The Collected Sermons of

Walter Brueggemann

Volume 2

Walter Brueggemann

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Foreword

The legendary Lutheran preacher and teacher of homiletics Edmund Steimle once said of a famous pulpiteer of a previous generation that his sermons were elegant and rhetorically brilliant, but they lacked specific context. "They could have been preached," said Steimle, "in New York or Toronto or the highlands of Scotland, could have been uttered in 1950 or 1850. They floated above circumstance. There was no grit of a particular time and place."

A lack of gritty context is by no means the case for these provocative and evocative sermons of Walter Brueggemann. Not only do they contain specific references to the locations in which they were preached—Chicago, Seattle, Houston, the coast of Florida, Boston, a small town in Georgia, and more—they even more significantly evoke the cultural moment in which they were spoken and to which they are addressed: the anxious, fearful, fevered, consumerist culture of the weary and declining American empire in the bottom of the ninth inning. These sermons in no way "float above circumstance," but instead they energize and illumine specific times and places with judgment, grace, and hope.

Brueggemann is well–recognized as a prophetic voice in our time, and these sermons will do everything to burnish that reputation. He shines a searching light on our society and does not shrink from naming "the power of chaos and death, of greed and brutality, of selfishness and hate" that festers among us. But it seems important to note that Brueggemann has been holding steady in this pulpit for several decades now. He is a prophet to be sure, but a resident prophet, one who buys a piece of real estate in Anathoth even as he weeps for the doomed city.

These sermons, therefore, are not "drive–by shootings" committed by a rootless activist preacher with nothing at stake. Brueggemann lives here and yearns for the restoration of a just community. He provides a sharp critique, but it is always on the way to proclaiming hope, hope engendered by the God who will not leave the people forlorn or the church forsaken, but who will always bring redemption out of despair.

Brueggemann's prophetic voice cannot be collapsed into partisan theological politics. He recognizes that all of us, regardless of position, are caught in the snare. "Conservatives among us," he observes, "do not want . . . change; and liberals among us only want change we can manage." The goal of these sermons

is not persuasion to a particular political or theological posture. It is instead the opening up of for all of us the possibility of singing the doxology. "It might be an expensive doxology," he warns, because the very act of praise implies an unsettling of the status quo and a welcoming of God's transforming power. "When we praise," says Brueggemann, "we sign on. We are for sure invited to reach toward God's new world that is on its way . . . by the mercy of God!"

These sermons are themselves versions of that dangerous but longed-for doxology, and they move from ruthlessly honest cultural analysis to confident praise with such linguistic power that one can easily overlook the superb detail, the impressive craft, and the fine tooling employed by Brueggemann, the master preacher. The impact of these sermons comes not simply from the finished artwork but also from the artist's technique—the preparation of the homiletic canvas, the mix of pigment, and the brush strokes.

To begin with, these sermons are firmly biblical, in fact to be more specific, they are profoundly *textual.* They burrow deep into the marrow of biblical texts, exploring their contours, surveying their passageways, delighting in the interplay of their images and metaphors. They are a form of Christian *midrash.* Sometimes hearers attempt to compliment a preacher by saying, "You made the Bible come alive!" For Brueggemann, though, the Bible already is alive, humming with energy and power, and he attaches jumper cables from the text's dynamo to the sermon, springing it to life.

In his stimulating essay "The Preacher as Scribe," Brueggemann argues that the best way for today's parish preachers to "speak truth to power" is not to imagine themselves as Moses, raising the fist to Pharaoh, or as Nathan, dramatically pulling the mask of pretense off a wayward David, but as scribes—not the scribes who are the New Testament opponents of Jesus, of course, but the kind of scribes Jesus himself depicts when he says, "'Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old'" (Matt. 13:52). Such scribes are alert both to the fluctuations, transitions, and shifts in the culture and to the primary task of *re-texting* God's people. Faithful scribes do for congregations what the sermons in this volume do: they refresh the memory and irrigate the parched imagination of the people of God with the streams of subversion and hope coursing through their own nearly forgotten scriptures.

