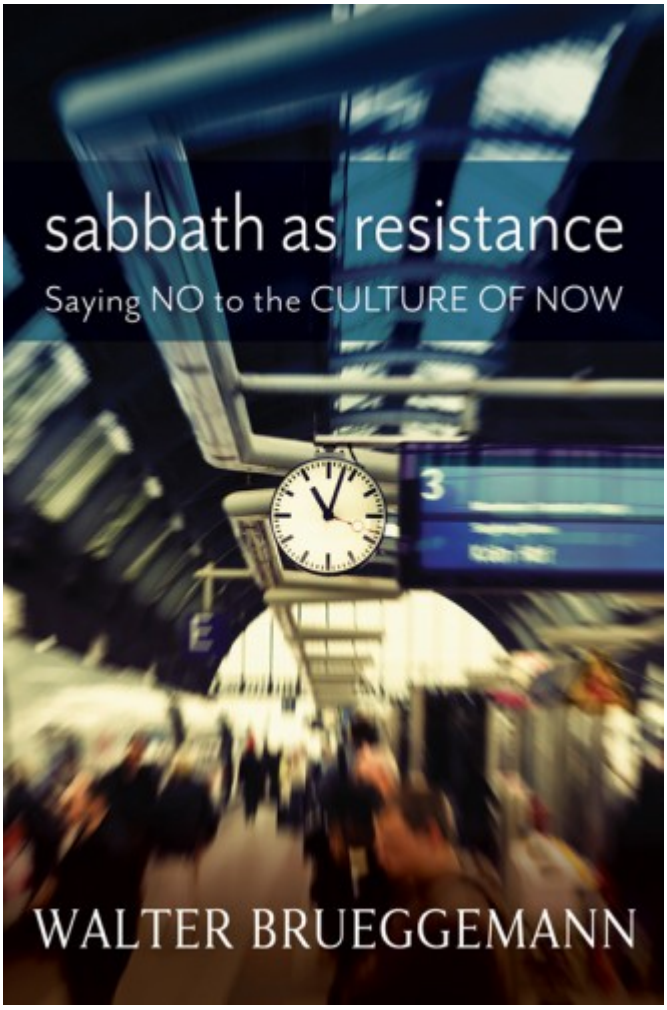
Subversion and hope

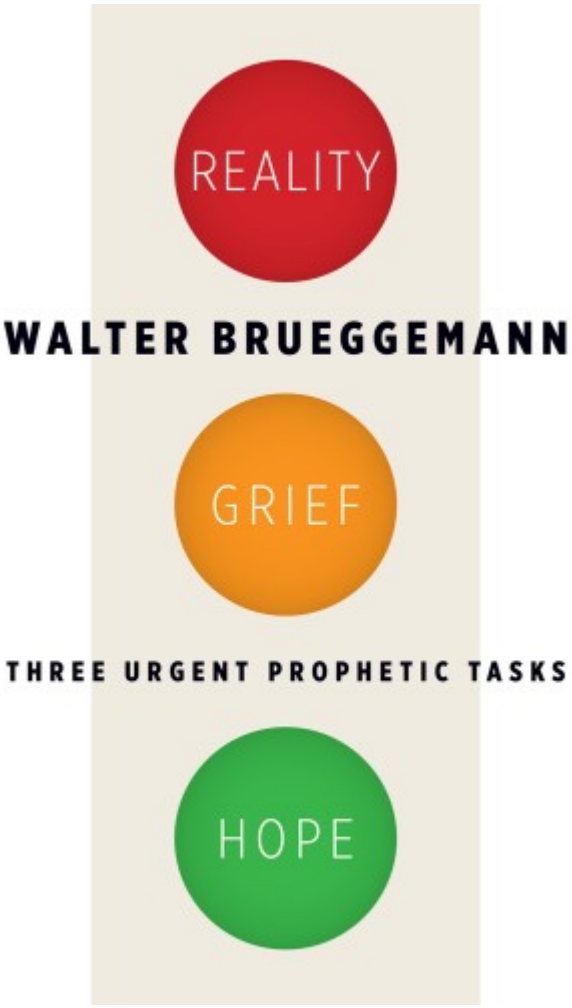
by James C. Howell in the June 25, 2014 issue

