

*The Collected Sermons of*  
**Walter**  
**Brueggemann**

Walter Brueggemann

**WJK** WESTMINSTER  
JOHN KNOX PRESS  
LOUISVILLE • KENTUCKY

# Contents

xi	Foreword by Samuel Wells	
xvii	Reflections on Walter Brueggemann's Preaching by Rebecca J. Kruger Gaudino	
xxiii	Preface by Walter Brueggemann	
1	1. Gosh, Some Angels	December 24, 1972
6	2. A Zinger That Changes Everything	July 16, 1983
9	3. A Demanding Long-Term Miracle	February 28, 1988
14	4. What You Eat Is What You Get	June 5, 1988
19	5. Starting Over—From Heaven Out	December 25, 1988
23	6. By Faith	May 21, 1989
29	7. The Strong God with Two Weak Verbs	February 2, 1990
33	8. The Ultimate Gate-Crasher	June 3, 1990
37	9. A God Who Gives Wildly . . . and Then Insists	October 14, 1990
42	10. A Loser's Powerful Footnotes	October 23, 1990
46	11. On Not Winning the Heisman Trophy	January 15, 1991
49	12. Neighbor Religion That Lets a City Work	February 26, 1991
54	13. The Surge of Dangerous, Restless Power	April 14, 1991
59	14. Taking a Second, Painful Look	February 23, 1992
65	15. Re-Formed for Ministry	March 1, 1992
70	16. Deep Waters	April 17, 1992
75	17. God's Relentless "If"	April 23, 1992
83	18. Power to Remember, Freedom to Forget	May 10, 1992
89	19. On the Wrong Side of the Ditch . . . for a Long Time	September 27, 1992
95	20. When Nagging Is Hoping	October 18, 1992
100	21. Afterward . . . After George . . . After Bill . . . Newness	November 8, 1992
106	22. Checkpoint John	December 8, 1992

111	23. Trusting in the Water-Food-Oil Supply	March 23, 1993
116	24. Outrageous God, Season of Decrease	December 12, 1993
120	25. More Coats Than Imelda Had Shoes	December 11, 1994
125	26. Birthed Public and Peculiar	January 7, 1997
129	27. Sabbaticals for Rats?	April 29, 1997
135	28. An Intrusive Absence	December 7, 1997
140	29. On Signal: Breaking the Vicious Cycles	November 15, 1998
145	30. Uttered beyond Fear	December 4, 1998
150	31. The <i>Yet</i> on the Other Side of the Millimeter	December 13, 1998
154	32. Strategies for Humanness	February 21, 1999
159	33. Do You Want to Join the Miracle?	March 14, 1999
164	34. A Fourth-Generation Sellout	July 14, 2000
168	35. The Stunning Outcome of a One-Person Search Committee	April 25, 2001
174	36. Newness from God That Unlearns Family	May 13, 2001
180	37. One Exorcism, One Earthquake, One Baptism . . . and Joy	May 27, 2001
186	38. Joined in Suffering . . . Reliant on God's Power	October 7, 2001
192	39. Missing by Nine Miles	January 6, 2002
198	40. The Big Yes	March 3, 2002
204	41. Saints Remembered and Saints to Come	April 7, 2002
211	42. Consider Your Call	June 15, 2002
218	43. Shrill Faith for the Nighttime	September 22, 2002
225	44. Bragging about the Right Stuff	October 19, 2002
233	45. Embrace of the New Truth of Abundance	November 3, 2002
239	46. The Church with a Middle Name: "West . . . 'Water and Vegetables' . . . Minster"	March 9, 2003
245	47. Three Habits That Make God Un . . . Happy	March 10, 2003
251	48. "Until" . . . Endlessly Enacted, Now Urgent	April 21, 2003
259	49. A Resurrection Option	May 4, 2003
263	50. Variations from the Barrio	June 14, 2003
272	51. Medical Care Free and Expensive	November 9, 2004
278	52. "Morphed" Back to a New Life	November 14, 2004
284	53. A Nighttime Gnaw and a New Possibility	February 20, 2005

288	54. The Good News of Cosmic Regime Change	May 8, 2005
294	55. The Sabbath Voice of the Evangel: Against Death, Denial, and Despair	May 29, 2005
300	56. Bread: The Good Stuff on the Table	October 2, 2005
304	57. On Not Doing God Any Favors	February 26, 2006
311	58. Called against the Distortion	March 19, 2006
317	59. The Hard Miracle of Transformation	June 12, 2008
323	60. Trusting Two Rocks	August 24, 2008
330	61. The Song of an Ex-Leper	February 15, 2009
336	62. A Bilingual Life	
341	63. A New Way of Being in the World	
346	64. Power for Life Flown in by Bird	
350	65. The Gift of a New Chance	
355	66. The Saving, Disruptive Moment	
359	67. The Threat of Life: Permitting Its Intrusion	
365	Scripture Index	

## Foreword

Surely none of his great forebears, Elijah, Jeremiah, even John the Baptist, can have looked the part more than Walter Brueggemann. Even had he not been soaked to the skin in the cadences and themes of the Old Testament (and soaked countless grateful others of us); even had he not taken on the role of wandering minstrel among the deaf citadels of the comfortable church; even had he not placed his ear to the ground of our culture and warned of our collective apostasies and traced our self-inflicted exile as eloquently as any figure of his generation; even then, the uncompromising beard, the doom-echoing voice, the halting stride, and the piercing eyes would have done it on their own.

They could, together, in another frame, another vocation, another identity, say, “Don’t mess with me.” Instead they say, unequivocally, disarmingly, unforgettably—but thrillingly: “Don’t mess with God.”

How can one introduce the work of Walter Brueggemann without three numbered points followed by some exegesis and a constant eye for contemporary application? Hence, since imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, this is what follows.

1. *Walter Brueggemann is a scholar and a preacher. But he never assumes the two are the same thing.* To speak of this man as the finest Old Testament exegete of his generation is so commonplace as scarcely even to be controversial. The guild may mutter about methodology but what makes the conscience of the guild stutter is precisely what makes the heart of the church sing: it is Brueggemann’s facility with a multitude of styles and genres, his ability to draw the text out in historical or literary or political or philological relief, that animates the sense of expectation that arises on opening one of his books or seeing him stride toward the pulpit. The criteria for assessing his work are twofold: the fruitfulness of his exegesis—that disciples and churches are invigorated by inscribing their lives into the books and passages he unfolds; and, most of all, the peerless degree to which he portrays the Old Testament as the gospel—with nothing but enrichment in one’s understanding of each.