These sermons, then, embody Bruggemann's own advice to preachers to hew closely to the biblical text—"to study it, to trust it, to engage it, to be led by it, to submit our modernist assumptions to it, and to have confidence that this text—despite all its vagaries and violence, its unbearable harshness and confounding cadences—is the one that merits our primal attention as a word of life." The preacher as "scribe" speaks powerfully to those in our time who have no text to guide them or who are living out of hollow and vapid cultural texts:

> Some in the congregation are textless, believing that they can live out of their autonomous experience without any text, while others bring a weak, thin text of technological, therapeutic, military consumerism that is an odd mix or moralism, market ideology, self-congratulations and anxiety. The scribe, then, does not do text-work in a vacuum, but (a) in the face of resistance that rejects any text, or (b) in the face of thin text that claims excessive and disproportionate authority, or (c) in the presence of those who are inclined to this text but who have little clue about how to hear it so that it can function as identity-giving." ("The Preacher as Scribe" in *Inscribing the Text*, 13–14)

Part of Brueggemann's alertness to texts involves his savviness about genre. For him, the Bible is not an undifferentiated literary milkshake but a rich bundle of varying genres: poem and drama, story and chronicle, chant and hymn, antiphon and proverb, oracle and testimony. When Brueggemann enters a scriptural house, he knows both the neighborhood of the text and its architecture, and he allows the multiplicity of the biblical witness to find expression in his sermons.

Another mark of Brueggemann's fine sermonic craft is the freshness of his language. The more pedestrian preachers among us might say that "God is present in our world," but Brueggemann proclaims that "God is on the loose." For Brueggemann, we don't merely "do sinful things," we are instead "scavengers and cheats and corner cutters," and instead of just saying that "God will establish righteousness," Brueggemann has us wonder, "What would you do if you were God? And you saw the world you had made gone crazy?" For Brueggemann, the church is not simply the "recipient of the Holy Spirit" but is "the breathed-on church."

One could go on, placing chevron after chevron on these sermons to mark their excellence, but there is at least one more virtue that cries out to be named, and this one perhaps unexpected. These sermons are clear, simple, and profound all at once, or perhaps better, they are "simply profound." There is great depth of thought here and sophistication of exegesis, as one would anticipate from a scholar like Brueggemann. But having plunged many fathoms into these biblical texts, he resurfaces with prose accessible and inviting. In one sermon, for example, Brueggemann is explaining Jesus' call to discipleship:

> Let me tell you what I think that means in the Gospel story and in our lives. Jesus calls people to believe that he saves and that he is saving and that we are saved . . . that we are safe and loved and cared for. To be a disciple means to know you are safe and loved and to live that way. Jesus calls people to trust that God is with us, that we are not alone even in the face of death and every kind of danger.

Those could almost be words from a children's sermon, and in a way they are, a sermon to all of us who are God's children and "little ones."

All readers of these sermons will be challenged and rewarded. Preachers will find much bread for the journey. The editors at Westminster John Knox Press have polished this already gleaming collection by arranging the sermons according to the liturgical year, thereby making them useful to the company of preachers who desire both to discern the times in which we live and to observe that countercultural shaping of time that is the Christian calendar.

Thomas G. Long
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Preface

For those of us who preach, the act of preaching and the craft of the sermon constitute an endless challenge and something of a puzzle, albeit a deeply serious puzzle. We keep at it but continue to wonder how the good news of God's love and the serious summons of God's will are transmitted, uttered, and received in our foolishness. Like most people of my generation, I have had much to unlearn about conventional modes of preaching and much to keep learning about contemporary possibilities of that art and that craft. In the presence of that ongoing unlearning and relearning, however, I continue to retain much of what I have been taught in seminary, what I have learned from my father-preacher, and much that continues to work in the strangeness of the church.

I am able to trace some patterned development in my way of preaching and can identify four accents that have become increasingly important to me:

First, I have come to believe that we may and must trust the biblical text more to do its own work, even given our best critical capacity over against the text. I certainly do not mean that the text should go uncriticized! I have no doubt that the text is recurringly more interesting and more compelling than anything we might talk about. It may be that I rely so much on the text because in my more-or-less itinerant ministry, I am almost always preaching with people whom I do not know, and the text is a point of reference in such a venue. In any case, I believe increasingly that the work of the sermon is to make the biblical text available to the church so that church folk can, if they choose, reimagine their lives according to the strange cadences of the text.

