

Walter Brueggemann. *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012. 176 pages. \$25.

The young woman sat at the end of the table surrounded by a room full of examiners who were assessing her readiness for ordination. This particular interview team was tasked with discerning her theology and practice of preaching. This aspiring pastor had soaring rhetorical gifts and a solidly grounded theology of preaching, and the interview was moving along well. From the end of the table came one last question: “Can you tell us your perspective on prophetic preaching?” Just as she prepared her answer, the interviewer followed up: “You know, how does the pastor speak truth to power and address contemporary social issues from the pulpit?” After a longer, prayerful pause, the young preacher responded tentatively, “Maybe our role is to preach the text and invite people to allow the Holy Spirit to enliven God’s word to convict and convince people how to respond.”

This young preacher’s thoughtful response strikes at the heart of Walter Brueggemann’s thesis in *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination*. In a profoundly thoughtful, yet deeply practical manner, Brueggemann offers preachers in congregational settings a “realistic” way to bring prophetic preaching to life in myriad contemporary contexts. Rather than focusing on the preacher as prophet, he looks to the biblical prophetic texts to serve as the grounding source for prophetic preaching, offering “inescapable side glances at contemporary issues” (1). This calls forth, according to Brueggemann, a “prophetic imagination” that views the contemporary context as though the Triune God “were a real character and an effective agent in the world” (2). Prophetic proclamation, in Brueggemann’s view, involves the imagination of an alternative narrative in which YHWH, not humankind, was the “deciding character and key agent in the historical-cosmic process.” He clearly articulates that this narrative, rooted in the “truth-telling” discovered through the prophetic biblical voices of Amos, Micah, Zephania, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others, stands over/against the contemporary Western narrative rooted in self-invention, competitive productivity, and self-sufficiency.

As a work of biblical scholarship, Brueggemann masterfully traces the “remembered imagination” at work in biblical doxologies of creation, ancestral narratives of new birth, exodus deliverance, and the Sinai covenant, which gives rise to the prophetic themes of loss, relinquishment, and new life. More importantly for this work, in my view, is the practical theological guidance for contemporary preachers seeking to speak a prophetic word while avoiding the false understandings of the prophet as predictor of the future or as one who calls forth social activism to enact social justice. Specifically, rather than attempting predictions at the future or moralizing towards action, the prophetic preacher invites congregations and communities to live in the tension between the “presumed world” or “dominant narrative” of the contemporary context that is always totalizing and silencing any opposition and the “alternative” or “proposed world” imagined and re-imagined in the biblical narrative.

Prophetic preaching is effective when it moves people through what Brueggemann calls the “human process of loss-grief-new possibility.” When congregations and communities are called up short, becoming aware that YHWH, not themselves, is the grand actor in the human narrative, and they are empowered to grieve that loss of control, then they are able to imagine alongside, and with the assistance of, the preacher a new possibility as they wait in hope for God’s new future.

As always, Dr. Brueggemann artfully weaves solid biblical interpretation into the contemporary cultural and ecclesiastical milieu, providing contemporary preachers with the

guiding principles for developing a prophetic voice in the pulpit. While some will look for more down-to-earth practicality guiding the preacher in the regular task of sermon writing, I value the thorough development of a prophetic pastoral imagination that can cross the divides of differing ecclesial and cultural contexts. In the end, he delivers on that which he set out to accomplish—namely, to lead preachers into a deeper encounter with the biblical text in order to enliven their preaching and call forth a prophetic imagination from both pastor and parishioner.

Drew A. Dyson, Clinton United Methodist Church, Clinton, NJ