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A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners

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Still, no matter how it is used, this text is an ideal resource for parish pastors. It inspires and challenges while also offering a solid survey of contemporary literature in the field of preaching. Edward Marquardt calls us to a quest that is well worth joining, effectively inspiring us to make that quest our own.

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A Trumpet in Darkness: Preaching to Mourners

Robert G. Hughes

Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985

109 pp.

"A mourner," writes Robert Hughes, "is a story in search of an ending." The funeral sermon, when it engages the particular grief dynamics of the mourners in the context of the theology of the cross, becomes a vital link in that story, perhaps even the energizer which moves that story toward an ending, namely, new life.

The problem, of course, familiar to every pastor, is to know where the mourners are "on the continuum of grief" (10). This requires careful listening. Using the case of a protracted death from cancer, Hughes demonstrates "a strategy for communicating with mourners" (chap. 1). By listening to the mourners' story of the death and concentrating on their feelings and questions, the pastor can identify emotions (eg "I really miss her"), discover images (eg "I feel alone in the dark"), and pick up theological clues (eg "Is it wrong to feel relief?"). These become vital elements for the sermon as well as for further pastoral work.

Furthermore, each type of death has its own peculiar "syndrome of emotions and questions" (24), and in chapter 2 Hughes discusses the following types: prolonged, sudden, untimely (eg child), timely, sought-for (suicide), unbeliever's, and anonymous (the deceased is unknown to the pastor). Each type is examined for its grief dynamics (eg guilt, anger, shame in the case of suicide), and its "variable factors" (eg state of the body as the result of an accident; the consequences of certain concepts of God). Appropriate Scripture passages are listed for each type.

In chapter 3, "The Cross in the Face of Death", Hughes correlates the theology of the cross and the theology of the mourners as the latter has been revealed in the mourners' questions and feelings (cf. chap. 1). For example, the question "Why?" involves *anger* and signals a probing of the goodness and justice of God; "What did I do to deserve this?" involves *guilt* and signals a salvation-by-works mentality: "God, where are you?"

involves *depression* which is *anger* plus *guilt* and conceives God as enemy and punisher.

The pastor, out of such careful listening, is thus considerably prepared to create a sermon which will "match specific situations of death with appropriate responses of faith" (75). The funeral sermon, writes Hughes in chapter 4, will have two movements: (1) The reality of death and loss, in which the story of death is told; the mourners' stories—pastor's, congregation's, family's—are told (these can be as brief as one evocative sentence) in order to focus on one question and one image (eg "Is it wrong to be relieved?"; "I feel alone in the dark"); (2) The good news of the gospel, in which the biblical text engages that question and counters that image with a hopeful image.

Three funeral sermons are analyzed in chapter 5: a child's sudden death; an adult killed in an accident; an older adult after a prolonged struggle with cancer.

Hughes, professor of Practical Theology at Lutheran Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, writes out of a decade of parish experience as well as the knowledgeability that comes of team-teaching a course on "Ministry and Death".

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. Though there seems to be some depreciation of the Old Testament (other than a few Psalms and one Isaiah text no OT passages are suggested: and see a pejorative reference to "Old Testament religion", p. 26) the book will be of invaluable assistance in that always tough struggle to be at once realistic and genuinely hopeful, and on both counts to be theologically substantive.

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