

The hard generative work of good preaching is to show the ways in which an old treasured text is as contemporary as the life we live today. I cannot remember when I have seen such a sustained embodiment of the good work of preaching. DeLoach has taken up both the plotline and the specificity of the Book of Exodus in order to summon us to fresh faith and to missional living. This is a series of sermons to which attention should be paid because Greg's word and our lives constitute a perfect match for each other. This book is an important gift we do well to receive and welcome.

Walter Brueggemann  
Columbia Theological Seminary

# Catching Up with God

Freeing Ourselves for  
Divine Engagement

C. Gregory DeLoach

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Published in the United States by Nurturing Faith Inc., Macon GA,  
[www.nurturingfaith.net](http://www.nurturingfaith.net).

Nurturing Faith is the book publishing arm of Good Faith Media ([goodfaithmedia.org](http://goodfaithmedia.org)).

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is available.

ISBN: 978-1-63528-098-2

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# Acknowledgments

It is often said that gratitude is its own form of prayer, and I believe this to be true. Since no book or sermon worth reading is written without the markings of gratitude, this is as much a book of prayer as it is of sermons.

My prayer of gratitude begins with the many congregations who opened wide their doors and hearts, allowing me the privilege to stand behind pulpits and say a few meager words into their lives. I am especially grateful to the beautiful souls who gathered every Sunday at Unity Baptist Church near Summerville, Georgia. These good people took me in and claimed me as their pastor when I was a naïve but earnest young college student. Their generosity of love and gift of blessing has held me and kept me through the years.

Tiffany Stubbs, a student at McAfee School of Theology, worked over my manuscript, made suggestions, corrections, and encouragement. On her horizon churches will be as thankful as I am as Tiffany lives out her calling. Speaking of McAfee, Mercer University provides yet another context to live more fully into my vocation as I work with and learn from the students, faculty and staff.

I conclude with a prayer of gratitude for my beloved family. My father taught me to appreciate the gift of hard work and honest living, and he taught those lessons daily as a dairy farmer and daddy. My sons Clark and Aaron remind me how thankful I am that their lives completely changed my own life. Nothing I have or will ever accomplish will equal the gift they give to me by calling me daddy. Finally, my wife Amy does not always understand my wilderness wanderings in matters of life and faith, but has remained steadfast by my side all along the way. Her life is grace to me as we wander together.

Gratitude is prayer. Gratitude is life. Gratitude is really the only thing we can leave behind to share with others.

Ordinary time, 2020

*The boundary lines have fallen for me in pleasant places;  
I have a goodly heritage.*

Psalm 16:6

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# Introduction

*“In your steadfast love you led the people” (Ex 15:13).*

I preached this collection of sermons while I served as the senior pastor of the First Baptist Church of Augusta, Georgia. We lived “thickly” for nearly a year in the ancient stories, following along with the narrative and theological arch of Exodus (the book that bears that title as well as the movement that defines the people).

The word “exodus” brings to mind urgent images of migration, flight, or escape. Rarely does one think of it as something generative and life giving. Exodus feels more like survival. Kurds in flight across Turkey, Iran, and Syria are described as being in exodus, with blood marking their steps. Children of El Salvador and Honduras are in exodus as they desperately pick their way through Mexico and into the United States. Hurricanes like Katrina push families out of their homes and neighborhoods and into migrations of transitions. Churches, too, are in their own kind of exodus, with the loss of privileged status, navigating through the wilderness of missional identity and theological wanderings.

Exodus is both an ancient story and a contemporary one. The book within the Torah called Exodus is the epic narrative of God’s deliverance of the children of Israel that continues to speak to all who wander, seek, or flee. It is the story of a larger gospel of *Missio Dei*—the work or mission of God. The center, or subject and object, is with YHWH moving ahead, leading, calling, and summoning. Through Exodus we read of Israel’s experience as part of the greater story of God at work in creation.

In the book of Exodus, we read of the LORD God working through the particular people called Israel to bring about liberation and deliverance and along the way we read of wanderings, apostasy, grumblings, and restoration. This is a story about a particular people in a particular time. And yet, it is also a story for all people groaning, murmuring, wandering, and searching for God to remember, direct, and work in their lives.

