



Rutledge, Fleming.

And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011. Pp. xiv + 421. Paper. \$30.00. ISBN 9780802866066.

Nick Norelli

Rightly Dividing the Word of Truth

New Jersey

I've *heard* thousands of sermons preached over the years but I've never really taken to reading them. Perhaps that's because I've been reared in Pentecostal churches where the sermons are often unrehearsed and not written out beforehand. Perhaps it's because in my own preaching I work simply with minimal notes and don't write the sermons myself. I can't say for sure, but I can say that I'm not very versed in the genre. Among the sermons I have read have been Charles Spurgeon's, which I have found often infuriating and sometimes convicting, as well as John Wesley's, which I almost always find myself in awe of. If anyone could preach it was that guy!

When I initially heard about Fleming Rutledge's collection of sermons entitled *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching from the Old Testament*, I wasn't drawn to it simply because it was a collection of sermons (again, I've never been big on reading them); in fact, it was the subtitle that grabbed my attention: *Preaching from the Old Testament*. Anyone even casually interested in biblical and theological studies knows well the popularity of the study of the New Testament's use of the Old Testament. Gallons of ink have been spilled in journal articles, monographs, commentaries, and handbooks in order to explore how the NT authors utilized the OT in their writing. Yet very little seems to be said about how Christian preachers use the OT in their preaching.

Now Rutledge is an Episcopal priest, and while I don't know much about the Episcopalians, I'm pretty sure that they use a lectionary. This would suggest that whoever is preaching on any given Sunday is in some way constrained to craft their sermon to align with the lectionary reading (although, as I said, I know very little about the Episcopalians so I could be entirely off). And yet Rutledge's sermons don't read as if she was constrained to the given OT text in any way; rather, like the Apostle Paul, she speaks as one who believes that "whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom. 15:4 cf. 4:23-24; 1 Cor. 10:11).

She has the rare gift of being able to preach as if she was present at the times of the events she's speaking about. She speaks with such passion and clarity about the biblical text and the God it bears witness to that it's almost impossible to believe that she comes from a more liberal mainline tradition. But this is one of the things that make this collection of sermons so great; she's not afraid to speak prophetically to the mainline churches and call them back to faith in the God who *speaks*. And that's the constant thread throughout her sermons: that God speaks, hence the title *And God Spoke to Abraham*. God has not only created human history, but he's also broken into it with promise and action.

This isn't to say that she doesn't hold some views that would make those on the more conservative end of the spectrum a bit uneasy (e.g., denying that Adam and Eve were historical persons; interpreting the primeval history of Gen. 1-11 as myth; etc.), but she's much too passionate about the word of God to be written off as just another run of the mill liberal. She's far too confident in God's ability to be faithful when we're faithless; far too excited about Jesus' victory over death; far too in love with the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (she preached on sermon on the Trinity from Exodus 3:1-6!) to be discounted for the vestments she dons or the church she's ordained in or the mere fact that she's a woman who preaches. Her faith is much too vibrant for that!

My friend Esteban said, "I am able to affirm, without danger of exaggeration, that Fleming Rutledge is the greatest preacher in a generation." I don't know that I'd go so far as to say that, but now when I speak about the sermons I've read, along with Spurgeon's I'll say that Rutledge's have sometimes convicted me, and along with Wesley I'll say, "If anyone can preach, it's that gal!" When Paul said that "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17), he had the OT in mind. Rutledge shows this in action. I'd highly recommend this volume to one and all.