

Advent and Apocalypse in America—a Triad for Crossing.

Colleagues,

Funny thing happened in California last week. Marie and I were there for Thanksgiving at my sister's home in Ukiah, 100 miles north of San Francisco. We were using up our remaining Frequent Flyer Miles before they expired. These miles we'd chalked up from our last Global Mission Volunteer junket (2004) when we flew across the Pacific 4 times in that one year. Because we were "beggars" asking for a free ride on the most air-travelled weekend of every year in the USA, we couldn't be "choosers." So the airlines stretched out our Thanksgiving weekend to 10 whole days—November 23 to December 2. What to do with all that time? Even for a dear sister—and she is indeed—we stuck to the classic axiom for visitors: After three days guests, like fish, need a change of venue. So it was Wednesday through Friday with sister and family—a wild bunch with 5 brainy grandchildren home from prep school and college. Before and after that we bivouacked with Crossings folks who had heard that we were in the neighborhood and told us to stop by.

One of those alternate venues (there were three in all) came right at the outset, before the turkey stuff at Ukiah, as Pastor Stan Abraham picked us up at SFO airport, to mentor us through a couple days in Aptos on Monterey Bay. Seafood dinner with more California Crossers, the shore, the surf, the sea lions, the vistas, the multimillion-dollar homes—the whole nine yards. For Marie it was fun and games, but I had to pay the piper. How so? preside and profess at the Tuesday morning text study with Stan's group of regulars, a marvelous mix of LCMS and ELCA pastors.

So I “got to” wrestle with texts for Advent I, the Sunday just passed. Here’s what I found.

1. The Gospel for Advent I is always taken from the “apocalypse” chapter of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, whichever one is up in the current three-year lectionary. For the church year just started it is Mark 13. I didn’t have access to Jim Squire’s brilliant study of that text offered for last Sunday on the Sabbatheology listserve, so I had to wing it.
2. The word “apocalypse” does not appear in the Greek of Mark 13, but—surprise, surprise—it DOES show up in last Sunday’s second lesson, I Cor. 1:3-9. Second surprise is that it is not the cataclysmic apocalypse portrayed in Mark 13. Instead it is the “apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ,” a “good news” apocalypse, no cataclysm at all. But the two are related.
3. Christ’s mercy-apocalypse is so good that Christ-trusters are “safe” – aka “saved”— when any cataclysmic apocalypse comes. That applies both to the one way at THE END, and also to apocalypses that are not across the whole cosmos, but “little” apocalypses where my own individual world, the “mini-cosmos” I’ve built for myself, comes crashing down.
4. In fact, it seems to have been the disciples’ own faulty vision that opens chapter 13 in Mark. They ask: “When, Jesus, will we see all this apoc alypse-stuff take place? It’s obviously somewhere in the future, right?” “Not so,” he says, “I’m talking about ‘this generation.’” How long do you have to wait for false Messiahs to show up? How long do you have to wait for “nation against nation”? For earthquakes? For famine? For people being led astray? For persecution? Betrayal? Terrible things happening—yes, happening to you? When your own personal and private

heaven and earth (the mini-cosmos where you are secure) will pass away? The topic in Mark 13 is apocalypse now, not apocalypse some day, although there will be more tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

5. We need to take the term literally: apo-calyptse = take the veil away. You can have your eyes open, but if there's a veil in front of those eyes, then "seeing, you do not see." There are four different Greek verbs in Mark 13 for looking, watching or seeing. The four together appear 13 times in the text. It's all about seeing or not seeing. The faulty vision of the disciples is the D-1 (diagnosis, first step) of their problem. Even with eyes wide open, they are not seeing the "apocalypse now" confronting them.
6. Aren't these the ones, the personal cataclysmic apocalypses, that Luther is talking about in his "Mighty Fortress" hymn.

