

DEMAND AND DELIVERANCE: BRUEGGEMANN ON THE TORAH

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AS ANCIENT ISRAEL was summoned into covenant, so contemporary believers are summoned to respond to the demands of a holy God who reveals divine love and purpose in covenantal relationship. Faithful memory and faithful practice have always been joined in the life of the faithful. Narrative and covenant are inextricably intertwined for us today, just as the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and the statutes of the law are woven together in biblical literature. Law can never be understood apart from God's wondrous giving of grace in the life of the people of God. Brueggemann writes, "YHWH's mode of governance is through 'wonders' that lie beyond human possibility, to permit the emergence of the utterly new in the processes of nature and history."¹ Conversely, the stories of the Torah show us that the same God who performs redemption in miraculous ways for the faithful community also demands holiness and righteousness of believers. Thus, deliverance and covenantal demand cannot be separated. As Brueggemann puts it,

The way in which Israel is to become and remain YHWH's "treasured possession" . . . is not simply by divine designation, but by vigorous, intense, intentional adherence to YHWH's commands given in the Torah of Sinai. By situating "chosenness" at Sinai . . . the tradition witnesses to the *unconditional* commitment of YHWH to Israel that is *conditioned* by Torah obedience.²

Brueggemann acknowledges, with many scholars, that the relationship of narrative and legal material in the Torah is an important and unsettled issue. Narrative in the Torah may be "roughly characterized as a recital of miracles wrought by YHWH in which unexpected transformative miracles characteristically happen because the defining Character in this tradition is none other than the YHWH to whom the entire corpus attests."³ Law, then, becomes the living out of our

faith—for Jews, in worship and halakhic observance; for Christians, in worship and following of the great commandments to love God wholly and to love neighbor as self. The Torah’s literary richness represents a vast diversity of historical contexts and genres, everything from extremely old and mysterious fragments of poetic tradition to sophisticated postexilic editorial shaping. Each sort of diction—storytelling, poetry, genealogy, legal stipulation—places a distinctive kind of claim on the reading community, yet overall, the coherence of the Torah’s witness to the purposes of God remains unmistakable. As Brueggemann notes the Torah “reflects ongoing tension between a *variety of materials* that continue to have something of their own say and a *theological intentionality* that seeks to bring coherence to the complexity and variety of the materials, and, where necessary, to override and trump the initial claims of extant materials.”⁴

In the Torah, Israel remembers who they have been in the struggle to walk with God. Brueggemann reflects on this process of memory as both the content of what Israel has learned about God and the ongoing way in which we join ourselves to those who walked in faith in ancient times:

In this imaginative remembering, the notion of “Mosaic authority” is the thick label that signals Israel’s conviction concerning YHWH. It is clear that human agents have been at work through the entire traditioning process. They witness to the will, purpose, and presence of YHWH who remains inscrutably hidden in and through the text and yet who discloses YHWH’s own holy Self through that same text. “Moses” is the signal of faithful traditioning that attest that these scrolls are a reliable source upon which to ground faith and life.⁵

In his work on the Pentateuch, Brueggemann has focused on dimensions of spiritual formation that are on offer through the Hebrew Scriptures’ representations of covenant. Getting our idea of God right, or at least a little closer to right, is important for biblical theology; but more important, it is essential for our growth in faith. Many biblical texts take pains to combat idolatrous or inadequate views of God. That being so, the faithful reader should attend to theological constructions of God in Scripture with deep seriousness. Brueggemann recognizes that on this score, a great deal is at stake, not least for how we understand ourselves:

If our mistaken notion leads us to an impassive, self-sufficient God in heaven, then the model for humanity, for Western culture, for ourselves, is that we should also be self-sufficient, impassive, beyond need, not to be imposed on. Willy-nilly, we will be made in the image of some God. The one for whose image we have settled is a sure, triumphant God who runs no risks, makes no commitments, embraces no pain that is definitional. Against that, the covenanting God of the Bible protests and invites us to protest.⁶

Covenant thus rejects idolatry, shows us our God, and helps us to understand who we are. Covenant creates us anew in the image of God.

In the addresses here Brueggemann ponders the scandal of covenantal vocation that frees us from the enslavements of the secular world. His exposition of the exodus story draws us into the drama of the contest between our Creator God and the world's fraudulent secular "magicians." Brueggemann challenges us not to collude in the anxious commodification of one another that fuels our society's feverish compulsion to produce and to acquire. And he calls us to hearken to the Torah imperative to remember and trust in the holiness of God. His musings make clear that the Torah is a holy means of reconstituting the community of faith in every age. For through story and law, as Brueggemann has said, "God gathers together folk like us, rich and poor, liberal and conservative, willing and reluctant, slave and free, and bids all sign on for odd songs and hard commands. In that way a community is formed like none other in the world."⁷ For all who seek God in these times so distant from Moses' encounter on Sinai, that is good news indeed.

CHAPTER I

Summons to a Dialogic Life

THE CHURCH HAS ITS LIFE from the God of the gospel.¹ For that reason, the wonder and character of God matters crucially for every aspect of our life, the matters about which we trust, about which we are vexed, and about which we quarrel. Thus, I will think with you in these moments about the character of that God and the endlessly unfinished business about how to articulate that God faithfully and how to respond appropriately.

