

Tsunami Preaching in the 12 Days of Christmas

Colleagues,

Today's posting for the Feast of the Epiphany is Pr. Steve Krueger's sermon of a few days ago, on the Second Sunday after Christmas. The preface is mine. In these days of Apocalypse Now,

Christ's Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

PREFACE ON CATAclysmic DEATH

1. Previous six-figure death toll cataclysms (1944-45) that I remember as a kid.

A. Fire bombing of refugee-packed Dresden 100,000

B. Fire bombing of Tokyo 100K plus

C. Atomic bombing of Hiroshima 200K—in a nano-second

D. Ditto Nagasaki 100K

The British joined the US Air force for Dresden; the rest we Americans did on our own. That totals half a million. "Innocent" civilians. We even called it "terror bombings" then, I think. I don't remember any euphemistic "Shock and Awe." But it was "our" terrorism and thus OK.

2. Every day on our planet with its 6 billion-plus inhabitants, 300,000 of us die "naturally." Every three days a million obits. Every year 100 million. Was it Dante

who said, upon entering the underworld in his Divine Comedy, "I did not know that death had undone so many"?

3. "I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand." God talking in Deut. 32:39. Same chapter, same God, four verses earlier: "Vengeance is mine, and recompense."
4. Moses responding to this God-talk in Psalm 90: "You turn us back to dust . . . You sweep us away; we are like a dream, like grass that is renewed in the morning . . . in the evening it fades and withers. For we are consumed by your anger; by your wrath we are overwhelmed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your countenance. For all our days pass away under your wrath, our years come to an end like a sigh. [And now switching to Luther's translation for the conclusion] But who really believes that your wrath encounters us in death? Who bothers to fear your anger? Teach us to ponder that death is a divine MUST for us, so that we finally catch on."
5. Amos 1:1 and 4:6ff. "The words of Amos . . . at the time of the earthquake . . . 'and yet you did not return to me.'"
6. Jesus at the time of a double catastrophe in his day (Luke 13): "But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."
7. St. Paul in his great resurrection chapter (I Cor. 15:22): "In Adam all die. In Christ shall all be made alive."
8. And now Steve's sermon of 4 days ago on the text of St. John's Christmas story: "In him was life . . . and (tsunami) darkness cannot overcome it."

San Diego, CA

Readings for the Day

Jeremiah 31: 7-14

Ephesians 1: 3-14

John 1: 1-18

1. Today on this Second Sunday after Christmas we have a tough assignment. Karl Barth, the great European Reformed theologian of mid-twentieth century, said that the preacher should preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other and were we to do that today, we would encounter a problem. We are today to bask again in the Christmas Gospel about how God's Son is born among us to bring us salvation and peace, and yet, today we would have to say such a thing when the world is still reeling from one of the greatest natural disasters of any of our lifetimes, even as the death toll from the tsunami half a world away continues to mount. God's Word today gives us some remarkable readings on which to reflect. To the exiles of Israel, through the prophet Jeremiah, the Lord promises restoration, redemption, ransom. "I will turn their mourning into joy," says the Lord in today's Old Testament Reading, "I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow" (Jeremiah 31: 13b). Such a promise our world today surely would cling to, too, as shock and tears of sorrow flow from places like Sri Lanka, Indonesia, India, Thailand as they mourn their dead.

Our special place in God's universe as confessing Christians who trust such a promise is told about in today's Second Reading from St. Paul's New Testament Letter to the Ephesians. We, you and I and the Christian Church, are as adopted children through our big brother Jesus into the family of God. We didn't get born that way, natural children as we are of our parent, Adam, the rebel

man. Rather, we were those called by a big brother whose promise to us was, "I will not leave you as orphans but I will come to you," as Jesus says to his disciples in John's Gospel (John 14: 18).

So, the prevailing metaphor for us is adoption, by a big brother who promises not to leave us orphaned but to come to us and take us to our new home...our new family...his family, complete with his Father becoming our Father, too.

In the Gospel today we hear how he came to us. He, who was with God in the beginning...He the Logos, the Word of God from everlasting...became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

He chose to become our brother, with our condition, our fate, our lot for his very own. That is why he can lead us home to his side of the tracks.