To what extent his vocation as a preacher shapes and enhances his skill as an exegete, I am not qualified to judge. But turn the question round, and ask to what degree his skill as an exegete enhances his powers as a preacher, and the answer is beyond question. There is a veritable tingle of excitement

when he utters a phrase like, “Today’s equivalent of Naaman would be . . .” or even, “The two verbs are interesting imperatives . . .” The reason for that excitement is that not long after comes a claim like, “Thus I suggest that the cosmic purpose of God is caught in these two quick verbs.” Anyone can utter such a vast, expansive statement: few besides Brueggemann could both see the whole gospel in two verbs in Isaiah and then present them compellingly to a congregation in such a dazzling and electrifying way.

2. *God is fully known in the pages of the Bible, and the same God is fully alive and active today.* Along with the quality of the scriptural exegesis, what is most impressive about these sermons is the care and perception with which Brueggemann exegetes our contemporary reality. Speaking to a white, middle-class congregation in honor of its twenty-fifth anniversary, for example, he notes a contemporary trend but stays with it long enough to discern what lies beneath the surface. He describes the present time in the United States as

a culture living in caution and in dysfunction. One could think of many dimensions of such anxiety, ranging all the way from terrorist threats to a collapsed economy. But my sense is that such broad threats only feed the anxiety that is already among us, much deeper and much more elemental. I suspect that the deep, albeit unarticulated threat among us is the awareness that the world is changing, that the old world of a certain order, a certain security, and a certain privilege is ending, is over with—because newness crowds in from unexpected sources; it intrudes, it unsettles, and we wish it were not so.

This is truly the much-spoken-of, much-attempted, much-parodied, but nonetheless vital holding of the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Not long ago a woman spoke to me after I had offered a sermon in a church where I had never preached before. She said, “How interesting. You chose to do your talk about one of the *readings*. What a great idea!” Sadly there was not the remotest trace of sarcasm. She really meant it. There are, of course, many congregations that have grown accustomed to their pastor taking the opportunity of several minutes of their attention to vent, rhapsodize, lament, or speculate about current affairs, lyrical philosophy, homespun wisdom, or personal grief. Only such a reality could have evoked such an ingenuous compliment. But for Brueggemann the gospel is wholly political because the Bible is wholly political; and the gospel is wholly personal because the Bible is wholly personal. The personal is the political and the political is the scriptural. It is the ability to demonstrate these truths in a way that is not simply angry, disillusioned, or cavalier, but rooted, empowering, and invigorating that sets Brueggemann’s preaching apart from many lesser versions of the genre.

3. *A congregation can only be induced to be absorbed into the world of the Bible if the Bible’s full breadth, sweep, and complexity are laid out before them vividly*

*and urgently.* There is one style of preaching, wholly out of fashion, that is didactic, theologically and morally, and sees the primary role of the preacher as to convey saving information to the congregation in a form that the congregation can ingest, embody, and later recall for passing on to third parties. This style has largely been displaced by a lyric approach that seeks to engage with the congregation's emotions, contexts, sympathies, dreams, and doubts. Though both flawed when employed in isolation, together they recognize the truth that the incarnation comes from outside yet is fully human.

Yet Brueggemann's sermons transcend both these approaches—taking what is most serviceable in each, but setting both on a much larger canvas. This is most noticeable in his sermons among regular congregations, where he cannot take for granted the common vision and engagement he assumes at a seminary. The significance of a moment in the Old Testament story is not primarily that it illustrates an already established doctrinal or spiritual conviction; not just that it amplifies a personal struggle or paradox; but most of all that it takes its place in the broad sweep of the scriptural story, from Genesis to the maps. Brueggemann's gift as a preacher is to highlight ways an assigned passage of Scripture summarizes or stands in tension with other passages or the narrative as a whole, to show how that narrative as a whole is indeed the narrative of all things at all times, and to locate the listener's life and context as one that epitomizes, summarizes, or stands in tension with that narrative of all things.

I want now to offer a brief exegesis of one of my favorites among this collection of Walter Brueggemann's sermons, in order to highlight the ways he puts his skills to work. He begins his Christmas 1972 sermon, "Gosh, Some Angels," with a marvelous dialogue between a donkey and a lamb, composed by his then ten-year-old son, Jim. The dialogue includes some treasured staples of the Christmas-sketch genre, such as "*Donkey*: Do you know what year it is? *Lamb*: I think it is the year 1." With Walter Brueggemann, the complete central casting prophet—minus only the camel's-hair tunic and the unfit-to-tie sandals—you're not going to get advance warning that there's a joke coming; you have to rely on the slight pause and the twinkling of those penetrating eyes.

But then he launches into a subject made-to-measure for his skill as a theologian, exegete, and preacher: the nature and purpose of angels. His brief but pithy literary-historical survey achieves the much-sought-after but seldom-achieved goal of shedding genuinely new and totally unsentimental light on the Christmas story. His contemporary illustrations are particularly enjoyable because they are brief, apposite, and often very funny. For example: "It was widely believed that the gods [in their divine council] decided who would be king [for the year], and of course that is not remote from us either

because every presidential candidate likes to have a Billy Graham at hand to give religious legitimacy to it all.” Having softened the congregation up with illustration and humor, Brueggemann then delivers succinct information that compels attention. Angels “come to tell what the gods have decided. They do not have wings. The message comes in all kinds of ways, in a dream, in a vision, in a nightmare, in a fire, in an earthquake, even an inner voice once in a while, sometimes a voice from the heavens. But it is all the same. It is all message and the one who brings it is a messenger, an angel. And that is what happened in the fields of Bethlehem that night.”

Quickly we see Brueggemann’s characteristic facility not just with contemporary illustration, but also with inscribing the text with contemporary sociopolitical realities. He compares the sky filled with angels to the sky filled with bombs borne by American aircraft in Vietnam, during a resumption in the bombing campaign days before Christmas 1972. With characteristic humility, Brueggemann acknowledges that in the face of this grief and shame he doesn’t know what to say. But that simply focuses the listener’s attention on what God has to say. For now we are into the very heart of the sermon, which consists of a three-way tug between the transformation brought upon the shepherds (“they thought their reality consisted in darkness and sheep and it does not. It consists in light and a message from God”), the way the powers of the world make decisions (illustrated so painfully by what “American power does at this very hour in Asia”), and the divine council (whose decision is announced by the angels). With masterful rhetoric and careful use of summary phrase, Brueggemann seizes this moment to summarize the meaning of Christmas, made existentially urgent and disarmingly poignant by the realities of contemporary American politics.

