

## Relentless Hope

Prophetic imagination in a time of despair.

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WHEN I WAS A YOUNG, green, pre-tenured professor, I joined Anna Carter Florence, the Peter Marshall Professor of Preaching at Columbia Theological Seminary, and the eminent Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann on an academic panel about preaching. I had accepted the invitation to participate only a month before; two other panelists had canceled, and I'd been tapped to stand in as a substitute.

Walking into the standing-room-only conference hall, I was elated and anxious. Respected biblical scholars and experts in the art of preaching lined the walls; over-eager doctoral students had secured front-row seats. In this sea of spectators, I knew not to flatter myself: Most had come to hear Professor Brueggemann. Though I had never had any prior formal acquaintance with this sage of biblical scholarship, I had spent nearly five years in my doctoral program in conversation with his work on the prophets, including his popular and widely influential *The Prophetic Imagination*, published in 1978—only four years after my birth.

I listened to my co-panelists' presentations. Then, not long before I had the floor, my purpose became clear: I had not come to pay obeisance to veteran scholars. I was there to realize my own voice and declare my own contribution to the conversation. And though I had been deeply shaped by Brueggemann's work, his scholarship on the prophetic voice had sparked new questions I needed to answer.

**New perceptions of reality**

Acts of utterance are acts of imagination that evoke new perceptions of reality. Through spoken word, prophets rise up to engage life-and-death matters, carrying the divine response into material reality. This idea is the central thread through all of Brueggemann's work on prophetic speech.

**Prophets conjure up possibilities of another reality when the king declares that only one reality exists.**

*The Prophetic Imagination*, first presented as lectures for United Church of Christ and Disciples of Christ ministers in Washington state, remains "one of the most perceptive uncoverings of the prophetic voice in contemporary Old Testament study," as Old Testament scholar Patrick D. Miller put it. Brueggemann himself described the book as "my first publication in which I more-or-less found my own voice as a teacher in the church." This admission is worth remembering because, regrettably, not all biblical theologians see their scholarship as work in service to ecclesial communities.

The focus of his time-honored classic is the prophetic consciousness of Moses, a holy tradition that continues in the work of other biblical prophets and consummates in Jesus of Nazareth. According to Brueggemann, this prophetic consciousness is concerned with the rejection of the status quo, speaking words of resistance, a healthy suspicion of power, and self-awareness about the seductive influences of culture.

In the Bible, this consciousness echoes through the despair-penetrating hope that Jeremiah and Isaiah offered to exile-weary Israelites. Today, this consciousness reverberates through people such as William Barber II who speak out against white nationalism, police violence, and corporate greed to remind us another way is possible.

The ideological opposite of the prophetic tradition is imperialism, or "royal consciousness," which Brueggemann finds in the Egyptian empire and the reign of Solomon. While prophetic consciousness promotes an economics of equality, politics of justice, and religion of God's freedom, royal consciousness, by contrast, reinforces an economics of affluence, politics of oppression, and religion of divine accessibility where God is fully controllable and perceived as the king's patron. We hear echoes of this imperial mindset today when religious leaders—professional God-knowers—claim that natural disasters are a sign of God's displeasure and at the same time endorse political candidates whose moral actions and legislative agendas stand counter to Jesus' vision of good news for the poor.

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As Brueggemann explains, prophetic consciousness always seeks to free people from the royal consciousness. People locked in an imperial mindset assimilate to the status quo—critics are silenced, grief is buried, faith identity is lost, and passion withers. And when passion disappears, people develop immunity to transcendent voices and to concern for one's neighbor.

But through acts of creative speech, prophetic imagination creates a genuine alternative. Prophetic imagination—“alternative consciousness”—counters royal consciousness with pathos and imagination. By waging poetic war through image and metaphor, prophets conjure up possibilities of another reality when the king declares that only one reality exists.

