

To Speak Like Prophets

Genesis 11:1-9; Acts 2:1-21

On Thursday, the Old Testament scholar and theologian Walter Brueggemann died at the age of 92. While I only met him a few times, his work has been a tremendous influence in my ministry as well as my personal faith. He spent his life in devotion to the poetry of the Hebrew prophets.

To begin, I will offer a prayer of illumination written by the late Dr. Brueggemann—may his memory be a blessing.

Truth-telling, wind-blowing, life-giving spirit—we present ourselves now for our instruction and guidance; breathe your truth among us, breathe your truth of deep Friday loss, your truth of awesome Sunday joy. We pray in the name of Jesus risen to new life—and him crucified. Amen.

Our second scripture reading is called the Tower of Babel, and many of us have heard the ancient story preached and taught as the sin of human pride trying to construct a tower to heaven. However, neither the builders nor the God in the story emphasize that point. Listen for what the Spirit is saying to us today...

They build a tower, but these builders are motivated to “make a name for ourselves” in order that “we would not be scattered across the face of the earth” (Gen 11:4). The Hebrew word “scatter” literally refers to a clay pot that has been smashed into pieces. I can understand why the ancients wished to avoid this fate.

Yet, the Lord decided to confuse their languages precisely so that they would be scattered (Gen 11:8-9). To explain, Walter Brueggemann pointed us to the first creation story in the opening chapter of Genesis, when God makes all of humankind in God’s image (Gen 1:26). God blessed humankind with the divine name and then charged us to “fill the earth” (Gen 1:28). It’s a tragic misinterpretation in recent Christian history that our “dominion” of the earth justifies our exploitation of it. God charged us to fill the earth so that we would take care of land, water, sky, and sea, as well as flora and fauna.

Yet, we, like the ancient builders, have sought to make a name for ourselves apart from the rest of creation. We have isolated and sheltered ourselves at the expense of the environment. Only three generations ago, the majority of the human population would have considered the destruction of land, water, plant, and animal life as a failure. Now, for the first time in human history, the majority of the

world's human population lives in cities, and our agricultural and energy needs are largely at the expense of the welfare of the planet. We are reaping what we sow. More and more populations are being smashed apart and scattered due to the refugee crisis caused by political warfare over scarce resources and climate change disasters.

The story of the scattering at Babel, however, is paired this morning with the reading from Acts at Pentecost. In Jerusalem, disciples were sheltered in locked rooms. They had built towers of fear. The Spirit scattered them so that they would fill the earth, but the gift of the Holy Spirit was not a curse of confusion. Neither was it the restoration of Babel nor the reconstitution of one universal language. Each culture heard the same message of love and grace in their unique language. Together, Genesis 11 and Acts 2 speak of judgment and hope. They are prophetic.

Like we have preconceived notions about the Tower of Babel, we often think that a prophet rages about hellfire and brimstone. But Brueggemann painted the prophetic task as neither angry denunciation nor moral exhortation, but rather as the deeply pastoral calling to nurture hope amidst grief. In his seminal work "The Prophetic Imagination," Brueggemann argued that prophetic tongue was strong, even harsh, toward a positive goal: "It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one."

The message for Pentecost is about such imaginative, alternative, and urgent language. In our time, there are voices calling for subjugation, domination, and violence. As Spirit people, we must both name the injustices and point beyond them. We are charged to be prophetic and penitent, to decry what's wrong and work toward what's right. Our prophetic calling, Brueggemann wrote, is to "reform our deformed lives."

For inspiration and example, I think of the personal witness of Susie Park, who died just last week. She was one of the founding members of this congregation. I had the gift of knowing her for a couple of years before she moved to Burlington.

Susie was born in South Korea and immigrated after the Korean War to attend college in South Carolina. She was scattered from her homeland and all she had known. Here in this country, she faced racism and sexism. Her faith was forged in the fires of such pressures. Susie told me that I never had to give her a watchword, for she already had one: "I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me."

That is Philippians 4:13 in the Good News Version of the Bible. The translation, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," may be more familiar to you. But Susie preferred the idea of God-given strength to "face all conditions" because she knew hardships. She lived her faith with courage, not fear, breaking boundaries of culture and language to be a living embodiment of God's grace. Susie's life was a prophetic testament to alternative, imaginative possibility.

Yesterday, I participated in the Partners in Racial Justice event and Pittsboro Pride. I saw people who, through no fault of theirs, have experienced persecution and prejudice, sometimes by the words and actions of Christians.

And yet, the truth-telling, wind-blowing, life-giving spirit was moving, nudging people into speaking and singing, beginning new friendships and deepening familiar ones, giving strength and power to a people who are prophetically imagining a new world of justice and joy.

Let me close by putting words to that vision with a prayer for Pentecost written by the church in South Korea:

O God, we are all of different ages, different appearances, and different abilities. Even though we are each different, we are all your children in your image, so we confess that we are one family. God, you who renew us each day, connect us closer together. Lead us on the path of love and lead us on the path of a holy life. In Christ's holy name we pray, amen.

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June 8, 2025