I

As the Bible has it, the God of the gospel bursts into the world with an utterance of promise and summons. There are all kinds of evidences and scholarly strategies to indicate that the God of the gospel in the Bible has important religious antecedents in the ancient Near East. That is not how the Bible has it. The Bible—after mapping the wonder of all creation and the peoples in it—presents the God who bursts in utterance. That divine utterance, in all of its surprise, is addressed to Abram, of whom we only know that he is the son of Terah in Ur of the Chaldeans, husband of a barren woman, Sarai. None of that matters, however, as the divine burst of utterance is unencumbered. It is a word of *summons*, the first word: “Now the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you’” (Gen 12:1). Abraham and his kin are summoned to depart their comfort zone in obedience to a God they do not know, toward a zone that remains unidentified. The utterance continues as a *promise*: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of

the earth shall be blessed” (Gen 12:2-3). The speech is dominated by first-person pronouns: “I will make . . . I will bless . . . I will make . . . I will bless.” Abraham is on the receiving end, passive recipient of divine commitment. And even the last phrase, “in you,” gives Abram no agency, simply a vehicle through which the divine resolve for blessing will extend to all the peoples of Genesis 1–11.

Abraham is required to leave the old regime of his life. Abraham is promised by this divine utterer a future, an heir, a land, and a material bodily well-being in the world. This God of promise and summons defines Abraham’s life. In Genesis 15, many heirs are promised: “He brought him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be’” (Gen 15:5). And much land is promised:

On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Gergashites, and the Jebusites.” (Gen 15:18-21)

The vision of “Greater Israel,” a force in our contemporary politics, is grounded in covenant: “On that day YHWH made a covenant.” It is all promise. In chapter 17, circumcision is a sign of that divine commitment. But there is no commandment. Scholars have noted that *covenant* began in the Old Testament with an unconditional divine promise, a commitment of divine power and divine purpose and divine fidelity to Abraham and his family.

The God of the gospel, we are told, bursts into the world most unexpectedly, to the fugitive slave Moses in the burning bush. That moment does not get much airtime in the Bible. But the components of divine speech are crucial:

- There is an initial *double imperative*:

come no closer,
remove your shoes.

This is an *awesome presence* to which attention must be paid.

- There is holy presence. The ground is holy because it is occupied by the Holy One.
- There is *promise*. Oh my, there is promise:

Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver

them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites.” (Exod 3:7-8)

And the ground of that promise is the fidelity of the promise-maker who looks back to the book of Genesis: “He said further, ‘I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.’ And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God” (Exod 3:6). The life of Moses is an interrupted life, interrupted by a *mandate* and *imperative*, interrupted by an *abiding presence*, interrupted by a *revolutionary future*.

But then, after fearful confrontation with pharaonic power, after dancing at the edge of the water, and after the risks of the wilderness, they come to Sinai. Will it surprise you that at Sinai, YHWH interrupts the life of Israel by a burst of utterance? Everything to be said at Sinai is in the epitome of Exodus 19:4-6.

- There is the remembered miracle of the exodus, how the slaves were removed from the comfort zone of Pharaoh to an exposed, risky life of sojourn:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. (Exod 19:4)

You have seen! You are here because of that interruptive act of fidelity.

- But then there is an *imperative*. It is a bigger imperative than that made to Abraham or by the utterer at the burning bush. Now it is a defining imperative:

Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites. (Exod 19:5-6)

Everything about the future of this relationship depends on Israel’s meeting the conditions of the divine “if.” *If* you listen, *if* you heed, *if* you pay attention . . . you will be my people. It all depends on you; you get to choose your future, but the condition is raw and urgent, and the unspoken negative is that if you do not respond appropriately, you will not be my covenant partner.

This terse epitome is fleshed out in the more familiar utterance of Exodus 20, where the emancipator has spoken ten times. This defining burst of utterance has the same components:

- There is a recalling of *divine generosity*:

I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me. (Exod 20:2)

- There is a follow-up of *conditions* for the future that are terse and nonnegotiable:

You shall have no other gods before me.

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not acquit anyone who misuses his name

Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work—you, your son or your daughter, your male or female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it.

Honor your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the LORD your God is giving you.

You shall not murder.

You shall not commit adultery.

You shall not steal.

You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Exod 20:3-17)

These are not little moralisms. They are an act of divine resolve about how the world could be alternatively organized in a faithful way—faithful in letting God be God and letting neighbor be neighbor. And in Exodus 24, Israel accepts the conditions and enters into this covenant of fidelity, which has starchy requirements to it:

Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, "All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do." . . . Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient." (Exod 24:3, 7)

These encounters with Abraham at the burning bush and at Sinai are the founding memories. When they are completed a *novum* has appeared in human history, a linkage of fidelity between the Holy One and an identifiable public people in history, so that God has become known as "the Holy One of Israel" and Israel has become known as the holy, chosen people of the God of the exodus.

