

30,000 More Charioteers into the Red Sea? “Finish the Job.” Whose Job? On Whom?

Colleagues,

We need Biblical metaphors to talk about the US wars in the Middle East. Today's Baghdad is only 50 miles away from Biblical Babylon, one on the Tigris, the other on the Euphrates, with only a skinny strip of land between the rivers, hence Meso(between)-potamia(the rivers). Needed are not just Biblical metaphors for the stage-setting, but for who—who all—is on stage. And for just how big, how deep, the problem is on that stage.

The OT reading for last Sunday, the First Sunday in Advent, was from Jeremiah. It was about the chosen people entangled in Babylon. How big was their problem? It's a God-sized problem, said Jeremiah. That's not simply a metaphor for the immensity of the problem, but for who's there “making problems.” It's not Babylon, claimed Jeremiah, but God who is the Promised People's problem. How big the solution needed? Same answer.

Is it any different now—as you move east of Baghdad/Babylon to Iran, Afghanistan and Pakistan and zero in on the US entanglements there? If you're using Biblical spectacles, the answer is clear. But you got no clue of that in President Obama's speech to our nation Tuesday evening. It's only al-Qaida and the Taliban—and the wobbly government in Afghanistan, and the safe havens and nuclear bombs in Pakistan, and Bin Laden and, and, and.

Perhaps the most revealing part of the Tuesday evening telecast

was not what Obama told the nation, since we knew that already, but those faces as the cameras swept the audience. Obama most likely did not see those thousands of faces so close-up. But we did. Row on row of cookie-cutter clad cadets. And then those faces! The gray was not only in their uniforms, but in their faces—also cookie-cutter identically stark, sober, sombre. Never once did we see a smile—either in the sweep across that oceanic auditorium, nor when the camera zoomed in on a single face staring at the speaker. What were they thinking? It surely was not “Hooray, I’m likely to be chosen to liberate Afghanistan!” More plausible is the question-caption for this ThTh posting: “30,000 More Charioteers into the Red Sea? And I’m likely to be one of them.”

I wonder whether any of them thought about the “God-sized” element in their possible Red Sea futures. Surely behind some of those thousands of faces there must have been a remnant who put God into the picture, though the president did not. Not God as someone to believe in, but God as an opponent in this war to be reckoned with. In prior ThTh offerings you’ve heard of Luther’s translation of the original Red Sea catastrophe. “God knocked the wheels off the Egyptian chariots.” When the waters rushed back—talk about “surge!”—God engulfed that empire’s army back into the sea.

Long-time readers of these ThTh missives may remember frequent references—since Nine-Eleven—to Luther’s treatise on War Against the Turks (=Muslims), written in 1529 as the people on the eastern edges of Christian Europe were being chewed up by Suleiman the Magnificent. “Two enemies confront us in this war,” he said, “Suleiman’s army and God.” For the moment, Suleiman, though a total villain, is the “rod of God’s anger, the staff of God’s fury.” (Isaiah 10:5) So he and God are in cahoots. We might “kill or capture” (Obama’s frequently used verbs in the address) Turks, but we’ll not succeed in killing or capturing

God. It's patently the other way round. "I kill, and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand." To ignore such a prominent opponent is to be blind indeed—and doomed to defeat.

So when we hear "Finish the job," we have to ask: Whose job? On Whom?

God always has a "job" going on with every nation. Read Psalm 2. Ancient Jeremiah tried to get his own people to face up to the job that God was doing on them. No success. He got dissed—and almost killed—and God did indeed finish the job on King Hezekiah and the people. His agent Babylon swallowed them up.

Does anyone talk about the job God is doing on America these days, with ourselves—what irony—as helpers in "finishing the job"? Any preachers anywhere? Surely not in the mainline denominations. Though madman Jeremiah [his "Christian" name!] Wright, UCC mainliner (well sortuv), sought to do so not long ago and you know what happened to him. The worst of which was that Obama disowned this Jeremiah that God had sent to him in the most explicit way imaginable as his own personal pastor. And with that dissing, Americans didn't listen to him either. Ditto for the first Jeremiah and King Hezekiah. Don't like the message? Kill the messenger. "You're mad. Get out of here!"

Despite the daily catastrophes here at home (in Biblical metaphors "I, the Lord, sent you these") like the Titanic it is still Full Steam Ahead. Not even Stop. Let alone Turn Around.

30,000 more charioteers to Afghanistan to finish the job. Also God's job on us? Another Biblical metaphor: Goliaths wind up decapitated. By virtue of their own pride and folly. In Biblical tragedies the God-conflictors self-destruct, often directly assisting in their own demise.

