

One New Book for the Preacher

Rush Otey

Selwyn Avenue Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, North Carolina

AWED TO HEAVEN, ROOTED IN EARTH: PRAYERS OF WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, edited by Edwin Searcy. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003. 174 pages.

(Reviewer's note: The review of this book is my idea, and was neither solicited nor censored by Erskine Clarke or Walter Brueggemann. It appeared in slightly different form in the "Circuit Rider," a publication of the Western North Carolina Conference of the United Methodist Church.)

Published on the occasion of Walter Brueggemann's formal retirement from teaching, at Eden Seminary (twenty-five years) and Columbia Seminary (seventeen years), this volume will serve as a summary of many themes familiar to his students and readers, and as an introduction to people who may not have encountered Brueggemann's challenging and passionate work. It is also a clear reminder that loving God with the heart does not occur in isolation from matters of the intellect.

Brueggemann says in the introduction that the collection is offered as both an aid to others who pray publicly, and as an act of gratitude. There is a quite helpful index at the end of the volume that links prayers to biblical texts (both Old and New Testament scriptures). Edwin Searcy, one of Brueggemann's former students, has masterfully organized the prayers in nine chapters related to the several motions and moods of worship, such as confession, illumination, intercession, and thanksgiving. The final chapter leads readers through the liturgical seasons of the Christian year.

Though the style and language of the prayers are reverent, elevated, and eloquent, the prayers are neither flowery nor ostentatious. As with the Psalmists, prophets, and the Lord who prayed in Gethsemane, Brueggemann displays the agony, struggle, and pathos of faith. The absence of God is felt as frequently as the Presence, and more often than not the prayers are anticipatory and longing and even combative. Brueggemann broods over the problem of evil and suffering, revealing raw pain brought to God without apology. In fact, one of the prayers is entitled, "Is there a balm . . . in Gilead or anywhere?" (127).

Many of the prayers refer to contemporary events such as September 11, 2001, or to the clearing of homeless people from the Atlanta streets before the 1996 Olympic Games, or ethnic cleansing, or war. At other times there is lyrical praise and thanksgiving: "Speaking, acting, life-giving God, /the one with the only verbs that can heal and rescue . . ." (123). Always there is the implicit commitment that prayer is not to withdraw us from the world in some solipsistic sweetness, but to fortify and prepare and embolden the community of faith for mission in the world.

Carlyle Marney, another wonderfully poetic and articulate pastor, preacher, and teacher, used to exhort his students not to lie when preaching. Walter Brueggemann, ever the advocate and practitioner of "true speech," certainly shows here that neither ought we lie when we pray. On September 11, 2001, Brueggemann was engaged in teaching Isaiah 1, and his prayer before his class that day concluded:

. . .We are, we confess, sobered, put off, placed in dread,
that you are lord as well as friend,
that you are hidden as well as visible,
that you are silent as well as reassuring.
You are our God. That is enough for us . . .but just barely.
We pray in the name of the wounded flesh of Jesus. Amen (37)

And elsewhere, he prays:

You are not the God we would have chosen
had we done the choosing,
but we are your people
and you have chosen us in freedom.
We pray for the great gift of freedom
that we may be free toward you
as you are in your world.
Give us that gift of freedom
that we may move in new places
in obedience and in gratitude.
Thank you for Jesus
who embodied your freedom for all of us. Amen (87)

Certainly Walter Brueggemann knows that while “rest” and “Sabbath” are biblical terms, “retirement” is not! And so his readers may well anticipate further gifts such as this one, during Advent and in every moment when the people of God yearn honestly and freely and painfully and lovingly for the coming of the Kingdom on earth.