

Reckoning with holiness

by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [December 8, 1999](#) issue

*The Bible and the New York Times*, by Fleming Rutledge

When sermons are lifted from the pulpit—where things like eye-contact, delivery and relevance to the local context are critical—and put into a book, they can easily lose their impact. Fleming Rutledge's sermons do not. They carry into print the fervor and reverence that inform her spoken words. Read thoughtfully, they possess what Eugene Peterson calls a "subversive" quality: they get into one's heart and mind and change one from within.

What is most distinctive about these sermons is their preoccupation with the holiness of God, not as an arid abstraction incomprehensible to contemporary folk but as an unavoidable point of reckoning for all humanity. With disarming matter-of-factness, Rutledge preaches as if nothing could be more crucial than our coming to grips with the reality that "God is holy, and we are not." The sermons are also distinguished by their bright clarity. As they follow the cycle of the church year, the whole becomes even greater than the parts. Well phrased and carefully written, they make for engaging reading.

With a wonderful combination of humility and irony, Rutledge presents the sermon as a meeting place for the holiness of Almighty God and the varied hopes and fears of humanity. Like a newspaper columnist, she talks about events, people and trends—but with the deep conviction that God is at work in these affairs, and that it is "meet and right" for the Bible to be in conversation with our daily newspapers. Like a columnist, Rutledge has a distinct editorial perspective. "The message of the Bible is that there is no rescue from within [the human] sphere," she declares. "Rescue must come from beyond. And that is exactly what has happened."

Preaching as eloquent, incisive and passionate as hers cultivates and builds hope that, in the words of Handel's *Messiah*, "the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdom of God, and of his Christ."