

EMBRACING THE  
PROPHETS  
IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURE

*Walter Brueggemann*  
*on Confronting Today's "Pharaohs"*

A 6-SESSION STUDY BY WALTER BRUEGGEMANN WITH TIM SCORER

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DVD filmed at Christ Church Cathedral in Cincinnati, OH. Special thanks to the cathedral staff for their gracious hosting.

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“I can’t imagine a more important set of biblical texts to study in our day and age than the Old Testament Prophets, and I can’t imagine a better teacher than Walter Brueggemann, a modern-day prophet himself! This is a wonderful multi-media resource, well-designed to help all of us who are Christians to better engage the power of the prophets for our own cultural context. Highly recommended!”

—**Brent A. Strawn**

*Candler School of Theology,  
Emory University*

“The next best thing to having Walter Brueggemann, the premier biblical scholar of our generation, lead your small-group study! *Embracing the Prophets* is a marvelous resource for all who are interested in a provocative and penetrating conversation about the ancient text and the dominant forces of contemporary culture.”

—**Louis Stulman**

*Professor of Religion,  
University of Findlay  
Co-author of You are My People:  
An Introduction to Prophetic Literature*

“A marvelous opportunity—for an individual or a whole church—to learn not only about the way the ancient prophets can be heard to speak to our time but about religious teaching more generally. Don’t miss it!”

—**James Boyd White**

*Hart Wright Professor of Law emeritus  
and Professor of English emeritus  
University of Michigan  
Author of Connecting to the Gospel*

“What a gift to local faith communities this series is! In it Walter Brueggemann brings a wealth of scholarly study on the prophets to life in an accessible, thematic fashion that engages our minds even as it also challenges our living. From the Mosaic covenant in Exodus to Isaiah’s cry of “Comfort my people,” Brueggemann takes us on a journey through prophetic witness that breaks through our culture of denial, mourns our public failures, and ultimately gives us hope in God’s re-creative vision. The study guide provides a treasure trove of discussion ideas, and the conversations among participants in the videos are provocative. This is biblical study at its best.”

—**Leonora Tubbs Tisdale**

*Clement-Muehl Professor of Homiletics  
Yale Divinity School*

“Embracing the Prophets is a remarkable gift to everyone interested in the Israelite prophets and their significance for contemporary faith. The series weds the always compelling, deeply relevant and clear teaching of Walter Brueggemann with thought-provoking group reflections and helpful study questions. The result is a richly substantive, accessible exploration of these ‘strange’ ancient voices and what it means to heed their persistent call for covenant fidelity in our own time.”

—**Christine Roy Yoder**

*Associate Professor of Old Testament Language, Literature and Exegesis  
Columbia Theological Seminary*

“Embracing the Prophets in Contemporary Culture” is a perfect tool for study, reflection and community building. The ever-moving and provocative Walter Brueggemann sets out prophetic thinking in clear and appealing terms as challenges to ancient cultures and worlds. Then he turns to our contemporary western world and finds an urgent prophetic call to resist consumerism and power structures that oppress and dehumanize us all. Brueggemann is at his passionate best, but there is even more here—a model of communal study in which the participants contribute insight and probing questions. Small group reflection is at the heart of the enterprise. This project not only instructs but shows how.”

—**Kathleen M. O’Connor**

*Professor of Old Testament, emerita  
Columbia Theological Seminary*



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# QUICK GUIDE TO THIS HANDBOOK

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**TEN things to know as you begin to work with this resource:**

## **1. HANDBOOK + WORKBOOK**

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This handbook is a guide to the group process as well as a workbook for everyone in the group.

## **2. A SIX-SESSION RESOURCE**

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Each of the six sessions presents a distinct topic for focused group study and conversation.

## **3. DVD-BASED RESOURCE**

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The teaching content in each session comes in the form of input by Walter Brueggemann and response by members of a small group; just over 30 minutes in length. A DVD Table of Contents is included to enable you to go directly to the beginning of each session.

