

Christian reports on the Israeli Invasion of Palestine

Colleagues,

I'm torn between a number of options for this week's posting.

- A. The horror-stuff we just received (April 3) from our Lutheran friends in Bethlehem.
- B. Telling you about our weekend in New York City (Maundy Thursday through Easter) with four liturgies, sermons by 2 bishops—one Episcopal (Griswold), one Lutheran (Bouman)—the Easter parade on 5th Avenue, plus 2 operas at Lincoln Center (with five corpses, ribald raunch, etc.) and our eerie visit to Ground Zero on the Saturday between Good Friday and Easter.
- C. Thoughtful responses from several of you to recent postings.

I'll opt for A. The others can wait.

In the very face of Apocalypse Now—Even so, Lord Jesus Come.
Ed Schroeder

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1. Mitri Raheb & Bethlehem Worst invasion in centuries, Pastor Raheb says www.wfn.org JERUSALEM, April 3, 2002—Word is filtering out from Bethlehem describing the devastation to the city streets and the infrastructure from the current attack by Israeli military.
The Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb, pastor of the Christmas

Evangelical Lutheran Church and director of the International Center there, has sent an email asserting that the attack that Israeli's call an "incursion," is in fact "the worst invasion since decades if not centuries."

Raheb and his family, who yesterday were reportedly confined to upper floors of their home adjoining the historic church, are unhurt.

As a community leader, the popular Lutheran pastor was a prime mover on the eve of the millenium to see that the city's streets were repaved in local stone. They had fallen into acute disrepair during the long years of the occupation. He now reports that "the beautiful stone-paved streets around Christmas Lutheran Church are devastated. The tanks were standing around our Church and firing at the center of the old town. The entrance to our parsonage, car garage and staircase were destroyed. Most of the shops on Paul VI. Street were totally damaged."

Raheb, who also directs the new Bethlehem Media Center (organized with help from churches in America and Europe), now reports that "Journalists are forbidden in entering the city to cover the cruelty of occupation."

To help provide creative employment in the area, the International Center opened an Arts and Crafts workshop. Raheb now reports that "Our workshops, where we are trying to train young women to earn their livelihood, to appreciate beauty, experienced great destruction."

In his email, Pastor Raheb writes that "The offices of our architect and engineer also experienced much vandalism. The apartment of our volunteers as well. My office was hit too, this is why I can't write as usual. I hope that our communication specialist will be able to post some of the

pictures I took on our website. Please check there in few hours. These are first reports of what is going on here."

During the Gulf War, when Israelis confined Raheb and his family under 24-hour a day curfew, the Lutheran pastor wrote a book, "I am a Palestinian Christian" that was published in the U.S.A. by Fortress Press.

2. Paul Rowold writes:

Bethlehem—

I was able to speak with Mitri [Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church, Bethlehem] and [his wife] Najua this morning [April 3]. With the focus of conflict being the Church of the Nativity, I hoped that the "smoke had cleared" around the Christmas Church and their home. Their comments:**Najua:** "This is real war! Rockets are flying, tanks are shooting! We can't leave our home, we can't even look through our windows! They are treating us like animals! Thank God Mitri's mother was able to come to our home before everyone was threatened to be shot if they show their faces, for Viola (who lives with Mrs. Raheb) is still in Austria and cannot come here! It is unbelievably horrible!"

Mitri: "There is so much destruction that we can see from here. There are IDF snipers in the Grand Hotel (one block away from the church), so I have not yet been able to assess the damage. Friends called to tell us that there is significant damage to the stained glass windows of the church, and all the windows of the guest house are gone, but I cannot go out to see for myself. The carpet store across from the entrance to our apartment is completely destroyed, as is our carport and the entrance to our apartment. I went through the building to see some of the International Center, and there is lots of damage there.

My office is heavily damaged. We are trying to stay in communication by remotely operating some of the equipment, but much is no longer working and I fear it is completely lost. This has nothing to do with "fighting terrorism"! The IDF [Israeli Defense Force] is destroying anything that could be a source of pride for us, including the German stone in the square adjacent to the church and the shop which displayed the art produced by our visiting artists. The electricity came back on at 10 this morning, but just now the shooting has begun again. It is not close...at least a block away. The IDF has not invaded our apartment as yet, but neighbors have called to say that in their area the army is going from house to house, taking the men away. It is really horrible. Does your government really know what is going on here? Some journalists tried to enter, and got nearly to our church before they were shot at. There is a lot of destruction. I haven't even begun to think about assessing it. Everything we build, they destroy."

Several items from Fred Strickert:

3. Blind children at the Helen Keller School tear gassed.

The school's Director is Suad Younan, wife of Lutheran Bishop Younan. Israeli police have fired tear gas in clashes with more than 2,000 activists attempting to carry humanitarian supplies to the West Bank. The activists, both Israeli Jews and Arabs, carried banners and chanted for Sharon to get out of Ramallah as they passed through a military checkpoint in north Jerusalem. The clashes happened on the doorstep of a school for the visually impaired, where 70 blind children aged from four to twelve were hurried into a basement by teachers. "It was awful," said teacher Suad Younan, 42. "They were so scared, and

because they are blind it really triples the agony for these children." As tear gas drifted across the school and police used batons to beat back the peace protesters, Mrs Younan and other staff members managed to spirit some of the children away. "We managed to sneak some of the children out of the compound," she said. "We were climbing fences, jumping in ditches to try to get them home." Thirty-two of the children remained trapped at the school, she said. Twenty of them had no hope of going home because their parents lived in the West Bank, where Israeli tanks and helicopters are hunting for militants.

4. JERUSALEM—The leaders of Christian denominations in the Holy Land on Wednesday were barred by Israel from entering the biblical town of Bethlehem, which was seized by Israeli forces as part of a military offensive in the West Bank. Latin Patriarch Michel Sabbah, the top Roman Catholic clergyman in the region, said the group was trying to help get medical treatment to the wounded and bury those killed in fighting in the biblical city.

The convoy of church leaders and about 100 priests and lay people was stopped at an Israeli checkpoint on the outskirts of Bethlehem, just south of Jerusalem. The clergymen stood in heavy rain, holding gilt crosses and umbrellas while trying to negotiate their passage with army officials. "We want to see to it that the occupation of Bethlehem and also of other Palestinian cities come to an end," said the Anglican bishop of Jerusalem, Riah Abu el- Assal. "All this military strength that the Israelis have and are showing will not bring peace closer to the area. On the contrary it will create greater grudges and greater hatred."

Near Manger Square, the bodies of four members of the Al Aqsa Martyrs' Brigade militia were lying in the street

Wednesday, a day after being shot and killed, with Israeli troops barring their removal for burial.

"We are going to help bring the wounded to hospital and bury the killed," Sabbah, a Palestinian, said while waiting at the Israeli checkpoint. However, after standing in the rain and wind for about an hour, praying and singing, the group was forced to turn back to Jerusalem.

5. Water cut off to Ramallah Wednesday, April 3, 2002
Ramallah – I hope you get this message soon. The situation in Ramallah is as follows: many parts of the town continue to be without water. Even with the problems of water solved, it will not reach most homes because 6 out of 9 electrical feeding stations are down.

No electricity means no water, no sewage pumping (serious for public health) and no ovens can work to bake bread, among other problems. Five of the main feeding stations that provide electricity to Ramallah and 24 western villages are located in the Ramallah industrial zone. The electricity company is not allowed by the Israeli army to reach the area to fix the problems. The company was given the ok this morning to fix two other feeding stations in the Al-Bireh area, where the governorate and President Arafat are located, but as they go out this morning, they are being harrassed and believe they are in danger.

What we need is immediate intervention to get the feeding stations fixed in the industrial zone and in other areas. Without electricity, there will be no water and no bread and a major public health disaster. I hope you can work on this issue. The information in this email comes from the electricity company. About 120,000 people in Ramallah and surrounding villages are without electricity at this moment.

Rita Giacaman

Institute of Community and Public Health, Birzeit University.

6. Marla Schrader—U.C.C./ Disciples of Christ Representative in Bethlehem
- Dear friends and colleagues,
- As of this Wednesday morning, all major towns of the West Bank have been re-occupied. Nablus and Salfit were taken over by Israel this morning, adding to the atrocities taking place already in Ramallah, Tulkarem, Qalqilyia and Bethlehem.

There is little reporting as international journalists have been asked to leave or are confined to certain areas. The world knows best of the horrors taking place in Ramallah, however it seems that they are being repeated all over. In Bethlehem, we are under strict curfew and basically house arrest as there are Israeli snipers out on the rooftops. Yesterday there was non-stop shelling into the night. It is reported that the many wounded are not allowed to be taken away for treatment and have taken refuge in the Church of the Nativity. We were without electricity for the past 24 hours and telephone line for part of that time. The weather is cold and rainy. Many worry about running out of heating and cooking fuel, as well as fresh produce and dairy. There is no access to medical care at all.

Please raise your voice and help overcome the silence of the world governments. Every phone call, letter, rally and demonstration counts.

Marla Schrader

7. Jerusalem Anglican Bishop Riah from Episcopalian News

ServiceSalaam and grace in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ and blessed greetings from Jerusalem, It is Easter Day, the day of Resurrection. However, this year's celebration of Christ's new life is remembered in the middle of total chaos, and persistent suffering of a lonely people, who has long been fighting for their freedom and dignity. The services in the cathedral this morning took place with half the number of people we normally have due to closures and checkpoints. This year, the Easter story has been as vivid and clear as never before. The biblical drama continues; the actors change, but the plot remains the same. We have been witnessing the many Judas Iscariots, who continue to betray the Truth, and the many Pilates, who wash their hands, to defend their own safety. We weep before those who continue to watch the cross from afar, as if the scene means nothing to them.

After the services, I left with clergy and heads of churches towards Ramallah on a mission of peace and justice, trying to break down the siege inflicted on the city and its people, and to visit President Arafat. Apart from the Anglican clergy with me, we had the Roman Catholic Patriarch and his clergy, the Greek Catholic Archimandrite, and representatives of the Armenian, Lutheran, Coptic, and Franciscan Bishops and clergy. We were 15 people altogether. We gathered at St. George's Cathedral and left in the afternoon hours towards the city of Ramallah.

Prior to our departure from the cathedral, I spoke several times with the Deputy Foreign Minister of Israel, Rabbi Melcheor, who was part of the Alexandria Declaration, initiated by the Archbishop of Canterbury, as we committed ourselves to work for peace and justice as religious

leaders. We asked for his help and intervention to mediate with the authorities, and allow us to enter into Ramallah; I have even challenged him to come with us, expressing readiness to meet with Sharon as well. But all our three-hour-endeavor to enter the city came to an empty hole. We felt that the authorities do not want the church to provide a channel for peace and reconciliation, to bring an end to all the suffering and pain of the peoples of this land. As we were waiting, some settlers were passing by, some cried at us with the words: "Go to hell." Others spit at us. We were forced to return back to Jerusalem.