The tradition is so familiar to us that we do not often notice its oddness. It is odd because it is so abrupt and disruptive. It disrupts the life of *the rich man in Ur* who had to go. It disrupts the life of *the fugitive slave in Egypt* who was heading out to the wilderness for safety. It disrupts the slave community that does not know that it has any peculiar identity. It is a narrative of disruption. But it is a *disruption* that has deep and abiding *durability*. More than that, these three bursts of utterance are odd because the memory is saturated with deep contradictions that they were never able to work out. The contradiction is so deep that scholars have concluded that the Abraham tradition and the Moses tradition originally had nothing to do with each other and are only loosely joined by editorial work among the traditionists.

But there they are, these two traditions of Abraham and Moses. They are there together as the beginning point of covenant. Here is God's covenant to Abraham that is *unconditional and unilateral*. Here is God's covenant with Moses and Israel that is *bilateral and conditional*. They are there together, and that interface of contradiction may offer us the most work to do but also the most honest disclosure of the truth of our life. The full tradition asserts that all of our relationships, including that with the Holy One, are an unsettled mix of *unilateral and bilateral*, of *conditional and unconditional*, and it is that unsettled truth of covenant on which I will dwell for these comments.

II

That is what we get with this God who is a covenant-maker. If you inhabit *the Jerusalem tradition*, you get a unilateral covenant given by a God whose commitments are unconditional. If you inhabit *the Sinai tradition*, you get a bilateral God with a set of quid pro quo requirements and sanctions to match. As we read the text and ponder these offers, we tend to choose up sides, select our rootage, notice our vested interests, and make our advocacy. The problem

with that is that this God, in unutterable holiness, occupies and legitimates all of these transactions. In the biblical tradition that carries the good news of the gospel, it is the one God who is both *unilateral in generosity* and *bilateral in requirement*. It is the same God who can be inordinately demanding, crushing, and reprimanding, and who can be graciously accepting, welcoming, and affirming. It is the one God who sees through hard times with patience and who terminates interactions in cold refusals. It is the God who endlessly negotiates being fully *for us* but who will get glory *for God's own self* and who will not be mocked. It is this God who becomes a threat if approached too casually or carelessly and who warns about drawing too close, but who is nearer to us than our breath or our utterance.

We wonder how this could be. If you would like, you can call it a contradiction. Well, of course. But you can also notice that this God has a rich interior life in which this God in freedom and in fidelity is always processing the world before God's own self, always deciding, always adjudicating, always exercising options, always living in freedom, always repositioning and reengaging afresh. That interior life of God is not available to us, except for the poets and the priests and the singers of songs and the tellers of tales. These makers of texts in uncommon artistry and enormous courage enter into God's own holiness and invite us to go there with them. Because they are artistic, they deliver to us open and imaginative and daring probes. But what they offer is not and could not be flat, one-dimensional, or certain. These poets and singers and tellers of tales make clear to us that *artistry* is required to practice the *complex interiority* of God that makes possible a *dialogical exteriority*. Notice the terms:

- *Artistry* is required concerning the God who comes at covenant practices with ease and restless risk. It is a divine artistry that is matched by the *artistry of human imagination*.
- Such artistry yields a *complex interiority* in which God is capable of self-examination, probe, and critical reflection. Such an interiority evidences that God is capable of more than one possibility, which is why the Bible offers us from time to time probes into divine anguish.
- This complex interiority in turn posits *dialogical externality*, a capacity to come at the covenant partner in a variety of ways, sometimes with the crankiness of self-regard, sometimes with the generosity that considers only the partner.
- Such a flow of *artistry*, *internal complexity*, and *dialogical externality* issues, does it not, in *fidelity* that arises in *freedom*. Indeed, fidelity, wondrously articulated in the Hebrew triad of *hesed*, *raham*, and *amunah* is the hallmark of this God in relationship, not a mechanical predictability but a fully personal capacity for being with and being for and being over against, and staying with and calling out.

You will notice, if you take this sequence of markings of God's holiness—artistry, internal complexity, dialogical externality, and, finally, fidelity—that this characterization of the covenant-making God flies in the face of a long-preferred orthodoxy of “omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence.” That is the God long confessed among us, present in the catechism traditions, in a mistaken attempt to fully characterize God in God's own self as the one with all the power and all the knowledge and everywhere present in sovereign form. That characterization of God exhibits a God who needs no partners, for whom partners are an “extra,” that are not indispensable for divine personhood. Such a God (that requires a quite forced reading of Scripture) results in large measures of *certitude* in which everything is settled well ahead of time. That is the stuff of sovereign *authority* and of unchallengeable *control*.

But it will not work. It will not work biblically because since the first divine utterance to Abraham and the first divine self-disclosure at Sinai, the biblical God has been in relationship. This is a God capable of love and anger, of presence and of absence, of forgiveness and retribution, so much so that we have had to explain it all along the way as “anthropomorphism” and “anthropopathism,” language that makes God “too human.” It will not work in trinitarian terms because it is impossible that the Father of the Three O's would have sent such a compassionate, self-giving Son into the world. Indeed, the famous football slogan of John 3:16 already gives the game away: “God so loved the world that he sent . . .” It is this God so committed, so dialogical, so covenantal since Genesis 9 with whom we have to do. It will not work biblically. It will not work in terms of trinitarian theology.