*"Were they to take our house,
Goods, honor, child or spouse,
Though life be wrenched away . . ."
That's the cosmos that has my name on it—wrenched away.*

*Yet Christ's alternate apocalypse—the big unveiling on
Good Friday and Easter—trumps all of that.*

*"Whom God himself elected . . .
Christ Jesus mighty Lord . . .
His verdict must prevail . . .*

*They cannot win the day,
The Kingdom's ours forever."*

The disciples do not get to this feisty faith in Mark 13. But Paul is ascribing it to the Corinthians in last Sunday's second text. More about this later.

7. With eyes still pasted shut, though they think they see, the disciples in Mark 13 suffer an even worse affliction. They are “un-awake,” un-seeing, themselves “led astray,” “un-alert” to the very Messiah who is talking to them. Hearing, but not hearing what he calls “my words,” the only ones that (so he claims) will survive any and every apocalypse now. So that’s D-2 in Crossings procedure, Step 2, signaling an “even worse” D-3 Final Diagnosis.
8. Namely, still stuck with hearts hanging on the stuff “of heaven and earth,” the cosmos that passes away. If that is where your heart is hanging, when it crumbles so do you. Apocalypse arrives when God removes the veil. And who among us is not veiled? Yes, hiding behind self-concocted hoods whereby we hoodwink ourselves to the truth—the full truth—of our personal histories and of our world’s history as well. Or as Paul puts it in second Corinthians—when “Moses’ veil is taken away,” i.e., when God’s law is unhooded and we do not have Christ’s heat shield to survive its blast, then the axiom is inevitable: sinner equals cinder.
9. The OT text for last Sunday, Isaiah 64:1-9, signals this too. Twice the prophet bemoans directly to God that “you have hidden your face from us.” God can play the veil game too. And what was still hidden for Isaiah and his people is exactly what he pleads for. Namely, that when God is engineering those burning apocalypses (vv. 1 – 7), God would “not remember [our] iniquity forever,” but remember, yes un-veil, something else. “You, O LORD, are our father and we—rascals though we be—are your kids. Though we fail our Moses contract with you, we plead the Abrahamic one. We are his kids. And trusting the promise as he did, we are your kids too. You said so. You promised.”
10. All of that finally gets unveiled in the “apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ.” That’s Step Four in the Crossings

process: Good News, good enough and new enough to trump any and all of the other Mosaic unveilings, where it's sinner = cinder. That includes the ones that happen today all the way to the Big One at the end. God's mercy for sinners is un-veiled on Good Friday and Easter Sunday. The hidden God of Isaiah 64 becomes the revealed-un-veiled-God outside the walls of Jerusalem on that weekend.

11. If you look a bit closer, that Good News unveiling is actually narrated with stage settings from the Final Apocalypse. "The sun's light failed. The earth shook, and the rocks split. The tombs were opened and many . . . were raised." Bob Bertram often referred to this apocalypse of Christ as one that "scooped" the grim apocalypse at the end—and all the ones prior to it. Because he took the heat of the "sinner = cinder" apocalypse, folks trusting him cash in on his promissory offer: "I did it for you. It's yours for nothing more than faith. Faith alone. Trust it, you have it. And here's what you have: trusting me you've got all your apocalypses—including the Big One—already behind you. The next one, as well as the last one, 'cannot win the day.'" [that's step 5 in the Crossings matrix.] Christ's apocalypse initiates God's new regime in an otherwise "passing away" world. Christ is The Word at the center of this new regime. In the face of any and every apocalypse—think the last musical line of Luther's hymn—"His kingdom's ours forever."
12. The move to Step 6 in the Crossings matrix—and here we go back to Mark 13—is to live our lives in the world under this regime. Hanging on to "words that will not pass away" amid all the apocalypses where otherwise solid stuff, things that people build their lives on, do indeed "pass away." And not being surprised whenever it happens, whether "at evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn." Doing our daily work of caring for creation with

the additional calling of hustling Christ's apocalypse, God's mercy regime for sinners, to rescue them as we were rescued from the inexorable law of sinner = cinder. In Mark 13 Jesus signals that with such words as: "The good news must first be proclaimed to all peoples. So when you are on the witness stand, give testimony of the alternate apocalypse you live by, for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit." Christ's "keep awake" mandate is more than just "don't doze off and be left behind when the Big One comes," but "keep awake to the assignment I've given you. You are the 'angels' (=messengers) whom I send out to the ends of the earth to gather the elect from wherever the wind blows. And they become 'elect' when you proclaim the good news to them."