For the gods have met and they have made a new decision.

And *Christmas is the celebration of the new decision of God. . . .* They have decided that all the fake kings would be dethroned. Not Caesar in Rome, not Herod in Jerusalem, not Pilate as governor, not all the presidents and premiers and executives and generals, not any of them will be king, because the world has been turned a new way. It has been turned so that a king shall come from Bethlehem, not from the great city, but from a little city filled with filth and poverty. But think what it means. It means to anybody who knows, that the promises of God have been kept. He is faithful. . . . Where there has been fear, he will bring joy. Where there has been oppression he will bring justice. Where there has been suffering and sorrow, he will bring wholeness. (italics added)

And then, in a final, deft touch, Brueggemann returns to the narrative written by his own son. This is exceptionally artful, because it takes the sentimental

pull of the conviction that “Christmas is really for the children” and sets it within a wholly unsentimental sermon about God’s action and human brutality. The effect is deeply satisfying. Young Jim concludes his dialogue (and his father concludes his sermon) with the Lamb. The lamb is a telling choice of animal, although, true to form, Brueggemann leaves it to the listener to make the connection with the little lamb in the manger. The Lamb sums up the animals’ perspective on the Christmas story as follows: “Hey, this has been a neat story, huh? . . . It really is a neat story, and it’s for you.” This takes the epic realities of Christmas and places them lyrically in the lap of the congregation.

Enjoy this volume from a master exegete, a master theologian, and a master preacher. They really are neat sermons. And they’re for you.

Samuel Wells

## Reflections on Walter Brueggemann's Preaching

As Walter Brueggemann has long seen it, we in the U.S. dwell in empire. An Old Testament scholar, he looks across the long arc of empire—Egyptian, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Roman, you fill in the blank—to see yet another imperial presence whose reach is vast in geography and thick in consequence for the world, community, and individual. Carried upon the shoulders of military might and ceaseless propaganda, guarded by more and more intrusive surveillance, it has fallen upon our social, political, and economic lives, severing our connectedness with one another, injuring community, banishing the true self for the new socioeconomic unit. Isolation, exploitation, inequity, and brutality flourish under the sway of this tyranny, and we who struggle to breathe under Pharaoh's heavy hand find our lives more and more unbearable.

The surprise is the fact that many of us settle for this life. Truthfully, sometimes we do not even see it for what it is. In his sermons, Brueggemann explains that we accept the reality that empire creates and reveals to us in its propaganda campaigns of advertising and press release, which rely on euphemism, redefinition, and calculated claim. These are the canonical texts and tools of empire disseminated by “the royal engine room of public distortion.”<sup>1</sup> They are intended to soothe us. “Isolation and injustice and misery are just a normal, inevitable part of life, dear. Don't worry if our version of reality has nothing to do with your experience of life,” the voices purr. “This *is* the way, the truth, and the life!” And enthralled, ensnared, we are led away to the marketplace, to the cubicle, to the lonely apartment, to the killing field.

Against this lullaby, this soft purring backed by money and muscle, Brueggemann pits the church. Yes, the church! As the presence of God in this weary world, the church is the counter-presence to empire, standing for truth, hope, power, and renewal, even in the midst of our weakness and humiliation. In fact, some of us still show up to hear what this counter-presence has to proclaim, for perhaps we will hear something that imbues us with “the endurance to confront the indignities of [our] lives for another day.”<sup>2</sup> Or more than this, perhaps we will hear a new, life-changing truth, an Easter truth.

1. Walter Brueggemann, “Truth-Telling as Subversive Obedience,” in *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 170.

2. Gita Mehta, *A River Sutra* (New York: Vintage International, 1993), 73.

Brueggemann points out, however, that the church, like those of us who make it up, is also under threat. The empire's "Musak," as he calls it, is piped through the church's very sound system. To be honest, some of us sitting in the pews are relieved to hear the "good-news" Musak that being a Christian is no trouble at all: just go along to get along. Others of us have almost given up on any good news whatsoever, and we sit, one foot in the aisle, about to heave ourselves up from the pew and escape this house of "myth." To still others of us, the Musak is floodwater trickling through the cracks, and we are busy battenning down the hatches, hoping to create a watertight ark that can sail a dangerous world, with no leaks. Placid and accommodating, fearful and defensive, or just about done with this whole business of faith, we pause and linger a while longer in the pews, just in case.

This is where Brueggemann's sermons enter. They catch us in our pews, half hoping, half despairing, that the church has anything new and life changing to offer, and they hold us there long enough to say, "There is another world! Listen! Imagine! Live!" Indeed, preaching for Brueggemann is a life-or-death matter. As he sees it, we who still step foot in the church are exiles, nomads, orphans, aliens. The world that once seemed to value our faith and our presence has cast us and our quaint ideas off for the Gospel of Getting Ahead. Its message and symbols are alluring and confident. But preaching, as Brueggemann defines and practices it, lays out another compelling option that has to do with a different kind of life involving love, forgiveness, joy, freedom, and self-giving. This kind of preaching stands determinedly against the empire's message of "the normalcy of deathliness."<sup>3</sup> In his sermons, Brueggemann lays out this ultimate choice and highlights the alternatives: will we perish in empire's wasteland—"Rock and no water"?<sup>4</sup> Or will we depart for "a livable human habitat,"<sup>5</sup> where we may relearn our great worth, discover and reach out to neighbors once again, rebuild our communities, and sit under our vines and fig trees? Our answer makes all the difference. It is life or death!

In his collection of essays on preaching, *The Word Militant: Preaching a Decentering Word*, Brueggemann explains that the aim of the preacher in laying out this choice is to advocate for an alternative world whose vision summons us to new life. This summons involves mobilizing ancient, sometimes forgotten texts that are nonetheless still charged with God's initiative. Once spoken, they can jump-start our tired imagination so that we may see God's world and even choose to live in this world. Finally recognizing the failure of the empire's constructed world—"Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!"—we have

3. Walter Brueggemann, "Preaching a Sub-Version," in *The Word Militant*, 156. See also "Life or Death: De-Privileged Communication," 122–31.