But most of all it will not work pastorally, for who among us in our ecstasy, and especially our agony, needs a God of certitude? For it is the ache of our heart and the yearning of our body that we should finally be attended to by one who is full of grace, and before grace, full of truth. The *narrative of the God of fidelity* lives in deep conflict with the *syllogism of the God of certitude*. The gods of certitude are often in control, control through some moralism, through settled orthodoxy, through the ideology often allied with the rulers of this age. But in the midst of the gods of certitude there is this burst of the God of fidelity,

- the God *artistically rendered*;
- the God rich in *internal complexity*;
- the God free in *dialogical externality*;
- the God saturated with *fidelity and freedom*.

This God will not settle in certitude, for certitude is finally a cognitive category and not one that is thick with relationship. This God will not settle for certitude but is on the way with Abraham and with Moses and with all their fellow travelers.

And because this God steps out with this people and all such peoples in covenant, the covenanted community comes on hard days. They came on hard days

in old Samaria, which the Assyrians destroyed in 722 BCE. They came on hard days in Jerusalem, which the Babylonians destroyed in 587 BCE. And there will be more hard days in Jerusalem in 70 CE, when the Romans put an end to things, and in New York City in 2001 on 9/11, and on and on, always hard days. And those hard days are hard as well for the covenanting God, for how shall the artistically rendered, interiorly complex, externally dialogical God of fidelity respond to such hard days?

The troubles of Samaria and Jerusalem, of New York and Belfast and Sarajevo and Baghdad and Johannesburg and Jerusalem again present the God of covenant with vexation. The troubles, so say the poets, evoke the complexity of YHWH's interiority into dialogical externality in two tensive modes. On the one hand, the God rooted in Sinai speaks out of a bilateral conviction that obedience results in life and disobedience results in death. It figures, of course, that suffering and destruction follow covenantal disobedience. The outcome of poetic utterance is, not surprisingly, poetic oracles of indictment and sentence. This strand of divine utterance offers a tight moral calculus. Thus it follows that Samaria was destroyed because Israel had whored after other gods:

For they sow the wind,
 and they shall reap the whirlwind.
 The standing grain has no heads,
 it shall yield no meal;
 if it were to yield,
 foreigners would devour it.
 Israel is swallowed up;
 now they are among the nations
 as a useless vessel.
 For they have gone up to Assyria,
 a wild ass wandering alone;
 Ephraim has bargained for lovers.
 Though they bargain with the nations,
 I will now gather them up.
 They shall soon writhe
 under the burden of kings and princes. (Hos 8:7-10)

And it follows that Jerusalem is destroyed for its abuse of the poor:

Your iniquities have turned these away,
 and your sins have deprived you of good.
 For scoundrels are found among my people;
 they take over the goods of others.
 Like fowlers they set a trap;
 they catch human beings.

Like a cage full of birds,
 their houses are full of treachery;
 herefore they have become great and rich,
 they have grown fat and sleek.
 They know no limits in deeds of wickedness;
 they do not judge with justice
 the cause of the orphan, to make it prosper,
 and they do not defend the rights of the needy.
 Shall I not punish them for these things?
 says the LORD,
 and shall I not bring retribution
 on a nation such as this? (Jer 5:25-29)

It follows in reliable covenantal fidelity. It could not be otherwise. It could not be otherwise in New York and in Washington, in Nanjing and Islamabad, and all other places of violence. Our text of covenant shows the way in which the covenant-making God stays faithful, and the world witnesses moral coherence that cannot be violated with impunity.

On the other hand, the God rooted in Jerusalem—all the way back to Abraham—has a bottomless unilateral freedom that gets expressed as generous fidelity. It is for that reason that the very same daring poets, the ones who imagine and who probe the divine interiority, notice around the edges of divine resolve a countertheme of suffering love that produces costly forgiveness at the very core of divine indignation. The covenant-making God is precisely pressed toward pathos, the capacity to care about, suffer with, and suffer for those in solidarity. Such divine pathos is not an aberration. It is an inescapable enactment of covenantal fidelity.

For that reason the very same poets who speak *bilateral indignation* are recruited to utter, right from God's own heart, *unilateral pathos*. It is this same Hosea, the one who noticed while God responded in rejection against recalcitrant Israel:

They shall return to the land of Egypt,
 and Assyria shall be their king,
 because they have refused to return to me.
 The sword rages in their cities,
 it consumes their oracle-priests,
 and devours because of their schemes.
 My people are bent on turning away from me.
 To the Most High they call,
 but he does not raise them up at all. (Hos 11:5-7)

It is this same God—through this same poet—who stops short in the middle of the poem, engages in critical self-reflection, and then speaks these awesome words of divine generosity:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart recoils within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender.
 I will not execute my fierce anger;
 I will not again destroy Ephraim;
 for I am God and no mortal,
 the Holy One in your midst,
 and I will not come in wrath. (Hos 11:8-9)

Thus, after a rebuke of Samaria, this northern poet is authorized to speak a future grounded in God's own fidelity.