Ramallah has been declared a war zone, nobody allowed in or out. The reports that are coming from the city are incredibly horrendous. Our people could not attend church on Sunday. George Kopti, our priest in charge of the community, said his prayers with the immediate neighbours, who are living in the church close. He cannot walk out of his house, like everybody else, for fear of being shot dead. He reported that people were executed in the neighbouring Islamic Club with cold blood. There is lack of food and water supplies in the houses. President Arafat's compound has run out of water, too. Ambulances have not been allowed to reach to the injured, and one of the hospitals has been invaded. The soldiers are threatening to blow it up, 10 minutes after they leave the building; and all this comes with the ongoing reports of lack of blood in the hospitals for the injured, a matter that is causing the death of many others; 25 dead Palestinians are still kept in one of the hospitals, while the Israelis are not allowing their burial. The hospitals report that there is no more space to keep more bodies. Some of those bodies have been recognized, others have not

been recognized due to the extreme degree of torture. The church is planning tomorrow to donate blood here in the cathedral through one of the ambulances, the least we can do in our support for the community in Ramallah.

Stephanie Koury, an American citizen, lives and works in Ramallah as the legal adviser on settlements for the Palestinian Negotiating team. She reported to me personally that on Saturday, March 30 at 1:45pm, 10 Israeli soldiers invaded her house, and threatened to kill her cat. They ate her fruits on the table, even when she told them that that was the only food left for her. One of the soldiers lay down and asked her to give him a massage, an act of total humiliation, if not a war crime. She witnessed them holding an 18-19 year old young man, the son of her neighbour, forcing him on his knees, and pointing the gun at his head. When they left her house after three hours of sheer humiliation, they ran over her car with their tanks.

Know that this comes with my prayers, and best wishes,

In Christ,
+Riah Abu El-Assal

There's not enough room on this long posting to give you another report, this one from Robert Fisk, TV journalist in Bethlehem. Look it up at http://news.independent.co.uk/world/middle_east/story.jsp?story=281051 He gives a graphic account of trying to cover the story of the war in Bethlehem today, April 3.

Creation Spirituality – an Other Gospel

Colleagues,

Once each semester the community here at the Overseas Ministries Study Center joins the Maryknoll Sisters, a Roman Catholic mission order an hour's drive west just across the border in New York state for a week of study together. It's home and home. So two weeks ago we went to their place. The Maryknoll campus is huge. There's also a Maryknoll order of priests. The Maryknollers are a distinctly American mission order, with an impressive track record for the 100 years of their existence. Orbis Books, leading publisher of mission theology from around the world, is a Maryknoll project. For these ecumenical visits the host chooses the topic and speaker. So for our week at Maryknoll it was "Christian Mission: What Can We Learn From Wisdom Traditions?" Our teacher was Marlene De Nardo, with long years of experience as a Notre Dame Sister in Latin American missions, and now administrator and professor at Naropa University in Oakland, California. Naropa offers a "widescreen" program of studies in world religions, yet it does have an operational credo in its Master's Program in Creation Spirituality. "Creation Spirituality," if the term is new to you, is a late 20th century movement linked to Matthew Fox, former RC monastic (Dominican, I think, but I'm not sure). For more info about it, read on.

Our OMSC community, from a dozen or so places and denominations around the planet, and most all calling themselves "evangelical," had a hard time trying to find Marlene's message on their own screen of Christian options. So when we got back home, discussion ensued. Below you have my contribution to the conversation.

Even though Christ's Good Friday and Easter doesn't get much attention in the "News from Naropa," I'll do as Melanchthon recommends: "When Christ's promise is missing in a text, add it."

Ergo Easter Peace and Easter Joy!
Ed Schroeder

**OMSC Colleagues,
Here are some thoughts about our week at Maryknoll,
March 11-15, 2002.**

What we encountered:

1. Our teacher Marlene De Nardo was an evangelist for the "gospel" of the "Creation Spirituality" [hereafter "CS"] movement associated with Naropa University in Oakland, Calif. (where she teaches) and its proposals for dialogue with world religions. Drawing on the readings she gave us—from Donal Dorr and Matthew Fox—she proposed that the "CS" gospel was compatible with the Christian gospel.
2. Marlene represents a sample of one of the new movements these days coming from Roman Catholicism (prominent in the USA, but also in other continents—especially India). Marlene and the authors she gave us to read are "unhappy" Catholics. They are unhappy about their own "old" Roman church, and the bad things it has done and for many of them, keeps on doing. Some of them—Matthew Fox, for sure, I'd say, and perhaps Marlene too, are simply "burned out" on Roman Catholicism. For them dogma and doctrine and authority and other words associated with traditional

Roman Catholicism are “dirty words,” old fashioned, even oppressive, not uptodate and/or just plain wrong. How many times did Marlene tell us: “Let’s not talk about dogma and doctrine, but let’s talk about our religious experience.”

3. Yet there are aspects of the “old Roman Catholicism” that continue. Our OMSC colleague Bambang [an evangelical from Indonesia] told us last evening that he talked with Marlene about “justification-by-faith and Christ’s vicarious atonement.” And she didn’t know what he was talking about. Not faith-in-the-heart, but having a heart of goodness and doing-good-works is her priority. There is no need for justification or atonement. That is dogma and doctrine. Old, outdated religion. We’ve moved beyond that. “Works of goodness and charity and justice” are the bottom line. How many times did Marlene tell us that this was the essence of religion—all religions—even the Christian faith? That sounds like something from the Reformation era: what are the “grounds” of Christian righteousness—faith in Christ or “works of goodness and charity and justice”? And if the latter, Marlene’s choice, is correct, then, of course, a certain kind of dialogue is possible: speaking with one another about how do YOU/ how do WE promote such attitudes of “goodness” and get people to do such works?
4. To dialogue about faith, about who/what is at the center of our religion, whom or what we trust, was not encouraged. That is dogma, doctrine, systematic theology—always stuff of conflict, not friendly cooperation—she said. And yes, these topics do indeed bring up disagreements, often serious disagreements. It seems that a small amount of conflict is OK in Marlene’s dialogue notion—dialogue about goodness and justice –but not too much. She did not want to push the dialogue partners to serious wrestling with the “questions of the

heart—what people fear, love, and trust.” We found it tough even to dialogue with Marlene about her own “new” Catholicism.

5. Marlene’s response to Roel was very revealing. [Roel is a missionary from Manipur in the far northeast corner of India] She had just played for us a Hindu chant calling on the god Shiva and encouraged us to join in the singing. Roel said he couldn’t. Hindus calling on Shiva have been killing Christians in Manipur. Many of the victims are Roman Catholic priests and nuns. Remember how Marlene responded to Roel: “I can see that your experience would not allow you to join in this chant, but mine does.” Roel’s experience was not her experience, so Shiva-mantras are OK for her—even when Roel pointed out that some of the victims were “her” people. That shows what happens when “my experience” becomes the yardstick for what is true and valid. Experience is always fickle, similar to “feelings,” which sometimes go this way, and sometimes go that way. We can’t deny our experience, of course, but to base our faith on our experience, instead of Christ’s word of promise to us, is shaky indeed. Didn’t Jesus call it “sand?” To make “experience” our god and build our faith upon it is another Gospel.

Much of the time, perhaps most of the time, Christians trust God’s promise AGAINST what they are experiencing, such as Roel’s experience of Christians being murdered by Hindus. Or the experience of Yossa [Anglican priest/prof from the Congo] telling us of the 5 wars (sic!) that have roared through his life already. To build faith on such experience = despair. Jesus’s own “Eli!” cry on Good Friday arises from experience; his “Father into thy hands” trusts the promise.

6. The easiest place to see the specifics of this “other

gospel," as I will call it, is in the readings from Donal Dorr [Mission in Today's World] and Matthew Fox [One River, Many Wells] that Marlene gave us. **FIRST DORR**

A. He proposes to replace evangelization with dialogue, which "at the present time seems more appropriate." So evangelization is ruled out as central to mission. Reasons for that: "mission has lost much of its glamour," evangelization is "unbalanced." He is really critical of the evangelization missionary: "crusading missionaries . . . preoccupied with the number of converts. . . secretly afraid that their missionary enthusiasm would be weakened by engaging in religious dialogue." He charges them with "insensitivity" that actually "undermines the missionary enterprise." Seems to me that this sort of reasoning is "ad hominem" argumentation. It says more about Dorr than about the validity of the position he's critiquing.

B. He then indicates his own theological premise, what I would call his own "systematic theology" with its unique "other gospel," p. 16

1. It is a "fact that the Spirit (of God) is at work in the people being evangelized" by missionaries.

2. The various religions "may be seen as attempts to give some institutional shape to such movements of God's Spirit and God's grace. In all of the religions we can find rituals, symbols and traditions which express . . . people's religious experience. These symbols and rituals evoke in people a sense of the loving, healing presence of God in their own lives and in the wider world." (p.17)

3. In inter-religious dialogue participants "can

open themselves to the influence of the Spirit of God.” (p. 18) Then comes a paragraph spelling out Dorr’s “theology” of Spirit.

4. Seems to me that Dorr’s theology of Spirit is not even close to Biblical theology of the Spirit of God, even less so of God’s Holy Spirit as proclaimed in the N.T. In the early years of Christian history Dorr’s Spirit-of-God talk was called “pneumatic gnosticism”—a “wind blowing” [=pneuma] that brought “wisdom, insight, knowledge” [=gnosis] to those who had been awakened to its energy. Dorr continues to promote such a pneumatic gnosticism throughout the 2 chapters of his book that we received to read. Seems to me the central point is: There is no necessity in Dorr’s “gospel” for a crucified and risen Messiah. He doesn’t need such a Messiah to get sinners reconciled to God, since the God he’s talking about is not the sinner’s critic, nor are sinners accountable to God. Nobody needs to be justified before God. Even apart from Christ, he says, people encounter everywhere the “loving, healing presence of God in their own lives and in the wider world.” Is that really true of anybody’s experience? You wouldn’t guess it from just watching the TV news these days. Or from the report of the five wars Yossa told us about in his devotional homily at Maryknoll.
5. Already in St. Paul’s letters to the Corinthians such Spirit-theology without any need for a crucified/risen Christ is rejected as contrary to THE gospel. In later church

history it is formally labelled "heresy." Paul's harshest words about such "other" gospels is that, if they are true, then "Jesus Christ died in vain."

6. Dorr could possibly be helped to see this if we were to take his diagram (p. 22), the circle with its pie-segments of "Ten Deeper Issues" of religion, and ask him about the center. There's no label for the center of his diagram. But the New Testament, of course, has one: the crucified/risen Christ, the center of all those items. Dorr would put his "Spirit" theology at the center, I imagine. But then the question is: which Spirit? There are lots of spirits, even supernatural ones, in the world. We are called upon to "Test the spirits, and see which ones come from God, the God who came to us in Jesus, the Christ."