## **4. EVERYONE GETS EVERYTHING**

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The handbook addresses everyone in the group, not one group leader. There is no separate “Leader’s Guide.”

## **5. GROUP FACILITATION**

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We based this resource on the understanding that someone will be designated as group facilitator for each session. You may choose the same person or a different person for each of the six sessions.

## **6. TIME FLEXIBILITY**

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Each of the six sessions is flexible and can be between one hour and two or more hours in length.

## **7. BUILD YOUR OWN SESSION**

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Each of the six sessions offers you four to five OPTIONS for building your own session.

## **8. WITHIN EACH OPTION**

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Most of the options feature a mixture of quotations from Walter Brueggemann and the video participants, plus questions for discussion. Some options also offer additional creative activities.

## **9. BEFORE THE SESSION**

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Each session opens with five questions for participants to consider as preparation for the session or to consider after the session.

## **10. CLOSING AS IF IT MATTERS**

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Each session concludes with a prayer written by Walter Brueggemann that emerges naturally from the content of the session.



# BEYOND THE “QUICK GUIDE”

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Helpful information and guidance for anyone using this resource:

## 1. HANDBOOK + WORKBOOK

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This handbook is a guide to the group process as well as a workbook for everyone in the group.

- We hope the handbook gives you all the information you need to feel confident in shaping the program to work for you and your fellow group members.
- The work space provided in the handbook encourages you...
  - to respond to leading questions.
  - to write or draw your own reflections.
  - to note the helpful responses of other group members.

## 2. SIX-SESSION RESOURCE

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This resource presents Walter Brueggemann insights on the prophets framed as six distinct topics of study:

1. Moses, Pharaoh, the Prophets and Us
2. The Prophets as Uncredentialed Purveyors of Covenant
3. Moral Coherence in a World of Power, Money and Violence
4. The Shrill Rhetoric that Breaks Denial
5. The Grief of Loss as Divine Judgement
6. The Promissory Language that Breaks Despair

## 3. DVD-BASED RESOURCE

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The teaching content in each session comes in the form of input by Walter Brueggemann and response by members of a small group; just over 30 minutes in length.

Walter Brueggemann’s unique presentation and accessible academic authority stimulates thoughtful and heartfelt conversation among his listeners.

The edited conversations present group sharing that builds on Brueggemann’s initial teaching. They are intended to present to you a model of small group interaction that is personal, respectful and engaged.

You will notice that the participants in the DVD group also become our teachers. In many cases, quotes from the group members enrich the teaching component of this resource. This will also happen in your group—you will become teachers for one another.

We hope that the DVD presentations spark conversations about those things that matter most to those who are called to be prophets in the 21st century.

## **4. EVERYONE GETS EVERYTHING**

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The handbook addresses everyone in the group, not one group leader. There is no separate “Leader’s Guide.”

- Unlike many small group resources, this one makes no distinction between material for the group facilitator and for the participants. Everyone has it all!
- We believe this empowers you and your fellow group members to share creatively in the leadership.

## **5. GROUP FACILITATION**

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We designed this for you to designate a group facilitator for each session. It does not have to be the same person for all six sessions, because everyone has all the material. It is, however, essential that you and the other group members are clear about who is facilitating each session. One or two people still have to be responsible for these kind of things:

- making arrangements for the meeting space (see notes on Meeting Space, p. 8)
- setting up the space to be conducive to conversations about the things that matter most
- creating and leading an opening to the session (see notes on Opening, p. 8)
- helping the group decide on which options to focus on in that session
- facilitating the group conversation for that session
- keeping track of the time

- calling the group members to attend to the standards established for the group life (see notes on Group Standards, p. 8)
- creating space in the conversation for all to participate
- keeping the conversation moving along so that the group covers all that it set out to do
- ensuring that time is taken for a satisfying closing to the session
- making sure that everyone is clear about date, location and focus for the next session
- following up with people who missed the session

## **6. TIME FLEXIBILITY**

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Each of the six sessions is flexible and can be between one hour and two or more hours in length.

