

Book review

Rosanna McFadden

The Preacher as Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit, by Austin B. Tucker. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008.

Austin B. Tucker's *The Preacher as Storyteller: The Power of Narrative in the Pulpit* presents a toolbox of ideas and exercises for preachers. Although many writers have acknowledged the power of narrative in the Bible and in the pulpit, Tucker makes a strong case for storytelling and gives guidelines and caveats for its use.

Chapters include "The Essential Elements of Narrative," "Telling Your Own Story," "Step-by-Step to the Narrative Sermon," and "Ten Ways to Sharpen Storytelling Skills," and he devotes an entire section to brief biographies and sample sermons by historic preachers. Each of the how-to chapters ends with three exercises geared toward concrete practical application in a congregational setting. And pastoral storytelling is not limited to the pulpit: Tucker mentions therapeutic storytelling for pastoral care with adults or children, and he devotes an entire chapter to children's sermons, complete with suggestions for format, topics, and delivery.

Throughout the book, Tucker seasons with caution his encouragement to tell stories. He affirms the power of sharing one's own story but warns against too much self-disclosure. Although stories from life settings are powerful, a pastor must never use—or even refer to—a story shared in confidence by a parishioner. Tucker explores the boundary between persuasion and manipulation, and he distinguishes between personal testimony and logical argument.

Tucker presents a wide range of storytelling styles—personal testimony, third person narrative, various plot constructions, character monologue—and he encourages preachers not to rely exclusively on any single mode. He suggests keeping a card file of

“sermon seeds” drawn from sources ranging from family stories to bumper stickers. He states categorically that every sermon should be rooted in God’s Word, but he does not provide tools for Bible study or say much about how to use the Bible. Instead he assumes knowledge of the Bible and an understanding of its use, and he suggests no framework—such as a lectionary—for the selection of texts. Tucker’s examples of biblical applications are in the context

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of personal faith; he gives little sense of the power of scripture and story to inspire and transform communities. Conspicuously absent is any mention of the Holy Spirit for inspiration or guidance in sermon preparation.

Some readers will be distracted by the author’s tacit assumption that all preachers are men. In his pantheon of great homiletics, a biography or sample sermon from a female preacher would have provided welcome variation. And Tucker refers to the great narrative tradition of African American

preaching but does not treat it in detail or profile an African American in the section on storytelling masters. In a book that presents such a rich variety of narrative styles and affirms their use in preaching, these omissions are unfortunate.

The Preacher as Storyteller is a clearly written, broad-ranging resource for pastors who wish to incorporate narrative in preaching, or who are looking for ways to hone their storytelling skills. The exercises enable readers to apply the material to their practice of preaching. The book neglects some significant preaching tools, but it offers a nuts and bolts approach to narrative preaching which would make it a practical addition to any preacher’s library.

About the reviewer

Rosanna Eller McFadden lives in Goshen, Indiana, and is a member of Creekside Church of the Brethren in Elkhart. She is an MDiv student at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and was a presenter at the Biblical Storytelling Festival there in November 2008.