4. T. S. Eliot, "The Waste Land," 1922, in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), 47.

5. Brueggemann, "At Risk with the Text," in *The Word Militant*, 5.

the graced power of imagination and will to throw our lot in with God's truth and to do our part in making a more livable world, God's world. Brueggemann puts it simply: we shift worlds. An immense possibility, this world-shifting depends on the surprisingly vulnerable, preacherly act of putting the text back into the human context and seeing it revive, like Lazarus walking out of the tomb to proclaim, "Let me speak of life!" to all the grieving onlookers.

But how to speak to all of us onlookers sitting in the pews? How to hold us in our pews long enough to see this new life and turn in our weary world for the blazing world of God? Some of us are tired of preaching and Bible-thumping. Does this dusty, old book really have anything life-mattering to say? Elsewhere Brueggemann asserts that "nobody can switch worlds unless an alternative world is made richly available with great artistry, care, and boldness."<sup>6</sup> He calls for preachers to be poets, to offer up powerful words that "shatter settled reality" and "[press] us always toward new, dangerous, imaginative possibilities."<sup>7</sup> When I read Brueggemann's sermons, I think of physician/poet William Carlos Williams, who asserts:

It is difficult  
to get the news from poems  
yet men die miserably every day  
for lack  
of what is found there.<sup>8</sup>

Brueggemann's sermons are these poems, offering the challenging but life-giving gospel.

As you read these sermon-poems, note their artistry that opens up possibility and sparks the imagination. First is the flourish of their rhetoric, from the shimmering, unexpected word choice to the figurative language that suffuses these sermons. The "wonder bread" of God satisfies, comforts, energizes ("Bread: The Good Stuff on the Table," see p. 300), while the "junk food" of empire leaves a gnawing belly.<sup>9</sup> Midnight is every moment we are brought up short by our own nakedness and neediness. Jazz is Miriam's ancient song of liberation, improvised in barrios across the centuries. More than characterized by flourishes, each sermon's rhetoric is also carefully patterned. In fact, the sermon form is often organic, growing out of the biblical text itself, and rhetorical patterns make clear this form. Here Brueggemann specializes in parallelism,

6. Brueggemann, "Preaching as Reimagination," in *The Word Militant*, 33.

7. Walter Brueggemann, *Finally Comes the Poet: Daring Speech for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 4, 6.

8. William Carlos Williams, "Asphodel, That Greeny Flower," in *Pictures from Brueghel, and Other Poems* (New York: Random House, 1955; New York: New Directions, 1962), 161-62.

9. In "A Much Better Nourishment," unpublished sermon, August 26, 1993.

sometimes paired with assonance or alliteration, as signposts for his textual maneuvers. The "rock in a hard place" is the "rabbi at a well" ("The Big Yes," see p. 198). The three temptations of Jesus are ambition, acquisition, and accommodation. Antithesis is a favored Brueggemann tool that lays out the paradoxes, the choices, the points of transformation. "Friday people of pain" become "Sunday people of hope" ("The Sabbath Voice of the Evangel," see p. 294). In a sermon of the same name, YHWH's "wondrous solidarity" is matched by YHWH's "devastating starchiness." God is "best friend and deepest threat."<sup>10</sup> The "John season" is followed, thanks be to God, by the "Jesus season" ("The Yet on the Other Side of the Millimeter," see p. 150). All of these rhetorical tools are poetry, often with the very rhythm and meter of prosody.

While these tools open the biblical text to us and clarify the movement of Brueggemann's exegesis, other tools draw us into the very heart of these sermons. In particular, these sermons take the drama of the text and make it live again. Sermons about the Psalms move the offstage story behind these hymns onto center stage, and we recognize the turmoil that engulfs our lives and finally tears from us our desperate pleas to God. In other sermons, we become the audience seated in an ancient theater. A raging Nebuchadnezzar stalks on stage, demanding the abject loyalty of three new bureaucrats, cranking up the "furnaces of intimidation" to get his way.<sup>11</sup> Beggar Bartimaeus commands Jesus. A no-account widow wears a couldn't-care-less judge down to the nub.

Brueggemann uses two tools with great skill to erase the aesthetic distance between contemporary audience and ancient cast. Poetic license, especially anachronism, leads us theatergoers onstage. Pharaoh's big house may overshadow the slave huts, but soon Pharaoh stands before Moses like "De Klerk before Mandela, Wallace before King."<sup>12</sup> In another sermon, news has it that the Northern Kingdom faces an energy crisis, and only an airlift operation has any chance of hope. We also hear that the empire keeps us on orange alert, always scrambling and fearful, always off balance, oblivious to the easy yoke of Jesus.

Another tool that calls us onstage is anticlimax. While we might expect Professor Brueggemann to cleave to the serious, high-flown language of theology and textual criticism, Preacher Brueggemann repeatedly drops the bottom out from under us, almost as if he knows a thing or two about slam poetry, and drives home the point that this Bible talk really is about us everyday folk and our everyday lives. Weary quarterback God runs off field after a so-so quarter.

10. In "Turning Loose for Surprises," unpublished sermon, April 5, 1992.

11. In "Always Again Before Nebuchadnezzar," in *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness*, ed. Charles L. Campbell (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 125.

12. In "The Midnight of Power and Weakness," in *The Threat of Life*, 27.

Elijah's assistant is a scammer and a hustler, and Abraham, Sarah, and Peter are chips off the old block. The "big-time guy" Nicodemus comes under cover of night to visit his therapist Jesus ("A Nighttime Gnaw," see p. 284). And for Moses, theophany is really "*theos-fanny*"<sup>13</sup>—anticlimax, for sure.

Altogether these sermons invite us theatergoers to see our own lives and circumstances in the characters and plots played out before us. We are invited to shift points of view, to try on different hats, to look through the eyes of slaves awaiting the command to depart. Or perhaps we finally recognize our accustomed point of view: through the eyes of a self-indulgent Pharaoh, gratified at the sight of all "the help" hanging on our every word. The playfulness of these sermons permits us to question and acknowledge the truth of our world and ourselves. And when we begin to tug at the tight fit of our empire-assigned identity and try on something new, we have the chance to make this change permanent. It's what we Christians call conversion, but what Brueggemann rightly calls "sub-version," for it initiates us into a counter-life of resistance, right under the nose of Pharaoh.<sup>14</sup>

In the end, Brueggemann's sermons invite us to enter the free space of imagination where we may think through the alternatives of our lives, the players in our lives—what if these were to include God?—and the possibilities for new life that radicalize us to slip past the checkpoints of empire and light out for the open territory of faith. As Brueggemann understands it, preaching is not a new tyranny that reduces the fiery text to tight formula and legalism. Neither is preaching mere literary exercise, entertainment that erases the huge claims of the text. We are burdened enough by reductionist systems that eliminate God one way or another. No, preaching is "an act of human imagination rooted in divine self-giving"<sup>15</sup> that opens up our lives, granting a spaciousness both joyous and challenging.