In Review



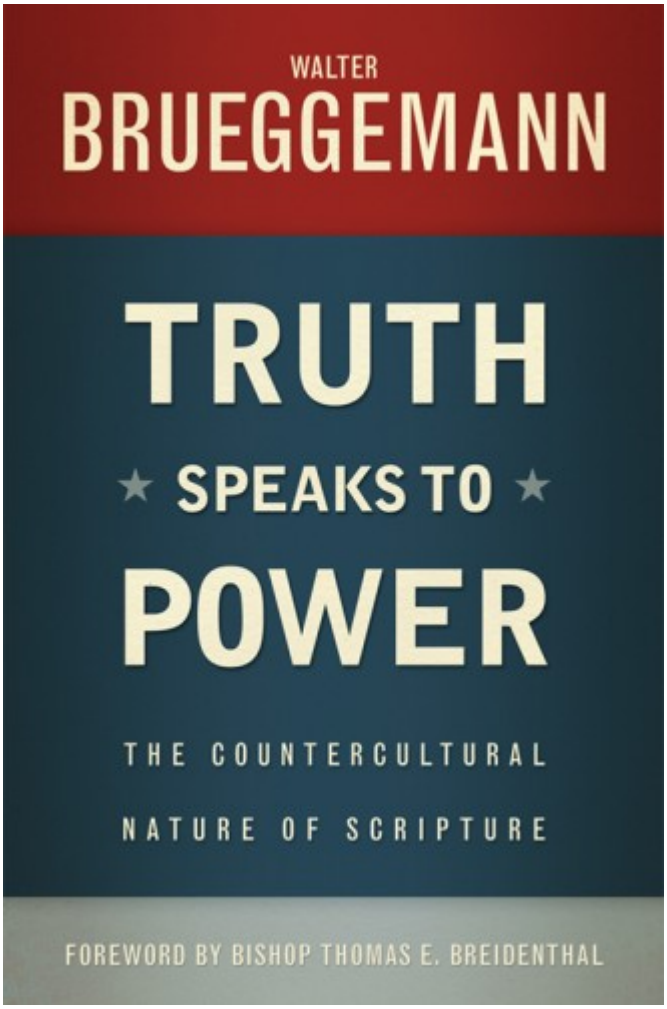
Sabbath as Resistance

By Walter Brueggemann
Westminster John Knox



Reality, Grief, Hope

By Walter Brueggemann
Eerdmans



Truth Speaks to Power

By Walter Brueggemann
Westminster John Knox

In the Old Testament section of my office library, my Walter Brueggemann collection measures just over a cubit and a span. The oldest pair of books are hardbacks I bought for less than five dollars new for a college Bible course: *The Vitality of Old Testament Traditions* and *Tradition for Crisis: Hosea*. Together they were an epiphany for me. Having thought the Bible to be a flat, advice-filled bore, I was mesmerized by the idea that there was a living history behind and within it. We can overhear a hotly contested conversation going on within the Bible, I learned, and that debate drives our theological and social discussions today. A year later I was surprised to find myself in seminary, scooping up more Brueggemann, my imagination stretched to discern the ways biblical truths really matter, and might still matter.

Through my now three decades of ministry, I have found Brueggemann to be a constant partner in thought, a provocateur who keeps me on my toes. He has made me a more insightful reader—of books, of culture, and of the church. His Genesis commentary sent me scurrying to read John Steinbeck's *East of Eden*, and Brueggemann introduced me to Christopher Lasch and Neil Postman as well. I've heard him talk quite a few times. Or I should say, I've experienced him talking: piercing eyes, white beard, grand gestures, and a voice he must have borrowed from John the Baptist.

At some point I wearied of him. I felt his modus operandi had become predictable. Pick any topic or person—peace, David, worship, or Ichabod—and Brueggemann would be off and running, exposing what is foolhardy in our culture in the searing light of the Bible's counterculture. I have the hang of his grammar; I've imbibed his perspective; I can perform a pretty fair impersonation of him.

So I've not been reading him so much lately. Then not one, not two, but three books appeared in my mailbox to be reviewed. I decided to start with *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now*, thinking it might help me brush up for a spiritual disciplines project my congregation was embarking upon, but I suspected I would still favor my fallbacks on the matter, Abraham Heschel's classic *The Sabbath* and Christopher Ringwald's marvelous *A Day Apart*.

