

Jerusha Matsen Neal. *The Overshadowed Preacher: Mary, the Spirit, and the Labor of Proclamation*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020. 267 pages. \$35.

In an age that demands profound attention to bodies, preachers may feel underequipped. The preacher's mainstays of textual analysis and rhetoric have bumped against their limits, while the bodies that surround the preacher beckon something more. In *The Overshadowed Preacher*, Jerusha Neal offers a robust and thoroughgoing theology of preaching that aims to reclaim what she calls a "fully human homiletic," by affirming the presence of the risen Christ when the Word is preached (19). Neal constructs this homiletical theology by employing the Spirit-empowered pregnancy and labor of Mary, the mother of Jesus, as an instructive metaphor for preachers. Neal sets forth a bold claim that the body in the pulpit is neither accidental nor incidental, but essential for bearing witness to the presence of Christ. Further, it is the Spirit who overshadows the preacher that makes the relation between the preacher's body and the body of Christ possible and recognizable.

Neal begins with the precarious task of defining key terms relating to preaching, bodies, and Spirit. These definitions carry considerable freight when Neal opens upon her use of Mary's pregnancy as a presiding metaphor for a theology of preaching. When emphasizing the "overshadowing" of the Spirit in Luke's account of Mary's pregnancy, Neal asks her reader, "What would it mean to move out from the shadow of false ideals and be overshadowed by the Spirit instead?" (19). In the following chapter, Neal goes on to explore how "inadequate theologies of performance and revelation have led to less than fully human pulpit practices, practices that can cause the preacher to disappear, become disillusioned, or become dangerous" (27). It is in this chapter that Neal demonstrates a sharp intuition about current pressures and challenges faced by preachers today, particularly those preachers whose bodies have been idealized or ignored to the point of erasure.

Subsequently, Neal traces a pneumatological thread from the nativity of Luke to the ministry of the disciples in Acts to draw a connection between the Spirit's empowering of Mary's pregnancy and early gospel preaching. She argues that the preachers of Acts bear witness to a real and present Christ, even as they bear witness to his absence. She writes, "In the world of Acts, preachers are not sorcerers or ciphers. They are signs—witnessing to an embodied Presence that is real if unseen. Preachers' performances bear traces of this embodied Person because preachers have bodies themselves" (65).

Once Neal has developed a strong link between the Spirit's overshadowing of Mary and the Spirit that overshadows gospel proclamation, she focuses on deepening the Marian metaphor. In a chapter entitled, "The Spirit-Filled Handmaid," Neal navigates the fraught history of Christian traditions of Mary's body. While she seeks to employ Mary's pregnancy as a metaphor, she is also concerned with dismantling oppressive narratives of ideal womanhood that so often accompany Marian traditions. While metaphors are not inherently free from oppressive readings, and can certainly function to reify essentialized depictions of womanhood, Neal's concerted effort to name the problem of essentialized womanhood yields confidence in her choice of metaphor.

After returning her attention to the concept of "fully human preaching," in which she connects the dots from previous chapters with a sacramental view of preaching, Neal drives home a crucial aspect of her project: "If human bodies marginalize other bodies, they marginalize Christ" (136). Therefore, preachers must begin with bodies—namely, the body of the risen Christ. Neal concludes her project by drawing upon three verbs from Mary's pregnancy

and labor to inform “the fully human, sacramental labor” of preaching: conceive, bear, and name (144). These verbs direct preachers toward practices of hospitality, dependency, and discernment, and in the context of Neal’s project, present a practical turn for preachers who have traveled the distance of theological rigor in the preceding chapters.

As a book that emerged from Neal’s dissertation, this is an expansive project, taking the reader through winding corridors of academic theory and interdisciplinarity. Neal’s thesis is bold and risky, and therefore requires a formidable network of theory and theology. And yet, if readers permit Neal to guide them through this network, they may very well arrive at the conclusion that perhaps bodies in all of their particularity, permeability, and provisionality, are essential for preaching that bears witness to the risen Christ.¹ And to bear witness to the particular, permeable, provisional body of Christ in our midst is to affirm the real bodies of those who preach.

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¹ Neal defines “real bodies” as possessing three characteristics: (1) real bodies are particular, (2) real bodies are permeable, and (3) real bodies are provisional. *The Overshadowed Preacher* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2020), 11–12.