

## BOOK REVIEWS

JOURNEY TO THE COMMON GOOD. By W. Brueggemann, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010, 120 pp. \$17.00.

As I write this review, the multi-state Mega Millions lottery boasts record numbers – \$640 million to be more or less exact. With a simple Google search you can read various accounts of the hopes and dreams of people all across the fruited plain. What would you do with the money? Who would you give some to? How much would be taken in taxes? Does a person tithe on \$640 million? And so on. It's an interesting dream; it's a spiritual dream. It's a dream where problems might evaporate if only you held the winning ticket. If you read Walter Brueggemann's compelling book *Journey to the Common Good*, you'll see just how similar this dream is to the dreams of Pharaoh and Solomon, and how different it is from those of Moses, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Paul, and John. The dreams of the former are predicated on the expectation of need – or in Brueggemann's words, of paucity – and rooted in the ideology of scarcity. Pharaoh's dreams reverberate with anxiety about having enough – and there is never enough. More bricks, more control, more dominance, more acquisition, and more military to guard these things. Solomon, portrayed by Brueggemann as a type of pharaoh, enacts policies which guard resources for the empire – his empire – reinforcing stratification systems, clearly demarcating who counts as insider and who counts as outsider, and preventing resources from reaching those who exist in the lower strata. One thing jackpot lottery winnings do for a person – for Pharaoh, or for you or me – is to free him or her from the demands of the neighborhood. \$640 million quickly removes you from obligation to those around you – just observe how many people plan to leave their present neighborhoods, jobs, and maybe even churches if they win. Indeed, winning the lottery makes symbiotic relationship with the neighborhood optional – you can resist it, ignore it, help it if you wish, or simply leave it. One thing is certain – with that kind of coin, you don't really need the neighborhood – you can live a gated life... with some pretty ornate gates which block outsiders and undesirables from unauthorized entry.

But people of the scriptures can't really avoid neighborhood – for the Bible is the story of neighborhood, and the undesirable outsiders are precisely those to whom God freely gives of his abundance and of whom he requires similar generosity. If love of God is love of neighbor, then to love God's kingdom is to love the neighborhood – the two are the same. For God loves the common good. There is a story in my family about my Russian grandmother who grew up in a Polish orphanage during the scarcity years following the Russian revolution. When a missionary, who had a soft spot for her, delivered on his promise to bring her a treat upon his next visit (a large sweet roll), she, in an act of great generosity passed the roll around to the other girls, and when it circled back to her there was nothing left. The roll was given for the common good, and while I'm sure it didn't break the cycle of poverty in that place, her "act of abundance" demonstrated freedom from anxiety, and provided a powerful counternarrative in that place of scarcity and need – breaking through "business as usual." As Brueggemann writes, "It is precisely an overwhelming, inexplicable act of generosity that breaks the grip of self-destructive anxiety concerning scarcity" (p. 22). Accordingly, people of faith are called to live outside the nightmare of scarcity, rejecting the expectation of paucity and the anxiety of that accompanies restless acquisition, and redirecting their energies away from violence and guardedness to the common good.

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*Journey to the Common Good* traces a scriptural journey which begins with the “nightmare” scarcity of Egypt, moves through the abundance and provision of God at Sinai, and concludes with an ethic of common good in the neighborhood. The journey depicted in the scriptural narrative remains, more than ever, our call and challenge yet today. Developing this challenge for our present context, Brueggemann asks us to consider the ways in which abundance might overtake scarcity, generosity might break the cycle of violence and exploitation, and shalom might replace aggressive anxiety. He beckons us to move away from a world that continuously lives on *Orange Alert*. The book is nothing less than a call to a new world-view – one which gives rather than takes, shares rather than guards, and empties self to fill the coffers of the common good. The message of the book is rather the opposite of the lottery ethic described above. Join me in a brief account of the journey:

The journey described in the book begins in Egypt where we encounter first Pharaoh, and then Joseph. Pharaoh controls great wealth and innumerable resources. But he keeps them from the common good, guarding them with military force fueled by great anxiety. Here in Egypt we find the well-known Marxian theme of the two-class system – the workers, in contrast with those who control the means of production amidst an organized system of exploitation. Brueggemann observes that when we read the story of Joseph in the Egyptian narrative, we are quick to acknowledge God’s provision for his people, through Joseph, but we overlook the subtext which draws to attention the “down and dirty” narrative of economic transaction. For example, “Joseph, blessed Israelite that his is, is not only a shrewd dream interpreter; he is, as well, an able administrator who commits himself to Pharaoh’s food policy. The royal policy is to accomplish a food monopoly. In that ancient world as in any contemporary world, food is a weapon and a tool of control” (p. 5). Brueggemann sees a Marxian parallel in the way Joseph, on behalf of Pharaoh’s monopoly takes first the peasant’s money, then their cattle, and in the third year of the famine, after their resources have been exhausted, appropriates their freedom in exchange for food. This, explains Brueggemann is “policy rooted in nightmare” (p. 5) and “Slavery in the Old Testament happens because the strong ones work a monopoly over the weak ones and eventually exercise control over their bodies. Not only that; in the end the peasants, now become slaves, are grateful for their dependent status” (p. 6). To borrow another well known Marxian concept, “false consciousness” reigns over the oppressed, making them complicit in their own imprisonment.

