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Yohan Go

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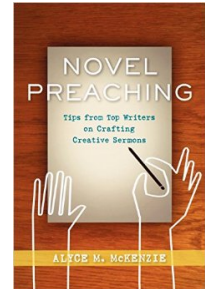
Book Review

Novel Preaching: Tips from Top Writers on Crafting Creative Sermons

By Alyce M. McKenzie

Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010

Alyce M. McKenzie, Professor of Preaching and Worship at Perkins School of Theology, proposes a creative way to overcome two millenniums-long divide between two primary functions in preaching – teaching and delighting – by means of imagination. In response to the contemporary preaching context in which preachers would preach to people who are easily bored and are less informed about Scripture and their faith tradition, McKenzie argues that sermons should accomplish the roles of teaching and delighting at the same time. In other words, sermons should “teach with imagination.”(5) From the Israelite sages, the writers of Proverbs, McKenzie discerns a way of teaching that satisfies reason and moves emotion simultaneously through the use of word pictures, which are distilled from observations of daily life. What is essential for this task is the habit of attentiveness to “our inner life (inscape), life around us (landscape), and the life of the biblical text (textscape).”(17)



In part one, McKenzie explores creative writers' methods for cultivating the imagination in relation to the preaching task. McKenzie points out three obstacles to cultivating the habit of attentiveness: lack of discipline, lack of daring, and lack of direction. An antidote for the first obstacle is developing and maintaining a habit of recording immediately while having the courage to encounter pain and suffering in our lives is necessary to overcome the second obstacle. For the third obstacle, McKenzie provides encouragement to notice what she calls “floaters,” which are “the stray images, thoughts, and insights”(19) that emerges in the mind while we are attentive to people, events, and locations around us. There are nine types of floaters: “dilemma, incongruity, connection, memory, common emotion, archetypal characters, flexible images or concept, imaginative situation, and intriguing fictional situation.”(22) Developing “our knack for noticing character, plot, scene, and imagery”(32) within floaters is important in relation to preaching because these are key elements for shaping sermons.

In part two, McKenzie applies her insights gained from creative fiction writers for crafting sermons. Instead of proposing a general methodology for crafting sermons, she begins by providing “a typology of four types of sermon struggles”(48) and shares advice from creative writers for each type of sermon. The first type of the sermon is “the sermon that is coherent and entertaining but lacks depth.”(48) The lack of depth in a sermon results from the failure to be attentive to congregational context or text. In order to overcome these problems, preachers should choose a subject that is worthy of their congregations and pay more attention to character, imagery and setting in biblical texts. The problem of the second type of the sermon is lack of cohesion. The sermon often lose its coherence when there are too many competing themes in one sermon or lack of preacher's desire to achieve a certain goal, which is essential for developing characters and plot of the sermon. Advice from fiction writers suggests to use “a guiding image or metaphor to organize and unify the sermon and check the sequence of scenes”(55) of the sermon. The

third type of sermon is coherent but boring. The dominance of the passive voice and abstract language, weak adjectives and adverbs and humorlessness are common features of this type of the sermon. An antidote for this symptom is to find one's own voice and plot, and to describe a character's emotion, personality, and setting by using descriptive vivid sensory language and active verbs. In the fourth section, McKenzie warns us about eight patterns of false teaching in sermons, which "eliminates the complexity and tension from the plot of the life of faith." (67) In the remaining chapters, McKenzie creatively introduces many contemporary homiletical ideas and insights from influential homileticians of our days as a complement for crafting sermons with her insights from creative writers along with her sample sermons.

One minor critique of her work is the unclear use of the term imagination. McKenzie points out that "the listening heart is the work of the faculty we call the imagination" (6) so she does not identify attentiveness with imagination. However, it seems that cultivating imagination is almost a synonym for cultivating a habit of attentiveness throughout the book. By clarifying the difference between imagination and attentiveness, McKenzie can highlight a creative and ingenious dimension of imagination.

Many preachers struggle to write sermons that are not only didactic but also engaging. For these preachers, McKenzie provides an insightful way to integrate two functions of sermons, teaching and delighting. She also offers a practical guide to cultivating imagination, which is the essential element for every sermon, along with a rich resource.

Yohan Go
Boston University School of Theology