Second, my embrace of the practice of "imagination" has been a long study in my life, ever since I first read Paul Ricoeur. I take "imagination" to refer to the capacity to host ("image") a world other than the one taken for granted among us. I understand preaching to be a process of layered imagination. First of all, the biblical text itself is an act of imagination, not much illuminated by historical critical study of the kind fostered by the Jesus Seminar. The biblical writers and the long-term traditioning process are witnesses to a world other than the one practiced by the several empires that constituted the matrix for ancient Israel and the early church. In turn, the church tradition and the critical tradition of scholarship are practices of imagination that a preacher then takes up in her own imagination. It is this peculiar act of the

preacher's imagination that permits a thousand different sermons to arise on the same Sunday on the same text. The finish of the project is the fact that the listening congregation also engages in an active process of imagination, as it does not hear what is spoken but what can be received. That is why the preachers are thanked and attacked after church for things they did not say. I suppose the process is not unlike the ancient game of "Rumor" in which there is a succession of whispers of the same message around the room, with the outcome at considerable variance from the beginning. Such imaginative preaching is an exercise in freedom that does not aim at precision, but at empowerment and generative possibility that are not possible or available until the word has been uttered.

Third, I have come to see that evangelical imagination is an offer, as best we can, of an alternative to what is otherwise available as a livable world. That means that in a variety of ways preaching is a contestation between the world given in the text as God's good rule and the world where we live otherwise when we are not listening. I am struck by the way in which the preaching in Deuteronomy, the prophets, and the apostles are always in contestation with the prevailing order of the day. I suggest that the preaching venue in the church is one of the few available venues for such contestation, because elsewhere the ideology of the world out there is so totalizing as to permit no contest.

Fourth, I have come to see that preaching is a performance of God's good rule that, in an act of utterance and receptive listening, mediates the truthful, joyous reality of that rule. By performance of course I do not mean anything theatrical per se, but the actual (*wirklich*) doing of the truth of the gospel. Thus preaching is not simply a reference to or remembrance of something from elsewhere, but it is here and now the offer of that news. Such a practice of re-presentation eschews any temptation to be didactic; it has taken me a long while to come to that realization.

Thus I imagine that the biblical text, rendered with all of the faithful imagination that we can muster or that is given us by the Spirit, is an offer of a world other than the world of weary anxiety that is everywhere among us. I have no doubt, moreover, that the offer of this alternative world that is always an elusive figment of faithful imagination will be all the more urgent in time to come in our society. As the grip of the ideology of military consumerism tightens among us, as it surely will in our anxiety, the utterance of an alternative is both urgent and high risk. The contestation consequently will be, perforce, more vigorous and the preacher placed more at risk.

I am greatly indebted to the folks at Westminster John Knox Press, notably David Dobson and Julie Tonini, who exercise great care, patience, and attentiveness to my work. And I am grateful to Tom Long for his generous foreword, as Tom remains for me one of the model preachers of our generation.

I am glad to dedicate this book to the memory of Frederick W. Schroeder, my first preaching teacher in Seminary, then teacher who in a preaching class gave me my lowest grade in seminary. He was also the president of the seminary who appointed me to my first teaching position at Eden Seminary, my alma mater. Earlier I had written of him: "These then are Schroder's guidelines: passionate churchmanship, disciplined intellect, deep faith, and open ecumenism." That list continues to be the guidance to which I try to adhere. Schroeder was austere and parsimonious in his humor. Occasionally he sent one of us home to "dress better" before we could preach in class He taught me about the deep urgency and seriousness of preaching that continue to summon me, and I am grateful.

