

**Christina R. Zaker, *Surprised by God: Teaching Reflection through the Parables*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020). 137 pages. Paperback. \$26.00.**

Christina R. Zaker's *Surprised by God* is a timely book about cultivating the capacity to experience God's nearness and to be transformed by it, both in the seemingly mundane moments of life as well as in highly structured facilitated conversations such as those in seminary classrooms. Drawing on her range of experiences as a theologian, field educator, parent, spouse, and group facilitator, Zaker makes a compelling case that the parables offer a beautifully simple framework for inviting people to reflect on their own stories and God's to be transformed.

The parables of Jesus in Christian Scripture offer glimpses of what the kingdom of God is like, and these glimpses are both familiar and surprising. The familiar pulls us in, and the surprising catches us off guard. This pattern becomes a method for communally exploring the familiarity and surprises in the stories of our lives.

The book opens by defining what theological reflection is and for whom it exists. Zaker's definition here is broad; theological reflection is not only for theologians in the academy. Rather, it is for anyone who intentionally chooses to explore their spirituality and growth in community. Using examples from the classroom and her children's bedrooms, she illustrates the potential for being surprised by God over and over again.

In addition, the book provides concrete processes for reflection and encourages routine reflective practices so that habits are formed and strengthened over time. Through practices of story-sharing and questioning, people are invited to understand the kingdom of God through biblical parables and also within the parable-like stories and circumstances of everyday life. She refers to the surprises that emerge as being "parabled." Inherent within these moments are invitations to enter into parabolic living. That is, those who are surprised by God are invited to be transformed by the nearness of God. The ways that God surprises are challenging, inspiring, and potentially life-altering. Here Zaker draws deeply from Catholic social teaching as well as from liberation and mujerista theology.

Zaker is not content to leave theological reflection at the level of individual understanding or intellectual engagement. Her insistence on communal exploration, contextual understanding and critique, and transforma-

tive living pushes the reader to consider the moral imperatives discovered in seemingly simple stories. God's preference for the marginalized crops up repeatedly throughout the book and provides a consistent interpretive lens.

For new field educators and others who facilitate theological reflection in educational settings, this book can serve as an introductory framework with practical guidance. For those who already have years of experience, the book is a reminder of the heartbeat of theological reflection. *Surprised by God* is refreshingly simple and communal, and it honors the experiences of all people who engage in reflective work. The book can also help congregational leaders adapt in this moment in history by identifying and celebrating the presence of God in the midst of dizzying changes that continue to unfold in our political, religious, and cultural landscape. Zaker's journey with the parables invites readers to anticipate the ongoing surprising revelation of the kingdom of God.

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