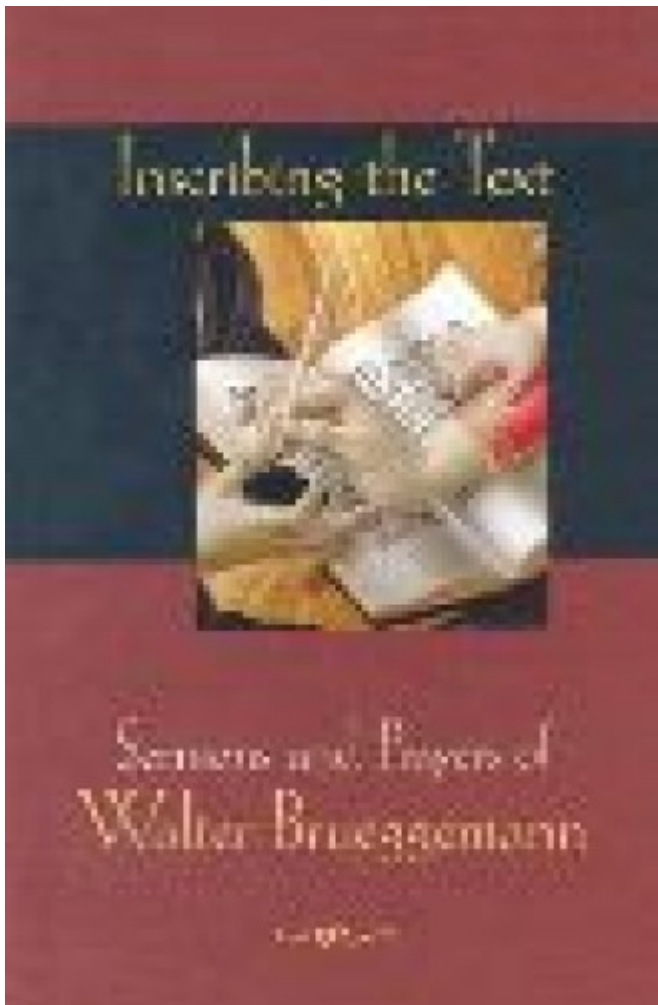


Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann

reviewed by [Eugene H. Winkler](#) in the [June 1, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Inscribing the Text: Sermons and Prayers of Walter Brueggemann

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Fortress

A good preacher should be able to teach in a right and orderly way . . . be able to speak well . . . have a good memory . . . be sure of the material and be diligent . . . stake body and life, goods and honor on it . . . [and] know when to stop,” said Martin Luther. Walter Brueggemann meets all these criteria and more. His energy and creativity “make us wonder if he is climbing Sinai every morning for dictation,” Anna Carter Florence writes in the foreword to this collection of his sermons and prayers. Brueggemann’s capacity for work, his enthusiasm for God’s word, his novel reading of scripture and his pastoral concern mark the wealth of books, articles and reviews that he has authored.

These various writings were delivered in a variety of churches, seminaries and pastors’ gatherings during the past three years. As with his earlier *Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth: Prayers of Walter Brueggemann* (Fortress), the prayers alone make the book valuable. They express a deep commitment, a life penetrated by the Word and a compassion born from an openness to God’s leading.

Brueggemann wrote most of these prayers after reading the psalms, and they give us new understandings both of biblical poetry and of how the psalms can enrich our prayer lives. Heed, for example, these words from a prayer on the theme of generosity: “Sink your generosity deep into our lives / that your muchness may expose our false lack / that endlessly receiving, we may endlessly give, / so that the world may be made Easter new, without greedy lack, but only wonder / without coercive need, but only love / without destructive greed, but only praise . . . all things Easter new. . . . Finish your creation in wonder, love and praise.”

The sermons—preached in Presbyterian churches across the U.S.—deal creatively with all three of the appointed lectionary texts. I was especially moved by “Saints Remembered and Saints to Come,” preached at Peace United Church of Christ in Tilden, Nebraska. Brueggemann and his wife, Mary, had been invited to the 100th anniversary celebration of the church his father, August, served from 1931 to 1935. Brueggemann begins the sermon by recalling childhood memories, then affirms the historic creeds of the church and explores what it means to celebrate the saints. His exposition of Hebrews 11 is excursive and brilliant. He concludes by calling upon the Holy Spirit’s inspiration and guidance for the congregation as it faces an uncertain future in a tiny town.

The first piece in the book may well be the most important. In a paper presented at the Festival of Homiletics in Chicago in 2002, Brueggemann introduces a whole new understanding of the preaching task. Speaking of the preacher as scribe, he moves from four scriptural confrontations in which truth speaks to power (Moses addressing Pharaoh, Nathan addressing David, Elijah addressing Ahab and Daniel addressing Nebuchadnezzar) to an analysis of the “deeply problematic things” inherent in this model. Pastors presiding over institutions with programs, budgets and anxiety-filled members are not likely to speak truth to power. Not if they want to keep their jobs.

Brueggemann describes “scribal refraction” as an approach vastly different from historical criticism. The preacher as scribe does what “school-men, book-men, and the scroll-makers who gathered old traditions and memories and preserved them in some form” did after the Babylonian exile. The postmodern preacher, like Ezra and his cohorts, must retext the community, turn it back to the imagination and practices which lead it to God’s most elemental assurances and claims. “Preaching in postmodern North America addresses folks of Christian descent who have been tossed about by the vagaries of historical circumstances and who have largely forgotten our rootage in Moses and in Jesus,” Brueggemann asserts. The preacher’s job is “to keep that confrontation between truth and power alive and available to the community through acts of textual interpretation and imagination.”

The preacher must not only study and trust the text but also attend to the listening congregation. Some in the congregation are textless, believing that they can live out of their autonomous experience alone, while others bring with them a weak, thin text of technological, therapeutic and military consumerism, “an odd mix of moralism, market ideology, self-congratulation and anxiety.” The great 19th-century theologians were almost always pastors. In the 20th century the theological task was turned over to the academics, and pastors were relegated to administrative and therapeutic functions. Brueggemann, a preacher who is also an academic, reunites the two parts of ministry.