

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

2005

Review of *The Consolations of God: Great Sermons of Phillips Brooks*, edited by Ellen Wilbur

Robert B. Slocum
Marquette University

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Slocum, Robert B., "Review of *The Consolations of God: Great Sermons of Phillips Brooks*, edited by Ellen Wilbur" (2005). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 370.
https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/370

to the interested reader. For instance, the pages are filled with rich and helpful metaphors for ministry. In particular, the author writes of the “incarnational” nature of diaconal ministry. She points to the rainbow in terms of the mutuality of all ministries. She writes of the Rule of Benedict, not only as a helpful rule of life but also as an analogy of the ministry of deacons. She writes of a deacon as a midwife and, later, as the bishop’s ambassador.

While I would have preferred more attention to the uniqueness of diaconal ministry, the author does address the foundational nature of the order of deacon for all others. That surely is a helpful emphasis for priests and for bishops.

The three essays at the end of the book—“Pray,” “Love,” and “Remember”—provide significant reflections for anyone involved in any baptismal ministry. I found those essays to be quite beneficial. Indeed, the entire book offers instructional insight for lay ministry and for all ordained ministry as well. While my own expectations in picking up the book were not entirely met, I did receive some unexpected benefits. The particularity of diaconal ministry was not highlighted to the extent that I had hoped, but the fundamental blessings of that ministry were certainly emphasized in appropriate and helpful ways.

—Charles G. vonRosenberg

The Consolations of God: Great Sermons of Phillips Brooks. Edited by Ellen Wilbur. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003. xiv + 140 pages. \$18 pb.

Phillips Brooks (December 13, 1835 – January 23, 1893) is considered to be one of the preeminent preachers in nineteenth-century America. He defined preaching as “truth through personality.” After serving two pastorates in Philadelphia, he was rector of Trinity Church, Boston, from 1869 until he resigned in 1891 to become bishop of Massachusetts. Brooks was prominent in the Broad Church movement in the Episcopal Church. He was also the author of the Christmas carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” (Hymns 78-79 in *The Hymnal* 1982). Brooks is commemorated with a “lesser feast” in the calendar of the Episcopal Church on January 23. His *Lectures on Preaching* (the 1877 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale) have been reprinted often.

Brooks has drawn scholarly attention in recent years, including David Chesebrough’s *Phillips Brooks: Pulpit Eloquence* (2001), John Woolverton’s *The Education of Phillips Brooks* (1995), and Gillis Harp’s article “The Young Phillips Brooks: A Reassessment,” *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 49 (1998): 652-67.

Ellen Wilbur is a short-story writer and parishioner at Trinity Church, Boston. She sought to read Brooks’s sermons and was frustrated to discover that most of his published works were out of print and difficult to locate. She states in

a preface that “the few volumes I culled were in such fragile shape that more than once, as I was reading a particularly fine sermon, the pages broke and crumbled in my hands. It was shocking to discover something precious at the moment when it was destroyed” (xii). So she edited a collection of ten sermons by Brooks, with the encouragement of Samuel Lloyd, then rector of Trinity, and Peter Gomes of Harvard’s Memorial Church. The volume includes a foreword by Gomes, expressing his appreciation for Brooks and for Wilbur’s work as editor.

Brooks’s sermons are brilliant, timeless, and moving. His sermons are aimed at influencing Christian life, and they are often illustrated with examples and applications. His preaching gives a vivid expression to Christian faith, but he does not linger over theological fine points. The sermons in Wilbur’s collection are varied in terms of homiletical content and presentation. Wilbur says that two of the sermons (“The Withheld Completions of Life” and “The Consolations of God”) are drawn from the early years of Brooks’s preaching. Of course, the sermons were intended to be heard, but Brooks’s powerful message does come through in print. For example, from “The Seriousness of Life”:

It is better to be lost on the ocean than to be tied to the shore. It is better to be overwhelmed with the greatness of hearing the awful voice of God than to become satisfied with the piping of mechanical ceremonies or the lullabies of traditional creeds. Therefore seek great experiences of the soul, and never turn your back on them when God sends them, as He surely will! (111)

As Wilbur says, Brooks was “a poet of a speaker” whose words “made it easy to imagine rooms of hushed, uplifted people pinned on him, as much astonished by the man as by his teachings” (xiii).

It is encouraging to see a new collection of Brooks’s sermons in print. This short collection will help college students, seminarians, and members of parish study groups to “hear” one of the most engaging preachers in American Christianity. This volume would have been even more useful if it had included a detailed introduction to Brooks’s life and ministry, the major themes of his preaching, and the significance of his contribution to American Christianity and, especially, the Episcopal Church. Further, why only ten of Brooks’s sermons? There are ten *volumes* of his sermons, all out of print, and a substantially larger collection of republished sermons would have been welcome—perhaps a different sermon for each Sunday of the church year. Nevertheless, Wilbur has taken an important step in making Brooks available to a contemporary audience. I hope that others will follow her lead.

—Robert B. Slocum