The Collected Sermons of

Walter Brueggemann

Volume 3

Walter Brueggemann

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Foreword

No one who hears Walter Brueggemann preach forgets the first time. He does not interpret a biblical text as much as he inhabits it, speaking from the inside in a way that makes those who are still on the outside wonder whether it is safe to enter. It never is, when he is your guide. You can hear it in the urgency of his voice, turning the volume up high. You can see it in the energy of his body, plowing the air with his hands as he bends over the pulpit so far that his reading glasses seem sure to fly off his face. His listeners often remark that being in his presence is as close as they will ever come to being in the presence of Hosea or Jeremiah, though he is clearly a prophet ignited by both testaments of the Bible. If your heart beats faster when you listen to him, it is because his heart beat faster first. The dangerousness of his preaching comes straight from his firsthand experience of a dangerous gospel, with power to wake a sleep-walking world.

Although you cannot see any of this in a book, you can still hear it. The volume you are holding in your hands is the third in a series of Walter Brueggemann's collected sermons. This might lead you to believe that it contains the husks left over from previous volumes, but you would be wrong. It contains his most recent work, some of it less than a year old at the time of this writing. So what can you learn from a third volume that you might not have learned from the first two?

First, you can get a sense of what "indefatigable" really means. Now in his ninth decade, Brueggemann continues to preach at churches both large and small across the nation. Sometimes the occasion is as grand as the annual Festival of Homiletics, where he speaks to more than a thousand preachers who wish they had half his pop and sizzle. At other times the gathering is as intimate as a memorial service for an old friend. Whatever the setting, a Brueggemann sermon never stays put in its own time zone. Because he is able to inhabit a text rooted in the ancient world while keeping the world of his listeners fully in view, he can articulate the ways in which these are not two worlds, but one. The God who spoke is the God who speaks, to humans who are not as far away from Eden as we may think.

Brueggemann does not convince us of this by taking us back in time, however, so much as he brings Scripture forward to speak to us in ours. This is a second thing you can learn from a third volume of sermons: how an

accomplished preacher never stops hearing the new things an old text can say. There are multiple sermons on the same passage in this volume, but they are not alike. This is because Brueggemann has tended Scripture carefully enough, for long enough, to know how it re-seeds itself in his absence. When he returns to a familiar passage, he expects it to have grown while he was away, and he is not disappointed. There is always something fresh for the preacher who takes time to look—not only at the fertile field of Scripture but also at the world God so loves—and who makes the connections that escape those who are satisfied with what they saw last time.

For this reason, surprising words show up in these sermons. Hosea never mentioned white privilege or gender bias. Jeremiah did not rail against gerrymandering or voter supression. In this collection, Brueggemann cements his reputation as a prophetic preacher by channeling the spirit of God's old agitators into a new tongue. This leads to a third thing you can learn from this volume, though it has been true all along. Brueggemann is always a visitor. Check out the church names at the end of his sermons and you will follow him from Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, to Dauphin Way United Methodist Church in Mobile, to Saint Michael and All Angels Episcopal Church in Dallas. While this reflects his ability to speak meaningfully to a wide variety of people, it is also a good fit for his subject matter. How many resident preachers do you know who can take on regressive tax policy, payday loans, and low minimum wages on one Sunday and tackle torture, surveillance, and militarization of the police on the next?

Even Brueggemann takes a break between sermons like these, but it seems important to note how this prophet stays on the move, paradoxically becoming a pastor to pastors who count on him to say things they would if they thought they could. It would be a great mistake, however, for resident preachers to discount their own gifts in light of his. Better to let him feed the bravest parts of their hearts so that they can hear the revolution in their own surprising words at baptisms, communions, marriages, and funerals.

When I was a younger preacher, I turned to Brueggemann when I needed someone to take a pickaxe to my frozen brain. What more was there to say about Christmas, Easter, or Pentecost? How many more ways were there into the stories of the healing of the ten lepers or the feeding of the five thousand? Familiar language may work brilliantly in Scripture, liturgy, or hymnody, where repetition is key, but when the preacher stands up, listeners are within their rights to hope for something different.

In mainline Protestant churches, at least, this is the part of the service that is not as scripted as the rest. If God has answered the preacher's prayer for a particular word to this particular congregation at this particular time, there is a chance that what he or she says today may never have been said before

or may never be said exactly the same way again. There is also a chance the arrow will miss its mark, which heightens the sense of risk on both sides of the pulpit. As different as their roles may be, the preacher and the congregation share one hope: that the Word of God will come alive for God's people, both to revive and ignite.

