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# Alyce M. McKenzie, making a scene in the pulpit: vivid preaching for visual listeners

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Alyce M. McKenzie, *Making a Scene in the Pulpit: Vivid Preaching for Visual Listeners*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2018. 218 pages. \$17.00.

Alyce McKenzie considers the shifts in attention span in a digital age to be not merely a problem but an opportunity for homiletics. Cell phones, digital devices, and the divided minds they engender are not merely a source of lamentation to the preacher, but an occasion to re-envision what the craft of preaching might look like for a time such as this. McKenzie proposes an alternative: preachers should learn to make a scene.

For McKenzie, such a “scene” represents a most promising way to reach out homiletically to the visual listeners of the digital world. She is suspicious of the ability of longer narratives to carry the freight that they once did for hearers. At the same time, she is clear that the visual logic of the scene, a kind of constituent element of a narrative or drama, may prove all the more useful for the task of preaching today. A scene is a strong, brief, visually oriented narrated moment that ideally includes dialogue and invites the participation of listeners in the story. In its best sense, a scene has the potential to connect to larger narratives, but need not presuppose that a listener is already familiar with a longer narrative arc, whether of the Bible as a whole or the cultural narratives that we human beings tell ourselves. McKenzie is convinced that a well-designed, engaging, participatory scene both meets the needs of the changing media age while opening up wider opportunities to relate to the narrative of God, understood as a kind of theo-dramatic view (Vanhoozer) of the whole.

Her argument develops over five variegated chapters. In the first chapter, McKenzie makes her case for “scene” as the new story. Here she also locates her work relative to developments in story and narrative in recent homiletic theory. Chapter 2 gives McKenzie the opportunity to describe the preacher as scene maker. She draws on her own previous scholarship in the wisdom literature to ground this scene making task in the work of the sage and pointing specifically to skill in “noticing” matters of inner experience (inscape), the shape of Biblical texts (textscape), and wider shared experience in contemporary life and culture (landscape). In chapter 3 McKenzie considers how texts already manifest this scene-making capacity for noticing. Although she begins by looking at how this holds true in the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible, she expands her treatment to include Jesus’ own teaching. All of this seeks to correlate God’s knack for noticing with our own human capacity *and* in relation to the person of Jesus, God’s incarnate wisdom. The fourth chapter is concerned with “Making a Scene in the Sermon.” Here she reconnects her argument with Vanhoozer’s concern for a dramatic shape of the gospel in scenes. For the most part, however, the chapter is concerned with laying out options for using scenes in sermons (deductive, multi-scene, single-scene, etc.) which can appeal to different kinds of hearers and open up a greater of variety of options to the preacher at the same time. Chapter 5 then gives examples of several types of scene sermons and allows the reader to correlate the sermons with the more explicit methodological options she describes in the previous chapter. These final two chapters are especially helpful to read side-by-side, or even back-and-forth, in order to grasp the whole of her project. Two appendices follow that can aid the preacher to go and do likewise. They offer a kind of checklist for making scenes and exegetical hints to help in scriptural interpretation for preaching in scenes.

Her book is useful and will help preachers think in a wider variety of ways about how “scene” connects to experience and Biblical texts. Its proximate goal is thus well-met in these pages. McKenzie offers useful guidance for reconsidering a more modest goal for narrative in an age of digitally shortened attention spans while not losing sight of theology. At the longer end of its goals, however, I would have also been intrigued to imagine how a book about “scenes” in a media-saturated age might look if it also took on some of the issues raised every time a new medium threatens to change the sensorium (Ong, or in a sense, McLuhan). For with the change of media, as even philosophers like Socrates noted with writing, capacities and possibilities for both memory and identity are altered as well. All this is to say that a change of attention or awareness may just involve both “making a scene” and “remaking ourselves” in surprising ways.

I highly recommend this book. Preachers will find it useful and practical for dealing with how our minds are changing in the new media environment. Homileticians will find an insightful conversation partner in the ongoing struggle over the future of narrative homiletics—I could see it fitting in well to my narrative sermons course as a way of carrying that important disciplinary conversation forward into a new media context. All of this is to say that, McKenzie is, in fact, a sage herself and a scholar with much wisdom to offer to a field on the edge of something new.

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