, the purpose of reading short stories is to get them in one's head to influence one's preaching. If one cannot find the time to read short stories, then listening to them works equally well.

Types of Short Stories

It also helps if one knows which kinds of short stories one likes. There are not just short stories; there are different types of short stories. Knowing which type or types one likes could direct one in the direction of more of those types. While it is good to read a variety of short stories, if one is smitten with a certain type and will only read that type, then it is better than not reading any short stories at all. William Boyd, a Scottish author, has proposed seven different types of short stories:

³⁵ May, "Why Teaching the Short Story Today is a Thankless Task," 158-59.

³⁶ At the time of this article's publication, the latest editions are Min Lee, ed., *The Best American Short Stories 2023* (New York: Mariner Books, 2023); Lisa Unger, ed., *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2023* (New York: Mariner Books, 2023); Lauren Groff, ed., *The Best Short Stories 2023: The O. Henry Prize Winners* (New York: Anchor Books, 2023); Mark Wish and Elizabeth Coffey, eds. *Coolest American Stories 2024* (New York: Coolest Stories, 2023).

³⁷ Craddock, *Preaching*, 78.

³⁸ Craddock, *Preaching*, 80.

“event-plot,” “Chekhovian,” “modernist,” “cryptic/ludic,” “mini-novel,” “poetic/mythic,” and “biographical.”³⁹ Here are descriptions of each:

Event-plot stories are stories with a readily identifiable plot. O. Henry stories with their surprise ending fall into this category. So do detective and ghost stories.⁴⁰ These stories have wide appeal and are a good place for students to begin.

Chekhovian stories are named for the Russian short-story writer Anton Chekhov, who loved to portray snippets of life in his stories with little or no commentary. Since these stories focus on portraying snippets of life, they can have a weak plot. James Joyce was known for writing “Chekhovian” short stories as can be readily seen in his short story collection *Dubliners*. Short-story writers Katherine Mansfield and Raymond Carver were also influenced by Chekhov.⁴¹

Modernist stories strive to be deliberately difficult.⁴² They can be like modern art in which the viewer asks, “What is this about?” “Lycia” by Brendan Williams-Childs is a good example of a modernist short story.⁴³ Unlike event-plot short stories, modernist stories are frustrating for readers who are new to this genre.

Cryptic/Ludic stories are closely related to modernist short stories as there is more to the story than meets the eye.⁴⁴ Joseph Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer” fits this mold.⁴⁵ You think the story is about one thing when it is about something else.

Mini-Novel short stories attempt to give readers the feel of a novel in the space of a short story. They have multiple characters and multiple plots. Writers of these stories want to say, “You see, you don’t need hundreds of pages to write a novel.”⁴⁶ James D. F. Hannah’s “No Man’s Land” is an example of a mini-novel short story.⁴⁷

Poetic/Mythic stories can range from poetic to stream-of-consciousness to gnomic. They prefer symbolism to reality.⁴⁸ William Faulkner’s “The Old People” is a good example of a poetic/mythic story.⁴⁹

Biographical stories would be better named “historical fiction” in which you have either a fictive story in a real-life setting or a biographical story with fictive elements.⁵⁰ Rudyard Kipling’s “The Gardener” about a woman and her nephew set in the years surrounding World War I is an example of a fictive story set in a real-life setting.⁵¹ Greg Jackson’s “The Hollow,” which touches on the life of Vincent Van Gogh, is an example of the latter type of biographical story. In

³⁹ William Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” in *Bamboo: Essays and Criticism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007), 196-99.

⁴⁰ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 196.

⁴¹ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 196-97.

⁴² Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 197.

⁴³ Brendan Williams-Childs, “Lycia,” in *The Best American Mystery and Suspense 2022*, ed. Jess Walter (New York: Mariner Books, 2022), 253-67.

⁴⁴ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 197-98.

⁴⁵ Joseph Conrad, “The Secret Sharer” in *31 Stories*, ed. Michael R. Booth and Clinton S. Burhans (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1960), 45-75.

⁴⁶ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 198.

⁴⁷ James D. F. Hannah, “No Man’s Land,” in Walter, 111-22.

⁴⁸ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 198.

⁴⁹ William Faulkner, “The Old People” in Booth and Burhans, 105-18.

⁵⁰ Boyd, “The Short Story [2004],” 198-99.

⁵¹ Rudyard Kipling, 1865-1936, “The Gardener,” in *Debts and credits* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page, 1926), 339-52.

the story, Valente, the protagonist, says Van Gogh was killed by teenagers rather than by suicide—something that is more fiction than fact.⁵²

The problem with categorical labels is that relatively few short stories come with labels affixed to them by which to recognize them. And, of course, Boyd's categorization is not the only one. One could characterize short stories by other labels such as crime fiction, science fiction, and spiritual fiction. Still, Boyd's and other categorizations can help one think of the types of short stories one likes to explore and will draw one into further reading.

Short Story Club

Another way for teachers of preaching to encourage homiletics students to read short stories is to organize a short story club. In this case, the teacher of preaching would propose a list of short stories for students to read and join them in reading. If, as Craddock says, the lack of reading time is the oldest fiction in the academy, then the teacher could demonstrate this is true by leading the club.⁵³ Still, participation in the club would be optional without any points assessed. A brief portion of each week's meeting time could be devoted to the discussion of a short story; or if class time is limited and must be devoted to required course objectives, then the teacher could propose a meeting time outside of class such as via videoconferencing to discuss the week's short story.

Another option would be an online discussion forum where participants could post their reactions, comments, and questions about that week's story.

If students are reading short stories as part of a club, they will be more likely to take up the practice and keep it going. When the course is over, the teacher could encourage the students to continue the club on their own. That way, the teacher would be free to start the next short story club the next time around.

The following are some questions that could be used to generate discussion:

What do you think the story is about?

Were there confusing parts to the story? If so, where?

What did you like about the story?

What didn't you like?

Does the story have traits that could be carried over into preaching? If so, which traits?

Of course, this list is suggestive and one could come up with many other questions. In looking for essays on a short story to help guide the group into discussion, one could search the *MLA International Bibliography* database to see if any were available.

Teaching the Short Story Using Memes and Twitter

In lieu of a short story club, teachers of preaching could follow the example of Erin Jensen, associate professor of English at Belmont Abbey College in North Carolina. Jensen developed an assignment in which students read several short stories and then picked one to demonstrate their understanding of that story by creating a series of tweets using memes. The tweets summarized the story from the viewpoint of a minor character in the story. Jensen assessed points based on how well a student summarized the story and created interesting tweets.⁵⁴ This could be another

⁵² Greg Jackson, "The Hollow," in *The Best American Short Stories 2022*, ed. Andrew Sean Greer (New York: Mariner Books, 2022), 68.

⁵³ Craddock, *Preaching*, 79.

⁵⁴ Erin Jensen, "How Do I Do It?: Using Memes and Twitter to Teach Short Stories," *Teaching American Literature* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2022): 86–95.

way to get homiletics students to read short stories since they would be tasked to create a set of tweets showing they have read at least one short story during the course. A small portion of each week's class time could be devoted to discussing the tweets that a student created. This would encourage other students to keep reading even though they were not presenting for the sole purpose of understanding other students' tweets. Of course, this also presupposes that students were reading from an assigned list set forth by the teacher. The tweet series and students' participation in the class discussion would be graded exercises. If students cannot be persuaded to read short stories on their own, then perhaps the only way to get them going is to make it a graded exercise.

Conclusion

Reading short stories benefits preachers. The primary benefit is not in finding sermon illustrations. Rather, the primary benefit is learning from short stories about how to say profound things briefly and in a way that gets people to sit up and pay attention. Thus, Craddock advised homiletics students to start reading short stories while they were in their studies and to continue the practice throughout their ministry. Still, given how time-constrained people's lives are and how daunting short stories can be, homiletics students will need assistance from their teachers to get started. That assistance comes in helping students see connections between short stories and sermons, giving them a reading list and some guidelines, and coming up with creative ways to get them reading via audiobooks, short story clubs, and digital media assignments. Students may bemoan the extra work, saying, "I thought I signed up for a preaching course, not a short story course." Teachers of preaching may think they already have enough to do without worrying about introducing short stories to their students. But, in the end, it is all for the benefit of preaching.

**Preaching in Place: Reflections on the Sermons of Oscar Romero,
Dislocated Pulpits, and the Dangers of an Incarnate Word**

Matthew D. Love, Ph.D. Student, Baylor University

Abstract: *Preaching becomes true preaching when it is grounded in real place. In real place the pulpit becomes a cross. Among those who have given their voice to preach such a located gospel is Oscar Romero (1917–1980), whose pulpit became a cross when he chose to preach a word not abstracted from his place, but that touched the wounds and sins of his own people. This paper highlights excerpts of Romero’s sermons and commends this preacher as a guide in imagining what “preaching in place” might look like today.*

Dislocated Pulpits

In his 2010 book *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race*, Willie James Jennings describes the unspeakable horrors of racism and the unthinkable devastation that results when Christianity climbs into bed with worldly powers. Jennings details how slavery destroyed—for both the oppressor and the oppressed—the interdependent relationships of individuals and communities with *place*. Of the conquest in Africa, for instance, he writes, “The deepest theological distortion [that took place was] that the earth, the ground, spaces, and places [were] being removed as living organizers of identity and as facilitators of identity.”¹ He traces the disruption between people and place across centuries and continents. Then, after surveying the global wreckage left by imperialism and mapping the historical impoverishment of the Christian imagination in the West, Jennings claims that “Christianity is in need of place to be fully Christian.”² He denies the existence of a *spaceless* or *timeless* Christianity; he suggests that to abstract the Christian faith from historical *place* and *time* is to destroy its integrity—and, in so doing, to inflict harm on self, others, and creation.

Some may disagree countering with the possibilities of universal and eternal truths within the Christian faith, perhaps even invoking Vincent of Lérins, whose canon states that “in the Catholic Church itself, every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always, and by all.” After all, he writes, this is what the word “catholic” means.³ Biblical prooftexts exist: Jesus tells the woman at the well that the day would come when worship would no longer be restricted to a mountain in Samaria or Jerusalem (John 4:21–24)—ostensibly forecasting a future worship that would not depend on place. The writer of Hebrews preaches that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever,” a timeless Lord who does not change.⁴

Nevertheless, universal and timeless truths of the faith in no way detract from Christianity’s dependence on context. One needs to look no further than Christ himself, who “became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14). The Christ was no universal human being but Jesus of Nazareth, a male Jew born to poor parents in a remote village in the Middle East two thousand years ago. He was born into a specific community’s history with concrete aspirations. Richard Hays writes, “Jesus locates himself in a particular national history, with all its pain and

¹ Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2010), 39.

² *Ibid.*, 248.

³ Vincent of Lérins, “The Commonitories,” in *Grace and Free Will* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 270.

⁴ All Scripture quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

ambiguity, and with its hopes for final vindication by God.”⁵ He was born in utter particularity and died in like manner: “There they crucified him,” John, the Evangelist, writes (John 19:18). *There*—on a hill named Golgotha, between two insurrectionists, by the hands of some Romans and because of many Jews, Jesus died. He was not killed for preaching a timeless message about an otherworldly love, a point similar to the one William Barber II makes about Martin Luther King Jr., in paraphrasing Richard Lischer: “King didn’t get in trouble for preaching love, but for preaching love in all the wrong places—places of power where ruthlessness and greed refused the challenge of truth.”⁶

“Christianity is in need of place to be fully Christian,” Jennings writes, and few in the church know this as well as *preachers*. The preacher does not just ask, “What does God say?” but “What does God say *here, today, to these hearers, through me?*” Fred Craddock explains, “It is only when local soil has been added that the sermon will take root and grow.”⁷ Mary Hulst opines that “to preach in our contexts . . . is to put [our congregants’] names in the Story.”⁸ Similarly, Luke A. Powery insists, “There is no such thing as a ‘universal’ homiletical theology . . . the preached word not only goes somewhere but also comes from somewhere.”⁹

Many preachers, past and present, could be commended to preachers today as guides toward greater contextualized preaching. Few have left as great a legacy of witness to the gospel and prophetic preaching as Oscar Romero (1917–1980), priest and eventual archbishop of El Salvador, who was martyred for his witness to the gospel in his own place and time. In his writing and preaching, Romero pushed the church toward greater valuation of place:

For it is very easy to preach a Gospel that sounds the same here in El Salvador as it does there in Guatemala or in Africa. It is the same Gospel, of course, just as it is the same sun that brightens the whole world. But just as the sunlight is diversified in flowers and fruits according to the needs of the nature that receives its rays, so God’s word has to be incarnated in concrete realities, and that is what makes the church’s preaching difficult. Preaching a Gospel that does not engage with reality creates no problems, and it’s very easy to carry out the preacher’s mission that way. But casting the Gospel’s universal light on our Salvadoran miseries—and also on our Salvadoran joys and successes—that is what is most beautiful about God’s word because that is how we know that Christ is talking to us, our archdiocesan community gathered here to meditate on his divine word.¹⁰

Romero’s preaching ministry came to be defined by such “concrete realities,” namely the wounds and sins, hopes and frustrations of his own people.

⁵ Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels* (Waco, TX: Baylor, 2016), 139–40.

⁶ William J. Barber II, “Foreword: The Terrible Joy of Dangerous Preaching,” in *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* by Frank A. Thomas (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), xiv. See Richard Lischer, *The Preacher King: Martin Luther King Jr. and the Word that Moved America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 12.

⁷ Fred B. Craddock, *Preaching* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 98.

⁸ Mary S. Hulst, *A Little Handbook for Preachers: Ten Practical Ways to a Better Sermon by Sunday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2016), 115.

⁹ Luke A. Powery & Sally A. Brown, *Ways of the Word: Learning to Preach for Your Time and Place* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2016), 30.

¹⁰ Oscar Romero, “The Mystery of Salvation in Christ,” 4 June 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol3_91_MysterySalvationChrist.pdf.

Jennings's insight, that Christian imagination in the West has been broken and impoverished by being detached from place, holds implications for Western pulpits, also. Though many preachers express a conviction that preaching must be contextualized (as briefly indicated above), it remains possible that such contextualization manifests in shallow and insufficient ways. Surely many preachers and traditions succeed in contextualization more than others, yet regardless of the degrees to which preachers or preaching traditions succeed or fail in contextualization, Jennings's insight remains relevant and worthy of stress for preaching. In faithfulness to the example of an incarnate Christ, preaching cannot disregard the concrete realities of the world. True preaching can only happen in real place.