Welcome to the sermons of Walter Brueggemann, bold and deft in their proclamation, tender in their acquaintance with hurt, and generous in their understanding of the God of horizonless hope, for whose all-transforming word many of us in the pews linger just a little longer, just in case.

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13. In "An Offer of Adult Rest," unpublished sermon, Sabbath Conference, Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), April 17, 2009.

14. Read "Preaching a Sub-Version," in *The Word Militant*, 147–66.

15. Brueggemann, "At Risk with the Text," in *The Word Militant*, 8.

## 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 not yet finished unlearning and learning about the challenging and puzzling assignment of preaching; I hope, by the mercy of God, to keep unlearning and learning for a while. For now my debts are very great, both to

my teachers of preaching, my father, August, and my seminary teachers Frederick W. Schroeder and Ernest F. Nolte, and to the many generous pastors and congregations who have invited me into their preaching venues. With particular reference to this volume, I am greatly indebted to Donald McKim and his colleagues at Westminster John Knox Press. Don has been steadfast in the hard work of turning my scrappy pages into a book. I am grateful to Rebecca Gaudino who, in her own elegant sensibility, has done the hard work of editing and given me guidance and courage to complete this volume.

Over my adult life, I have been blessed to have “sat under” (as we say) faithful preaching in the congregations where I have worshiped regularly. In my later aging years, I have stumbled—no doubt providentially—into St. Timothy’s Episcopal Church, Anderson Township in Cincinnati. That congregation features vitality and hospitality, uncommonly good music, missional energy and imagination, and fine preaching. I am glad to dedicate this book to our rector, Roger Greene, who is a splendid preacher and a pastor to me. One senses in his courageous preaching both how deeply convinced he is of this news, and the ways in which he generates and evokes missional energy among us. Attending to his words regularly has reinforced my conviction that preaching, challenging and puzzling as it is, continues to make a decisive difference to us all. I am grateful to St. Timothy’s and to Roger.

Walter Brueggemann

## Gosh, Some Angels

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*December 24, 1972*

LUKE 2:8–20

My ten-year-old son Jim had to write a play for Christmas for his Sunday School class. He made it a dialogue between two animals at Bethlehem. It goes like this:

- Donkey:** It sure is cold, is it not?  
**Lamb:** It sure is.  
**Donkey:** Do you know what year it is?  
**Lamb:** I think it is the year 1.  
**Donkey:** Did you hear that Caesar Augustus sent out an order that everyone in the country should be taxed?  
**Lamb:** That means that the people will be coming back, does it not?  
**Donkey:** Right.  
**Lamb:** Here comes somebody now.  
**Donkey:** Hey, there's something in the sky.  
**Lamb:** Is that not a star?  
**Donkey:** Yes, there is something right by it. There are two of them.  
**Lamb:** Who is that over the hills?  
**Donkey:** It looks like some people coming to get their taxes in the books.  
**Lamb:** But the inns are all full. Maybe they will come here, huh?  
**Donkey:** Here they come.  
**Lamb:** Be nice to them, huh?  
**Donkey:** She looks like she is going to have a baby!  
**Lamb:** Hey, look over the hills. It looks like some kings.  
**Donkey:** She's having a baby—look, some angels.  
**Lamb:** Gosh, some angels.  
**Donkey:** The shepherds see the angels.

He goes on. But that is enough so you know where I got the title for this sermon. I don't know how you say in Aramaic, "Gosh, some angels," but I assume that the first shepherds said at least that. I want to talk about the angels because they are crucial for the first Christmas. I think we don't take them very seriously. We have reduced them, after the manner of medieval art, to cute little babies, or nice little children with wings and sparkling stuff on their backs. I suppose that is to make them seem innocent or heavenly. I suspect that we don't understand fully what Christmas is because we missed out on the angels.

The angels in the Bible are a part of a much larger notion. It was commonly believed by the people who wrote and valued these stories that heaven, the world of the gods, was filled with many gods. They all had their various functions, like the god of snow and the god of war and so on, like Mt. Olympus, and each year they met at new year time in a grand assembly. In the Bible it is called the Divine Council, sort of like a United Nations in heaven. Each year they did several things.

1. They decided who would be king of the gods, who would preside over the council and have the final say. There are many psalms in the Old Testament which tell about Yahweh, the god of Israel, being chosen king of the gods for a new year:

Sing to the LORD a new song  
the LORD reigns!  
(Ps. 96:1, 10 RSV)

(which means he is king for another year).

2. The gods also determined how it was going to be for the new year, rather like writing out the Farmers' Almanac a year ahead of time. This is called *fixing the tablets of destiny* whereby they determined if it would be a prosperous year or whatever. And if that sounds remote to you, I heard over KMOX yesterday that one of the economic analysts said '73 would be a good year, that it was in the bag, and obviously such an announcement is not only prediction but determining how it would be. This is the tradition behind Jesus quoting the Old Testament when he says,

To proclaim release to the captives  
and recovering of sight to the blind . . .  
to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.  
(Luke 4:18-19 RSV)

It is the announcement of a good plan for the new year which the gods decide.

3. Finally, this council of the gods makes a decision about who would *be the human king for the new year*. It was widely believed that the gods decided who

would be king, and of course that is not remote from us either because every presidential candidate likes to have a Billy Graham at hand to give religious legitimacy to it all. Which suggests that in that ancient world the kings could use this holy symbolic system for propaganda and claim divine appointment, but that is the way they did it.

Which brings us to the angels. After the gods had made their decisions about the human world, they chose from among their numbers some of the gods to bring the message to the world of men. And that is all the word angel means, messenger, one who brings the message from the meeting of the gods to tell the world of humankind how it is going to be. And those angels (messengers) are not baby-faced cherubs with wings. There is nothing soft or sweet or childlike about them. They are rather stern and uncompromising, even insistent, because they bring a message that is clear and firm and non-negotiable. They come to tell what the gods have decided. They do not have wings. The message comes in all kinds of ways, in a dream, in a vision, in a nightmare, in a fire, in an earthquake, even an inner voice once in a while, sometimes a voice from the heavens. But it is all the same. It is all message and the one who brings it is a messenger, an angel.

