

**Acknowledging reality, being able to mourn and daring to hope:
three urgently needed prophetic tasks
„Miteinander auf dem Weg“ / Baar, 25. März 2023**

The title of my talk is not particularly short or catchy. So, let me begin differently:

It was a few years ago in Edinburgh. I was attending a conference on my favorite research topic. I am, or rather, I was a health researcher, nursing expert, and epidemiologist. The topic was community interpreting and intercultural translation. The conference (apart from my talk) was rather boring. While browsing in a Christian bookstore, I came across this book by Walter Brueggemann (and the feeling of apathy disappeared, replaced by the sense of having discovered a treasure).

Reality, Grief, Hope: three urgent prophetic tasks¹

The author is Walter Brueggemann: an Old Testament researcher, Protestant theologian from the United States (with German roots; his father was a Lutheran pastor), Psalm specialist (where I knew his name from already), and also a prophet specialist. For me, Brueggemann is more than a biblical scholar: he is a prophet and a therapist. I saw this already in the study of the Psalms: Psalms are healthy, Psalms make you fit, Psalms have a therapeutic effect. I see something similar in Brueggemann's book and would like to present it to you now:

- I. Brueggemann brings together two events: one took place in 587 BCE, the other in 2001. One is a terrible military defeat with subsequent major deportations, the other is a great political uncertainty, with radicalization everywhere, and hostile powers and ideologies. You guessed it: I'm talking about the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent deportation of the local population (modern-day hostage-taking) to Babylon; the other event is "September 11" in 2001. Both events were formative for the world at the time, especially for the faithful. In both cases, it is about the greatest possible insecurity and identity crisis. And both caused by God! The believers in Jerusalem were safe and confident that they were God's chosen people. Just like us modern-day pious Christians think that God is on our side and protects us. Since then, the United States (and the whole West) has been threatened in its identity, just as the Jews were then, whether they lived in Jerusalem under foreign rule or were deported to Babylon.

- II. These catastrophes have triggered three things:
 - (i) Our worldview has failed. The ideology has failed. We have slipped into crisis.
 - (ii) Denial is the strategy with which we want to manage the crisis.
 - (iii) Despair is spreading because ideology and denial no longer work.

Regarding ideology: As in ancient Israel, ideology has spread in the West. This ideology includes the belief that we are the chosen people and that the world revolves around us. Décentration! This image is being shaken, and people are uncertain. We want to play the role of the strong man. We want to get rid of those who, as we believe, are responsible.

¹ Walter Brueggemann: Reality, Grief, Hope: three urgent prophetic tasks, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 2014. S.a. The Prophetic Imagination, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2018/1978

Regarding denial: Just as in ancient Israel, there are reflexes: people deny, we do not want to admit that God does not always serve our needs as we would like. We do not want to admit that we are not doing well, and that God does not work as we expected. And that my own life is not going as I wanted it to.

Regarding despair: In ancient Israel as well as in the West today, if the denial strategy does not work, only despair remains. Denial: Does this sound familiar to you: the glorious old days are over, when everything was still okay in society and religion? The reflexes of "back to the good old days"? Make America great again? Or in the Orthodox Church, the terribly nationalist tones? Or in Europe, the demagogic slogans about political and Christian values? Maybe we are still denying other issues.

Fortunately, it doesn't have to stay that way. In this situation, prophets come into play. They must live and predict what God says and how to deal with the situation. Fortunately, there is the prophetic word. The exit from these three things can be achieved by performing the following tasks:

