


Following
into Risky Obedience

Prayers
along the Journey



COLLECTED PRAYERS OF
WALTER BRUEGGEMANN, VOLUME 2

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN

WITH BARBARA DICK

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Acting in the Wake: Prayers for Justice

*Following into Risky Obedience: Prayers along the
Journey*

Waiting in Gratitude: Prayers of Joy

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FOREWORD



Years ago, I was mentoring a pastor who thought she was making a routine home visit on an elderly couple. Good pastors know that no visit is routine. Wise ones are attentive to the opportunities that lie under the surface as pivotal moments in ministry.

After taking several sips of coffee and listening to some disjointed conversation, she quickly diagnosed that there was distress in the room. Every pastoral engagement has the potential to open closed doors. In this case, the ultimate source of these seniors' stress and quarreling *was behind a closed door*. Days earlier, the shelves in one of their closets had collapsed.

Like all of us, their lives were in the layers. Books, photos, treasured memories, and select heirlooms were now mixed with ordinary things like winter coats, a feather duster, and a vacuum cleaner. The disruption had metastasized from the closet and attached itself to every preexisting conflict in their relationship. They were angry, and they felt powerless and ashamed. Their well-ordered lives had turned to chaos. While everything in that small storage space was mentally and emotionally well inventoried, all of it was no longer accessible.

Hearing their distress, the young pastor put down her cup of coffee, rolled up her sleeves, and

helped them in ways that they dared not ask. When she did, she learned something important about pastoral ministry. The couple not only reorganized a closet but were able to *reorder their lives*.

For many of us, Walter Brueggemann's prayers do what that young pastor did for the couple in their time of need. Many of us don't know where to begin. We find ourselves searching for vocabulary in a season of dislocation. We know "it's in there somewhere," but more often, the words we *yearn* to offer God seem inaccessible. In our weariness or frustration, our best and hardest expressions cost more energy than we can muster. Some of us are grieving. We are at a loss for words or there are no words. The structural shelving that once held our memories, treasures, and ordinary parts of our lives has collapsed, and this now impacts our energy, resolve, and relationships. Even if we could ask for help, we might not know what to ask for.

Brueggemann's prayers give new resources, new energy, and new possibility. He offers fresh vocabulary and images that serve as wonderful scaffolding for the life of faith. Who knew that a relationship with God could be so honest, so earnest, so painful, and so real? Brueggemann knows. He knows not just because he can quilt together nice words in an orderly way; he knows because he has wrestled these words out of himself, his experience, his faith, and his God.

The large theme under which these prayers are organized is journey. There are people who navigate their way through the world by maps and there are those who navigate by landmarks. This is both liter-

ally true *and true pedagogically*. Some anchor what we read or hear or see in a story or in an image, and others, in a linear outline; it's just how we are built.

Good preachers recognize the needs of both kinds of hearers and do their best to provide for both. The best teachers provide some linear direction *as well as* images as they recognize the needs of both kinds of learning styles. Good writers follow Jesus' sage wisdom and become disciples of the kingdom of heaven by bringing forth something old and new (Matt. 13:52). The best guides help us find our way on the journey by providing maps *and* landmarks and will not settle for one or the other.

Walter Brueggemann has shown once again that he is a trustworthy and seasoned guide for the journey. His vocabulary is rich and risky. Brueggemann understands that relationships need both *security* and *authenticity*. A relationship with God is not immune from those needs. Unlike many interpersonal relationships, *authenticity* does not jeopardize relationship with God, it *deepens* it. This takes practice and some unlearning and relearning. Giving voice and vocabulary to "what is in there" may uproot some of our assumptions and sensibilities about God. Once named and spoken, these things root us even deeper in the relationship *now that they have been said*.