This paper applies Jennings's statement (i.e. "Christianity is in need of place to be fully Christian") to preaching, and does so primarily through the exemplary witness of Oscar Romero. This paper addresses the question, In what sense and to what degree have many pulpits in the West become *dis-located*?—unscrewed and unhinged (so to speak) not simply from the boards of the platform on which they are physically fastened, but unscrewed and unhinged from the particular contexts in which they exist. This paper is a call to *re-locate* and *further locate* the pulpit. As a result, it will become evident—as in the example of Christ and also in the example of Romero—that to preach in such a concrete and contextualized way is to invite a cross into one's life. In real place the pulpit becomes a cross.

Oscar Romero

The Preacher's Formation

A prosaic, yet still remarkable, observation to be made about Oscar Romero is that he was not born a preacher of an incarnate, concrete, hyper-contextualized gospel. No one is. In fact, it was not until much later in his life, after becoming archbishop of El Salvador only a few years before his assassination that he seems to have fully embraced such a gospel. He was entering his seventh decade of life, and it was then that his deep inner transformation most fully manifest itself in his preaching and writing. From childhood to adulthood, from beginning minor seminary at age 13 to becoming archbishop at age 59, from his birth in 1917 to his death in 1980, he was on a long journey of understanding the implications and cost of his faith.

Romero was born on August 15, 1917 in Ciudad Barrios in the remote, eastern part of El Salvador, just ten miles from the Honduran border.¹¹ The country became a Spanish colony in 1540 and gained independence in 1821.¹² In area, El Salvador is the smallest country in North America (about the size of the state of New Jersey), but it is very densely populated.¹³ The family Romero was born into was not the poorest of the poor, but at times they struggled to get by.¹⁴ From a young age, Oscar felt called to be a priest,¹⁵ and from the age of 13 until 18 he attended minor seminary in the city of San Miguel.¹⁶

¹¹ Kerry Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero: Pastor, Prophet, Martyr* (Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media, 2018), 1. Most of the biographical information in this paper is taken from Walters's biography. For another account of Romero's life, considered a standard text, see James R. Brockman, *Romero: A Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

¹² "El Salvador Country Profile," *BBC*, accessed 5 May 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-19401932>.

¹³ "Central America: El Salvador," *CIA World Fact Book*, accessed 5 May 2023, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/el-salvador/>.

¹⁴ Walters, op.cit., 2.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 6, 13.

During these formative years, Romero witnessed immense suffering among his people. The global depression in the late 1920s and early 1930s impacted his homeland and gave rise to country-wide economic hardship. An even larger economic gap between the haves and the have-nots resulted. At the beginning of the year 1932, the year Oscar turned 15, a peasant rebellion occurred in which some 30,000 people were killed within a month's time. This event came to be known as *La Matanza*, "The Slaughter," and it left a deep wound on the nation.¹⁷ According to Kerry Walters, "In a fundamental way, both the injustice and oppression that led to the rebellion and horrible killing that followed in its wake defined the economic, political, and cultural climate of the El Salvador in which Romero would live and die."¹⁸

In 1937, having completed minor seminary, Romero was awarded a scholarship to study in Rome where he would spend the next six years.¹⁹ There he developed a deep respect and love for Pope Pius XI which he would carry with him for the rest of his life.²⁰ He was also impacted by Ignatian spiritual practices and wrote his dissertation on the Jesuit Luis de la Puente. The experience in Rome made a deep impression on the young man, and he was ordained in 1942 at the age of 24.

Returning to El Salvador in 1944, he became a priest and auxiliary bishop in the section of his country that included his hometown Ciudad Barrios.²¹ He quickly garnered the reputation for being a tireless worker, and he was a beloved preacher.²² He was a perfectionist, which not only placed an almost unbearable weight on his own ministry, but also on his relationships with other priests. Romero was not always liked or understood by his fellow clergymen, but he sought to be a friend to the poor and the rich alike. He took it upon himself to minister to everyone, regardless of their socio-economic condition.²³

His career as priest and bishop is too detailed to rehearse, but what is of interest to this study is that Romero continued to have some reservations about the social movements underway in the area.²⁴ He was regarded by many as a conservative, and even as late as 1976 (just a year before his appointment as archbishop, and four years before his death) he had outspokenly rejected the liberation theology of Jon Sobrino.²⁵ Romero fit neatly into no camp, so much so that members of whichever party (e.g. Marxists on the left, power holders on the right; ecclesial conservatives, liberal theologians) were bewildered, if not put off, by Romero's lack of commitment to a party. Until the end, he seems to have retained his thoughtfulness and nuance.

On his way to his appointment as archbishop of San Salvador in 1977 at the age of 59, Romero underwent several transformative experiences. One of these was the impression left on his thinking by the Second Vatican Council. Vatican II was the council that called the church to

¹⁷ Ibid., 10–11.

¹⁸ Ibid., 11.

¹⁹ "The importance of Romero's formation there cannot be overstated. He fell under the influence of all things Roman—or at least all things Vatican—an attitude traditionally labeled *romanità*. Rome instilled in the young Salvadoran a deep fidelity to the institution and hierarchy of the Church, unwavering devotion to its doctrines and traditions, and a deep appreciation for its spiritual traditions, particularly as expressed by the Jesuits." Ibid., 16.

²⁰ Pius placed special import on social justice. Ibid., 17.

²¹ Ibid., 27.

²² Ibid., 27, 30.

²³ Ibid., 31.

²⁴ "Romero still wasn't ready to acknowledge that El Salvador's woes were the result of systemic inequality and institutional sin rather than the individual actions of rogue guardsmen." Ibid., 64.

²⁵ E. A. Livingstone, "Romero, Oscar Arnulfo," in *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd ed., 489 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

return to the gospel²⁶ and tried to bring Catholic teaching “up to date.”²⁷ Sobrino notes that Romero’s ministry was deeply affected by liturgical movements (like Vatican II) which were underway in the 1950s and 1960s.²⁸ In addition to Vatican II, the conference at Medellín in 1968 also deeply shaped Romero, and not just Romero, but the entire Latin American church. This conference (*Consejo Episcopal Latinoamericano*, also known as C.E.L.A.M.) was called by Pope Paul VI to apply the teaching of Vatican II to the Latin American context, to its societies, economies, and politics. The conference was a “watershed in the history of Latin American Catholicism,” and called the leaders of the church to stand in solidarity with the poor.²⁹

In addition to these conferences which engendered the revitalization of the Church’s doctrine, there was another major factor that pushed Romero over the edge and into transformation, and that was the continued violence in El Salvador. Kidnappings and killings were happening with increasing frequency. One instance of suffering impacted Romero more than any other: the murder of his dear friend, Father Rutilio Grande. As church historian Justo González tells it, Romero did not have many intimate friends in his life. He was described as an inward person. He was misunderstood by many, even those nearest him. But the Jesuit priest Rutilio Grande was one of the rare people with whom Romero became close. Sometime after 1967, the two men met and kindled a friendship. They shared much in common including life experiences, theological convictions, and hopes for the future of the church.³⁰ But on March 12, 1977, following a harsh sermon against the injustice of his country, Father Grande was assassinated. He was shot so many times that one witness said his body looked like it had “disintegrated.”³¹

This event would later be referred to as “Rutilio’s Miracle,” because, when Romero saw the body of his slain friend, he was profoundly reformed.³² It was not that this change had come about all at once but rather that this event was, as Walters puts it, “the final straw in a long process of coming to terms with the time and place in which God had called him to serve.”³³ Romero had just been appointed archbishop of San Salvador a few weeks prior and following the killing, he called for a *misa única*. There, Romero declared to his church that “the one who attacks one of my priests, attacks me.”³⁴ Thus, Romero’s journey from inward priest to outspoken archbishop was complete.

The Preacher’s Sermons

More could be said about Romero’s development into a preacher of a concrete gospel but it is enough to say that by 1977, after nearly six decades of life, years of witnessing economic injustice and country-wide violence, and the killing of his dear friend, this preacher was no

²⁶ Walters, op.cit., 38.

²⁷ Livingstone, *Oxford Concise Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 588.

²⁸ Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: Our Own Time*, vol. 7 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 268. Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric writes, “Anybody reading Romero’s sermons will be quickly struck by how often he cites from the official teachings of the Catholic Church.” Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric, “Microphones of Christ: Lessons from the Pulpit of Oscar Romero,” *Homiletic (Online)*, Vol. 42, No. 2 (2017): 6.

²⁹ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Reformation to the Present Day*, vol. 2, rev. (New York: HarperOne, 2010), 508.

³⁰ Walters, op.cit., 86.

³¹ Ibid., 86.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 88.

³⁴ Ibid., 87.

longer content to preach a gospel that had little to say to his own broken corner of the world. Romero had arrived at the conclusion that unless the gospel becomes incarnate in his place (as it should in every place in which Christians preach) it ceases to be the true gospel. In many places in his homilies, Romero advocates for the preaching of a concrete gospel:

If one desires to preach without any reference to the historical situation in which one lives, then one is not preaching the gospel. Many desire a preaching that is so spiritual that it would allow sinners to remain in their present state, a preaching that would not call people idolaters even though they bow down before the god of money and power. A preaching that does not denounce the sinful realities during the time of reflection on the gospel is not a proclamation of the gospel.³⁵

It is clear here, as in other sermons, that Romero believed that one who fails to address the church's societal or historical situation is not simply preaching poorly but is not preaching at all. Though he acknowledges that the gospel is in one sense unchanging and universal, he also argues that the gospel addresses particular situations:

[Christianity] has to be the leaven of the present time. It must not just point out the sins of the time of Moses and Egypt nor of the time of Christ and Pilate and Herod and the Roman Empire, but the sins of today, here in El Salvador, the ones that we are forced to live among in these actual surroundings. We must be the seed of holiness and unity here amid the dreadful things that are going on among our own people, with whom we are in communion as a Church.³⁶

This is not to say that everything is relative and subject to complete contextualization. The gospel does contain constants but those constants must morph to fit specific places and times. Perhaps nowhere does Romero communicate this more artfully than in his sermon on June 4, 1978 (as previously quoted):

For it is very easy to preach a Gospel that sounds the same here in El Salvador as it does there in Guatemala or in Africa. It is the same Gospel, of course, just as it is the same sun that brightens the whole world. But just as the sunlight is diversified in flowers and fruits according to the needs of the nature that receives its rays, so God's word has to be incarnated in concrete realities, and that is what makes the church's preaching difficult. Preaching a Gospel that does not engage with reality creates no problems, and it's very easy to carry out the preacher's mission that way. But casting the Gospel's universal light on our Salvadoran miseries—and also on our Salvadoran joys and successes—that is what is most beautiful about God's word because that is how we know that Christ is talking to us, our archdiocesan community gathered here to meditate on his divine word.³⁷

Romero articulates here both the challenges and rewards that come with preaching concretely. It is easier, he says, to preach a gospel that is not concrete. It is more difficult to preach the gospel

³⁵ Oscar Romero, "Christ, an Always New Word for the Church," 19 February 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/christ_an_always_new_word_for_church.pdf.

³⁶ Oscar Romero, "The Eucharist: Christ's Presence in History," 17 June 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/eucharist_christs_presence_in_history.pdf.

³⁷ Oscar Romero, "The Mystery of Salvation in Christ," op.cit.

in a way that casts a light on the real world in which people live. Not only is it more challenging to do this intellectually, but it is also more challenging because one runs greater risk of persecution—as his friend Father Grande had and as Romero himself would in short time. This preaching causes problems. But, without running the risks of preaching concretely, one misses out on the true beauty of this gospel.³⁸ The sun by itself may be beautiful enough, but it is the way in which the sun is diversified in the life of particular landscapes that showcase the greatest beauty.

One may wonder what concrete preaching looked like in Romero's practice. In the above excerpts, Romero preached about preaching, saying what good preaching ought to do. But in the normal design and content of his actual sermons, how did Romero follow his own advice? In answering this question, one might make a few summative remarks. First, Romero preached to the poor. This was all but inevitable due to the large percentage of his parishioners who were poor, including many who worked as *campesinos*. But it was also a product of his being shaped theologically by councils like Vatican II and Medellín and the writings that were produced by them. The option for the poor was one such doctrine that was especially emphasized by these late-20th-century councils. The poor had a special place in the church and the church was called to help the poor.³⁹ Romero had immersed himself in these writings, and they shaped how he saw the world around him and his work in that world as a priest. He came to believe that "the Christian who does not want to live this commitment of solidarity with the poor is not worthy to be called Christian."⁴⁰

The poor held a privileged place in the church and this meant, also, that the poor had much to offer the people of God. Thus, Romero not only preached *to* the poor, but *about* them. The poor were exemplars of what it took to enter the kingdom of God. On Christmas Eve 1978, Romero called all of his church to this same poverty: "Only the poor, the hungry, and those who need someone to come to them because they have need of someone, someone who is God, someone who is Emmanuel, God-with-us—only these people are able to celebrate Christmas. Without the spirit of poverty one is unable to be filled with God."⁴¹ The poor were the church's models of what it took to accept the Lord.

Second, Romero preached concretely by preaching against corrupt moral systems. This is seen, for instance, in his practice of beginning his homilies with announcements of the country's

³⁸ By now, it will be clear to the reader that it was not only the sermon that was to be contextualized, but the preacher's life itself. Romero refused to live away from his people in an ivory tower. Rather, he placed his life among the people. "I want to assure you and I ask your prayers to be faithful to the promise that I will not abandon my people but will share with them all the risks that my ministry demands of me." Oscar Romero, "Three Christian Forces for Liberation," 11 November 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_171_ThreeChristianForcesForgeLiberationPeople.pdf.

³⁹ "Since there are so many people prostrate with hunger in the world, this sacred council urges all, both individuals and governments, to remember the aphorism of the Fathers, 'Feed the man dying of hunger, because if you have not fed him, you have killed him,' and really to share and employ their earthly goods, according to the ability of each, especially by supporting individuals or peoples with the aid by which they may be able to help and develop themselves." *Gaudium Et Spes*, 69, accessed 4 May 2023, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_cons_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html.

⁴⁰ Oscar Romero, "The Poverty of the Beatitudes as the Force for the True Liberation of the People," 17 February 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_186_PovertyBeatitudesForceTrueLiberationPeople.pdf.