Ever true to his methodology, Brueggemann establishes Sabbath not merely as a congenial spiritual discipline but as an alternative to culture—that busy, frenetic, anxious, workaholic consumer culture that afflicts us all even as we giddily indulge. God and the gods, competing for our souls. But then his unanticipated turn: "If we want to understand this God (or any god) we must look to the socioeconomic system that god legitimates and authorizes." Knowing Brueggemann, I was foolish to let myself be surprised. Endless shopping and obsessive work depend and feed on much larger forces, of course, so Brueggemann guides the reader into a complex maze: a sense of anxiety located in a market ideology of endless acquiring, hence a consumer-driven requirement for more products, which entails issues of economic leverage; then land is abused, obliging us to engage in an ugly kind of politics to keep the system running; violence is made the norm, which in turn depends on an expansive and aggressive military; money then must flow upward to the top.

Vintage Brueggemann: in a page and a half, you go from thinking about a simple devotional habit to finding yourself sucked into the vortex of power plays in world

politics. And along the way he manages to touch on the parenting of busy consumerist children.

What's charming is that he isn't merely on a rant. He weaves every loose thread back into the fabric of scripture. "It was the deities of Egypt for whom work was never done." "God is not a workaholic," and "the well-being of creation does not depend upon endless work." His verbal and visual capture of scripture can be breathtaking: "It is not accidental that the best graphic portrayal of this arrangement is a pyramid, the supreme construction of Pharaoh's system." And who is the most anxious person of all? The one at the top of the pyramid!

If you think he's making too much of the admonition to keep the Sabbath, Brueggemann points out that this commandment gets the "longest airtime" of the ten, and it does explore property and economics. Claiming that the Sabbath is the "linchpin" of all the commandments, he suggests that it is no different from the first ("No other gods") and the second ("No images": life is not about objects and commodities). Coining a felicitous, memorable phrase, Brueggemann avers that "YHWH is about restfulness not restlessness." Sabbath breaks all the interlocking cycles. Parents don't have to rush their kids into ballet, you don't have to buy the newest gadget, you aren't compelled to get prettier.

Then he ranges all over scripture, finding this Sabbath touchstone in unexpected places. Amos and Hosea upbraid the people for multitasking while in worship, asking themselves: "When will the new moon be over so we can sell grain?" Did Brueggemann catch me checking my phone during the anthem? "Multitasking is the drive to be more than we are, to control more than we do, to extend our power and our effectiveness. Such practice yields a divided self." A clever turn then to Isaiah 56: if Sabbath is the great equalizer, why do we fence out immigrants, women, gays? "Sabbath deconstructs the notion of being 'qualified' for membership." There is only one requirement: keep the Sabbath; everything else falls into place.

He even dashes into the New Testament. The fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5 is the fruit of Sabbath keeping. In the other two books under consideration here he does the same—and sadly it strikes me as rare, even gutsy, which only reveals how timid most scholars are about venturing beyond their narrow professional turf.

Also rare is his way of boiling all of scripture down to something simple, digestible, and useful. With our well-honed deconstructionist instincts, we shake our heads over

any attempt to locate a simple, central expression of what all of scripture might be about. Brueggemann's own methodology is to scoff at totalizing, centralizing statements. But in *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, he makes a salient case that we can understand what scripture is essentially about. In the face of dogged denial and fake narratives that mask over pain and injustice, the Bible simply exposes reality and enables us to face it; instead of offering smiles and cover-ups, the Bible allows, invites, and even pleads for grief; and then instead of retrenchment or naive optimism, it portrays and draws us into a genuine kind of hope.

Too simple? Yes, there are cover-ups in the Bible, trivialized flights from grief, and vain hopes. But Brueggemann's genius is that he explains how this conversation among divergent voices goes on within scripture itself. That's the beauty of it all: there is room for debate, for dissident voices, and yet there is a proclivity toward justice, inclusion, the demise of affliction, and an ultimate goodness stretching from creation to God's promised future.

Reality, Grief, Hope unfolds as a tour through various biblical moments—several prophets' preaching, the Exodus, and of course the Psalms. I felt as though I were sitting next to Brueggemann as he leafed through his Bible, pointing to a phrase or two, with sidebar comments on culture, the inner soul, politics. Although he asserts, "I do not believe the Bible points directly to any political policy or action," he does name names (the NRA, racist immigration posturing, banking greed). And he remembers which readers matter in terms of anything actually changing: "Contestation on behalf of this alternative narrative is the deep work of the parish and the deep claim of the church." Not in "absolute edicts," but in "sacramental gestures": every time we open scripture, break bread or touch the poor, subversion is doing its work—and we in the church need it to be named in just this way.