Over and over, Brueggemann did that for me so I could aim to do it for others. He broke up the logjam by using fresh language to enable fresh hearing. He shifted my perspective by two degrees, or ten, so that I saw things I had not seen before and could no longer behave as if I hadn't. He reminded me that what I said was only as effective as how I said it and that an eccentric imagination was my best friend.

That is a fourth thing you can learn from this volume, whether you are a professional preacher or someone who does it for free, every time you talk to yourself or anyone else about the startling reality of God. Words matter. Taking a long time with them does not mean that you are uninspired. It means that you love words and know how much power is in them, which is why you are willing to wait for the right ones to come along. Sometimes they will be odd and sometimes they may be dangerous, but those are exactly the kinds of words you want. You want the ones that can wake the ears of those who are sure they have heard it all before.

Brueggemann is a master at this. In one of his three sermons on Jesus' baptism in this volume, the Beloved Son rises from the water as "God's conduit, God's character on earth." While this "newly authorized agent of God" might have expected to be given a throne, he is given "a zone of discomfort" instead, where he is at risk because it is "a dangerous place without normal or visible life support systems" (see p. 32 in "Taking the Plunge"). There are prey-eating beasts in that zone, but there are also "sub-gods who do God's work" (see p. 32) called angels, who protect the Beloved on his way to his new vocation.

Jesus' followers may be tempted to think of baptism as "a bit of holy magic" in which we have our "dirt removed" before returning to business as usual, Brueggemann says, "But it is not that. Baptism is the dispatch of the beloved, for the sake of the gospel, out of our comfort zone into the zone of inconvenience where the risks are greater, where the kingdom of God is making its claims over the empire of evil" (see p. 33). It is about "making a pledge to be fixed on God" (see p. 37).

Listening to Brueggemann speak is like watching Picasso paint a bowl of fruit: it is a complete waste of time to try and copy him. Better to stare at the fruit in front of you long enough to be re-amazed by it, so that you mix your colors in a new way. Better to dwell on a passage of Scripture so long that the dusty velvet curtains rise and you are no longer watching a play but performing your own part in God's story on earth.

That is, after all, what Brueggemann invites his listeners to do over and over again: not to be wowed by his chops but to find our own. "Imagine, and take up your many roles on his gigantic stage!" he says in a sermon on Jesus' healing of the blind beggar Bartimaeus. "Play the one who trusts and cries out, play the one who is healed and follows. Play the one who does the healing and transformation. And notice that we all play, sometimes, the role of silencer. Experiment with the gigantic stage and the awesome script of evangelical surprise" (see p. 266).

Whatever side of the pulpit you are reading this volume from, you and the preacher are reading it from the same place at God's table. The sermon is over. The hymns have been sung, and the prayers have been said. All that is left is to hold out your hands together in the reverberating silence, accepting the abundant gifts of God along with the risks of conveying them into the world, with thanks to the indefatigable Savior who enlivens us all.

Barbara Brown Taylor

Preface

It is certain that sermons are intended to be heard and not read. For that reason a volume of printed sermons must, perforce, begin with an apology or a disclaimer. The sermons printed here were spoken and heard in quite particular contexts. The excuse for publishing them is not very compelling, except that in my old age I have wanted to leave a memory of my witness over time. My hope is that this more "durable" form of these sermons might continue to evoke and nourish faith, for it is unmistakably evident that God has now placed us in a context where faith requires energy, courage, imagination, and boldness. It is my hope that these sermons may, in modest ways, evoke such marks of Christian discipleship and glad obedience.

These sermons are divided into two unequal parts. The large majority of them have been preached in local congregations according to the Common Lectionary. It will be readily noted that they are not evenly distributed over the church year. That is because visiting preachers (as I always am) are much more often welcomed into local congregations in "lesser times" in the church year, hardly ever at Easter and almost never at Advent or Christmas. Thus with one exception, there are here no Advent or Christmas sermons. And even that one exception of an Advent sermon is in fact for a "special occasion," the installation of my friend Tom Rice.

