

And the Wall Came Tumbling Down

Colleagues,

Sherman Lee's ThTh post last week was brilliant. From some of the comments coming back to Sherm, I wonder if it may have been too brilliant. Blinding. At the very least so replete with shoptalk from the Crossings club that folks not yet having signed up got something, but didn't (yet) get IT. Sherm tells me that one of his colleagues on the job, having read his text, responded: "So, in a nutshell, just remember to keep a spiritual connection throughout all of this (mess)."

Well, yes, spiritual, but that's not yet getting to the "Saver" Sherm wanted to present, a Saver for Sherm and that very colleague too—right there in the shop—as the whole outfit faced Losses. For as the Wall (of THE Street) was tumbling down, so was theirs. Yes, on the very day they were talking "the primary identity" of their mega-mega-company was being sold off for survival.

So I'm going to be the old professor and walk/talk you through it again. Of course, I may add an item or two. If for no other reason than that this week in the church calendar there's another special day, September 29—St. Michael and All Angels—with its own bizarre Biblical text [Revelation 12:7-12] to add to the mix. You may want to read those 6 verses before you go any further.

Back to Sherm's ThTh last week.

He was doing a self-crossing. Taking the Christmas story from Luke (of all texts!) and laying it over his own daily work in

“Goliath Financial Services” as the invincible wall of Wall Street comes tumbling down—and GFS does too.

His self-crossing might have been more obvious if Sherm had added a fourth “L” to the topic line: “Lucre, Linus, LEE and Luke – Crossing the Current Financial Crises.”

In the Crossings paradigm Bob Bertram bequeathed to us for “crossing our world with the Word of God” it’s a three-stage process. #1 TRACKING a slice-of-life from the world we live in. #2 Getting our GROUNDING in a specific Biblical text, a Biblical slice-of-life, you might say. And then #3 CROSSING, bringing those two slices together, criss-crossing them [Btw, the ancient meaning of criss-cross—once Christ-cross—was to “mark something with Christ’s cross.”] More precisely, lay the Biblical slice-of-life across the personal one and see what you get.

So following his teacher Sherm started with TRACKING his world of daily work—and not just “it” or “them” but Sherm himself, his own slice-of-life at GFS.

- this market crash
- collective psyche (at GFS)
- where has the future gone
- water cooler conversations
- belief within the industry
- nothing is certain anymore
- anxious, tired, exhausted . . . on edge a lot
- catatonia
- the market runs on emotion
- it’s about confidence, built on stability
- problem runs deeper than we’ve been thinking
- markets have been overvalued . . . not in an academic, technical sense
- but rather in the emotional sense of us overestimating our

own health

- like dying of multiple cancers
- keep thinking: if we can lick the last one, we'll be perfectly fine
- emotional quakes
- after-shocks which accelerate the downward spiral of confidence
- we have the makings of extreme fear, loss, doubt.

[Goldie-oldies in the Crossings community will divine that Sherm's choice of terms, images, metaphors as he goes about this self-tracking is already tinted by the language of where he'll be taking us next, St. Luke's Christmas story. But how on earth can he get from Wall Street to Bethlehem—from the mess at the tip of Manhattan to the manged Messiah in Bethlehem? Read on.]

So much for Sherm's TRACKING.

Then he moves to phase #2, GROUNDING. And he takes us to the first-ever published Crossings piece Bob Bertram wrote, "A Christmas Crossing." It's a show and tell on how to do Biblical text study when you read the text through the lenses of diagnosis and prognosis. Bob used these medical terms as a pun in their ancient Greek meaning. Like this: diagnosis is "God seeing through us," and prognosis is "God seeing us through." In Lutheran lingo, that's law and promise. So the "Crossings method" for reading Biblical texts is bifocal. You use two lenses—one looking for diagnostic stuff, one for prognostic stuff, one for the bad news, one for the good news.