Brueggemann draws considerable attention to the deep anxiety characterizing the “deteriorated social situation” which has developed by the end of the book of Genesis, explaining that, “all parties in this arrangement are beset by anxiety, the slaves because they are exploited, Pharaoh because he is fearful and on guard” (p. 7). This anxiety drives the human actors in a scarcity system of exploitation and oppression. Accordingly, “The narrative of the book of Exodus is organized into a great contest that is, politically and theologically, an exhibit of the ongoing contest between the *urge to control* and the *power of emancipation* that in ancient Israel is perennially linked to the God of the exodus” (p. 7). This leads to the importance of imagination for the people of God. With their consciousness colonized by the nightmare system of scarcity found in Egypt, when God provides manna for them in the wilderness, they can “... hardly take in the alternative abundance given in divine generosity, the purpose of which was to break the vicious cycle of anxiety about scarcity that in turn produced anger, fear, aggression, and, finally, predatory violence” (p. 17). We see this in the Israelites’ reaction to divine abundance, wherein they try to store up manna surpluses – hoarding now, in the face of expected scarcity in the future. They have little imagination for anything else. The parallel with our own situation is unmistakable.

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Bread has great significance on the journey out Egypt. As they journey, the Israelites long for the Egyptian bread of scarcity – bread baked of oppression and exploitation. In the wilderness, en route to Sinai, God provides bread for his people – the bread of grace, leavened with generosity. Brueggemann tells the reader that when the “bread of heaven” fell on the Israelites in the wilderness they asked “What is it?” “The Hebrew for that question is *man hu*’, and so the bread is called ‘*manna*.’ The bread is named ‘What is it?’ which makes it a ‘wonder bread’ that fit none of their prevailing categories; they wondered what it was” (p. 14). Consequently, “The wonder bread, as a gesture of divine grace, recharacterizes the wilderness that Israel now discovered to be a place of viable life, made viable by the generous inclination of YHWH” (p. 15). Bread has further significance in this exodus narrative from scarcity to abundance, from dullness to imagination, from nightmare to dream, for over and over again in scripture it is the practice of feasting – an act of abundance – that breaks the pattern of violence, oppression, expectation of paucity, and need. “The [feasting] narrative attests that the world is not as we had imagined it, not as Pharaoh had organized it. Adherence to patterns of scarcity produces a world in which the generosity of God is nullified. The narratives attest otherwise and invite the listening community into an alternative mode of existence, one that is ordered according to divine generosity” (p. 19). This alternative mode of existence is embodied in the practice of neighborhood. Perhaps it is no accident that we are invited to the wedding *feast* of the lamb – a feast which once and for all breaks through violence and anxiety, and which reorders all of existence in an ethic of neighborliness.

And so, out of Egypt, sustained by wonder bread, they come to Sinai. Sinai represents a break with the Egyptian worldview and system of oppression. Brueggemann explains that there was no common good in Egypt, because people in a scarcity system cannot entertain the notion – they are too caught up in anxiety. It is at Sinai that the people of God receive a lesson about the common good. The Ten Commandments are nothing short of a counternarrative, a new social imaginary, a code of neighborliness. But, entrenched as we are in the ethic of Egypt, we have too often used the Ten Commandments in ways which sustain anxiety – enforcing a hierarchy of holiness – rather than using them to inform an ethic of neighborly care. Brueggemann feels we must rethink the commandments, using them less as a means of stratification (the good insiders versus the bad outsiders; the really holy versus the not-so-holy), a ranking by observance, and more as a way of reimagining the world. From the Ten Commandments we learn that neighbors are to be respected and protected... not exploited. To give two examples, the fourth commandment, prohibiting work on the Sabbath is primarily about work stoppage – not worship. “Israel learned from the fourth commandment that Sabbath rest is an alternative to aggressive anxiety... It is about withdrawal from the anxiety system of Pharaoh, the refusal to let one’s life be defined by production and consumption and the endless pursuit of private well-being. It is easy to imagine that in Pharaoh’s system there never was Sabbath for anyone. Everyone was 24/7!” (p. 25, 26). Likewise, the tenth commandment prohibiting covetousness proclaims that there is a limit to acquisitiveness. Brueggemann explains that this commandment is not about petty acts of envy. “It is about predatory practices and aggressive policies that make the little ones vulnerable to the ambitions of the big ones. In a rapacious economic system, nobody’s house and nobody’s field and nobody’s wife and nobody’s oil are safe from a stronger force” (p. 25). And so, the message we find in the Ten Commandments is, don’t envy, don’t work all the time, direct your energies to the other and the common good... and all will be well.