This past Tuesday's edition of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch had two headline articles on the front page. One was about the president's upcoming speech picturing two US soldiers dressed as though they were on the moon in an Afghanistan landscape that looked like the moon's surface. They were looking up into the sky at aircraft overhead, so you could hardly see their faces—a metaphor for the “faceless” who get sent to Afghanistan, and Iraq, and, and, and

The other front page story was about “Angela Peacock, an Iraq war veteran, suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.” We see her full face as she and her “psychiatric service dog, named G.I.Joe” push a shopping cart in a local supermarket. It's a full-face photo, but the face is almost empty, as though the Edvard-Munch-horror was still inside and nothing showing. Nothing of anything. Honorably retired Army sergeant Peacock came home from Iraq “unwounded,” but the war is still with her, in her. Still destroying her. Sample: “Peacock describes a panic attack she had the night before. She buried her head in G.I. Joe's shiny black coat. She rubbed him and thought hard about how he wasn't panicking, so everything must be OK. ‘And in 10 minutes, I was OK,’ she says. ‘He forces me to think about something besides myself.’” A nation that destroys its own children is mocking God when it says: God Bless America.

To bring this jeremiad to closure, let's move over to Steve Kuhl's superb text study offered for last Sunday's OT reading from Jeremiah 33. In the early days of Crossings workshops linking our faith to our daily work we called such a text study the GROUNDING for our time together. Then we went about TRACKING the daily work of the participants—What do you do all day and what does that do to you? In both phases we'd scribble out our findings on newsprint sheets and then hang them on the walls around the room. Final phase was CROSSING, where we'd take the newsprint sheet from one of the participants, the personal

TRACKING of her/his daily work and tape it up right alongside the GROUNDING sheet we'd created from our Biblical study. Then in Q&A conversation we'd connect the two, CROSSING back and forth the stuff that was on the two newsprint pages.

So for a windup this week let's take Steve's text study as our GROUNDING, then Obama's Tuesday speech as our TRACKING and see what we can come up with in CROSSING the two into each other. [For the full text of Steve's item GO to <https://crossings.org/theology/2010/theolo758old.shtml>]

First Sunday in Advent

OT reading: Jeremiah 33:14-16

DIAGNOSIS: Insufficient Righteousness

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis: Dangerous Days

The situation of Judah is dire. The glory of the nation and the security in which it once resided is slipping away. It is only a matter of time until the nation is overtaken by the Babylonians and carried away into exile. Specifically, Nebuchadnezzar's army is advancing on Jerusalem (Jer. 33:5) and the prophet Jeremiah has been preaching that this is God's judgment upon Judah and its king, Zedekiah (whose name in Hebrew means "the righteous") for their cleverly concealed wickedness (33:5). In effect, Jeremiah the prophet is Zedekiah's "Jeremiah Wright" (recall the 2008 presidential elections), speaking words of "God's wrath" (God damning the nation) against the king and the nation for its "wickedness" (33:5).

So far Steve's prose. Now CROSSING that much of Jeremiah's diagnosis to USA Today.

Steve already does that with his Jeremiah-then and Jeremiah Wright-now crossover. Here's some more.

Of course, we're righteous. That's America's centuries-long mantra. We sang it at our Thanksgiving liturgy last week: "And crown thy good . . . from sea to shining sea." Our president preached to us on that theme—endangered America, yes, but righteous America, no question. But are we righteous enough? That is THE question. Righteous enough for survival? is a question nobody is asking. That itself is a signal of deficient right-ness. Not seeing our own self aright. Not seeing aright the signs of the times. Not hearing the voice behind the signals: "I sent you this affliction." Such deficient rightness is dangerous indeed. When God is the decider of rightness, deficiency is more than dangerous. It is deadly. [But I'm jumping ahead to Step 3.] Not right! Back to Steve.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : Shutting up the Word of God: "The Prophet Jeremiah was confined [by Zedekiah] in the court of the guard" (32:2-3)

What do Zedekiah and the nation do in the face of such danger? They trust in their own righteousness and attempt to silence the word of judgment by locking Jeremiah in the palace prison (33:1). "How dare Jeremiah speak against God's favorite, Judah, and its righteous king, Zedekiah?" After all, isn't Zedekiah a "righteous branch" of the tree of David, a leader with the right pedigree, the right royal genes? At least, that is the skewed logic of all those who operate with a presumption of righteousness before the Lord.

Crossing to USA Today

Which God do we trust—most of the time?

Where are the temples? Wall Street and the Pentagon. The edifices of our accumulated righteousness. Granted the former was near catastrophe last year, but we're into "recovery." That's a curiously applied medical term and we've never asked if we got to the bottom, the D-2 and the D-3 of the diagnosis. And not having probed there—call it denial—we're content with bandaids for surface symptoms. But the heart of the matter, and the roots underlying that, aren't touched, and they haven't gone away. Presumption. And Wall Street and the Pentagon are Siamese twins. and we like it, we trust them. Those are the gods in whom we trust. Money (we have enough to do it 30-billion for one year) and the military (30K will do it. That's amounts to one million for one soldier for one year!) were the deities we were asked to trust in the president's Tuesday evening homily. "Yes, it'll be tough. But we can do it."