Walter Brueggemann

PART ONE

Sermons for Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany

1

The *What* and the *When* of the Christ Child

PSALM 25:1–10
LUKE 21:25–36

People like us have careful work to do in Advent, to weave our way between two big dangers. On the one hand, there are dangerous people floating around the church who specialize in times and dates and schedules, who know with precision the time of Christ's coming and who speak confidently of millennia and pre-millennia and post-millennia. . . . They know too much and reduce God's freedom to the timetable of their ideology. On the other hand, there are dangerous people floating around the church who are offended by those people, and who in reaction are in love with their comfortable affluence and who imagine that it will not get any better than this, and who expect no gospel arrival at any time ever. People like us live in that awkward place amid those *who know too much* and those *who expect nothing*.

But we, in our theological tradition, occupy a different posture about Advent as we ready for Christmas. We are the ones who know *what* is coming but do not know *when*.

The *what* for which we wait at Christmas and for which we prepare in Advent is that God's rule of starchy justice and generous mercy will arise in the earth, and all that seek to negate abundant life will be overruled and nullified. That is how we pray every time we are together. We pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." We pray that God would show God's self so that the power of chaos and death, of greed and brutality, of selfishness and hate would end, for such negators cannot stay when God comes among us. We pray always in confidence, for we end and say, "For yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory": . . . it belongs to no one else.

But we do not know the *when*. We do not know when because the coming of God is not our doing. God's way is a mystery that has not been entrusted to us. It is hard for us to imagine that the regime of violent death will finally not prevail, and we do not know when or how it will end, because we trust all of that to God.

So we have this work before Christmas, to think deeply and pray hard and face passionately the "what" of God's way, without any anxiety about "when." We confess the "what" against those who expect nothing who are left in ultimate despair because they think it will finally not change at all. We confess no "when" against those who know too much and reduce the mystery to political ideology. We have passionate preparation to do in Advent so that we may be ready, and of course you know that that preparation has nothing to do with the consumer fever of American society. My modest gift to you today, as you gather around *what* and shun *when* is this Psalm 25, a delicate, passionately confident prayer that can give us a way to the "what" as we arrive at Christmas,

- Rested up for the "what,"
- Not exhausted with shopping,
- Not undone by too many parties,
- Not stressed by family quarrels over Christmas decorations, just on the alert!

The prayer of Psalm 25 is all about waiting:

> Do not let those who *wait* for you be put to shame.
> You are the God of my salvation,
> For you I *wait* all the day long.
>
> (v. 3, 5)

Thus the one who speaks the Psalm is waiting. But this waiting is not dormant, passive inactivity. It is being on active alert in hope, watching for signs, the kind you see at small airports where people gather to meet planes with big signs and flowers and happy waving, not knowing when the plane will arrive, but already elated well ahead of time, because it is someone we so want to see and hold and welcome. Advent is for getting our lives and our money and our energy and our time and our future and our outlook attuned to the one who is coming soon.

I.

What strikes me about this prayer in Psalm 25 is that it is so *God centered.* It begins:

> To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
> O my God, in you I trust . . .
> You are the God of my salvation.

The life of the Psalmist is focused on the God who is a reality of faith and prayer and worship known in Israel's past for wonders of steadfast love and miracles of faithfulness.

Now all of that is obvious, except it is not an obvious practice for assertive, effective people like us. We are mostly preoccupied with the world, with the parade of crises that claim our energy and attention. And if we are too self-centered to focus there, we may focus more closely on ourselves, on our family, our money, our sexuality or whatever. The world is very much with us!

What this Psalmist knows, moreover, is that when the world is too much with us, we are talked out of hope, and the future feels like more of the same stuff that leaves us exhausted. But Christmas is not about us. It is about this God who erupted amid the Roman Empire. It is about the God who birthed this vulnerable Jesus just at the instant when a decree went out from Caesar Augustus to sign up for the taxes and the military draft of the empire. It turned out in Bethlehem that the world was not about Caesar's taxes or Caesar's draft or Caesar's war or Caesar's failed economic policies, but about the baby who confounded the powers of this age. Perhaps Christmas is about refocusing our lives away from all those forces that diminish us, to focus instead on this one who is our hope and our trust, our future and, indeed, our present.

II.

