

One New Book for the Preacher

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Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2008. 552 pages.

Last spring I ran into a Presbyterian minister friend at the Starbucks near where I live. I affectionately call him Rev. Starbucks because he's even more of a regular than I am. After a few moments of chit-chat, he noticed the book I was reading and asked about it. I came on with the fervor of a recent convert, "I'm not finished with it yet, but it's amazing, very challenging, but amazing." Without any further prompts on his part, I added, "The authors challenge much of what we know about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. In fact, you won't believe this, but guess how long it was after Jesus' death before his crucified body began to appear in Christian artwork." From the way I phrased the question, I had implied he would underestimate. I don't remember his guess, but most folks miss it by a mile. I continued, "The authors show how we've reversed the emphases of the early church. We have a cross on display all year long and celebrate the resurrection one day each spring, whereas the early church remembered the crucifixion one day a year and celebrated resurrection all the time."

Rev. Starbucks said something like, "Humph, that's interesting. I don't think it will work in the church, but it's interesting." I had heard those kinds of comments before, a kind of "You work in an ivory tower; I work in the church of the real world." Still, my minister friend does not have anti-intellectual leanings; he is well-read, so his comment surprised me. At the same time, I understood his reservations. Lent was in full swing with Holy Week and Easter fast approaching just as it is again this year. What was he supposed to do, cancel Good Friday services and take down the cross for good? And what was he to proclaim on Easter from a book like this?

It's true that *Saving Paradise* qualifies as a theological tome at over 400 pages of text, with enough footnotes to make a doctoral candidate smile (nearly 100 pages, plus index) and simultaneously turn off most readers, pastors included. But the book's thesis is mind-blowing, powerful enough to challenge most everything we thought we knew about the church's understanding of the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus. Brock and Parker begin with these jarring sentences, "It took Jesus a thousand years to die. Images of his corpse did not appear in churches until the tenth century" (ix). That's enough to hook most readers. I am told by art experts that a key distinction is in order here, the difference between images of Jesus' crucifixion and his corpse. But it's still such a striking notion, that Jesus' dead body would be absent for so long in Christian artwork, especially given its ubiquitous presence these days.

The author's note, for example, how on their sabbatical journeys, they traveled to St. Apollinare Nuovo Church in Ravenna, Italy. The artwork inside, originally designed for sixth-century worshipers to meditate upon, is the "earliest surviving life story of Jesus depicted in images" (xi). There are twenty-six panels in all, thirteen devoted to the life and ministry of Christ and thirteen that focus on the passion of Christ,

beginning with the Last Supper. Except in the passion series, after panel ten which portrays Simon of Cyrene carrying the cross, the next scene is of an angel before an empty tomb (164-65). Thirteen panels devoted to Christ's passion, and nothing about the crucifixion! How can that be? Like the first women disciples, the authors thought the angel seemed to be saying to them, "I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here" (Matt 28:5-6). They found this same pattern repeated throughout the Mediterranean world. Instead of a focus on the crucified Christ, early Christian artwork focused on the resurrected Christ who had reclaimed paradise here on earth. That will preach at Easter, and most any other time of the year!

In keeping with the book's subtitle, the authors wondered, "When and why did Christianity shift to an obsession with atoning death and redemption through violence? What led Western Christianity to replace resurrection and life with a crucifixion-centered salvation and to relegate paradise to a distant afterlife?"(xix). Those two questions are the thesis of their work, and while the results are scholarly, overall the book reads more like a sermon. That is to say, the authors combine scholarship and storytelling that is compelling the way good sermons demand attention but also many sermon ideas for preachers to ponder.

