

Walter Brueggemann. *Preaching from the Old Testament*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019. 196 pages. \$13.82.

This volume serves as the inaugural book in a new series entitled *Working Preacher Books*. Walter Brueggemann looks at larger units of material that represent genres from the Old Testament including Torah, Prophets, Psalms, and Wisdom. He explores these genres as texts without imposing systematic categories on them, and primarily with the preacher in mind.

The book contains five chapters. Chapter 1 is “Preaching from the Torah: Genesis.” To help the preacher, Brueggemann reads Genesis in light of Israel’s time under the Persian empire, an empire that was concerned with absorbing Jewish identity into its culture. Torah was the counter to that imperial effort. Brueggemann helps preachers see a contemporary analogy in the market ideology of our culture. Genesis 3–11 is about “distorted desires” upon which a consumer economy depends (18). This distorted desire leads to all kinds of violence. God’s community, however, is called to resist the imperial culture of the time. Therefore, God calls the community to serve as “carriers of blessing,” a theme developed in Genesis 12–50 (29). Ironically, the blessing is carried by some of the most dysfunctional families around. God, however, has always used the lowly, the weak, and the dysfunctional to carry forth the blessing.

In chapter 2, “Preaching from the Torah: The Tale of Moses,” Brueggemann identifies a series of events that work together to interrupt the “totalic” empire of Pharaoh. These interruptions include: 1) the midwives’ nonviolent interruption (Exod 1); 2) Moses’s violent interruption (Exod 2); 3) the outcry of the slave community to evoke Yahweh to action (Exod 2:23–25); 4) Yahweh confronting Moses at the burning bush (Exod 3:7–9); and 5) the mobilization of the slave community “to act out divine resolve” (50).

In chapter 3 Brueggemann turns attention to “Preaching from the Prophets.” He emphasizes that preachers are not cast in the role of a prophet when they preach from this genre. Rather, “when we face a prophetic text, we face a *text*, not a *role*” (71). Preachers are interpreters of texts, not imitators of prophets (71). Brueggemann identifies a theme that these prophetic texts stress. It is that the controlling regimes work at silencing dissenting voices in order to continue maintaining control. But prophetic voices break that silence in order to reveal injustices. Brueggemann identifies four dimensions of prophetic utterances that serve as guidelines for what preachers do today. First, prophets and preachers are deeply rooted in the exodus-Sinai narrative and the ten counter rules to Pharaoh’s agenda. Second, they are motivated by a “deep sense of personal urgency,” a moral urgency (80). Third, preachers engage in “acute social analysis.” They identify the systemic greed and the injustices it produces. Fourth, preachers, like the prophets, are word managers, poets. Prophetic preaching does not need to be confrontational. Rather it invites individuals into a new reality.

Chapter 4 turns to “Preaching from the Psalms.” Brueggemann identifies the emotional extremity of the psalms from the laments to the praises. Praise psalms overflow with self-abandoning gratitude. Laments protest the hurts, the isolation, and the suffering. These emotions fall in between two poles in our culture. On the one hand is the therapeutic culture which is a “tell all” culture: no discipline or restraint to process the hurt. On the other hand, the technology culture is all about control, total restraint, and denial (113). This is the dysfunctional bipolar culture in which we live.

The emotional extremity in the psalms gives preachers the obligation to proclaim to faith communities the need to take “responsibility for one’s extremity and at the same time entrusting

that extremity to the community in a way that does not withhold one's self from the neighbor" (114). Brueggemann continues, "Any particular psalm is an exercise in extremity, but it is before God, it is in a stylized, disciplined way to which attention must be paid, and it is in a framed, shaped tradition" (117). That is, it is shaped by a community that puts them alongside other psalms, which sang and prayed and taught them.

With chapter 5, "Preaching from the Wisdom Traditions," Brueggemann offers imaginative insights for preaching from Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and Job. Proverbs emphasizes the significance of ordinary life. It "aims at character formation for the community of faith" that goes contrary to the dominant culture (152). He suggests Job is organized around the movement from orientation to disorientation and to new orientation. Or, as one of his students suggested, around the sequence of the Wizard of Oz: Kansas (Job 1–2), Oz (Job 3–41), and Kansas (Job 42).

Brueggemann describes the community to whom Qoheleth writes as a "world-weary" community. In the face of exhaustion, perplexity, and weariness, Brueggemann suggest that Qoheleth still believes the community has fundamental responsibilities. Preachers today are to proclaim these responsibilities to fatigued and confused congregants: we still have moral responsibility, thus the battery of better-than sayings; we still can be joyful, thus the appeal to enjoy food, drink, work, and family; and we still fear God and keep God's commandments.

As Brueggemann works his way through each of the genres, he consistently shows how the events and ideas in the text parallel the tasks and responsibilities of the preacher. He points out how the narrative or the text parallels current scenarios, events, and issues. This volume is a rich resource for preachers. It is also a valuable resource for those who are interested in teaching students how to preach from Old Testament texts.

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