

understand that simplicity in effective preaching is rooted in the depth of understanding. Also, Pennington's use of the term "killing your darlings" to cut down on content while reviewing it is critical for better preaching. Moreover, the art of preaching can be clearly understood when Pennington compares sermon writing with sculpture—blocking in the beginning and chipping toward the end of the sermon preparation. Also, the suggestion for snack writing rather than big meals to gather the thoughts over the whole week seems trivial but has significant returns. Consequently, the author's advice to the reader to focus on sermon structure similar to the rhythm of education and jigsaw puzzle methods is a novel way to comprehend.

Out of the three sections related to the Person, Preparation, and the Practice of Preaching, the last section on practice seems to be the icing on the cake. Another suggested title for the section could be the Presentation of Preaching because the word "practice" would have an alternate meaning similar to preparation, just like a sportsman practices before playing the game. Pennington's suggestion of focusing on the first and last minute of the sermon is one of the most critical elements in becoming a better preacher. He dedicates individual chapters to the sermon's first and last minute, making it clear to the reader the importance of the details in each chapter. In addition, Pennington's references to the preacher as a conductor in an orchestra with a sermon as a musical story having tension with a plotline are a great way to help the readers take the preaching seriously and make the congregation learn life lessons more effectively. The author seems skeptical of being expositional all the time but suggests treating every sermon as a story with a plot. He is practical in suggesting keeping it short during important occasions like weddings and funerals. Finally, the book concludes with a statement that preaching is not a game of the perfect but that one should take small steps toward better preaching (p. 63).

Pennington focuses on the cohesive aspect of the preaching ministry when he mentions having a band of preachers, topical versus expository preaching. In addition, he covers strategic ministry calendar planning for a more effective ministry to address the cultural and church occasions during the year. *Small Preaching* is a book for every earnest preacher, whether a novice or a seasoned preacher of the living Word of God. Each chapter lays out simple principles, enabling the reader to realize how small things matter in a big way, causing the preaching to result in a transformed congregation for the glory of God.

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The Angel of Absolute Zero. By Marjorie Stelmach. Poiema Poetry Series.
Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2022. 112 pp. \$14.

Marjorie Stelmach's *The Angel of Absolute Zero* is a book of praise—an ecstatic song of wonder and wander, and an ode to all things winged: dragonflies, owls, spring peepers, angels. But it is also a dirge of worry. Will these wonders—even angels, even belief—become extinct? While the poet "long[s], like Peter, for miracles," she cannot help but

acknowledge that “of late, Hallelujahs are hard to come by” (p. 65). Our indifference and waste have consequences. Each day, we separate ourselves from God; each day, we needlessly harm the earth and each other. And yet, “stuck/ with [her] heartbeat and sorrows,” she still pulls her car over to witness a mare “moving through gauzy grasses” (p. 63). She still yearns for healing, crying out in her “Canticle of Want” to the “Lord of neglect and carelessness, of greed/ and depletion, the doleful call of the loon;// Lord of ruin” (p. 8). She still asks the seemingly distant Divine, “having come into the fullness/ of my longing . . . what . . . in the sweep of your reckless love,/ will [you] make of me next” (pp. 13–14). We hear Job. We hear David. We hear Ramah, alongside many unnamed women, weeping, questioning. We hear ourselves and our neighbors.

Often, Stelmach poses such queries through the lens of literature, history, science, philosophy, art, and music. For example, in “Teach Us to Number Our Ways,” she names a female ant Odysseus; it “shoulders a corpse and heads homeward. . . . halts: lost”

(p. 35), but not really. A minute later, we are told. “*What Odysseus knows astounds the scientists*” (p. 35), the ant even craftier than Homer’s protagonist. In her poem “In the Cave,” she mourns the decline in human compassion while alluding to moral philosopher Peter Singer and his writings on animal ethics. Her meditations on a bat that “hurls itself/ repeatedly upward until it collapses” (p. 18) becomes both metaphorical and prophetic. She muses,

It’s only now I remember: a bat plague/ is sweeping the country—I creat[e]/for him/a death rush . . . Poor little creature,/ innocent victim of a vile fungus. . . . many-mouthed demon . . . beyond all redemption . . . *here we are again in the cave.* (pp. 18–19)

