

When I returned from sabbatical this past fall I shared with you what I learned on a trip to Montana about the restoration of the wild bison herds in the American West. I also wrote to you about my delight in having time to take long, long walks that started and ended outside my own front door. In addition, I told you that, while I was gone, I had started to learn how to play the ukulele and while I haven't made much progress with that since then, at least I have a new stress-reducing hobby to pursue at a time when my life isn't so stressful.

But, what I did not tell you about my sabbatical last October, at least not with any degree of truth, is how much energy I put into actively pursuing opportunities to encounter, what I think might be referred to in the colloquial as stalking, I haven't been upfront with you about how much energy I put into actively pursuing opportunities to encounter Walter Brueggemann last October. For those of you who have thus-far escaped my soap boxing about Walter Brueggemann, he is professor emeritus of Old Testament Studies at Columbia Theological Seminary. Many of my shelves hold books written by Dr. Brueggemann and over the course of my career, I have traveled hundreds of miles just to hear him speak. Given the opportunity to have lunch with anyone living or dead, I would choose Jesus, but if the Son of God had other plans, I would choose Walter Brueggemann. And, if Walter Brueggemann found out that I had been actively pursuing opportunities to encounter him and refused to have lunch because he found me creepy, well, then, I'd dine with Abraham Lincoln.

But I didn't want to meet Brueggemann so I could get his autograph or to snap a selfie with him to post on Facebook or even so I could pick his brain about some Old Testament passage that has puzzled me for years—of which there are literally hundreds. I wanted to meet Walter Brueggemann because of the profound impact he has on my development as a Christian minister. I wanted to meet him so that I could thank him and tell him a little bit about why he has such a profound impact on my ministry. And, as it turned out, those two things did happen on sabbatical as a result of my efforts to actively pursue opportunities to encounter him.

Last summer, I learned that he and his wife had moved to Traverse City and he attends Central United Methodist Church. And so, after returning from our trip West, I went to worship at Central United Methodist Church in Traverse City. After seeing Dr. Brueggemann there in worship, I wrote him a lengthy three-point letter outlining the impact he has had on me and thanking him for all he teaches me. The following Sunday, when I returned to Central again for worship, I met him, if you can call shaking a person's hand and awkwardly introducing yourself during the Passing of the Peace as "that gal from Maple City who sent you that really long letter," meeting someone. And in between the writing him that letter and meeting him in worship, I did a little happy dance at my mailbox when I received a piece of correspondence back from him. No. Seriously. It happened. This is it. I could not even believe it. My efforts to actively pursue opportunities to encounter Dr. Brueggemann paid off and I have this letter to prove it.

There are two reasons I tell you these stories of actively pursuing opportunities to meet Walter Brueggemann as part of this sermon. First, the fact that this morning's sermon is based on a Psalm is due to Walter Brueggemann. Before I heard him lecture on the Psalms at a conference a few years ago, I did not preach on the Psalms because I couldn't make any sense out of them. I couldn't figure out what they had to do with my life or yours. I occasionally read from them as part of my daily devotional practices or included them in responsive readings in the bulletin because it felt like something a minister should do, but I confess that it felt rote and perfunctory. I couldn't wait to just be done with them and get onto something that told a story because I LOVE the stories in the Bible.

But what I learned from Dr. Brueggemann is that Psalms DO tell stories—they tell the stories of the people writing them. The Psalms tell the stories of people who are like you and like me. People who are struggling. People who are rejoicing. People who are wondering. People who are angry. People who are depressed. People who are indignant. People who can't sleep. People who can't seem to do anything but sleep. People who are

afraid. People who are conflicted. People who are, perhaps most of all, trying to make sense of their faith in the midst of the sorrows, joys, and sufferings of this life.

I've come to think of the Psalms sort of like the daily journal entries of particularly eloquent people, set to music, who lived many generations ago. But, though we are separated by vast amounts of time and distance from the original authors of these passages, the stories they tell are our stories. As Patrick D. Miller, editor of Brueggemann's book *The Psalms and the Life of Faith* writes, "The Psalms, for him, are not simply ancient texts or routinized elements of a liturgy. As they come to speech, as they are read, they make claims about reality, indeed shape reality in ways more potent and shocking than we usually realize. Brueggemann's great contribution is to uncover the power, literally, of these Psalms and to awaken us to what is said in the singing and praying them."¹

And what does Brueggemann suggest that Psalm 37, the one that Berkley just read for us, is meant to awaken in us? Dr. Brueggemann suggests that this Psalm "relates to the Creator and [reminds us that] true wisdom is . . . living [with a] responsible awareness of the Creator and his intention."² It is a Psalm intended to express what the author understands to be true about the world and how God is active and present in the world. I invite you to listen to the Psalm again, this time as it is translated into contemporary English in *The Message*.

Don't bother your head with braggarts or wish you could succeed like the wicked. In no time they'll shrivel like grass clippings and wilt like cut flowers in the sun. Get insurance with GOD and do a good deed, settle down and stick to your last. Keep company with GOD, get in on the best. Open up before GOD, keep nothing back; God will do whatever needs to be done: God will validate your life in the clear light of day and stamp you with approval at high noon. Quiet down before GOD, be prayerful before the Lord. Don't bother with those who climb the ladder, who elbow their way to the top. Bridle your anger, trash your wrath, cool your pipes—it only makes things worse. Before long the crooks will be bankrupt; GOD-investors will soon own the store. Before you know it, the wicked will have had it, you'll stare at his once famous place and—nothing! Down-to-earth people will move in and take over, relishing a huge bonanza. The spacious, free life is from GOD, it's also protected and safe. GOD-strengthened, we're delivered from evil, when we run to God, God saves us.

This is a message that is as true for us now as it was for the author who wrote it thousands of years ago—when we run to God, God saves us.

Which brings us to the second thing these stories of actively pursuing opportunities to encounter Walter Brueggemann on my sabbatical have to do with this sermon . . . this idea of "actively pursuing opportunities to encounter." When we engage in spiritual practices—reading scripture, praying, serving others, bothering to get out of bed on a cold, sloppy morning to come to worship, we are actively pursuing opportunities to encounter God, after all, isn't actively pursuing opportunities to encounter God just another, perhaps less urgent way, of saying running to God? I have no doubt that God is there to be run to, that God is a constant presence in our lives, that God is always and everywhere actively pursuing opportunities to be encountered by us.

Indeed, God's not the issue on that one. We are. In the midst of our often busy, mis-prioritized, fear-filled, distracted, stressful, and messy lives, I think we sometimes forget, or at least I know I do, that a relationship with God is, to a certain extent, a two way street. We're not likely to recognize God's presence, guidance, and correction in our lives if we are not actively pursuing opportunities to encounter God. If we're just standing still in the dingy mire of our existence and not embracing opportunities to run towards God—actively pursuing opportunities to encounter God—chances are good we'll just stay in the dingy mire of our existence. And I don't know about you, but I do not want to spend what precious little time I have on this earth standing in a dingy mire.

¹ *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, Walter Brueggemann, 1995, xviii.

² *The Message of the Psalms*, Walter Brueggemann, 1984, 44.

During this month in which we're considering the idea of transfiguration—of being made more beautiful or spiritual—it could be said that transfiguration comes when we actively pursue opportunities to encounter God. When, in the midst of our wondering and knowing, in the midst of our suffering and celebrating, in the midst of our struggles and our victories—we run to God with our questions, our gratitude, our prayers, and our deepest desires. Transfiguration comes when we actively pursue opportunities to encounter God and trust, as did the Psalmist, that God is right here in our midst, just waiting to be found. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

