

*Finally Comes the Poet*  
By Walter Brueggemann  
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Review by

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Brueggemann has done it again; here is a book about preaching that makes one want to find a pulpit and preach. The Old Testament scholar, who in his many works so effectively breaks open the text, making it appear to be something out of today's newspaper, addresses specifically the task of preaching. But this is not a typical book about preaching; it is an eloquent plea for creative, imaginative, daring preaching; not prosaic, moralistic, angry preaching, but poetic preaching that paints images of another alternative possibility for human life and human community.

The manuscript was prepared and presented as the 1989 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School. Brueggemann not only portrays vividly the preacher as poet, but presents models of interpretation of Old Testament texts that address the contemporary horizon of human experience into which the preacher is called to address the Word of God. In the Preface, Brueggemann writes:

I have sought to address the crisis of interpretation the preacher faces in our culture, what has either dismissed or controlled the text. Preaching as an act of interpretation is in our time demanding, daring, and dangerous. (p. ix)

Perhaps more poignantly than any biblical scholar writing today, Brueggemann brings into collision, in the being of the preacher, the text and the contemporary cultural situation. He contends,

It is increasingly clear that what the text "means" for us is not simply a matter of exegesis, but concerns the larger ideological realities in our society that rob us of our capacity to speak, our capacity to care, and our capacity to notice. Preaching and interpretation, however, exist precisely for such situations. It is the task of preaching to provide a ground and energy for speech, care, and notice. (*Ibid.*)

Brueggemann points to the present cultural situation as a "prose-flattened" world in which the gospel is readily heard and taken for granted as though it contained no

unsettling news and no unwelcome threat; it has been “flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane.” His proposal is the practice of “another way of communication that makes another shaping of life possible.”

The task demands a poet. Brueggemann reacts against our prose world “that is organized in settled formulae, so that even pastoral prayers and love letters sound like memos.” Rather, he calls for the poet whose language “moves like Bob Gibson’s fast ball, that jumps at the right moment.”

The poet/prophet is a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibility in the listening assembly. (p. 4) There are four partners who need to be present in the “speech meeting” so that “the new reality can be birthed,” the text, the baptized, the specific occasion for speech, and this better world given as fresh revelation.

The meeting involves this old text, the spent congregation believing but impoverished, the artist of new possibility, the disclosure ... The newly claimed territory becomes a new home of freedom, justice, peace, and abiding joy. This happens when the poet comes, when the poet speaks, when the preacher comes as poet. (p. 11)

In four chapters Brueggemann addresses the biblical word to the present cultural situation: Numbness and Ache (The Strangeness of Healing), Alienation and Rage (The Odd Invitation to Doxological Communion), Restlessness and Greed (Obedience and Missional Imagination), and Resistance and Relinquishment (A Permit for Freedom). In each chapter rich veins of biblical material are mined and interpreted so that the text powerfully addresses the situation of the baptized community of today. Woven throughout the fresh unwrapping of the biblical text is significant comment on the preacher’s task.

The event of preaching is an event in transformed imagination. Poets, in the moment of preaching, are permitted to perceive and voice the world differently, to dare a new phrase, a new picture, a fresh juxtaposition of matters long known. Poets are authorized to invite a new conversation, with new voices sounded, new hearings possible. The new conversation may end in freedom to trust and courage to relinquish. The new conversation, on which our very lives depend, requires a poet and not a moralist. Because finally church people are like other people; we are not changed by new rules. The deep places in our lives - places of resistance and embrace - are not ultimately reached by instruction. Those places of resistance and embrace are reached only by stories, by images, metaphors, and phrases that live out the world differently, apart from our fear and hurt. The reflection that comes from the poet requires playfulness, imagination, and interpretation. The new conversation allows for ambiguity, probe, and daring hunch. It is only free people, in contexts of trust, who are able to walk close to the scandal, to be seen in its presence, to live by its gifts. (p. 109f)

Brueggemann insists that the preacher does not simply report the old conversation between God and Israel “as though submitting an old verbatim.” Rather, a conversation “now to be imagined, evoked, and shaped in this moment of speaking and hearing” is offered.

For all who are called to preach and teach the word of God, Brueggemann offers a rare combination of rich biblical interpretation, sensitivity to contemporary culture and contagious awe before the preaching event.