

Mandate to Difference

An Invitation to the Contemporary Church

Walter Brueggemann

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Preface

Over the last year I have had the happy opportunity (and demanding assignment) to make presentations in a variety of inviting and responsive venues. The papers included in this volume are the outcome of these several oral presentations during 2005. For the most part, these opportunities specified particular themes and topics, thus directing my energy in a focused way. The result, of course, is a set of presentations that are to some extent ad hoc, with each study on its own as a self-contained exposition.

Nonetheless, there is a kind of coherence to the collection of presentations, because to each one I have brought my critical passion and conviction. The commonality in these presentations is an ecclesial insistence that the church in this demanding moment of its life must recover and embrace its missional identity that sets it in significant tension with major political-economic-ideological developments in U.S. society. From that, moreover, comes consideration of the shape of moral reflection and moral action that a missional community under discipline may expect to undertake. A byproduct of making the same argument with reference to a number of discrete issues is some inevitable repetition, but I do not mind my critical passions being reiterated.

I am glad to thank my several hosts who initiated and managed these occasions of the presentations. I am pleased to say that on every such occasion I enjoyed generous and thoughtful hospitality. More important, for the most part those who heard my presentations were willingly engaged and eager to respond. The conclusion I draw is that there is a profound readiness and a genuine eagerness that the church accept a bold missional stance on the great issues of the day. I am delighted that Westminster John

Knox Press has been willing to publish these interpretive efforts and so to make them more widely available.

I am grateful to Tia Foley, who has persevered in the demanding task of turning my efforts into a coherent, publishable form. I am grateful to Jon Berquist and his colleagues at Westminster John Knox Press for seeing things through to publication. I am again grateful to Chris Hooker for preparing the indexes. And beyond that, I am the recipient of support and generous critical feedback from a host of friends and colleagues without whom my work would be thinner and safer than it is.

I am glad to dedicate this book to Doug Hall, who is my ancient schoolmate from Union Seminary and my abiding friend and teacher. I am among the many who celebrate and give thanks for his wry humor, his deep brooding thought, his glad embrace of Reformed theology, and his ironic love of life. This is with my thanks and love to him and Rhoda.

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary
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The Good News of Regime Change

You might think

- if you cringe at the boisterous, cocky new sound of religion in politics,
- if you worry about the divisiveness of “red” and “blue,” and
- if you are vexed that too many people claim to be speaking directly for Christ . . .

you might think that our Christian faith is all about getting the moral issues right and leveraging others to think and act the right way, as do we. But if you think that, you are very wrong, because such contemporary loud posturing is not so much about faith as it is about anxiety and maintaining control in the world. Our faith, I propose, is not about pinning down moral certitudes. It is, rather, about *openness to wonder* and *awe in glad praise*.

Think back with me to what the church celebrates as the Ascension of Jesus, usually recognized one Sunday before Pentecost, but marked specifically on a Thursday, forty days after Easter. The ascension refers to the poetic, imaginative claim of the church that the risen Jesus has “gone up” to share power and honor and glory and majesty with God. It is a claim made in our creed that “he ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the father almighty.”

Now if you want to, you can vex about this prescientific formulation all you want. But you can also, as I do, take the claim as a majestic poetic affirmation that makes a claim for Jesus, that Jesus now is “high and lifted up” in majesty, that the one crucified and risen is now the one who shares God’s power and rules over all the earth. This prescientific

formulation of the matter is important, because it gives us imagery of a quite concrete kind to imagine Jesus receiving power, real power in a drama not unlike Miss America when she takes the throne. It's about coming to real authority.

That poetic imagery as *ascent to power* had in the background, for New Testament narrative writers, very old liturgical poetry that is even older than the Old Testament. Our psalm for the day, Psalm 68, is one such piece of poetic imagery that likely was used in Canaanite liturgy for their God Baal and was taken over for use of YHWH the God of Israel. In liturgical project, gods are always ascending to power, always being celebrated in authority, always being acknowledged as real rulers to whom allegiance and obedience are owed.

If you listen carefully to the poetic cadences of Psalm 68, you may hear the surging of the cosmic God who is portrayed—as was Baal and as was YHWH—as the great storm God who caused thunder and rain and who used clouds as transportation. This primitive rhetoric imagines the great God riding around in the sky on a cloud, supervising, monitoring, breathing life, and giving power to the creation. In its doxology, Israel recognizes the immense power of God who celebrated in his coming:

As smoke is driven away, so [God drives enemies] away;
 as wax melts before the fire,
 let the wicked perish before God.
 But let the righteous be joyful;
 let them exult before God;
 let them be jubilant with joy.

(Ps 68:2–3)

Then Israel refers to the holy cloud-rider:

Sing to God, sing praises to his name;
 lift up a song to him who rides upon the clouds—
 his name is the LORD—
 be exultant before him.

(Ps 68:4)

The psalm, at the end, returns to that same imagery:

Sing to God, O kingdoms of the earth;
 sing praises to the Lord,
 O rider in the heavens, the ancient heavens;
 listen, he sends out his voice, his mighty voice.

Ascribe power to God,
whose majesty is over Israel;
and whose power is in the skies.
(Ps 68:32–34)

The accent is on power before which Israel and all of the nations, and all creatures in heaven and on earth are subject in glad obedience:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow.
Praise him, all creatures here below.
Praise him above, ye heavenly host.
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Praise him all creatures, and that became an anthem concerning “all creatures” for Francis of Assisi.

