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Homeward bound: messages about life after death

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The book is a series of 15 sermons based on the lives of Christian saints commemorated in the calendar of Lesser Festivals and Commemorations in the *Lutheran Book of Worship*. The sermons have been used in the context of worship at All Saints' Lutheran Church in Lilburn, Georgia where Rossing is a part-time staff member.

I found each of the sermons to be excellent devotional reading as Rossing superbly combines the saints' lives with those of our own. Preachers will find inspiration for their own sermon preparation. Laypersons will find that indeed we can celebrate our own lives as saints by the grace of God. In fact Rossing encourages creativity in compiling our own list of saints to commemorate and celebrate.

I would recommend this book for both clergy and laity; a book that includes a sermon on the commemoration of Mary, Mother of our Lord, palatable to a Lutheran heritage, is indeed worth having.

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Homeward Bound

Harold L. Warlick

Lima, Ohio: C.S.S. Publishing Company, 1991

181 pp.

Harold Warlick is identified as "...minister to the college and chairman of the department of religion and philosophy, High Point College, High Point, North Carolina." The Library of Congress Catalogue data tells us that he is Baptist. The book is subtitled "Messages about Life after Death". But the data describes them as "sermons about life after death". It is not altogether clear, then, what the content and function of this book are. The messages/sermons have titles, but no biblical texts are prefixed, and they vary in length from very short (four pages) to very long (fourteen pages). Thus, they may be anything from brief college chapel addresses to privately composed personal meditations.

The book appears to be thematic, connected throughout by the theme of life after death, as the subtitle promises. In his Introduction, Warlick affirms that "We are all on a homeward bound journey" (p.7). Loss of spiritual home and inheritance, he says, is our great tragedy. He also confides that this is a book of middle age; hence the importance of the "vision of home". The first meditation/sermon is indicative: "The Child Points the Way". In the ensuing pages he often juxtaposes the child of Bethlehem with the journey home and the promise of eternal life.

Warlick is a very good writer. His homiletic style (we will assume that these are sermons) is generally to begin with a contemporary situation,

either graceful or sinful, and then lead up to a biblical text (usually not identified earlier) buried in the narrative. This inductive approach, moving from experience to spiritual truth, is generally effective in illustrating the truthfulness and applicability of scripture to today's experience. If there is a problem with this approach, it is that faith tends to come across as built on experience and not on objective proclamation.

We have said that the book *appears* to be thematic. Often, however, the theme of "going home" is missing. One wonders even more, then, about the subtitle and the provenance of these messages: are the non-thematic meditations simply "fillers" chosen from the "barrel" and used to pad the book up to 181 pages?

Warlick is a Baptist with whom Lutherans could be friends. Just the same, he makes some assumptions that some of us might challenge. We might disagree with his conclusion regarding the reason for Jesus' life and death: "There is no greater purpose for anything than releasing us from our fears of life and death" (p. 21).

A more substantial criticism arises from Warlick's theme which affirms the Christian faith as a journey through this life to our eternal home. This is a narrow, personal interpretation of the Christian faith which inevitably misses the social and active dimension of our life together as the body of Christ. Many readers of this journal, especially those informed and inspired by the liberationist and feminist critiques of society and the church, will find Warlick's message incomplete.

For those who have made the commitment to lectionary preaching, it will be interesting to read these sermons. Here, in another sense, these themes are personal, meaning that they arise from the individual rather than from the church. Who has not been enticed by the "free preaching temptation"? But how to choose those themes? Politics? Personal problems? Social crises? Passages of life, such as Warlick's, shared by some but not by all one's listeners at any given time?

When you are oppressed by the loneliness of the preacher's task, console yourself by reflecting on the even greater loneliness of the person who, like Warlick, must preach without the lectionary, aptly and warmly called *comes* (companion) by the medieval church!

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