

FOREWORD

ON THE WALL OUTSIDE the door of my study at the Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago hangs a framed objet d'art that I see every morning when I arrive at work. What it depicts is not clear at first. There are arrows, streaking lines made with a black Magic Marker, and three prominent phrases—*Orientation, Disorientation, New Orientation*—connected by arrows and underlined several times. Directly beneath these are four more words: *suffering, hope, lament, doubt*. Arrows connect these words and lead to another series of words, at an angle in the bottom corner under the heading *Hymns: crucifixion, resurrection, baptism, dying*. Several asterisks, stars, and exclamation points appear in the margins. The diagram exudes energy and passion, almost electrically charged. It is a single page of Walter Brueggemann's lecture notes on newsprint. Walter was visiting our congregation to preach and lecture and someone had the creative imagination to capture a page of his scribbling, have it framed, and present it to me as a gift.

I like it a lot. It reminds me of the man, his energy, his passion for truth-telling, and his extraordinary and accessible biblical scholarship. These are the sources of his fearless commitment to social justice, his love for the theological tradition and its ageless themes of sin, grace, forgiveness, and restoration, and most remarkably, his confidence in the church as the place where transformative good news is proclaimed and heard. On occasion, academics have been known to be dismissive of the church—"institutional religion"—as irrelevant, hopelessly mundane, and sometimes toxic. Not Walter Brueggemann. In the pages that follow, and consistently throughout his scholarly work, there is a wise sensitivity to the realities of the church and an effort to

be helpful, to make common cause with those of us who presume to stand in pulpits on Sunday morning and say something faithful. I am grateful to him and for him, and I smile every morning as his energetic scribbling helps me launch another day of ministry.

I was honored to be invited by Walter to write a foreword for *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*. I assumed I could fulfill my assignment by skimming the manuscript and thinking of a few nice things to say about the book and author. The fact is, however, that the book grabbed my attention and I couldn't stop reading it, underlining, and writing notes in the margin. This is a very good book. I wish I had read it years ago as I made fumbling and now embarrassing attempts to be a "prophetic preacher." I was so sure of myself: so sure that by scolding my congregation—all of whose members were as old as my parents and grandparents—they would see the righteousness of my words and become less racist, less sexist, less classist, and so on. I wish I had had the opportunity to hear a wise scholar/pastor point out, as Walter does here, that the great prophets of Israel only rarely addressed specific social issues and generally were not advocates for particular causes, as is the case with much liberal prophetic preaching today. They could, on occasion, be stunningly specific: one thinks of rigged scales in the market place. But more often, Walter explains, the prophets "aim beyond and beneath specific issues to the underlying governance of YHWH and the profound way in which Jerusalem must come to terms with that governance" (p. 60). I could have used that information when, in the first year of my ordained ministry, I charged into a controversial social and political issue—in that instance, whether the town should build a system to bring lake water to the community rather than relying on the iron-laced water from the town well—and took a side, in the process irritating quite a few members of the congregation and the community and losing a few members whom the congregation could not afford to lose—all over lake water. I thought I was being a prophetic minister.

I wish I had read Walter Brueggemann explain that "the prophetic is not, contrary to some conservative views, a matter of prediction. Nor is it, contrary to some liberal views, a nagging or a scolding or righteous indignation about social justice" (p. 132).

Looking back now, when the congregation and I got it right—as when we opened our new building for a day school for the children of migrant workers who came to northwest Indiana to work in the fields during the summer—it was not because I had scolded them but because they heard a biblical mandate to love neighbors and to stand with the poor. In Walter's image, the people allowed the preacher to help them root themselves, "embed" themselves in the text and in the prophetic tradition. They did something that would have

been unimaginable before—they opened their new building to the children of strangers.

If it is not nagging, scolding, or self-righteous pontificating, what exactly *is* prophetic preaching? Brueggemann says, and uses this as the fundamental theme of the book, that prophetic preaching is “a sustained effort to imagine the world as though YHWH were a real character and the defining agent in the life of the world” (p. 132).

True prophetic preaching is witness, affirmation, proclamation that God is, that God reigns, and that God does not abandon or forget. It is, simply, publicly articulated belief in God. The current climate for this public articulation is ambiguous at best. On the one hand, there are the purveyors of the prosperity gospel who claim, apparently without much concentrated time reading the Bible, that God will bless those who believe fervently enough with this world’s goods, wealth, health, and success. On the other hand are the neo-atheists who sell a lot of books claiming that the whole religion project is anti-scientific, unreasonable nonsense, if it is not positively lethal. There is no God, they insist, and the sooner we acknowledge that, the better off we will be. And multitudes of others—even if they do not go so far as to buy the neo-atheists’ books or gather under their banner—are nevertheless their acolytes when they simply act as if there were no god; they are implicit atheists. In the prevalent American predilection for an “irrelevant transcendence” and a “cozy immanence” Brueggemann perceives the pet gods of our culture.

