

Book Review

LOW-BACK, LADDER-BACK, CANE-BOTTOM CHAIR: BIBLICAL MEDITATIONS by James S. Lowry. St. Mary's Press. Winona, Minn. Foreword by Walter Brueggemann. 115pp.

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In an introduction to one of his books, Frederick Buechner describes himself as a part-time novelist who happens also to be a part-time Christian, because "part of the time seems to be the most I manage to live out my faith." When certain things seem "real and important," he is closer to being a Christian; the rest of the time, he is not — in any sense, he writes, that could matter much to Christ or anybody else.

A similar modesty—or more likely a similar deep understanding of what the word "Christian" ought to require—underlies these ten sermons by James S. Lowry, pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New Bern, North Carolina, who is surely at least a part-time poet and storyteller as well as ordained minister, having held previous pastorates in four other southeastern states. Lowry grew up with two brothers in a rural area near Great Falls, South Carolina, and he knows well the world of mules, backwoods drunks, corn shucking, and straw brooms much as our prime storyteller knew shepherds, sowers, and lepers. As in New testament parables, Lowry's sermons remind readers that "God chose to be born among the have-nots," and that the life of ordinary people and things is worth examining for the illumination constantly cast upon and through it by the Light of the World.

He deals very early with the possibility that the shift from a pulpit sermon to print may alter effect, that a homily is "heard and not seen," adding that good preachers, even those who seem barely to glance down at notecards, are not really spontaneous or unrehearsed. The Bible, too, is an oral form, with narrative one of scripture's favorite methods. And, as a teacher of writing and sometimes a public speaker myself, let me insert that laboratory tests have shown that silent readers who never move their lips are nonetheless silently "saying" words seen on the page. Electrodes applied to their throats outside the larynx vibrate steadily, and vary as if tone and volume were fluctuating in the most inner, inner ear of all.

Lowry aims to reproduce the rise and fall of an orator's voice, the pauses for emphasis, by arranging his sermons in free-verse form; and whether your own vocal chords buzz easily or not, reading each one aloud will justify his method.

Using lectionary texts within three divisions (Advent and Christmas; Lent and Easter; Pentecost), the sermons blend thoughtful theological analysis with family stories and memories. The title sermon, about a chair "with the legs cut off just so" allowing Bessie Grier—a cook and maid born in the early 1880's—to sit so one mismatched leg reached down to the floor—is tied to Paul's love letter to the Philippians. Two grandmothers, one in low-country South Carolina and one in the more plebian upcountry, teach Lowry something about the precious untouchable manger figurines and the tattered crèche grandchildren used to retell the Bethlehem story. Something new is added to John 3:16, that "gospel in miniature," at the funeral

of hard-drinking Tex Malone in backwoods Alabama.

Apart from a valuable object lesson in the use of concrete and poetic storytelling from the pulpit, the collection offers devotional use for a lay reader like myself. Most personally helpful to me was “By the Waters of Babylon,” based on that beautiful psalm we sang in alternating male and female voices in my childhood Associate Reformed Presbyterian church—beautiful, that is, until the latter verses which picture God rejoicing when the babies of enemies shall have their heads dashed against stones. Lowry’s use of Billy Hooper’s story illustrates his view that some of Psalm 137 is a raw prayer like those irate letters we hold overnight and decide not to mail. God’s mailbox receives these raw and vengeful prayers as well as our revised petitions, and can use even our outbursts to break down rage and bitterness.

The dramatic approach to Pentecost and Babylon, the colt of an ass on Palm Sunday, are all old stories renewed here by recent anecdotes woven alongside. And there are smiles as well—as when four-year-old Megan, explaining the Nativity, is asked why her stable scene does not include Joseph. “Who needs Joseph?” Megan replies. “Doubtless a feminist theologian in the making,” Lowry adds.

Walter Brueggemann’s introduction contrasts the thinness of most contemporary discourse, restricted by haste and reduced by brevity, with the “thickness” that in Lowry’s sermons continues to insist that to be human is to be “marked by staggering gifts and stunning demands.”

Though perhaps of special value to preachers, to all of us whose love of language is rooted in biblical poetry, we whose view of what Kathleen Norris called the “quotidian mysteries” preset a lifelong alertness for mustard seeds, widow’s mites, unrecognized angels, this book is all too short—but so is John 3:16, which Lowry revitalizes as a new and timeless promise for the modern worshipper and seeker.