

# *One New Book for the Preacher*

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PREACHING EYES FOR LISTENING EARS: SERMONS AND COMMENTARY FOR PREACHERS AND STUDENTS OF PREACHING by J. Will Ormond. Introduction and Commentary by Lucy A. Rose. Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Company, 1999. 183 pages.

How does one learn to preach? The response to this question would vary from preacher to preacher, of course, but for most of us the list of influences which have shaped our preaching would stretch long and full. Some would note the lasting impression of a potent preacher from one's childhood; others would cite the sermons of Bishop Sheen or the literate preachers of the Protestant Hour falling upon ears attuned to a crackling AM radio. Most would name a book title or two, whether a reliable chestnut from seminary days or a recent "find" which washed up on the homiletic shore during an afternoon of internet surfing. Few lists, I suspect, would omit the names of those who toil in the homiletical vineyards of the seminaries of the preachers being queried, for most of us realize the enormous debt we owe to those who first placed the unfamiliar tools of preaching in our hands and were patient as we unsteadily wielded those tools as novice preachers awed with the enormity of the task of proclaiming the good news.

For those who sat in biblical exegesis and preaching classes at Columbia Theological Seminary from 1966-1987, J. Will Ormond was one of those patient teachers. Students came to appreciate Ormond, the J. McDowell Richards Professor of Biblical Exposition, as a thorough pedagogue. I'll bet I'm not the only one who, when Year B in the lectionary cycle looms on the horizon, riffles through file drawers searching out my dog-eared "Mark Chart," a diagram which I ground out for Will's class twenty-plus years ago and a resource which serves me still as an ever-current refresher course on the narrative flow of the Second Gospel.

Will Ormond is known not only as a teacher of preaching, but as a preacher who interprets God's Word faithfully and well, having honed his preaching skills not only in an academic community, but as the pastor of two Alabama churches. In the preface of *Preaching Eyes for Listening Ears*, Tom Long writes, "where some preachers would shout like a parent, Will Ormond whispers playfully like a gently mischievous friend; where some preachers would stare a congregation down, he arches an eyebrow and winks conspiratorially; where some preachers issue demands, he spins winsome yarns, his words as warm and inviting as a southern river on a lazy summer day."

*Preaching Eyes for Listening Ears* is a treasure trove of Ormond's sermons, preached over the span of several decades in a variety of contexts. Since Ormond describes the context in which each sermon was preached, readers can imagine themselves in the sanctuary of Covenant Presbyterian Church in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, on the Sunday following the 1956 Lucy Riots listening to "This Above All" in which Ormond addresses the racial crisis in his own community; and they can consider his sermon "Barefoot in The Pulpit" through the lenses of an ordinand poised upon the moment of becoming a minister. Ormond reports that in the case of the latter, the

young man who was being installed came forward to answer the required questions after he had removed his shoes!

Ormond, as Long notes in the preface, sees humor in the drab landscapes of daily routine. The sermon “Why Can’t We Call Him Clarence?” illustrates this characteristic of Ormond’s preaching. It reframes the story of the naming of John in Luke 1:57-66 as a conversation between two ladies past middle age sitting in a well-appointed but old-fashioned parlor having a cup of tea:

“But we aren’t going to name him Clarence [the name of the baby’s father].”

“Not going to name him Clarence? But why? What in heaven’s name are you going to name him?”

“We are going to name him John.”

“John! Every Tom, Dick, and Harry is named John...”

Ormond does not display humor simply toward the narcissistic end of eliciting guffaws from the congregation, however; his gentle playful touches always point the reader/hearer in the direction of connecting the ancient truths of the biblical texts to contemporary needs and challenges. His tender retelling of the familiar wedding feast at Cana narrative in “When the Wine Fails,” a sermon preached on the occasion of the marriage of two friends, enfleshes the truth that “God [is] with us in the long haul, in the ongoingness of human existence, and that [God] is there to make all things new when the wine fails.”

In addition to his teaching and preaching, one of Ormond’s great gifts to the Church has been his courage in navigating through the rough racial storms which buffeted the South during his years as a pastor in Alabama. His “A Sermon in Clay” profoundly reveals the stone from which this courage was hewn: the intersection of the Word and the words spoken by the black farm worker who stepped forward at the graveside of Ormond’s father, extending a work-hardened hand to pick up a shovel while saying with dignity and compassion, “We would like to do that.” The sermon word which Ormond forges at the intersection of Word and words inspires us to believe that God might even work within those who read and those who hear these sermons to speak and act bravely in the similarly stormy situations of injustice which are encountered in the present day.

Ormond’s sermons have been sorted into three categories: Story-Sermons, Deductive and Inductive Sermons, and Sermons by Other Templates, by Lucy A. Rose. At the end of each of the three sections, she has inserted a discussion of Ormond’s style and form which is a great gift to the reader. By comparing patterns in sermon-writing to the way the buttonholer on her sewing machine uses templates, Rose has put her considerable skills as a practiced homiletician to work at teasing out the patterns and making them available as useful models for preachers. Her commentary is not solely the intellectual output of an academician, however; it is the witness of a person of faith being moved to deeper faith as she encounters the Word preached. She has written of re-reading “Why Can’t We Call Him Clarence?” and being stirred to think prayerfully about her own future and the future of her daughter, then five years old. Rose, whose strong and sensitive preaching voice the Church still misses since her death in 1997, writes that her intent is not to reduce the sermons in this volume to paint-by-number

patterns, but to provide templates that most preachers, with practice, can claim for their own, adapt to their own idiosyncrasies, and add to their stockroom, quiver, work apron, or drawer of available sermon forms. In her contribution to *Preaching Eyes for Listening Ears*, she has succeeded magnificently in fulfilling her intent.

Those of us who have known Will Ormond as a faithful teacher and preacher are delighted that his sermons, so instructive to so many during his years as a pastor and professor, are now available to nourish a wider audience.