


*Acting
in the Wake*

Prayers
for Justice



COLLECTED PRAYERS OF
WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, VOLUME 1

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FOREWORD



In his teaching, preaching, writing, and praying, Walter Brueggemann testifies to a deep and abiding relationship with both the biblical text and the astonishing God who abides in and cannot be disentangled from that text. Both seem to grasp him without ever quite being grasped by him.

He puts on the biblical text like a well-worn, coarse-wool coat. It's no comfy barn jacket, nor a glorious coat of many colors. It's a garment that never quite fits: it pinches, scratches, bunches, and binds; it's a little too warm in the summer and not warm enough in the winter; and it's never really in style. Yet there's no imagining him going out without it. Brueggemann understands that this peculiar text lives and moves and has its being in our own peculiar lives, individual and corporate, as we grapple with it and try to put it on. He reminds us that one must keep one hand on the page, with all its odd particularity, and the other on one's own oddly particular passion, pathos, and pain.

There is nothing like sitting around a seminar table and a biblical text with him. He always puts his whole self into his engagements with the text and with his students, and he expects no less from them. Still, as exciting as it is to be in the front row at one of his lectures, ducking

flying chalk fragments and dodging a right jab as he reenacts Moses parting the Red Sea, what is most remarkable is his love for this fascinating and often disturbingly strange text that we call Bible. He helps us understand that biblical theology, like all good theology, is at its best poetry, a bold and subversive act of creative world-making, inviting us to imagine bold alternatives to the prose-flattened script of commodification and violence that the empire wants us to believe is the only realistic possibility. In so doing he shows us what he means when he writes, in his *Theology of the Old Testament*, that “the interpreter must be an at-risk participant in a rhetorical process in which being is regularly at stake in and through utterance.”

Nowhere is this risky imaginative participation in alternative world-making more in evidence than in his public prayers. Indeed, I still remember many of the prayers he offered at the beginnings of seminar meetings when I was his student in the late 1980s and early '90s. There were never any polite formalities of opening and closing; he would simply walk into the room, drop his stack of books and notes on the seminar table, and start talking. I don't recall him bowing his head or folding his hands or closing his eyes. He just started in, without warning. Sometimes it took the rest of us in the room a second to realize that he, indeed we, were now in prayer. One especially memorable prayer went something like this:

We walk through minefields
wondering where you might show up
to rescue or undo us.

I believe that was it, the whole thing. No “Let us pray,” no “Dear God” to start, no exposition or explication of the terse words, no “Amen” to finish. Only this densely concentrated, profoundly fraught utterance from “we” to “you.” We walk. You show up, rescue, undo.

Then as now, his prayers always began with either “we” or “you.” The one to whom the prayer was addressed was not some third-person God that we already know *about* from inherited doctrines and confessions. Allied with Martin Buber’s understanding of the “I-thou” relationship between oneself and another, as opposed to an “I-it” dynamic of separation and objectification, these prayers invoked a “we-you” relationship in which each party is vulnerable to and impinged upon by the other in ways that cannot be objectified or reduced to formulae.

I don’t recall him ever typing or writing out his prayers back then. Nor does he. Thankfully, he did write them out for other public occasions, and eventually he started doing so for his classes. And so we have the remarkable gift of this book. Along with his earlier collections, the prayers gathered here carry that distinctive at-risk theological generativity that we so need in these times. They are boldly experimental, creatively and provocatively drawing from the biblical pool of imagination in order to conjure new social and theological possibilities on new horizons of meaning. Akin to his understanding of the prophetic imagination as poetic and world-creative, his prayers are often stunningly affronting, echoing biblical rhetorical patterns and images even as they interrupt and

subvert them. He experiments with language in ways that break onto startling images of and agonistic engagements with God.

Echoing Buber's *I and Thou*, another title for this book could have been *We and Thou*. As Brueggemann writes, its division into "Prayers of *We* Justice" and "Prayers of *Thou* Justice" aims to make clear that justice work is a "bilateral, covenantal enterprise" between the work "we" do and the work "you" do. "The *we-prayers*," he writes, "bespeak a resolve to engage in the troublesome, glorious work of justice as our proper human preoccupation. This work of justice requires of human agents courage, stamina, energy, and durability, because it is labor against greatly entrenched powers that are in part propelled by demonic resolve."

