

Lisa Cressman. *The Gospel People Don't Want to Hear: Preaching Challenging Messages*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2020. 160 pages. \$17.

In *The Gospel People Don't Want to Hear: Preaching Challenging Messages*, Lisa Cressman argues that the aim of the preacher is to present challenging messages so that they are “taken in, considered, and wrestled with” (43). The task of preachers, asserts Cressman, “is to make saying yes to the pain of change and conversion sound irresistible” (64). The monograph offers a framework and tools for preachers to consider as they prepare and preach challenging messages that cause listeners’ “sky to fall.”

Cressman defines preaching as “the art of communicating the Spirit’s desire to persuade listeners that they are loved and forgiven more than they realize. It is the art of persuading listeners to believe something they didn’t believe before; and then they are converted” (73). In chapter 1, “Letting the Sky Fall,” Cressman invites the reader to explore how the sky falls and changes our identity, roles, systems, livelihoods, wellbeing, and relationships. A challenging sermon is not so much about the actual subject as it is about the “relationships listeners have to their skies” (26). In chapter 2, “Building Mutual Trust,” Cressman argues that preachers have to be intentional in building trust before preaching challenging messages. Three overlapping practices that build trust with the congregation are: *diagnose*, *experiment*, and *appraise* (34). “We are only willing to build the reign of God to the extent we trust God and each other,” concludes Cressman (43). In chapter 3 she attempts to reclaim President Roosevelt’s *bully pulpit* for today’s preacher. The aim for contemporary preachers is “to present a challenging message in such a way it receives a fair hearing; that it’s taken in, considered, and wrestled with,” as opposed to bullying people into believing and behaving in ways the preacher believes are right (45).

In chapter 4, “The Preacher as Trusted Guide,” Cressman focuses on the preachers’ responsibility to make saying yes to change the most desired path forward. Here Cressman delves into the complicatedness of white fear, as it relates to white privilege and power. She suggests ways in which preachers might offer challenging sermons that can be heard for those that benefit from white privilege—as they deal with their “sky falling.” By naming her particular identities—white, woman, preacher, Episcopalian, Cressman reminds readers that preaching is shaped by the social locations and experiences of the preacher and listeners. This is particularly important when considering the skies that may fall for differing listeners. In chapter 5 Cressman offers eleven approaches to apply the tools of words to craft challenging sermons (73). Some of the tools include creating a sermonic arc; making the invitation to transformation an actual invitation, not an agenda; and teaching people the power of lament. In the final chapter, “How to Offer Challenging Messages,” Cressman shares practices for preaching challenging sermons so that people hear them. Noting the emotional toll for preachers, Cressman also offers self-care practices to sustain the preacher.

This timely writing draws readers to thoughtfully engage the topic of preaching challenging sermons. Cressman provides tools for preachers to consider what a challenging sermon might be in their context and how they might build their relational capacity with listeners. The goal is to craft sermons that do what the sermon is intended to do—transform the lives of the hearers. Aside from the practical tools, the reflection questions at the end of each chapter may be helpful for independent and group reflection. Although written with working preachers in mind, *The Gospel People Don't Want to Hear* is a great resource for all clergy and

laypersons committed to crafting challenging and transformative messages that may reach the hearts and minds of listeners.

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