Brueggemann's vocabulary always comes with freight. He helps us reimagine not only the dynamics of a relationship with God, but also the one with our neighbors. A neighbor and neighborliness are not just polite words in a lexicon. Neighbors are real, storied people with texture. Some of them are

easy to love on the grounds of their need. Some of them might currently be enemies who are on the way to becoming neighbors. The change of status from enemies to neighbors requires a movement in the heart of the one praying. Enemies can and should be loved, but this transformation of status can't happen until hard truths are spoken to God. Once those truths are uttered, the one praying is *given* new resources for reimagining others. The dialogue with God about enemies, neighbors, and circumstances is the stuff of faith that challenges, tests, convicts, and summons us to something larger than ourselves.

Those familiar with Walter Brueggemann can easily cite by heart some of his memorable frameworks that can serve as maps. For the Psalms it is *orientation, disorientation, and reorientation*. For the culture it is *therapeutic, technological, military, consumerism*. For the contests between prophets and power brokers it is frameworks of *anxiety, control, monopoly, and truth to power*. For those needing a map, Brueggemann provides these as potential scripts for navigating his prayers.

Nonetheless, neither readers, nor God, nor the world, nor Brueggemann (!) is reducible to a framework—Brueggemann would *insist* on that. There are no simple formulas or shortcuts. Brueggemann is impatient with reductionism and every form of simplifying the hard complexities that go with a dynamic relationship with self, God, and others. Relationships require wrestling and negotiation. Sometimes those are contested, sometimes they are adversarial, and sometimes they come with unwelcome emotions that *feel adversarial*. Deep truths, long

kept at arm's length, once voiced, set inner and external captives free. God's shoulders are large enough (and God's ego is small enough) to take the hard truths of our lives, truths about which we should not bear false witness. This is some of the hard work of being in relationship, but God demonstrates God's own resolve in the person of Jesus. In him, God reveals a willingness to meet us in the intersections that are honest, raw, and human. Brueggemann's prayers provide on-ramps to a new kind of relating with God, self, and world.

The journey toward new relationships continues as we navigate a new world. On behalf of a whole church that has experienced its reality as collapsed, that continues a turbulent journey toward reordered lives and longs to find our voice and vocabulary, we say to Walter Brueggemann "thank you" for your prayers that help us orienteer along the way!

Marc Nelesen
September 2022

PREFACE TO VOLUME 2



The theme for this selection of my prayers, *journey*, has been suggested by my editors. It is an excellent rubric for prayers, as the people of God, in both the Old and New Testaments, are indeed on a journey. They never travel alone but are always “on the way” with the God who summons and accompanies them. And because of that travel arrangement, they are always in conversation with that God, that is, they are always engaged in prayer. Sometimes that conversation is peaceable and companionable; very often it is one of vigorous contestation. Faith is indeed a journey, and the “conversation of the heart” is one of the fiercest constituent members of that journey.

Since God’s initial summons to Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 12:1–3), Israel has been a people on the way in the Old Testament. According to the arc of that ancient tradition, Israel arrives in the land of promise, always the destination of the journey:

Thus the LORD gave to Israel all the land that he swore to their ancestors that he would give them; and having taken possession of it, they settled

there. And the LORD gave them rest on every side just as he had sworn to their ancestors; not one of all their enemies had withstood them, for the LORD had given all their enemies into their hands. Not one of all the good promises that the LORD had made to the house of Israel had failed; all came to pass. (Josh. 21:43–45)

Along the way from the initial imperative to the final fulfillment, Israel faced many toils and snares. Along that way, Moses is the great exemplar of prayer who engages God in a series of contested conversations (Exod. 32:11–13; 33:12–23; Num. 14:13–19). Alongside Moses, his sister Miriam leads the women of Israel in anticipatory praise as Israel is on its way (Exod. 15:20–21). In turn, Moses echoes the Song of Miriam to affirm that the destination of the journey is not only the land of promise, but specifically the city of Jerusalem:

You brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your own possession,
the place, O LORD, that you made your abode,
the sanctuary, O LORD, that your hands have
established.

Exod. 15:17

It is always Jerusalem: next year in Jerusalem!