MATTHEW FOX

1. Seems to me that Matthew Fox's "other gospel" is even more easy to see. He tells us directly what is at the center of the "wheel" of this theology: "the human is divine." p. 171. That conviction is at the center of his "faith." "It takes a lot of trust to recognize humanity's divinity." 184
2. By eliminating the distinction between Creator and creature, there is no "Outsider" to call us to account for the way we are living. God calling Adam and Eve to account, God calling us to account, is taken care of by simply eliminating any distinction between God and human creatures.
3. Fox dismisses sin as the central problem of humankind, namely, that we are God's creatures, that

our relationship with God is broken, that God calls us to account, & that we are unable to “justify” our lives before God with our own resources. If that is not our problem, then what is?

4. Fox’s model for salvation looks like this, I’d say:
PROBLEM: humanity has forgotten, lost, been led astray from, the knowledge and awareness that “the human is divine” and living on the basis of that “faith.” [“Churchy” religion is more often the cause, than the solution, to this problem.] **SOLUTION to the problem:** to get people to learn again, know again, experience again, that their own “humanity is divinity.” And then to urge and encourage the “lot of trust it takes” to believe this.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE TO GET TO THAT SOLUTION? A teacher, a guru, who has already arrived at that knowledge and that “faith,” who can then help the rest of us to do it too. Some people say Jesus is such a guru, others say the Buddha, others point to other inspired teachers. Some (not only out in California) say Matthew Fox.

5. This is an even clearer example of the gnostic way of salvation. Most important (again) is that a crucified/risen Christ is not needed at all to get people “saved.” That is surely an “other” gospel.

Prayer and Providence

Colleagues,

Every now and then during the academic semester here at the Overseas Ministries Study Center we have no formal classes for a given week, but do a “reading week.” Last month we read and discussed the book listed below. Review addict that I am, I put my input down on paper. Since this was written, one of you asked why I’m so negative so often in Thursday Theology postings. Simplest answer probably is that I’m getting more and more curmudgeonly as I get older. Other folks get more mellow. It’s yin and yang. Could also be that alternate gospels abound as pluralism presses in upon us, and pointing that out is not useless work.

Seems that something similar was already the case back in the New Testament era—right from the word go. Most every one of the 27 NT texts—the epistles for sure and even the gospels when read closely—are not only proclaiming the crucified/risen Messiah as Good News but also polemicizing against “other” gospels. Some of them are explicitly named: the Galatian legalist gospel, the Corinthian gnostic one, the anti-incarnationalists who vex St. John. Imagine! That many heresies in the teensy-weensy body of Christ within just the first few decades (= the life span of most all you readers!) of church history! Pluralism of gospels within the church, not just pluralist ideologies on the outside, was at least as bad then as it may be now. So what else is new?

My review below doesn’t intend to be that adversarial. [Surprise?] The topic is Christian prayer. My thesis is: prayer grounded on providence is dicey business, but prayer grounded on promise is better. If interested, read on. If you do want something more feisty, come back for next week’s look at the “creation spirituality” of Matthew Fox and company.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

Terrance Tiessen: PROVIDENCE AND PRAYER: HOW DOES GOD WORK IN THE WORLD?

Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press. 2000. 432 pages. Paper.

Terrence Tiessen is a Canadian Mennonite, professor of theology and ethics at Providence Theological Seminary in Otterburne, Manitoba. His study of Providence and Prayer is a monumental study, but

FIRST THE MONUMENTAL STUDY. . .

- 1. He formulates 10 (yes ten!) different models in the history of Christian theology (and then adds his own #11) for relating the two key terms: providence and prayer. Providence (literally pro-videre, looking out for) is the what and how God works in the world, continually “looking out for” the world he’s created. Prayer is believers speaking to God about his workings in the world, and in specific instances petitioning God for special attention (special favors?) to some difficult situation they confront. The 10 models he proposes are labelled as follows: Semi-deist, Process, Openness, Church Dominion, Redemptive Intervention, Molinist, Thomist, Barthian, Calvinist, Fatalist.*
- 2. Tiessen’s format for presenting each model is eminently readable. He summarizes each model in a paragraph or two at the outset of the chapter on that model. Then comes an exhaustively researched middle section: his presentation of the model in detail—often stunning in the breadth of its coverage and the clarity of his interpretation. To conclude each chapter he composes a prayer grounded in this model’s point of view. To make that prayer “real*

life" he conjures a Christian prayer group each of whose members offers a prayer in keeping with one of the models. The real life issue each pray-er addresses is the crunch situation of a missionary group captured by guerrillas in a politically conflicted nation and held for ransom.

3. In the book's final 70 pages Tiessen presents his own proposal, "A Middle Knowledge Calvinist Model of Providence," distinct from the ten classical ones he has chronicled, though "close" to Calvin as his label indicates. Here too he follows the same format: summary of the model, the model itself in detail and its rationale, and the concluding prayer for the endangered missionaries based on such a model.

The presentation is brilliant, I'd say, but . . .

AND NOW THE "BUT . . .

1. The complementary term to Christian prayer is God's PROMISE, not God's PROVIDENCE. God's fulfilled promise in Christ, and the future promise-consequences of faith in that promise constitute the grounds for Christian prayer. That is the meaning of the N.T. term "prayer in Jesus' name." Christian pray-ers come to God with a marking: we are "in Jesus' name," the signal of who owns us, to whom we belong when we address God in prayer.
2. Hence the term "Our Father" in Christian prayer, a title for God signalling endearment and linked to God's promise in his Son to us. Not so Jewish prayer which is regularly addressed to the "ruler of the universe," a title signalling providence, not God's promise. It is perhaps no accident that there is no listing for "promise" in Tiessen's index. Nor is there a listing for "Gospel," nor for "faith," faith in that promissory Gospel. That signals a major lacuna, I'd say.

3. Even though all the sample prayers (with one exception, the “fatalist” model, which sounds to me like Islam) at the end of each chapter conclude with the words “in Jesus’ name,” Jesus plays no role in the text of the prayer. More specifically, the saving work of that crucified and risen Messiah does not surface to shape the prayer at all. Which is finally not surprising since the author does not reckon with the person and work of Christ as he describes each model to us. [Here too one possible exception, the “Barthian” model.] So prayers fashioned on Christ-less notions of providence come out Christ-less too.
4. Tiessen wants to be doing Christian theology, I’m sure. So why doesn’t Christ get some attention? It’s a conundrum. Possibly he thinks that since he’s regularly using Biblical material, that is sufficient warrant to render his study Christian. But that’s not warrant enough to make anything Christian. Especially Christian prayer which is substantively Gospel-grounded, not just warranted by Bible passages.
5. All of the models—some more and some less—make use of the Bible, but we get no help from Tiessen for evaluating which uses of the Bible are better than others. He proposes no criterion, no yardstick, for adjudicating how the Bible is being used. Also in his own model #11.
6. Not that there isn’t a principle of adjudication at work. It is the principle of rationality. If you articulate your doctrine of providence in this particular way, then that has such-and-so consequences, rational consequences, for the character of prayer. I thought of the old “slide-rule” that mathematicians used to use. If you move the function of providence to this point on the slide rule, then the prayer function comes to this corollary point to have a balanced equation. When you nuance one of them by

some “x” factor, you get a corollary “y” factor shift in your prayer component. It all makes rational sense.

7. But that is hardly good theology, is it? Sounds rather skimpy as Good News, good news on which believers might stake their lives. As masterful as Tiessen’s work is, I don’t think it’s good enough. Not close enough to the Good News itself. Reason still rules, and Gospel-promise doesn’t even get into the index. The 16th century Reformation went to the ramparts to unseat reason as queen in theology and to put the Biblical gospel in its place. Wouldn’t a Mennonite do that too?
8. Even though Luther was less than kind to the Mennonites of his day, Tiessen casts a wide net, so why not a chapter on Luther? And I don’t say this merely by virtue of my churchly heritage. The big argument of the Reformation era about providence and human will was Luther’s wrestling match with Erasmus and their respective major works—Bondage of the Will and Freedom of the Will. Tiessen ignores it. Had he looked at it, he might have seen that Luther is attacking Erasmus’ slide-rule theology with all its reasonableness, and countering it with a Biblical theology grounded in God’s promise. Even if Luther is not “nice guy” for Mennonites, why move toward Erasmus?
9. Of course, there is more in Luther’s model of “how does God work in the world?” than just God’s promise. ‘Fact is, God’s promise is the alternative to “how God (normally) works in the world.” The antipode to God’s promise in the Bible is God’s law with its fair-and-square critique of sinners. God regularly “works in the world” counting trespasses, as St. Paul says. How does that connect with providence? Tiessen comes off “soft” on God the critic as he articulates God’s work in the world. Basically his God is always benign, working out his good

purposes for all of us and for the whole creation. Everything God does is finally gracious. And that may be a clue to his bypassing explicit Christology/soteriology in this book. For if God is by definition gracious, Jesus needs only to show us that, but not actually DO anything to make it true for sinners.

- 10. When talking about God in the Bible, said Luther, we must distinguish between “God hidden” (deus absconditus) and “God revealed” (deus revelatus) in Christ . Talking about providence involves us with deus absconditus [“Truly, you are a God who hides himself.” Is. 45:15 and many other places in Isaiah], God-apart-from-Christ. God apart from Christ is impenetrable for humans, “unsearchable his judgments, inscrutable his ways.” (Romans 11:33). Working with the hidden God is a lost cause. Even worse, if we were to break through to this “God working in the world” apart from Christ, it would be deadly. “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” (Heb. 13:31) Can any discussion of providence cope with those caveats? And how do you pray to such a deity at all?*
- 11. There is in Tiessen’s book no wrath, curse, death (all of them coming from God) which must be engaged and endured and then trumped by a crucified Messiah before you can get to a God who is Good News for sinners. In 2 Cor 5 (et passim) Paul claims that Jesus changed God’s way of dealing with sinners. “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not counting trespasses—as God otherwise regularly does—but making Christ to be sin for us so that we might become the righteousness of God.” That transaction is the cornerstone of Christian prayer. Tiessen never uses it to make his own case.*
- 12. In the introduction the author chides his classroom students for separating their soteriology from their notion of prayer and providence. Seems to me that Tiessen*

comes close to doing the same, giving us 360 pages on p & p without any serious use of Biblical soteriology. Concluding a prayer with the words "in Jesus' name"—as he does with all but one of the prayers he composes for the models he presents – doesn't make it a Christian prayer. Faith in the Gospel, God's promise in Christ, makes a prayer Christian.

13. *Jesus thought so too. As pious Jews his disciples had a long tradition of (providence-based?) prayer, but they had never, he said, "asked the Father in my name" for anything. Jesus said that their connection to him made all the difference—both for God's fatherly providence and for their confidence in praying. My question to Tiessen: Does it?*

Six Months After Sept. 11

Colleagues,

The missing "R" word, "repentance," promoted in the first ThTh posting after Sept. 11, 2001—exactly 26 weeks ago—is still significant by its absence from secular and churchly language in the USA. When I mentioned that a few weeks ago commenting on President Bush's State of the Union message, the axis-of-evil speech, I kicked the tripwire for one of you."Dear Ed, You are out of your theological mind. I can't bear to read what you write any longer. Please remove me from your mailing list. Feel free to tell anyone that I totally disassociate myself from you and what you teach and preach – a form of Marcionite theology, which is but a smokescreen for cultural left politics. Ugh." This unhappy camper is a

Seminex grad, once a teaching assistant in our systematic theology department.