2. Those are good words but they can easily slip into religious sentimentality for us if we do not apply them to ourselves, to our own histories and to our own day and time. We need to ask, "How can these promises help us now when we find our world and, perhaps even ourselves, wondering about a good God who seems to permit tens of thousands to perish because the earth moved under the sea?" Such a question is humbling, as Job of the Old Testament found out. Why does a God whom we believe is good permit what we humans experience as, let's call it for what it is, "evil?" This universe for which we say God is responsible can sometimes seem so arbitrary from the cancer cell that takes the life of a little child to the devastating loss of life in an event only a week old. C.S. Lewis, the great Christian writer, as he mourned the death

of the woman that he loved, in one of his honest moments of lament wrote, "Some people say that God is good. Have they never been to the dentist?" (from A Grief Observed). Where is the Christmas Gospel today for those who mourn and weep, whose tears of sorrow have cried out since the beginning when man, Adam, our first father, was consigned back to the dust from whence he came?

3. Yet, it ought to occur to us, that maybe, that it is precisely those tears and that sorrow that made necessary the Christmas Gospel. And to see the Christmas Gospel in that light will remove it off the cover of syrupy Hallmark greeting cards and place that Gospel into our hearts where we need it the most. No man, no woman, no preacher, no theologian can know why it happened that a seismic movement of the earth's geological crust in the ocean half a world away caused a wave so enormous that it killed well over 100,000 people a week ago. Let alone, no mortal has the wisdom to begin to know why a good God would permit that. Why there, rather than here? Why nature can rise up with such power and force to reveal how vulnerable we human beings truly are...despite our pretense that we have it somehow all under control? No man or woman is that wise...and only a fool would pretend to know the answer to that awesome thing.

But this, today's Scripture makes it unmistakably clear, we can know. While the world does not know it, as John says. While his own did not know it and rejected its truth. God put in his lot with us when his Word became flesh and dwelt with us...and a baby was born in Bethlehem...and became the center of all our human history...whichever was or will be. There is not anything which can happen which God has not made his own. And if you want to know who is responsible, as we all do, "who is

in charge here? Who is responsible?", God says, I tell you, "I am. Even to the point of taking the rap for it all...lay it on me...for that is what that incarnation, that birth, that life and that crucified death were, indeed, all about and what it was all for."

Martin Luther put it like this. "There is no theology that is worth anything except a theology of the cross. And if you want to know what Jesus means, then be a theologian of the cross."

That is what it means to say, as St. John does today, "the Word was made flesh and lived among us."

There is no fate of the world, nor of any person alive, whom God, in God's Son, Jesus Christ, does not make his own.

That is what Christmas really means! And sometimes it takes a tsunami for us to open our eyes to see it. To use St. John's image – we are so blinded by the darkness otherwise that we can miss the light when it indeed shines.

4. It is an incredible thing to notice what happens when the world together faces a disaster. The heart stretches beyond what we even thought was possible. \$35 MM in aid suddenly becomes \$350 MM and charities throughout the planet, like Lutheran World Relief, one of the great ones over the decades who have always been there when it counted, face the problem of handling people's generosity. The world becomes for a moment a family – perhaps like its God intended for it to be in the first place – as people are forced into this thing called love, compassion, selfless generosity. It's almost as if you can't help yourself...as even historic enemies concede

they've got to lay down their arms for a moment and work together at this one. But our readings today, as if that weren't miracle enough, even up the ante when they ask us to consider this even more incredible thing...this Christmas Gospel. God's at the center of it all in his human child, incarnate among us, even in our sorrows and our tears and our dying. It is he who is there among the dead and the living, among the mourners and the grieving. The Jesus Story is for them as it is for us all.

It is that Story into which we have been adopted. An orphaned world suddenly gets called back into being the family of God through its brother Jesus. And we have been given the gift of faith to see it, to see in our darkness where there is God's light.

Where is the God of restoration and hope promised by the prophet today in all of this, we ask, even as we revel as a new calendar year begins?

Look to Jesus, we, the adopted say. Find God there. In a manger at Bethlehem. In a man of sorrows, nailed to a cross. See him there, making our story his own, gathered up now as we are, in him, and leading us to a resurrection, swapping stories, as he does, with us.

Yes, as Karl Barth says, the preacher ought to preach with the Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Because to make the connection is why Christ, the Word of God incarnate, came.

A blessed Christmastide. May God grant us a grand Epiphany, full of Epiphany light to the nations...especially now. In his name. Amen.

Pr. Stephen C. Krueger