Still, the title he has given us is *Acting in the Wake*. What to make of that? In the wake of what? In the wake of catastrophic sufferings and injustices, to be sure: there are prayers from the near wake of the attacks of September 11, 2001, and other terrors; and prayers in the wake of devastating political moments; and prayers in the midst and wake of war. As he reminds us in other writings, all these wakes are aftermaths of our delusional claims to chosenness and exceptionalism, and they call for forms of prayer that can help us break through such delusions toward paradoxically humbler yet bolder action.

But there is another potential meaning of "acting in the wake," one that comes from the prayer that bears the same title: acting in the wake of "you," our "gospel God."

We live and move in your wake.
and so after you;
we practice your habits of justice,
 your well-being,
 your safety,
 your mercy and your compassion,
 your faithfulness.

Acting in the wake: living and moving and having our being in your wake, following after and drawing close to your best, most just ways of being in this world. And therefore acting, and praying, in the wake of Jesus, who “has broken the force of violence” so that we are free to act and speak differently, with one another and with you, *Thou* Justice.

Timothy Beal

ONE



PRAYERS OF
WE JUSTICE

NATIONAL DAY OF PRAYER



We are a strange mix of
amber waves of grain
and
rockets' red glare.

We are a people blessed with flourishing land that is marked by beauty and prosperity. We are, at the same time, a people bent on war and domination, violence, and torture. We mumble about our ambiguity. And then we notice that we are in free fall:

We have messed up the amber waves of grain
with our fossil fuel economy;

We have settled for brutalizing metaphors
for our national strength and pride.

And so many—more and more—are left behind.

And now today, amid loud rhetoric,
defiant stalemate, and cynical exclusion toned with
racism,

We pause.

We pause in your presence,
For a moment of candor,
For an instant of yielding,
For a prospect of receiving from you.

What we hope for in this pause of prayer is that
You will attend to us in our anxiety;
You will forgive us in our small-mindedness;
You will engage us for your work of justice;
You will restore us to the sanity of neighborliness;
You will work your will for peace and shalom
among us,

Through us,
In spite of us,
Beyond us.

We are a conundrum of competing
loyalties and ideologies.

So call us beyond ourselves,
That shared amber waves of grain
will prevail
Over fearful red rockets that glare.

We pray in the name of Jesus who wept over Jerusalem
and who lingers amid our shambled cities.
Amen.

—May 1, 2014, Columbia Theological Seminary

*ON THE ORACLES
AGAINST THE NATIONS*



We know well the “honor roll” of nation-states and mighty empires that run all the way from Egypt and Assyria to Britain and Japan and Russia and finally us. We know about the capacity for order that they have, and the accompanying capacity for exploitation and violence. We know that the great powers, while held in your hand, are tempted to autonomy and arrogance.

In the midst of war and in the wake of the election, we ponder modern empire and our tacit complicity in the current venture. In these moments, we hold our own resource-devouring empire up in your presence. For the moment, we pray for it . . .

forgiveness for its violence,
authority for its vision of freedom,
chastening for its distorted notion of peace.

We pray, for the moment, that our very own empire may be a vehicle for your good purposes. Beyond that, we pray the old hope of our faith:

That the kingdoms of this world
would become the kingdom of our God
and of his Christ.

We do not doubt that you will reign forever and ever. Along with all waiting powers, we sing gladly,

Forever and ever,
Hallelujah!
Hallelujah! Amen.

—November 4, 2004, Columbia Theological Seminary

*ON READING
THE BOOKS OF KINGS*



We pray, as often as we can,
“Your kingdom come on earth.”
But our version of your rule is all mixed
up with our interests and passions and
cheaper commitments.

We pray, as often as we can,
“Your will be done
on earth as it is in heaven.”
But our take on your will is all entwined
with our frightened conservative ideologies
or
our shrill liberal passions.

And when we pray for your kingdom and your will,
we ask for far more than we intended to ask . . .
but we do know better.

We do know that your kingdom
is one of weakness amid our
many strengths,
is one of foolishness amid
our deep wisdom,
is one of poverty amid our
cherished wealth.

We do know better . . .
and so, in a moment of pause
we pray that your
kingdom will overrule the rulers of this age.

We pray that your will
will subvert our will.
That we will be drawn toward your
kingdom and your will,
that we may depart to new justice
and new peace and
new joy.

We pray in the weak, poor, foolish
name of Jesus. Amen.

—*October 10, 2006*