The apocalypse of our Lord Jesus Christ is the message. His "Stay alert" is "Stay on message."

So much for "Grounding," in the Biblical text. After which in the ancient days of Crossings courses and workshops came phase two: "Tracking" a slice of life today. Call it a contemporary text. Then came phase three: "Crossing" the two texts, today's slice of life and the Biblical text.

It may not yet be clear to all in America that is is indeed Apocalypse Now in our land—and from our land out into the entire planet. Even secular analysts are saying so. Most are not daring to use the God-word in their rhetoric, probably because they don't believe it applies. Even the US president-elect believes Jeremiah Wright was wrong as he encouraged his congregation to stop reciting the mantra "God bless America," when the opposite was patently the truth of the matter. But, of course, it is not patent. Surely not in America's public square. Sadly, not in the churches either in any audible way. All of Obama's proposed team members agree with his prose: "Times are tough, but we can fix

it.” Not so, when it’s apocalypse now. If you don’t even acknowledge the presence of the veil-puller-offer and think you and your team are able to take the heat with your own resources—such as billions now somehow therapeutic to cope with the billions that are lethal—you too will pass away. Cinders.

One strange exception among the “secular” analysts was a news clipping brought along by Joe Strelan when he came up from Downunder for the Crossings conference a few weeks ago. It’s from The Weekend Australian Magazine (October 11-12, 2008) by Phillip Adams, whom I’d never heard of. Googling I learned (from Wikipedia) this: Phillip Andrew Hedley Adams (born 12 July 1939) is an Australian broadcaster, film producer, writer, humanist, antiquities collector, social commentator, satirist, left-wing pundit and atheist. “I’ve been an atheist since I was five.” His father was a Methodist minister.

Even so, listen to these paragraphs from this atheist’s “God-talk.”

Among my collection of antiquities are fragile fragments of papyrus that look every bit as old as the Dead Sea Scrolls. But they’re as hard to date as they are to translate. I’ve managed to make some sense of the text, though, during my many insomniac nights. So do the papyri have anything to say about recent events? Yes! There are clear warnings about “Palin heresies.” I’ve passed this papyrus on to both McCain and Obama.

Even more remarkable revelations and prophecies come on a larger fragment helpfully headed “Revelations and Prophecies.” They may well be related to the bad news in the business pages of this very newspaper.

“Verily I say unto you, your day of judgment will fall in the

year of our Lord 2008. Sinners who walked tall on Wall Street instead of humbly along the Road to Damascus will be detoured through the Valley of Death and into deserts of financial despair. Accursed will be the brothers of Lehmann. Their once-proud profits will be without honor in their own country and through the global economy.

“Those who thought greed good and who worshipped at the golden calf rather than goodness and God, who showed no mercy to those in need, who held their cards of gold higher than they held Jehovah, will be toppled from the pedestals and cast into the fiery pit of failed fiscal policies.

“Verily, they will be as accursed as the moneylenders Christ drove from the temples they fouled with their sub-prime mortgages. They shall be placed into junk bondage and forced to wander the deserts of devalued derivatives and fiscal-re-regulation. Like their bonuses, their plump Porsches will pucker and their Ferraris rust. Oh ye despoilers of the dolorous dollar, ye shall crawl on your bellies like snakes, or use public transport.”

There's mention of a new 10 commandments but I can't find all of them. “Thou shalt have no other God before Me” survives, as does the reference to lusting after thy neighbor's wife or ox. But that's been modified . . . the ox is now a BMW.