The identification in almost every case of the specific preaching venue may indicate some context. At any rate such locality calls to my mind specific pastors and congregations that have been generous and hospitable to me as a visitor. In such a capacity, I am always aware that the local pastor works away as a preacher on a regular and demanding schedule and does so, for the most part, with uncommon fidelity. Such regular preaching is much more demanding than an occasional sermon such as I do. For that reason these sermons are offered with gratitude to a host of pastors who continue to do the hard wondrous indispensable work of preaching, for there is no doubt that sustained faithful preaching is essential for sustained faithful obedience in the church. Our greatest preachers—among them Chrysostom, Luther, Barth, and Fosdick—have always understood that faithful preaching matters decisively for good faith. Thus I offer these sermons with thanks to those who do that work.

The second brief part of this collection is from "special occasions," which means that I did not follow the lectionary. Foremost among them are several sermons from the Festival of Homiletics where I have preached regularly for many years. My thanks is very great to David Howell and Teri Temple for including me regularly in the Festival, a glorious venue for preaching. Then follow two brief homilies offered at the clergy conference of the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado, and two sermons at Calvary Episcopal Church in Memphis, where sermons happen every day in Lent amid a great pageant of pancakes. It was Doug Bailey who first included me in that peculiar and wondrous program. I prepared two sermons (and preached one) on Martin Luther King Day in Louisville. I did so at St. Stephens Church (Kevin Cosby, pastor) at the behest of my friend Joe Phelps. My final chapter is a memorial for my beloved colleague Lowell Zuck. Speaking alphabetically Lowell was always last on every list, so it seems appropriate that my final words should be in celebration of his faithful life.

I am pleased to dedicate this book of sermons to Will Willimon, a foremost preacher among us. I am glad to salute him for his long-term passion for critical thinking about the shape and practice of the church. Beyond that, I am glad for our long-term comradeship that has been one of mutual reliability, support, and appreciation. Will and I have outlasted almost all our generation of those who have been on the "circuit" of church teachers. And now, alas, he has outlasted me! I have no doubt that when we write the record of recent church history, Will will be featured as a durably important player as critic, leader, and bold practitioner in that history.

I am glad to voice my durable thanks and appreciation to the editorial staff that has seen such work as mine through to publication, notably David Dobson, David Maxwell, and especially Julie Tonini, who accommodates my old-fashioned ways with a manuscript.

Finally, I am aware that preaching does not happen in a vacuum, but always in a community of trust and engagement. This publication, at the end of my work, has given me an opportunity to reflect on the crowd of faithful witnesses that has funded, evoked, supported, and critiqued my preaching work. That company includes my father, August Brueggemann, to whose sermons I listened the most. My first homiletics teachers in seminary were Ernest Nolte and Frederick Schroeder (who gave me my lowest seminary grade in preaching). James Muilenburg taught me the generative power of words. And then came a great company of good friends and colleagues who have called me to do the best work that I could. Pertinent to my growth and savvy has been a variety of liberationist initiatives, most recently post-colonial interpretation. I note with gratitude an instant of exchange with Murray Kenny, then an Episcopal priest in St. Louis where I lived and taught. He chided me gently

for being too much "settled," and said, "Man, you have to get off your pad!" I have been trying since that moment to get off my pad in faithful and generative ways. I finish with bottomless gratitude to that good company that has let me trust that the story of covenantal Israel, for me of course mediated through the person and life of Jesus, is the true story of my life and the true story of the life of the world.

Walter Brueggemann

PART ONE

Sermons for Advent and Epiphany

1

Disciplines Shared in Gratitude

Second Sunday of Advent, Year C

MALACHI 3:1–4
PHILIPPIANS 1:3–11
LUKE 1:68–79; 3:1–6

I can imagine Tom Rice, twenty years from now, writing a letter of farewell as he retires from Worthington Presbyterian Church. That letter will be like the one that Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, the congregation that was dearest to him and that had supported him most fully in his risky ministry as an apostle. Paul's letter might be a model for Tom's letter to you some years from now.

I.

Paul writes: "I thank God every time I remember you." He is grateful to God for that congregation

- because we shared the good news of the gospel,
- because God is doing a good work among you,
- because you hold me in your heart through all my tough times, and
- because I long for you with compassion and I pray for you.

Paul (or Tom) does not focus on the recognition that this congregation was "good to me," but rather that you were a church in faithful mission. What Paul knows and what Tom knows, is that thankfulness is the primary mark of the Christian life. Thankfulness is an acknowledgment that every important benefit to us is a pure gift. So Paul does not report here on his achievements or his missionary accomplishments, but speaks of God's good gifts. Tom will be able in time to come to thank God because God has been at work here doing wondrous things in your midst.