And that's where Sherm then takes us. However . . . He doesn't make it exactly easy for himself, nor for us readers, in that he tells the GROUNDING story in two formats. One is Luke's own version. The other is Luke's story via Linus in "Charlie Brown's

Christmas.” Sherm can’t resist pulling in the Linus version because in his own childhood days and as “young adult” too he watched that TV special umpteen times and was “awestruck” by it. All that was a segment of his self-tracking, long before “at age 23 . . . I was baptized.”

[There are other places where Sherm makes us readers “work” to keep up with him. I’m thinking of his occasional “sidebar” sorties into stuff that does indeed relate to his storyline, but it’s not so obvious unless you know Sherm. E.g., his Batman sortie, his sidebar about the OCD affliction of the American media, his move to Monty Python.]

Bertram parsed Luke 2 with three simple diagnostic terms going down, down, down. Who’s got the problem in this text? The shepherds. What’s their problem? Three-fold-deep, deeper, deepest.

Level one: NIGHT. They’re benighted. In the dark—about lots of things. “Thick” darkness.

Deeper still, level two: FEAR. The Fearful Visitor and, yes, mega-fear (Luke’s actual Greek for that “sore afraid” rendering we’ve all often wondered about. Sherm did too.) It signals a God-problem, not just a “human” problem.

Deepest of all, level three: LOST. Not simply that they’ve gotten lost, strayed away from their own (capital S) shepherd, but even worse than that, namely, God, the cosmic shepherd, has lost them. That is a major motif later on in Luke’s Gospel, as he alone among the four evangelists offers the parables (chap. 15) of owners losing a sheep, losing a coin, concluding with the whopp er-loss of a father losing both his sons.

After which Bob reads the text again looking through the prognosis-lens.

Good news for level three: a SAVIOR for the lost (along with all their losses).

Good news for level two: JOY. Fear trumped by Joy.

Good news for level one: GLORIFYING. Formerly benighted shepherds now angels of God's own glow-ry in the thick darkness that still persists.

Sherm uses all these key terms as he moves into the Luke/Linus GROUNDING material. But he can't resist sliding into phase-three CROSSING as soon as he gets started. He's crossing his slice-of-life with Luke's slice-of-life right from the git-go as he walks/talks us through the original. Like the double-helix in DNA, they're interwoven. He can't pull them apart for separate treatment. That's not bad.

NIGHT

"In this story, I am one of the shepherds . . . a white collar worker in the distant reaches of an office . . . sometimes at night." Even more, my "whole world is upside down . . . disappearing into the night. Almost as if [it] were never there." "Gone, destroyed, no longer reliable. My own behaviors—reflecting stability and confidence—shot to hell as I revert to bad habits, becoming more irritable and short-tempered, searching for a calm port in these financial storms. I worry about every asset—money and time—and how can I provide for my family."

FEAR

Yes, a frightful visitor has barged in. Yes, sore afraid. "Everything I trusted . . . poof!" "A different kind of fear, a different kind of accountability." [Sherm is already beginning to segue to the deepest level.]

LOST

“The angst I feel is not just fiscal responsibility for my family and community...” It’s bigger than that. “Trust only in myself . . . my judgment to the exclusion of God, I no longer trust in God. It’s no longer just my problem. God has lost me—my heart and my soul.”

[So in Luke’s distinctive telling of the Jesus story, God too “has a problem.” He’s lost his kids to other families, other owners. How to get them back? Technical term for what’s needed is “re(d)emption,” regaining ownership, getting the kids back into the family business. Sherm peers again at the text with the prognosis lens.]

Enter the Manged Messiah.

Sherm continues his double helix entwining as he simultaneously does GROUNDING (Luke’s good news for the Bethlehem shepherds) and CROSSING that immediately to his own calling, his “keeping watch over his own flocks—at Goliath and at home—by night.”

So first it’s Luke’s #1 prognosis term SAVIOR.

For the Bethlehem shepherds: “In the city of David a Savior for the Losers who is Christ the Lord.”

For shepherd Sherm: “God’s response to God’s losing me is to become one of us.” And then he spells that out all the way to Christ’s cross, as God’s sweet-swaps Sherm’s losses for Christ’s gains. Debts exchanged for assets, “balancing the ledgers of hearts, minds, souls and bodies. It’s The Story intertwined with our own stories in our here and now.” Moving on . . .

