

Preaching to America

by [Richard Lischer](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

**American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.**

*Edited by Michael Warner. Library of America, 938 pp.*

This splendid and judiciously selected collection of sermons begins and ends in the promised land. Puritan Robert Cushman's sermon is the earliest extant sermon preached on American soil and the first to be printed. Given in Plymouth in 1621, it launches the American quest for the promised land with a heartfelt appeal to communal love and care. Of your neighbor, Cushman says, "Let his joy bee thy joy, and his sorrow thy sorrow; let his sicknesse be thy sicknesse: his hunger thy hunger; his povertie thy povertie." The first page of his sermon contains a near-Shakespearean evocation of the England he left behind, so "full of ryvers and sweete springs." In the volume's concluding sermon, Martin Luther King finally spies the promised land, but only after appealing to the same spirit of mutuality and after leading the nation through battles Cushman never dreamed of.

In between these two gorgeous visions lies a feast of history, language and proclamation encompassing 58 representative American sermons, from John Winthrop aboard the *Arrabella* to the freed slave Brother Carper, from Theodore Parker on war to Sister Aimee on the Holy Ghost.

The sermons in this volume reflect not only our religion but our literary sensibilities and our political conflicts. Many will read these sermons as a companion to American history and literature. They will not be disappointed or complain about the proverbial dullness of printed sermons. Those of us who are devoted to the matter of these messages will be further inspired by their theological richness and rhetorical vitality.

Many of the sermons convey two qualities sorely needed by contemporary preaching. They are public sermons that address civic and national issues, and they are crafted with an eye (and ear) to the public use of language. Not until late in the 19th century do we get the private ruminations and precious stories of the preacher. Only in the modern period do we meet inspiration segregated from the life of the community.

The enormous density of the Puritan entries compared to the rest of the collection reminds us of what a homiletically slender century we inhabit. The earlier sermons teach their readers how to be neighbors, subjects, rulers, rebels, spouses, citizens and Americans. "Wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill," promised John Winthrop, "the eis of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world."

Even when the story descends into "witches and imps," as in Cotton Mather, or a cheeky defense of regicide, as in the controversial Jonathan Mayhew, nearly every Puritan sermon wrestles with the "welfare of God's people" and the "common good." Even as he reflects on his Puritan forebears, Henry Ward Beecher worries that America has become, in effect, a superpower. After reflecting on its policies toward Indians, Mexico and, most eloquently, the Negro slaves, Beecher sounds like one of us when he complains, "This nation has employed its gigantic strength with almost no moral restriction."

Beecher, Niebuhr, King and even Fosdick found themselves in dialogue with the ideals and social methods of the Puritans. Beecher wondered at their strengths; Fosdick chafed at their intolerance. Niebuhr disputed their "simple moral correlations" between virtue and success. King, like Mayhew before him, analyzed the Christian's duty to resist oppression and, like Jonathan Edwards, compared himself to a surgeon who lances a horrible boil in the body politic. King was our last and best public voice in a contentious land where even churches find it difficult to reason together.

If one can speak of improving such a book, one might ask for a brief introduction in which the editor defines a sermon (since not all the entries were delivered as such) and gives his rationale for including some preachers and excluding others. Social gospelers like Walter Rauschenbusch and pop psychologists like Norman Vincent Peale are absent from the book. The father of modern revivalism, Charles Finney, and one of the religious shapers of the 20th century, Billy Graham, do not appear. Since others of Graham's generation such as King, Heschel, Tillich and Niebuhr are included, the exclusion of the century's greatest evangelist is a mystery. Nevertheless, this volume may well spark a revival, if not in religious piety, then in the appreciation of one of our neglected national treasures, the American sermon.