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Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation

Walter Brueggemann

Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989

x + 165 pp. \$11.25

After the seas are all cross'd, (as they seem already
cross'd)
After the great captains and engineers have accomplish'd
their work,
After the noble inventors, after the scientists, the
chemist, the geologist, ethnologist,
Finally shall come the poet worthy of that name,
The true son of God shall come singing his songs.

— Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*

For the church, the poet is the preacher. It is time for the poet/preacher/prophet (for the prophet, too, spoke poetically) to come. Surveyors, scientists, inventors, engineers, entrepreneurs, politicians, media whizzes, religious propagandists, etc., have given us knowledge, largely frozen into ideology ("closed, managed, useful truth", 2), and we are a reduced, diminished, and restless society; finally, now, must come the poet—the only one who can construe an alternate world.

The gospel, contends Brueggemann, has been so reduced in our society ("Smile, God loves you", "Washed in the blood", economic and moral values, to mention a few) that people cannot hear it. The profound movement of the gospel (admission of guilt, conviction of God's judgment and anguish, reparation and forgiveness, obedient mission, godly personhood) is likewise reduced, often simply to *feeling* guilt or *feeling* good. As well, human and societal self-understanding has been so reduced that both the grandeur and the misery of humankind is squashed into mediocrity. In a word, the people to whom we preach and the gospel we preach have been reduced to this-worldly realities. There is no transformative power. Finally, then, must come the poet who can make preaching "a poetic construal of an alternative world" (6).

This alternative world as well as the "poetic" words are given us in the biblical texts. Brueggemann examines four crucial dimensions of existence (which are, of course, also theological realities): guilt and healing via texts from Jeremiah, Leviticus, Matthew, and Hebrews (ch. 1); alienation and community via texts from Psalms, Moses' prayers, Jeremiah, Hosea, Job, Isaiah, and Revelations (ch. 2); restlessness and greed and baptismal obedience via the Sabbath-keeping and non-coveting commandments (wonderful tracings of these two commandments through scriptural-historical periods!)

(ch. 3); and human personhood via texts from Daniel on the themes of resistance and relinquishment (ch. 4).

Brueggemann is at his best when he takes up texts, and his textual studies alone are worth the price of the book. The study of Leviticus 6:1-7, for example, is presented "as a model for dealing with the powerful reality of guilt and the more powerful reality of healing" because "the neglected Book of Leviticus is a long study on the good news that God has indeed provided ways through the paralysis of guilt" (23).

It is these studies, of course, which show preachers the way to "daring speech for proclamation" and provide inspiration for it. Against each reduction of God and humanity comes the poet with an alternative vision of God and humanity. "Our lives wait in the balance, hoping, yearning for the promissory, transforming word of the gospel. In the end, all we have is the word of the gospel. There are evidences and signs all around us, however, in the great brutal confrontations of public power and of the weeping hiddenness of hurt in persons, that this odd speech of the gospel matters decisively. We have only the word, but the word will do. It will do because it is true that the poem shakes the empire, that the poem heals and transforms and rescues, that the poem enters like a thief in the night and gives new life, fresh from the word and from nowhere else" (142).

Walter Brueggemann is Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Atlanta, and this book is the 1989 Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale Divinity School.

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Creative Communion: Toward a Spirituality of Work

Joe Holland

New York: Paulist Press, 1985

87 pp.

Dear Joe,

The very nature of your book—an appeal to dialogue and intuitive musings about a spirituality of work—is most welcome at this time and place in human history. Also its very non-triumphalist character calls for a book review in a format that is fitting for an on-going communication concerning the issues with which you are wrestling.

Overall I liked the book. It wrestles with the issue of work that moves qualitatively beyond the pious nonsense that is published about work and