Walter Brueggemann

The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word


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The Practice of Prophetic Imagination is classic Brueggemann, designed to encourage and challenge clergy to not only enter the heart of the prophets but to follow their role by challenging listeners to return to YHWH. Those in ministry feel the burden of both caring for people and opposing the systems of power and exploitation that cloud our minds toward viewing YHWH as a loving and compassionate God. However, Brueggemann also reminds listeners that God is just and does not expect to be exploited by the system or the people.

Brueggemann suggests that the exile of both Israel and Judah were an attempt to teach the community that they had not only turned from their God; they had suffered loss. According to Brueggemann, YHWH suffered loss as well. As the nation grieved, so YHWH grieved—not only over the loss of land and home but also of relationship. He writes:

It is, clear, however, that divine judgment is in fact a subset of the overriding reality of loss. Loss, as we all know, admits of no quick resolution. It lingers; and we linger in it. It lingers through the long nights with unrelenting force. And when it does, one has no option but to live with it and hopefully to live through it.
And because loss is the overwhelming reality and divine judgment is a subset of prophetic imagination that seeks to make sense out of loss, I want in this presentation to explore the awareness that divine anger, rejection, and alienation are decisively qualified, in the prophetic horizon, but the working of empathy.

Thus YHWH is imagined as standing alongside Israel in its loss, as though YHWH were helpless to avert the loss, as though the loss were as acutely felt by YHWH as it was felt by Israel. The move of pathos from the lived experience of Israel to the designated experience of YHWH is indeed an act of imagination. (72)

For Brueggemann, God’s loss created a sense of helplessness, sadness, and grief. As the people suffered, so YHWH suffered. The prophet, according to Brueggemann, has the role of communicating that shared loss and grief. While the people of Israel may have resented and resisted admitting their sin, the prophet continued to remind them that they were suffering the consequences of their own sin.

It is also suggested that the prophets had the role of reminding the nation of the “ominous if,” as Brueggemann labels it. The Deuteronomist retold the story of Sinai and the Torah with a reminder that there were conditions to the covenant. “If you obey…” or “If you do not obey…” were reminders for the nation that their exile and loss were consequences of their own sins. God was faithful; they had not been.

Brueggemann also suggests that the nation of Israel needed to reawaken their imagination. A nation suffering from guilt, shame, and punishment needed someone to offer hope. The prophet, he explains, had the role (from YHWH) of inspiring hope and a sense of peace in a system that promised much and delivered little. Israel had promised hope but continued to turn from God. Babylon promised hope but was only God’s servant. For Brueggemann, the prophet was one who reimagined hope for a nation in despair. As YHWH was creator and imaginor in Genesis, so God again can do the same today.

This book targets the minister, preacher, teacher, and leader in a Christian community. For Brueggemann, these roles are highly important for the future of the American churches. He indicates that Americans live in a time that is consumed with “military consumerism.” According to Brueggemann, the American churches suffer as they live in a culture that also promises much and delivers little. Our idea of safety and peace are much like those in Babylon—a world power that promises to take care of us. However, YHWH continues to battle this mindset as Jesus’ people are called to trust in God, not human systems.

The task of the prophet or prophetic preacher is similar to the prophets. First, clergy must communicate and be honest with the deep sense of loss in our country. In a country that
lives in denial, honesty is prophetic and will be resisted. 9/11 is one event that reminds us how vulnerable we are. A society that promises protection has its faults, but God offers peace.

Second, the “if” clause is a reminder to those of us in America that God is still one who requires obedience, faithfulness, and submission. While we strive not to be judgmental or critical of others, the prophetic message does call us to be honest and faithful with a God who is faithful to us.

Finally, Brueggemann calls for prophetic preaching to reawaken the imagination. God creates new life and breathes hope into a people paralyzed by fear and numbed by denial. The prophetic voice offers hope and a new view of the world system we inhabit. This requires courage, justice, and love.

The prophetic task of “imagining YHWH” flies in the face of our conventional idolatries and/or our conventional atheisms. The task requires courage and unfettered imagination as well as categories that are unsettling and subversive of the way we conventionally prefer to construe reality. (3)

This book is a valuable tool for those in ministry as well as seminary students enrolled in a class discussing the prophets. It provides a good balance to the academic study of the text and application to ministry. As always, Brueggemann has written a book that speaks to those of us in ministry both as a challenge and an offer of hope. Those who wrestle with the biblical text and seek a method to apply the prophetic voice to their audience will find points that are outlined for preaching and teaching. The Practice of Prophetic Imagination will be a valuable and current tool for many decades.