I can imagine that Tom need not wait a long, long time to write that letter. He could write it tomorrow. Because he knows very well that the good stuff in this church will not have started with his arrival. Rather God's spirit has been at work here for a very long time, and God's work has been done here for a very long time before now. Tom, and you with him, is situated in a long memory of faithfulness that evokes gratitude. The existence of the church in this place is nothing to take for granted. It has entailed much faithful work. But finally, it is a gift from God for which thanks to God may be given.

II.

Tom's mandate in his new assignment is as minister of discipleship. He is to provide guidance, leadership, and imaginative programming that more and more the life of this congregation will be as followers of Jesus who do Jesus' work. Paul can write to this congregation, "that your love may overflow more and more." What a mouthful! Love of a self-giving kind is so countercultural in our society of fear and anxiety. It was countercultural in Paul's first century as well, because love of a gospel kind means to get our minds off ourselves and to care about the neighbor who is in front of you that you would otherwise not notice, to get our minds off our own well-being and security and achievement, and be attentive to the structures and practices of justice that make it possible for neighbors far and near to prosper.

Tia and I went to a family wedding recently. The bride and groom are not church people, and the ceremony had a sense of "spiritual but not religious" about it. But like almost every wedding these days, part of 1 Corinthians 13 was read. That reading seems to be a necessity now at every wedding:

> Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. (vv. 4–7)

No doubt as we listened, some had in mind love between bride and groom, recognizing that a good durable marriage requires giving one's self to the other.

But of course Paul is not thinking about love of a couple already in love. He is thinking of the life and work of the church to care for what he calls in 12:7 "the common good." This love, he writes, is "a . . . more excellent way" (12:31), more excellent than the usual ways of greed, anxiety, pettiness, and

all the stuff that turns up, even in the church. When he writes to his favorite congregation, that "your love may overflow more and more," he means a way of being church that is more excellent. This love does not insist on its own way. The performance of God's love as a more excellent way means more excellent than greed, more excellent than self-advancement, more excellent than fear or anxiety, more excellent than our several ideologies that propel us to stubbornness, selfishness, cynicism, despair, or anger.

It is this love to which Jesus calls his disciples. It turns out that the substance of discipleship is not some idea or some creed or some liturgy, or some piety, or some political conviction. Rather it is that the blind may see, that the lame may walk, that the deaf may hear, that lepers may be healed, that the poor may have their debts cancelled. That is what Jesus did with his life, and then he would have his disciples do that same transformative work by the power of the spirit. That work of love cannot be done, as Paul understood, when we are busy with self-advancement, and self-securing, and self-sufficiency, and having our own way. It is no wonder that in giving thanks Paul prays that "your love may overflow more and more."

III.

Such gratitude and such missional love do not happen in a vacuum. The church is always in a context. The Gospel reading for today situates John the Baptist, the carrier of Advent, in his immediate context. The report on his appearance begins this way:

> In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas . . . (Luke 3:1–2)

Luke knows the big players. He names the emperor, Tiberius; he names the governor. He names the high priests who in a cynical deal had purchased the highest priestly office. He knows the entire power structure. He identifies those who had made it to the top of the power heap and the top of the money heap. In the narrative of Luke, this enumeration of powerful people is not innocent reportage. It is rather a recognition of the way in which the dominant values of society have been arranged according to money and power that depend on violence. This list bespeaks a coalition of money and power, a consolidation of greed and a predatory economy that is propelled by fear and anxiety and scarcity, a practice of greed and confiscation that eventuates in

violence against the vulnerable. All of that, moreover, is legitimate according to the law. But it stacks the cards against the needy, the vulnerable, and the powerless.

It takes no imagination to transfer that list of power brokers to our own society, for the headliners of political power, economic leverage, the stars of entertainment and sport spectacle, as a systemic force, embody these same dimensions of predatory greed that are grounded in anxiety and that eventuate in violence against the poor and vulnerable. The power structure of that ancient Roman world that Luke lays out, with its predatory greed, counts on cheap labor and ends in fearful self-protection.

And right in the middle of that, says Luke, "the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness." It is that way with God's word. That word is a disruption. It is demanding. It is displacing. It is summoning. It is scary. It is a truthfulness that exposes the flow of conventional power and contradicts that flow of power with the counterflow of love.

