

One New Book for the Preacher

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REVERBERATIONS OF FAITH: A THEOLOGICAL HANDBOOK OF OLD TESTAMENT THEMES by Walter Brueggemann. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.

[Editor's note: Martha Sterne was invited by me—without any promptings by Walter Brueggemann—to review *Reverberations of Faith*. —Erskine Clarke]

Walter Brueggemann handed me my only B in seminary. I'm not telling in which direction the other grades congregated. His class on Psalms was unforgettable and opened my eyes to both the hidden order and the wild beauty of the texts, to the need to respect the identity of the text communities, and to the need to begin from the text rather than begin from what is floating around in my head from some Sunday school felt board story or some half-conscious axe I want to grind.

Brueggemann is a splendid teacher, and this handbook of more than one hundred Old Testament themes in alphabetical order is a gift to anybody who for most any reason wants a door into (or back into) the Hebrew texts. As always, Brueggemann brings other theologians into the conversation so that what looks like one book and one lone reader becomes a short seminar with top theologians—living and dead—and with questions and issues arising from the text pointed into our own strange times.

Each entry has both a discussion of the topic (everything from Angels to Death to Neighbor to Jezebel to Education to Deuteronomic Theology to Holiness to Vengeance to Satan to Listening to Sexuality to History to Hope to YHWH), as well as article and book references for further reading. There is also a scripture index and a name index.

Reverberations of Faith recalls being back in Brueggemann's classroom, and offers a hand to preachers and teachers anywhere who want to invite that same kind of creative, energized ethos for study and worship. In his free and friendly space at Columbia, it didn't seem to matter if you were a top scholar or a working pastor or a dentist or a housewife or a visiting student from another seminary like me. Everybody counted, although bankers and Episcopalians caught a lot of grief, which I remember because I am one of those types and am married to the other.

My sister in law, Helen Anderson, an artist, gardener, and all around good egg, along with a lot of other lay people, has found her passion for scripture through Brueggemann's classes. She says her first memory of him was of this guy reading one of those texts when God remembers the plight of the Israelites. And Brueggemann looked up and growled, "Is this a God who FORGETS? Were they sitting around up in the heavens and God said, 'Oh my God, the Israelites! I FORGOT!'" Helen says the implied job of reminding God to take care of business has done wonders for her prayer life.

She pictures Brueggemann always moving through the space—crouching, bouncing, prowling—in khakis and a sort of tennis shoes with his tie askew. ("One could use

the word ‘rumped,’” she murmurs.) Chalk is always flying, and his glasses make a hundred trips from riding way on top of his bald head to being jammed down low on the bridge of his nose while he sight-reads the Hebrew text. Or his glasses flail the air in his hand, often making circles of inclusion—the living, the dead, the storytellers, the writers, the readers, the memory, the hope. So that, by the grace of the Word, the words flow through his extraordinary voice and through his fingers at the chalkboard, and even better, the Word flows into and among the gathered community.

That is what happens when a good teacher gets hold of even a group of strangers. The Word moves back and forth, round and round, and the strangers get gathered around the Word. And through the Word, the strangers, even the alien, become community.

I believe this authentic communal faith experience, however brief, happens when the people sense that the teacher knows that the Word belongs to them, not to the pros. The Word has always been and will always be a communal project. If it is just an expert droning to the students, then the Word has no flesh and blood. If it is just a performance before the great unwashed, then the Word is stillborn. But when you have a teacher (or more to our *Journal’s* point, a preacher) who really trusts the Word to come alive among those gathered, anything can happen.

Brueggemann’s respect for the role of the community, particularly the laity, as bearers of the Word is one of the most enduring and fruitful memories of my seminary training. This book is a wonderful companion in making that happen, either in the hands of the preacher, or as a resource for a study group, or as a launching pad for anybody’s wonderings. Just think of the meanness and silliness we could avoid if people in conflict over, say, human sexuality, would actually study scripture together rather than throw broken-off scriptural bricks at each other.

As a pastor fourteen years out of seminary and up to my eyeballs in parish blessings and woes, I offer a couple of ways I will use *Reverberations of Faith*:

I tend to be a narrative preacher and head to wherever the story is in the lections. What a deep help it is to have a solid discussion of “Repentance” or “Chaos” or “The Fall” to put some backbone and vigor into what might otherwise be a sermon aimed for only the heart and not the head, only the hope and not the will, only the faith and not the understanding. In even a crazy week, I can find a beginning of a theological framework that may be enough, or I can follow the references and cross-indexed themes for more extended study.

Another way I will enjoy the book is with my Tuesday morning Bible study. We have gotten a bad case of the “predictables.” We have been together five years and can chat the time away if we don’t watch out. We are appalled by the hatred spewing so far and wide around the world these days, and every week the conversation moves toward the rumors of war, etc. Our temptation is to retreat into a Sunday school, kind Grandfather God who must be shaking His White Head at all those other people’s wickedness.

I looked up “Violence” in *Reverberations of Faith* and found this quote: “...in the Old Testament Text, YHWH is deeply implicated in the practice of violence. God’s own life and history are permeated with violence for this God is at times a crude, ruthless sovereign who will in the most savage ways impose a will upon any who stand in the way of God’s sovereignty. This quality of violence in the portrayal of God and of life with God constitutes an immense problem for theological interpretation.”

You can say that again. What if instead of idly critiquing other people and the violence entwined in their religions, we did some hard work looking at our own, since “if we take the text with theological seriousness, we must entertain the testimony that deep in God’s history and deep in God’s character are powerful residues of violence that are not readily overcome.” What if we look at some of the violence of God and prayers-for-violence texts? What if we brought in some of the reference work? What if we talked about our own darkness and the darkness of our God rather than projecting all of that toward others?

There are a hundred (actually 105) doors to open into the Old Testament here and to invite others to a more nuanced understanding of the texts.