### **Seminary, sanctuary, streets**

In the four decades since its publication, *The Prophetic Imagination* has been translated into six languages. It has been cited by South African Christians who challenged apartheid, psychologists analyzing the role of grief in hope, and Catholic theologians responding to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. And across the denominational spectrum, hundreds of scholars and theologians have turned to *The Prophetic Imagination* to provide insight on pastoral care, religious education, preaching, and biblical interpretation.

According to activist theologian and biblical scholar Ched Myers, in the U.S. the book sparked a movement of alternative consciousness at a time when the prophetic voice “had been dulled or disappeared in the preaching and teaching of most dominant-culture churches.” As Myers explained, “*The Prophetic Imagination* gave countless mainstream white Christians permission to reconsider social justice as an integral part of their faith and practice. In it a respected member of the academic guild (and a Presbyterian) dared to breach the gulf between seminary, sanctuary, and streets—something all too rare in white professional biblical studies at the time.”

### **If you want to see alternative consciousness in action, you must look beyond the majority culture.**

Duke Divinity professor Ellen F. Davis put *The Prophetic Imagination* in a broader context. “This one book,” Davis said, “evidences what is of perennial value in Walter’s wide work: namely his deep conviction that these texts speak directly to the church in our time, and the scholar’s task is to do the kind of exegetical and rhetorical work that makes their voices audible, intelligible, and compelling to people who are eager to hear that kind of honest speech about what God is about in our world.”

Brueggemann’s work on the characteristics of prophetic speech created an opening for me to explore the continuity between biblical prophecy and the prophetic speech of African-American preachers in the U.S., a topic that eventually led me to write *A Pursued Justice: Black Preaching From the Great Migration to Civil Rights*. For nearly a decade I have been chasing down answers to questions inspired by Brueggemann’s work: What does it mean to preach prophetically? Why are culture and context essential to how imaginative speech functions? And how do we preach prophetically in a postmodern context?

### **Voices from life’s underside**

When I was a young doctoral student reading *The Prophetic Imagination* for the first time, I was surprised Brueggemann’s work wasn’t in conversation with African-American theologians such

as Jacquelyn Grant, Randall C. Bailey, Katie G. Cannon, and James Cone. To me, these voices were crucial in bringing the oppressive structures of systemic injustice to the attention of the mainline—real-live examples of prophetic consciousness in our own era.

Their absence was especially curious because *The Prophetic Imagination* emphasizes the importance of “subcommunities,” or habitats that stand in tension with the dominant community in any political economy. These places, as Brueggemann describes, become dynamic spaces to actively nurture “a community of peculiar discourse with practices of memory, hope, and pain that keep healthy human life available.” Or in other words: If you want to see alternative consciousness in action, you must look beyond the majority culture.

But while he recognizes the importance of subcommunities in his writing, Brueggemann did not specifically tie his scholarship on prophetic ministry to a specific people or era. Thus, at the time of his writing, his more universal claims about the prophetic tradition remained untested beyond his principal audience, which appeared mostly to be people like himself: white, “mainline” church folks.

For example, in the book’s postscript on practice, Brueggemann writes that prophetic imagination ultimately must be more than “a good idea.” “It is a concrete practice that is undertaken by real believers who share the conviction of grief and hope that escapes the restraints of dominant culture,” he writes. To that end, he cites examples of alternative consciousness in action: communities that care for people with dementia, provide healthcare for the poor, and incorporate lament and dissent into their corporate liturgy.

Brueggemann acknowledges that this list is “happenstance and subjective,” limited by the churches and organizations he knows. Yet his contemporary examples largely overlook how religion, scripture, and culture have been central to naming and interpreting existential events of ultimate significance in the African-American lived experience in North America.

Of course, as a white, Presbyterian male writing in the 1970s, Brueggemann was not in a position to speak authoritatively on these topics. In the book’s revised edition, Brueggemann notes that his own affinity with liberation theology grew after *The Prophetic Imagination* was published. In the years since, Brueggemann’s more-forthright chastisement of the white establishment has given me hope that there are voices from the majority community that are not bought.

Nevertheless, we are right to consider how Brueggemann’s own social location influenced his understanding of a prophetic voice that speaks for the margins. As an African-American, middle-class man thinking about the history of prophetic preaching, I must be careful of similar concerns myself.