⁴¹ Oscar Romero, "Mary, Sign of the Fullness of Time," 24 December 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol4_119_MarySignFullnessTime.pdf.

past week's occurrences.⁴² This news often included stories of violence and corruption. He also called out the powers of society that were antithetical to the gospel in his sermons, and by so doing he was "the voice of the people, the voice of those who are voiceless."⁴³ Romero preached that,

The great conflicts of the church arise because she denounces sin: because she says to the rich, "Do not abuse people by sinning with your money!"; because she says to the powerful, "Do not abuse people with your politics or your weaponry or your power—don't you see that is a sin?"; because she says to the sinners who torture others, "Do not torture; you are sinning; you are doing wrong; you are establishing the reign of hell on earth!"⁴⁴

Romero was not shy about denouncing sin or sinner. Here he calls out the rich, the powerful, and sinners. And he was not afraid to get his hands dirty in the society of his people. "We decry every sin that is night," Romero said, "every evil that is darkness: drunkenness, gluttony, lust, adultery, abortion; we decry everything that is part of the kingdom of iniquity and sin. Let it all disappear from our society."⁴⁵

Third, Romero was true to his own advice to preach concretely in calling the laypersons of El Salvador to work for change in the society. Romero did not believe in a complete and sharp divide between clergy and laypersons, nor, for that matter, between Sunday Mass and Monday morning. All Christians were called to lay their talents and their energies at the feet of Christ in order that the reign of God might be established in El Salvador. The priest was not the only prophet among the people:

Remember I am trying to speak as a member of the people, of a diocese. Although it is true that I am the bishop of the diocese, still I am not the only one with a prophetic mission. It is my whole people, all of my priests, all my religious, the Catholic schools, and all who form the Catholic community. In the name of all of you, beloved lay people who listen to me and reflect with me, I speak about the meaning of our prophetic mission—what we must preach with our witnessing and with our words to the people of El Salvador who so much need this Christian light. You and I are responsible for seeing that Christ's message reaches everyone.⁴⁶

⁴² "The sermons regularly begin with a list of notices, announcements, and comments on the events of the week that the archbishop considers significant. . . . Romero interprets the events of the day before he begins to interpret the text of Scripture." Old, *Our Own Time*, 275.

⁴³ Oscar Romero, "The Divine Saviour is the Solution to All Our Problems," 29 July 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_155_DivineSaviourSolutionAllProblems.pdf.

⁴⁴ Oscar Romero, "Immaculate Conception of Mary," 8 December 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol2_51_ImmaculateConceptionMary.pdf.

⁴⁵ Oscar Romero, "The Church of Hope," 27 November 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol2_47_ChurchOfHope.pdf.

⁴⁶ Oscar Romero, "Christ Gives to Us a Prophetic Mission," 15 July 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_152_ChristHasEntrustedUsWithPropheticMission.pdf.

Romero called every believer a “microphone” of God and urged them to be God’s microphones in their daily lives, at their workplaces, and in their homes.⁴⁷ In this way, God’s word was further incarnated: not only did the preacher preach a word about concrete realities, but the people of God themselves incarnated this word in the society in which they lived. All were called to embody the sermon in El Salvador.⁴⁸ The gospel of Christ Jesus is a lamp in a dark world, and Romero called on the church of El Salvador to be that lamp.⁴⁹

The Preacher’s Cost

The message Romero proclaimed came at the price of his own life. On March 24, 1980, Romero was shot down while celebrating Mass.⁵⁰ But there were other consequences of his preaching that predated (and even postdated) Romero’s martyrdom. “We are a pilgrim church,” Romero said at the funeral mass of his close friend, Father Grande. We are “exposed to misunderstanding and persecution.”⁵¹ Here, Romero articulates two consequences of being a pilgrim church, a church that wanders within this present world: misunderstanding and persecution. Persecution in Romero’s life (which, most of all, includes his death) is somewhat self-evident; misunderstanding, on the other hand, merits a closer look.

Romero’s ministry demonstrates that incarnational preaching invites misunderstanding. This fact contains some irony since Romero was a great rhetorician and a mark of good rhetoric is clarity of communication. This has been the rule for roughly three thousand years. Aristotle instructs that rhetoric aims at lucidity and that any speech that does not communicate clearly fails.⁵² Augustine also teaches that the use of eloquence is not to make what is unfavorable favorable, but to make what is unclear clear.⁵³ Clarity has always been a central aim and hallmark of great speaking.

⁴⁷ “The best microphone of God is Christ, and the best microphone of Christ is the church, and the church is all of you! (Applause) Each one of you, from your own position and your own vocation, should live the faith intensely whether you are married, a religious, a bishop, a priest, a student, an undergrad, a laborer, a worker, a market vendor. In your own particular situation you should feel that you are a true microphone of God our Lord. That way the church will always be preaching, will always be a homily. . . .” Oscar Romero, “The Homily Actualizes God’s Living Word Among Us,” 27 January 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_184_HomilyActualizesGodsLivingWordAmongUs.pdf.

⁴⁸ “The citizen of heaven must first be a good citizen on earth. Those who want to take part in the promises of eternity must collaborate with God in justice and peace and love in this kingdom of earth. And so, sisters and brothers, the struggle of the church is precisely to sow more love, to awaken greater hope, to help sinners repent of their sins and draw closer to God, and to renew us all interiorly.” Oscar Romero, *The Scandal of Redemption: When God Liberates the Poor, Saves Sinners, and Heals Nations* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing House, 2018), 97–98.

⁴⁹ “This ought to be the primary task of the priest, religious women, faithful and all pastoral agents. We are not meddling in politics but enlightening the political situation with the light of the gospel. Our primary task is to light the lamp of the gospel in our communities.” Oscar Romero, “Christ, The True King and Shepherd of All Peoples,” 22 July 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_154_ChristTrueKingShepherdAllPeoples.pdf

⁵⁰ Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero*, 153–56.

⁵¹ Oscar Romero, “The Motivation of Love,” 14 March 1977, accessed 30 October 2023,

http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_1_Motivation_Love.pdf.

⁵² “Let us take it as established that the virtue of a rhetorical use of language is lucidity (for since speech is a sign, it fails to do what it is supposed to do if its meaning is unclear), and that a good rhetorical style is neither humble nor grandiose, but appropriate.” Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. Robin Waterfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 122.

⁵³ Augustine, *Teaching Christianity (De Doctrina Christiana)*, trans. Edmund Hill (Hyde Park, NY: New City, 1996), 215. “What is the point, after all, of correctness of speech which the hearers are unable to follow and

Yet, what is often minimized is that preaching necessarily entails misunderstanding. To be sure, some misunderstanding can be helped and preachers do well to follow the advice of Aristotle, Augustine, and others in working for clarity. But the fact remains that no one, not even a trained and seasoned speaker, is above being misunderstood. This is not only because of unfortunate static in the communication process but it occurs whenever God's eternal word is made concrete in temporality.

Christ's preaching exemplifies the paradox of brilliant teaching that is met with misunderstanding. Yes, there are plenty of occasions in the Gospels when Christ is enigmatic and purposefully puzzling,⁵⁴ and at times he means to evade understanding.⁵⁵ However, being misunderstood was also his fate and a natural result of a word made flesh. Examples from John's Gospel suffice to make the point. In the wilderness, some of the Jewish people tried to make Jesus king, clearly misunderstanding his ministry (John 6:15). At his triumphal entry, readers are told that "his disciples did not understand these things at first" (John 12:16). The Last Supper is a string of confusions, one after another (John 13:8–9, 29, 37; 14:5, 8).⁵⁶ Time and again Jesus was misunderstood. This misunderstanding was inherent in who he was: the eternal word of God made flesh. "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him." (John 1:10).⁵⁷

Romero's preaching was not misunderstood because he was vague or disorganized. On the contrary, his preaching was misunderstood because he was all too clear. His concreteness led to his being misheard.

The whole person must be saved and that includes people in their social relationships so that they will not view some people as more human than others but will consider all people as brothers and sisters and give preference to the weakest and the neediest. This is the integral human salvation that the Church wants to bring about—a difficult mission! Often the Church will be identified with communistic or revolutionary subversives. But the Church is aware of her revolution: the revolution of Jesus Christ's love.⁵⁸

In this homily, Romero reveals his awareness that there were outsiders who misunderstood his church. The word here translated "will be identified" is *catalogar* in Spanish, which may also be translated into English as "catalogued."⁵⁹ This word evokes a helpful image for why the church is misunderstood. A catalogue contains only so many predetermined categories into

understand, seeing that there is absolutely no point in speaking at all, if the people do not understand, whom we are speaking to precisely in order that they may understand?" Ibid., 214.

⁵⁴ One thinks especially of Mark 4:11–12. Jesus said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside everything comes in parables, in order that 'they may indeed look but not perceive, and may indeed hear but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

⁵⁵ "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants." Matt. 11:25–26.

⁵⁶ And apparently misunderstanding continued even after his resurrection, because John tells of a rumor that circulated for some time that was built on a misunderstanding about what Jesus said about John (John 21:23).

⁵⁷ Henri Nouwen observes that the incarnation is a prevalent theme in Romero's preaching. One can see why the doctrine would have been so central to this preacher's thinking. Henri J. M. Nouwen, "Foreword," in *The Violence of Love*, Oscar Romero (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), xii.

⁵⁸ Oscar Romero, "True Independence Can Come to Us Only from Christ," 9 September 1979, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol5_162_TrueIndependenceOnlyFromChrist.pdf.

⁵⁹ Translated thus in Oscar Romero, *The Violence of Love* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 164.

which new content must be placed. These systematized groupings are seldom hospitable toward items and experiences that are new or that straddle many categories and neatly fit into none. Hearers cannot but place the preacher's words into the categories available to them; hearers can only bring into the church the categories they have learned from their experience in the world.

Thus, when outsiders heard Romero's preaching about saving whole persons within their social relationships, they were tempted to categorize him and his parishioners as communistic or revolutionary subversives. These categories had been predetermined by the society of which the church was a part (in fact, by other societies outside Central America, also). The society had gotten its foot in the door first, so to speak—or better, it had the ear of the people. This made Romero's task of preaching a concrete, gospel word to his people very difficult. For good or bad, it would be very difficult for outsiders (and insiders, too, for that matter) to hear his message without identifying him with societal movements and happenings. Romero continued to insist that "the work of faith cannot be identified with a specific political task."⁶⁰

That Romero does not fully and neatly fit within categories like "liberation theology" or "Marxism" is evidenced by tracing again his development as a pastor. Early in life he fell under the spell of *romanità*, "a deep fidelity to the institution and hierarchy of the Church, unwavering devotion to its doctrines and traditions, and a deep appreciation for its spiritual traditions."⁶¹ Later in life, in his final letter as archbishop, he "defended the analytic value of Marxist social science methodology while rejecting its materialist ideology," another example of his nuanced understanding.⁶² When Romero spoke out against the government and the elites in power, other bishops accused him of being communist. Then, when he encouraged the *campesinos* not to resort to violence he was accused by leftists of being a "shill for the nation's powermongers."⁶³ Romero's elegy at the funeral of the victims of the Tres Calles massacre of June 1975 angered some who thought his call to nonviolence was an indictment of the dead.⁶⁴ Later, when the government began a campaign of terror, Romero's call to peace was ignored by both the military and the guerillas. To the guerillas' ears, Romero's appeal "sounded like just another pious pie-in-the-sky subterfuge that favored the status quo."⁶⁵

It may be easy to categorize Romero (especially later in life) as belonging to the camp of "liberation theology." Although this is appropriate to some extent, the danger is in cataloging him too completely with this movement and eschewing the nuances in his thinking that are needed to describe him. Thus, rather than buying Marxism wholesale, he continued to call for close examination of its principles,⁶⁶ and in a meeting at the Vatican with Cardinal Agostino Casaroli in 1980, he voiced concerns about the "popular liberation movement falling prey to 'foreign ideologies.'"⁶⁷ Romero maintained his sharp mind, his balance, and his nuanced approach to the end of his life.⁶⁸

His criticism of these social movements is clearly evident throughout his homilies after 1977. For one, Romero saw the problems at work in his society as the product of sin and sin was

⁶⁰ Brockman, *Romero: A Life*, 141.

⁶¹ Walters, *Saint Oscar Romero*, 16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 64–65.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 146.

⁶⁸ "Romero was and still is hard to locate on ideological maps." Edgardo A. Colón-Emeric, "Microphones of Christ," 14.

not a problem that anything apart from Christ himself could solve. “There can be no true liberation until people are freed from sin,” Romero said.⁶⁹ Only God could redeem the people and make their society a place of peace. In his final Sunday homily of his life, the day before his death, he acknowledged how often he repeated this very idea, but goes on to argue that the church cannot be content with any solution that leaves out God:

I believe I repeat this idea too often but I do not tire of doing so because we run the great risk of wanting to get out of pressing situations with quick solutions and we forget that quick solutions can patch things up without being real solutions. A genuine solution must fit into God’s definitive plan. Whatever solution we decide on for better land distribution, for better management of money in El Salvador, for a political arrangement suited to the common good of Salvadorans, will have to be sought always in the context of definitive liberation.⁷⁰

Romero resisted parroting the ideologies the world handed to him. Rather, he recognized the right in these movements while at the same time calling them to be more. Put another way, he loved the word “liberation” but only as he was able to define it by the gospel.⁷¹

In conjunction with his emphasis on sin, Romero also placed a great deal of importance on the individual. No doubt he called for structural changes in his society but he recognized that unless citizens were made whole by God, structural changes would constantly be undermined. “Let us not just shout slogans about new structures. New structures will be worthless without new persons to administer and give life to the new structures that the country needs.”⁷² Not only

⁶⁹ Oscar Romero, “Lent as God’s Plan for Transfiguring the Peoples through Christ,” 2 March 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_189_LentGodsPlanTransfiguringPeoplesThroughChrist.pdf.

⁷⁰ Oscar Romero, “The Church Serves Personal, Communal, and Transcendent Liberation,” 23 March 1980, accessed 5 May 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_192_ChurchServesPersonalCommunalTranscendentLiberation.pdf. “The Church tells every person and every organization that pursues a noble or just purpose that they are acting well but that is not enough. They must incorporate this work into the work of Christian redemption. If people do not liberate themselves from sin (Christ came here on earth to break the chains of sin), if people do not better themselves to the point of becoming children of God by grace and holiness, then their liberation is incomplete. If people view liberation in a way that dispenses with Christ and trusts only in the ideologies of the earth, then again their liberation is incomplete. The great service of the Church is to serve people and lead them by the hand toward true redemption, toward their true identity, toward their true destiny, toward their integral human calling.” Oscar Romero, “The Church: A Prophetic, Sacramental Community of Love,” 10 September 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol3_103_ChurchPropheticSacramentalCommunityOfLove.pdf.

⁷¹ “I hope that all the movements active in social matters are aware of this doctrine. If they are, they will avoid failure and the short-sightedness that is unable to see beyond worldly realities and temporal structures. As long as our hearts are not converted, as long as our lives are not based on this doctrine that is enlightened by faith to help us to harmonize our hearts with the heart of God, then everything will be feeble, revolutionary, passing, and violent. None of these things is Christian. What gives true life is the social doctrine that the church proposes to people. How enlightened the world would be if all of us took the social doctrine of the church as the basis of our social action, our existence, and our concrete commitments in political and economic affairs!” Oscar Romero, “The Motivation of Love,” 14 March 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_1_Motivation_Love.pdf.