It is not different in the south, in Jerusalem. This same Jeremiah from Anathoth who noticed the abuse of the poor and drew the inescapable conclusion now articulates the God who grieves the loss of the covenant partner, who is sent away in profound rage. Now speaks the poet again in the voice of covenantal fidelity:

Is Ephraim my dear son?
 Is he the child I delight in?
 As often as I speak against him,
 I still remember him.
 Therefore I am deeply moved for him;
 I will surely have mercy on him,
 says the LORD. (Jer 31:20)

The divine speaker, the same one as in Hosea 11:8, engages in self-criticism. In Hosea 11:8 the self-criticism comes as two questions:

How can I give you up, Ephraim?
 How can I hand you over, O Israel?
 How can I make you like Admah?
 How can I treat you like Zeboiim?
 My heart recoils within me;
 my compassion grows warm and tender. (Hos 11:8)

Now in Jeremiah 31:20 it is the question again:

Is Ephraim my dear son?
 Is he the child I delight in?
 As often as I speak against him,
 I still remember him.
 Therefore I am deeply moved for him;

I will surely have mercy on him,
says the LORD. (Jer 31:20)

And then, as in Hosea 11:8-9, there is a divine response of fresh resolve. I will get my mind off the affront. Indeed, my covenantal attachment to Israel is so intense that I am required to utilize two infinitive absolutes, says the God who has mastered Hebrew grammar:

I am deeply moved.
I will surely have mercy.

My intensity of attachment pushes me beyond retaliation to care. I find myself propelled beyond my resolve by a deeper impulse, a love that “will not let me go.”

In both Samaria and in Jerusalem, the dialogic God struggles and says both things: *death*—and *new life*. Surely it is so everywhere with this God of complex interiority. It is so in New York and Washington, in New Orleans and Tulsa, and in every village and town where the truth of covenant is observed. It is so wherever there is a poetic pause to cut beneath the flat certitude of control to see that *holiness is a tensive, struggling passion for truth and grace*, for retribution and compassion, for a God whose innards touch lived reality and press toward new possibility. It is so where there is such artistry. And where there is no such artistry, there can only be *denial and despair, resentment, self-indulgence*, and finally, *violence*. The truth of the poetry is that this covenant-making God is never finished and settled; rather, the Holy One is impinged upon and moved to compassion in the same way that the well-beloved Son is moved to compassion when he sees the hungry crowds (Mark 6:34; 8:2). As you know, “compassion” means the cringing stirring of innards moved to new response. Such a moment in the life of God is signaled by Hosea, “My heart recoils within me.” And in Jeremiah, “I am deeply moved.” This is no unmoved mover, no settled certitude, but a partner evoked and moved to fresh engagement, stringent and caring, passionate and indignant, who variously engages in moral seriousness and generous care.

III

Given that dialogical God who comes toward the world with fidelity and freedom that together constitute covenant, it is the Jewish proposal that human persons are constituted precisely for *dialogical existence* in relationship to this God of fidelity and freedom. The peculiar Jewishness of this offer is made evident in the modern world most especially by Sigmund Freud who, for all his personal struggles against Jewishness, did indeed bequeath to the world a Jewish notion of the human self.² For whatever scientific notions of healing that may have occupied Freud’s work, at bottom his great insight is that the self can emerge in health only in a candid dialogic transaction with one who listens well and receives honestly. That dialogic

self arises only in an exchange with the other who acts freely and faithfully. Freud discerned, moreover, that the thickness (“depth”) of the self with layers and layers of meaning is not unlike the thickness of texts that the rabbis could read endlessly for more and more meanings. Thus, the self is essentially a venue for interpretation, an enterprise that requires a trustful exchange. We may notice in addition that, in more recent time, work on a dialogical sense of self in covenant has moved in a more bilateral direction, as the listening partner now is seen to be not simply a passive receiver but also an active participant in a two-way exchange.³

After Freud, it is most obviously Martin Buber who has grasped the dialogical quality of the self in his well known “I-thou” formulation and his aphorism that “life is meeting.”⁴ Buber’s work is intended to be a direct and intentional refutation of the modern Cartesian self, a self posited as an isolated, self-sufficient autonomy without regard to any others.⁵ The Cartesian self in the modern world has become a narrative of Promethean dimension, and a performance of domination and control that can freely violate any of the others in the pursuit of self.

Buber’s more or less mystical sense of I-thou has been given a more formidable articulation in the work of Emmanuel Levinas, notably in his programmatic book, *Totality and Infinity*.⁶ By “totality” Levinas means a fully contained and self-sufficient system of power that runs in the direction of totalitarianism, and conversely, “infinity” means an openness to possibility that is not known ahead of time. The defining characteristic of infinity, for Levinas, is the face-to-faceness of human engagement. The supreme act of being human is to look into the face of the other, and in characteristically Jewish fashion, Levinas finds in the face of the other an immediate and elemental ethical demand; having seen the face of the other, one is bound to that other in caring, neighborly ways. It seems clear enough that Buber and Levinas, as alternative to Descartes, could not have written as they have except for the Jewish dialogic tradition of covenant in which they stand.

