

[MJTM 21 (2019–2020)]

BOOK REVIEW

Walter Brueggemann. *Virus as a Summons to Faith: Biblical Reflections in a Time of Loss, Grief, and Uncertainty*. Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2020. xii + 80 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-1-7252-7673-4. \$14.00.

Being scared silent is something we have all experienced. Fear can grip and overwhelms us. It can all too often drive away our faith, or at least cause us to lose sight of it. However, Walter Brueggemann did not become silent when a virus began to sweep across the world. He went to the keyboard to unleash his voice in the way he has often done. He wrote an entire book and had it in print in under two months. *Virus as a Summons to Faith* is exactly what North American Christians needed to hear during these times.

Brueggemann addresses critical areas of concern for the individual Christian and the Church, focusing on how to move forward with greater faith. The first and primary area Brueggemann seeks to address is related to the question many asked at the outset of this pandemic, namely, “Is this pandemic a curse from God?” Wisely, Brueggemann does not presume to be an all-knowing prophet. Rather, he attempts to offer a prophetic voice that encourages the growth of a critical faith wrestling with Scripture. Turning attention to key Old Testament passages, Brueggemann demonstrates that God works in varied ways and provides three lines of interpretative options: transactional, purposeful enactment, and enacted in freedom.

The transactional interpretation of events sees a *quid pro quo* reaction from God. This line of thinking is most clearly discerned in the Mosaic administration. Passages like 2 Sam 24:12–13 and Deut 28:20–34 present pestilence as an *unnatural* event in response to personal or community disobedience. The Lord

will pour forth curses because the people “have forsaken me” (Deut 28:20). It is possible to view the current pandemic as such a response from God. Brueggemann allows readers to contemplate the possibility of the North American Church suffering based on the sinfulness in the land. However, the Church must question how the New Testament, specifically the New Covenant, transforms such a *quid pro quo* response from God.

The second interpretative lens is the “purposeful enactment of force” for the “specific purpose of YHWH” (5). This trajectory is mainly drawn from the events in the book of Exodus. Brueggemann highlights that after God does specific actions, he explains their divine purposes. Pharaoh’s heart is hardened for the express purpose that God will be glorified (Exod 14:4, 17). The destructive power of the plagues—analogue to the pestilence of a pandemic—is two-fold. Their end is to rescue his people and proclaim that YHWH is God to the Israelites, the Egyptians, and all the nations.

Contrary to many popular views of divine power, Brueggemann explains that “YHWH, it turns out, has many tools of sovereignty beyond the force of love” (10). Destructive force, and the enactment of terror, is something God has done to bring about the good of his people and his glorification among the nations. Such passages and portrayals of God are an excellent biblical reminder to the North American Church, which has experienced very little martyrdom and persecution in the last few centuries, especially in comparison to China, North Korea, and other former communist states.

The third interpretive option takes us beyond the ability of human interpretive prowess. It requires acknowledging that God’s sovereignty is beyond the capacity of people to comprehend the world (think of passages like Deut 29:29 and Isa 55:8). Brueggemann defines some actions of God as arising from “the sheer holiness of God that can enact in utter freedom without reason, explanation, or accountability, seemingly beyond any purpose at all” (10). For a full display of this freedom of God, readers are turned to events in Job. The enacted wonders in Job 38–41 are not explained, but they cause Job to respond that he is not God. Brueggemann concludes that one of the critical results

of God's actions is to "expose Job's anemic capacity for understanding" (10).

In an age where seemingly endless information is only an internet search away, and there is no shortage of opinions on everything, the Church needs to have humble wonderment restored. God's holiness and utter freedom in all of his actions should lead to the response that he alone is God, and we are not. Brueggemann encourages the understanding that this pandemic is no different from all other calamities. It is an event under God's direct sovereignty, where the divine intent is unlikely to be fully comprehended. It elicits a mental and emotional response that should foster greater faith.

Those who have read Brueggemann over the last four decades know that the restoration of awe and wonder is a primary goal of his work. While not explicitly giving a final interpretation to the divine intent in and through the pandemic, Brueggemann does see that the Church and her preachers are authorized to guide Christians into such wonderment (18). It is the restoration of imaginative wonderment, guided by Scripture, that turns pestilence into a season where faith grows as it seeks mercy.

Using 2 Sam 24, Brueggemann exposes the problematic reality that David faced for his sins. David confesses that he has sinned and acknowledges that punishment is expected. The important thing to understand is that David chooses direct action from God rather than punishment from indirect actions. David does not flee from God. Rather he anticipates God will dispense mercy amid the pestilence. As it may be preached, "we may dare imagine with David that the final word is not pestilence; it is mercy" (26). Faithful hope in the God of mercy is a primary lesson we should draw from this season of a pandemic.

From these object lessons, Brueggemann teaches that the hope needed in this season is the Christian hope that rests on a firm foundation. It is not a hope based on the whimsical expectations of a quick vaccine or a rational governmental response. It is not a hope that hides behind platitudes like, "we will get through this." The Christian response to a season of pestilence is to foster a faith that firmly rests in a hope founded upon the "conviction that God will not quit until God has arrived at God's good

intention” (2). Churches should be proclaiming a restorative message that does not hide from the pain caused by death, fear, and anxiety. Instead, the Church should proclaim that war, pestilence, and famine are accountable to God. This theological acknowledgment can restore an imaginative hope, which in kind robs the pandemic of its capacity to disorder life (43).

While the book is short, it is content-rich and nourishes faith. It challenges and comforts with the Scriptures. The social reordering that Brueggemann offers will challenge ideas of returning to the past experiences of *normal*. Brueggemann is daring to imagine a social order that is greater.

One possible shortcoming of the work might be its brevity. At times there is an abruptness to the discussion, and the end seems to come too quickly. However, it does not deter from the overall quality of the book and makes sense in light of the need to quickly address current events.

A final aspect to highlight is the offered prayers. At the end of each of the seven sections, Brueggemann provides psalm-like prayers that confront different aspects of the season. They are helpful for personal prayer, liturgical guidance, and community reflection.

As a pastor, I heartily recommend this book to all Christians. It is not light reading but rich reading. I recommend it to all Christians who have questioned how to respond to the current pandemic and wondered if Scripture offers any reflection. I also heartily commend it to church leaders looking for ways to lead their fellow sisters and brothers in Christ.

Chris S. Stevens
John Knox Presbyterian Church
Ruston, LA