

Prophetic Preaching

THE HOPE *OR*
THE CURSE
OF THE CHURCH?

EDITED BY
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Introduction

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Politics matters. Unlike sport or food or music, our political preferences are often defining. We are “appalled.” We are “afraid.” We are “passionate.” We are “hopeful.” Our language reflects the depth of our convictions. We are not neutral. And, what we believe politically is absolutely shaped by what we believe as Christians. The political really matters.

For the clergyperson, there is a weekly opportunity to share our political convictions. It is called the pulpit. Each week, we find ourselves bringing our political selves into the task of preparing to preach. In most churches, the pulpit is “above” the congregation; the preacher addresses the congregation just after the reading of the gospel. It is an awesome opportunity or, perhaps, temptation.

This issue is acute in today’s church. Many clergy in the Episcopal Church are advocating and developing a prophetic preaching voice in response to a landscape marked by increasing polarization and politicization. Often, this involves preaching sermons with direct political themes (and calling for others to do the same). While many congregants respond positively to this, others respond quite negatively. The Episcopal Church, it seems, is no more immune to the temptation of polarization than the secular world. Episcopalians in the conservative minority are often very uncomfortable with politically themed sermons, while liberal Episcopalians may demand the political message from the pulpit. Herein is the problem. The preacher occupies a particular political identity that may be in keeping with, or out of step with, some of those in his or her care. What is a preacher to do? This book offers a collection of essays from a range of preachers working within the Episcopal tradition on the role of the preacher in addressing political issues. Contributors work in varied locations (for example:

Houston, Richmond, London, Washington, DC) and embody varied vocational callings (for example: bishop, rector, professor, college chaplain), offering perspectives enhanced by diversity—from age, race, and gender to preaching experience, prior careers, and political leanings. This book has the spectrum. Republicans and Democrats are in this book. Advocates of “political preaching” sit alongside those who think that “political preaching” is a key reason why the Episcopal Church is in trouble.

While this book seeks to promote and even to produce purposeful conversation around the question of preaching politics (and its interrelationship with prophetic preaching as our current age understands it), this cannot be done apart from engagement with a rather more fundamental question: what is the role of the preacher? This book engages that question necessarily, as it reflects on the answers to it in light of our increasingly polarized society.

In March 2019, contributors gathered at Virginia Theological Seminary to reflect on this project and to offer their opinions, as represented by their essays, amongst their colleagues. As each essay was shared, a rich conversation took place, both on small matters of agreement and critique about individual essays, and on larger matters of understanding (and misunderstanding) about what it means to pastor and to preach in today’s political climate. This conversation greatly enhanced the essays that follow, in that each contributor had the opportunity to receive feedback on their essay, which many then incorporated into their finished work. This book then is, truly, the sharing of a dialogue—it is a product of civil, prayerful conversation amongst preachers with differing theological and political viewpoints resulting in thoughtful, contextual approaches to the politics of preaching and the preaching of politics.

In chapter 1, “Preaching Politics: Not Yes or No, but How,” Crystal Hardin introduces a taxonomy of the preaching model into which Episcopal preachers appear to be ordering themselves in response to the debate around preaching politics. Critiquing this taxonomy, she promotes instead an alternative vision that could be claimed by the preacher: that of faithful, fellow wrestler. Sarah Condon, in chapter 2, addresses “The Dangerous Potential of the Prophetic Pulpit,” leveling