But clearly, long before Freud, Buber, or Levinas, it is the book of Psalms, which bespeaks the dialogic covenantal self whose vocation is to glorify and enjoy God forever. The book of Psalms, while complex, can in simplistic fashion be understood as a collection of doxologies and complaints-laments. In the doxologies of praise, thanks, and trust, all the energy and attention of the human person (and the human community) are devoted to the enhancement of God. Indeed, praise is the full, glad, exuberant *ceding* of the self over to God. As counterpoint, the complaints and laments of the Psalter are the full, resolved assertion of the *claiming* of the self in the presence of God or even over against God. It strikes one as odd and remarkable that the self in the complaints can address imperatives to God, even if we choose to label those imperatives as petitions. There is no doubt that God is the “thou” who responds to the complaints of Israel in order that the suppliant can be an “I.” (At the very edge of this transaction, we may entertain the thought that the human self becomes the “thou” whereby the “I” of God is constituted and signified in the covenantal transaction, which is the self.) Thus the Psalter, before any of the modern thinkers I have cited, provided the script for

the performance of *the dialogical covenantal self*. Given the force of the Cartesian self in the modern world, the self necessary to a modern technological society and the self propped up by consumer propaganda, the nurture and performance of the dialogical self is an urgent, subversive activity. That alternative self is one defined precisely by fidelity wherein even lapses into infidelity can be taken as significations of what generates the self. That self, moreover, is constituted in freedom, the freedom to engage, to praise and obey, to command and rejoice, most of all to trust self in a relationship that valorizes the self.

IV

The dialogic self in its interaction with the dialogic God is called to a demanding, energizing way of living in the world. Given that dialogical life is a demanding way in the world, there is an endless temptation to avoid the recurring jeopardy of covenantal existence by embrace by one of two alternatives.

On the one hand, there is the possible flight to *absolutism*. Absolutism is an attractive, seductive alternative because it moves toward the nullification of the risks of dialogue into a flat, settled state of being. Such absolutism can easily become a category into which God is recharacterized and redescribed. Indeed, one can judge that the classical tradition of Western theology, overly informed by Hellenistic categories, has settled for a God who is an absolute sovereign. The familiar characterization of God as “omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent” bears witness to a God who is settled and fully self-sufficient, not in any need or in any vulnerability. It is astonishing that Christian theology has sought to accommodate this way of God to the suffering love of the Son, an accommodation that has made trinitarian theology exceedingly problematic. This is a God who cannot be impinged upon and, as Jürgen Moltmann has shown, is a God who cannot suffer in compassionate availability.⁷

Apropos this way of rendering God, the spinoff will predictably be a community of moral conformity that is severe in its demands and unbending toward those who violate the absoluteness of morality that is said to derive from the absoluteness of the deity. It is impossible to measure or provide an inventory of the wounds inflicted by such a self-convinced community of moral certitude that has been experienced as oppressive and unforgiving.

When God is reduced to a settled formula, the notion of God in dialogue seems weak and inadequate. But from the perspective of the covenantal traditions, the lust for absolutism eventuates in *idolatry*, a flat, settled God without dialogic agency who cannot care or answer or engage or respond. The poetry of Israel is capable of contrasting such *absoluteness* with *covenantalism*:

Their idols are like scarecrows in a cucumber field,
and they cannot speak;

they have to be carried,
 for they cannot walk.
 Do not be afraid of them,
 for they cannot do evil,
 nor is it in them to do good.

.
 But the LORD is the true God;
 he is the living God and the everlasting King.
 At his wrath the earth quakes,
 and the nations cannot endure his indignation.

.
 It is he who made the earth by his power,
 who established the world by his wisdom,
 and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.
 When he utters his voice, there is a tumult of waters in the heavens,
 and he makes the mist rise from the ends of the earth.
 He makes lightnings for the rain,
 and he brings out the wind from his storehouses. (Jer 10:5, 10, 12-13)

And so the poetic tradition can dare to mock such absolute gods who can perform none of the functions of “thou-ness” that are so crucial to the health of the world:

Their idols are silver and gold,
 the work of human hands.
 They have mouths, but do not speak;
 eyes, but do not see.
 They have ears, but do not hear;
 noses, but do not smell.
 They have hands, but do not feel;
 feet, but do not walk;
 they make no sound in their throats. (Ps 115:4-7)

And the Psalm knowingly adds, concerning those who trust such idols:

Those who make them are like them;
 so are all who trust in them. (Ps 115:8)

On the other hand and in reaction against such absolutism, there is a flight to *autonomy*. Those who find absolutism too hard to bear flee from it and imagine an unencumbered self. That autonomy is now romantically expressed in the familiar mantra, “I am spiritual but no longer religious,” that is, no longer attached to the institutions of holiness that are too demanding and authoritarian. Such a flight merely enacts the Cartesian premise.