⁷² Oscar Romero, “The Poverty of the Beatitudes as the Force for the True Liberation of the People,” 17 February 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrusted.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_186_PovertyBeatitudesForceTrueLiberationPeople.pdf.

do new structures without new people run the risk of collapse, but new structures do not ultimately benefit the people. “The church seeks the conversion of every heart because there would be no sense in an economic liberation in which the poor possessed houses and wealth but were all sinners. What good is a heart estranged from God?”⁷³ A temptation of liberation theology is developing an over-realized eschatology, to abandon the hope of resurrection for hope in an improved life here and now. It is clear that Romero never lost sight of the Christian’s ultimate hope: “For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?” (Matt. 16:26).

Preaching in Place

On Sunday October 2, 1977, Oscar Romero was concluding his homily when he remarked that he was nothing more than “God’s humble echo in this people,” *el humilde resonar de Dios en este pueblo*.⁷⁴ This metaphor offers a fitting summary to this section in three ways. First, Romero stated that he was *God’s* echo, indicating that the word he spoke (not to mention his very life as a preacher) had its origins in God. Second (though perhaps to extend the metaphor beyond Romero’s original meaning), an echo is *sound*, and sound is a physical and temporal phenomenon. Sound cannot occur in a vacuum. Echoes depend on the material world, and without matter there can be no sound. Sound travels through things like wires and water; that is, it depends on a medium. The application of this to preaching is readily available: preaching does not take place in a cultural or societal vacuum; indeed it cannot. What Romero demonstrates is that the gospel must become incarnate just as Christ had to become incarnate.

Third, to expand on the second point, sound is a *disturbance*. Sound is little more than a disturbance of what is already present; it is a disturbance of matter like vocal cords and air. No word that has its source in God and that passes through space and time, the here and the now, can ever do so without disruption. Preaching, like an echo, disturbs what is in place. It disturbs a complacent church and it disrupts corrupt systems. Romero gives words to this, also: “A church that doesn’t provoke any crises, a gospel that doesn’t unsettle, a word of God that doesn’t get under anyone’s skin, a word of God that doesn’t touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed—what gospel is that?”⁷⁵

In the same year that he was murdered, Romero would say while preaching that “Christ is the homily”;⁷⁶ that is, the preacher communicates Christ and Christ communicates God. This is true or preaching is for naught. Nothing less than the second person of the Trinity is communicated to the church in the preaching of the word. This word is made incarnate in the

⁷³ Oscar Romero, “The Church of Integral Development,” 9 October 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_37_ChurchIntegralDevelopment.pdf.

⁷⁴ Oscar Romero, “The Church, a Community of Faith,” 2 October 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol1_36_ChurchCommunityOfFaith.pdf; Oscar Romero, “La Iglesia, Comunidad de Fe,” 2 October 1977, accessed 30 October 2023, <http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/1977%2010%2002%20La%20Iglesia%2C%20comunidad%20de%20fe.pdf>.

⁷⁵ Romero, *Violence of Love*, 44.

⁷⁶ Oscar Romero, “The Homily Actualizes God’s Living Word Among Us,” 27 January 1980, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol6_184_HomilyActualizesGodsLivingWordAmongUs.pdf.

event of proclamation and in the lives of the hearers and it does not leave things the same. It disrupts hearts, lives, systems—yes, even preachers themselves.

When Christ came into the world as the incarnate word some two thousand years ago, a great disturbance was made. Scripture and Christian history tell of individuals, communities, and countries that have been transformed as a result. Christ's coming in the first century disrupted the way things were, and the ripples of that disruption have lapped onto the shores of the present time. If it is the same disruptive person of Christ who comes through the preacher's words to the people of God today, then how could disruption not result?

To summarize some of the principle observations from the preaching of Romero, we have said that he developed into, that is, *he was not born as*, a preacher of a concrete gospel. He grew into this sort of person through life experiences and through exposure to the theology of the Catholic Church. In El Salvador in the latter part of the twentieth century, Romero preached concretely by (1) preaching to the poor, (2) confronting morally corrupt systems, and (3) inviting his parishioners to incarnate the gospel in their lives. Preaching this gospel led to persecution (foremost, his own death in 1980), but also misunderstanding. His preaching sought an appropriate, divine disruption of all that was wrong in his world.

Guidance for Contextualized Preaching

Most preachers preach standing in one place, in or behind a pulpit or perhaps moving within some small, circumscribed area such as a stage. Most preaching is done by located, congregational preachers who preach in the same place to the same people week after week, year after year. How is it then—with the preacher's feet and life so grounded—that preachers could fail to adequately contextualize their sermons?

Charles Campbell has written of the “double bind” of preaching. Others need to have their stories told by those with a voice so that those who do not know them can hear them. Yet, he writes, “It is very dangerous, even inappropriate, to tell another person's story.”⁷⁷ People should be able to tell their own stories, not to have them told by someone else. To tell or not to tell? This is the double bind with which preachers wrestle. In fact, this is the double bind of the present study, wherein I have chosen to tell. The aim of this study has been to highlight the beautiful witness of Romero's life and preaching by sharing his story but also to explore ways to apply his story to the American pulpit today. How might we do this?

Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor offers helpful language of how we might re-contextualize the already-contextualized example of one like Romero when Taylor insists that each Christian has her or his own *itinerary*. This is one's “existence embedded in a historic order, with its good and bad, in and out of which [one] must move toward God's order.”⁷⁸ Whether it be Charles Péguy or Gerard Manley Hopkins (two of Taylor's examples), or whether it be the Apostle Peter or Oscar Romero, every person has their own itinerary. None has the whole picture; but each works piecemeal in her or his own corner toward God. In seeking and understanding our own itinerary, we do not seek to move *backwards* to, for example, the first century church which we read about in Luke's book of Acts. Neither do we mimic exactly what one like Romero did in his corner of the world, in his time. Taylor writes:

⁷⁷ Charles L. Campbell, *The Scandal of the Gospel: Preaching and the Grotesque* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2021), 32.

⁷⁸ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap of Harvard, 2007), 754.

The goal in this case is not to return to an earlier formula, inspiring as many of these will undoubtedly be; there will always be an element of imitation of earlier models, but inevitably and rightly, Christian life today will look for and discover new ways of moving beyond the present orders to God. One could say that we look for new and unprecedented itineraries. Understanding our time in Christian terms is partly to discern these new paths, opened by pioneers who have discovered a way through the particular labyrinthine landscape we live in, its thickets and trackless wastes, to God.⁷⁹

Taylor reminds the church and its preachers that faithfulness in *our place* will always have a certain quality of unprecedentedness about it.

How then does one apply Romero's example to preaching in America today? To begin, preachers must learn to take their *places* more seriously. Trygve Johnson writes, "To take preaching seriously, we have to take its context equally as seriously."⁸⁰ Sally Brown reminds us that "the everyday spaces where our congregants conduct their daily lives are quite socially and religiously complex."⁸¹ There is no "ordinary" place, no "neutral" sphere wherein the gospel enters as onto a *carte blanche*. As various preachers have noted, the gospel is both at home in every culture and alien to that culture. For a primer toward this sort of cultural engagement for preachers, one may consider Leonora Tubbs Tisdale's classic homiletical text wherein she invites preachers to consider themselves as local missionaries and ethnographers of their people. Tisdale calls for a manner of preaching

which not only gives serious attention to the interpretation of biblical texts, but which gives equally serious attention to the interpretation of congregations and their sociocultural contexts; preaching which not only aims toward greater "faithfulness" to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but which also aims toward greater "fittingness" (in content, form, and style) for a particular congregational gathering of hearers.⁸²

In light of Romero's example, one question preachers might ask is, *What are the false gods that compete for my parishioners' worship?* Homiletician Jared E. Alcántara defines context for preaching as "a community shaped by local and global identity markers, experiences, expectations, and allegiances."⁸³ Some of these "allegiances" will certainly compete with—if not entirely block—fidelity to Christ. The false gods in Romero's context could be named *materialism* or *power* which led to landowners and government officials oppressing their neighbors. One imagines what these gods are for an American church.

If each place has its own "itinerary" (as Taylor claims) and if the work of the local preacher really is unduplicable (as Tisdale suggests), then it is hardly appropriate for this paper to announce the gods which each and any people in every place are tempted to worship. And, as helpful as it may be to encourage preachers to "preach dangerous sermons," as homiletician

⁷⁹ Ibid., 755.

⁸⁰ Trygve D. Johnson, "Preaching in Context," in *What is Jesus Doing: God's Activity in the Life of the Church*, ed. Edwin Chr. van Driel (Minneapolis: InterVarsity, 2020), 294.

⁸¹ Sally A. Brown, *Sunday's Sermon for Monday's World: Preaching to Shape Daring Witness* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 7.

⁸² Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, *Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997), 32–33.

⁸³ Jared E. Alcántara, *The Practices of Christian Preaching: Essentials for Effective Proclamation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 78.

Frank Thomas has done, inviting preachers to develop a greater “moral imagination,”⁸⁴ it is important to note that there is no such thing as *a universally dangerous sermon*. What one preacher calls “dangerous” may actually be the safest thing to preach in another context.

Nevertheless, certain false allegiances and gods do come to mind in America. Some of these operate deep beneath the surface of conscious awareness; for instance, the unholy *individuality* that pervades the practices of the church. Stanley Hauerwas calls for the advent of something like an anti-Luther, that is, someone who will come *take the Bible* out of the hands of individuals, undoing the Reformer’s work that began some 500 years ago.⁸⁵ As shocking as this sounds, perhaps it is in some part necessary since the Bible in much of America is no longer the possession of the *church* (i.e. some historic community), but the possession of the *citizen*, “who has every right to determine [the Bible’s] meaning.”⁸⁶ Too often this “meaning” becomes the self-serving possession of the private life and private interests, rather than being a meaning—better, a *purpose*—for the world.

Other examples beyond extreme individualism come to mind. Walter Brueggemann claims that America’s god is “military consumerism.”⁸⁷ This dominant narrative in which American Christians live, “characterized as ‘therapeutic, technological, consumerist militarism’—is committed to the notion of *self-invention* in the pursuit of *self-sufficiency* . . .” which “enjoins to *competitive productivity*” and gives way to “*US exceptionalism* that gives warrant to the usurpatious pursuit of commodities in the name of freedom, at the expense of the neighbor.”⁸⁸ In these ways and more, Christianity in America has often displayed a bankrupt moral imagination. Wrapped in the world’s linens of power, consumerism, and exceptionalism, the church has often failed to see place and people the way Christ sees them, in the light of the gospel.

Conclusion

To preach, preachers must preach in place. That is, preachers must see their corner of the world in light of the gospel and speak as members of that corner to that corner.⁸⁹ This allows the preacher to affirm the culture and the people in many ways, but also necessitates confronting false allegiances. It will take the preacher as local ethnographer to tell what these allegiances may be. Nevertheless, one cannot but be moved to confront local wounds and local sins as one recalls the preacher Romero’s words:

A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's skin or a word of God that does

⁸⁴ Frank A. Thomas, *How to Preach a Dangerous Sermon* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018).

⁸⁵ Stanley Hauerwas, *Unleashing the Scripture: Freeing the Bible from Captivity to America* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 15ff.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁸⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 3.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 4–5.

⁸⁹ Postcolonial studies can aid the preacher here. Pui-lan Kwok notes that postcolonial preaching is “a locally rooted and globally conscious performance that seeks to create a Third Space so that the faith community can imagine new ways of being in the world and encountering God’s salvific action for the oppressed and marginalized.” Pui-lan Kwok, “Postcolonial Preaching in Intercultural Contexts,” *Homiletic* 40 (2015), 10. For more on postcolonial preaching, see Elizabeth J. A. Siwo-Okundi, “Preaching in the Postcolonial Theological Family,” in *Preaching the Manifold Grace of God, Volume 2: Theologies of Preaching in the Early Twenty-First Century*, ed. Ronald J. Allen (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2022), 258–73.

not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?⁹⁰

A final word may be offered. Today, many homileticians and preachers bemoan the place of preaching in the academy and the church. In many seminaries, only one course in preaching is required for even the longest master's degree. In many churches, preaching fares little better. Some parishioners may imagine that "anyone can preach," there is not all that much to it, or that it is the preacher's job merely to be mildly entertaining and inspirational. The place of preaching in the academy is troubling; the estimation of preaching in many churches is troubling. But perhaps this situation has come about in part because preaching has too often lost its place. That is to say, perhaps preaching is in danger of losing its own way by neglecting its *place*, namely, the specific contexts in which it is performed. Perhaps the way forward for preaching will not be found merely by reflecting more internally on the practice of preaching, but by reflecting more externally on the places in which it occurs.

⁹⁰ Oscar Romero, "The Good Shepherd," 16 April 1978, accessed 30 October 2023, http://www.romerotrue.org.uk/sites/default/files/homilies/ART_Homilies_Vol2_82_TheGoodShepherd.pdf.

Review Article Related to Pedagogy for Teachers of Homiletics

Best Practices in Education: Responsibly Teaching the History of Preaching

The Rev. Caroline P. Smith

Ph. D. Student, Baylor University

Abstract: *A recent evaluation of the histories of preaching by Hughes Oliphant Old and O.C. Edwards, Jr. raises concerns for what students learn about the history of preaching. It also raises questions of whether or not teachers should use course materials that perpetuate racism and racial biases or if used, how those materials need to be introduced with preparatory words of caution. Whether or not these resources are used, additional resources need to be made available to students so that they may have a more realistic and expansive view of the history of preaching.*

In an earlier issue of *Homiletic*, Allie Utley published an article reviewing the pedagogical practices of grading used by teachers of homiletics (Vol. 47, No.2). She stated that “as the academy continues to consider systemic racism and ways to de-colonize preaching and teaching, a look at how we grade may be in order.”¹ Utley calls for an assessment of pedagogical practices that should not be limited to grading but should also extend to the course materials that are assigned to students. It is the contention of this brief essay related to best practices in education that the resources for teaching the history of preaching should be re-evaluated because many traditional materials serve to perpetuate racism and racial biases.

Edwin Charles Dargan first published *A History of Preaching* in 1905. This was the primary text for the history of preaching until Hughes Oliphant Old published the first book in his multi-volume series in 1998, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. (The seventh and final volume of that series was published in 2010.)