The others seem to be regulatory recommendations. “Thou shalt not take the widow's mite nor tempt her with filthy riches” and “thou shalt not hide thy money in the Bahamas and refuse to give unto the ATO [=the Aussie IRS] the things that are the ATO's.”

There are big threats about Sodomizing Wall Street, in the sense of shock and awe. And a reference to a burning bush is about burning George W in fire and brimstone. For sins including the claim that the Lord supported the Iraq invasion. If I were Bush

I'd get out of the White House before the elections as the Lord is threatening to Gomorrah Washington.

It's not clear whether the past few weeks have seen the last Judgment or just a trial balance. But he's really pissed off.

So far an Aussie atheist's analysis. Is his vision blurred, or is he clairvoyant [=seeing clearly]? You can guess what my answer is. Even Balaam's burro saw the angel of judgment that the bumbling prophet was blind to.

Let's call Adams' rant a "Tracking" of America. Now to "Crossing" it with last Sunday's "Grounding" texts.

Diagnosis. Level -1 Blindness. Thirteen verbs for seeing, looking, watching and not one of them is working in the body politic. Example. Yesterday the official word was out in US media: "It IS a recession. Fact is, it's been a recession since December last year, but we didn't see it."

D-2 Hanging our hearts on false Messiahs—people and policies that will save us. You fill in the blanks. Even Obama's highly hyped "change!" sure looks like re-arranging deckchairs on the Titanic. Nobody sees the iceberg. [Yes, there was this guy who once was his pastor]

D-3. The God-problem at the root of it all. Diagnostician Phillip Adams is right, atheist though he be. As is non-atheist Jeremiah Wright. It is Judgment Day. And so severe is the judgment that the folks being judged haven't a clue that it is God who is pushing Humpty-Dumpty off the Wall (Street). We need to think of that every time we hear the new terror word on everyone's lips, "crisis." Crisis doesn't mean "hard times." It's the NT Greek word of judgment. Judgment day is Crisis day. When the NT speaks of crisis, God is always the critic. Crisis

day is apocalypse now. The party is over.

Is there any Gospel cross-over for this? Probably not for the USA as nation.

Did you notice in the appointed Gospel [Matt. 25] for November 23, the last Sunday in the church year just concluded, that it was the "nations," not individual folks, who were arrayed before Christ the judge? It's the nations who get sorted out as sheepish or goatish. The yardstick for measuring the survival or death sentence of nations is not faith, but works. Nations pass or fail God's judgment by the yardstick of performance. In Lutheran lingo it's all according to God's left hand rubrics of carrying out God's law of preservation and fair recompense. Did you care for the poor, or increase poverty among your people? Did you visit the imprisoned and care for them or did you engineer the largest prison population of any nation in the modern world? Did you, did you, did you? You say you didn't notice these "least" people? Too bad. The final exam is "pass/fail." Here's your report card. You didn't make it. The party's over.

Nations don't get saved. Promise-trusting people do. And for that, go back to number 10, 11, 12 above.

Way back in 1952 when I was an exchange student in Germany, just a few years after the end of the Second World War, I learned that for many a Christian during those days of Germany's Apocalypse Now—both the one inflicted BY Germany and the one inflicted ON Germany—the OT book of Ecclesiastes and the last book in the NT had become favored texts. Actually eye-openers. Ecclesiastes with its unveiling of the emptiness of lives that cling to the stuff of "heaven and earth," and St. John's Revelation (Greek title: apocalypsis) for Christian coping—yes, Christian survival—when it all comes tumbling down.

We once offered a Crossings semester-long course on the Book of Revelation. Maybe I can dig out the syllabus and tell you about it sometime. But for now take another look at #10, 11, and 12 above. That's also St. John's solid grounding for

Peace and Joy—especially when it's apocalypse now.

Ed Schroeder