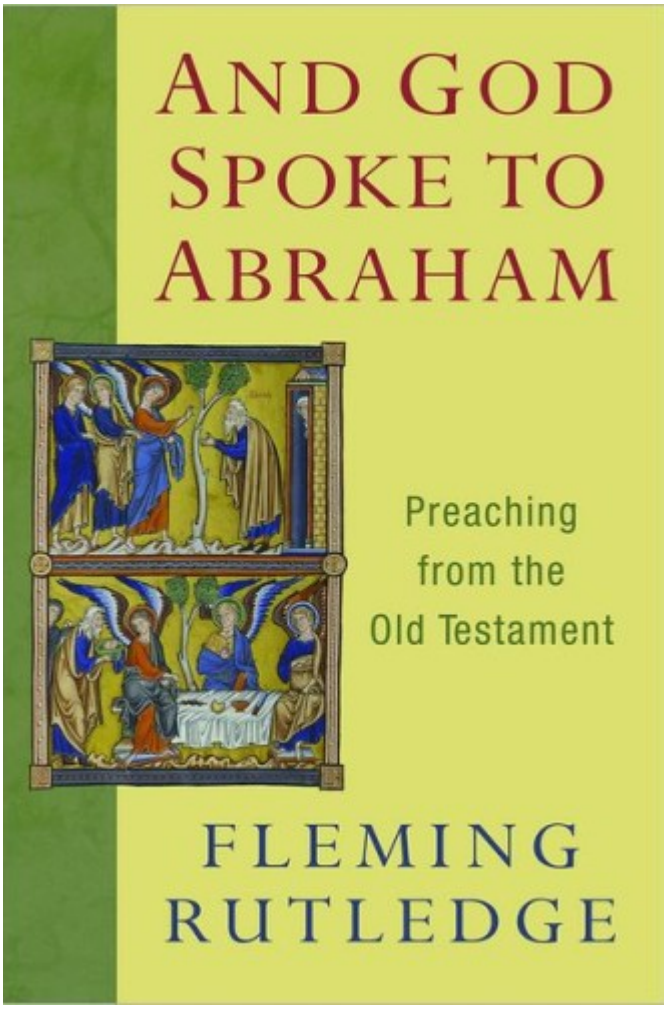
And God Spoke to Abraham, by Fleming Rutledge

reviewed by Jason Byassee in the October 31, 2012 issue

In Review



And God Spoke to Abraham

By Fleming Rutledge
Eerdmans

Fleming Rutledge is the most interesting preacher today working the fault line between the mainline churches and evangelicalism. Throughout this remarkable collection of Old Testament sermons she calls for mainliners and evangelicals to

realize their common identity in Christ for the sake of our mutual mission in the world. She chides both, loves both, belongs to both—and offers semieschatological predictions like this: “If the mainliners can get over their distaste for the evangelicals, we are going to see something happen in American Christianity that we haven’t seen for a long time.”

Rutledge has plenty of grief to pour out both on her fellow mainliners, as we yawn in the presence of a holy God while our churches hunger for the word of the Lord, and on evangelicals, who fetishize the flag and rally to American bravado rather than biblical humility. But she judges so as to offer grace. If our divisions are a theological mistake, cannot God bring about their remedy?

An associate rector at Grace Episcopal Church in New York City for many years, Rutledge now practices what she calls an itinerant ministry of preaching. This gives her a broad vantage point from which to view what happens in the nation’s mainline churches. There was a day, she says, when Episcopalians didn’t preach Jesus overmuch. But now all they do is preach Jesus—without attention to the Old Testament matrix in which he was nurtured and without which we cannot understand him. She detects “a noticeable slippage” in the knowledge and use of the Old Testament in our churches. And not coincidentally, we have lost a sense of “a living God.” There are exceptions: African-American churches and evangelical churches speak as though God is still living and active and may turn up and demand something of us.