What apparently pushed this erstwhile co-confessor over the edge were these words in that posting: "Some still ask: what's heretical in the religion of America? Answer: Check the president's text again for the following: our Manichean view of evil [world divided between those evil people and us righteous ones], our Pharisee heresy [God, I thank thee that I am not like other people], . . . and the all-pervasive blindness to God our critic, God the terror-inducer whom Jesus urges us to fear [and NOT the Osama ben Ladins of our life] (Luke 12:4f.)."

Comes now the New York Times (Feb. 24) and says (almost) the same thing. An Op Ed item there pinpointed the "Manichaen (sic!) mentality" now enveloping our national psyche, which makes it impossible to distinguish between being "righteous and being self-righteous." Is that Christian theology, or what? And in the NYT! Or Daniel Schorr on National Public Radio last week speaking of the "Armageddon mindset" taking root in Washington. Is that theological analysis or what?

After six months Osama is still at large, so is the anthrax-killer, taunting the allegedly most powerful (ever) nation on earth. Does Psalm 2 fit? "He who sits in the heavens laughs [as the nations conspire]; the LORD has them in derision." That's not good news. Yet could it be true?

Shortly after Easter I've been asked by some folks from the United Church of Christ here in New England to discuss this theme with them. Attached below you'll see how my outline is shaping up "after six months."

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Theme: PREACHING IN THIS STRANGE, NEW TIME

[Their first title was “Preaching in a Time of Terror,” which I still prefer as you’ll see below.]

Intro:

It is “Apocalypse Now” and we’re missing it. Francis Coppola’s movie by that name a decade or so ago was showing us an “apocalypse now” not just in Vietnam, but “back home” in the USA already then—and we continue to miss it.

I. 9 – 11 was a big event of Apoc. Now in the USA. Literally apo-calyse, God pulling off the veil. And we continue to miss it. Examples abound. Au contraire Lincoln’s call for repentance in the Apocalypse Now of the Civil War. He didn’t miss it.

II. What’s the “it” that we continue to miss?

A. “Strange, new time” [Why did your program committee fudge away from the original title, “time of terror,” as your theme? Terrorism is the grim new word in everyday life.]

B. No matter. “Strange and terror” are theological synonyms when doing God-talk. God’s “opus ALIENum” [Latin for “strange work” (Is. 28:21)] and the “megan phobon” [Greek for “sore afraid” – call it “terror” – of Luke 2] are the same thing.

C. The “it” is God the critic [“kritees” in Greek = judge] calling us to account. God’s critical work is indeed “alien” to God’s “special” work of saving sinners, but the terror it induces is nonetheless real—unless the sinners are too blind to see it.

III. Preaching Repentance when it’s Apocalypse Now

A. Grounding: Jesus’ own preaching paradigm in Mark

1:15. There are four verbs in that passage: two indicative (God's kairos is now; the King's at the door), two imperative (repent; trust the good news). How these 4 verbs function in Mark.

B. Naming and Facing THE terrorist. Luke 12:4f.

C. Coping with God the Terrorist. Two examples.

- Augustine 410 – 'Fessing up to God's critique of every empire.
- Luther 1529 – Disarming the terrorist by repentance.

IV. Preaching the Good News when it's Apocalypse Now.

A. The grounds for proclaiming: "Fear not, only believe" [i.e., trust the Good News].

B. Preaching that Good News in the face of terror, God's opus alienum: Necessitating Christ vis-a-vis terror. Exploiting Christ's "sweet swap" when it's apocalypse now.

V. What may we expect from such repentance-and-good-news preaching?

A. The "thin tradition" of the theology of the cross in the church's history.

B. Repentance preaching as "a voice crying in the wilderness."

C. Winning by losing (Mark 8:35).

D. Bonhoeffer's commentary on Jesus' words: "Come follow me . . ."

"Pardon My Dying: A Sequel to

Ash Wednesday”

Colleagues,

Richard Weaver, a ThTh regular, Seminex alum and ELCA pastor in Ohio, asks me to ask you for prayers on behalf of his wife Estelle, undergoing a complex heart surgery on the Thursday date of this posting. So I’m sending ThTh #195 out a day early for you to do so. Another reason for posting on Wednesday is that Marie and I will leave later today for the family funeral of Dor(othy) Hoyer, wife of Marie’s brother George. Besides being family, George and Dor—known to many of you—are Seminex co-confessors from those ancient days. Dor also was kindergarten teacher (a superstar in that calling) for one of our kids in St. Louis.

Dor’s death is #5 in our family/friends network during the two months we’ve been in New England. They’ve never come so close, so fast, so many, for us before. It’s “memento mori—remember that you must die.” Which, of course, were the words we heard on Ash Wednesday just a few days ago as we got marked on the forehead: “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

That all brings with it another memento linked to Ash Wednesday. Namely, Bob Bertram’s chapel sermon at Concordia Seminary on the day after Ash Wednesday in 1972. That’s 30 years ago. Bob’s sermon constitutes today’s posting. Here’s the context. Bob and I had recently attended a conference of ITEST, the St. Louis-based “Institute for Theological Encounter with Science and Technology.” Bob himself and St. Louis University Jesuit priest-scientist Bob Brungs, co-founders of ITEST, had chaired the sessions. The topic was something like “The Reality of Death in Today’s High-Tech Medicine.”

I gave a paper examining St. Paul's label for death as the "last enemy." The book by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kuebler-Ross "Death and Dying" was a big hit at the time. Although she was not on the program, her analysis of death was very much part of the discussion. Still in my mind is the table conversation Bob and I had with another ITESTer—a Lutheran hospital chaplain. He was "sold" on Kuebler-Ross and her claim that human death was "natural" and, according to the final step of her paradigm, to be "accepted." Paul had gotten it wrong, he thought, and consequently so had I.

Bob's chapel sermon was his return to that table-talk. His words take on additional meaning after 30 years as the last enemy now presses his case against Bob.

Even so, Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

PARDON MY DYING

A SEQUEL TO ASH WEDNESDAY

Today's first lesson recalls yesterday's Imposition of the Ashes, Genesis 3:19: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." The second lesson is I Corinthians 15:49: "Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven."

*'A conversation overheard,
at least imagined,
a private conversation
between a husband and his wife—
she on her deathbed,*

he seated close beside,
both of them hoping still to say
what needed saying most
before the end."Before I leave," she said,
"I do have something to confess."

"Please don't," he said
"Now's not the time for that.
If there's confessing to be done,
let's let it go at saying
you're my girl
and that I've loved you always."

"That's right," she said, I'm only yours.
And that you love me, that I know.
It's just because you do
that I believe
that you could handle
my confession now."

"But don't you understand,"
he said,
"that I don't need
for you to say you're sorry,
not for anything."

"Well," she agreed, "you may not need that
but I do.
And I do understand
that if I have that need
—the need to make confession
and to be forgiven—
you're strong enough to hear me out."

"Maybe," said he, "I'm not so strong at that,
At least I'm not afraid

that some last, unacknowledged sin
still stands between us.
And if I'm not afraid of that,
why should you be?"

"Oh, Adam, you poor dear,
Is that what you had thought I said,
that I'm afraid,
that that was why
I wanted to confess?
I'm not afraid, at least not much.
At any rate that wasn't why
I wanted to apologize:
not out of fear
but out of hope.
I dare to hope that I'm absolved
and hoping that, I want to hear you say
I really am.
And hoping that I am
does make it easier to say
I'm sorry."

"All right," said he, "You win.
What is there to forgive?"

"Forgive my dying.
Pardon this damned mortality."

"Your dying? Pardon that?
But girl," said he,
"that's something you can't help.
Dying is . . .
only natural."

"No, it's not natural at all,"
she said.

*"Life wasn't meant to die.
Neither were we.
We both know that.
We've known that ever since
we've known of Easter.
Death isn't natural at all.
It's a downright dirty, dastardly demeaning defeat.
We're not meant to 'accept' it,
not even if with 'dignity.'
We're meant to trump it,
as we shall."*

*"But then," said he,
"if death is conquered anyway,
if we outlast it,
(and we shall)
why do you still think
dying needs forgiving?"*

*"Does that," she asked, "disturb you so,
for me to say that death
is what we've brought upon ourselves,
what we've got coming to us?
Does that strike you as morbid,
despite the fact I'm not afraid?
Despite the fact that it's my hope
and not my fear
which frees me to admit
the shame of dying,
do you see that
as merely clinical escape?
Come, Adam, can't you deal with that?
I believe you can."*

"I wouldn't say," said he,

*"that that is morbid.
Still, it does seem – –
how shall I say? – –
a bit too self-important
for us to take the credit for
so vast a thing as death.
Are we, for all our guilt,
really that influential?"*

*"That does seem hard to believe,"
she said,
"unless we manage first to believe
that God is interested enough to judge
because he's still more interested
in resurrecting and forgiving.
For him to let us die is judgment,
not contempt.
And there's a difference.
Ignore us? That he never does.
But deal with us he does.
That important we all are."*

*"But then," said Adam,
"why do you
ask now to be forgiven
by me?
Forgiveness, yes. But why from me?
I'm not the one who judges you."*

*"But you're the one I hurt.
For, Adam dear,
I do hurt you by dying.
You know I do.
It hurts me, too, of course.
Death even hurts my vanity."*

*Death isn't pretty
and, as you know,
I've always liked being pretty.
But worse than that by far,
it hurts to have to liquidate
the fondest love affair
that any wife could want.
And it's for that, for interrupting that,
That I do say I'm sorry."*

*To which he said, "I do forgive,
I too forgive."*

*"And thanks for that," said she.
"Meanwhile, Adam, think spring.
Think Christ."*

"I'll see you later, girl."

*Robert W. Bertram
Concordia Seminary
St. Louis, Missouri
17 February 1972*

Desert Theology and Lenten Piety

Colleagues,

[First of all a correction. Last week's ThTh–Richard Lyon's

*Crossing—went out mis-numbered as #192. It really was #193. And now to this week's #194.]*The February 2002 issue of our ELCA magazine THE LUTHERAN recommended "Desert Theology," a six-page article, for our Lenten piety. There was a "real absence" of Christ in the piece, I thought. So I dutifully wrote a letter to the editor. I imagine that its chances of getting printed are slim. My colleague in these Thursday Theology endeavors, Robin Morgan, thought it was fit to pass on to you for your own Lenten reflection.

But Robin had one caveat: "Your critique of the article is on target, but you offer no alternate proposal for the malady which the desert theologian sought to address. To wit, today's multi-dimension madness of our over-stuffed agendas that chews us up, leaving no free time for anything except more stuff which generates more chewing. If he wrongly proposed God in the desert as remedy, what's your proposal?" I told her I'd try.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. First the Letter. Editor, THE LUTHERAN.

