

Two New Books for the Preacher

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Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America: The Battle for Our Better Angels* (New York, Random House) 2018

Diana Butler Bass, *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks* (Grand Rapids, MI, Harper One) 2018

Preachers have long been advised to prepare, as Karl Barth is attributed to have encouraged, with the Bible in one hand and a newspaper in the other. This review suggests an occasional variation (or at least an additional perspective) and recommends that further preparation take place with a sense of history in mind along with a discriminating fixation on the present moment. Perhaps we need four hands!

Most readers of this Journal are assumed to be in the United States when preparing to address their congregations. Jon Meacham, in his *Soul of America* cautions us not to “catastrophise” during these turbulent times as if this were a unique moment in our life as a nation. Meacham, of course, is well-known as a historian, a presidential historian at that. He has won the Pulitzer Prize for his writing, and is presently visiting professor of Political Science at Vanderbilt University. In addition, he appears regularly in the press and on television, offering perspective on both history and these present times. In other words, he is eminently qualified to give us a picture of our current, and past, state of affairs in the United States.

To address the intense dis-ease of our age without awareness of where we have been dooms us, as the adage goes, to repeat our history to our detriment. Meacham is articulate and insightful in reminding us of our own history. As he puts it, “History shows us that we are frequently vulnerable to fear, bitterness, and strife. The good news is that we have come through such darkness before” (p.9). That good news can give us courage and perspective as we prepare to address our congregations during these clearly chaotic times. Meacham moves on to say, “What follows is the story of how we have endured moments of madness and injustice, giving the better angels of which Lincoln spoke on the eve of the Civil War a chance to prevail—and how we can again”(p.29). In laying out that story, he encourages us to acknowledge the difficulties of our time with unblinking honesty and, at the same time, identify the resources at our disposal in our own history for facing them with courage and reasonable confidence.

Meacham, of course, is not invoking biblical or theological resources. Rather, he reminds us of historical figures and movements that have shaped this country: George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Abraham Lincoln, Sojourner Truth, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, to name a few. In contrast to the direction set by those figures, he also reminds us of the power of figures such as Adolf Hitler, Joseph McCarthy, George Wallace, and, of course, many more. His recounting of the struggles that went on within and between these historical figures reminds us that, in many ways, we are living into a time that is not entirely new.

There is no way to summarize adequately what Meacham does for us in this

book. His sweep of history is articulate and global, on the one hand, yet focused on particular issues and persons illustrative of what he considers to be the “soul” of our country. What does he mean by soul? He moves through an interesting discussion of the concept, speaking of it philosophically as “the vital center, the core, the heart, the essence of life” (p.13). He moves on to say that in our Western thought, the soul is what makes us *us*. But, what makes us *us* lies in the history of what we have loved and hated. After giving numerous illustrations of those events and movements that have moved us to love and to hate and everything in between, he writes, “The only comfort, if we can call it that, is that a knowledge of our past failings may equip us to confront evil without delay when evil comes again. For it will” (p. 222).

Now, we may quibble with Meacham about his understanding of “soul,” but he does remind us of the importance of seeing and acknowledging threats to our “soul,” understood, in his terms, as our sense of well-being, our health as a nation. And, while the preacher is not necessarily called to be a patriot in the pulpit, we are called, just as were the Old Testament prophets, to look around, identify sin, praise virtue, and lead our congregations in ways that will strengthen us for what lies ahead.

One of the ways that can equip us to see beyond present day troubles is to look carefully at present day sources of courage and gratitude. I’m conscious here that one of the historical responsibilities of pastoral care (and preaching) is to remind people of resources that, in their preoccupation with fear and/or anger, they may forget. This is an important reason for my varying from the Journal’s usual invitation to suggest one new book for the preacher and, instead, offering two.

Diana Butler Bass, in her most recent book *Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*, like Meacham, invites us to look at the present moment squarely and unflinchingly. But, her invitation is to look for the sources of gratitude that we may miss in our preoccupation and fascination with what is threatening and disillusioning in our current ethos. Diana Butler Bass is an author, speaker, and independent scholar specializing in American religion and culture. So, yes, I’m pointing you to two historians. But, Bass has her gaze more firmly fixed on us in the life of the church in our present cultural context.

One of her first observations is that currently “we live in a toxic habitat of ingratitude” and “nothing really escapes its poison” (p. xix). As a historian, she then finds herself drawn to parallels between our times and the 1930s in Germany. There, she notes, “a citizenry well-versed in a theology of grace...had turned gratitude into a path of individual salvation and personal comfort, all the while allowing deep social discontent and anger to fester in public life” (p. xix). The most well-known voice to speak out about that, she maintains, was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. With that observation, she moves to engage us in carefully defined self-examination (no narcissism, please!), noting that we need to discipline ourselves to identify the sources around us for which we are grateful. We must not allow our current preoccupations with bickering, personal attacks, discouragement, and mayhem to separate or distract us from the deeper resources available to us in the midst of it all. And, when we recover those sources of gratitude, our aim should not be to “yield to temptation” and retreat with them into a protective, private, nest of self-consolation. Rather, we are called to reach out in a way that can persuade others that there is more than what they see in the media. Here again, whether she claims it or not, she is performing a “pastoral responsibility” in reminding us of that which we may have forgotten or overlooked.

Bass does not take us into a careful theological exploration. Rather, her approach is a confessional stance, noting how vulnerable she herself has been to being stripped of gratitude while caught up in binge-watching the circus of political chaos swirling around us.

As a manual for re-orienting ourselves in ways that will have theological integrity, this book serves as an invitation to hold onto and deepen our roots in the reality and power of grace in all times. This is a valuable book. It will preach! And, it certainly would be a wonderful book for discussion groups. As her mantra, at the very beginning of the book, she quotes Maya Angelou (source not identified): “Let gratitude be the pillow upon which you kneel to say your nightly prayer. And let faith be the bridge you build to overcome evil and welcome good.” That is the invitation that both Jon Meacham and Diana Butler Bass offer to us in our pursuit of perspective for our preaching and daily life in these times.