

Paul Scott Wilson's *Preaching as Poetry*

A Review

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In 1 Chronicles 12 there is a list given of all of the different people that came to join King David's newly established army. Of all of the people that are described, it is those found in verse 32 that have always intrigued me the most. There are verses about people who are masterful with their swords, some noted for their skills with bow and arrows, and still others lauded for their extreme valor. But it is the men of Issachar that have always captured my imagination. In verse 32 we are told that these men of Issachar "had an understanding of the times" and knew what Israel ought to do. I have always imagined these men of Issachar to be cultural observers who had a deep intuition and understanding of what was going on around Israel at any given moment. King David needed people around him who could read the times, and recognize what might be the best course of action in order to lead the people. This passage came to mind almost immediately as I read Paul Scott Wilson's, *Preaching as Poetry: Beauty, Goodness, and truth in Every Sermon*. Wilson masterfully situates himself as a "man of Issachar" in this monograph, offering preachers advice on what is needed in preaching for such a time as this.

This book is the beginning of a series on "The Artistry of Preaching" and lays the groundwork for what should be a strong series. *Preaching as Poetry* reads like a memoirs of sorts; a personal and impassioned accumulated wisdom tailored for a particular moment. Wilson has written a book

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that offers a viable and necessary method of preaching for the current postmodern cultural milieu. Throughout the work, Wilson demonstrates a keen understanding of the postmodern developments in our culture and the many different ways that this postmodern move affects how people receive sermons, articulate their own beliefs, and how people understand beauty, goodness, and truth. But one of the many things that I appreciate about this book is the posture from which Wilson writes. He is not the elderly curmudgeon in the neighborhood who sits on his porch and waxes poetic about the good old days and about how things used to be. Instead, Wilson is an appreciative observer of the times, and the advice that he gives for preaching and the call that he offers for preachers is an excited one. Postmodernism is not a problem for Wilson, but is in many ways an opportunity. Because of the cultural shifts that come from postmodernity, preachers are now forced to “immerse themselves in the mind set of today in order to creatively speak to this world” (xiv) and in so doing, they also craft sermons that are somehow more faithful to the Biblical witness. Postmodernity calls for sermons that are poetry, preaching as theopoetry.

In many ways, this text itself is a model of the kind of theopoetic work that Wilson calls for. It is beautiful in its form and ambitious. Moving carefully between story, example, and precept, Wilson’s passion for the topic comes through the page, and by the end of the work he is noting how “fun” a different preaching strategy would be to try out (136). Wilson invites preachers to a kind of theopoetic preaching that stokes the imagination of the hearer and speaks to the core of our faith. Important to Wilson’s argument for this new kind of preaching is the notion that much of the Christian faith is already poetry. Making a distinction between a “math” way of thinking and poetry, Wilson suggests quite strongly that the general way for talking about faith requires poetry (4). It requires language that opens up relationship, points to beauty, much more than a logic that makes propositions and appeals to reason. What I feel most from Wilson in this work,

more than just a nod to a more creative style of preaching, is a deep sense that theopoetic preaching best represents, or best communicates the story of our faith.

This is not about a new style of preaching that is going to be more readily accepted by postmodern hearers, this is about developing a way of communicating the Gospel that is more faithful to the Gospel itself. Wilson is making the case that the postmodern turn, and the imperatives that it offers are in many ways more conducive to preaching and communicating the life of faith. The world craves spirituality and Wilson is suggesting that Christian spirituality can meet this need if we embrace who we really are. And who we are is a people of poetry, a people best described through theopoetics. I get the sense that Wilson is almost thankful for postmodernity as it lends itself to a theopoetic transmission of the Gospel, a way of preaching that Wilson might say through its very nature is more faithful to the Biblical witness. Wilson's take on theopoetry is much deeper than simply a rhetorical form or methodology. Wilson wants preachers to become "poets in residence" such that they can think about God and preach through a theopoetic lens. I hesitate to call it a methodology, because such language betrays the sense of feeling and intuition seemingly behind this work. Wilson seems to appropriate much of L.B.C. Keefe-Perry's description of theopoetics for his work.¹ This understanding of theopoetry is much different than what you see in David Miller's article on theopoetry.² For Miller, theopoetry seems to primarily be about the way that the story, God's story is transmitted to the people. It is a kind of "poetizing" of knowledge (Miller, 6). But in Wilson's work, theopoetry is much deeper. Wilson suggests that we experi-

¹ Wilson quotes Keefe-Perry as saying, "Theopoetics is a type of writing and I would like to offer that it is a way of perceiving as well. The theopoet as wordsmith can so craft because she sees theopoetically, because she is looking for all the ways her experiences are variations on a divine theme." L.B.C. Keefe-Perry, "Divine Exploration and Invitation," in *Cross-Currents*, Issue 1 (March 2010): 98.