But I want you not to miss another angle in the great doxological celebration of God’s power as the one who has ascended to the throne. It is offered in verses 5–6:

Father of *orphans* and protector of *widows*
is God in his holy habitation.
God gives the desolate a home to live in;
he leads out the *prisoners* to prosperity,
but the rebellious live in a parched land.
(Ps 68:5–6, emphasis added)

The song of Israel now opens for us another side of the God who reigns in power. It turns out that God’s reign is not simply about power. It is about a relationship of caring fidelity, wherein God is in solidarity with the most vulnerable and most needy in society, which in ancient Israel includes

- *orphans* who lack a protector in a patriarchal society, so that God is a father for those who have no father;
- *widows* who lack a male protector in a patriarchal society, so that this God is a protector of the unprotected;
- *prisoners* who, then as now, were characteristically poor people who lacked resources or a smart lawyer. Thus God is an ally to those whom society would hold in bondage.

It turns out that the one who has ascended into power is not transcendent in remoteness, is not splendid in indifference, but is deeply in touch

with the reality of the earth where money and power and social leverage and differentiation of gender, race, and class leave some dangerously exposed. This father-God to whom we pray “our father” rides the clouds not as a joy rider, but rather to be in a position to see and to know and to care and to intervene and to feed and to heal and to forgive and to reconcile and to liberate. It turns out that ascension, whereby God is celebrated in power, is a claim that the earth is ordered differently because of the one who governs it.

It is clear that in the New Testament narratives concerning the “ascent” of Jesus that this ancient poetry is in purview. Israel has taken the liturgy of the ascent of Baal and made it into an ascent of YHWH the God of Israel, and now the early church does the same. It takes the poetry of the ascent of YHWH and transforms it into the ascent of Jesus who is now the one who is elevated and celebrated with majestic sovereignty,

who gives daily bread;
 who forgives sins;
 who rescues us from evil and makes life possible.

We may then, on this Ascent Sunday, imagine that the same Jesus who was known in the Gospel narrative is able to do on a cosmic scale what Jesus of Nazareth had done locally:

He feeds hungry multitudes.
 He touches lepers and they are healed.
 He welcomes children who are vulnerable.
 He enjoys the company of those disapproved of by proper society.

Or as Luke puts it, everywhere Jesus goes good stuff happens:

And he answered them, “Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.” (Luke 7:22)

And that leaves us to answer. If we accept this particular scenario of the truth of our life, we may confess the creed: “He ascended into heaven and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father.” But we may do more than confess. We may move our life into coherence with the new rule of Jesus. I suggest three urgent issues where we may take into account this regime change:

1. Jesus has come that we may have an abundant life. His feeding narratives attest that the generosity of God is assured wherever Jesus rules in the earth and we count on that generosity. And that means, does it not, that our common practices of greed, of the pursuit of consumer goods, of the frantic effort to acquire more, are both inappropriate and unnecessary. Our society hungers always for more: more body surgery, more cosmetics, more cars, more beer, more sex, more certitude, more security, more money, more power, more oil . . . whatever. This hunger for more is a true sign that we do not trust the goodness of God to supply all of our needs; we do not trust that the generous rule of Jesus who has ascended to power is in effect. But we, we are Jesus people, and therefore we are pledged and empowered to act differently, differently in the neighborhood, differently in the economy, and as citizens of the last superpower, differently in the world.

2. Jesus has given a new commandment, that *we love one another*. And then it is added,

We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also. (1 John 4:19–21)

And Jesus went to great length to identify "sister and brother" as everyone, including those most unlike us, those who do not fit, those who upset us and make us uncomfortable.

What a gospel word in a society that is increasingly given over to exclusion, to hate, and to vengeance! There is an ideology at work among us that wants to make the world very small, in order to make it safe for us, and to exclude and eliminate everyone who is not like us. That attraction to hate and resentment spins off in policies concerning immigrants and capital punishment, so that our hate of the other turns to violent vengeance and all in the name of religious piety. Such a practice of hurt that is among us is a contradiction to the father of mercy who loves all the children and protects all the weak ones.

3. Jesus is the glue of the universe. Paul has written,

in him all things hold together.
(Col 1:17)

And Jesus said, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life” (Matt 6:25). This is an assurance that God’s caring sustenance is everywhere at work in creation.

As you know, we live in a fearful society that is devoured by anxiety. And we imagine in our anxiety that there are extreme “security” measures that will make us safe. But if this is God’s world and if the rule of love is at work, then our mandate is not to draw into a cocoon of safety; rather, it is to be out and alive in the world in concrete acts and policies whereby the fearful anxiety among us is dispatched and adversaries can be turned to allies and to friends.

So imagine on this ascension day in poetic idiom, the ascended Lord Jesus, riding on a cloud of glory, keeping the world under caring surveillance. Imagine that the cloud is the throne room where sits the Father of all mercy. Imagine the governance of Father-Son sending out edicts, directives, and policies that concerning the earth:

Here is a press release that says,

The newly ascended power has decreed that there is *more than enough*,
and *greed* is inappropriate in this world of God’s generosity.

Here is a new act of legislation from the government of God that says,

Perfect love casts out hate, that we are not free for *vengeance* but must
leave such matters to the wise Father.

Here is an edict from the government that says,

Do not *fear* for *I am with you* and the world will hold.

My urge to you this day is that you go deep into the vision of the psalm concerning a new governance, a new heaven, and a new earth. And then you can decide day by day—as your lifelong vocation—to bring your life and our common life more fully in response to this regime. The claim that he ascended into heaven is not an abstract theological formula. It is, rather, an act of praise that asserts that the gospel is true. The world is under new management. Think of us under new management:

Once you were not a people,
but now you are God’s people;

once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.
(1 Pet 2:10)

Be glad, be obedient, be joyous. Pray and sing and give thanks!