The Psalmist prays:

> Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame.
> (v. 3)

If you spend your time advocating the things of God, you will look like and sound like an innocent who does not know the ways of the world. The world is all about power and force and money and control. And those who live that way easily dismiss those who gather around the Christ child who specialize in neighborly love and unwanted children and needy widows and illegitimate outsiders of a dozen kinds. The people of the gospel keep up this alternative advocacy and we are left out of the main power games; it seems obvious that the rulers of this age will win, and our little gospel claim is so weak and so marginal and we ourselves doubt it sometimes. The "shame" is the impression that we back a loser when we bet on the future of the world.

This Psalmist prays that God should show God's hand, that God should appear in some sign and validate our faith and our advocacy. It is a good prayer to pray in Advent, to pray it before we lose hope and cease to trust.

III.

The Psalmist revels in God's mercy, goodness, and steadfast love:

> Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord and of your steadfast love.
> According to your steadfast love remember me.
> All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness.
> (vv. 6–8)

It is the same term three times, *steadfast love*, a term always on the lips of ancient Israel, a term that most fully characterizes the God of Christmas for whom we prepare in Advent. "Steadfast love" means solidarity in need enacted with transformative strength. It is the solidarity enacted with strength that Israel knows in the exodus and in a thousand other life-giving miracles. It is the solidarity in need offered by Jesus to the woman at the well, to the IRS man in the tree, to the blind beggar, to the woman with a bad back. What human persons and human community most need is abiding, committed, passionate *transformative solidarity*. This Psalmist waits for it in need and knows the place from where it comes.

Truth to tell, that kind of solidarity is not on offer in our world from the big players in power and money and authority. Israel knew that it was not on offer from Pharaoh who always demanded productivity. Jesus knew it was not on offer from Pilate who washed his hands of need. It is not on offer by most of the loud voices of ideology and propaganda among us.

But we are like the Psalmist. We know better; we are not seduced. So we wait with eager longing, for the one thing needful, for the one source that assures, and we will be in readiness.

IV.

But there is more about steadfast love from the God for whom we wait. I just gave you verse 10: "All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness." The word "path" in the Old Testament means the way of the Torah, the guidance of the covenant, the instruction of the tradition. It is the reason the first Christians were called "followers of the way," the way of Jesus, the way of the gospel, the way of steadfast love, mercy, and justice. The Psalmist prays:

Make me know . . . your ways;
Teach me . . . your paths;
Lead me . . . in your truth,
Teach me . . . Instruct me!

And then the Psalmist says in verses 8 and 9:

Good and upright is the Lord,
Therefore he *instructs* sinners in the way.
He *leads* the humble in what is right,
And *teaches* the humble his way.
(emphasis added)

The Psalmist is aware of the way of the world. The "sin" he talks about is not wild, distorted stuff. It is simply life against the Torah, pretending that God has no purpose for the world, or for us; we are on our own, autonomous agents who must make it all up as we go along. But the ones who wait know better. The ones who wait do not ask for a free lunch of mercy. They ask that we be educated in and for God's future. They ask to be humble and equipped for the new life of God's rule, to enact that justice and to enact it now.

So imagine, good church folk, imagine the Advent faith of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church. Imagine a whole company of believers in this place rethinking their lives, redeploying their energy, reassessing their purposes.

The path is *to love God*,
not party, not ideology, not pet project,
but God's will for steadfast love that is not deterred by fear and anxiety.
The path is *to love neighbor*,
to love neighbor face-to-face,
to love neighbor in community action,
to love neighbor in systemic arrangements, in imaginative policies.

This Psalmist knows that if we do not prepare for and receive the future God will give, we will be left simply to cope on our own with the world of hurt and hate and violence and selfishness, without a hand to play in an alternative life.

Sometime during this Advent week, somebody will say to you in an open-ended, leading question:

You know what?!

And you can say, "Yes, the 'what' is that the gospel world is coming upon us; it will be a new world of well-being without fear." And they will ask, "When will that be?" And you will say, "I do not know 'when.'" But I am waiting for it, and already living it. I know the path into the future . . . loving God and loving neighbor.

The decrees of Caesar Augustus continue to go out for taxes and for draft and for frantic attempts to keep the world under our control. But the truth is found in the vulnerable village of Bethlehem outside the capital city, the village that disregarded the imperial decree. It will take a village to exhibit this alternative, and we are citizens of that coming society.