² David L. Miller, "Theopoetry or Theopoetics," in *Cross-Currents*, Issue 1 (March 2010): 6-23.

ence God through poetry, we perceive God through poetry and then, only after experiencing God through poetry can we then preach as poetry.

Though written in a theopoetic style, this book is structured quite logically and provides readily accessible practical help for preachers looking to hone their craft. More than musing about the work of preaching, Wilson throughout offers actual tools and suggestions for the development of sermons. The book is divided into three parts, with each part dealing with one of three important theological aspects of theopoetry: beauty, goodness, and truth. As the name suggests, Wilson believes that every sermon should wrestle with all three of these aspects. Within these three major sections is one chapter on contemporary thought, one chapter more specifically on homiletical theology and theory, and a third chapter that demonstrates this theopoetic method. Wilson shapes these different sections around the three most important aspects of the Christian story, Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost.

The postmodern landscape certainly complicates the ways that the preacher must handle beauty, goodness, and truth. Postmodernity will not allow these ideals to be described in the kind of universal ways that they once were. There is no unified idea of beauty, goodness, or even truth. As such, the preacher as poet must use their imagination to invite folk into a conversation about each of these ideals. Wilson suggests that “the preacher is a poet in the sense of being an agent of God’s poetry, someone who perceives God’s beauty, goodness, and truth (8).” The theopoetic preacher does not stand as an authority that preaches down propositionally but instead the theopoetic preacher invites the congregation into a conversation, and postures herself as one who is revealing God’s beauty, goodness, and the power of truth in our lives. The theopoetic preacher must offer a way to think about beauty as found in God and God’s creation. The theopoetic preacher must help people see that there is something to goodness beyond simply that which is effective. The theopoetic preacher must give good rea-

sons for and demonstrate the transformative power of truth in a world where truth as a concept is not necessarily a concern (107). Preaching in postmodernity is a beautifully challenging endeavor.

Toward the end of this work, Wilson begins to play with the forms of worship and even of traditional sermons as a ways of trying to imagine a way forward for what I have been calling theopoetic preaching. He begins to think about preaching as a way to model and foster civil discourse in society, a real reimagining of the preaching moment. He also begins to wonder aloud about the very structure of the worship service and whether or not it serves as a barrier for some to experience God as it is currently constituted. The new modes of worship that he offers are fresh and exciting to dream about. As I suggested earlier, this is an exciting text that serves as a fine beginning to a series on the artistry of preaching. There is much here that could be considered new but I must say that that I was somewhat surprised that a reference to the Black Church and implicitly Black preaching was held off until the last few pages of the text. Wilson references Hartford Memorial Baptist Church in Detroit in the chapter on Pentecost. Hartford Memorial is lifted up as an example of a church that has worship that fills the congregation with the Spirit. And while this is certainly a good illustration for a mention of the Spirit, limiting the mention of the Black Church in this work to this single illustration ignores that fact that the rich tradition of Black preaching has been dancing on the edge of many of the claims of this text. Many of the moves that Wilson calls to be developed in preaching mirror some of the richest and longest standing aspects of the Black preaching tradition. More than just celebration, the notions of imagination, creating an experience for the hearers, preaching as event, creating the Biblical world in the mind of the hearers, and placing God and God's saving

actions as the central focus of the sermon are all prominently named in African American homiletic literature.³

Wilson challenges preachers to reimagine their practice as poetry. By the end, he says simply that “preaching is theopoetry (144).” This is a request for preachers to offer something beautiful to the world and to God that counteracts years of overreliance on reason and logic. I can sense Wilson’s heart through these pages. And while it is a practical homiletics book, with real methodological suggestions, more than anything this book is a piece of theopoetry, calling forth that which is good, beautiful, and truthful from the heart of preachers for the people.

³ Henry Mitchell’s *Celebration and Experience in Preaching*, Cleophus Larue’s *The Heart of Black Preaching*, and Frank Thomas’ *They like to never Quit Praising God*, are three of many books on the Black Preaching tradition that demonstrate many of the themes found in *Preaching as Poetry*.