Autonomy, the notion that one need to rely on or answer to no other, is the ground for a society that is endlessly acquisitive of the resources of other people and does so with unrestrained violence. That autonomy is also an invitation of the self to live without rootage or tradition, and without the resources or requirements of a community of discipline and expectation. The Bible does not spend as much time on autonomy as on absolutism, because autonomy is a much more modern option. There is, however, enough in the Bible to see the temptation even there. Thus, the prophet Isaiah can imagine the systemic autonomy of the great superpower Babylon:

You said, "I shall be mistress forever,"
 so that you did not lay these things to heart
 or remember their end.
 Now therefore hear this, you lover of pleasures,
 who sit securely,
 who say in your heart,
 "I am, and there is no one besides me;
 I shall not sit as a widow
 or know the loss of children"—

 You felt secure in your wickedness;
 you said, "No one sees me."
 Your wisdom and your knowledge
 led you astray,
 and you said in your heart,
 "I am, and there is no one besides me." (Isa 47:7-8, 10)

The prophetic rebuke is the assertion that the superpower has forgotten that it is permitted no such autonomy. The sapiential tradition can see such autonomy in the action of the arrogant, who know no restraints:

In the pride of their countenance
 the wicked say, "God will not seek it out";
 all their thoughts are, "There is no God."

 They think in their heart, "We shall not be moved;
 throughout all generations we shall not meet adversity."

 in hiding places they murder the innocent.
 Their eyes stealthily watch for the helpless;
 they lurk in secret like a lion in its covert;
 they lurk that they may seize the poor;
 they seize the poor and drag them off in their net.

They stoop, they crouch,
 and the helpless fall by their might.
 They think in their heart, “God has forgotten,
 he has hidden his face, he will never see it.” (Ps 10:4, 6, 8b-11)

The upshot of such assured autonomy, inescapably, is the violation of the neighborhood. In Psalm 14, such autonomy is deemed “foolishness,” the very foolishness that Gerhard von Rad has termed “practical atheism”:

Fools say in their hearts, “There is no God.”
 They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds;
 there is no one who does good. (Ps 14:1)

This is, perforce, the same fool who, in the parable of Luke 12:20, engaged in endless acquisitiveness and who had his life required of him in the night.

From a covenantal perspective, *absolutism* (which is *idolatry*) and *autonomy* (which is *atheism*) are two violations of a world ordered for covenant, twin violations that in the end make life unlivable. It is clear, of course, that the twin practices of *conformist absolutism* and *unfettered autonomy* can be practiced at the same time and produce a world wherein covenantal dialogue is impossible to sustain. The outcome of such a practice, even when legitimated by misguided theology, is a common life that is filled with anxiety that is always again at the edge of violence and brutality.

V

Given the seductions of absolutism and autonomy, it is the steady alternative of biblical faith to bear witness to a covenantal existence that is dialogical from the ground up. The summons of the gospel is always to covenantal existence with all of its possibilities and risks and inescapable hazards. Covenantal existence eventuates in the pathos of God, the great holy God reaching in vulnerability to be with neighbors in need. It is for that reason that the most compelling articulation of God in the Bible is as a *covenanting father* or as a *nursing mother* or as a *suffering spouse*, or as an *attentive shepherd* or as an *intrusive king and judge*. This is not to deny that the Bible in its patriarchal presuppositions can flirt with the seductions of absoluteness. But as can be regularly seen, the poetic force of alternative intrudes on that conventional theology, disrupts it, and says otherwise. Thus, after God, in the guise of a husband, can file divorce papers against wife Israel, the poem has God reverse field and make new vows to the practice of covenant with Israel: “And I will take you for my wife forever; I will take you for my wife in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love, and in mercy. I will take you for

my wife in faithfulness; and you shall know the LORD” (Hos 2:19-20). The new vow of fidelity is filled with all of the great words of covenantal loyalty. As we have seen, after God can be a wistful, irate parent ready to abandon the wayward child, the poetry has God flinch from such an orgy of self-satisfaction, reverse field, and make new resolve for fidelity (Hos 11:8-9; Jer 31:20). The intensity of parental connectedness requires a great leap on God’s part. Most spectacularly, in Jeremiah 3 there is such a yearning on God’s part for the covenant partner Israel that God is prepared explicitly to reject the torah requirements of Deuteronomy 24. That God should violate God’s own torah for the sake of the relationship becomes the new arena for hope and possibility in Israel. And surely a new arena for anguish and joy in God’s own life.

It is required, then, that we pay attention to the breakout of new image and new metaphor that are necessary for God’s great leaps into new depths of fidelity. Of course, one could not build a great superpower on these awkward images of engagement and fidelity. But so it is with this God who, from the first utterance of Abraham, has been on the way to pathos. We say, we Christians, that we have been on the way to the cross from the very outset; and Jews dare say that they have, from the outset, been on their weeping way to the ovens, broken in love for a lost people. God goes to the cross, and to the ovens. And we with God.

Thus covenantal existence, in Christian articulation, eventuates in the Son who suffers. It is this Son who shockingly asked, “Who touched me?” (Mark 5:31) He perceived that power had gone forth from him. He is touchable and reachable and, in that bodily touch, contact is made, power is transmitted, and he is, in that instant, diminished. It is this strange rabbi who came upon a hungry crowd in the wilderness and was moved to do his manna performance. He did so because he was “moved to compassion.” The move to compassion that evoked food for the hungry is, of course, an echo of the father who was deeply moved over the suffering of the son in Hosea and Jeremiah. It is not that Jesus had to wait until Friday to suffer. Rather, he is, from the outset, a carrier of covenantal possibility; and so he prefers a covenantal existence, being always impinged upon by those around him.