And that is what happened in the fields of Bethlehem that night. The shepherds are every person with their grim business as usual, tending their flock, assuming that tomorrow would be like yesterday, that life would be about what it had been, with its little joys and its little disappointments but mostly just making it a day at a time with a little wool and a little mutton but not much more.

This has not been an easy sermon to prepare. Obviously today one can scarcely talk without mentioning the renewed bombing and I have not known what to say. You have been through it all before and you are as angry, as discouraged, as immobilized, even as guilty as I am, so I don't want to lay that on you. But our eyes, like those in Viet Nam must be fixed on the skies which are filled with bombers. And I think it fair to say that our eyes are like those of the shepherds, also fixed on the skies, filled with dread and resignation.

The skies are always filled with bombers, but Christmas is the incredible affirmation that the skies at the important moment are not filled with bombers, which is our symbol for weary business as usual. Just then the skies are filled with angels, voices of another announcement about something God has decided. That is what Christmas is about, the perception that the skies are not filled with bombs, but with angels.

The story in Luke is at pains to describe the happening to the unsuspecting ones.

First there is the statement of glory, a bright light usually, an awesome experience, a time of terror, for the glory is the coming of God in all his power. And then there is the reaction to it: they were afraid. These are not nice friendly little

angels. They are the ones that come crashing in where they are least expected and not welcome. Christmas is not a time of pleasantries, but it is a show of power, power to transform, but that means power to cause upheaval. It is the coming of the holy, the awesome surprising, disturbing presence of God himself.

I don't know about you, but I do not expect transforming holiness to come in my life. I would not know what to do if holiness came, for I have got it all boxed off to come at special times in special ways. The message to the shepherds is that they take another look. Here they thought their reality consisted in darkness and sheep and it does not. It consists in light and a message from God. For the gods have met and they have made a new decision.

And Christmas is the celebration of the new decision of God. You know their decision well: "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (v. 11, RSV). Remember, we said one of the things the gods decide is who will be king in the human world. That is the central decision taken by the gods. They have decided that all the fake kings would be dethroned. Not Caesar in Rome, not Herod in Jerusalem, not Pilate as governor, not all the presidents and premiers and executives and generals, not any of them will be king, because the world has been turned a new way. It has been turned so that a king shall come from Bethlehem, not from the great city, but from a little city filled with filth and poverty. But think what it means. It means to anybody who knows, that the promises of God have been kept. He is faithful. He has not reneged. For a thousand years earlier he has said, I will keep this royal family and this royal promise and this royal vision. I will send the true David and he will turn the world back to its sanity. Where there has been fear, he will bring joy. Where there has been oppression he will bring justice. Where there has been suffering and sorrow, he will bring wholeness.

All the kings of the world hustled to keep their thrones. Even as American power does at this very hour in Asia. They are panic-stricken powers, scared of everything and everyone, but they don't know how to work at it except to kill and destroy, and our whole human history is like that. Except the gods have made a fresh decision, and this new one does not come as threat but as child. He does not come as victory, but as helpless child. He does not come in pride, but in a way almost unnoticed by the world. But he is king. He is not robed in splendor but in baby clothes. He is not in the royal nursery but in a barn. None of it makes any sense. At least it does not make sense to people who think they have all of life reduced to a pattern and a formula. The Christmas event in Bethlehem makes no sense unless you allow that it is a fresh decision from God himself about the new shape of the world.

All of that came with the new announcement of the king. And then that messenger was joined by the chorus who gave the theme of the divine decision: glory and peace.

Glory to God—  
Peace on earth!

They cannot be separated. Some want peace on earth without taking seriously the holiness of God. Some want to worship God and pay no attention to peace. But they are a common theme, which bind the world of God and the human world together, which let both heaven and nature sing. Glory and peace!

Glory, the gods rejoice. They are very pleased with themselves  
because they chose the right one for king of heaven.  
Peace, not just a shifty cease fire, but a zone of wholeness  
in which we can live our lives.

Christmas is the incredible celebration that the new decision of God is being actualized even in our kind of world.

Well, that's very primitive. And you may wonder how anybody could think that way about the world. But think again. If you wanted to talk about the world being changed. If you wanted to talk about newness which is really new and not just a reshuffling of all that is old and weary, how would you say it? I think we might want to say it comes from God, it is a gift of God, it is a fresh decision from God. We are all the time having decisions handed down from great councils.

Henry Kissinger on War and Peace—  
Warren Burger on race and crime—  
The pay board on the price of our groceries—  
General Motors on the pace of inflation—  
George Meany on who will be president.

But the Bible knows that the real decisions are not at our disposal, because we have to do with a god who makes promises and who keeps them, who acts in power and communicates with his world, who intends something very glorious and very peaceful, very healing and very new for the world, for you and for me. Maybe you think angels are a little primitive, but it is one symbolic attempt to talk about God's new program coming to us. Christmas is a time for leaving our sober, sane world of budgets and schedules and rules and for just a notion blowing our minds with the thought that God intends other ways for us to live. So notice the angels, heed the message, a new king.

In the play from ten-year-old Jim, after the Lamb said, "Gosh, some angels," the Lamb concludes the story this way:

Hey, this has been a neat story, huh?  
It really is a neat story, and it's for you.

## A Zinger That Changes Everything

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*July 16, 1983*

DEUTERONOMY 30:10-14

COLOSSIANS 1:15-20

LUKE 10:25-37

They had the question right. It is no small thing to get the question right: “What shall I do to inherit eternal life?” It is an odd question that does not surface much for our culture. We do not know where the question came from for these people, or what they intended by the question. It might have been a serious question. Or perhaps it was a trick question, because there is scarcely a right answer. Or perhaps it is a question evoked when one is in the presence of Jesus, because Jesus may be playful, but he never settles for frivolous questions. The verse before our Gospel reading had that remarkable Christological affirmation:

Blessed are the eyes which see what you see! For I tell you that many prophets and kings desired to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it. (vv. 23-24, RSV)

In the company of Jesus you can hear and see odd things. For that reason, you had better ask while you have the chance: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Funny phrase, “eternal life,” perhaps an oxymoron. If you think of “life,” it suggests abundance, joy, vigor, freedom, energy. The word “eternal,” however, qualifies everything in the direction of transcendence, and maybe diminishes what the word “life” seems to mean when taken alone. Take the word “eternal” with some transcendentalism, and it means long-term life with God, life as has been our destiny from the beginning of creation, life beyond time, an endless well-being, free from trouble, anxiety, vexation. The question suggests a contrast between what is promised and what we have now.