This book is a primer on how to get reacquainted with the living God who spoke to Abraham and who raised Israel from Egypt and Jesus from the dead. That language, borrowed directly from the eminent Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson, shows another strength: these sermons are deeply learned theologically. Rutledge has sat at the feet of Luther and Calvin, Jenson and David Hart. The sermons here are almost a matchmaker for a church that has forgotten its very first love—the Old Testament. In Rutledge’s hands, scripture is a squirming, living thing, not off-putting or distant but unbearably close, grappling with us, wounding us, bringing about healing.

The sermons’ central theme has a Barthian inflection to it: we can speak of God only because God has first spoken to us. The trouble with the church in the United States is that we constantly turn that order around. Every sermon in this book stretches to remind us of the biblical order of things: God seeks us before we have any interest in

or word to say about God. There is also here an Augustinian enthusiasm for the "radical leveling" effect of original sin. And it's all mediated through liturgy, of course, especially the bits of liturgy that the church in more "enlightened" times has snipped out. Rutledge recalls: "When I was a child, we all said, in the general confession, that we were *all* miserable offenders and there was no health in us."

The volume covers the length of the Old Testament, with equally strong sermons throughout. An early one on Exodus describes the way God permits Moses to refract God's "fierce, dazzling holiness to the people below." Another, on the burning bush, describes the "magic" that comes when someone "gets it": that faith is about God's address to us, not the reverse. Yet another, on Moses' bargaining with God, describes the way the liberator takes the side of sinners, laying the way in advance that Jesus would walk.

A series of four remarkable sermons on Isaiah 28 describes scripture's response to suffering, with attention to Luther's distinction between the proper and alien works of God. Those left me stammering: I knew of Luther's distinction between the works of God's right and left hands, but I did not know it came from Isaiah 28:21: "alien is his work." So much of the church's traditional teaching comes directly from the specific words of Israel's scripture. How much we lose when we lose those!

Rutledge somehow manages to champion orthodoxy without anger and without adopting a scold's posture. The theologically mature church that she seeks is

> formed by the Bible, proudly Trinitarian, grounded in justification by grace through faith, dedicated to the person of Jesus Christ, convinced of his incarnation as Son of God, recognizing his death on the Cross as redemption from sin for the whole world, boldly convinced of the truth of the Resurrection, and committed to a worldwide mission of witness in Christ's name.

What would the Episcopal Church, or indeed any mainline church, look like founded on such beliefs? That's hard to know from this volume. Because the sermons were addressed to a variety of congregations dating back to the 1970s all over the country, it's hard to know how Rutledge would preach amid the specifics of one church in one place over time.

A friend pointed out to me that preachers in the U.S. often cease to be interesting when they leave their parishes and travel around the country and speak. They become too generic, too in love with the echo chamber of those who itinerate to all

the same conferences, too above-it-all with regard to the harsh and mundane reality of parish life. These sermons escape that fate because of Rutledge's intense wrestling with the live wire of scripture. They touch down in lived reality often enough to make the reader long for more, as when Rutledge writes about a laundromat employee named Beulah who tells her that she is ashamed of her name: "It's a country name." Rutledge wishes she knew then what she knows now, that biblically the name means "beautiful."

One sermon has such granular detail throughout, for Rutledge preached it at the tail end of her time at Grace in New York as a sort of valedictory. That parish managed to increase its passion for the plainly proclaimed gospel story of Christ's death for the ungodly, and at the same time increase its activism on behalf of the poor and its minority membership.

Could sermons as confidently biblical, as plainspoken, as theologically rich as these bring about such an effect in other churches? Maybe not. But one theme that appears again and again here is that God uses unlikely individuals, even enemies, to humble God's people and glorify God's name. Wrestling with scripture, and especially the Old Testament, the way Rutledge does could lead to churches becoming both more theologically attentive and more attentive to the poor, erasing that silly mainline-evangelical fissure. If that erasure happens, it will be because of leadership from a pulpit like hers.

The third paragraph was edited on October 17, 2012 to correctly identify Rutledge as a former associate at Grace Episcopal in New York, not its rector.