Although homiletical scholars have provided reviews of the works of Dargan and the earlier works of Old, a comparative analysis of more recent volumes, such as that of Edwards, is long overdue. Determining whom to include and exclude in history books is certainly a daunting task. However, as histories are preserved, it is paramount that they are introduced in such a way as to acknowledge their omissions and that teachers provide historical examples of preachers and traditions that represent greater diversity among global preaching populations who have previously been ignored.

A recent evaluation of these histories on preaching points to some disconcerting realities. For example, in his sixth volume, Old finally looks at preachers who are not men of European descent. He provides what he considers to be “the beginnings of black preaching,” but in this chapter he reviews only five preachers.²

In his seventh and final volume, Old does indeed include women preachers. However, among the 70 preachers in this volume, only two are women: Fleming Rutledge and Aimee Semple McPherson. He also looks at African preaching. One might be thankful to see that Old included African preachers; overall, however, he is not complimentary of many of them. For example, he says of Peter Jasper Akinola, “from the standpoint of the homiletician, these sermons do not have much to offer. They are repetitive, they ramble, and they have little

¹ Allie Utley, “Best Practices in Education: Standards Based Grading,” *Homiletic*, 47 no. 2 (2022): 27-28.

² Hughes Oliphant Old. *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, MI. W.B. Eerdmans, 2007, 583.

illustrative material.”³ Even when he approves of the style of preaching, Old’s words are not approving. In his consideration of Conrad Mbewe, he says, “these sermons, out of Africa as they may be, are the most profound of Christian doxology.”⁴ Old does provide brief histories of Asian preaching and Latin American preaching in the seventh volume.

O.C. Edwards includes more women and African American men in his single volume than does Old. However, there is a voiceless void from preachers in South America, Asia and Africa. Edwards’s style of historiography is more objective than that of Old. He simply presents biographical information and sermons, leaving the critique to the reader.

Teachers seeking to provide examples of a more expansive history of Black preaching might include Martha Simmons and Frank A. Thomas’s *Preaching with Sacred Fire: An Anthology of African American Sermons, 1750 to the Present*. For women preachers of the past, E. Lee Hancock, ed., *The Book of Women’s Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other’s Voices* and Ella Pearson Mitchell and Valerie Bridgeman Davis, eds., *Those Preaching Women: A Multicultural Collection* provide historic and recent examples of women preachers. These and other volumes are available to broaden our appreciation and understanding of Black and women preachers. These as well as the works of Native American, Asian-American, Latinx, LGBTQ+, and other preachers and scholars, need to be included, also.

In light of these concerns, the following questions are of great importance to teachers of preaching: Should teachers continue to use course materials that ignore vast groups of preachers and diverse preaching traditions and that perpetuate racism and bias? If so, what preparatory words of caution need to be offered to students in order to contextualize these histories? Regardless of how one answers these questions, it is evident that additional resources need to be promoted. There is certainly an opportunity for someone to write a history of preaching that offers a more ethnically, gender-aware, and geographically expansive view, including those who have been ignored or maligned, or to prepare a comprehensive online database that includes preachers and sermons of different eras and communities that would also help students to appreciate the range of preachers who may offer today’s students perspectives and insights into their own and others’ contexts (something similar to Wikipedia).

As Utley suggests, the academy must continue “to consider systemic racism and ways to de-colonize preaching and teaching.” Teachers in homiletics have a responsibility to work toward that good end by providing materials that do not perpetuate racism and bias. While some of what earlier scholars have produced in recounting the history of preaching may be useful for continued study, much is not. Past work is in dire need of updates and supplemental materials that more fully and fairly represent the range of voices that have contributed to homiletics in past and recent generations. Preaching has such a rich and diverse history that any course on the history of preaching should reflect that diversity.

³ Hughes Oliphant Old. *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*. Grand Rapids, MI. W.B. Eerdmans, 2010, 218.

⁴ Ibid, 234.

Jared E. Alcántara. *How to Preach Proverbs*. Preaching Biblical Literature. Dallas: Fontes Press. 2022. 202 pages. \$19.95.

Let me begin with confession, an appropriately religious thing to do. I have never preached a single sermon based on the book of Proverbs. I have preached in over a thousand churches in nearly every state and in more than twenty foreign countries over more than fifty years, yet have never based any of my thousands of proclamations on that particular book. I even had a colleague, Alyce McKenzie, for the final years of my teaching ministry at Perkins School of Theology, who has spent much of her scholarly life probing the book of Proverbs, but apparently little of her very fine work rubbed off on me.

I was far too enamored of the sparkling narrative traditions of the Hebrew Bible, focusing most of my scholarly energies there. As I look back on my preaching ministry, it is clear to me that I needed to take more seriously this portion of the scriptures, its admonitions and rich theological insights. In short, I needed Alcántara's book, which I find to be a useful and valuable introduction to this literature for the pulpit. (Of course, I could also have taken with more seriousness Alyce's 1996 *Preaching Proverbs*!) Any preacher who wishes to expand her repertoire of biblical materials might well take up McKenzie's earlier book and this newer one from Alcántara.

Though McKenzie and Alcántara cover the same biblical material, they do so in rather different ways. Alcántara, Paul W. Powell Chair of Preaching at Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, divides his biblical and homiletical analysis into seven chapters, each one emphasizing a different characteristic of the proverbial material. These include: genre studies, imagery, characters, themes, timing, integrity, and justice. From these studies he suggests seven strategies for sermons, informed by the seven characteristics. The strategies do not always fit easily within their correlated characteristic—some seem a bit forced—but each characteristic and each strategy holds important aids for a preacher searching Proverbs for homiletical gold.

I applaud the chapter on justice (129–150). One of the dangers of preaching from Proverbs is the distinct possibility of falling into the trap of haranguing. “Do this, but do not do that” makes up a huge portion of proverbial literature and how easy it is to preach a sermon that takes up that verbal stance! Such admonitions are less preaching the gospel of God than offering speeches about correct and incorrect human behavior. Alcántara warns us away from that danger, bidding us never to forget that we must regularly preach using a “prophetic tone,” grounding whatever we say in God's call to speak truth to power, to move beyond advice toward community-building in God. This insight helps me to see how Proverbs can offer far more than generalized human advice; it can move a preacher toward the central concerns of justice for all God's people.

That said, I found the three sermons in the book's appendix rather disappointing. Alcántara's own, “Street Smarts” (165–175), was the best example of the three to illustrate more exactly how his analysis of Proverbs could be played out in actual proclamation. The genre, images, and themes were clearly stated and interestingly fleshed out. The second, Ralph Douglas West's “Wisdom for Times of Uncertainty,” based on Prov 30:24–28 (176–190), demonstrates again how hard it is to experience a written sermon in the Black Church tradition as opposed to hearing it preached. Still, I found the sermon difficult to follow, and stretched over some 14 pages, a bit overstuffed with ideas not always made clear. The final sermon, Ingrid Faro's “Proverbs 31” (191–202), was to me the weakest of the three, rather ill-focused, not a good example of what Alcántara offers to us in his helpful analyses in the bulk of the book.

Here we find a very good introductory book on ways to enter the world of biblical proverbs and employ them for proclamation. I found the book eminently useful and commend it to you if you are after ways to expand your biblical range into material both rich and insightful, yet little heard in pulpits. Perhaps it is not too late even for me to dip a toe into these homiletical waters. I am grateful to Alcántara for giving us his important insights into the book of Proverbs and the wonderful value they may have for our preaching. This volume appears to be the first of a series, *Preaching Biblical Literature*. One can only hope that future volumes will equal this one as important aids to faithful biblical proclamation.

John C. Holbert
Lois Craddock Perkins Professor Emeritus of Homiletics
Perkins School of Theology
Dallas, TX

Lewis Brogdon. *The Bible in the Ashes of Social Chaos: An Introduction to Problematic Texts*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2023. 128 pages. \$20.

Throughout Christian history, interpreters have adapted biblical hermeneutics to address the meaning and relevance of scripture for varied social and cultural moments. With this short, accessible volume, Lewis Brogdon charts a path for readers of the Bible in the wake of manifold social crises in the United States. He asserts that though the majority of our society would claim that the Bible is an important book, biblical illiteracy is on the rise (Brogdon, 3–7). Given the Bible’s great complexity and its abundance of “problematic texts” (e.g., stories of horrific violence, genocide, slavery), people no longer know how to engage the Bible as an authoritative, let alone divine, collection of writings. Brogdon’s purpose for writing this book is to offer a primer for three audiences: people in the church who “are interested in thinking critically” about the Bible, undergraduate students who are enrolled in a Bible course, and people who are wrestling with their faith (10–14). Offering insights from African American biblical hermeneutics, Brogdon models for readers the importance of naming and engaging the complexity of biblical texts in order to discern how God is speaking through scripture. He writes, “In the end, wrestling with problematic texts shows thoughtful persons ... that faith and intellectual honesty can work together for those of us who hold Scripture as the word of God” (54).

The book is divided into two sections. *Part One: Getting Honest about the Bible* is concerned with surfacing primary challenges for understanding the Bible in our present context. He rightly names biblical illiteracy, the presence of problematic texts, and the church’s history of misusing scripture for pernicious ideological ends as hindrances to substantive engagement with the Bible. Brogdon’s appropriate criticism of the church’s handling of scripture is tempered with generous insight. He states, “I believe the reason some Christians suppress this history is because they do not want people to lose faith in the Bible’s ability to speak on spiritual issues” (49). Charitable insights like this appear throughout the book, denoting Brogdon’s sincere love for the church, even as he holds our hermeneutics to the fire. Toward the end of Part One, he echoes an observation from Phyllis Trible’s 1984 *Texts of Terror* when he describes problematic biblical texts as a mirror, reflecting back to us the “painful realities of a sinful world” (72). He adds, “There is wisdom in including problematic texts in Scripture. They cut to deep issues about humans and faith communities in unique and impactful ways” (73).

In *Part Two: From the Text to Our Context*, Brogdon develops the theological impulse for his hermeneutical method. All interpretation of scripture should ultimately be bound to the tasks of discerning God, listening for the Spirit, and seeing Jesus Christ (77). In pursuing the heart of God through our interpretation of scripture, we move from hermeneutics to praxis “that advocates for the vulnerable” (97). He acknowledges that there is no single, simplified, streamlined way to move from interpretation to practice: “our discernment of God’s work is subjective and messy and imperfect; it does not answer all the questions nor solve all the problems.” Yet “the perfect God—not the text—utilizes imperfect people, tools, words, cultures, and writings to reveal truth to the world” (84).

Anyone who reads this book will need to confront the insufficiency of their engagement with scripture for their current social context—an exceedingly uncomfortable task for some. However, Brogdon models for his readership the appropriate response to such a challenge: a response of confession. He shares about his own journey of learning to engage deeply with scripture, while learning to confront his own social prejudices. By pulling back the curtain for his

readership, he assumes an invitational posture as one who sojourns with his readers. In the final chapter of the book, Brogdon issues this clarion call: “It is time to move beyond the weaponization of the Bible. It is time to avoid approaches that discourage dialogue about issues of faith. It is time to craft spaces in our minds and in our churches for a theological vision that is bigger than the small theologies that have for centuries propped up colonialism, racism, militarism, and capitalism” (101). The future of the church depends upon our capacity to summon this moral clarity and ethical urgency. This book offers ministers, students, and laypeople alike an abundance of insight to meet the needs of our present moment in the ashes of a chaotic age.

Amy McLaughlin-Sheasby
Assistant Professor in the Department of Bible, Missions, & Ministry
Abilene Christian University
Abilene, TX

Karoline M. Lewis. *Preaching the Word: Contemporary Approaches to the Bible for the Pulpit*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2023. 178 pages. \$28.

Here is the theme song of Karoline Lewis's splendid new book on biblical hermeneutics for preaching: "The Bible. How do I interpret thee? Let me count the ways." Lewis, persuaded that most preachers lack both rigor and versatility in biblical engagement, has produced an expansive manual describing nine different avenues preachers may travel as they approach the Bible: literary/narrative, postcolonial, feminist, African American, Latinx and Asian, queer, ecological, disability, and trauma theory. She devotes a chapter to each of these angles of interpretation, and every chapter crisply describes the approach, summarizes how it is performed, and then illustrates it with an interpretation of a sample text from the Gospel of John. Rounding out each chapter is a short essay in which Lewis names the practical difference such an approach can make for preaching.

Preaching the Word calls to mind other guides to biblical interpretation, in particular *Biblical Exegesis: A Beginner's Handbook* by John Hayes and Carl Holladay (3rd edition, 2007), which takes a similar carousel approach and includes a number of the same perspectives as does Lewis (e.g., feminist, postcolonial, queer, African American). Lewis's book, however, stands apart in several ways. First, unlike the more general approach of Hayes and Holladay, Lewis's book is distinctively about the Bible and the *pulpit*, maintaining a steady focus on the sermon as the *telos* of biblical interpretation.

Second, while Hayes and Holladay treat the more contemporary perspectives as supplements to traditional historical critical approaches (including textual, grammatical, and form criticism), Lewis runs in the opposite direction. She is persuaded that historical criticism is so firmly ingrained in homiletical practice that it needs little elaboration. Hayes and Holladay devote three-quarters of their volume to grammatical, historical, and redactional aspects of texts, but Lewis says almost nothing about these more traditional exegetical methods. On the other hand, Hayes and Holladay give fewer than a dozen pages total to the newer cultural and ethnic perspectives (what they call "exegesis with a special focus"), but Lewis gives virtually her whole book over to such approaches. While Lewis doesn't devalue historical criticism, she believes that preachers should immerse themselves in multiple interpretive viewpoints and methods in order to shake loose from "unconscious contextualization," a phrase Lewis borrows from Justo González and which points to the tendency to assume that some vantage point (such as a historical rendering of a text) is a universal when it is actually only one perspective among many. Lewis's choice of interpretive vantage points also discloses that she is relatively less interested in what biblical texts are in themselves and more interested in how they are *read* by constituencies.

A less visible departure of Lewis's book, perhaps, is her challenge that interpreting the Bible from multiple vantage points involves much more than simply learning different methods; it also demands repentance and the making of new commitments on the part of the interpreter. For example, engaging in queer interpretation means, among other things, repenting of the implied heteronormativity smuggled into "ordinary" language, and assuming the vantage point of African American interpretation means (for white preachers) naming the sin of white supremacy and publicly acknowledging the many ways the Bible itself has been used as a tool of racial oppression. For Lewis, interpreting the Bible is not only a matter of technical achievement but also a series of moral acts.

