

#765 God's deadly diagnosis

This week we bring you a piece that the Rev. Dr. Steve Albertin presented at the Crossings Seminar last month in Belleville, Illinois. In making his point about the importance of God's "deadly diagnosis" of our sinfulness, Steve includes one of his own sermons from 2009 on the proclamation of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34.

(By the way, if you missed [Thursday Theology #763](#), which featured Ed Schroeder's discussion of the film *Carnage*, you may want to start there. Steve mentions the film at several points in this essay.)

Peace and Joy,
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"It Can't Be All That Bad: Why God's Deadly Diagnosis of Our Human Condition Matters"

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When I shared the title of this conference ("Good News We Don't Want to Hear – Preaching to a Skeptical Word") with a friend a few months ago, he stared at me rather incredulously. What a strange title! *Why would anyone not want to hear good news?* Then he answered his own question: *Probably because it is too good to be true.* You know what they say about those late night TV ads for some incredible weight loss product that is going to make you look like you are 18 again with all kinds of girls crawling all over you for date and you don't have to exercise or starve

yourself...all for \$19.95. *If it sounds like it is too good to be true, it probably is.*

My presentation is going to flip this familiar advice on its ear. If people are skeptical of news that is just too good to be true, then they are also skeptical of news that is just too bad to be true.

That has been my experience of preaching weekly in a congregation for over thirty years. Inevitably, some listener in my congregation will complain that my sermons are too dark and negative. "Pastor, it can't be that bad. Our sin can't be that bad, our life can't be that bleak and God can't be that upset with us." Any hint of what the Crossings Matrix calls D-3 or "The Eternal Problem" or "The God Problem" or "the judgment and wrath of God" or Step Three offends listeners. They disagree with my diagnosis. "We aren't that bad and God isn't that upset. After all, God is good...all the time. All the time...God is good."

The goodness of God is a given. "Pastor, just look around you. Isn't it obvious?"

But I am not so sure it is so obvious. That is not what I see when I look at the world in which I live and the lives I saw portrayed in Roman Polanski's film *Carnage* that we saw yesterday. Life can get pretty ugly. People can be cruel. Bad things happen. No wonder Penelope, Michael, Nancy, and Alan descend into a cauldron of cruelty and carnage. No wonder that it is with a sense of cynicism and defiance that Alan Cowan declares his religion: "Penelope, I believe in the god of carnage. The god who rules has been unchallenged since time immemorial."

When I ask my critics about Jesus and what he has to do with goodness of God, I usually get some pious rambling about a Jesus who reveals what is already and obviously true anyway. Jesus

does not change anything or make any difference to what is already a given. With a tenacious piety they cling to this *a priori*, fundamental theological presupposition that refuses to be confused by the facts and that no one dare call into question: "God is good all the time. All the time God is good."

Hmmm. But if I ask, "How do you know that God is good all the time? What is the basis of such a belief?" they look at me with disdain and disgust. I get the feeling that they think I am disrespectful and irreverent. How dare I ask a question like this? I'm the pastor. I am not supposed to question the goodness of God. My job is to defend it. That is what good Christians do. They are committed believing, no matter what, that God is good...all the time. And all the time...God is good.

If I ask how I can believe in God when there is so much suffering, hurt, and *carnage* in life, I am usually told to "buckle up and believe." Sometimes I feel bad for daring to imply that God might somehow have something to do with the bad things of life. The pleasantly polite cultural religion of America has staked its hopes on a pleasantly malleable karma that always seems to work to our advantage. If something goes badly, we just need to work a little harder and make a few more adjustments.

The cultural orthodoxy of *moralistic, therapeutic deism* (see the work of sociologist Christian Smith at Notre Dame) assumes that a God of beautiful sunset, fine music, pleasant feelings, and human fulfillment would not have anything to do with really bad things. Bad things happen because people are only human. They make mistakes that a little more education, elbow grease, or government funding can surely correct. Bad things happen because God sort of loses control every once and a while. Occasionally it might look like evil has gotten the upper hand. However, in the end the goodness of God will win out. What looks bad now

just looks that way. Change the way you look at things, believe in the goodness of God, be good, and it will work out all right in the end.

It reminds of the kind of fatalistic faith that I saw portrayed in a wonderful film of the last year, "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel," where the protagonist repeatedly repeats his faith in the goodness of destiny, his synonym for God: "In the end everything will turn out all right. And if things don't turn out alright, it's not the end." This fatalistic commitment to believe that all will turn out alright in the end sounds more Hindu than Christian. Yet this is often how I hear the very people of my congregation speak of Christian faith.

When I hear people talk like this, I sense that they are trying to defend God or get God off the hook. Does God really need defending? Does God need us to make God look good and keep God's nose clean?

I don't think so. I think God is up to the task. Besides, defending God seems like a terribly big job and one that I don't think I am up to. God is capable of doing that himself (which of course God has done in Christ crucified and risen—more on that later).

This is my point. God's deadly diagnosis of our human condition matters, because without this diagnosis, Christ's work gets wasted and its promising comfort is thwarted.

God's deadly diagnosis matters for two reasons. One is theological. One is pastoral.