Prognosis level 2. JOY trumps fear as “we are invited to . . . trust God’s generous payment of our debts . . . God’s gift of settling our accounts.” Sherm has but one crisp paragraph on

this one. But he says it all—"hanging our hearts" on this Savior, replacing the fear-full hearts hanging on other saviors gone bankrupt, punning his way to "the imprint on our currency of 'In God We Trust.'"

And finally prognosis level 3, his last two paragraphs. "After seeing [the SAVIOR for the LOST] and believing [= JOY trumping FEAR], what do the shepherds do? They return to their workplaces and daily lives—to their regular programming as it were—but changed. They GLORIFY AND PRAISE God, doing their shepherdly duties but adding another task to their to-do list: to be messengers, that is, angels, of God's Good News." Then Sherm tells how that can and does happen from his desk at Goliath. "Continue the struggle" but with a twist. "The dark night of analysis paralysis . . . the dialogue of despair . . . replaced by hope and confidence of God paying my God-debt for me" and how that "opens new dimensions in my work relationships." Sherm's final sentence is: "I've never been a soapbox evangelist. [Rather] leavening existing relationships is how God has blessed me with evangelistic opportunities." Such as his colleague asking him this past Monday if his own (strange?) "attitudes and behavior" at work were something about his "spirituality." Voila! Another "evangelistic opportunity" for him to proceed with Luke, Linus and Lee's shepherd/angel agenda "glorifying and praising God for all the things that [Sherm] has seen and heard."

I intended to add a P.S. of my own on the wall(s) of Wall Street come tumbling down and cross that with this week's St. Michael & All Angels text. But this much is enough already. For a hint of the GROUNDING segment that might be in the mix GO to the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> Put "St. Michael" into the internal Google system on the page and see what you get.

Foundational for all of them is this one:

<https://crossings.org/archive/bob/SPIRITUALITYISFORANGELS.pdf>

Maybe next week. What new humpty-dumpty great falls yet await us? Back in the days of Crossings semester-long courses, we had one on that Revelation text about St. Michael et al. The course title was “Apocalypse Now.” At that time the focus was Vietnam, when the walls of Wall Street had no cracks. Or so we thought. But our vision was myopic. Now we’re in two more Asian wars.

But these, so some tell us, we are winning. Yet it’s NYC implosions, not Baghdad or Kabul explosions, that are bringing us to our knees. If only they indeed would do that! We might yet be saved. Might get the genuine “rescue” package, the bail-out that works. But it depends 100% on who the deity is before whom our knees bend. Currently a 700 billion dollar golden-parachute (golden calf?) is the one we are encouraged to trust. 700 billion—that number itself is super-natural, ungraspable, infinite, incomprehensible. Once upon a time those adjectives applied only to the deity. Perhaps they still do. It is Deity-Dollar before whom we bow in these desperate days. If the U.S. Congress would only give us access to Deity-Dollar in its infinite sum, we would be saved! [Talk about need for change!]

But Deity-Dollar is a false God. The True One, the Deity de facto in charge, remained the Unknown God among the other gods worshipped at Mars Hill in Athens in ancient days. And so it is today “on the Hill” in Washington DC. I have not yet heard that True God mentioned in all the media madness—surely not by the elected makers and shakers. And not much, so far as I’ve heard, by the parsons of our land either. Blindness appears to be endemic—and epidemic. Sherm’s view—America’s economic crisis is a God-problem—is clearly a minority one. And he never went to a seminary, though I know that once he was tempted.

Even so, and because of the Manged Messiah—and St. Michael too—and all his shepherd-angels,

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. After Sherm OK'd the text above, he added this:

A teaser about the Crossings Conference: Pastor Robin Morgan is leading the "Pop Culture roundtable session." If all goes well, she'll use this essay as a launching pad to start the discussion – and the discussion will continue after the Conference ends, in the form of a blog hosted by Robin and Sherman.