This book will be useful to seminary students and provocative for pastors. I found myself often nodding enthusiastically to what is present here. At times I missed what is not here. For

example, I wish Lewis had not so quickly assumed our familiarity with historical approaches. I would love to have seen her fresh take on them. I missed a chapter on the theological interpretation of texts, which to my mind is often neglected in preaching. I would also have liked a concluding chapter about how to put all of this together, how to allow a single sermon to emerge from these many sometimes overlapping, sometimes competing perspectives. Lewis leaves us with nine powerful horses harnessed to one wagon, each pulling in a somewhat different direction. Even so, Lewis deserves our gratitude. Nine chargers rearing up and ready for action is far more exciting for preaching than the old gray mare plodding wearisomely down the ruts of traditional exegesis.

Thomas G. Long
Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching
Candler School of Theology
Atlanta, GA

Robert Chao Romero and Jeff M. Liou. *Christianity and Critical Race Theory: A Faithful and Constructive Conversation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023. 196 pages. \$21.46.

Critical Race Theory has become a flashpoint of social and political tension not only in our divided country but also among evangelical Christians. Romero and Liou argue CRT is often mischaracterized and misunderstood. If employed with discernment, it can be a valuable tool for Christians desiring to promote God's vision for humanity. Through their experiences as Asian-Latino (Romero) and Asian (Liou) Americans and through lenses of ethics, Scripture, and theology, the authors offer their voices of reason to the conversation. Romero and Liou critique evangelical Christianity's tendency toward color-blind and individualistic theology, while also calling into account destructive and divisive aspects of CRT from a biblical frame of reference. They suggest a useful overlap between CRT and Christian theology that opens possibilities for realizing the hope of beloved community.

In the introduction, the authors lay the groundwork for the discussion by explaining their social locations and defining Critical Race Theory. They suggest CRT can be held in productive tension with Christian theology and discuss the consequences of a selective, individual-focused theological framework that excuses ecclesial inaction. They delimit the scope of subsequent chapters, explaining their examination of CRT will take place through the doctrinal narratives of creation, sin, redemption, and consummation (eschatology).

Chapter 1 exposes racist educational trends of viewing "communities of color as sites of cultural poverty and disadvantage" (29) and the attempt to "solve" the problem by homogenizing all cultures into the dominant white, middle-class culture. Demonstrating how CRT and Scripture both resist the "cultural deficit" picture, they point out how CRT educational scholars focus on various communities' unique "cultural wealth" and how that aligns with the eschatological picture of God bringing "the glory and honor of the nations" into the temple—not as heavenly homogenization but as a treasure of diverse creation. The authors provide a historical backdrop for the construction and maintenance of racial categories, how racism became "ordinary," and how systemic racism has functioned in society, and then juxtapose that picture with the vision of community in Revelation.

Chapter 2 compares the "ordinariness" of racism with the pervasive nature of sin and suggests that just as individual sins do not constitute the fullness of the "sin" problem, individual attitudes do not constitute the broad problem of racism. The authors delve into explanations of sin and atonement. While they break down some of the problems with aligning the "legal theory" of CRT with the "theological concept" of sin, they show compatibility between the two views and explain why it is important to see the problem as systemic in order to move toward a solution.

Chapter 3 shares narratives to show how racial issues function in the church and religious educational institutions. They explain the "voice of color thesis" which states that people of color who live racialized experiences are best situated to understand and create solutions for the problems. The CRT voice of color thesis aligns with the biblical model of the body of Christ, where each distinctive part is necessary to the whole. The authors believe institutional colorblindness can be resisted through the voice of color thesis and counterstories, along with examples of the early church recognizing and responding to racially-charged situations without being colorblind to the people in them.

Chapter 4 explains Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vision of a beloved community and contends that the church should live into this vision now, not only in some future realm.

However, CRT's vision is limited and is susceptible to an endless roundabout of "rhetorical violence" (153). The chapter concludes with the ultimate counterstory in Revelation, distinguishing the "gloomy" eschaton of CRT with the eschaton of Scripture.

The book concludes with an appeal to church leaders and educators, and a word of encouragement to those bearing the wounds of racialized experiences. A limited glossary contains helpful terms at the end.

Since the topic is examined through the particularities of the authors' theological convictions, readers with different doctrinal beliefs may need to focus on the principles and concerns the authors raise and determine how to apply them within their own doctrinal context. In addition, while the book covers a range of ideas, the glossary did not contain some terms frequently used (and misunderstood), such as "whiteness" and "white privilege." Since the book prepares Christians to engage in productive conversation, an expanded glossary containing more explicit definitions of key terms that confuse people would have been helpful.

This book is an excellent primer for evangelical Christian leaders and others who are seeking a deeper understanding of racial issues and Critical Race Theory, as well as guidance on how to respond faithfully to God and to others in critical conversations and decisions.

Melanie M. Bockmann
Vanderbilt University
Nashville, TN

Kimberly R. Wagner. *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2023. 184 pages. \$28.00

Many, if not all, preachers have had to preach to a congregation reeling from the aftermath of an acute mass trauma. Whether it be the COVID-19 pandemic, a mass shooting, or a natural disaster, our communities are more and more frequently experiencing mass trauma. Preachers need to know how best to preach in light of such tragedy. *Fractured Ground: Preaching in the Wake of Mass Trauma* is a great resource for today's preacher. This book artfully and accessibly describes the content and form of trauma-responsive and trauma-informed preaching.

In Part 1, Wagner helps the reader understand what trauma is and how it impacts communities. After surveying contemporary scholarship on the matter, Wagner puts forth her working definition of trauma: "a blow or wounding of the mind, body, and spirit/self that occurs when a destructive experience or event exceeds a person's or community's resources to process or assimilate the experience into preconceived frameworks of understanding" (24). She carefully unpacks the definition and suggests that this kind of trauma creates an experience of "narrative fracture." Trauma disrupts our overarching life-story and God story. Trauma disrupts our sense of time and coherence. In other words, we cannot make sense of trauma. This leads to fracture or separation and invites us into difficult but important theological reflection.

In Part 2, Wagner lays out a "trauma-responsive homiletic." Wagner coaches the preacher in establishing a safe space and attending to the liminal space created by narrative fracture. She describes how the preacher attends, on the one hand, to the realities of brokenness and death and, on the other hand, the realities of hope, redemption, and new life. A trauma-responsive homiletic maintains the tension between these two realities, not allowing one to collapse into the other.

Wagner outlines two different preaching forms which lend themselves to this kind of content. The first is a "snapshot" form which allows sermonic moves and ideas to be side by side without a need to construct a traditional narrative arch. This form resists chronology and coherence. The second form is called the "frayed edge" form which can follow more of the pattern of a traditional narrative but avoids "tidy resolution or redemptive ending" (89). Each of these forms is well described and exemplified through various preaching and biblical excerpts.

Part 3 concludes with a chapter on the ability of lament to generate social action and a chapter describing the impacts of prolonged trauma. This pairs nicely with the end of the first section which discusses the complexity of trauma. In conclusion, Wagner states her hope that "the kinds of trauma-responsive and trauma-aware preaching we have explored in this book will open possibilities for communities experiencing trauma to encounter God's presence, love, and life-giving work and to share that love with one another" (127).

This book is a valuable resource for practitioners of preaching and for the homiletic classroom. It stays narrow in scope, carefully defining the kind of trauma it addresses, and provides a satisfying foray into the field of trauma studies. Preachers and scholars will learn what not to say in the wake of mass trauma and be offered sound advice and practices for preaching well in times of crisis.

Allie Utley
Phillips Theological Seminary
Tulsa, OK

Biko Mandela Gray. *Black Life Matter: Blackness, Religion, and the Subject*. Duke University Press, 2022. 176 pages. \$24.95.

Gray's *Black Life Matter: Blackness, Religion, and the Subject* provides a treatment of the discourse on Black Lives Matter that, while solemnly attentive to the historical concreteness of black lives that have been the objects of the lethality of anti-black violence, seeks to explicate the intellectual and religious structures that sustain the constancy of threats to black life. While some will read Gray's work as an anti-police treatise, this conclusion is inaccurate as his work is grounded in a love for black life and not a hatred of the police. Gray does aver that police forces need to be abolished and views the police as "proxies for a structure of subject-hood that is compelled to enact cognitive, symbolic, religious, and philosophical violence when it is confronted with the indeterminate movement and presence of blackness" (4-5). However, his aspiration for this work is to provide an ethical consideration, from the perspective of philosophy of religion, that can clear the philosophical ground of police abolition discourses.

To accomplish this, Gray offers the normative subject as the focus of his attention. While the normative subject is untethered from gender, class, or nationality distinctives so common to these discourses, it is the primacy of this subject-hood that sustains the violence toward black life that the subject experiences as a threat to the construction of their reality and existence. To counter the deadly influence of the subject, Gray advances the theological response of not being captive to the violence of the normative subject or its proxies but disrupting the violence by "sitting-with" black lives can speak from the grave. Sitting-with is a mode of critical philosophical thinking that defines what Gray refers to as paraphenomenology that allows for the attending to and care for those black lives lost. This sitting-with disrupts the instincts of phenomenological analysis and challenges the assumptive privileging of the subject's perspective for understanding the possibilities so inherent to black life. This allows for an attentiveness to black lives that elevates understandings of why black lives matter and what is at stake in anti-black violence. This attentiveness also exposes the violence of abstraction, another manifestation of privileging the normative subject's perspective.

Care of black lives lost (or philosophical eulogies) occur through engagement with the detailed stories of black lives that retain vital philosophical and ethical importance. Our attentiveness to these lives provides a critique of religious logic long complicit in the subject's violence. Gray explains this in chapter 1 through the treatment of evil as "a modality of instrumental reason." In chapter 2, he argues that police identity is given meaning by black flesh in a way that drives the "enactment of deonto(theo)logical duty." In chapter 3, Gray avers the relationship between blackness and experiences of terrifying sacredness that inform and sustain the subject's "enactments of black death and anti-black violence."

Gray's consideration of the sacred can be read as asserting the contradictory nature of religious experience that produces the tendency within the subject to respond to that which does not conform to the subject's understanding and creates a fear which must then be rationalized in a manner that sustains the primacy of the subject when confronted with black life. Ignoring the sacredness of black life, the subject reduces black life and justifies the violence directed toward these lives through theodicean logic. Religious experience can and will sustain violence, but it also affords the opportunity for life when grounded in the testimony of black life which offers the critical space for sitting-with lives that exceed our logics. "Religion can and does offer life and death and often offers both simultaneously." (27)

Gray's work could be considered temporally bounded, having little meaning beyond the tragic black deaths he so ferociously sits-with. To this critique, Gray offers a powerful rejoinder. "The brutally, undeniable, long-standing, and enduring reality is that black lives have been, and will continue to be sacrificed on the altar of American religion" (114) gives timeless power and purpose to black lives to resist the forces of religion and subjectivity that Gray understands as fundamentally anti-black. Gray's work, through the attentive comfort and defense of those who are "already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always imminent death," will remain ever relevant (5).

David Latimore
Director for the Betsey Stockton Center for Black Church Studies
Princeton Theological Seminary
Princeton, NJ

Diarmuid O'Murchu. *Beyond the Pandemic: Spiritual and Ecological Challenges*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022. 184 pages. \$25.

"What have we learned from it [Covid-19, S.L.]?" (XIV) This question marks the beginning of O'Murchu's search for a form of spirituality which "is an alternative way of serving both God and our created world" (135).

O'Murchu undertakes this search in three parts. In the first part (chapters 1 to 4), he outlines the originating conditions of his spiritual awakening. According to O'Murchu, the church responded to the effects of the pandemic by taking flight into the otherworldly and the sacred. Just like everyone else, the church was waiting for vaccines and the return of normalcy. People's lives and needs were slipping out of their sight and the church could barely communicate any sense of hope. As a result, it was becoming less and less relevant. O'Murchu makes it clear that a new form of spirituality is needed that can relate religion and life positively to each other. In doing so, he makes a strong case for the need for holistic healing that goes far beyond curing Covid-19, both individually and socially. Spirituality can play an important role in this endeavour if it can positively situate people in their environment.

The second part (chapters 5 to 9) focuses on the reasons for the church's loss of relevance and the way to a "new, earth-centered mysticism" (41). Here O'Murchu first introduces a concept of mysticism going back to Karl Rahner, which has its core in the unity of human being, world, and God. Starting from this concept and with reference to our response to Covid-19, O'Murchu shows that the way we deal with the world is characterized by alienation and exploitation instead of relationality and cooperation. He sees the cause of this problematic situation in the competitive and profit-maximizing behaviour of humans who thereby mentally detach themselves from their environment. For O'Murchu, the roots of this disturbed relationship with the world lie in theoretical precepts that go far back in history. The philosophical teachings of abstract thinking, the dualistic separation of body and mind, and the hierarchization of humans over the rest of creation on the basis of having a soul all lead to the alienation between humans and the world. The great religions take up these teachings and, with the separation of the sacred and the profane, they shift the essential into the beyond. The world then becomes a malleable and exploitable mass. How unsatisfactory these basic (religious) principles are for many people is shown by the high demand for spiritual meaning beyond what the church can offer. O'Murchu therefore wants to oppose the dualistic-hierarchical religious doctrine and to extend Rahner's concept of the mystical by examining the religious features of indigenous cultures. The Great Spirit of these cultures, identified as the Holy Spirit, becomes the centre of religion and spirituality. Humans can think of and experience themselves as part of creation, and spirituality can promote more cooperative and empowering lifestyles.

Part 3 of the book (chapters 10-15) further develops O'Murchu's new spiritual understanding with an eye toward theology and the environment. Theologically, O'Murchu interprets Jesus's miracles as the restitution or re-creation of the individual in relationships and the kin-dom of God correspondingly as the "companionship of empowerment" (111). In the human relationship with the environment, the effects of the new spirituality manifest as "eco-justice." If human beings know themselves as connected to the whole of creation through the Spirit, human problems can be solved cooperatively with nature. Theology and the environment are consequently related through a new understanding of incarnation. God is incarnated not only in Jesus, but through the Holy Spirit in all bodies of the universe. Subsequently, O'Murchu understands worship as perceiving the presence of the Holy Spirit through rituals and sacraments connected to everyday life through meditation and eco-justice. In the concluding summary, O'Murchu makes clear the joint responsibility of religions for

the current state of the world; he identifies the changes needed and summarizes his understanding of an “integrating spirituality” (162).

In close proximity to postcolonial discourse and process theology, O’Murchu offers an alternative, empowering and collaborative way of thinking and living Christian religion and spirituality. It has the potential to transcend denominational and religious borders in the search for a healing relationship between humanity, God, and nature. His identification of the Holy Spirit as a Great Spirit and its central role for spirituality and religion, reveals a dogmatic inventory at the same time, which fundamentally questions the self-understanding of Christian religion. This questioning, however, rests on attentive sociological, psychological, as well as scientific observations. His “New Spiritual Reset” (103) can be read far beyond academic circles as a thoughtful as well as pointed answer to the major problems of our time, even if their consequences for (practical) theology are hardly foreseeable.

