

Elaine M. Flake. *God in Her Midst: Preaching Healing to Wounded Women*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2007. 93 pages. \$10.20.

Elaine M. Flake's *God in Her Midst* offers a womanist, healing hermeneutic of Scripture for preachers. While her primary audience is preachers in African American contexts, her book is a valuable resource for any preacher. The book is divided into two sections entitled "A Womanist Hermeneutic of Healing" and "Sermons for Healing."

In part one Flake introduces the problem of black preaching that has traditionally focused heavily on liberation from racial oppression yet has for the most part ignored or even contributed to the ongoing oppression of African American women. While the oppression of African American women has its roots in slavery, with sexual violence used as a means of control and subjugation by slave-holders, much of contemporary violence against African American women happens at the hands of African American men (3). African American women have the highest rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse among racial and ethnic groups, and "are three times more likely than white women to die at the hands of an intimate partner" (3). Among high school students African American women have "the highest incidence of forced sexual intercourse" (3).

In keeping with many womanist theologians, Flake offers a hermeneutic of Scripture that is grounded in the power of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and in the power of the Holy Spirit to liberate, heal, and empower people today. Flake helps readers understand that womanists differ from many feminists in these two emphases, particularly in the womanist appreciation of Jesus' suffering.

Against the backdrop of sexual violence and other forms of oppression against African American women, Flake recommends that all preachers learn to expose and denounce violence against women, and that they learn how to read and preach from the Bible using a hermeneutic of healing.

Part two of the book offers several representative short sermons in which the author demonstrates the hermeneutic of healing. Principles for this way of reading and preaching include affirming women's perspectives and experiences in the biblical narrative, highlighting positive examples in women's lives in the Bible, sensitivity to the struggles of broken women in the Bible, avoidance of "male bashing" while preaching honestly about the subjugation of women, honoring African American cultural traditions whenever possible, and acknowledgement of African ancestry of persons in the Bible such as Hagar the Egyptian (13-18). Sermons should empower congregants toward healing and liberating action. In summary, "Womanist preaching emphasizes survival and the reclaiming of self-esteem and dignity. It calls upon believers to draw from an inner strength and power that come from God. Insecurity, self-condemnation, and pessimism are named as sin, and the preacher calls for women and men alike to purge themselves of attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions that are self-destructive and self-defeating" (21).

While some of the representative sermons in part two are taken from familiar "women's" narratives such as the woman with the issue of blood, others will be less familiar to many readers. For example, Flake uses texts from Zechariah for two sermons. The first is entitled "Wounded in the House of My Friend," and is based upon Zech. 13:1-6. In this sermon she exposes and denounces the sin of violence against women in the house of God, the church, likening the church to Israel under Zechariah's prophetic denunciation (55-59). The second sermon is entitled "When Women have Wings," based upon Zech. 5:5-11. In this message

Flake wrestles honestly with the misogyny in Zechariah's prophetic vision in which evil is metaphorically portrayed as a woman in a basket. Then she moves toward using the image as a way for survivors of violence to own the ways in which they have participated in their own oppression. Women do not have to remain "in the basket" Flake says; they can become the "women with wings" in Zechariah's vision. With subtle skill Flake helps her audience wrestle through the obstacle of what appears to be misogyny in the text, to see how it actually liberates and heals women who are stuck in unforgiveness, bitterness, and other negativity.

God in Her Midst is a very good homiletical resource not only in African American contexts, but in all congregational settings, because the consequences of sexual abuse and domestic violence know no racial boundaries. In addition to being a good resource for preachers, this book can help survivors to heal.

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