It is important to understand (and to undertake) Israel's journey with the practice of prayer on the way. By way of inflection on this contested journey toward Jerusalem, we have the vigorous stormy lament prayers of Jeremiah, who, on behalf of Israel as well as for his own life, disputes with YHWH until,

in the end, his prayers finish in unresolved travail (Jer. 11:18–12:6; 15:10–21; 17:14–18; 18:18–23; and 20:7–18). His prayers of course are uttered in Jerusalem, the contested destination of Israel’s journey.

In the later tradition of the Old Testament, Israel reiterates, with sustained intentionality, the old tradition of journey as it begins again in exile (aka “wilderness”). Israel sets out on its belated journey under the exuberant imaginative impetus of the poet:

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Isa. 55:12

As the Hebrew Bible ends (with its different ordering of books), Israel is under mandate from the Persian king, Cyrus, to complete its journey to Jerusalem. In the last verse of that Bible, the imperial edict is ground for both hope and action:

Thus says King Cyrus of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whoever is among you of all his people, may the LORD his God be with him! Let him go up. (2 Chr. 36:23)

As that Hebrew Bible ends, Israel is not yet returned to Jerusalem; but it is on its way there. That journey from exile to homecoming, a reperformance

of the old tradition, is again marked by prayer, notably the long petitionary laments of Ezra 9 and Nehemiah 9. The journey is not ever simply a whim of travel. It is an engagement of faith that depends upon this interaction every step of the way. As Israel journeys, so it prays.

Many of my prayers in this collection were offered at the beginning of a seminary class. Most often in each case I took as a theme for prayer a text we would study that day in class. The collection will indicate that I ranged over much of the Old Testament as did my teaching. My effort was to create a pedagogical environment in which the text of the day could be seen as in some way immediately contemporary in its address to us in our study. On occasion this caused me to focus not on a text, but on a circumstance in our interpretive context for that day. With both text-based and context-based prayers, I wanted to bear witness to the claim that *a faith-based journey is a pray-practicing journey.*

When the early church reflected on the journey undertaken in the Old Testament, it was able to produce an inventory of those on the journey who had traveled “by faith.” Thus it is attested that the faithful journey is toward the promise, even when they do not arrive at their destination:

All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them. They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth, for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking

of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed, he has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:13–16)

By the conclusion of that long recital of those on the journey, the text addresses the contemporary generation of the faithful that is to continue the journey of faith:

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God has provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect. (vv. 39–40)

Because the ones we remember “did not receive what was promised,” the new generation must continue the journey. The urgency is to be “on the way.” Such “being on the way” is the only chance that the older travelers on the journey should “be made perfect.”

In the New Testament, the companions of Jesus are always “on the way,” so much so that they came to be called a sect of “the Way” (Acts 24:14). Indeed Jesus’ singular word of command whereby he recruits disciples is simply “Follow me” (Mark 1:17; 2:14; 8:34; 10:21). In issuing this command Jesus does not specify what will be entailed. The disciples learn that only as they travel with him. Once they are under way they come to understand that they

are on their way to Jerusalem. That is, they are to leave the safer environs of rural Galilee to travel to the holy city where the leadership of the city has colluded with the officials of the Roman Empire. The journey will yield a high-risk alternative to imperial authority. The disciples do not know this as they begin their walk with him. Along the way, he instructs them (Mark 8:31; 9:30–32). He empowers them (Luke 9:1; 10:9, 17). He acknowledges their acute fear because of the high risk of contesting the claims of empire. Thus the “journey” is not a fanciful romantic outing. It is rather a mission to show forth an alternative governance that will, soon or late, here and there, displace the present rule of empire. That journey, when faithfully undertaken, will end in *faith on Good Friday* and in *hope on Easter Sunday*. It is no wonder that the journey of faith and hope is one of prayer. Without that sustaining conversation, the journey for any one of us could not continue. It is my hope that these prayers will be resources for that journey of faith and hope, with our destination of *an obedient Friday* and a *joyous Sunday*.

