

[MJTM 23 (2021–2022)]

BOOK REVIEW

Scott M. Gibson and Karen Mason. *Preaching Hope in Darkness: Help for Pastors in Addressing Suicide from the Pulpit*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020. xii + 260 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-68359-411-6. \$23.99.

With expertise in homiletics and suicide prevention, respectively, Scott M. Gibson occupies the David E. Garland Chair of Preaching at Baylor University/Truett Seminary, while Karen Mason is professor of counselling and psychology at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. Their collaborative project (prefaced by four pages of effusive endorsements) is informed by extensive interviews on the part of both authors with clergy, funeral directors, and “suicide bereaved persons” (4). With a view to providing practical resources for preachers and pastoral caregivers, its seven chapters also offer clinical data on the causes and prevention of suicide, together with post-suicide pastoral care, combining theological analysis with case studies and questions for discussion. Although there is brief mention of Catholic tradition (109), this treatment is mainly directed to evangelical Protestants.

Chapter 1 (“Understanding Suicide”) helpfully identifies specific pastoral skills that respond to key aspects of the problem: for example, listening, risk assessment, and appropriate referral given that some suicides are preventable, or open discussion and community building to remedy the challenges of shame, stigmatization, and isolation. Chapter 2 (“Preaching to your Culture”) notes the many voices both for and against suicide in contemporary culture and previous eras alike. Chapter 3 (“Preventing Suicide”) offers preaching topics and concrete pastoral strategies as a series of “fences” against suicide amongst parishioners (e.g., “Preach and teach on the worth and dignity of every person”

[43]; “Preach and teach on hope” [46]; “Encourage congregants to reach out for help” [54], etc.). Chapter 4 (“Preaching to Protect against Suicide”) emphasizes both the power of the preached word and the fact that proclaiming the gospel is a vital aspect of sensitive, hope-focussed pastoral care. Here the authors warn against “guilt-driven preaching” (64); “We want to use our words to preach the gospel of grace,” they insist, “not guilt” (65). Accordingly, they also emphasize the importance of timely counseling and care for those who are contemplating suicide, those who have already attempted it, and those who are dealing with the suicide of a loved one (Chapter 5: “Pastoral Care after a Suicide Crisis”). The comprehensive scope of this chapter is evident in the fact it includes care for the congregation as a whole as well as for pastoral caregivers themselves. As might be expected from a text on preaching, Chapter 6 (“The Funeral Sermon and Post-Suicide Care”) offers practical directions for sermon preparation (e.g., “Proclaim hope”; “Give words of grace”; “Provide an atmosphere of forgiveness and healing,” etc. [105]). A final chapter addresses “Young Adult and Youth Group Preaching and Teaching,” making the unexpected (but doubtless accurate) claim that “Mental health is the twenty-first century mission field” (121). The book concludes with nine appendices, offering sample sermons and worship liturgies, along with handouts, resources, and guidelines for survivors, caregivers, youth, and parents.

The great strength of this treatment is its consistently practical thrust, in addition to which these chapters are notable for their careful balancing of biblical/theological and psychological/emotional considerations. There is also frequent engagement with popular and critical literature alike; numerous quotations from interviewees make the challenges of both pre- and post-suicide care abundantly clear. The writers are especially to be commended for modeling the approach that they advocate, offering an open, honest, and wide-ranging discussion of a topic that has received comparatively little attention to date. Not least because it cites any number of clergy who lament that their training left them unprepared for dealing with suicide, *Preaching Hope in Darkness* represents a valuable addition not only to the pastor’s

bookshelf but also to seminary courses on pastoral care.

That being said, there were some surprising omissions. Notwithstanding the individual case studies and citations from broader clinical research, there were few instances of individuals who were contemplating or had actually attempted suicide having been consulted on the utility of pastoral care generally or preaching in particular; their insights would have added further nuance and depth on several fronts. Absent altogether was any explicit discussion of spirituality (the classic “dark night of the soul,” for instance) or—more surprising still—what it might mean to encounter Christ himself in the face of personal despair. In this regard, Jesus’ own cry of dereliction (Matt 27:46; Mark 15:34) seems especially pertinent: how, indeed, do we minister to those who sense God as distant or absent? While the authors rightly point out that Christians at risk for suicide have need of “theological answers” (11), such answers are at least as much existential and experiential as intellectual. As they concede in their discussion of the theology of hope (46) and again in relation to grief and suffering (53), doctrinal knowledge alone is rarely transformative. Along these lines, popular Evangelicalism typically makes little room for affliction or adversity; going forward, the challenge of Christian suicide invites articulation of a more robust spirituality (as well as theology) of suffering. Another lacuna (perhaps more understandably) was any mention of struggles with sexuality and sexual orientation, which are significant risk factors for suicide among adolescents.

But by no means do these criticisms detract from the considerable value of this work in its present form; *Preaching Hope in Darkness* should be received with gratitude by preachers, pastoral caregivers, and seminary faculty alike.

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