God is still at work in this world, from one generation to the next, in a mission of liberation and redemption. We are invited to join with God in that holy enterprise. In joining God, we also recognize our own need for

liberation and redemption, as well as our call in and to a world of dislocation. Walter Brueggemann writes of the Exodus story, "...it provides for us the *essential characters* and the *recurring plot* that is always being performed and re-performed in the world."<sup>1</sup>

In Exodus, we witness a "contextualization" of the good news of God speaking to weakness and power, to enslavement and liberation, to deliverance and inheritance. As witnesses, we listen for our call of God, see the dislocation of our world, and re-imagine what could be. This work inevitably involves its own kind of wilderness wandering along with failures, sin, and broken faith. Yet YHWH invites us back into covenant and restoration as we move forward into a world broken and waiting.

The Latin term *missio dei*, the work of God, provides an interpretive framing of the sermons based on Exodus. Lesslie Newbigin and later Alan Roxburgh challenged the church to move from an ecclesiastically-centered mission to catching up to where God is already at work. As such, just as God was at work in the Exodus narrative and in the hearing and telling of it, God is also at work in our world today. The role of the community of faith is to discover how and where God is working and to join with God in that holy endeavor.

It is an old story and if we are honest in the telling, sharing, and hearing of it, we can at times find ourselves standing alongside the bloody Nile with Pharaoh, or trotting alongside it with some of the women. We may sympathize with the enslaved as we arise each day to make more bricks or as likely be discomfited and disturbed by our own complicity as the taskmasters disburdening burdens.

The old story is still a fresh story that people of faith and people wanting faith still tell because we still live in a world that needs to hear.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 16.

darkness and hopelessness where our experiences feel God-forsaken. We have spiritual high points like Mount Sinai and we have low moments complaining in the desert. We know what it is like to feel the power of God on our side with plagues upon our enemies, and we have tasted the failure of our apostasy with our own golden calves.

God's commitment is to move you, to move us, to move creation from the chaos and darkness into the light of promise. As Exodus closes, we have these poignant reminders for our own trajectory of life. Exodus tells us that this life is never about any one of us, but all of us. And, for all of us, Exodus is the epic narrative of God's mission to the world and our purpose is to be part in it.

You cannot lead a life of purpose without God filling you and leading you.

You cannot live a life that matters without God filling you and leading you.

We cannot partner with the Mission of God without God filling us and leading us.

Like Israel, we dare not go where the Glory of God does not lead.

To matter in life, God needs to matter in your life. God's Glory is not an add-on to your plans; not a sub-set to your life's mission; and certainly not an afterthought to your priorities. Remember that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit is the peculiar presence of God's Glory that liberates, enlivens, and lights up our movement to the promise.

If we follow the Glory of God, it takes us into the mission of God. Exodus is that epic story that is echoed in the final words of Jesus before his ascension into heaven: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28:19–20).

The complete Tabernacle; the fullness of God's Glory. What are you waiting for? You have a life to live and if you follow the Glory of God it will be an epic one.

<sup>1</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Truth Speaks to Power* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2013), 16.

<sup>2</sup>*The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*, directed by Peter Jackson, based on a novel written by J.R.R. Tolkien, featuring Elijah Wood, Ian McKellen, Liv Tyler, Viggo Mortensen, Sean Astin, Cate Blanchett, John Rhys-Davies, Christopher Lee, Billy Boyd, Dominic Monaghan, Orlando Bloom, Hugo Weaving, Andy Serkis and Sean Bean, (Los Angeles, California: New Line Cinema, 2003), DVD.

Dr. C. Gregory DeLoach became interim dean of the James and Carolyn McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University on August 1, 2018. He also serves as director of development for McAfee and the College of Professional Advancement at Mercer University.

A native of Eatonton, Dr. DeLoach has pastored congregations throughout Georgia for nearly three decades, including in Mansfield, Chickamauga, Marietta, and Augusta. Following 10 years as senior pastor of First Baptist Augusta, he became executive director of Developmental Disabilities Ministries, an Atlanta-based nonprofit, charitable corporation serving adults with developmental disabilities and their families through operation of 19 homes across Georgia. In February 2017, he joined the development staff at Mercer, having previously served on the University's Board of Trustees.

Dr. DeLoach earned his Bachelor of Science from Shorter College, Master of Divinity from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and Doctor of Ministry from Columbia Theological Seminary. He and his wife, Amy, have two adult sons, Clark and Aaron.