We designed this resource for your group to tailor it to fit the space available in the life of the congregation or community using it. That might be Sunday morning for an hour before or after worship, two hours on a weekday evening, or 90 minutes on a weekday morning.

Some groups might decide to spend two sessions on one of the major topics. There’s enough material in each of the six topics to do that. Rushing to get through more than the time comfortably allows, results in people not having the opportunity to speak about the things that matter most to them.

## **7. BUILD YOUR OWN SESSION**

---

Each of the six sessions offers you from four to five OPTIONS for building your own session.

How will you decide what options to use?

- One or two people might take on the responsibility of shaping the session based on what they think will appeal to the group members. This responsibility could be shared from week to week.
- The group might take time at the end of one session to look ahead and decide on the options they will cover in the next session. This could be time consuming.
- You might decide to do your personal preparation for the session (responding to the five questions), and when everyone comes together for the session, proceed on the basis of what topics interested people the most.

## **8. A FORMAT WITHIN EACH OPTION**

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Almost every option mixes quotations from the video (from Brueggemann and the other participants), along with thoughtful questions for discussion. Occasionally, options simply feature questions or other creative activities.

## **9. BEFORE OR AFTER THE SESSION**

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Each session opens with five questions for participants to consider either as they prepare for the session or as they reflect on the session afterward.

- We intend these questions to open in you some aspect of the topic under consideration in the session, which may lead you to feel more confident when addressing this question within the group or in further discussions outside the group.

- Sometimes these questions are the same as ones raised in the context of the session. They offer the opportunity for you to do some personal reflection both before and/or after engaging in the group conversation on that topic.

## **10. CLOSING AS IF IT MATTERS**

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For each session there is a final prayer—written by Walter Brueggemann—to use when closing the session.

- It's important to close well. It's like a period at the end of a sentence. People leave the session ready for whatever comes next.
- Whether you use the closing prayer or something else one of your own choosing, closing well matters.
- Another aspect of closing is evaluation. This is not included in an intentional way in the design of the sessions; however, evaluation is such a natural and satisfying thing to do that it could be included as part of the discipline of closing each session. It's as simple as taking time to respond to these questions:
  - What insights am I taking from this session?
  - What contributed to my learning?
  - What will I do differently as a result of my being here today?

## POINTERS ON FACILITATION

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### 1. Meeting Space

- Take time to prepare the space for the group. When people come into a space that has been prepared for them, they trust the hospitality, resulting in a willingness to bring the fullness of themselves into the conversation. Something as simple as playing recorded music as people arrive will contribute to this sense of “a space prepared for you.”
- Think about how the space will encourage a spirit of reverence, intimacy and care. Will there be a table in the center of the circle where a candle can be lit each time the group meets? Is there room for other symbols that emerge from the group’s life?

### 2. Opening

- In the opening session, take time to go around the circle and introduce yourselves in some way.
- Every time a group comes together again, it takes each member time to feel fully included. Some take longer than others. An important function of facilitation is to help this happen with ease, so people find themselves participating fully in the conversation as soon as possible. We designed these sessions with this in mind. Encouraging people to share in the activity proposed under *Beginning Conversation* is one way of supporting that feeling of inclusion.
- The ritual of opening might include the lighting of a candle, an opening prayer, the singing of a hymn where appropriate, and the naming of each person present.

### 3. Group Standards

- There are basic standards in group life that are helpful to name when a new group begins. Once they are named, you can always come back to them as a point of reference if necessary. Here are two basics:
  - Everything that is said in this group remains in the group. (confidentiality)
  - We will begin and end at the time agreed. (punctuality)
- Are there any others that you need to name as you begin? Sometimes standards emerge from the life of the group and need to be named when they become evident, otherwise they are just assumed.



**Note:** The video that accompanies this study guide depicts a live, unscripted interaction between Walter Brueggemann and a group of adults. You may, on a very few occasions, find it difficult to hear a few of the participants. We apologize for those few moments.



