

Help My Unbelief, by Fleming Rutledge

reviewed by [David R. Stewart](#) in the [August 15, 2001](#) issue

Fleming Rutledge's second collection of sermons (her first, *The Bible and the New York Times*, appeared in 1998) is presented as a thoughtful and sustained response to the plea expressed in the book's title, "Lord I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

Rutledge's preaching is eloquent without being virtuosic. Her sermons contain equal measures of intensity and humility, and this is part of what makes even the sentences themselves so lucid. (In the preface Rutledge aptly describes her sermons as like "the narrow beams of a flashlight shining briefly first in one dark place, then another.") Her use of language is skillful, encompassing major themes but never becoming ponderous. Her sermons are grounded deeply in scripture and are well versed in the events and culture of our time. Both persons and doctrines are treated with absolute respect.

But I think it is Rutledge's adeptness at opening the Word of God to people while at the same time opening people's hearts to the Word that is especially remarkable. This achievement is both simple (what the best preaching has always done) and profound (such preaching now seems harder to come by than before).

The author has no time for the notion that belief is easy, nor does she suggest that the church is always much help in determining what, or how, to believe. At times she finds it necessary to take a sideways step from the current state of Episcopalianism, her denomination, and when it comes to the Jesus Seminar that step widens to a chasm. It is the voice of the advocate--for those whose beliefs have been unsettled, for those who want to believe but need a place to begin, for those whose trust has been betrayed--that is heard most clearly throughout the book.

What rings most true in these well-crafted and artfully arranged sermons is how richly they convey the fear of God and fearlessness in the pulpit. The biblical themes most prone to make sophisticated listeners feel awkward--atonement, resurrection,

righteousness, sin--aren't tactfully avoided here.

Among the many other blessings it brings, Rutledge's book helps to restore our confidence that, both as a ministry and as a literary form, there is simply no substitute for good preaching. The need for such preaching is impossible to overstate. If we don't have the good fortune to hear sermons like this very often, let us at least read them. We will grow in grace and courage by doing so.