Who's taking care of the store? I'm referring to the "Desert Theology" article by Kerry S. Walters in your February 2002 number. What he's proposing is clearly an "other" Gospel. Most obvious is that the Good News which the NT predicates to the Crucified and Risen Messiah, Walters predicates to the Desert as where to get it. Is that not "another Gospel?"

Examples: "Through the desert journey we are restored to our original likeness to God – our TRUE self." "We go to

the desert to find the freedom and transformation offered by God.” “When we trod -[he must mean “tread”] – on its sacred ground, we reclaim the image of God that we are.” “It’s from our sojourns in the desert that God’s kingdom is built up in us.” [For a second opinion check Luther’s Small Catechism on the Kingdom of God in the Lord’s Prayer.]

Where in this alleged good news of the desert is any “Christ-necessity?” Necessitating Christ is a requirement according to the Lutheran confessions for any proposal claiming to be Christian. That is really no surprise. That’s got to be a yardstick for anything appearing in THE LUTHERAN, right?

Yes, Christ, and Luther too, do appear frequently in Walters’ text, but the necessity isn’t there.

For the Christ-component of the article, it is “imitatio Christi” [imitating Christ] that is urged upon us. To wit: do as Christ did. Go into the desert for prayer and meditation and be renewed by that experience just as he was. No mention, of course, of the Gospel for First Sunday in Lent. Here the desert is NOT the place where Jesus finds God. On the contrary, the desert is the place of God’s absence. God’s presence for Jesus, God’s beneficial presence, is in the Word of God—plain old Bible passages. He draws on that source to refute the supernatural message coming from The Voice of the desert.

Seems to me that Walters also misreads Luther’s comments on Meister Eckhardt, the German desert theologian of the late middle ages. Walters may have some grounds in Eckhardt when he tells us: “The whole point of going to the desert is to meet God firsthand.” Or when he urges us

to seek “firsthand encounters with the living God.” Yet Luther’s question here is: on what grounds do you assume that such “firsthand” encounters with God are good news? Surely not for sinners. That’s a constant theme in Luther. He found it constant throughout the scriptures. “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands—see the face—of the living God.”

To claim Luther as support for finding God in the desert? Hardly. Luther called such “firsthand” encounters with God “*deus absconditus*” [God-hidden] events. What’s hidden in all such firsthand encounters is God’s mercy. Thus already at Sinai Israel’s terror is their rightful response to their own firsthand encounter with God—in the desert. But here again it’s the Christ-quotient that Walters doesn’t use—and worse still, doesn’t need—to make his recommendations. Maybe he doesn’t even know the need for it. To wit, that apart from the heat-shield supplied by Christ the mediator, any firsthand encounter with the living God turns sinners into cinders. God as blazing fire is not a mercy metaphor.

And then those several paragraphs in the article about the human self—“false self, everyday self, old self, and how to find one’s true self.” The entire transaction is Christ-less. The desert does it all.

This desert theology, all six pages of it, is bad news, not good news. It’s frightfully close to Niebuhr’s old adage about a certain sort of Protestant theology where “a God without wrath, saves humankind without sin, through a Christ without a cross.” That’s surely not the Christic Good News you want to commend to us readers for our Lenten discipline.

Even so, Peace & Joy!

Ed

II. Attending to Robin's caveat: An alternative to desert theology for today's multi-dimension madness of our over-stuffed agendas that chews us up.

1. In the Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent the desert is the metaphor for the absence of God. The desert is not the solution.
2. If the absence of God surfaces in our overstuffed contemporary lives, then we already are in the desert. Deserts, ours too, are theologically deadly. Wastelands. Not that there are no messages coming from the desert. Messages abound. But the messages are demonic. Jesus heard them too, personified in the Voice of the Desert.
3. In his case the message was three-fold: First off: "If" you really are God's child [remember he encountered the Voice of the Desert immediately after he'd heard another voice at his Baptism calling him God's beloved boy], then why this desert emptiness in your life—no food, no drink, no nuthin'?"
4. Our parallel may seem the opposite—food, drink, work, stuff to the nth degree—but from all that fullness we still wind up empty. Full of emptiness. And when that rises to consciousness, we too ask: "If I am God's baptized child, why is my life a desert? Why am I—though surfeited—still running on empty?" Needed is to be emptied of such choking fulness. Not that the Gospel relishes emptiness. But if you're not initially empty, St. John's axiom is thwarted for you: "From his fulness we have all received—grace upon grace."

5. The second word from the Desert Fox urges Jesus to cope with emptiness by putting God to the test, tempting God to pay off, or else. It's the Sinatra syndrome that may still leave God in the mix, but God is challenged to "do it my way," or there will be no other way. Jesus' own response is that to "tempt the Lord thy God"—to offer God an alternate proposal to the one he's chosen for dealing with us—is to turn the tables around, put God in my box and then dangle him from my string. In decalogue language, that's breaking the first commandment. Our parallel, with lives stuffed wall-to-wall, is its own form of tempting God. Tempting God to catch us as day-in day-out we jump off the pinnacles of our olympic agendas, challenging him to prevent us from going splat! on the pavement below. Eventually we will splatter, since given Gods' design for human fueling, we can't run on empty forever.
6. The final temptation of overstuffed agenda-itis is to run with it, worship the Desert Fox himself and howl along adding our own voice to the Voice of the Desert. The deafening noise (some of it called music) of today's western culture bellows this cantus firmus into our ears 24 hours a day. The last temptation is to join up, sign up, and declare the tempter's proffered fulness to be our salvation, worshipping it and acclaiming it the kingdom of heaven.
7. The Biblical image that contrasts with the desert is the tree planted by the stream—Psalm 1, Psalm 23, and more. Such first-hand experiences may be hard to find in daily routines, but the metaphor might still point to a genuine option. Water and live vegetation are the clean contrary to dry sand with its

dessicated fossils. Perhaps like this: Lent is for checking our thirsts and above all checking what we're drinking to assuage them. No accident that the upcoming Gospel this weekend is Jacob's well with Jesus' diagnosis of waters that never quench, and his own that always does—and does so once and for all. "Never thirst again," he claims. Look at your commitments calendar—or watch just an hour of TV ads—to find today's phony thirst-quenchers, the Jacob's wells of the new millennium.

8. Well, you may say, I could just turn off the TV. [Yes, even the Olympics. Ouch!] But that commitment calendar can't just be switched off. How to get Living Water to keep us from choking there? One term St. Paul liked is "mindset." There are two ways to be minded, he claimed, two ways to "mind" the business of our daily lives. His proposal: consciously switch on the "mind of Christ" as you look at tomorrow's list of "gottas." That might even allow you to scrub a couple of them. But for those that can't be scrubbed, the mind of Christ applied to them speaks: Your life does not depend on your success or failure in any, or all, of these things you've "gotta" do tomorrow. "Your life (right now!) is hid with God in Christ." So do what you've got to do, but do so "free" from the mindset that you've "got to" save yourself in the process.
9. Is that risky? Of course. Even secular freedom is risky; the freedom of the children of God all the more so. For the risk we run when functioning under Christic freedom is that we'll still be critiqued—by others, our own conscience, even God—when we don't do everything we were "supposed" to do. But Christic freedom arises from faith. It is the confidence, not

only that we will survive if/when others, our own conscience, critique us, but also that we'll survive the divine Critic. Fact is, we trust that we're already now beyond divine criticism—also for unfinished agendas. How so? Re-enter the Christ-necessity factor. "There is now no condemnation [from God!] for those who are in Christ Jesus." Call it perfect freedom.

10. The Christic mindset can even "free up" some time to revise agendas. Maybe even to go to some National Park desert for R&R. But you don't go to the desert to find the Good News and escape the rat-race. It's the other way round: The Good News meets us first in the cluttered desert we already live in, since Christ came into that very desert and silenced the voice of the Desert Fox (for us!). Word and sacrament are this alternate voice now present in our deserts. The Gospel does not offer escape from, but survival in, the desert. Appropriating Christ's fulness and freedom in our daily-life deserts opens the door for R&R among the sand dunes—and under the tree along the stream. But you need to take your Christic mindset with you. If you don't, neither the desert on its own, nor the green tree either, will supply it.
11. So take your Gospel with you as you enter your own desert. Those three OT texts that Jesus cited are still pretty good for desert encounters. Christ-confessors even have these three texts "improved" by a Christic-coating. To wit:
 1. Not to live by bread alone, but by the Word that comes from the mouth of God, a. k. a. the crucified and risen Messiah.
 2. Not to tempt the Lord our God to deal with us

by any other way than the way he has chosen,
the crucified and risen Messiah.

3. To worship the Lord our God and seek to serve him only. Who is that Lord? Thought you'd never ask: The crucified and risen Messiah.

Richard Lyon's Crossing – A Funeral Sermon

Colleagues,

Here's the sermon I preached at Richard L. Lyon's Funeral at First Presbyterian Church, Alton Illinois on Feb. 5, 2002. At 3 a.m. of the day of the funeral I woke up in our St.L. condo with the Easter hymn couplet going through my head: "We shall rise our Lord to meet, Treading death beneath our feet." Then I recalled the humongous Resurrection banner (8 feet tall) from Seminex days, featuring that verse, and rolled up in our closet.

It has the first clause of that couplet at the very top where the Risen Lord is portrayed, and the second one at the bottom where the dragon monster death is. Between these power figures are three Hallelujahing humans in the middle section. They are, of course, rising their Lord to meet treading death beneath their feet. The words OUR LORD directly under the Christ figure are gold, and the word DEATH silver.

So I decided to take it along to the funeral, set it up in the chancel for all to see. The sermon's preface was a few words about this banner, "a Seminex artifact," I called it, from the

seminary which was Dick's alma mater. My summary axiom was "Gold trumps silver." That became a refrain later on in the sermon. I also pointed out that the eyes of DEATH are mirrors, so as we look into it we see ourselves. Later I mentioned that if we stood on our tippy-toes and looked into the eyes of OUR LORD, we'd find mirrors there too. So much for introduction.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder

A bit more intro from me. If you'd like to see the banner and some of the other things Ed alluded to above, you can go to Sherman Lee's website that has photos from Richard's funeral. The address is <http://homepage.mac.com/sherman42/Crossings/PhotoAlbum5.html> The password into the site is peacejoy.

On a more painful note. The Rev. Dr. Sam Roth passed away yesterday from complications after bypass surgery. His funeral is Saturday at 11AM at Zion Lutheran Church in Ferguson, MO. RIP

Robin Morgan

Readings (chosen by RLL for his funeral liturgy):

Genesis 15:1-6 [That's the one about = TTOA] "Abraham believed God's promise and God reckoned it to him for righteousness."

Psalms 84 [TTOA] "How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts...your courts...your house." And other images of habitation: "home, nest, tents." Blessed is everyone who trusts in this

Lord.