Samuel Lacher
Eberhard Karls Universität
Tübingen

John Roberto, editor. *Digital Ministry and Leadership in Today's Church*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2022. 140 pages. \$16.95.

The book itself is presented to the reader as a workbook or manual rather a theoretical tome. This does not mean that the book is entirely operationalized, as will be noted below. What it does mean is that the material presented is done so practically, with the intention of being applied immediately into the context of the local congregation or parish. As is noted in the Introduction, the book “provides essential knowledge, practices, and skills to guide church leaders in creating digitally integrated ministry and faith formation in their churches” (p. 1). This goal is meant for both the local congregation in terms of discipleship, worship and preaching, but also for the global mission of the church in which the local congregation is engaged through prayer, evangelism, and social justice. Christian ministry and mission has more than one avenue through which to conduct the work of God. No longer is the work of God bound to the print world of the sanctuary; it is now also offered through the new Roman Roads of digital and social media.

In chapter 1, John Roberto, the book's editor, unpacks the new reality of ministry in a post-Covid world. New tools and media have emerged since 2020 that now allow the church to expand its reach in integrated and immersive ways. In chapter 2, Tim Welch, a leader in digital catechism, explores the various tools that the digital frontier offers to the local congregation—tools such as websites, video production, graphic design, and livestreaming options. This chapter is guided by a foundational principle of media—whoever controls the media controls the message. Welch's argument is that the church has resisted modern-day technology for far too long and much to its own detriment. Compared to the other chapters, this chapter is the proverbial “reading from a firehose.” However, it provides a formative and informative starting point. In chapter 3, Deanna Bartalini and Claudia McIvor, two educators, discuss how to build community through digital spaces, a continued concern. During the Covid pandemic, the concern of isolation was not only a church concern, as people figured out how to have block parties and game nights while staying indoors. This chapter focuses on various digital platforms that can be used to build communities online that also reach beyond the local congregation. In chapter 4, John Roberto discusses faith formation in the digital age through the use of hybrid tools such as video playlists and interactive courses that can be accessed through a congregation, parish or denomination's website. In chapter 5, Marge Babcock, a website developer and curator, provides a toolbox full of skills and ideas for organizing, evaluating, and developing digital resources for ministry and discipleship. Finally, in chapter 6, William Miller, a catechist educator, and John Roberto share their perspectives on the kind of competent leadership needed for ministry on the digital frontier, focusing primarily on the leader's own discipleship. The book ends with a list of suggested readings.

Overall, this is an extremely helpful resource in the ever-growing field of resources related to digital ministry. The advice and ideas are creative and innovative yet also thoughtful. This material is written with the smaller congregation that lacks resources in mind, as evidenced by Welch's chapter on various digital tools. Also, Babcock's chapter on resource curation is certainly unique and worth purchasing the book. The only concern noted, as is often noted with such resources, is the lack of real-life examples. While this book does offer some examples, it lacks sufficient examples overall, reminding the reader of the work that lies ahead.

Rob O'Lynn

Kentucky Christian University
Grayson, KY

Karla J. Bellinger and Michael E. Connors, CSC. *Remembering Why We Preach: A Retreat to Renew Your Spirit and Skill*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2022. \$21.95

Remembering Why We Preach, the most recent from Notre Dame's Marten Program in Homiletics and Liturgics, presents itself as a workbook that guides the reader on a renewal retreat. The authors rightly argue that a preacher can only preach as deeply as they have plumbed their relationship with God. This, then, is the central theme of the book—helping those who preach develop an ever-deepening relationship with God in order to lead God's people into similar relationships. This is understood and articulated through the lens of the sermon-crafting process as an "encounter" with God through the Holy Spirit (ix). The "retreat" experience offered is not only in the teaching of homiletical theory (of which there is relatively little) but by encouraging the practice of preaching. In seeking God through the homiletic encounter, the authors argue, preachers open themselves up to change, creativity, and community—all which are needed for effective preaching and evangelization.

The remaining eight chapters are divided evenly into two units. The first unit (chapters 1-4) focus on the person of the preacher. Chapter 1 lays the foundation for the book's idea of preaching as an encounter that leads to deeper spiritual connection to God, giving special attention to discerning the work of the Spirit in this process. Chapter 2 presents the content of preaching as "encounter"—the nature and work of Jesus Christ, the great paschal mystery. The more clearly that Jesus can be articulated, the more confidence those who listen can have in Jesus as their savior and redeemer. Chapter 3 focuses on preaching as a spiritual practice, drawing heavily on the final writings of Dag Hammarskjöld and his understanding of faith as a journey and the journeyer as a witness. Special attention is given here to the disciplines of scripture reading, prayer, meditation, and solitude. Chapter 4 reminds the reader of the pastoral nature of preaching by drawing on the 1982 document on preaching entitled *Fulfilled in Your Hearing* to remind the preacher that we will only be heard as we hear those in the congregation.

The second unit (chapters 5-8) focuses on preaching as a form of spiritual leadership. Chapter 5 introduces this theme, focusing again on the need to practice discernment within the context of community. Chapter 6 centers on the role that congregational feedback can play both in maturing the preacher's abilities as well as shaping the congregation's faith formation. Chapter 7 returns to the idea of preaching as "encounter" to emphasize that the goal of preaching is to promote spiritual formation and evangelization. Preaching provides us with the space to address the complexities of faith while offering the vocabulary to articulate the good news outward. Chapter 8 expands on the previous chapter with an emphasis on fostering missional activity by the congregation. Each chapter ends with a discussion page, application exercises, and a list of additional readings. The book concludes with four appendices that provide further documentation and guidance for engaging in peer and congregational feedback.

Bombarded by the constant news of clergy leaving the ministry due to burnout and waning faith, this workbook comes as a breath of fresh air. While it does include some homiletical theory (mainly in chapter 5), it remains comfortably in reflection and application. The only critique (a term that I hesitate to use) would be that the consistent references to the writings of the Catholic Church may be distracting for those not familiar with Catholic polity or the thoughtful writings of Pope Francis. However, there is also encouragement here as Protestants can see how their Catholic brothers and sisters are wrestling with similar ecclesial concerns. The material on feedback alone (mainly in chapter 6), including the provided

evaluation forms, earns the book a hearty recommendation. If you are involved in preaching in any way, this book will be a valuable resource.

Rob O'Lynn
Kentucky Christian University
Grayson, KY

R. Khari Brown, Ronald E. Brown, and James S. Jackson. *Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2021. 167 pages. \$70.00

In our politically divided nation, the topic of the political sermon has become perennial for many church leaders. Do Americans have an issue with politics being preached in their houses of worship? Perhaps a way to answer that question is to look at it through the lens of the race of the parishioner. In *Race and the Power of Sermons on American Politics*, the authors probe four poignant issues for our times in light of racial identity:

- 1) Support for clergy/religious leaders discussing political issues and or taking a political stand.
- 2) Attending places of worship led by politically active clergy, i.e. “political congregations.”
- 3) The relationship between attending political congregations and supporting progressive public policies.
- 4) The relationship between attending political congregations and political activism in congregants. (4)

Using multiple research methods to offer holistic findings such as case studies, interviews, historical figures, sermon excerpts, national survey results, and other quantitative data, the authors weave together the story of the role that race plays in the willingness to receive the political sermon. More salient, what are the racial differences for those who are willing to hear political sermons, support politically involved clergy, who attend political congregations and therefore support public policies aimed at reducing racism poverty, war, and nativism, and who become political active as a result of the political congregations they attend (15)?

In the introduction, the authors offer the case of Central United Methodist Church as an overtly political congregation with political leadership that has spanned decades. Knowing that the church is not the norm, the authors ask their research questions, while also defining what they mean in terms of American Covenantal Civil Religion, “a duty to engage in political activities that enhance the self-governance or sovereignty of powerless peoples” (12). Allowing each question to form the basis for the corresponding chapter, the authors offer compelling research and findings suggesting that not only does race play a significant role in the reception of the political sermon, but offering reasons for why that is the case.

In chapter 1, the authors investigate if racial differences correlate with Americans’ beliefs about whether or not clergy should engage in taking political stands in the pulpit. Offering examples of politically involved clergy such as Rev. William Sloane Coffin, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a sermon excerpt from Rev. Mike Morran, and data from the 2016 National Politics study as well as other regional and national study data, they conclude: “In nearly every study examined, Blacks are more likely than Whites – and, to a slightly lesser extent, Hispanics – to favor their religious leaders and institutions taking public stands on social justice issues and politically acting on their beliefs” (37).

In chapter 2, the authors examine the degree to which racial difference is observed in the political discourse heard within American houses of worship (38). Highlighting different clergy and the churches they lead, analyzing survey data, and taking into account the lived experiences that lead to expectations about what is proclaimed in houses of worship, the authors conclude that “Blacks are more likely than Whites and Hispanics to attend political congregations, many with a commitment to social justice” (62). In light of this data, the question is posed, “Does

hearing a ‘political message’ shape a person’s support or opposition for policies that aim to reduce racial inequality, poverty, war, and enhancing citizenship opportunities for immigrants?” (62). Taking into account the Exodus narrative as a Christian/biblical framework that is applied to political issues more broadly, as well as liberation theology, examples of clergy sermons, and surveys on political congregations and policy attitudes, the authors conclude that “Whites attending political congregations are more likely to hold progressive policy positions than are their White counterparts attending nonpolitical or less political worship settings” (84). A significant finding to note is that whereas Blacks and Hispanics have lived experiences that will offer them insight into American suffering and marginalization, it is meaningful for Whites to attend political congregations where privilege can be challenged, race in the American context can be scrutinized, and the barriers that minorities face to opportunities and flourishing in America can be clearly articulated.

In chapter 4, the authors ask, when a person is part of a political congregation, what impact does that have on their political activism? The evidence indicates that for both Whites and Blacks, it makes a difference. “White attendees of political congregations are more likely to act politically on their beliefs than are both White non-worshippers and attendees of non-political congregations...[and] Black attendees of political congregations are more likely than other Blacks to politically act on their convictions” (101). Thus, it appears that political congregations produce politically active congregants for both Blacks and Whites.

In the concluding chapter, the authors summarize their findings by stating, “our study provides considerable evidence that race matters in Americans’ perceptions of the degree to which religious bodies should offer critiques (of public policies) (108). Further, “Race also matters regarding who attends those congregations and the potential effect attending has on their justice-related policy attitudes and political behavior ” (108).

The book is well researched, offers detailed data, and compelling arguments for the role that race plays in the willingness to hear the “political sermon.” Gleaning from the information offered in the book, we are compelled to ask: how can faith leaders move away from discussing *whether* politics can/should be discussed in the pulpit, and move forward with *how* it should be done effectively while taking into account the race of the hearer?

Crystal DesVignes
Duke Divinity School
Durham, NC

David R. Fields. *Preaching and the Mission of God: Faithful Witness after Christendom*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2023. 180 pages. \$25.00.

The essential claim of this book is that a missional reading of the Bible, or “missional hermeneutic,” is necessary for preaching that will bear faithful witness to the gospel and serve to form communities of faithful witness in our now-missionary context in the West. (3)

David Fields, an evangelical pastor in southern British Columbia, presents this claim in three stages. His first five chapters concern “God’s Book, God’s Story,” situating the authority for preaching in “the storied nature of the Bible” (21), by which he means that Scripture provides a counter-cultural narrative for human existence. More specifically, he draws on N. T. Wright’s schema of salvation history as a five-act play, in concert with Kevin Vanhoozer’s “theodrama,” to account for contemporary appropriations of the biblical text. Importantly, this formulation assumes rather than establishes the authority of the first four “acts” as the basis for innovative improvisation in “act five,” which represents the life of the church. Invoking David Bosch, Christopher Wright, Darrell Guder, and Richard Bauckham (amongst others), Fields advocates a missional hermeneutic as paradigmatic for homiletical engagement; in his view, this perspective entails “recognizing God’s missionary nature, the missionary nature of the Bible, and the missionary task of God’s people” (34).

Part 2 defines “Preaching as Participation in God’s Story.” According to Fields, “biblical preaching must aim to *do* what the Bible itself *does*: announce God’s saving work and prepare God’s people to live in light of it for the sake of the whole world” (57; emphasis original). Focusing on testimony to the person of Jesus, this formulation expands into a threefold definition of preaching: (1) “Participation in God’s mission”; (2) “Calling for repentance and conversion”; and (3) “Empowering and equipping the people of God” (59–60). Part 3 turns to contextualization, specifically, “Preaching in a Post-Christendom Setting.” First, citing the example of Lesslie Newbiggin, this section advocates an intentional “evangelization” of one’s congregation or audience so as to embed missional values and motivation and foster culturally appropriate ways of living as a church in the post-Christendom West. So, for instance, preachers should employ gender-inclusive and disability-sensitive language; attend to their local arts and music scene; “connect without capitulating”; challenge the reigning plausibility structure of religious pluralism; and invite repentance as a precondition for entering the Kingdom of God. Two further chapters offer both thematic and practical suggestions for sermon preparation (e.g., “Preach Grace” [93]; “Focus the Sermon” [104]; “Create a Tentative Outline” [105]; “Write the Sermon” [106], etc.).

Each chapter concludes with three or four questions for “personal reflection.” Each major section also includes a longer series of questions for group discussion, along with annotated recommendations “For Further Reading.” A final section consists of three sample sermons by Stephen Holmes, senior lecturer in theology at the University of Saint Andrews; Miriam Swanson, director of Fusion USA (which connects local churches with university students); and Fields himself. Two appendices offer “Missional Hermeneutical Questions for Sermon Preparation” and a “Congregational Sermon Evaluation Form.”

Although the book is based on Fields’ doctoral work (“Shaped for Faithful Witness: Missional Hermeneutics and the Task of Preaching,” D.Min., Acadia Divinity College, 2017), its tone and manner of presentation are both conversational and practical rather than didactic or

abstract. In his forward, Stephen Holmes (who supervised the original dissertation) observes that “This is a book for good preachers who want to be better.” Yet because most of its content is well-travelled territory (whether with regard to missional hermeneutics, the testimonial character of preaching, or suggestions for sermon preparation, each of which is more fully treated elsewhere), this text seems better suited for lay preachers without prior theological education who would benefit from a foundational grounding in missional reading strategies. It will prove especially congenial to readers who share the book’s theological (i.e., pietistic/evangelical) assumptions concerning Christian identity and ministry.

