

Walter Brueggemann. *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020. 80 pages. \$14.

In *Virus as a Summons to Faith*, Brueggemann invites us to see COVID-19 as a summons to the renewed and reflective practice of prophetic imagination and lamentation. For Brueggemann, COVID-19, despite its unusualness, is not strange to the biblical faith. He argues that the devastations caused by COVID-19 reflect the same plague summons that all prophets in the Bible hear in the midst of calamity. Drawing on biblical verses, Brueggemann brings forth deep biblical wisdom to provide helpful guidance to face the current virus crisis.

This volume consists of short seven chapters. The first three chapters explore the nature of God. The next two chapters deal with Christian relationship with God through prayer, and the final two chapters call for a new Christian imagination amid the virus. The theological themes in each chapter are closely related to each other. Brueggemann does not provide scientific and medical approaches to the pandemic, but as a Christian scholar he focuses on how one should rightly understand the nature of God in the context of the pandemic.

Brueggemann opens up the volume by exploring the kind of God in whom we believe in the context of the pandemic. He uses mercy or kindness (*hesed* in Hebrew) to define the nature of God and God's tenacious covenant with humans. The author employs Leviticus, Exodus, and Job narratives as the biblical sources for God's tenacious covenant with God's people. Central to Brueggemann's understanding of God is a merciful God whose presence amid disaster is dynamic. God is not just up in heaven without being present with people on the earth. Brueggemann's understanding of God's tenacious solidarity with God's people serves as a motivating power for Christian hope and action in the face of the virus (1–20). Interestingly, Brueggemann's understanding of God is similar to Jewish theologian Abraham Heschel and German Christian theologian Jürgen Moltmann in their understanding of the God of *pathos*—the God who shares an active suffering and tenacious solidarity with God's people.

After exploring the nature of God's tenacious relationship with humans in general, Brueggemann discusses the task of a Christian's ontological relationship with God through prayer. This is the central theme of his book, which sees the “virus as a summons to faith.” Readers will find the chapter on prayer and faith amid the virus especially helpful for their spiritual journey as a personal practice, and as a communal practice. Brueggemann sees prayer as a primary way Christians can deepen covenantal attentiveness. Through prayer, Christians grow in finding truth in God, and in their awareness of God's comfort and compassion amid the virus. Brueggemann emphasizes that the goal of prayer is not that a given request be granted, but rather that a covenantal relationship of lamentation is enacted. Building on Psalm 77, he argues that prayer is not simply a devotional act, but is the self's total reliance on God's love amid the virus (35–46).

Brueggemann's concluding two chapters address a summons to a new future. The virus has caused problems for people in different ways. While many elderly and more vulnerable people of all races are afflicted with and oppressed by the virus, some (but not all) people of color, especially of Asian descent, have been discriminated against and marginalized. In these chapters, Brueggemann's meditation on Isaiah 43:18–19 takes us to the heart of imagining a new future. Brueggemann teaches us that the God of love and justice “may be amid this crisis to do the hard work of checking arrogance and curbing hubris” (57). He invites us to see the virus not as the last word, but as a *kairos* for imagining God doing new things among us. Brueggemann teaches us that we are not passively imagining God doing new things without participating in

God's act of the new thing, but he reminds us that our covenant with God summons us to do the twin moral habits of what he famously called "prophetic imagination"—a term he coined some 40 years ago.

Brueggemann urges that we are to lament and grieve with those afflicted with the virus and those groaning over losing their loved ones. He also encourages us to criticize forms of social injustice and racial discrimination happening amid and in relation to the virus. To criticize injustice means to expose sheer lies and to speak the truth—there is no hope of a new future without telling the truth. Hope is rooted in God's promise of a new future, and truth is to be told in order to see a feasible justice.

In short, this is classic Brueggemann—a prolific scholar, public intellectual, and churchman of prophetic imagination. His writing is accessible to both scholars and lay Christians asking questions about God, COVID-19, and Christian responsibilities. To be clear, this is not purely a scholarly book; rather, it is a meditative resource that summons every one of us to renew our covenantal and spiritual relationship with God, and to renew our moral and social responsibilities for hospitable relationships with our neighbors in a time of loss, grief, and uncertainty. Pick up the book, read it, and meditate on it with your families, friends, and the church. If you do, your relationship with God and with your neighbors across religious and racial differences in the contemporary context of the coronavirus crisis will not be the same!

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