There is also Lear—“Though mad, he saw human wretchedness/ clearly, called it by name: *The thing itself;/ unaccommodated man, a poor;/ bare, forked animal.* Yes. Us” (p. 63)—Donne, Dostoevsky, *Henry IV*, the Bible, Hans Christian Anderson. In these poems, “each creature [is] wise/ to its own dual nature: predator/ prey” while “successive worldview[s] devour the last” (p. 38). Similarly, in a reference to Yeats’ “The Second Coming,” the falcons circle higher and more menacingly. “Something/ about beasts. About circling birds/ of prey. Deserts. Darkness./ Nothing about repentance./ No second chances. No mention/ of saviors” (p. 52).

Stelmach’s words are lyrical, perceptive, and hauntingly ominous. “Early Onset with Quicksand and Pythons” speaks as contemporary parable to what we lose, not only in connection to memory and relationships but also in how we respond to real and imagined dangers: “[W]e’re all still here,/ holding our breath as we wait to be rescued . . . quicksand everywhere, all these pythons” (p. 25). In addition, many of her titles underscore overall themes: “Toxic Nocturne” (p. 30), “Dark Doctrine” (p. 38), “Guilt Litany” (p. 40), and “How It Is We Have Come to This” (51). Her poems embrace the brushstrokes of Fra Angelico, the notes of Shostakovich, the statistics of textbooks, and the narratives of Russian history.

Through these, she also connects us to the personal: sorrow, love, grief, faith, and happiness. For example, in her poem “RIVERS WANTED,” seeing an ad on the back of a semi-truck leads to joy:

One missing letter and . . . the trundling world,/ all eighteen wheels, singing/in pure *B-flat*. And yes,/ I'm still stuck in rush hour traffic . . . behind a truck I can't see past./But something in the universe/loves me. (pp. 73–74)

And thus, *The Angel of Absolute Zero* moves from decrescendo to crescendo. Rain, while taking “up the task of/ endlessness” (p. 66), sometimes becomes cleansing. Grief, while questioning “*Are we all in this together?*” (p. 71), may also “keep something nameless nonetheless whole” (p. 1).

In the collection’s powerful final poem, “How to Disappear,” Stelmach meditates on this life, the next, and our transition between the two. “Keep still so long/ times comes to rest/ like dust/ on your shoulders . . . Which of you, then—figure or ground—is ghost?” (p. 75). Even here there is a rising: sorrow lifted to song, and the old life and its losses cleansed:

Sing like an echo returned/ from the shores/ of an old fairy tale. Sing,/ like a plain simple thing./ No love/ need be revisited now;/ no sin remains/ to be undone./ Release your name,/ your past, your dust./ Only now it begins—the *after*, the *life*. (p. 76)

In these ways, Marjorie Stelmach’s *The Angel of Absolute Zero* is a book for believers and doubters alike. It is a call for connection, compassion, and action; it is a missal for those deeply concerned about the environment, as well as those now contemplating the state of the world. It also is a treatise on grief, faith, and empathy. And finally, it is a call—despite everything—to sing.

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Flourishing Together: A Christian Vision for Students, Educators, & Schools. By Lynn E. Swaner and Andy Wolfe. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2021. 296 pp. \$24.99 (pb). ISBN 978-0-8028-7957-8.

The authors, Lynn Swaner and Andy Wolfe, bring together their significant experience from two educational worlds, the Church of England schools in the United Kingdom and the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). I am an Episcopalian with some familiarity with the Church of England and its schools. I also have delightful colleagues in ACSI, but I must disclose that I would respectfully disagree with sections of their organization’s Statement of Faith, which may be read at <https://www.acsi.org/about-acsi/statement-of-faith>. I therefore read this book very carefully with an eye to whether I could recommend it for the full spectrum of Christian schools. I am happy to say that I can and would recommend it to colleagues in schools of other faiths and secular schools as well.

Swaner and Wolfe’s premise is that God wants us not just to exist but to flourish, and they demonstrate that schools can be constituted as places where that is the goal. Quoting

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