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : I Have Hidden My Face (33:5)

But Jeremiah is only the messenger. He is not himself the rod of God's wrath "executing justice and righteousness" against Zedekiah and the nation. Babylon is (32:3)! And Zedekiah and the nation are helpless before Babylon. Why? Not because Babylon is so powerful militarily (recall how little David felled Goliath), or because Babylon is righteous before God. Indeed, Babylon is as presumptuous before God as Judah and Zechariah—and it too will fall one day. No, the reason why Babylon at this time is invincible is because the Lord says, "I am going to give this city into the hand of the King of Babylon" (32:3). Babylon is simply a tool in the hand of the Lord "to exercise justice and righteousness" in accord with God's wrath. Just because God's face is hidden within the armies of Babylon (33:5), don't think

God's judgment, "the execution of justice and righteousness" upon wickedness, isn't there and real. Zedekiah and Judah do not have sufficient righteousness to stand up to this enemy, "the Lord who made the earth" (33:1). Indeed, no one does.

Crossing to USA Today

You can do this one yourself. Substitute al-Qaida or Taliban for Babylon and read Steve's paragraph again.

PROGNOSIS: Sufficient Righteousness

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : I Will Cause a Righteous Branch to Spring up for David (v. 15)

If only Zedekiah and Judah had ears to hear Jeremiah, they would hear not only words of judgment but also words of promise. Indeed, the text for today is that promise. Read it now in its entirety! The first thing to note is that "the days [that] are surely coming" have come! They have come in the incarnation, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The old adage holds true. It takes the fulfillment of a prophecy to fully understand the meaning of a prophecy. Who is Jesus Christ? He is that "righteous branch" that "the God who made the earth" himself has caused "to spring up for David" (v. 15). Note, not from David, but for David. David and his posterity do not have sufficient righteousness to prevail against the wrath of God, so thoroughly are they enmeshed in their own "wickedness." But Jesus Christ does! By taking on human flesh and by going to the cross, Jesus Christ enters into our misery and identifies completely with our condition, becoming subject to the very wrath of God that we ourselves are subject to. But because he is, in himself, the righteous Son of God, and in no way deserving of such wrath and

death, he has the right, confirmed in the fact that God raised him from the dead, to take the rod of God's wrath out of God's hand, laying it down forever. In Christ a new kind of "execution of justice and righteousness" emerges, a righteousness that is characterized by these words: "I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me" (33:8). The Lord [Jesus] is the "righteous branch" (v. 16) as the prophet Jeremiah prophesied. He is able to take the sting of God's wrath out of the hands of all our enemies, establishing himself as the source of salvation and safety (v. 16) before God.

Crossing to USA Today.

This one too is a do-it-yourself.

How about this? For these final three "Good News" GROUNDING paragraphs, you readers (some I hope) send me your three-paragraph proposals for proclaiming this Good News to those grim-faced gray-uniformed West Point cadets. I'll post them (some of them, if I get too many) as next week's NUMBER 600 Thursday Theology. At ThTh#500 a number of you provided the prose and I had a day off. I'd enjoy the same for #600.

Send it not to the Crossings info address, but to my address (*removed for spamming reasons.*)

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Embracing the Promise of God: "The Lord is our righteousness" (v. 16)

Of course, the good news is not simply that Jesus is righteous in himself and hence, not subject to the wrath of God. Even more, the good news is that he is our righteousness. How so? By faith! Not by trying to shut-up the word and its medium in some

prison, but by embracing the promise (and the medium) with thanksgiving (33:11). Just as Christ in his incarnation and death completely comes under God's wrath because of our wickedness, so because of our faith, our embrace of him, we come under his righteousness, totally and completely. Jesus Christ is the end of God's wrath for all those who have faith. If that is presumptuous, it is being presumptuous in Christ, not in ourselves.

Crossing to USA Today.

Do it yourself and if you wish, send it to me.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : Saved and Living in Safety (v. 15)

Although human enemies, like the Babylonians, may still threaten us, they are really nothing when they are bereft of being the rod of God's wrath. Indeed, they may even be conquerable in military terms. But even if they aren't, and the land in which we live is lost, and our calling is simply to bear the cross, we are not really defeated. For we have the promise of a righteousness that will bear fruit forever: keeping us safe within "the steadfast love of God" (v. 11) in Christ. Indeed, we might find ourselves living like Jeremiah: speaking words of warning and promise, all to the ultimate end that the world might be saved and live in safety (v. 15).

Crossing to USA Today.

Do it yourself and if you wish, send it to me.

Even in these dire days—especially in these dire days—
Christ's Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder