

Joni S. Sancken. *Words that Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls*. The Artistry of Preaching Series. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2019. 122 pages.

The fifth volume in the Artistry of Preaching Series, *Words that Heal: Preaching Hope to Wounded Souls*, proves to be a timely, practical, and theologically accessible resource. Homiletician Joni Sancken examines the heart of human trauma, practical ways for preachers to assist individuals and communities in the healing process, and the role of resilience in healing. Sancken admits, “Those who write about healing from trauma often have a personal catalyst” (xiii). She is not exempt from her own observation. Lest readers dismiss Joni Sancken’s work as an academic exercise, she immediately reveals her own wounds and vulnerabilities: the sudden death of her sister-in-law informs her work. Sancken weaves her personal experiences throughout the book, creating a personal connection to readers and gently reminding us that all of us have experienced pain and wounds. Such personal examples establish her credibility as one who also is aware of her own pain and the connection to others (96–98).

In four chapters, Sancken explores wounds in various individual and communal contexts. Readers unfamiliar with trauma studies will find Sancken’s multidisciplinary and historical exploration of trauma informative and the examples carefully selected and presented. Sancken uses chapter 1 to introduce the idea of a “soul wound,” which she defines as “the pain that lingers within those who survive trauma and other wounding experiences” (2). For Sancken, preachers must be “trauma-informed,” compassionate, and hopeful. She navigates the causes of soul wounds, the impact of stress, and ways to recognize unhealed wounds so that preachers can preach about trauma and do so with compassion. She implores preachers to preach about the lingering effects of trauma.

How then should preachers navigate the Bible through a trauma-informed lens? Sancken moves forward by providing five interpretive tools for exploring the Bible and using that exploration to inform one’s preaching. According to Sancken, the very language of the Bible is a key to speaking about pain. Readers need not shy away from assigning blame (to self and God), are encouraged to focus on God’s power and promises, use past events to help one with present events, and explore ways to connect with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In case one is unclear about how to apply the five interpretive tools to a text, Sancken uses Genesis 22 (the binding of Isaac) to illustrate how preachers could bring such a text to a point of preaching it in the present-day context. What is most important in this chapter is “Preachers need to stay in close communication with those who carry deep wounds. Preaching is not a separate act from pastoral care...Sermons that take God’s healing power seriously must tell the truth about the deepest pain so that God in Christ can redeem even this pain” (47).

Telling the truth includes an internal examination of the church’s complicit role in causing trauma and its continued resistance to addressing trauma. In chapter 3, Sancken exposes the reality that some people have left the church as a result of wounds inflicted by the church (58), while others are less trusting of clergy. Sancken gives examples such as sexual abuse by clergy and pastors, and abuse by prominent seminary leaders. She argues, “Acknowledging the failures of the church is healing not only for survivors but also for the latent communal wounds that were caused by coverups, denial, and brokenness in the system” (61). For Sancken, preaching can provide an element of justice for those who have been victimized. She concludes the chapter with a sample sermon about trauma and provides a discussion about her thought process in crafting the sermon.

The final chapter focuses on resilience. Preachers often are eager to offer resolutions to trauma and can be afraid to preach about trauma for fear of imperfection. Sancken offers encouragement: “In the immediate wake of local or broader traumatic events, listeners would rather have a relevant word that speaks to what is happening in our world than a perfect and well-researched sermon” (80). She returns to the importance of truth-telling: “When survivors hear their truth spoken from the pulpit, it legitimizes their experiences, humanizes them, and highlights their worth to God and the church” (82). From there, she uses the Apostle’s Creed as an example, bridging biblical stories with present-day realities. Two appendices serve as convenient references for preachers to consult when crafting sermons. Appendix A is organized into strategies (such as listen, care, confess, and apologize) and applications (such as attending to triggers and encouraging survivors). Appendix B provides steps and suggestions for exegeting a text and crafting a sermon that is trauma-sensitive.

Sancken’s contribution will be welcomed by those interested in healing themselves, their congregations, and their communities. Vivid examples abound and allow readers to carefully navigate a range of challenging topics.

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