sharp critique at the self-professed prophetic preacher, while offering keen observations about the effect of such preaching on diminishing Episcopal congregations. Phoebe Roaf, in chapter 3, “Addressing Power,” urges preachers to recognize the inherent power that exists in preaching and in the congregations who receive the Episcopal sermon. She offers a thoughtful process for crafting sermons, one that is aware of the prophetic tradition and pays due attention to scripture, prayer, and context. Roaf’s chapter stands in the tradition of the prophetic as inherently communal and aimed at structures of sin. In chapter 4, “Remember Jesus: The Purpose of the Pulpit,” Russ Levenson sets out a purpose for preaching that aligns with Jesus’s prayer in Gethsemane, one that focuses above all on reconciling humans to Christ and to one another. Boldly, Levenson proclaims that “more is needed than a human solution to a spiritual problem.” Alex Dyer agrees with this proposition, yet writes from a different perspective altogether. In chapter 5, “Reclaiming the Prophetic Pulpit,” he challenges progressive preachers to reclaim the prophetic pulpit, allowing scripture to act as sure foundation for “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.” In chapter 6, “Preaching the Jesus Movement,” Stephanie Spellers speaks to preaching the Jesus Movement, making the claim that authentic, faithful preaching is always prophetic and urging preachers to consider that neither prophetic preaching nor the Jesus Movement are optional for those who wish to serve Jesus and call others into that service. In chapter 7, “The Political Work of the Church: Go for the Underlying Issues,” Ian Markham argues that preaching should always be set in an eternal context; preachers would do well to develop a capacity to “read the signs of the time” such that underlying anxieties and dispositions can be addressed by the preacher in a framework eternal. In chapter 8, “Prophetic Preaching as Sacrament: Finding and Using a Political Voice,” Ruthanna Hooke similarly calls for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the times in which we live, suggesting that this reorientation to what lies beneath troubled waters may meet the need for sacramental preaching that “is political without being partisan, truthful as well as loving, and that can reach us in our soul-weary captivity to the powers.” In chapter 9, “Getting the Basics Right,” Samuel Wells examines the topic at issue from the

viewpoint of one standing apart from the United States (he serves in London), but with some familiarity of American society and politics (having previously served in the United States). He offers a rich set of practical guidelines to be considered by preachers when approaching controversial subjects in sermons and highlights that political sermons should be rare and rooted in pastoral necessity. In chapter 10, “What Succeeds in Preaching: The Way of Blessing,” Sam Candler suggests that to bless people is the true end of all effective preaching (even, and especially, when that preaching touches controversy). “Practice blessing people,” he writes. A good reminder for all preachers in divisive times. Finally, in chapter eleven, Mark Jefferson gets a last word, reflecting on the necessity of “Reimagining Prophetic Preaching,” or preaching politics. He inspires preachers to see this cultural moment as a “new opportunity for action.”

This is a book aimed at both preacher and hearer. It is the hope of this book’s editors that the preachers find within its pages both practical advice for use in sermon preparation and delivery (particularly as it involves controversial subject matter), as well as positions that provoke thought and challenge formerly held beliefs (regardless of one’s current position) about what is meant by prophetic preaching and when, if ever, a preacher should touch upon politics in a sermon. We hope that this book assists the hearers of sermons to grasp the dilemma of the preacher and the deep sense of authenticity out of which the preacher is seeking to work. No one preaches a political sermon simply to divide and alienate a congregation. These preachers preach political sermons because they feel that they have no choice. On the other hand, those who choose not to preach political sermons rarely make that decision thoughtlessly. Just because they do not preach on it does not mean that they do not care about.

Everyone knows that the preaching moment is an important one, and preachers in the Episcopal tradition occupy an influential and formational role—not just as to individual church culture and strength, but as to the Episcopal Church writ large, and its vitality moving forward. It is our hope that the dialogue contained in these pages provokes continued conversation around, and consideration of, the importance of being thoughtful, purposeful preachers, for this time and for all time.

A Word about Language

This book questions whether preaching politics has a place (or should have a place) in the Episcopal pulpit. And yet, at the same time, it works through ideas of prophetic preaching—what it meant to be a prophet in scripture and what it means to be a modern-day prophet, particularly as a preacher. Sometimes, these words are used interchangeably: prophetic, political. This is a sign of the times, as many who call for prophetic preaching mean preaching that explicitly touches on matters of politics. This is complicated by the fact that the term politics is used in our present day to invoke partisan politics. Contributors come at these words, and their myriad implications, differently; and, yet, they all share a hesitation about this language, how it is used, and how its use impacts Episcopal preaching. Readers should note this at the outset, as the manner in which contributors speak to the lack of clarity on this language speaks also to their own positions and the process by which they arrived at them and present them within this book.

Finally

When our contributors gathered for our conversation, we knew that we had the spectrum of the Episcopal Church present. We knew that we had “opponents” and “advocates” of political preaching. But, what we did not know is just how much overlap we would find. All were committed to preaching the gospel. All were committed to the serious theological work of seeking to preach out of the tradition and out of the biblical witness. Like many conversations, once one starts talking one discovers that massive differences from afar look much smaller when one is closer in. This is the gift of grace.