To see the connection between social justice as an aspect of the human condition, contextual theology, and identity construction, one does well to go through Brueggemann. But to understand the power of the prophetic word to impact social change in the here-and-now, to illuminate what might otherwise be considered one-size-fits-all claims, one must draw in other

voices who take seriously the distinct question sets of persons and communities experiencing life's underside.

### **From pulpits to hip-hop**

The prophetic word is a word of relentless hope. In a society that cooperates with violence and where a large contingent of white evangelicals tolerates divisive and bigoted rhetoric from the leader of the free world, *The Prophetic Imagination* and its sequel, *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipatory Word*, have secured their place as hope-generating lexicons for courageous Christian preachers today.

If we take these books seriously, we will recognize that the contemporary church must ask itself again and again: How are we to navigate our current social climate in the way of Jesus, the disinherited Palestinian Jew whose love ethic stands opposite America's enthronement of whiteness, unregulated embrace of capitalism, and obsession with conquering—the triple evils that have profoundly corrupted U.S. Christianity's reputation around the globe?

Where do we find prophetic consciousness today? As a preacher, my first instinct is to look to the pulpit. After all, who will speak legitimately on behalf of our society's weak and most vulnerable citizens if not leaders within Christ's church? And I'm hopeful; I've been privileged to journey alongside African-American clergy who are using spoken word to creatively challenge a death-dealing culture.

### ***The prophetic word is a word of relentless hope.***

But prophetic imagination cannot be so narrowly confined. The places where we can see this alternative consciousness let loose in the world include not only congregational pulpits but also music studios. When I listen to "Welcome to America," by Christian rap artist Lecrae, or watch the music video of Common and John Legend's Oscar-winning "Glory," I hear songs that marry prophetic criticism and hope to honor sacred truths.

Like African-American spirituals, "Glory" is a proclamation of hope in the face of human tragedy. With impeccable timing and lyrical precision, Common describes a kind of justice he wants to see in the world—justice that honors cultural particularity. One can hear this impulse in Common's trouble-making wordplay, "Justice for all just ain't specific enough," which both recalls the Pledge of Allegiance and the unfulfilled promise of true democracy for African Americans. He infers that to cling to the garbs of religious piety without concrete, just actions to follow is to nurture a false testimony that mocks the meaning of Christ's public crucifixion, negates Rosa Parks' courage to sit in a forbidden seat, and trivializes the death of Michael Brown, the unarmed teen fatally shot in Ferguson, Mo., by a white police officer who escaped indictment.

One would neither expect—nor perhaps desire to see—Walter Brueggemann outfitted with a hoodie and earbuds, head bobbing to a poetic construal of the gospel in hip-hop verse. Yet, more than any other biblical theologian, Brueggemann's work has helped me to name Christian

hip-hop as a hopeful and dynamic habitat for what he describes in *The Practice of Prophetic Imagination* as “imagining the world as though YHWH ... is a real character and the defining agent in the world.” Like the subcommunities that Brueggemann describes, hip-hop artists use imaginative language to let people know that hope is available, despite damning evidence to the contrary.

I am not implying that we should accommodate to culture uncritically and run the risk of having the peculiar news of God’s freedom in Christ ensnared by the spiritual relativism of secular society. I am suggesting, however, that preachers—and all of us—would stand to grow in prophetic imagination if we listen hospitably to rich rhetorical discourse often considered unsuitable for the sanctuary. Tepid talks might satisfy the catechized believer, but if we fail to poetically reclaim assertive, more-courageous *justice-to-hope* themes, an opportunity to reach a generation of would-be Christian converts in communities on the brink of collapse will have been forfeited.

Speaking truth to power while adhering to realistic hope remains the only viable way to community flourishing in a culture of fear. This is the work for which we’ve been commissioned: to name God and voice God’s enduring concern about human suffering and despair and not to overlook what God has done in the person of Jesus Christ, who personified prophetic fulfillment.

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