

## ***Message on Friday, August 15, 2025***

***“Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?” Isaiah 43: 18-19a***

**Dear church,**

Forty years ago, the paperback edition of Walter Bruggeman’s book “Hopeful Imagination” was published. Most of you will not know the name of this author or the book, but it had a deep impact on me. Bruggeman was an Old Testament scholar and one of the few biblical scholars who have been widely read because he wrote simply and coherently, frequently connecting his research and biblical insights with contemporary issues. He died earlier this summer, on June 5, at the ripe old age of 92. He was one of the best American theologians.

But let me get to this book... It is about the prophets who lived and spoke during the time when Israel found itself in an existential crisis, both spiritually and culturally. Defeated, expelled from their homeland, they lived in forced exile in Babylon and later in Persia. Disconnected from their traditional temple worship, far away from home, surrounded by powerful foreign cultural forces, they could have easily faded away into the sunset and been soaked up by Babylonian mainstream culture to disappear forever. Sort of... like the church today that is becoming increasingly marginalized in our secular culture. Bruggeman was aware of some of those parallels some forty years ago.

The prophets during that anxiety-filled exilic time sounded amazingly hopeful though, much more hopeful in fact than the earlier prophets who raised their voices (in anger) when everything seemed to be fine on the surface but was rotting at the core. So, there is an opportunity in every crisis, let us remember that! Sometimes things crumble that have not been healthy for a while, and when they fall apart, there is a chance for a new beginning.

The quote above stems from that difficult exilic time. The prophet asks people to embrace new beginnings and trust in God preparing a new way for them. He even dares to say to a traditional community: “Do not dwell on the past!” Bruggeman also emphasized the poetry of that time. Isaiah for instance, *spoke beautifully of water springing up in the desert, the wilderness coming alive and blooming, pouring hope and faith into the barren hearts of Israel during this spiritual desert.*

Bruggeman wrote: *“This literature is from a period when the ‘known world’ of Jerusalem was assaulted and finally disbanded. In 587 Jerusalem was destroyed, and with it the symbols and props that held life together... These*

*three poetic traditions of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and 2 Isaiah are cast in the difficult role of providing voice and articulation to the faith and experience of this very odd circumstance... In this brief definitive period in Old Testament faith, pastoral responsibility was to help people **enter into exile, to be in exile, and depart out of exile.**"*

In many ways, our "known world" is crumbling and changing. At least that's how I feel many days. Dealing with that is not easy. In the church we are becoming an exilic community that abides by values and a faith tradition not shared by most people around us. Unlike during our grandparents' generation the Christian world is not the cultural norm anymore. We must learn to live in that exile as a place of renewal and open our ears to the God who makes a path in the wilderness. And surely, there will come a time when God asks us to depart out of exile. Now is a time to listen to the poets and truth-tellers among us, to listen deeply and to be re-formed.

I hope I haven't lost you... This is enough to chew on for today. It comes from deep in my heart.

**Happy birthday to Sam Tarasenko!**

(His concert with friends and guest performers is coming up on August 24, 4:00 p.m. Come and join us!)

Pastor Andreas Wagner