

One New Book for the Preacher

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Walter Brueggemann, *Preaching from the Old Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019).

A story is told about a grumpy couple having dinner at a restaurant. One complains, “This food is terrible. It’s barely edible.” The other responds, “Yes, and such small portions.”

When I am feeling grumpy myself, that story captures what I think of preaching from the Old Testament from most Christian pulpits—it is not done very often and, when it is, it is not done very well. In my experience, a slim minority of sermons from Christian preachers is based on Old Testament texts. If the top twenty Old Testament warhorses (texts such as Ecclesiastes 3:1-8 or Amos 5:21-24) were sent out to pasture, the frequency of preaching from the Old Testament would shrink even further and dramatically.

At the same time, sermons from the Old Testament I hear often lack theological sophistication or nuance. Such sermons fail to take up Old Testament texts on their own terms. Some reflect what might be called the “two God theory”—the old canard that the God of the Old Testament is a God of judgment, while the God of the New Testament is a God of grace. In this and other ways, Christian preaching can lapse into a form of supersessionism.

Then, to paraphrase Walter Brueggemann’s paraphrase of Walt Whitman, “Finally comes Walter Brueggemann.” His new book, *Preaching from the Old Testament*, draws on a lifetime of scholarship and commitment to preaching in a way that offers Christian preachers an opportunity to deepen their engagement with the Old Testament.

No one is better qualified for this task. As Rolf Jacobson asserts in the first sentence of his foreword, “There has been no greater Old Testament theologian in the last half century than Walter Brueggemann.” That is neither flattery nor hyperbole. *The Prophetic Imagination*, one of Brueggemann’s seminal works, was published forty-two years ago and practically every year since has seen the publication of another Brueggemann volume, each one marked by his stunning acuity.

For all of his importance as an Old Testament scholar, Brueggemann is further qualified to take on this particular task because he has always lived and worked between the guild and the church. What Brueggemann has written in his dedication to Ellen Davis could be applied to him just as aptly: His critical work has been “fully in the service of the community of faith.”

Still further, Brueggemann is both a student of preaching and a masterful preacher himself, who acknowledges “the cruciality of preaching for the life, faithfulness, and well-being of the church.” Even without such affirmations, we would know from reading the three volumes of *The Collected Sermons of Walter Brueggemann* that he sees the work of the preacher as both essential and urgent. His brilliant Beecher Lectures on preaching and the published volume that followed, *Finally Comes the*

Poet, would provide further evidence, in the unlikely event it were needed.

Brueggemann's new book draws on both his Old Testament scholarship and his understanding of preaching to explore the intersection of the two. He begins with the recognition that "the Old Testament is perennially, at the same time, a rich resource and a complex challenge for the Christian preacher," but goes on to affirm that it is "worth the effort." The rest of the book backs up his claim by tracing ways in which the Old Testament texts make "connections to our contemporary faith challenges that are myriad, rich, and suggestive."

Brueggemann makes quick work of refuting the notion that a Christian sermon must make direct Christological connections when it is based on an Old Testament text. His dismissal of that notion is based on two counts. For one, the sermon does not stand alone. It is embedded in a liturgy that will, in its own way, point to the work of Christ and offer affirmations of the Trinity. At the same time, there is indeed one God, so it is "sufficient to let the good news take the form of witness to the God of the text," wherever that text is situated.

The Old Testament is not a single work, of course. It is comprised of diverse works representing different genres. Reflecting this diversity, Brueggemann considers the preaching task as it relates to five genres, devoting a chapter to each: Genesis, The Tale of Moses, the Prophets, the Psalms, the Wisdom Traditions. Each genre tells a different part of the story of God's complex love affair with humanity in a distinctive way. Obviously, if the Bible is a library, one needs to approach it as one would any other library by being clear what kind of book one has taken off the shelf. To pick an obvious example, we will read a book of history in a different way than we will read a volume of poetry. Being clear about which genre a particular text represents is the first task of interpretation. By organizing his book around the distinctive approaches to preaching appropriate to each genre, Brueggemann helps the preacher add texture to the interpretive task.

