

[MJTM 22 (2020–2021)]

#### BOOK REVIEW

Kenneth J. Langley. *How to Preach the Psalms*. Dallas, TX: Fontes, 2021. xiv + 178 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-948048-53-8. \$16.95.

*How to Preach the Psalms* is the first book in a new series edited by Kenneth J. Langley and Jeffrey D. Arthurs which explores genre-specific preaching. The book tackles the poetic genre of Psalms.

A pastor with over twenty-five years of preaching experience, Langley admits his own struggle to capture and communicate the full experience and *poetic essence* of Psalms. His experience as a pastor, adjunct professor of homiletics at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, and member and past president of the Evangelical Homiletics Society equip Langley to recognize the need for more homiletical literature addressing the genre-specific challenges of preaching the Psalms. *How to Preach the Psalms* is his response to that need.

In chapter 1, Langley challenges the preacher to expand his or her repertoire of sermon genres by creating sermons that consider and convey the emotions, imagery, and artistic beauty of the Psalms. He argues that content alone is not enough to capture the intended meaning of a Psalm. Form must also be considered, since the poetry of the Psalms tries to “change us by moving our emotions, gripping our imaginations, and addressing our sense of beauty” (11). Each chapter that follows addresses a specific aspect of the poetic genre of Psalms. He discusses how to preach considering the imagery, movement, poetic devices, word choice, orality, emotion, and context of the Psalms. Langley presents fourteen practical strategies for incorporating these elements into a sermon. He concludes each chapter with suggestions for further reading, group discussion and exercises for prac-

ting the strategies proposed in the chapter.

Discussing the use of imagery in Psalms in chapter 2, Langley proposes that the preacher should allow the sermon to develop out of the imagery used in the psalm and utilize those pictures in their speech to engage the imagination. He offers examples to illustrate how one might go about doing so.

In chapter 3 Langley discusses movement within a psalm, instructing the preacher to follow the poem's logic (paying attention to the narrativity of the psalm), the logic of the experience of the psalm, and the liturgical logic of the psalm. He again offers examples and illustrates this by describing his own experience of studying a psalm.

In chapter 4 Langley explores the use of poetic devices in preaching to enable listeners to experience the rhetorical effect of the psalm, noting the Hebrew poetic devices that survive translation and those that do not. He also encourages the use of English poetic devices that fit the rhetoric of the poem. He suggests that an explication that unpacks the imagery and mood of a psalm can help the audience to appreciate the artistry of the poetry. Incorporating English poetry can be another way of illustrating or recreating the rhetoric of Psalms and, to that end, Langley provides a list of helpful sources for those who are not poetically inclined.

Chapter 5 draws attention to a preacher's choice of words. Langley highlights the use of densely packed words chosen for their specificity, vitality, and sensual appeal in poetic literature and challenges the preacher to follow suit.

In chapter 6 Langley focuses on orality in the preaching of a psalm. He encourages the preacher or the person reading the text to practice the oral delivery of a psalm, paying close attention to pace, pitch, pauses, and emphasis in the reading. He encourages the preacher to recognize the value of reading scripture well and offers practical dos and don'ts for oral reading.

Langley focuses on getting in touch with the emotion of a psalm in chapter 7. He points out that the emotional tone of a psalm is part of authorial intent and suggests strategies for communicating emotion by using rhetoric and hyperbole, and by letting listeners squirm with uncomfortable thoughts (expressing

joy and authentic expression of emotion).

In chapter 8, Langley encourages the preacher to be alert to the literary context of the psalm, recognizing groupings of psalms within the Psalter, and considering their intent and impact on the psalm being preached. He suggests the preacher consider using the psalm throughout the service as a song to be sung or a prayer to be prayed to allow the listener to encounter the psalm in a number of contexts.

Langley's intention in *How to Preach the Psalms* is to help preachers craft a sermon on a Psalms text that would not be "pedestrian" or "dull" in comparison to the text itself, so that they can more effectively minister to people in their congregations (4). The practical strategies, real-life examples, and suggestions for further reading, discussion, and practice work together to accomplish his goal. In fact, he more than meets his objective: this short book not only equips the reader to preach but also inspires them to creatively engage with the Psalms and other poetic literature.

Langley's own struggle to preach the Psalms fueled his search for a way to preach the Psalms in a manner that reflects the emotion, imagination, and beauty of the Psalms. The effectiveness of his strategies is illustrated not only in the sermon examples he provides but also in the creative and engaging style in which this book is written. His clear guidance on how to preach the Psalms in a genre-specific manner inspires the reader to try out new techniques and equips them for more creative and effective preaching.

*How to Preach the Psalms* is intended for preachers, but its application need not be limited to the writing and delivery of sermons. It is also relevant to anyone who takes up the task of communicating the Psalms or other poetic literature within the Bible, whether in written, oral, or visual form. Teachers, writers, and serious students of the Bible will find this book helpful for engaging and communicating the affective, imaginative, and aesthetic features of Psalms. The discussion questions, suggestions for further reading, and practice exercises at the end of each chapter make this book an excellent choice for supplemental reading in a preaching class or as a professional development

book for pastoral staff. The clear structure and easy-to-read style make this book a pleasure to read and useful resource to have on hand when preparing to preach from Psalms.

Since it will take time, careful thought, creativity, personal reflection, thorough study, prayer, and practice in order to use some of Langley's strategies effectively, it would have been helpful for Langley to address the objection that the strategies that he proposes will take too much time and effort. The book strongly emphasizes the emotion, imagery, beauty, and experience of Psalms as is appropriate to the nature of the poetic genre. The reader, therefore, must be willing to engage these aspects of the Psalms. This may pose a challenge for those less inclined toward creativity and emotion.

In conclusion, Langley challenges the reader to seek more than a cognitive understanding of Psalms in order to honor the full human experience, including the emotions, imagination, and appreciation of beauty that comes with reading, studying, hearing, and preaching the Psalms. As one who preaches infrequently, *How to Preach the Psalms* inspired me to want to preach more and to preach the Psalms in particular. It also challenged me as a scholar, teacher, writer, and Bible study leader to engage the emotion, imagery, and artistry of the Bible more (in order to write and teach more creatively and effectively). Many of the strategies Langley proposes are useful for this endeavor.

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