**GREAT  
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**NOW**



# SESSION | 1

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## MOSES, PHARAOH, THE PROPHETS AND US

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### **BEFORE OR AFTER THE SESSION**

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Many participants like to come to the group conversation after considering individually some of the issues that will be raised. Others like to take time following the session to do further processing. The following five reflective activities and questions are intended to open your minds, memories and emotions regarding some aspects of this session's topic. Use the space provided here to note your reflections.

What do you already know about the story of Moses, the Israelites in Egypt, Pharaoh, Sinai, the Ten Commandments and the Golden Calf? (If you want to recall the stories, then turn to the book of Exodus: chapters 1-7, 13-14, 16-17, 19-20, 32.)

Think of Pharaoh today as “the rat race,” the tendency to get pulled back into a consumer culture in spite of your best intentions, and the desire to always want more. Think of God as the One who still invites us into an alternative covenant relationship based on fidelity to God. Where is your allegiance most of the time?


How's your prayer life? Does it ever include energized, even contentious engagement with God, or is it pretty innocuous and polite? What does the way you pray tell you about your knowledge of God and God's ways?

What practices do you follow (like Sabbath) that enable you to maintain at the center of your life the things that matter most to you and to God?

Where do you experience worship that does not narcotize you, but inspires and stirs you to deal with life and death issues in a way that matters to you and to God?



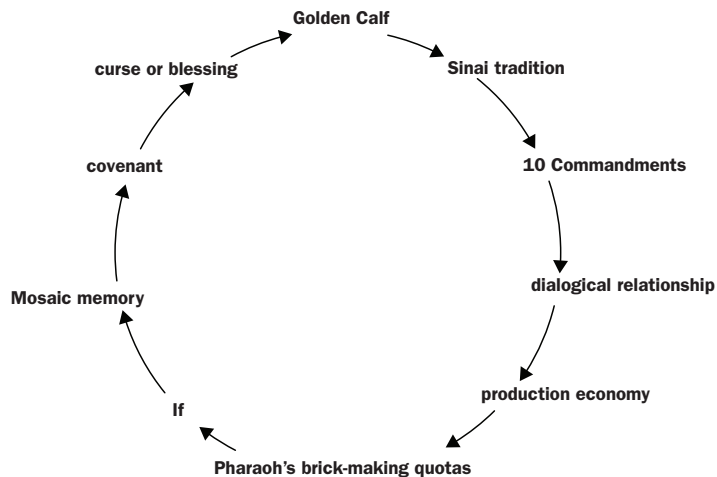
## ESSENTIAL: BRUEGGEMANN, MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

 Play the first part of the DVD (about 16.5 minutes), in which Walter Brueggemann lays the groundwork for the discussion which is to follow.

When you encounter a new teacher for the first time you may actually pay as much or more attention to the teacher as to the content of what the teacher is saying, especially when the teacher is one who is as dynamic and forceful as Walter Brueggemann. Share your initial impressions of Brueggemann with one another. What impact did he have on you both in his presence and in his words?

The members of the small group meeting with Walter had an opportunity to ask questions of him. If you were there, what questions would you have wanted to ask him based on his opening presentation?

Here we are in a series that focuses on the prophets of Israel, but we are beginning with events in the great narrative of Israel that took place at least 500 years earlier. Before we go on, let's take a moment to be clear about the connections between the story of Moses and the place of the prophets in the story of Israel. As a group, speak about the words and phrases in the circle below, using them as linking ideas between the age of Moses and the era of the prophets. (**Note:** If you have a large group, you might want to do this activity in pairs or groups of three, especially if people are quite new to one another and possibly intimidated by speaking in a large group.)





Now play the rest of Session 1. The group discussion surfaces the issues that will be covered in the rest of your session. You'll have the opportunity to choose options based on group interest and time available.

