

Walter Bruggemann, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Fortress, 2008), 224 pages, \$35.

In *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word*, Walter Bruggemann delivers a trumpet blast, saying that we have a *preaching emergency* in the church—more than a malaise, more than a temporary problem to be calmly discussed, more than a recruitment issue. We are faced with a heated, urgent, confrontational call to action—a *homiletical emergency*. The risk for preachers lies in forgetting what we are preachers for. The eleven chapters of the book collect essays from a variety of journals and lectures addressing what we preachers are for, namely, to invite people to embrace the just and militant word. That word presents an alternative way of life that challenges the culture and the conventional wisdom of the congregation with the promise of rescue and newness given by the God of the Exodus, the God of Good Friday crucifixion and Sunday resurrection.

The subtitle of Bruggemann's book, *Preaching a Decentering Word*, needs further comment because it is so central in his essays, lectures, sermons, and prayers. Chapter ten, "Preaching a Sub-Version," names the theme that runs throughout his work—there readers will frequently encounter words like "odd" and "oddity." The words occur prominently in the scandal of particularity; in the election of Israel and incarnation of Jesus, it is always the particular, always at odds with the culture. Whether we are Jews or Christians, we are always the odd people out. And for good

reason: being in the presence of the Holy One, or being with Jesus, we are transformed and therefore different. We have been “decentered” by the presence of the word as an alternative script. Jews have signs of oddity: Sabbath, kosher, circumcision, Torah. As Christians we have signs of oddity: the announcement of new life, “the bread of brokenness, the wine of blessedness, and the neighbor—always the neighbor as a signal of the love of God.” This oddity of text and sign are the sources of decentering.

Another word in Bruggemann’s vocabulary is “imagination,” a word he uses to describe this oddity. In chapter one, “Preaching as Reimagination,” he claims, “the great pastoral fact among us that troubles everyone, liberal or conservative, is that the old givens of white, male, Western colonial advantage no longer hold.” One senses in the political scene today that things are out of control. But for Bruggemann, this is the hour of opportunity.

It is my conviction that neither old liberal ideologies nor old conservative certitudes nor critical claims made for the Bible will now do. Our circumstance permits and requires preachers to do something we have not been permitted or required to do before. Ours is an awesome opportunity: to see whether this text, with all of our interpretive inclinations, can voice and offer reality in a redescribed way that is credible and evocative of a new humanness, rooted in holiness and practiced in neighborliness.

I invite you to read Bruggemann’s sermons and prayers to see how he is a practitioner of the pastoral task. For his sermons see *Inscribing the Text*, and for his prayers see *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth*.

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