Walter Brueggemann
Columbia Theological Seminary

ONE



PRAYERS *FOR*
THE JOURNEY

ON LOSING AND FINDING



Holy God,
Who has called this people for your own purposes,
Who has placed us, even us, in places of calling,
We give you thanks for our faithful companions and
for your whole church catholic.
We marvel at your patience with us.
We marvel at your graciousness and
forgiveness toward us.
We pray for your spirit of renewal and power,
that our fears and our hopes may be submitted
to your cross,
that we may experience the kinds of
brokenness that are faithful to Jesus,
and that we may come to know in intimate
ways that losing life is the way to find life.
We are, all of us, along with our brothers and sisters,
bewildered and anxious people.
We not only want to keep our lives;
We want to keep our lives just as they are.
So come to us with your weak power, and
your gentle abrasion,
even among us in our fearfulness.
We pray that you will keep your promise
of all things new.
Give us courage for the costliness of your way
of newness. Amen.

—October 15, 1976

*HOLDING OTHERS
IN GOD'S PRESENCE*



For the company of the faithful who have
trusted in your promises and
relied on the vision of your Torah,
For the brave men and women who have named
your name in hard places,
For faithful women and men this day,
For caring pastors and missionaries in places of
persecution and seduction,
For all the bishops of the church who struggle their
way to faithfulness,
For all the baptized who name your name,
We make intercession this day.

We know that you do not leave yourself ever
without a witness.

This is a hard time to witness,
so we pray for the gift of your power,
your wisdom, and
your energy,
that we may walk and not grow weary,
that we may run and not faint.
There is no power except your word
that lets us this day be whole. Amen.

—December 10, 1976

THE GOD OF THE BURDENED



We scarcely take time to be holy;
we pray on the run,
come in late and leave early.

We scarcely take time to be human;
we rush past the neighbor,
and even miss ourselves.

We scarcely take time to notice
the goodness and beauty of your world.

We are so anxious, so overextended,
so preoccupied, so propelled.

And you, amid our excessive engagement,
you utter the day “Seven!”
Six days to work . . .
seventh to rest.

You, in your unanxious presence, take the day off.
Your angels spend the day reading Torah.
Your saints pause in gratitude and wonder.

Well, we are not yet angels, and scarcely saints.
But “seven” us anyway.
Invite us into your rest,
that our restlessness may become
penultimate in our lives.

We are indeed burdened, heavy laden,
stretched thin.

And you, in the fleshed Nazareth guy,
offer an easy yoke.

Relieve us of yokes too heavy,
of finance and obligation,
of virtue and morality,
of performance
and all that causes us to
miss “the Big Seven.”

Be our rest . . .
turn our violent restlessness,
and make us new. Amen.

—*July 24, 2007, Columbia Theological Seminary
Continuing Education Event*

*DEPOSED FOLK
MADE NEIGHBORS*



How strange you are, good God,
that you gather those without rights or power, and
transpose them into chosen people
who carry your future in their midst.

How strange that in ancient Egypt
you gathered displaced slaves and
they became your chosen people.

How strange that Jesus came
among distressed people and
welcomed them as your kingdom carriers.

How strange that generous attentiveness
to “the least” is as though it were done to you.

And now!

We attend to many displaced peoples
and
we notice afresh displaced peoples in their own lands
who have been displaced, devalued, and dismissed.

We confess before you and our neighbors
that some of us have been preemptive
in aggressive ways.
We have been indifferent to the claims
of sisters and brothers.
We have been complicit in pretending
we are legitimate possessors.

Thus we pray to you, strange God,
do your strange work,
and guide us in doing your strange work.

Do your good work that the world does not expect.
Do your work of being mother and father to orphans.
Do your work of being guardian and patron
of disenfranchised peoples.
Do your work of restoring displaced peoples,
of recovering devalued cultures,
of giving back what has been lost
but never relinquished.
You are the God who regards “the other”
as friend and neighbor.
So bind us into your neighborhood.
People your neighborhood with folk unlike us,
and guide us as we learn to cherish and respect
our neighbors
who preceded us in the good land.
We pray your strange name as we await
your strange work. Amen.

—December 12, 2015