There are common themes among the genres, however, in the texts themselves and in Brueggemann's interpretation of them. Each genre exhibits a distinctive way of tracing the plot of the divine and human drama. In Genesis, for instance, the plot reflected in the text is one of humanity being cursed, followed by the promise of blessing. In a similar manner, one of the tasks of the prophets is to offer both judgment and promise, to expose an "illusion of chosenness," so that the people might receive the poetic word that offers hope. How such themes are played out in each genre is not easily summarized, so I will not attempt it here. But Brueggemann's interpretation makes clear that although there are many books and different genres that must be read on their own terms, ultimately it is a single story that is told—the story of God refusing to take the human "no" for an answer, of a God who insists on having the last word.

The chapter on "Preaching from the Psalms" deserves special attention, both in its own right and because the subject of that chapter is also the theme for this edition of *Journal for Preachers*. Brueggemann begins with the helpful reminder that the Psalms are human speech: "They are fully from the human side of the great dialogue of faith, and they are properly an articulation of anthropology (the nature of the human) as distinct from theology (the nature of God). As long as preaching is understood, even in an inchoate way, as "top down" revelatory disclosure of God, the Psalms will not do." Nevertheless, as Calvin asserted, one can start from either

the human or the divine and come to the truth of the gospel. Or, as Brueggemann puts it, “The Psalter is all human speech. It turns out, however, that this human speech is made possible—and serious and urgent—because of the one to whom it is addressed.”

The Psalms are of value to us precisely because they are so inescapably human, reflective of the human condition in ways in which we can recognize ourselves. The full range of human experiences and human emotions is in full display. As Brueggemann summarizes, “The Psalms probe and voice authentic emotional extremity” before God. This is not the voyeuristic “tell all” of a therapeutic culture. Further, the attestation of emotional extremity found in the Psalms is not a whispered word or private property. Rather, these expressions are a shared experience and find their true home in community and before God.

The value of the Psalms for the preacher is that they trace the range of human experiences—not just of the psalmist, but of the person in the pew—and place those experiences within the divine story. It is an exercise in reimagination—another of Brueggemann’s favorite themes.

Brueggemann employs various ways to describe the plot of human and divine drama as presented in the Psalms, including the typology that he introduced in his 1984 book, *The Message of the Psalms*: orientation, disorientation, new orientation.

Another of Brueggemann’s descriptions of the plot-line I found particularly helpful moves from the *trouble*, to the *petition*, to the *rescue*, to the *response of gratitude*. Some psalms (such as Psalms 30 and 116) reflect this plot quite exactly. Other psalms articulate only one stage of the plot, or a few of the stages, which is why the Psalms must be read canonically. It is only when we consider the entire Psalter that we get the full story.

Near the conclusion of this chapter, Brueggemann affirms: “We shall finish, it is promised, with Charles Wesley, ‘Lost in wonder, love, and praise.’ But the process that will end in praise is risky. It is a move through pain, brutality, and absence.” He goes on to offer a few examples of how the Psalms can help members of a congregation situate their own stories within the divine story: “This is the life of a woman in my congregation who lost her daughter and has found new life in presiding over shelter for homeless persons. This is the life of a guy in my congregation who every week sends a sermon summary to his grandchildren; he still thinks it is all working! This is the life of an old guy in our congregation who is alienated from his older son and lives in hope.”

Brueggemann goes on to give other examples, but they are more evocative than exhaustive. I found myself adding to the list in my own mind, based on my own experience and the experience of those I know. When prompted by the Psalms, there is no end to such examples that come to mind. Further, a preacher who brings the breadth and depth of human experience to speech will be able, through to Psalms, to situate the listener’s experience within the divine story in a way that reflects the pattern of the Psalms: orientation, disorientation, and, finally, new orientation.

Reading this book made me eager once again to preach from the psalms. It convinced me that the Psalms can both articulate and address the human condition in a unique way that can be transformative. It may be human speech, but it can be used for divine ends.

In his preface to the book, Brueggemann expresses gratitude “for this publication at the end of my work.” Of course, we hope that this is not the literal end of his work. I, for one, would love to find room on my bookshelf for new volumes because I always learn a great deal from any book from his pen. But it is also true that this little book has the feel of a valedictory. One hopes it is not a final blessing, but a blessing it is.