Jesus knows the answer to the question: “Love God, love neighbor, keep torah.” Jesus is not a burdened theologian or a troubled psychologist, so he echoes Moses: “You can do it.” YOU can do what you need to get real life. There is no blocking addiction. The problem is that the answer contains too much fuzzy territory. The commandment needs interpretation.

So there is a second question: “Who is my neighbor?” It is not obvious. This second question is asked because the asker wants to waste nothing unnecessary; don’t linger to love those who turn out not to be my neighbor. Like any good storyteller, however, the big move is made at the end of the account. Good pedagogy fixes it so that the student can answer her own question. Now, what did you ask about neighbor love? And the answer is given. “The one who showed mercy, compassion, solidarity, self-giving generosity.” And Jesus closes: “You’ve got it.”

The question at the beginning is: *eternal life*. The answer at the end is: *Mercy*. The question and the answer do not fit together. Eternal life smacks of transcendentalism, future, untroubled, secure. Mercy is by contrast freighted with *risk and hurt* and involvement. It is this shift from question to answer that is the characteristic work of parable, and of gospel.

When I got this assignment from Liz, I thought, OH great, take this intensely religious community, and then take the best-known story in the entire Bible, and everyone will know everything before you start. So take it simply as a reminder. But notice what we usually do not notice. The story is framed as question and answer. We usually neglect the framing to get to the story. The story functions to change the subject of the framing, the move from *eternal life* to mercy, away from life with God to live with neighbor.

The story in the midst of the frame is on the way, the way to having the subject changed. Faith means letting the subject of our life be changed by the presence and rule of Jesus.

Jesus’ story changes our life-question by *plugging us into a world of violence*. The subject is a street mugging, which seems far from eternal life. The great gospel questions are worked out midst the concreteness of brutality and nowhere else, brutality we work on each other, brutality we observe but in which we are, by our humanity, implicated.

Jesus’ story changes our life-question by *interrupting routine and inviting us to uncommon action, action that violates our social role and our sense of self*. The rushing priest and the hurried Levite will not let their lives be interrupted, as they quickly disappear from the narrative. They simply are not interesting. It is the Samaritan who claims our attention. He permits a change both in his routine and in his identity. He is for that reason permitted to linger and participate in the story. By the end of the story, this Samaritan has acquired a new adjective, “good,” that he never expected from a Jewish narrative.

Jesus' story changes our life-question by putting us in a situation of cost whereby we invest on behalf of those who have no claim upon us. This interrupted character used his oil, his wine, his beast, his money, and he signed a blank check on behalf of a nameless stranger, an investment he had no chance of recovering.

The question at the outset is shattered by the narrative. The gospel does not much linger over eternal Life, which will take care of itself. The zinger is *into brutality, interrupted in routine and identity, outrageous cost*. Add the summons to brutality, the surprise of interruption, the costliness of cost, and the odd outcome is mercy. At the end Jesus only adds tersely, "Do it."

Imagine your life with a changed subject, a changed identity, a changed purpose. Jesus has a way of shifting the subject. Our unfaith is a refusal to have the subject of our life changed. In the story, there is chance to regroup, to recast all of life around the one who "holds all things together." Jesus is indeed the glue of reality. First, however, the story causes everything to be unglued and then deeply reorganized.

## A Demanding Long-Term Miracle

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*February 28, 1988*

GENESIS 17:1-10, 15-19

PSALM 105:1-11

ROMANS 4:16-25

MARK 8:31-38

The Bible regularly confesses more than it understands. It claims more than can ever be explained. Its exuberant, unrestrained overstatement is an embarrassment to us. The Bible dares to assert that a miracle from God stands central to our faith and at the bottom of life. In our recent scientific period, say two hundred years, well-educated people have tried to dislodge this claim of miracle or at least make it marginal. In the face of our modernity, either sophisticated or obscurantist, the Bible is unembarrassed about its assertion that, at root, a very particular miracle is at the center of our world.

We are not speaking of a big, spectacular miracle, but a little, local one. We can name it and we cling to it tenaciously. It goes like this—in its embarrassment. Our faith-father Abraham was a very old man. His wife Sarah, our faith-mother, was equally old and they could not have a child. All their hopes, all God's promises, the whole story, hinged on a child to inherit, but none was given. Abraham did have Ishmael, born of a surrogate mother, and old, almost cynical Abraham was prepared to let this Ishmael be his rightful and only heir, because there was no other on the horizon, or even possible.

But, as the story goes, God has more faith, more resilience, more confidence in a possible future than does Abraham or Sarah. Then, inexplicably, this yearned-for, unexpected, desperately wanted baby is born, not of normal human circumstance, but of the power and fidelity of God. This birth is an event defying explanation, resisting reason. Abraham and Sarah and all of

\*This sermon was preached at Nassau Presbyterian Church, Princeton, N.J. The texts are from the lectionary for the Second Sunday in Lent.

us are thrown back from reason and understanding to the more elemental responses of wonder, astonishment, amazement, gratitude, praise, and laughter. In that moment of birth and thanksgiving Israel has broken free from all the bonds of reasonable control and technical prediction. There is only the dance of faith that does not ask for explanation. From that moment on, Israel lives by the inexplicable that evokes gratitude. What Israel sees of God's oddness is not craziness, but powerful faithfulness which can keep promises against all odds. Biblical faith is grounded in God's capacity to keep promises. In that moment Israel comes to know everything that needs to be known about God and about the world and about us. We live in a world of surplus surprises that outrun our capacity to control or predict or explain.

From that treasured gift wondrously given, Israel's lyrical imagination takes off. It sings, it extrapolates, it exaggerates, it generalizes. The God who can give a baby can give everything. The God who can work this new life can work all new life in every circumstance. The bounds of possibility are broken. This is not confidence in human, technical capacity or ingenuity or wisdom, but amazement about the power of life at work beyond our management. Israel sings and dances about the God of Abraham and Sarah, about the God who makes promises and keeps them, who keeps covenant and gives land. Israel in Psalm 105 dares to reread its entire history as a tale of surprising gifts wondrously given. Every aspect of life is now set to lyrics that invite celebration and amazement.