So imagine that contest that Luke sets up: the power structure of fear versus the word of newness, the power structure of greed versus the word of generosity. The power structure of scarcity versus the word of abundance. And we, readers of Luke, are plunged into that contest, always asked to decide. In the short run, we would bet on the power structure of greed, fear, and scarcity, because it has all the visible resources. In the long run, however, in the providence of God, it turns out that Tiberius and Pilate and Herod and Annas and Caiaphas—those whom he names—are very temporary folk. They vanished and never left a track in the sand. But the word that came to John persisted. It is the word become flesh among us. It is the word of life that we know in Easter resurrection. It is the word of fidelity that empowers us beyond ourselves. It is the word of life entrusted to this congregation in the face of an economy of greed and a politics of violence.

IV.

So now you install Tom as "Minister of Discipleship." It is a strange portfolio. It is not a familiar assignment in most congregations. I suspect it is a portfolio because this church and its session, in its wisdom, know that discipleship is not an obvious or easy thing. There was a time, I will bet even in Worthington, when becoming a Christian was "automatic" and we were carried along by habit. But not now! Now there are other attractions. There are "Nones" who when asked about "religious preference" say "None." There are those who say "spiritual but not religious," that often means, "I do not want to be accountable to anyone for anything." In that context, being a disciple of Jesus,

being a part of Christ's church, is a deliberate intentional act that requires sustaining energy and discipline. To have a minister of discipleship means a readiness to undertake the deliberate work of following Jesus in missional obedience when there are other options on offer.

Have you connected Tom's mandate to "discipleship" to the reality of discipline? Imagine a ministry of disciplines, to be schooled in "habits" that make overflowing love possible and reliable in a society that is organized so that love is severely limited to our own kind.

Tom's mandate is to engage the congregation in the disciplines that make discipleship possible, that our love may overflow. I have already pointed to the disciplines of the dominant society of the empire. They are the habits of fear, anxiety, greed, selfishness, and violence. All of these disciplines are rooted in a notion of scarcity. There is not enough to go around. You had better get yours while you can. So the mantra that I heard among frightened folk is, "Let's take our country back." Let's have it the way it used to be when our privilege was beyond challenge. Or I hear, "The country is going to hell," which means I do not like it that I must share with those who feel like a threat to me. These mantras of fear, anxiety, greed, and selfishness are easy and they come at us in many forms.

And now, in the face of such scarcity presided over by Tiberius and Pilate and Herod, comes this minister of discipleship to lead us into discipleship with different disciplines. Advent is a very good time to install a minister of discipleship, for Advent is the season of discipline so that we will be ready for God's new arrival. God's new arrival in Jesus is not a cute, sweet-smelling baby. Jesus arrives as Messiah, challenging the old power arrangements, and saying, "Follow me" into a more excellent way.

So Paul names some of the disciplines so that our love may overflow:

- knowledge: to be critically informed about how it goes in the world. Faith is no excuse for lazy ignorance.
- Insight, a deep reflective awareness of how things work in the world of God, that they do not work the way the dominant ideology of the market wants us to think.
- "Pure and blameless." The phrase means to many folk a focus on sexuality, pure and blameless sex. But in fact it means not to be entrapped in the habits of fear, anxiety, greed, selfishness, and violence that render us unqualified for gospel mission in the world.
- And finally Paul speaks of "*a harvest of righteousness* that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (emphasis added). So imagine a harvest of righteousness concerning discipleship, a harvest of poor people with adequate housing, a harvest of disabled people with full access and participation, a harvest of peace by way of disarmament . . . all the practices that make for well-being.

So now Tom is installed. By this act, this pastor and this congregation agree together to be upstream and against the grain of dominant disciplines, because we are called to a different set of habits in order to follow a different Lord and Savior.

So I imagine that in twenty years or so, Tom will write you a letter saying, "I thank God every time I think of you." And you will write him a letter saying, "Every time we think of you, we give thanks." Such an exchange is not the outcome of a romantic soft friendship. It is rather a recognition that all of us, pastor and congregation, have together been caught up in the big transformative work of the gospel. We have gotten our minds off ourselves, our fears, and our pet projects, to move every day more in the direction of overflowing love. Such love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. I have no doubt that as the Jesus movement practices these disciplines, the entire power structure of Tiberius, Pilate, and Herod tremble, because they know down deep that this is the good wave of the future.

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