- (i) Acknowledge reality: Acknowledge what is (Hellinger). Rieth: bring reality to someone. Sharpen perception. Prophets are not "predictors" or fortune tellers, but masters of anticipation (like Federer). The prophets in the Old Testament and today's prophets have an unsparing view of reality. That is why prophecy is often not particularly popular. Revealing reality: prophecy.
- (ii) This also includes mourning work: Yes, mourning is work, and work is exhausting, and we avoid exertion. Allowing grief. Praying many lamentations (Dieter Jost-Müller). Acknowledging loss. This is less exhausting in the long run than denying, than denial, than not wanting to admit.
Forgive. "Pardon". Forgive God, fate, politics, others, oneself. That is prophetic action!
- (iii) Hoping is a necessity: The third prophetic task. And hope not as ideology, and not as a cover-up for mourning work, but hope that withstands brutal reality and does not suppress mourning. Prophetic action! Hope is a prophetic action. Hope without reference to reality and without mourning work is just cheap hope (Bonhoeffer could've have said that).

Realism, mourning work, and hope: These prophets strengthen me, whether they are called Isaiah or Brueggemann. The sharpness hurts, but it is healthy, it bleeds, but a heart is a bloody thing. Prophecy helps to cope with life. Or: to become healthy and whole (or at least healthier and more whole).

Two examples:

First, the example of a modern prophet: Desmond Tutu² during a sermon in Cape Town during apartheid. Tutu addresses police officers and soldiers who had entered the service and were threateningly surrounding the congregation. A display of power! Tutu says to them, "You are powerful. You are very powerful. But you are not God. And I serve a God that will not be mocked."

² From: Weber, Christel E. A., Prophetisches Predigen als Sichtwechsel. Eine interkulturelle Studie. 2019. Rezension von Ralph Kunz.

(18) The short sequence ends with the invitation, "We invite you today: Come and join the winning side." And the congregation dances. The police, faced with this power, retreat. Ten years later, Tutu's vision is fulfilled with the end of apartheid. Summarized, Desmond Tutu's sermon in a situation characterized by danger and hopelessness appears as divinely wrought "hope." The message of the sermon is received as something new, something surprising, that is emotionally touching and incentivizes to action.

The newness for him consists in the imagination of a different reality in which the circumstances have been reversed by God's action. This imagination has the power to transform the present: it proves to be the energy of transformation.

Secondly, and finally, a few centuries back: that's exactly what Miriam does. Miriam: a key figure on the way to freedom, sister of Moses and Aaron, a prophetess, how it is surprisingly stated. She can also sing and has a tambourine. Here is one of the oldest songs in the Bible. I read Ex 15:20-21: ***...Miriam the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took a timbrel in her hand; and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them, Sing ye to the LORD, for he hath triumphed gloriously; the horse and his rider hath he thrown into the sea.***³

This is exactly what old and modern prophecy is (following is a sort of list):

- Miriam sings history and interprets it. Two longer versions of this story are found in Exodus 14 and 15:1-19. She tells the same story again, but in the form of a song. It is a song about the liberating God, against oppression, imprisonment, and totalitarian systems. That is prophecy!
- Miriam finds that the singing is too weak, it lacks energy. She takes a tambourine and sings the refrain again and probably the whole song again (there are even commentaries that say the whole song was by Miriam - not just v21f - but the men couldn't accept that and claimed the copyright for themselves). That is prophecy!
- Miriam can not only sing but also play the tambourine. I love the tambourine. Why? Because it is a percussion instrument. Instruments have value of their own next to the voice. Rhythm makes everything easier, drives us forward; groove calms us down. That is prophecy!
- In his book "Prophetic Imagination," Brueggemann does not start with the major prophets but more specifically with the experience of Exodus. Prophets have two tasks: **criticizing** and **energizing**! Criticizing includes two tasks: coming to terms with reality (mourning) and acknowledging it. Hopelessness must be criticized. How? With hope. Hoping is criticism. Because when you hope for something in the future, you indicate that you do not agree with the current state of affairs. That is subversive! And that means energizing. Giving energy, conveying energy, acting energetically. We become energetic (full of energy) not through what we already possess, but through what is promised to us and what we are supposed to receive as a gift. That is prophecy!

³ Quoted according to the King James Version.