The most eloquent, wondrous extrapolation of this miraculous baby is given by Paul in Romans 4. In this exotic, lyrical passage, Paul uses all the words we expect Paul to use—faith, promise, grace (v. 16). Then Paul gets quite concrete (vv. 19–20) in telling what it was like for this frail old man and this fruitless woman, to notice their hopeless, wrinkled bodies that had no vitality and to be amazed at their gift beyond reason. Between Paul's regular theological vocabulary and his historical reminiscence, Paul utters what must be one of the most remarkable assertions in the Bible: This God in whom Israel believes, "gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (v. 17). The lyrical quality of this affirmation is surely a confession beyond understanding, a claim beyond explanation. Liberal rationalists have been busy getting rid of miracles because they violate our control. Reactionaries have had a few select miracles they massage—creation instead of evolution, virgin birth, physical resurrection—but Paul's rhetoric blows both liberal reticence and reactionary selectivity out of the water: "gives life to the dead. Calls into existence things that do not exist." This entire lyrical claim comes from one baby born to an old couple. In the unexpected birth of little Isaac, God has made outrageous promises of well-being for all time to come. Paul and the whole church are custodians of that outrageous promise. And

along the way, we identify hints and glimpses and oddities where the impossible power of God has overcome our tightly disciplined, fearfully guarded notion of what is possible.

There is thus a dialogue set up in our faith. One voice says, “Can you imagine!” The other voice answers, “Yes, but.” Abraham, old, almost cynical Abraham was filled with “Yes, but.” Yes, but I am very old. Yes, but she is not pregnant. Yes, but we only have Ishmael. It is the naked voice of the gospel that counters his tiredness. Can you imagine a new son born right then? Can you imagine a covenant kept to countless generations to come? Can you imagine land given to landless people? Not: can you implement it, can you plan it, can you achieve it?—only: can you entrust possibilities to God that go beyond your own capacity for control and fabrication?

The New Testament is not different. The people around Jesus are filled with the grudging hesitance of “yes, but.” Jesus comes and says, Can you imagine a dinner for all? Can you imagine a blind boy to see? Can you imagine a prodigal welcomed home? Can you imagine a Pharisee reborn into childlike innocence? Can you imagine lepers healed, widows cared for, poor people made first-class citizens? Of course, it was judged impossible, but Jesus ran powerfully ahead of such fear.

In our day, today, “Yes, but” is powerful and usually wins. “Yes, but” makes us sane, sober, prudent, competent. But it can also drive us to despair, fatigue, cynicism, and even brutality. If you can imagine a baby born to such a failed family,

- Can you imagine a world of valued old people? Yes, but, consider the costs and the overwhelming statistics.
- Can you imagine a Latin America unencumbered by imperial domination? Yes, but Castro is so close.
- Can you imagine a missile-free Europe? Yes, but Russia has such powerful group forces.
- Can you imagine a new world of food for all? Yes, but our standard of living resists such sharing.
- Can you imagine a rehabilitated marriage? Yes, but he or she always. . . .

The list goes on, because Israel’s lyrical imagination is free and unquenchable. God brings into existence that which does not exist. Did you know that the Bible never uses the word *create* with a human subject? We may “make” or “form” or “fabricate,” but only God creates, only God works a genuine new possibility, a new thing beyond our expectations and our extrapolations. It belongs to the mystery and holiness of God to call to be that which is not yet. Because this is God’s world, the world is not closed, either by our hopes or by our fears.

When we have our lives governed by “Yes, but,” by our proud capacity to control or our fearful need to control, we resist God’s power for newness. We deny God’s freedom to give gifts. We end the song, we stop the lyric, we deny the truth of the memory, and we only hold on grimly. Holding on grimly is an act of atheism, governed by “Yes, but,” believing there is no more than what we can explain, no more than what we can control, manage, and predict.

Those of us who gather around these texts and these powerful memories keep alive in our lives the terrible, unsettling transaction between “Yes, but” and “Can you imagine?” Most of the time, “Yes, but” wins. But by God’s powerful grace, the “Yes, but” or our resistance is broken. Newness appears; we can sing songs, unembarrassed, songs about miracles.

The lectionary committee has done a hard and mean thing to us. It has juxtaposed to these powerful texts a Gospel story in which Jesus says, “I must die, I must be crucified” (Mark 8:31). Then Jesus, in the face of Peter’s resistance, gives us a powerful, frightening invitation:

If anyone would follow me, let them . . . take up their cross. . . . Those who lose their life for my sake . . . will save it. (Mark 8:34–35)

It is at best odd to speak about demanding discipleship in the context of such powerful promises as we have just considered. The Bible, however, has known about this juxtaposition all along. God’s incredible newness can be resisted by our capacity and desire to save our lives. We do not want to turn loose. We do not want to relinquish. All our “Yes, buts” are designed to keep control, so that we are not placed in jeopardy. We keep death at bay by our determination. Our long series of “Yes, buts” are designed to resist the Gospel, not only its costs, but its terrible surprises.

Abraham, our father in faith, is not the only one for whom God did staggering things. He is also an invitation to believe and trust and risk and relinquish. He is the one who was fully convinced that God was able to do what God had promised (Rom. 4:21). Abraham was, in an awesome moment of faith, prepared to receive God’s newness that was against all probability, but which set his life utterly new. Abraham might have said “Yes, but.” He might have, if he were embarrassed and sophisticated. Such faith, however, is not enacted by those who are embarrassed. It is modeled by the daring who sing songs, who receive gifts, who make journeys, who confess more than they understand and who claim more than they explain. Faith is enacted by those who trust God who imagines well beyond our resistant presuppositions. Such imagination requires a dying and yields utterly new life.

No one could have foreseen how long-term and how demanding was the birth of Isaac. That single birth is long term even until now. It is demand-

ing because its newness requires many relinquishments—economic, intellectual, religious, political. It requires especially relinquishing that “Yes, but” which hinders our singing. What it demands, however, is more than matched by what it gives—newness, things that do not yet exist. We would not have thought that this birth would lead to such possibility and such demand. But then, Isaac is no ordinary miracle. And the God who birthed Isaac is no conventional God. This God intends us no conventional life.