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Envisioning the reign of God

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Debra Mumford, *Envisioning the Reign of God: Preaching for Tomorrow*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2019. 242 pages. \$17.99.

Dean Debra Mumford of Louisville Seminary has written a remarkable book on eschatology and preaching. She does not so much make a case for eschatology in preaching as invite the reader to a feast of eschatologies—ways in which theologians from the nineteenth-century premillennial dispensationalist John Nelson Darby to the queer contemporary theologian Patrick Cheng deal with visions of a better world in context. If that sounds like a wild ride, you would be wrong. Mumford’s approach to the dozen eschatologies she treats is irenic, matter-of-fact, and steadfastly critical with respect to preaching. Her approach is irenic because she sees the value of all of these eschatological views for understanding the “Reign of God,” “Kin-dom of God,” or “Kingdom of God” today in light of each theologian’s context and history. Her treatment is matter of fact, because she unpacks each theologian’s eschatology carefully without rushing to judgment (an eschatological hazard in its own right!). Her work is however also steadfastly critical with its view of how it helps for preaching today. In a conclusion to each chapter, she covers what a particular eschatological view’s implications for preaching would be. She returns to the same now unpacked eschatology, but with a clear sense of how its answers to the problem of envisioning God’s reign might not necessarily be ours. Mumford does that critical theological work with grace.

The twelve main chapters are shaped by the theologians she treats: Darby and Cheng, yes, but also Rudolf Bultmann, Martin Luther King Jr., Jürgen Moltmann, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, Walter Rauschenbusch, James Cone, Emilie Townes, Ada María Isasi-Díaz, and Nancy Eiesland. Some of these theologians will be among the first to come to mind with a topic like eschatology. With some other theologians, a turn to eschatology as a lens helps to concretize otherwise already well-known features of their theological positions. Mumford’s gift is to be able to point out why all of these theologians are needed, and in fact need each other, to plumb the depths of eschatology—especially for the preaching task. For me, Mumford’s careful work with Townes, Isasi-Díaz, Eiesland, and Cheng were particularly rich chapters. Thanks to her careful and critical work, God’s reign looks differently to me now—and invites me to preach with greater range, theological precision, and steadfast solidarity.

A critical reader who is also happens to be a teacher of preachers may wonder what to do with a book like this. Most of us don’t line up for a buffet of eschatologies when we preach. That said, as someone who himself seeks to do theological work at the intersection of texts with more than a whiff of ancient apocalyptic and contemporary postcolonial identities that range from the privileged to the powerless, I think Mumford’s book on envisioning the Reign of God is promising indeed. When I teach courses on preaching Mark’s gospel, for example, I encourage students to understand the elements of apocalyptic eschatology that Mark appeals to from the rending of the heavens in Jesus’ Baptism in chapter 1 to the rending of the temple curtain that happens while the sun is darkened during Jesus’ crucifixion in chapter 15. What remains, of course, is the important theological work in making sense of such eschatological notions in today’s world: and this is the path that her dozen theologians have trod in such beautifully different and powerfully revelatory ways. Read them and you will see. Preaching Mark, better, any preaching that along with Mumford takes eschatology seriously can be richer for how it attends to God’s Kin-dom in our here and now. Or, as Mumford puts it in her concluding

sermon on Mark 1:40-45, we can see Jesus and thus even today envision a “chance of reign” (215). I recommend this book highly.

David Schnasa Jacobsen, Boston University School of Theology, Boston MA