Walter Brueggemann has taught us, over the years, to be careful not to circumscribe God. He has reminded us that God cannot be contained in human thought and rhetoric, even theological thought and rhetoric. He instructed us to be modest when speaking about God. He models the lesson himself by declining to translate into English the Hebrew construct *YHWH*, which designates the Holy One, the “I Am Who I Will Be” of Israel. Walter’s honest, eloquent, and powerful prayers in *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth* reflect that appropriate theological humility by not using other prayerful modes of address that are so commonly and thoughtlessly used.

The prophetic tradition, on the other hand, proclaims a God who is an active agent, who is manifestly present in the life of the world and is always up to the business of creating newness. “I am about to do a new thing; do you not perceive it?” (Isa. 43:19). It is precisely when we take the world seriously that the prophetic tradition becomes critical and complex—and urgent. Not unlike former St. Louis Cardinal pitcher Bob Gibson’s fastball, says Brueggemann, a devout and long-standing partisan of the Cardinals. “Of such pitches, the commentators say that they ‘pop,’ they ‘move,’ they ‘surge,’ they surprise, they overwhelm” (p. 25).

The future preacher will live in a world different from our own, in a culture rapidly changing in front of our eyes, and for those of us who are at home in the United States, in a nation that has sustained very significant loss. At the moment the U.S. economy is in shambles, a credit crisis narrowly averted but not addressed. The future will be one in which the United States will not likely be the sole economic super power and the model to which the rest of the world aspires. Brueggemann underscores several times the reality that continues to shock Americans, that a strong military cannot always have its way in the world and that our refusal to invest in education almost guarantees that our favorite narratives of technological self-sufficiency will not long hold. We live, Brueggemann says, in an “ocean of anxiety” (p. 18).

The most significant change looming over everything else is what happened on September 11, 2001. On that day, Brueggemann points out, we Americans lost more than buildings and almost three thousand lives, tragic as that was. We also lost our sense of invulnerability. And nothing our government has done since, including two wars and an intensive, tedious, and invasive security system at our airports, has made us feel safe.

Those are new realities for the next generation of preachers to confront. Brueggemann uses the categories of denial and despair to describe it. Nostalgia for the world we lost is palpable: the ritual singing of “God Bless America” is, Brueggemann says, a plea to give us back the world we have lost.

Far better and more helpful is to read Scripture. The Bible knows a lot about loss, lament, and grief. Brueggemann’s treatment of the eighth-century prophets—that extraordinary sequence of Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah of Jerusalem, who called Israel back to covenantal faithfulness—and the sixth-century prophets of Second Isaiah and Jeremiah, and the Psalm writers, who deal with the crushing loss of Jerusalem, is the most helpful thing I have ever read about these topics.

Many in Israel could not imagine a world without Jerusalem, the Temple, or the Davidic monarchy. The events of destruction, exile, and discontinuity were more devastating than anyone could imagine. Prophets deal with loss, prophetic narrative hovers over our loss and grief. And here Brueggemann becomes pastorally helpful to the reader.

Our culture is inclined to hurry past loss and grief, to rush too quickly to resolution. “Everything will be all right,” we assure ourselves, when everything is not at all right. The best and most sensitive of us know this in our preaching and pastoral care. But no one is immune to the deep inclination to “get over it” and move on. The prophets know about loss and grief, and Brueggemann supplies a wealth of textural material to illustrate.

As I write this, I am also planning a memorial service, something we pastors regularly do. A bright, lively, articulate, funny young woman, thirty-seven years old, has died. She was an officer in the congregation with many friends. Two years ago she was diagnosed with brain cancer. Her journey was not untypical: radiation, chemotherapy, remission, then more radiation and chemotherapy, a gradual weakening as the disease spread; and we, her minister and friends, watched and prayed for and with her. She died this week; and it would not honor her or her friends to hurry past her dying too quickly. The Bible, the prophets, know about loss and the importance of dwelling with it.

Walter Brueggemann reminds that there is always also a movement toward hope. It is not an add-on: hope is not a belated afterthought. Hope is “intrinsic to the prophetic message” (p. 111). The great prophetic themes of destruction and restoration are reenacted in the central Christian themes of crucifixion and resurrection. God, the prophets imagine, is always doing a new thing, creating a way where there is no way, bringing life out of death, light out of very real darkness.

At the memorial service for my young friend, I will read gratefully the words of the prophet:

The LORD is the everlasting God,

 He does not faint or grow weary;

 those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
 they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
 they shall run and not be weary,
 they shall walk and not faint. (Isa. 40:28b, 30, 31)

The practice of prophetic imagination is, this good book reminds us, a decision to believe and trust that God reigns. It is to imagine the world as God intends it and as God works to bring it about. It is never to deny or hurry past loss and grief. It is to remember—always—that “weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning” (Ps. 30:5b).

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