Covenantal existence eventuates in a community of uncommon generosity and mercy, a community of fidelity and freedom, a community that is not seduced by absolutism and that is not left unrestrained by autonomy. It is a congregation of conservative covenanters and liberal covenanters, all of whom are covenanters before they receive other labels. So imagine a community of covenant, set down in a society of usurpatious absolutism and self-indulgent autonomy come to give self away, ready and able to receive more life from those who are unlike us, ready for fidelity that takes the form of freedom that is disciplined, ready for signs and acts and gestures of forgiveness and hospitality and generosity, more ready to support than to judge. There are, to be sure, in such a community, sanctions, but the sanctions are provisional and penultimate, because the relationships count for more than the rules.

VI

Covenantal life is a life broken and poured out.

God's own life is broken and poured out for the sake of the partner. It is this God of whom Israel can sing:

. . . who forgives all your iniquity,
 who heals all your diseases,
 who redeems your life from the Pit,
 who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy,
 who satisfies you with good as long as you live
 so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
 The LORD works vindication
 and justice for all who are oppressed. (Ps 103:3-6)

Each of these acts—forgiving, healing, redeeming, crowning, satisfying, vindicating—is an act of self-giving. That self-giving is the order of the day because:

The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.
 He will not always accuse,
 nor will he keep his anger forever.
 He does not deal with us according to our sins,
 nor repay us according to our iniquities. (Ps 103:8-10)

The God of life is a father in compassion. This God knows how we are made, contentious, unreliable, and prone to self-destructiveness. And the divine response is forgiveness.

Four times in Psalm 103, Israel utters the quintessential covenantal term *hesed*:

. . . who redeems your life from the Pit,
 who crowns you with *steadfast love* and mercy.

 The LORD is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and abounding in *steadfast love*.

 For as the heavens are high above the earth,
 so great is his *steadfast love* toward those who fear him.

 But the *steadfast love* of the LORD is from everlasting to everlasting
 on those who fear him,
 and his righteousness to children's children. (Ps 103:4, 8, 11, 17)

Nothing here of a disengaged absolutism; nothing here of a self-preoccupied autonomy.

The community of faith, knowing about the covenant-keeping God, has long pondered how to be a community apropos of this God, a suitable partner in the ongoing transaction of mutual impingement. In ancient Israel, the poet Jeremiah arrives at the awesome conclusion:

He judged the cause of the poor and needy;
 then it was well.
 Is not this to know me?
 says the LORD. (Jer 22:16)

The case cited is King Josiah. He intervened on behalf of the poor and needy. This is the way to “know God.” This is to encounter the covenanting God by loving neighbor. It is neighborliness that is the heart of Sinai. Of course, it is not different in the community gathered around Jesus. The way to love the Son of Man is by commitment to the least:

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” (Matt 25:34-36)

The absolutists can be so elevated in their certitude that they do not see the facts on the ground, the facts among “the least.” Those in autonomy can be so narcissistic that they also do not notice. But the covenanters have watched their divine partner stop and care, and so they stop and care, and the world is made new.

Truth to tell, it is all about being *broken and poured out*. Jesus specified that, in a desert place, when he came upon the hungry crowd and uttered four great verbs of covenant: “*Taking* the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and *blessed* and *broke* the loaves, and *gave* them to his disciples to set before the people; and he divided the two fish among them all” (Mark 6:41). There is something of the new that wells up in being broken and poured out, five thousand fed and twelve baskets left over. And then he replicated the act in Mark 8 because he intended it to be unmistakably clear: “Then he ordered the crowd to sit down on the ground; and he *took* the seven loaves, and after *giving thanks* he *broke* them and *gave* them to his disciples to distribute; and they distributed them to the crowd. They had also a few small fish; and after blessing them, he ordered that these too should be distributed” (Mark 8:6-7). And the outcome is four thousand fed with seven basketsful left over because covenantal existence is abundant.

The replication continues. So Paul could write:

For I received from the Lord what I also handed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, “This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” In the same way he took the cup also, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes. (1 Cor 11:23-26)

This food is not a weapon; it is a gift for sharing God’s own holy self. And the sharing continues among those who are bound to God and to neighbor. The act is countercultural subversive activity, but it has been subversive since the first utterance to Abraham.

Jesus is a brilliant, knowing hermeneutist. He works the entire covenantal tradition:

- He criticizes those who prefer *absolutism*:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel! (Matt 23:23-24)

- He criticizes those who opt for *autonomy*:

But God said to him, “You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?” So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God. (Luke 12:20-21).

- And in his parable concerning the rich man and Lazarus, he works *the covenantal tradition*. To *the rich man*, he delivers the *conditional* covenant of Sinai:

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. . . . He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” (Luke 16:19, 31)

- To *the poor man*, he welcomes him to the *unconditional promise* of Abraham:

The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. (Luke 16:22)

Both receive covenantal payouts, one as *stringent requirement*, one as *abiding abundance*. Our anticovenantal society wants us to be one-dimensional. But we refuse because covenanting is a different way in the world, always requiring, always waiting, always letting us stand alongside neighbors, full of wonder, love, and praise.