December 3, 2006
New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, Washington D.C.

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The Poem

Subversion and Summons

ISAIAH 11:1–9
MATTHEW 3:1–12

Adults have always known that critical thinking is the best way to manage our life. Adults, since Plato, have learned to trust reason and proceed reasonably with their lives. Adults, since Aristotle, have preferred syllogistic logic that makes things certain. Adults, since the ancient Greeks have, by reason, logic, and critical thinking, been able to reduce reality to a memo, a syllogism, a syllabus, a brief. The Romans took over this Greek way to adulthood, and combined it with ruthless power to accomplish control and wealth and security.

In latter days, we in the United States have replicated Rome with our practice of memo, syllogism, syllabus, and brief . . . together with raw power. We have found our way to wealth, security and control. And to sustain that way in the world, we have founded great universities to champion critical thinking, reason, and logic. How is that for a quick summary of Western civilization?!

I.

Except this! Mostly unnoticed and not taken seriously, mostly under the radar in this adult world of control and order, there have been Jews. For the most part Jews have not committed to reason and logic and memo and syllogism and brief. Because the Jews came with their peculiar stories of odd moments of transformation, all about emancipation and healing and feeding and newness, all under the rubric of "miracle." And behind the stories there were poems . . . lyrical, elusive, eruptive, defiant. Jews have known from the outset that a commitment to memo and syllogism will not make things new. Jews have known

all along that in poetry we can do things not permitted by logic or reason, because poems never try to sound like memos. Poetry will break the claims of the memo. Poetry will open the world beyond reason. Poetry will give access to contradictions and tensions that logic must deny. Poetry will not only remember; it will propose and conjure and wonder and imagine and foretell.

So Jews, in their covenantal fidelity, did poems. Miriam did poetry when they crossed out of Egyptian slavery. Deborah did poetry when it dawned on them that the Canaanites were not so formidable. Hannah did poetry when little Samuel was born. Eventually Mary did poetry when she found out she was pregnant. All these mothers in Israel celebrated the impossible that was right before their eyes, even though they could explain none of it. They did poetry while the hard men were still parsing logic, and writing memos to each other, and drafting briefs. I propose that Advent is a time of struggle between the poem that opens the future that God will work and the memo that keeps control. Advent is a time for relinquishing some of the control in order to receive the impossible from God.

II.

Well, not just any poem. After the mothers in Israel there came the other poets, the ones we call “prophets.” They turned the poetry toward the future, never doubting that God would give new futures out beyond our memos. The book of Isaiah, complex as it is, is framed by poetry. The poems of Isaiah are about the future God will yet give. At the beginning of Isaiah, in chapter 2, there is this poem:

> In days to come . . .
> They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
> and their spears into pruning hooks;
> nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
> neither shall they learn war any more.
> (Isaiah 2:2a, 4)

It is an imaging out beyond our posturing in power through which we will never prevail. At the end of Isaiah, in chapter 65, there is this poem:

> For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;
> the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.
> But be glad and rejoice forever in what I am creating;
> for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy,
> and its people as a delight.
> (vv. 17–18)

The poet anticipates, against all the data, that there will be no more infant mortality and no more economic displacement:

> No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days . . .
> They shall not build and another inhabit;
> they shall not plant and another eat.
>
> (vv. 20, 22)

And finally, a peaceable creation with no oil spills:

> The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
> The lion shall eat straw like the ox . . .
> They shall not hurt or destroy
> on all my holy mountain, says the LORD.
>
> (v. 25)

It is promised! It is imagined! It is proposed! Surely the memo writers did not pause; but the poem lingered. The book of Isaiah moves from “not learn war any more” in chapter 2 to “not hurt or destroy” in chapter 65, a sweep of well-being that contradicts the facts on the ground.

III.

And right in the middle of this poetry, in chapter 11, is the poem entrusted to us on this Advent Sunday. It is a poem that refuses the facts on the ground, and invites us listeners to watch for newness outside our constricted, frightened logic. It begins with this that takes our breath away: “Out of the stump of Jesse.” Jesse being David’s father. David’s family and dynasty run out in failure, no king, no future, no royal possibility, only a stump. But, says the poet, the stump will produce a shoot, a shoot of new life that was not expected. The memo writers no doubt were at work thinking how to honor the stump and close down that history. But the poet said, “Watch for the shoot,” the new David, the new possibility of shalom. The poem that follows is about that shoot that cannot be explained by our reason.