Hebrews 11: 8-16 [TTOA] “By faith Abraham did such-and-so ... by faith ... by faith. The trademark of the ancient saints.” Always “faith” that “considered him faithful who had promised.” So as “strangers and pilgrims” they were exiles “not from the land that they had left behind [but] “a better country, a city” up ahead that God has prepared for them.

Luke 12:32-40 [TTOA] “Not to be afraid, little flock, it is your Father’s good pleasure to GIVE you the kingdom.” So mimic our give-away God—selling and giving away your possessions. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Be like the wise householder: awake, ready, “for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Dick’s daughter Susan tells me that my words were the last ones her father heard. That’s rather bizarre for someone who was 2000 miles away from Texas when Dick Lyon died. Here’s what she told me. It was Wednesday early afternoon. The hospice nurse had called them to the bedside—“Something’s changing.” Dick’s breathing was slowing down, and while they were there it stopped. Just then my call came in. She told me with sobs: “He’s gone!” And as I gulped back in New Haven CT, she then said: “Do you want to talk to him?” I gulped again, and said: Sure. She put the phone to his ear. I confected a home-made viaticum, focusing on the promise of the Christ he confessed, and bidding him farewell. Susan later told me: “When you spoke to him, Ed, his lips were moving.” Hearing is the last thing to go.

Bizarre. But that word fits much of my relationship with Dick. Possibly the same word is true for many of you—even for you family members?

Dick was already 60 yrs old when I met him. Tip of the iceberg. He was our dentist. And from that later on I became his theology prof, involved in that equally bizarre slice of life that moved this life-long Presbyterian into becoming an ordained Lutheran pastor. Bizarre.

I was his patient. The word "patient" literally means "one acted upon by someone else," one "suffering" the actions of someone else. Even allowing it.

I bet all of you can say the same thing, even if you never sat in the chair in Dick's dental office. He was always the one doing the action. His lips were ALWAYS moving. We all were on the receiving end—most of the time.

And after Dick and I got in cahoots about theology, he turned the tables—with glee. The dental chair was where I patiently suffered (?) his theological lectures back to me. With my mouth full of his tools, I was of course speechless. It was cruel and unusual punishment. Bizarre.

But he was a brilliant dentist, and "no surprise," once he bit his own teeth into it, a brilliant theologian. Not brilliant as the academic theologians he knew he could never be, but brilliant in that once he got wind of what the Good News of Christ was really all about, and had started to cross it over into his own life, he was a genius for seeing connections. For seeing what was — to use his own words — The Rotary Club religion of much of America and the clear contrast in the Gospel of a crucified and risen Messiah.

And then, typically Richard, he kept on grinding teeth, but added on some new ventures: Preaching that Gospel he'd discovered (or had the Gospel discovered him?) wherever he found a vacant pulpit in this corner of Illinois — and even beyond. And then going organizational with new inventions. Not another

new amalgam for dentistry (which probably made him a millionaire), but new metallurgy for Gospel-amalgams –

1. Order of Philippi – blending the Christian Good News into the lives of “people of means,” his fellow millionaires.
2. Sebring Seminar – a program for hustling Gospel and Crossings among the snowbirds and their pastors whom he and Dottie encountered in Florida.
3. And his most recent venture, Food for the Poor, the project for the kids in Haiti, which took him not only to Haiti but all over the USA hustling funds – as Norm would fly him in for Sunday preaching, often to Lake Wobegon towns, where the Gospel’s own dynamic and Dick’s chutzpah would bring back bucks for the kiddos. Bizarre & Brilliant. And there may well be more that I don’t know about.

Dick and I were simpatico. Both of us were country boys (he from SW MO, I from NW IL) who had gotten doctor’s degrees. But city-sophisticated we were not. You know what they say about taking the boy away from the farm.. . . The place where you could see this best was when Dick preached at the country churches. The one that sticks in my memory was at Zion Lutheran Church in Farmersville, IL. Of all places: Farmersville!? And the address? 400 E. ELEVATOR Street.

Zion congregation was at that time without a pastor, so visiting clerics showed up on Sundays. Through some glitch three of us showed up to lead worship that Sunday, Dick, myself and David Heyen. So we divvied up the chores. Dick was the preacher. David did the liturgy, I the sacrament. Dick ignored the pulpit, walked out there among the folks, and crossed the Gospel into their lives, the Gospel of Christ’s own cross—like an auctioneer at the cattle sale barn. In language they all understood because it was one of their own telling them about Jesus.

And he was really one of their own in another sense, a preacher, yes, yet not JUST a preacher, but a working man in the world of daily work just as they were. [Though his Mercedes parked outside was a cut above the cars they drove.] Bizarre and brilliant..

But Dick would be the first to criticize me if I didn't do as he did at Farmersville. Talk about Jesus with you folks, especially at this solemn occasion. And were he listening he'd check if I were doing it according to the Crossings paradigm. So I'll try. First "tracking" Richard in the realities of his own life (remember I knew him only after age 60.) and then "crossing" this same Richard with the Gospel in those readings he selected for his own funeral. I propose to do that with the seven letters of Richard's own name, putting predicates to each letter. You can add your own, for I won't exhaust the list.

Tracking

R	reliable, rascal, realist, restless, raconteur
I	impatient, inventive (remember that tooth- filling amalgam he created), insightful, insistent, irascible, impossible!
C	colorful, competent, complex, a character, not always couth , creative, sometimes a cad.
H	hard (drove hard bargains) sometimes hell- raiser, husband, helper, bhealer
A	awful, articulate, avuncular, acerbic.
R	(for this second R, you fill in the blanks)

D	A dealer (operator: how many airplanes did he buy and sell?). A drinking buddy (though I was never in that group!), a dad, a Grand-dad, also dear. Now dead.
Some or all of that was Richard on his own. Now crossed by the gospel, we have the same Richard, but Richard with a difference.	
R	From the Genesis text: RIGHTEOUSNESS. Like Abraham, Richard trusted God's promise, specifically God's promise in Christ. For mixed-bag humans like Abraham and Richard, God reckons that as righteousness.
I	From the Psalm text full of habitation terms: dwelling place, courts, home, nest, house. INHABITANT. Being IN the right place. Which is the real meaning of the Hebrew term "Blessed."
C	From the Hebrews text: Moving to a better COUNTRY, a CITY up ahead. Better even than 76 Fairmount in Alton. Key for the direction you are moving while you are an inhabitant is trusting the promise as you move that way.
H	From the Luke text (all the remaining letters) HOUSEHOLDER, the wise householder when it comes to managing your stuff, and finally your life. Namely,
A	AWAKE
R	and READY

D	<p>making DEALS (Dick was a chronic dealer) in a DIFFERENT way from the way you used to. Refocus your treasure ideas, and hang your heart there. Dick hooked on God's own "big deal" in the Sweet Swap whereby our sins go to Christ's account and his righteousness gets to ours—by faith alone. Gold trumps silver.</p>
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I remember the Christmas communion service in the Lyon house, the last time I saw Dick. Pastor Robin Morgan, Marie and me and the Lyon family gathered in the living room. Christmas tree on one side, Dick on the sofa on the opposite side, grown-ups in a circle from tree to sofa. Me the preacher sitting on the floor with the grandchildren. Dick and Robin con-celebrating, he not vested, but with a stole, the union card of his pastorate.

On the floor with the kids I preached about the image of the sculpture we'd brought back from our Indonesia mission venture: The mother hen and chicks. Here it is for you to see. It's the image Jesus chose for his own ministry, gathering the chicks beneath his wings. There are 4 chicks tucked under their mother's wings with only their heads sticking out, and then there's this 5th one sitting on top of Mama, mimicking Mama as she turns her head on the lookout for more chicks. I asked the grandkids: Which chick is Grandpa? They quickly pointed to the one on top. Of course. But now at his funeral it is not Dick, the non-conformist, we remember, but Dick connected to Jesus, the mother hen.

Conclusion: That's still Dick the bizarre chick. But the point is: whose chick was he finally? His own claim—despite all the adjectives we've come up with for the letters of his name—was that he belonged to the one he was resting on, the one whose posture he was practicing: still looking out for others not yet under the wings of the mother hen. And now he's not up there any

more. He's under the wings, completely under, not even a head peeking out. But under the wings and "asleep in Jesus" as the NT says. What counts is that the Mother hen knows where he is and She remembers him.

That is the message of the life of Richard L. Lyon, all 77 years. In its parts a very mixed bag, as is true of everyone of us here. But where does it wind up in the last chapter as the curtain falls? That's what counts.

It's all connections. This sculpture shows where Dick was connected when the curtain fell. I'll put this sculpture on the casket and as you walk by for the sacrament, take a look. His lips are now no longer moving, but the message of his life is what you see on the casket. And if his lips were moving, they'd say: Go and do likewise.

A Lenten Parable: Babette's Feast

Colleagues, "Friday Night at the Movies," is what they called it here last weekend at OMSC, the Overseas Ministries Study Center. The film was "Babette's Feast." Our international/ecumenical community here—from Ghana, Niger, Congo, Myanmar, Indonesia, Korea, China, Japan plus Europe, Canada, USA—from Anglican, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, Mennonite and a wide spectrum of Evangelical church heritages—watched attentively. With the English subtitles most of us understood most of the time what was being said in the Danish and French dialogue happening above.

Many of you may have seen the film, I imagine. It's a classic. For Marie and me this was the third time. And then there was another time a few years ago when we were invited to participate—live—in a repeat performance of Babette's banquet. For the 65th birthday of one of our Crossings colleagues in Belleville IL his kids gave him a "Babette's Feast," replicating ingeniously everything that was on Babette's table—well, mostly. They also engineered Danish General Lowenhielm's banquet speech on "Mercy and Truth," this time delivered by a Roman priest friend of the family who brilliantly wove into the General's rhetoric a theological reading of Babette's original feast.

In the OMSC discussion after our Friday evening viewing I resurrected from my own memory what the priest had said (plus a few Lutheran nuances that he forgot) and passed it on to the group—and now to you too.

The story takes place in a fishing village on the harsh and lonely coast of Jutland in Denmark (the world where Kierkegaard came from) in the late 1800s. It may even have been the birthplace of Karen Blixen, Danish author of the original story—I don't know. No surprise, it's a Lutheran community, whose social fabric is shaped by the pastor. Not tyrannical, but clearly in charge, this pastor and his brand of Lutheran pietism dominate the community ethos. Most evident is this control in the lives of his two lovely daughters—Martina and Philippa—named, as you may have guessed, after two notable Lutheran reformers from the 16th century.

Their mother apparently died early and in the flashback to those early years, we only get to know the family trio. Papa's way of ruling the roost, not tyrannically, but yet powerfully, frustrates every suitor for the hands of his daughters—more or less with their consent. They are, says papa in those flashback scenes "the left and right hands of my ministry." Years later

when Babette arrives on the scene, they are ageing maiden ladies . Though impoverished themselves, they continue their lifelong practice of care for the really destitute in the village.