Parts of *Journey to the Common Good* direct attention to the current situation in America. Brueggemann sees the US as caught up in the very anxiety and military control which characterized Egypt, and which was countered in Sinai. First and foremost, he sees the US as gripped by an entitled

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consumerism. This drive for more and more – fueled by “aggressive advertising” and guarded by consumer-driven militarism – leaves the country in a state of perpetual war. And war does not honor or protect neighbors. Furthermore, entitled consumerism adds up to a culture of anxiety, where, in arguably the richest country in the world, we live in continual fear of lack. And this fear, this ethic of scarcity, drives us to lash out at would-be neighbors. Consider the words so many of us use to describe the poor immigrants among us – not neighbors, but “illegals.” Energies we might otherwise have for neighborhood and the common good are invested in televised sports (far removed from our own local communities) and other media which further promote enchanted consumerism and the individualism (read “me” not “neighbor”) on which it rests. Reflecting on this American ethic Brueggemann advises that the narrative journey from Egypt to Sinai must be made over and over again. “More to the point, he comments that the “... journey from *anxious scarcity* through *miraculous abundance* to a *neighborly common good* has been peculiarly entrusted to the church and its allies” (p. 32). And about the present situation, “When the church only echoes the world’s kingdom of scarcity, then it has failed in its vocation. But the faithful church keeps at the task of living out a journey that points to the common good” (p. 32). For Brueggemann, and to the central message of the book, “The Lord of Sinai intends that all economies should be renovated for the common good” (p. 43). But it is all too easy to avoid the ethic of Sinai, retreating back into the anxious world – for the world of Pharaoh is “enormously compelling.” We too often counternarrate Sinai, rather than Egypt.

While the Exodus-Sinai-Deuteronomy narrative and its ethic of neighborliness hold “center stage” in the Old Testament, there are challenges to it. One of the most significant of these comes from King Solomon. Brueggemann writes, “In Solomon there is (a) a fresh enthrallment with Egypt and (b) a passion for graded holiness” (p. 46). This was, for me, a compelling section of the book. Now sensitized to his critique of how we read the Joseph/Egypt narrative, I see a similar tendency in how I read the chronicles of Solomon – with an eye on God’s glory and holiness as it relates to temple design and construction, and with tacit approval for his methods and vision. Brueggemann’s book opened my eyes to the economic and social implications of Solomon’s rule – and he is not renovating for the common good. In a sociologically compelling way Brueggemann deconstructs our class-tolerant understandings of Solomon and his kingdom. Rather than acknowledging the three-chambered temple as simply “God’s design,” he sees it as a replica of an *imagined* social order – one more than subtly reminiscent of the Egyptian empire. And the focus is on hierarchy. “It is evident that Pharaoh’s notion of the common good – a hierarchical ordering shaped like an Egyptian pyramid – reappeared in Jerusalem. – The echoes of Pharaoh are matched by a graded holiness and by its consequent of a hierarchical ordering of society. Solomon, of course, is the great temple builder in ancient Israel. We have, in the text, what amounts to a blueprint for his temple that was an imitation of a generic type of building from his culture” (p. 47). In this, Brueggemann finds a design that subverts the common good, while privileging hierarchy and prestige. When neighbors are graded according to the social valuations of the powerful, neighborhood and the common good are suppressed and degraded. Furthermore, “... Solomon’s temple was committed to the commoditization of all social relationships so that we are able to see what is valued and consequently, who is valued” (p. 49). And what we see is not neighbor, neighbor, neighbor, but rather gold, gold, gold. Brueggemann’s indictment: “Solomon is the model in the Bible for a global perspective of the common good, a perspective that smacks of privilege, entitlement, and exploitation, all in the name of the God of the three-chambered temple, the three chambers that partition social life and social resources into the qualified, the partially qualified, and the disqualified. It takes little critical imagination to see that Solomon’s

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perspective, which came to dominate urban Israel's imagination, is an act of resistance against the neighborly demands of Sinai, and an alternative to the possibilities of Mount Sinai" (p. 54). Solomon's design – for both temple architecture and the broader community – looks a lot like our own "upper," "middle," and "lower" class structure. Gated communities, it seems, are nothing new.

But, he writes... Sinai still has its advocates – the poets, the prophets. These people live "outside the box" and are rooted in Sinai. And so, in Jeremiah we find YHWH as subject, not object. In Isaiah we encounter the God of assurance "... who is no longer an agent of settled sovereignty... This God speaks against fear, the very fear by which the gods of the empire have kept all parties on orange alert. But now, so goes the poetic utterance, everything has changed. Displaced peoples need no longer cringe; they can stand tall, reimagine their lives in terms of miracle, and mobilize their energies for new possibility: Do not fear, for I am with you..." (p. 95). In 1 Corinthians 1:31 the apostle Paul exhorts us to boast only in the Lord of the neighborhood, and in 1 John we are reminded that love of God is love of neighbor. These and others poets help us resist Egypt's allures, and align us with the aims of another, better, more neighborly world.

This is a helpful book. It can reignite in its reader the call to neighborhood and to the common good. It can expand our understanding of what neighborliness means in a world of anxiety and orange alert vigilance. It can remind us that bread is to be shared, and that the only way to break through predatory violence, nightmare scarcity, and consuming anxiety is with inexplicable acts of generosity and abundance.

But I must go... I need to turn down the television and tear up my lottery ticket.  
Shalom.

M. Vos  
Covenant College