What a shoot it will be, conjured by the poet! This new ruler to come, only imagined here, will have qualifications like you have never seen, wisdom (not mere knowledge), understanding (not just data), wisdom and understanding from the Lord, fear of the Lord, recognition of the holy mystery that is at the core of the power process. This new shoot will be glad to sign on for God’s promises. Like every ruler, he must sort things out and make economic decisions. He will decide with righteousness on behalf of the poor. He will break the monopoly of the power elite and will notice that other neglected public.

He will rule for the meek, the ones who have no voice and no political clout and no smart lawyers. He will be all dressed up in robes of covenantal fidelity, and he will not forget what his vocation is.

The poem requires us to take a deep breath, because it is reality defining. What we usually have is authority with knowledge but no wisdom, with data but no understanding, the kind of power that governs on behalf of the billionaire club, so that the rich get richer. And now comes a poem of the new incursion of God's spirit that will break open the cabal of the critical control.

But there is more. The poet takes a long pause. Since we are already into God's impossibilities, the big impossibility is lined out:

> The wolf shall live with the lamb,
> the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
> the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
> and a little child shall lead them.
> The cow and the bear shall graze,
> their young shall lie down together;
> and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
> (vv. 6–7)

The old enmities, the old appetites of the food chain, the old assumptions of the survival of the meanest, all of that is subverted. The wild will not stay vicious, because the coming one, marked by righteousness and justice, will overrule raw power in the interest of new possibility. Finally, the young child will toy with the asp and the adder; nobody will get hurt, because the poison will be removed from the world. The poison will be gone because the shoot will override all business as usual. All will be well, and all manner of thing will be well:

> They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
> for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
> as the waters cover the sea.
> (v. 9)

The poem is about advent, about the coming one. And we dare to say, we confessing Christians, that the poem concerns the Christmas baby who refuses Rome's rule of force and religion's rule of code, opening the world to healing, freedom, forgiveness, and joy. So try this in advent. Depart from logic and memo and syllogism, and host the poem.

IV.

But there is an important caveat about the poem. Those who listened to John the Baptist, the big advent guy, loved the poem. They thought they

owned the poem. They thought they had the poem as a special promise just to them. It is the temptation of entitled people to think we have privilege about the poem. So John addresses them, calls them seething, slippery, creepy reptiles, lowlifes. And he says to them: Don't just enjoy the poem. Do the poem. Sign on!

> Bear fruit worthy of repentance . . . every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. (Matt. 3:8, 10)

This is the bite of advent. It is not just marveling at newness God will give. It is not about cozy, comfortable hope. It turns out, as always among Jews, that the poem is a summons to action. In these days of advent, then, imagine if the poem is true. Imagine if the poem is the true text of our life. What then?

> Well, be a carrier of wisdom and not just knowledge;
> be an agent of understanding, and not just data.
> Take on "the fear of the Lord," a sense that there is an out beyond us who finally governs.
> Watch for the poor and make a difference with them;
> watch for the meek and be a voice for the voiceless.
> Embrace the lamb and summon the wolf to newness;
> enfold the kid and deal with the leopard;
> watch for the hissing snake and notice the end of the poison.

And watch for the child:

> The little child will lead them . . .
> wolf and lamb,
> leopard and kid,
> calf and lion,
> cow and bear,
> lion and ox.
> The nursing child will play over the hole of the asp.

The poem anticipates the child. And when he is born, we should not be preoccupied with memos and logic and brief and critical thought. Because the child . . . and the poem . . . evoke a leap beyond our control. It is a leap to another world that requires daily obedience. And it ends . . . the poem ends . . . this way:

> They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. (v. 9)

That end of the poem is our beginning, beginning beyond memo and brief and syllogism. It is a world that began in the Jerusalem temple, ran through Bethlehem, and breaks open among us. Watch for the little child!

December 5, 2010