During a horrendous nighttime coastal storm, Babette stumbles into their doorway with a letter of introduction. It comes from Achille Papin, now a burned-out opera singer in Paris. Long ago he had come to the seaside village for some R & R—and fallen in love with Phillipa and her marvelous singing voice. All in vain, of course. In his letter he now pleads on Babette's behalf. She is fleeing Paris after a revolution that has killed her husband and son. Homeless and penniless and speaking no Danish (the sisters know French) she is welcomed and takes over household chores—especially the kitchen. What we learn later is that she had been the *creme-de-la-creme* chef at a 5-star Parisian restaurant. So even with the sisters' steady diet of lutefisk and common gruel the cuisine improves. Especially do the many homebound villagers notice, for whom the sisters have for years been bringing daily meals.

In all the shots of Babette we see her wearing a crucifix necklace, since she is “papiste.”

After 14 years of Babette's service the day approaches which marks Papa's 100th birthday. Though he's been dead for a generation, the sisters encourage the pious faithful remnant to celebrate the event—but with nothing special since their piety precludes any genuine festivity. The plan is to mark the day at one of the prayer meetings still being held around the parsonage table, a practice Papa initiated many years ago.

And then Babette gets a letter from Paris. Old Papin has for the intervening years been buying a lottery ticket in her name—and (you guessed it) she's won. 10,000 francs. A fortune. The sisters prepare for her to leave after receiving such largesse.

But Babette walks the dunes to meditate and finally concludes by asking the sisters if she can put on a French dinner for the 100th birthday celebration and do so with her own money. They object, of course, but she convinces them. It takes a while for her to stock the pantry for such a party, but finally a boat docks and the incredible wagon-load from her shopping list (e.g., a huge live turtle) comes to the house. And she goes to work.

When the day arrives, the goldie-oldies from the prayer-circle enter the room—whispering to one another that they will indeed eat and drink the marvels Babette sets before them, but will not enjoy them, lest their souls suffer damage. But once Babette, who stays in the kitchen all the time, begins sending the young server out with course after course of incredible delicacies (was it seven, or even ten courses?)—and wine (Oh no! It's a teetotaler town!) after wine appropriate for each course, things begin to change. First to change – and it's very funny – is the guests' commitment not to enjoy the feast. Present to interpret to them what they're really receiving is visiting General Lowenhielm, who knows the signature of the cuisine from a stint he once did as Danish military attache in Paris. Only at Cafe Anglais did he ever savor such delights, especially the piece de resistance of the feast, cailles en sarcophage [quail in a (pastry) sarcophagus]. Yes indeed, Cafe Anglais was Babette's place.

Most notable is the change in personal conversation, as lifelong pietists shed their veneers and begin to confess their sins to one another and be forgiven by the victims. Hatred, adultery, theft, false witness, to name a few. Toward the end comes the General's oration recalling the pastor's favorite Bible passage from Psalm 85: "Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." He crosses it subtly, but very patently, into the fading lives of those around the table.

Including his own, as his and Martina's faces acknowledge their frustrated love from days gone by.

The "mercy and truth" text always reminds me of something Elert taught us fifty years ago. In the language of St. John, "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Grace (a.k.a.mercy) and truth MEET in Jesus—the grace or Christ's forgiveness alongside the "truth" about ourselves—first of all the truth about ourselves, the truth to fess up, as did the penitents at Babette's feast, and then the New Truth of being and living as forgiven sinners.

But you may ask: where was Christ in the movie? Good question. You've heard me holler more than once about Christ not being necessary in large slices of theology and preaching today. Well, how about this? Remember, I called it a parable. Think Babette = the Christ figure. She's the only one wearing a crucifix. She's the prime agent for the (Lenten?) transformation of these pietistic Lutherans into "graced and truthed" Christians. Yes, a papiste! She puts on the feast all by herself. Who does that sound like?

Think eucharistic feast when you think Babette's feast. Wine there is aplenty and those quail in a breaded pastry—what might that all signal? And the name of the entree "in a sarcophagus." Is that Good Friday or what?

We never see Babette out at the table, but she's the one who creates it all. The only visible agent is the teenage waiter (deacon? minister?) who brings the goodies from the kitchen and sets them before the guests. He doesn't confect them, Babette does. And they work wonders. This banquet, as Luther's catechism says about another feast, "works forgiveness of sins . . . and brings life and salvation" to all who partake. Whose supper is it that "really" does such things?

As the guests leave, old enemies now arm in arm, snow is falling—white flakes from heaven. Manna? They've already consumed the quail. Again in John's gospel (chapter 6) Jesus appropriates that piece of Israel's wilderness history and then trumps it with his own "I am the Bread of Life." John 6, we need to recall, is the eucharist chapter in John's Gospel. He has no Maundy Thursday passover meal in his passion narrative.

The day after the feast the sisters expect to say farewell to Babette, convinced that she will now return to France. Thinking that a fair share of the lottery winnings is still in her box they sadly move toward closure. "No," Babette says, "I'll stay here. I have no money left." The sisters are smitten. She continues: "The cost for such a banquet for 12 at Cafe Anglais in Paris is 10,000 francs."

She gave her all. For these people! She was modelling the one attached to her necklace.

May your and my 40 days of Lent work penitential wonders for us too as we move to The Feast.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

The Gospel covers the Greatest

Sin (and which sin, pray tell, is that?)

Colleagues,

In last week's posting I mentioned responses to the previous week's ThTh #189 that I'd received from a number of women on the listserve. Even though I intended #189 to be my closure on the topic of homosexuality, these responses, as I told you a week ago, were "too good for me to try to summarize." I think they are also too good to keep from your eyes. So here they are: 4 of them. For next Thursday's posting—deo volente—the topic will change. At least, that's my intention.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

I. From Texas Besides the amusement and slight befuddlement I find from reading the various "for" and "against" arguments, I often get confused about what we are arguing "for" or "against." At first, it is like people arguing "is homosexuality a sin?" Well, Leviticus seems to say so. Then again, those great 10 suggestions from the hill (does sarcasm come over well on email?) seem to make me think that sin is unavoidable – it's that little "covet" clause in the bottom of the ninth, when you consider my thoughts with my actions, I'm downright screwed.

So, given that I have not yet found the great organized and ranked list of sins that God uses to check off "sin" "bad sin" "really bad sin" and "not so bad sin," I'm going

to go by that age-old standard of Jesus being for all sinners. After all, if we were without sin, we wouldn't need Jesus.

So, sorry to add on to your surely growing list of one of the great topics of conversation, but I thought you may have some extra time while trying to keep warm in New Haven. Coincidentally, I have begun working with the youth group at the church I have been attending (a non-denominational one, with a rock band and pastor in blue jeans – but the theology seems good so far, and the pastor is always up for discussions).

The youth pastor introduced me to some folks he knew last night, while chatting at the local Starbucks. “They’re gay,” he whispered to me a few minutes after they left. Trying to hold back my original response of “no – – – - !?”[expletive deleted], I just smiled and said, “I picked that up.” “I’ll minister to them, anyway,” he says – like he’s some sort of better Christian for considering the possibility of including them in God’s love. I saw my opportunity then – especially considering last week’s ThTh. We’re going to have lunch next week. We’ll talk.

II. From Mississippi All right, Ed. I’ve had enough. It’s time for the Mississippi armchair theologian to weigh in on this slyly contrived-to-be-polite discussion. There are plenty of daggers here, but cloaked in courtly language. Where did Christ instruct me to proclaim anything other than the Good News? Isn’t the sin we are dying of the refusal to admit our total unworthiness in any aspect? Can’t we trust God to deal with the hearts of all of us, to know our motivations and sort everything out in the end? Why should we be putting together lists of minor sins, big sins, and REALLY BIG SINS? Didn’t Christ

summarize the law by saying "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and others as yourself"? Shouldn't we be concerned with structuring our earthly actions around those two precepts to please God (as best we can) ? Wouldn't that take care of everything else until we get to heaven and God sorts it all out? We spend so much time on this stuff that non-christians think we're in the Sin Business, not the Good News Business.
Honestly – LOL – there's my rant. I feel better now.

III. From Minnesota Greetings from the north country where snow and real cold is expected today. Minnesota has been remarkably warm and free of snow, to the chagrin of the natives. It is the Thursday Theology of this last week (#189) which prompts me to write now. I had printed it, but just got to read it carefully last night. I've been unable to put it out of my mind since.

I admire your convictions, your strong faith, your courage to continue this debate which draws such loveless responses. I want to tell you to stop, to protect yourself. You have served your time in these kinds of wars. But I know there will be a whole new set of responses, and you will again feel led to protect those who suffer from such intolerance. So—I'm going to get my two cents in—from a less sophisticated and less educated perspective.

The issue of wiring seems to really unwire our clergy friends. What I wonder is if we accept the premise that homosexuality is sin, or at least that homosexual acts are sinful, isn't it strange that only this segment of the population is confronted with temptation to this sin? It seems that we are eager to feel good about resisting a sin to which we've never been tempted or to judge those whose temptation we cannot understand.

If their stubborn clinging to this sin is cited, how am I any different? I have favorite sins, those I confess half-heartedly and continue whole-heartedly, in spite of my claim to be a new person in Jesus Christ. Judging me or reducing my whole-being to the name of any sin denies what Christ has done for me. I have to believe that it is my relationship with him that will change me, not the judgment, correctly or incorrectly, of the Law as pronounced by others. I'm not advocating calling homosexuality sin. I'm suggesting that it is a self-accusing way to go.

I wonder if any of these pastors has ever ministered to a homosexual person or met with the parents or spouse of a gay or lesbian. Have they any Gospel to offer? *[Ed: Or has any of them a gay son or lesbian daughter—as is the case for some pastors who have responded. “God compelled me to change my mind,” they say.]*

What distresses me most of all is the agape-less and personal tone of the remarks. They do elicit some sinful responses from me. Bless you for never responding in kind.

Thank you for your clear expression of the Gospel. God give you strength to continue.

IV. From Ohio In regard to the recent emphasis on homosexuality as a topic for ThTh, and within the ELCA: I am learning that when conflicts in families or congregations focus on one particular issue, often that issue is really just a lightning rod for a deeper more existential issue. I wonder if all the heat and smoke surrounding the question of ordination for practicing gays and lesbians and all the fury over CCM [= ELCA agreement with US Episcopalians] are really just ways to release some of our energy and divert

our attention from the real problem.

This is not to say that the conversations surrounding CCM and the issue of ordaining active gays and lesbians are not vital to the future of the ELCA. I think the manner in which we work through these conflicts is extremely important, I'm just not sure they are the heart of the problem.

What is the problem you ask? I must admit that I am not certain. Perhaps I lack the clarity or the courage to name the problem, however it seems that the pain and conflict at the heart of the church runs very, very deep. I suspect, finally, that it is a God-problem (to use Crossings language). I suspect it is the kind of problem for which the ELCA needs a Savior (i.e.- God's saving work through Jesus Christ) to resolve. This is the kind of "God work" that will end in reformation.

Meanwhile as we address these important "lightning rod" issues, I hope we do not lose sight of the deeper pain. I pray God may give us the wisdom and the courage to face our real situation, for it will be through facing the truth that Christ will set us free.