Once we get the hang of Brueggemann's modus operandi, *Truth Speaks to Power: The Countercultural Nature of Scripture* will come as no surprise. Here he frames his theme around four "case studies," texts portraying Moses, Solomon, Elisha, and Josiah. This time, instead of feeling like you're sitting next to Brueggemann scanning these passages, you realize that others have pulled up to the table: Paul Ricoeur, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud—all masters of suspicion—along with Nelson Mandela, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Oscar Romero. The chatter is lively and rich. But I find myself wanting to raise my hand now and then and ask questions like, "Historically speaking, how did these subversive truths we detect in scripture survive instead of

being squashed?” I always want more historical critical backstory and rationale from Brueggemann.

Brueggemann’s ramble through Solomonic texts is stunning and serves as a perfect example of his entire project. Much fawning is done over this eminently successful monarch, but then he is clearly reprimanded by the Deuteronomist. Some of the Psalms buttress Solomon’s imperial overreach, and yet it is the clearly conditional covenant that saves the broader narrative—and us. Finally, with reckless abandon, Brueggemann asserts that Jesus’ musing in the Sermon on the Mount about birds and flowers that are clothed more elegantly than Solomon is actually his snub of Solomon as “the icon of commodity anxiety.” And then Brueggemann even has the temerity to suggest that the fool in Jesus’ parable of the barns is none other than Solomon. I will always hear those two passages differently now.

Noting the way Elisha interrupts the flow of the royal annals, proving himself to be the real actor in history (like a Mandela or a Romero), Brueggemann flashes his verbal panache: “Thus we have a narratively constructed world that features inexplicable transformations wrought by an uncredentialed character who bears the truth concerning God’s power in the world to the exclusion of the king.”

As much as I admire Brueggemann, I do have my quibbles. His approach is so . . . *literary*. Reading his assessments of the text, words on a page, I lose the sense that real people with beards, tunics, bare feet, appetites, and hair are involved. Characters are incorporeal ideas; kings and prophets seem more ciphers on a page than breathing, perspiring, frightening, or courageous human beings. I find myself wanting more archaeology, more history, more artifacts, more personal imagination. Those regimes the prophets blasted owned lots of shiny things we find in museums and built massive stone palaces whose remains are far from mute testimony to the megalomania of real kings, and also to their eventual and inevitable demise.

Sometimes his application to modernity, bravely attempted, feels hollow. In *Reality, Grief, Hope*, he compares 587 BC to America’s 9/11—a far paler, less comprehensive catastrophe. The nation was hardly emasculated in 2001. He compares Israel’s sense of being chosen with America’s gauche belief in its own exceptionalism. I find myself thinking that Israel actually was chosen by God, its tendencies toward arrogance and complacency notwithstanding; any notion in America that we are chosen or even all that special is nothing but arrogance in the first place. Ours is not chosenness but economic and cultural privilege and entitlement, which breeds

militarism, racism, and a vapid sense of superiority.

The question that nags me the most when I read these three books is Bruegge-mann's underlying and often verbalized assumption that there is a totalizing empire that silences truth and goodness and keeps us addicted. Power and wealth are concentrated among a few at the top of the pyramid, and that concentration is reinforced by government and legitimated by religion. Brueggemann sees collusion everywhere: politics, the corporate world, malls, the military machine, even in institutions like academia and in fields like technology.

But I wonder: Is there really a single colluded imperial reality that plagues us? Is there really any longer such an ominous, monolithic entity? Or are we now so fragmented that nothing hangs together? The old collusions, I suspect, have splintered apart; so if anything there are even more victims, and an increasingly impossible battle with not a single foe but myriad unlocatable foes. There is no longer a single empire to wage prophetic battle against. This harrowing possibility worries me more than Brueggemann's implacable singular foe.

Conversely, are the "good guys" Brueggemann favors in the intertextual conversations he detects as holy as he portrays them? In the Exodus it is not so much that "power eventually succumbs to truth," or that truth trumps power, but that Pharaoh's power crumples before an even nastier power. The prophets must have struggled not merely against the collusions of empire, but also with their own proneness to wander, their own jaded ungodliness.

And yet Brueggemann is always hopeful, and I feel hopeful when I've finished reading him. On the dust jacket of one of his first books, Brueggemann's teacher James Muilenburg claimed that he was "among the most promising of the rising generation of Old Testament scholars." That promise has been kept, and much more delivered.