## OPTION 1: NEGOTIATING WITH GOD

---

Prince asks this question of Walter:

*You make the suggestion that Moses was in fact negotiating with God. I'm wondering how people today will take and process that comment? Are we really in a position to negotiate with God?*

Walter responds:

*That is the peculiar genius of the Jewish faith. Most of our theology comes out of Greek philosophy. When you operate in the categories of Greek philosophy there's no chance to bargain, negotiate or rap with God. It is so Jewish to be engaged in that disputatious kind of way. In Exodus 32, at the end of the Golden Calf thing, Moses really persuades God to change God's mind. This is the ground of serious prayer. Most of our prayer life is so innocuous and polite because we don't think that we have a mandate to be that seriously engaged with God.*

Damon adds:

*And we can be [engaged with God]. Remember the woman who kept knocking: "I'm not leaving!" and she kept knocking. And so we have to be more persistent and God will change his mind. Yea. That's good.*

Later Prince adds this reflection:

*Negotiation is a way of continually providing people with options as they struggle with the dilemmas of life. If anything is finalized, then that's the end. That's it. But through the process of negotiating with God, you can continually*

*re-invent and re-invigorate and eventually reach a point where you are whole or moving in that direction.*

What do you think of this more Jewish notion of negotiating with God? Have there been times when you have engaged with God in this way? Did you feel like you were negotiating with God and that there was a real possibility that God's mind would change?

Could you imagine changing your prayer life to do more "bargaining, negotiating or rapping with God"? How would you make that into a prayer practice?

## OPTION 2: GOD LEARNING TO BE GOD

---

Walter talks about God in this way:

*The God of the Bible really doesn't fit our old formulations of omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent. Omnis don't work because this is a God who is much more engaged and at risk with us in the process. That requires a different portrait of God and a different sense of ourselves as human beings and as persons of faith.*

Ariel reflects:

*God is learning to be God by duking it out with us.*

Try testing out this notion of two visions of God by engaging with one another in a debate about the nature of God. Half the group will insist that God is “omni”: all-powerful, all-seeing and all-present. God is in charge and will not be moved. The other half will speak up for a God who is malleable, willing to engage with humanity, to be changed in the process, discovering who God is by “duking it out” with us.

If you want to talk less and embody more, then use your bodies, both individually and collectively, to express the difference in these two visions of God. You could create tableaux (group compositions) with your bodies arranged to represent the difference. You could also use movement to express the two different relationships between God and us.

Whichever of these methods you use, be sure to take time to debrief afterward and identify what you learned in the process.

### OPTION 3: COMMODIFICATION OR FIDELITY; YOU CHOOSE!

---

What does Pharaoh look like in our society?

Walter responds in this way:

*In our society, Pharaoh takes the form of the rat race, and the rat race drives us to want more, to have more and to do more. We will never make enough bricks to satisfy ourselves! It is the great seduction of a consumer economy to think that you always have to have more.*

And later in the conversation he goes on to say:

*I think the summons is, in every way we can, to resist commodification. That's going to be different for each of us in our circumstances. I suspect one thing it means is to turn off the television. It probably means to go to the neighborhood park [to] watch sports rather than [watching] big spectator sports that are all commodification. I think it requires great intentionality to be present as a deciding, responsible agent, rather than a pawn of the ideologies that push us around.*

Joanna responds:

*It sounds like we have commodification and then we have relationship almost as though they are opposed to each other. It reminds me of a book I read in which one person says to another, "Don't 'thing' me—don't treat me like a thing." When we commodify other people then we are cutting off the relationship. It sounds like between us and God, it is the relationship that matters.*

Walter:

*That's exactly right. The defining ingredient of real human life is fidelity. It's not wealth, power, control, knowledge. It's fidelity. And you can see that breaking up when universities no longer have students; they have consumers. Doctors no longer have patients; they have consumers. It's re-labelling us all according to a consumer ideology. It's the death of community.*

Describe a place in your life where creeping consumer ideology has undermined relationship and fidelity? In what ways is this a concern for you? To what extent are you willing to keep paying the price?