That being said, Fields’ invitation to the actual practice of missional hermeneutics (drawing on Guder) is both refreshing and helpful: how, he asks, does the biblical text “evangelize us... convert us... read us... focus us... [and especially] send us?” (102–103). As with the illustrative anecdotes from congregational ministry that appear in other parts of the book, here readers would have benefited from real-life examples indicating how these strategies might be implemented today in local ministries of preaching. A companion text or sequel along these lines would be most welcome.

Michael P. Knowles
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, Ontario

Leah D. Schade, Jerry L. Sumney, and Emily Askew. *Introduction to Preaching: Scripture, Theology, and Sermon Preparation*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2023. 390 pages. \$58.

Fred Craddock, who in his socks stood barely above five feet, used to quip that he was well over six feet tall before he started teaching preaching. Teaching budding pastors how to preach cogent sermons, difficult enough in Craddock's day, has become even more vexed recently. When I began teaching homiletics in the 1970s, I at least had the advantage of operating with what seemed at least like a common purpose and a unified student audience: a homogeneous group of mostly Presbyterians, all of whom were headed toward parish ministry and who were eager to learn how to be effective preachers.

Not so today. Many seminarians have little interest in congregational ministry, are indifferent at best to the whole enterprise of preaching sermons and possess a Twitter-age (or X-age) touchiness, often ready to go to the mat over fine distinctions of identity and diversity. Small wonder that many homiletics classrooms, in an attempt to meet the many needs of a multiple constituency, have fragmented into a Golden Corral buffet of bewildering pedagogical choices.

One piece of collateral damage of this Balkanization has been the basic preaching textbook. Who would assume that a single text could serve the needs of all students? Who would dare write such a monolithic thing? Who would assume the authority to speak for this multiplicity of identities? What could an African American Baptist homiletician possibly have to say to an Episcopal student, a Methodist female author to a male Church of God in Christ seminarian? Many teachers of preaching have long ago scratched textbooks from their syllabi in favor of a cacophony of diversity-driven readings, blogs, and video sermons.

The current partitioning, and perhaps even confusion, has a history. Years ago, the Academy of Homiletics, which is the oldest North American guild for teachers of preaching, assembled a task force to study how preaching should be taught in the contemporary classroom. After analyzing the current context, the task force eventually advocated for a radical student-centered approach. Don't try to teach a classroom, they advised. Instead, teach each student one-by-one. Within every student, they argued, was a little preacher ready to be summoned, eager to come out. Instead of teaching monolithic classes, homileticians were encouraged to realize that they were teaching discrete and unique individuals and should tailor instruction around each student's gifts and proclivities.

This was all well-intentioned, of course, and it did soften and take some of the terror out of preaching classes, but it also led to pedagogical madness. Would any self-respecting law school assume that inside each student is a little litigator eager to emerge? Would any medical school professor look out at a class and see the room filled with little neurosurgeons in embryonic form? No, in preaching as well as in law or medicine, there are time-honored traditions and disciplines to be learned. There are accepted ways to do kidney surgery, to cross examine hostile witnesses, or to engage scripture in sermons. The goal is to stretch students, to introduce them to best practices, not to whittle complex practices down to the crevices of an isolated student's unchallenged capacities.

Now, three professors from Lexington Theological Seminary—Leah D. Schade, who teaches preaching; Jerry Sumney, a biblical scholar; and Emily Askew, an emeritus theologian—have accomplished an amazing feat. With full attention to the new pluralism in the preaching classroom, they have nevertheless been bold enough to produce for a new generation a basic

textbook for preachers, *Introduction to Preaching: Scripture, Theology, and Sermon Preparation*, and a wise and thoughtful text it is, useful not only for beginners but also for experienced preachers.

The secret in their sauce is that they focus on sermon infrastructure. All sermons, regardless of whether they are Lutheran Advent homilies or extemporaneous messages whooped in a Chicago storefront, must have design, structure, and purpose if they are to be heard by listeners. And it is to these essentials that the three Lexington scholars attend. After a lucid section on biblical exegesis and a refreshing discussion of the theological heart of biblical texts and sermons (one that, characteristic of the current climate in biblical interpretation, is alert to the ideologies and social biases found in both texts and traditional interpretations), they turn to the structural essentials of sermons, which they name “the central question,” “the central claim,” and “the central purpose.”

The central question is “the compelling inquiry that is driving the congregation to want to listen, and the reason they should want to respond to the sermon” (134). When this central question is brought close enough to the sermon’s chosen biblical text for sparks to fly, the result is “the central claim,” namely, “the main point you are making that should mean something for our listener’s lives, for our neighbors near and far, and for all in God’s Creation” (153). Preachers preach to effect change, of course, and “the central purpose” of the sermon is “what this sermon intends to do and what it will accomplish,” that is, the “so what” of the sermon (173).

The beauty in these three categories is that the authors never lose sight of the fact that preaching is, after all, a form of human communication. Theologically, it may be more than that, but certainly not less. Paul Ricoeur once reminded us with elegant simplicity that in human communication “someone says something to someone else about something.” The authors of *Introduction to Preaching* guide preachers to attend to the various components of the something said to someone else about something. The clearer preachers are about these factors, the better chance the sermon has of hitting home.

There is a lot of acquired wisdom in these pages, but the writers convey it in conversational language, presenting themselves not as professors from on high but as companions of the reader in a journey of learning. The volume is punctuated by carefully curated sermons, annotated by the authors, that helpfully embody the key insights of the book. A series of classroom exercises and a glossary of major terms is included at the end of the volume.

Introduction to Preachers will no doubt be embraced by the current generation of teachers of preaching and also by pastors looking to strengthen their pulpit ministry.

Thomas G. Long
Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching
Candler School of Theology
Atlanta, Georgia

An earlier version of this review, titled “One New Book for Preachers,” originally appeared in Journal for Preachers, Advent, 2022. It is reprinted here with permission.

Jawanza Eric Clark, *Reclaiming Stolen Earth: An Africana Ecotheology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022. 240 pages. \$35.

In *Reclaiming Stolen Earth: An Africana Ecotheology*, Jawanza Eric Clark argues for the inclusion and prioritizing of land or Earth as a theological symbol and for reframing space as a theological concept. In his proposal, he interrogates liberal/progressive ecology and Black theology while explaining the importance of African and Native American spiritualities in addressing ecological concerns. Clark, who identifies as an African American constructive theologian, places his approach within the field of Africana religious studies "which seeks to increase our understanding of, and to affirm and appreciate the knowledge produced by, the religious cultures of African-descended peoples worldwide" (x-xi).

Clark presents a way of addressing ecological concerns that accounts for what he calls the white epistemological hubris that negatively impacts the Earth and all of creation (xiv-xv). Clark's proposal uses African, Black Diaspora (especially African American), and Native American spiritualities as foundational elements of his constructive theology. According to Clark, what many white ecological advocates and Black liberation theologians fail to address is the white epistemological hubris that promotes "the myth of objectivity, a false universalism, and a vicious individualism, all framed within a temporal orientation" (xv). Clark proposes reframing space as a theological concept as a primary means of addressing both the ecological crisis and ongoing racial injustices. He relies on an Africana theological method that "prioritize[s] the present and the importance of being in right relationship with the spaces we occupy, including the natural world" (xxiii).

In chapter 1, Clark explains this Africana theological method as one which champions interdependence and values "living revelation" over Western white Christianity's focus on revelation as "grounded in a historical revelation, a past moment" (15). For African and Native American traditionalists, God's revelation is ongoing with God communicating through all creatures, in a variety of forms, including through dreams and communing with nature (15). Clark lauds several Womanist theologians who "help us move away from an abstract theology rooted in a temporal orientation to one concerned with the practical import of living bodies" (17). He also pushes against Womanist and other theologies when they prioritize the Bible or the Cross over a spatial orientation that spiritualizes and prioritizes the land/Earth as a theological symbol.

In chapter 2, "The Failure to Indigenize Space: The Legacy of Stolen Earth," Clark focuses on the history of land dispossession, often by violent means, and the damage caused to the land and to people of color. As he does throughout the book, Clark gives specific examples of Black Americans violently dispossessed of land. Viewing this history through a theological lens, Clark argues that efforts to heal the earth must include recognition of the damaging impact of white supremacy and colonial proscriptions that demonized indigenous religions and disconnected people from the land. He calls for an "Africana ecotheology, that can begin to create a path toward reconciliation with the land and the Earth" (38). Reconciliation would include "the promotion of sacred memory, the overcoming of historical racial amnesia, and the development of rituals of healing and renewal based on a spatial orientation that gives attention to the legacy of blood-soaked and resource-depleted spaces of Earth" (38).

In chapter 3, Clark focuses on reconceptualizations of God he claims are needed in Western Christianity, including in Black Protestant Christian traditions. Clark calls for incorporating aspects of traditional African spirituality and African mystical traditions (83-84).

This would include embracing a doctrine of God "capable of addressing the trauma incurred by African-descended people's spatial dislocation and legacy of rigid geographical containment and alienation from the Earth" (84). Engaging the works of Albert Cleage, Jr., Ishmael Tettah, and Emmanuel Lartey, Clark supports an understanding of God "as creative energy, power, and intelligence" who is "neither a white racist nor a being on the side of the oppressed" (122).

In chapter 4, "Black Suffering and the Urgency for New Theological Symbols," Clark advocates for rejecting theological symbols that "instantiate social death under the guise of a false universalism" (142). He encourages embracing indigenous African religious symbols and orientations that emphasize the interrelationship of the natural world, all creatures, and the spiritual world, including the ancestors (143). Regarding the ancestors, Clark states, "Because they reside in the natural world, the ancestors provide a conceptual bridge linking racial suffering to the Earth's suffering and continental Africa with North America" (143),

Clark concludes by addressing the question "What Is Liberation?" in chapter 5. Here Clark challenges what he views as Black Theology's and many other liberation theologies' emphases on political and economic liberation. He applauds the work of Womanist and eco-Womanist theologians like Delores Williams, Monica Coleman, and Melanie Harris for advancing the concept of liberation not as a destination or achievement in a political or economic system but as a "theme of survival/improving quality of life" (173). Clark highlights Coleman's emphasis on creative transformation, which incorporates Process Theology as well as symbols and concepts of several religions, particularly African traditional religions.

Clark offers a text that incorporates historical overviews of Black theology, liberation theology, and Womanist theology in connection with Christian engagement in restoring and healing the land. Clark's *Reclaiming Stolen Earth* is an accessible text that invites Christians in particular to re-examine theological symbols used to support or detract from land dispossession and ecological devastation and to view land/Earth as a theological symbol and spiritual sibling crucial to human wholeness as well as human existence.

La Ronda D. Barnes
Boston University School of Theology
Boston, MA

Stephen Burns & HyeRan Kim-Cragg, editors. *Conversations about Divine Mystery: Essays in Honor of Gail Ramshaw*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023. 202 pages. \$49.00.

Words matter! This is the inspired thread woven throughout the tapestry of essays written by fifteen liturgical scholars across countries and cultures who have been impacted by Gail Ramshaw's work. While the authors found different inroads into this book's celebratory conversation unified around the scholar herself, Ramshaw's commitment to beautiful wordsmithing and her insight into the imaginative capacity of words was an ever-present theme amid its pages. Each chapter uniquely highlights her contribution to scholarship and the church, as both have been enriched by her working belief that carefully curated words have symbolic potential to create points of holy connection and transformation.

This collective work offers insights from authors representing liturgical traditions ranging from Episcopal to Pentecostal, illustrating the depth and breadth of Ramshaw's thought. The essays also vary in how they take inspiration from the scholar and her work. Some essays launch from a point of personal engagement. Jette Bendixen Rønkilde uses her essay to answer a decade-old question Ramshaw asked her about the communicative interaction of body and language in Eucharistic prayer after worshipping with her in an Evangelical Lutheran Church in Denmark. Kimberly Bracken Long remembers seeing Ramshaw wear a tree of life pendant, representing the profundity of the symbol for Ramshaw personally, and connects its metaphor into liturgical ecotheology to propose praying with creation rather than for it.

Other authors respond to themes they see in Ramshaw's work and utilize them as frameworks for discussion. Donyelle McCray engages Ramshaw's claim that liturgy has the power to shape identity by exploring the formative implications illustrated in Zora Neale Hurston's curse-prayer and the similar resonances of imprecatory psalms powerfully used within worship. In each of their essays, both Rhodora Beaton and Benjamin Stewart launch from Ramshaw's insight into the dynamic functions of metaphors. Beaton bridges Ramshaw's work in both metaphor and Trinitarian language to show how liturgy can generate disruptive open spaces for interconnected inspiration. Stewart illustrates how the tree of life metaphor can shape conversations about death to build ecological inroads for thought and practices regarding conservation burial. Gerald Liu utilizes the theme of storied identification present in Ramshaw's work in conjunction with cultural changes to point out the increasing gap between traditional liturgical symbols and the worshipers that use them, calling for new imaginings and contemporary words.

Two essays seek to build on Ramshaw's scholarship more directly. Lis Valle-Ruiz looks to expand the feminist commitment in Ramshaw's *Liturgical Language: Keeping it Metaphoric* by including a decolonial emphasis. She illustrates this move by examining how different groups who exist at the margins or push at traditional boundaries translate or adopt the pattern of words Jesus taught his disciples to pray. Similarly, Bryan Cones responds to Ramshaw's defense of the traditional invocation of the Trinitarian formulation used in baptism by suggesting a third expansive way between the two foundational commitments he sees in her work. While quite different, the patterns of these essays find a rhythm together and bring the reader through Ramshaw's work with varied insights and expressions.

For those newly interested in Gail Ramshaw, this book gives a snapshot of her impact on both scholars and scholarship. The editors' introductory essay does an excellent job outlining her leadership and contributions in important conversations that have impacted liturgical scholarship and the church's worship life. The chapters converse about Ramshaw's work in ways which

loosely place it into the ongoing theological and practical trajectory of the liturgical renewal movement while helpfully pointing the reader in directions to dive deeper. Still, this book also seems to acknowledge that a full representation of her thought cannot be captured in a simple compendium. Instead, the authors do something more with these carefully chosen words. For those who are familiar with Ramshaw and have felt the influence of her work in their own scholarship, this book represents an appropriate love letter to the scholar, one that will warm your heart and remind you of the faithful service she has offered to enrich us all. Melinda Quivik appropriately finishes the last page with gratitude: “Thank you Gail Ramshaw, for finding your path, led by your holy curiosity, and giving the rest of us language for worship that teaches, delights, and feeds us” (182).

Katrina J. Olson
Church Divinity School of the Pacific
Berkeley, CA