

Jerusha Matsen Neal. *Holy Ground: Climate Change, Preaching, and the Apocalypse of Place*. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2024. 379 pages. \$57.99.

Jerusha Matsen Neal's *Holy Ground* is an extraordinary book that brings readers into the climate-ravaged Indigenous islands of the South Pacific and asks what preaching means for their communities and beyond. "Apocalypse of place" is the unveiling of injustice and devastation that results from centuries of colonialism, capitalism, and a fossil-fueled economy that wreaks havoc on places often unseen and unnoticed by the developed world. Neal's approach in this book fuses post-colonial biblical exegesis, environmental ethics, and cultural studies to create a homiletic suffused with clear-eyed, heartbreaking honesty about the realities of displaced peoples.

Neal spent three years teaching as a missionary at Davuilevu Theological College at the invitation of Indigenous leaders of the Fijian Methodist Church. Moved by the plight of these ministers, as well as their unrelenting faith, she decided to engage in an ethnographic sojourn with fifteen of them. In their various ways, each sought to proclaim God's Word to a people enduring catastrophic storms and, for some, the forced choice to relocate from their ancestral homes. She aimed to construct "a practical theology of place that equips preachers from various contexts to proclaim God's Word in the face of climate catastrophe" (xvi). She does this by bringing the book of Ezekiel alongside the sermons of these Fijian Methodist preachers to find the resonances and responses between the ancient exiles of Israel and the contemporary exiles of the South Pacific. The result is a harrowing yet necessary interrogation of the White, Western, neocolonial church and what its preachers dare to say in the face of unthinkable loss.

A key question at the heart of preaching for exiled people is, "What is God's relevance—and the relevance of God's covenant—to those dislocated by imperial violence? Is God's creation powerless in the face of voracious greed?" (xv). Further, "Can the creation and covenant of a good God come undone?" (5). Preachers must navigate these questions like a *drua*—the boat used by South Pacific islanders—steering through the swelling waves of a tempestuous sea. Neal employs the image of the *drua*, the symbol used by the Methodist Church in Fiji, as a primary metaphor throughout the book. In turn, the book itself is like this boat that Neal expertly navigates, even as readers are pitched and swayed by the stories she tells and the realizations she reveals. "Climate change reminds preachers that the pulpit is not only fraught with power; it is fraught with powerlessness" (44), in the sense that no amount of words can turn back time or erase the losses of bleached coral reefs, hurricane-ravaged islands, and beaches slowly engulfed in rising seas. What, then, is the purpose of preaching amidst such tremendous theft by overwhelming global systems?

Holy Ground responds to this question by exploring the concepts of sovereignty, belonging, and loss as experienced by the Fijian people. Throughout the book, Neal extensively footnotes the impressive research that undergirds her project. She is a diplomatic and incisive conversation partner with the scholars who inform her work, always holding scholarship accountable to the Fijian people and their vulnerable islands.

Neal's primary biblical conversation partner is the Hebrew prophet Ezekiel whose community suffered exile and loss of land, heritage, and culture at the hands of the Babylonian Empire. While there are obvious differences between ancient Israel and modern-day Fiji, Neal makes a convincing case that Ezekiel is precisely the biblical book needed for her apocalyptic homiletic due to its complicated relationship with hope amid imperial trauma. Chapters two and five are outstanding examples of the deep exegetical work needed to construct sermons of resistance to empire.

Neal models intercultural engagement with humility and studious attention to language, history, and socioeconomic complexities. She shares her initial misunderstandings of seemingly naïve practices such as fasting, prayer, and sacramental rituals used by the ministers to formulate their responses to unimaginable loss from climate change. Then, through careful listening and reconsideration, she comes to understand the power of these spiritual practices as “courageous, vulnerable postures of relating to the world, the pulpit, and the biblical text” (85). Thus, she reframes our own understandings of sovereignty to include not just humans, but that of the oceans, islands, trees, and all of God’s Creation. In this way, readers come to internalize their own shifts in understanding the relationships between Creation, God, and those who have hubristically claimed sovereignty over all. This leads to the realization that preaching from an apocalypse of place is both pastoral care and resistance to empire, and that *place* itself preaches.

While the book is intended for both scholars and clergy, chapter four’s recounting of the history of colonization in the Fijian Methodist Church may be difficult for some readers. A glossary of Fijian terms would have been helpful. But like the recounting of Israel’s history in books such as Leviticus, this chapter bears witness and preserves the memory of an embattled community. Neal’s command of the chronology, terminology, and historical nuances is respectful and impressive, especially for one not born in that culture.

The final chapter, “Leaves of Healing,” draws out the implications of preaching when it is answerable to the voices of uprooted communities and to Creation itself. As with the entire book, there is enough exegesis, imagery, and ecotheological richness in this chapter to sustain a preacher for the difficult, painful work of proclamation amidst violation. She assures preachers not to be afraid of the “big questions” of Scripture and devastated communities; indeed, they are what reveal God’s call to respond to “the world God loves—a world in present danger” (258). Neal’s book educates, empowers, and equips preachers to respond to that call.

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