

From the Senior Writer



LOST SHEEP AND THE WELFARE WILDERNESS

How do you define the American Dream?

It is 1:00 in the morning, and Angie is out of food. Her two boyfriends are prowling around with cognac and pistols. She suspects that a drug-abusing cousin has stolen her food stamps, and wonders whether she should throw the woman out. In the middle of all this chaos, Angie decides that it is the perfect time to ... pick a portfolio of stocks.

If you want to know the end of the story, you'll have to get a copy of Jason DeParle's new book "American Dream: Three Women, Ten Kids, and a Nation's Drive to End Welfare" (Viking, 2004). He tells the story of Angie, Opal, and Jewell, and how they and their children have struggled with Welfare Reform over the past decade. The reason that Angie is picking stocks in the middle of the night is that she has finally qualified for a 401K, three years after leaving the welfare rolls. She may have empty cupboards, but she is determined to invest in computers.

This is no dry textbook for policy wonks. Instead, it's a book of stories that jump off the page with conflict and color and life. It takes you from the plantations of Mississippi to the crack houses of Milwaukee, and explores the ways that race, poverty, family ties, and government policies have shaped the America we know today. You'll appreciate its insights into the nature of our society, but also its wealth of touching, tragic and even amusing narratives. In fact, the human-interest stories alone should earn it a place on every preacher's bookshelf.

"Blessed are you who are poor," says Jesus in the sermon on the plain (Luke 6:20). But who are the poor? Do we really know them? Jason DeParle does, and he brings them to life in aching detail. Angie and Jewell work when their lives seem to be packed full of barriers to work. They work when they don't have enough food or sleep, and they keep working through ulcers and depression and back pain. With little education, experience or encouragement, they keep on working. If the deprivation of the ghetto runs deeper than typically imagined, writes DeParle, resilience runs equally deep.

We need to get to know these women, because Jesus spent his ministry reaching out to the least and the lost of his day. He is the Good Shepherd who leaves 99 sheep to find the one that is in danger (see this issue's installment on Luke 15:1-10). Jesus is the welfare worker who turns away from the dozens who are doing well to go after Opal, the one who is unable to find a home, complete a treatment program, or pass drug tests. Unless we are going after Opal, we are not following Jesus.

This book does not push a program or advance an agenda. Instead, it gives us a window on a world we rarely see, and draws us into the lives of people that would have been at the center of Christ's concern. Jason DeParle has spent years covering social policy for The New York Times, so he certainly knows his beat. In addition, he's been a friend for almost 25 years, so I can vouch for his honesty and integrity.

This book may give you some new ideas about the American Dream. It will certainly provide you with stories that will bring your preaching to life. But most importantly, it will expand your understanding of the Kingdom of God, that place where the Good Shepherd calls us together and says, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost."

That's the Dream we need to define.

—Henry Brinton
hbrinton@HomileticsOnline.com