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Preaching to People in Pain: How Suffering Can Shape Your Sermons and Connect With Your Congregations

by Matthew D. Kim, Grand Rapids, MI:
Baker Academic, 2021.

Although we all experience pain, most pastors fail to address this topic in their preaching. The dearth of sermons focusing on the universality of pain and suffering motivated Matthew D. Kim (the new professor of practical theology and the Hubert H. and Gladys S. Raborn chair of pastoral leadership at Baylor University) to pen this timely volume. This practical volume “encourage[s] pastors to preach less pain-free sermons and to preach more pain-full sermons where preachers disclose their own suffering and pain, which allows space to encourage listeners to identify and share their suffering in Christian community for the ultimate purpose of healing and transformation” (xii).

The book is divided into two parts. The first three chapters constitute part 1, “Naming the Pain.” In underscoring the benefits to be derived from preaching on pain, Kim reminds preachers that “sharing [their own] suffering from the pulpit—with wisdom and timeliness—may be the first step in helping to create a church culture of vulnerability, empathy, and healing” (20). He also provides a template for preaching with greater intentionality on pain. The section “Preparatory Questions to Preach on Pain” includes nine questions: (1) “Which Passage Will I Preach On?” (2) “What Type of Pain/Suffering Is Revealed in the Text?” (3) “How Does the Bible Character or Biblical Author Deal With the Pain?” (4)

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“How Does This Pain in the Text Relate to Our Listeners’ Pain?” (5) What Does This Pain Say About God and His Allowance of Pain?” (6) “How Does God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit Help Us in Our Suffering?” (7) “How Can Our Preaching Show Care and Empathy?” (8) “How Can We Share This Pain in a Christian Community?” and (9) “How Will God Use Our Suffering to Transform Us and Bring Himself Glory?” (36–41).

Part 2, “Preaching on Pain,” comprises the book’s last six chapters. Each chapter addresses one of the six types of pain with which most congregants grapple: (1) decisions, (2) finances, (3) health issues, (4) losses, (5) relationships, and (6) sin. The nine questions are applied to each type of pain. Each chapter concludes with discussion questions and a sample sermon focused on the kind of pain under study. Kim reminds readers that preaching about pain is “challenging, messy, perplexing, even heart-wrenching” (201). However, preachers should engage in this practice to reassure their listeners that they are never alone when they experience pain and suffering. God is present and always listening. Pastors must preach about pain because “Scripture exposes suffering and pain because God provides solutions for us and is the solution for the Christian” (9).

Kim makes it clear that he is “not arguing that every single sermon must address pain and suffering,” rather that “as a general rule of thumb, we can preach on pain and suffering when the sermon text addresses it” (35, 36). Additionally, preaching on pain should balance proclamation and a “loving, pastoral presence,” best exemplified through active participation and empathy (202).

It is no surprise that *Preaching to People in Pain* was selected as *Christianity Today’s* 2022 Book Award winner for Church and Pastoral Leadership. The book provides both homiletical and pastoral insights. Preachers with a vested interest in preaching sermons that address their pain and that of their congregants will find it an invaluable resource. 📖