Mostly Mission, Some Miscellanea

Colleagues,

I. First an obit.

Richard L. Lyon, 77, “late-in-time” “discoverer of the Gospel” (his words), founder of the Order of Philippi, Crossings aficionado, super-whiz dentist for our family, lifelong Presbyterian AND ordained ELCA pastor—a real Mensch—died yesterday afternoon in hospice care at his daughter’s home in Texas. Marie and I are flying home to St. Louis this weekend, d.v., for the funeral Tuesday morning at the First Presbyterian Church in Alton, Illinois. I’m slotted to be the preacher. R.I.P., Richard.

II. We’ve been here at the Overseas Ministries Study Center for exactly one month, and I am (slowly) getting on with the assignment for which I came, my two research projects: “Lutheran missiology: an oxymoron?” and “Why Jesus in today’s world awash in a sea of faiths?” Most of January I’ve been in the classroom in the OMSC’s 4-week Intermester Seminars for Seminarians. I’ve been one of a dozen-plus teachers in the program—most all of them “real” missiologists. I’m learning. Next week I can get down to “my own work.” Well, maybe, as the previous paragraph prognoses.

III. But to move somewhat toward the mission study agenda, I’m sending first-hand mission artifacts for today’s ThTh. I do so, biting my tongue and cuffing my hand NOT to send on to you responses to last week’s ThTh 189. All but one came from women colleagues, all of them “suggesting” other issues for the Gospel to address in our world. The theology in these responses is too good for me to try to summarize, so I’ll save them for posting on a rainy day. I’m also cuffing my keyboard fingers NOT to comment on the theology of our US president’s State of the Union message this week, almost every sentence wildly applauded by those in the live audience. Such applause signals that he was doubtlessly articulating the religion of America, a religion shot through with heresy. Some still ask: what’s

heretical in the religion of America? Answer: Check the president's text again for the following: our Manichean view of evil [world divided between evil people and righteous ones], our Pharisee heresy [God, I thank thee that I am not like other people], our salvation-theology that war and money for war will save the nation [i.e., that it is not real righteousness, God's kind of left-handed righteousness, that exalts a nation], and the all pervasive blindness to God our critic, God the terror-inducer whom Jesus urges us to fear (Luke 12:4f.). I've been asked by some folks from the United Church of Christ here in New England to discuss this with them after Easter. If something useful comes from that I hope to pass it on to you.

IV. Now finally to mission data.

In 1999 Marie and I did a mission stint in Indonesia—yes, it was the hardship venue of Bali—and sent ThTh postings on our life and learning there. Two of our colleagues there at that time were Bill and Margaret Hansen. Bill is a 1952 graduate (50 yrs ago!) from Concordia Seminary (St. Louis)—a member of one of the seminary's most illustrious classes ever. His classmates: Bob Schultz, Marty Marty, Richard Koenig, Ralph Zorn, Ken Kraemer, Bob Huebner, Don Meyer, Luther Beckemeier, Ken Mahler, Bob Clausen—and many others too humorous to mention (e.g., Franz Bibfeldt). Bill eschewed ordained ministry under the Lutheran label, took some alternate paths. In retirement he and Margaret came to Bali as a faith-missionary at the same time that we were there and we discovered our common roots. They continue in Bali responding to a variety of Macedonian calls. Below is some first-hand mission history from him that arrived in yesterday's In Basket.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

From Bill and Margaret Hansen

Denpasar, Bali, Indonesia

Thu, 31 Jan 2002

Here we are well into 2002 already. I am just finishing my monthly three-day fast and feeling quite victorious. In addition, in three more days I will have completed reading the Bible through entirely for the 69th time; this time it includes reading the New Testament through in the Indonesian language, for which I am so thankful to God. One more thing: If I live another week, I will be 73 years old (Margaret is a mere 65).

Do I sound like I am boasting? I am. The grace of God is something to boast about. When I realize that God has strengthened us for almost 2 1/2 years in Indonesia, I want to boast about His unfailing mercy.

This time I have three articles to send you—all in one package.

TAKE MY HANDS; TAKE MY FEET

Her face is lovely. She is warm, chatty, and fun to be with. Her name is Julie.

Just out of her 30's now, Julie, a single woman, came to Indonesia 8-1/2 years ago.

Talking to her, you forget about her hands and feet. Crippling arthritis has deformed all four limbs quite severely for such a young person. But it does not stop her from fulfilling her God-given calling in Bali.

I love to watch Julie's hands as she plays the keyboard for songs of praise during worship, even more when she stands

behind the keyboard and leads the music with her beautiful voice. As arthritic hands glide naturally over the notes, you think, "God is getting glory even through those hands."

Julie rides an 85cc Honda motorbike; she rides it everywhere in Denpasar where she lives, and she rides it to the mountains around Bedugul where she goes for regular ministry. I think of her on her motorcycle when it is raining so hard, as it is now. It rains so much in the mountains. Total raingear is a necessity. I think of those hands and feet on the controls of the motorbike, praying for her safety on the mountain curves.

Back in Denpasar, Julie regularly teaches over 100 children the English language. God has opened this door of ministry with its service and contacts for her. Julie was born a teacher, I believe. In her "free" time she teaches individual Christians, discipling them to follow Jesus. She also takes correspondence courses through an American university, and she develops reading material for children.

Serving God with good health (as in my case) is one thing; serving with severe handicaps is a special ministry of love. Lord, I am thankful that you put Julie in our path. She reminds me that "we have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." (II Cor. 4:7)

When I look at Julie's hands and feet and see her serving the Lord with such joy, I think of Paul's thorn in the flesh. Though I would say, "Take it away, Lord," He says: "My grace is sufficient for HER, for my power is made perfect in weakness." (II Cor. 12:9, adapted) Today, seeing Julie, "I delight in weaknesses" (v. 10), for I see the glory of God through them.

Julie has just gone back to America for a short furlough. She may need more surgery on her limbs. "O God, have great glory in

Julie!”

“ARI” CARRIES ON FOR JULIE (Name changed for security)

Ari is a bright 17-year-old Balinese high school student who accepted Christ into his heart because of Julie.

*His home village is *****, in the mountains, where Julie has been teaching people about Jesus for more than six years. There is a Christian man in *****, the first believer to convert from Hinduism. He is Ari’s uncle. He bore the brunt of persecution when he came to Christ.*

Ari’s uncle has invited Julie to teach children the gospel in his home. Ari was one of those children, who now remembers hearing about Jesus from Julie when he was 12.

Ari’s father died in 1997. Ari says appreciatively: “Julie was there for his funeral.” There were twelve children in Ari’s family, and there were three different mothers.

Many of Ari’s brothers and sisters have now moved to Denpasar, the center of Bali’s commerce and industry. Ari came to Denpasar last year in order to go to high school. He lives with one of his brothers.

After he moved to Denpasar, Ari looked Julie up, and she spoke to him further about the Lord. Ari decided to become a Christian, and the next day he told Julie about it. Julie prayed with Ari and continues to mentor him in Christ.

Ari’s school is Hindu. Ari has not hidden his Christianity, but he has not flaunted it either. Some of the students have made it hard for Ari. When they experimented with ouija boards

during recess, Ari felt that he should not. Julie confirmed his feelings and prayed for him. But taking a stand has not made him popular.

In class last week the class began to talk about how bad a thing it is to “change your religion.” No one mentioned Ari, but everyone knew who the subject of the conversation was. The teacher then asked everyone to “meditate” (Hindu-style) and report on what each person saw as he meditated. Ari wisely said that he just saw “light.”

Ari faithfully attends Christian worship services, and he freely asks fellow-believers to pray about his problems. He even hosted our mid-week prayer meeting this week.

At Christmas-time Ari took part in the program, singing and reading a Scripture. His voice was clear and golden, his love for Jesus shining through.

On Christmas day, at 6:00 a. m. Ari’s sister called to wish him “Merry Christmas.” He was thrilled with even this small touch from a family member, for he is receiving the usual cold shoulder from most of his family.

Pray for Ari to maintain a good witness, and ask the Lord to fill him with His love.

MUSINGS SENT TO A FRIEND

Every once in a while when we think it is hot here (we are quite close to the equator), we think of Birmingham, AL, and it doesn’t seem hot at all.

Sometimes we pass by Dunkin Donuts (yes we have them in Bali, and they are quite popular), and we wish we were with you on a

leisurely Sunday afternoon enjoying donuts and each other.

One of the hard things about being here—there aren't that many—is not having our privacy. People are everywhere in this island nation of over 200 million people. Early in the morning when we are walking and hearing nothing, we look to the side of the road, and there are people like noiseless shadows behind the lovely vegetation. We forget that, but then we can't forget, either.

At our home we have a helper couple living on the premises and working for us (cooking, guarding, washing clothes, cleaning, gardening, driving) with their beautiful six-year-old son. God couldn't have blessed us with better people. But they have no concept of privacy, nor will they ever have it, I believe. They were just raised with two dozen relatives around in small quarters.

After I take a bath I step out of the kamar mandi to dry off and finish dressing, and someone is standing there. I change my bath time—to no effect. Another time I think I am alone, but I look up from my reading, and someone is going through the house. I like my quiet. People talk endlessly. Men here are not non-communicative and they rattle off answers before their wives are through speaking, but the conversation goes on and on at 100 decibels. The constant loud chatter is like a radio that one cannot turn off.

People drop in to see you out of the blue. Sometimes they call ahead, but most do not have phones. We have learned to accept people at any time, but it is hard when we are tired. We often invite them to stay for a meal, and they usually do. Our cook is so supportive and ready with refreshments or enough food for guests.

Our helpers are Balinese Christians, and they share with us in

ministry. We want them to. We pray for them to this end, and for all the people whose paths cross ours regularly, that the Holy Spirit will use us to introduce them to Jesus or help them to know Him better through our example. We know we are living in a fishbowl, but it is a wonderful chance to show off our Jesus. And it gives us great joy when we see others walking in the light and going on in the gospel life.

After almost 2 1/2 years here, we are getting pretty well accustomed to living in Indonesia. The language is not coming easy, however. I have always had fair ability with languages, but starting as a septuagenarian who cannot hear well has carried its frustrations. We know a lot of words, we think, until we hear them spoken in fast sentences; then it seems we just don't know anything. Fortunately, many people speak a few words of English, and some speak quite a bit, if you can understand it. No worse, though, than Australian speakers—we live close to Australia—or people from European countries like Holland. Sometimes we have to check to see if we really know English!

In a week we will go on another trip to the little island of Sabu, the driest place in Indonesia. We have never been there before. We plan to stay a week, then go on to Timor for another two weeks. Our work in Sabu will be Bible seminars for pastors and leaders during the day and worship services in the evenings. In Timor it will be some of the same, plus intensive teaching of young people in Bible School. We need your prayers for boldness in witnessing and effectiveness in teaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Love from Bali, Indonesia

BILL and MARGARET HANSEN (January 2002)