The practice of sabbath is presented by Walter as one way for individuals, families and communities to develop resistance to a consumer-oriented society:

*Sabbath-keeping is the regular decision to opt out of the production-consumption rat race. I think we do not have energy for neighborly relationships of fidelity unless we have something like Sabbath at the center of our lives because we are exhausted by producing and consuming. One of the things busy people like us tend to do is just to add more things on but not stop doing things that are actually contrary to the truth of our lives.*

During the conversation Walter defines Sabbath in this way:

*A regular scheduled disciplined time in which we do not practice the values of the world which are the values of production and consumption.*

In what ways might you incorporate Sabbath-keeping into your life so as to fulfill the intention of this definition?

Let's imagine that you make some choices over the next little while to change your lifestyle so that it's more oriented to relationship and fidelity than to consumerism and commodification. Take a time jump a year into the future and write as if you are already living life from a different values base. It would sound something like this:

*It was almost a year ago that I became really intentional about changing the amount of influence that television had in my life. I realized what an insidious presence it was, programming a consumer orientation into me, and subverting the values that I really wanted to have as the basis for my life. Cutting back TV watching to one hour a day has made a huge difference, not only in removing the insistent presence of other voices, but also in opening up time for things that really do matter to me.*

You might not want to take time during the session to do this writing. You could take it away and make time during the next few days to do it. Then share with one another at the beginning of the next session what you wrote and how it affected you.

## OPTION 4: WORSHIP AS A LIFE AND DEATH MATTER

---

Prince introduces the matter of worship as a place where these issues could be focused:

*I sometimes sit in church and feel the focus is so much on service and praising God and not enough on a provocative sermon that causes people to question their very practice and whether or not that practice is liberating or challenging or contributing to the institutionalization of a mind set. Where is the spiritual food that is going to help us deal with the pressures of a world that is just total assault on what we think?*

Prince has opened a door into a place which is clearly much on Walter's heart and mind:

*Our meeting in worship is a life and death matter in which something is at stake. I think that very much conventional church worship is narcotized: "There's nothing important going on here so I'll just go through the motions one more time." When in fact it is a life or death matter. Annie Dillard says that if people understood what is in fact happening in Christian worship they would wear crash helmets. To understand worship that way already requires that we break the power of the ideology of Pharaoh. Pharaoh wants us to have worship that is innocuous.*

When you worship, where do you experience yourself on a continuum that goes from "innocuous/narcotized" to "life-and-death/wear a crash helmet"?

Perhaps you've never thought of worship in the terms that Brueggemann is using. What vision of worship does he evoke in you? How might you pursue that vision if you are not experiencing it already?

## OPTION 5: CHALLENGE FOR THE CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

---

The challenge that Walter Brueggemann issues to us at the end of his opening teaching is this:

*Our work in the life of the contemporary church is to continue to reflect on how we are called to live a life of dialogical covenant which is an alternative existence even though we, like ancient Israel, are always seduced out of it into other modes of existence. For the prophets, the great IF of Exodus 19 hovers over our life to see whether we will be choosing a life of blessing or a life of curse.*

One thing about Walter, as you've probably already gathered—he doesn't mince words!

As a group, talk together about how you are doing in your life as an alternative faith community, knowing that other modes of existence are always trying to seduce you. Use this frame below as a way to organize your conversation:

Ways that we are choosing a life of blessing:	Ways that we are choosing a life of curse:



## CLOSING

---

Offer this prayer:

We are dazzled  
by the way you continually reach out to us in fidelity,  
and then reach out to us yet again.  
You reach out to us in transformative love,  
inviting us to a new life.  
You reach out to us with sovereign commands,  
summoning us to obedience  
out beyond ourselves.  
You reach out to us and bind us to yourself.

And we,  
transformed by your love  
and summoned to a new life of obedience,  
move in and out with you.

We trust and then betray;  
we praise you and then resist;  
we thank you and then deny.  
And you reach out!

Enwrap us in the dazzling reality  
that you make all things new,  
even for us.

—*Walter Brueggemann, Cincinnati, 2011*