In addition to stories that most definitely will preach, the book abounds with stunning artwork. Although the images are in black-and-white, they are inspiring all the same, enough to send readers to the Internet, if not the Mediterranean, for a full-color view. The book is also lyrical at times, especially when the authors celebrate the goodness of the earth, quoting many of the early Church Fathers, like Augustine's well-known words, "Late have I loved Thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new; late have I loved Thee!" (148) as well as his lesser-known phrase in which he calls the world "a smiling place" (104). The book is full of great quotes like those, the kind that might make their way into a sermon or the cover of a worship bulletin.

As for scholarship, the authors trace the way early Christianity's focus on paradise here on earth slowly faded from the scene in favor of an emphasis on the next world, as well as the rise of its replacement theology, atonement by means of a bloody substitutionary death. As an example of the former, they look at several passages in John's Gospel, including 3:16 which is "invariably interpreted to mean that God placed Jesus in the world to die on the cross, but at no point does this story mention death" (40). The authors point out how the Gospels repeatedly note that Jesus' reign is not of "this world," meaning the economy of the Roman Empire, although his ministry is most definitely of this earth which God originally pronounced good (31). They note how the early Christians were painfully aware of the sorrowful suffering of Jesus, but since his resurrection had undone the curse of death, the early artwork celebrated "the life of paradise on earth" (53).

Their tracing of how substitutionary atonement came to be dominant is fascinating because of how they couple theological developments with the artwork of the time, which they argue were as influential as any writings at various points in history. If images of the gruesome death and dead body of the Christ are not to be found in the first thousand years of Christianity, those images become dominant as the Crusades begin. "Depictions of the crucified Christ proliferated in Europe in the eleventh century and became increasingly grotesque and bloody." In a fashion similar to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ*, "New scenes detailed each step of torment—the

flogging, the crown of thorns, the nailing to the cross, and the deposition of his body from the cross" (224).

Similarly, Brock and Parker trace the church's changing attitude toward war through the centuries. This alone may be worth the price of the book. Prior to the reign of Constantine in the fourth century, some churches "denied baptism to Roman government officials or soldiers" (121). Even after theories of just war developed, Christians who served as soldiers were expected to forego the Eucharist for a time of lamentation and penance before returning to the table (184). By the ninth century, however, a few clergy insisted that soldiers should be excused from penance since they fought with "Christ's support and assistance" (239). By the time of Pope Urban II (late eleventh century), some believed that killing in the name of God granted pardon for all the sins of warfare (264). The authors also follow Christianity's attraction to violence across the Atlantic, including the United States' shameful treatment of Native Americans and the often violent imagery employed in the preaching of the Great Awakening (363-ff).

While much of this volume deconstructs the church's violent past, the authors also offer a constructive theology, tracing the positive contributions of persons who viewed this world as a paradise or at least a place to work toward that end, like Henry David Thoreau (whose *Walden* is a far different read of the world than Hal Lindsey's *The Late Great Planet Earth*), Ralph Waldo Emerson, Horace Busnell, Walter Rauschenbusch (whose social gospel movement could only take place if this earth mattered), Ida B. Wells-Barnett, and Martin Luther King, Jr.

As a seminary professor who fills in most Sundays for pastors who are away, I hardly ever get to preach on Easter, which is understandable since most ministers wouldn't dream of missing the highest and holiest day of the Christian year. And yet I'm always amazed at how many ministers in a retreat setting will admit to struggles with how to preach the resurrection. Usually, they are looking for something new to say, a new twist on the old story. Of course, parishioners gather every year so that they might hear the good news of a very old story, and yet maybe Brock and Parker have supplied us with both, something new and old. If the old message of Christ's resurrection is to be heard anew, we have to explore the implications of Easter. Or in other words, if the *what* of Easter Sunday is "Christ is risen," the *so-what* is multi-faceted. With Brock and Parker as guides, preachers might explore what it means to live in peace upon the earth, or what it means to view life on earth as good, including our care for the planet. While ministers will not agree with everything here, I definitely agree with James Cone's endorsement on the back cover, "Every Christian theologian and preacher should read this book and be profoundly challenged." It would be hard to do otherwise.