First, the theological reason: D3 diagnoses the human predicament from two perspectives. From the human, anthropological side, the Law exposes the fact that we are stuck in our sin, trapped in our failed projects and unable to do

anything about it. We have God-sized problems, huge, immense problems from which it will take huge, superhuman, divine intervention to free us. Again, *Carnage* provided a vivid picture of just how trapped humans are in that condition. However, there is also the theological side of D3. The law finally reveals that God has handed us over to this predicament. As sinners we are under God's judgment and wrath. This is more than a God-sized problem. This is "The God Problem." God is now the problem. God can only save a world under the judgment of God's law. If God is to love and save the world, God must come to terms with God's own judgment. Solving that problem takes a crucified and risen Christ, the death of the second person of the Trinity.

Then there is the pastoral, experiential, and existential reason for recognizing the depth of D3. If Christ does not provide for us hope for life, then who does? The world is filled with alternatives all standing in line to offer us their hopes..."for a fee." Of course, it is up to us come up with the fee. It is up to us to make the law work. We still gotta *do* something. As a result, the unconditional comfort and blessed good news of Christ is compromised. The monkey is still on our back. We still need to do something. Christ is important but still needs to be supplemented by something we do, our works, our faith, our commitment, our obedience, our submission, our sincerity without which we can never be sure that we are still in the good graces of God.

The deadly diagnosis of D3 exposes the terrifying fact that God is THE final, ultimate and eternal problem for sinners. God's law, God's judgment, stands over sinners ready to send them to eternal oblivion. The only one who can solve the God Problem is God. If God's love is going to triumph and have its way with us, God has got to do away with God's law and do it in a way that does not just blow off the law as a good idea that went bad. God is serious about God's law and yet God must break hold the hold

of God's law on humanity in a way that does not pretend that the law never mattered.

The ultimate God Problem is that God has a problem. What is God to do with people who not only behave badly but also want to thumb their noses at their creator? What does God do with God's law and the sinners that have broken it? At the same time, what does God do with God's desire to love God's people no matter what? The depth of God's deadly diagnosis means that God is going to have to do something dramatic and costly to get God's people loved. That will take a crucified and risen Son of God. Without such assurance, the comforting and liberating good news of gospel will always remain qualified. The promise of the gospel will be muffled.

That message is difficult to preach to a skeptical world. The world cannot be so bad off and in such trouble that it would take a God willing to love the world this much. People will not accept the depth of this diagnosis and the shock of this kind of indictment unless they already know that they are tethered to someone who will not let them go. It is just too scary to dangle over the cliff like this. People cannot risk admitting that they are in this much trouble unless they know that they are already loved. Such a confession is only possible if one has heard and trusted the promise of the gospel.

As we apply the Crossings/Law/Gospel matrix to Biblical texts and human lives for the sake of preaching, we need to remember that fact. Even though the Crossings matrix analysis requires *"From Three to Four and not before"* (D3 before P1, or the Eternal Problem before the Eternal Solution), in the actual preaching and pastoral care of people such recognition by the hearer happens as a fruit of faith. The preacher theologically knows that Three must come before Four. But pastorally, in the lived experience of people on whom the Word of God through Law

and Gospel is actually doing diagnosis and prognosis, full recognition of the depth of D3 happens in Step 5. The actual crossing and application of Christ in Step 4 results in the faith of Step 5. Christ makes faith possible. From faith flows repentance and the acknowledgement of the depth of sin and the terror of God's judgment.

When the preacher insists that the hearers of God's Word first acknowledge the depth of Step 3 before encountering Step 4, that you gotta admit how bad you are before you are ready to receive the gracious promise of the Gospel, the hearer" surely will flee in disbelief like the tax collector, or resist in defiance like the Pharisee. No wonder that Penelope, Michael, Nancy, and Alan in *Carnage*, as profound as their awareness of their predicament is, are never able to admit that God is the enforcer of their predicament. The diagnosis is true but the hearers cannot face the burden of this truth without knowing that someone is with them holding their hand and walking with them through death and resurrection. Of course, that someone is Christ.

This administration of God's deadly diagnosis through the law along with God's life-giving prognosis through the gospel is at the center of my ministry and preaching. Without God's deadly diagnosis, Christ and the comfort he offers get wasted. The best way I know to show you how and why this matters, is to give you an example of how that happens in my preaching.

Hence, I offer you this sermon from 2009.

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"FORGIVE AND FORGET?"

Jeremiah 31:31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.

But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the LORD,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

Someone has wronged you, betrayed you, stabbed you in the back. You are angry, fuming, ready to strangle them. You complain to a trusted friend about what has happened to you. He tells you, “Steve, you have got to move on with your life. Continuing to stew about this is just going to eat you up. Why don’t you just *forgive and forget?*”

Forgive and forget! Ask someone in the coffee shop or at the water cooler what forgiveness means and that is probably what he will tell you. To forgive means to forget about it. To forgive means to stop remembering the hurt or the injustice done to you and to put all that behind you. To forgive means to move on with your life and live as if the hurt never happened.

People who offer such advice probably think they are being helpful. They probably think their advice is even comforting. They think that forgetting is at the heart of forgiveness. But how mistaken they are! To think that forgiving distorts the true nature of forgiveness. It trivializes the hurt that it is meant to heal. It deprives forgiveness of its true redeeming power. Ultimately such forgetting is humanly impossible. We might think

that we are being helpful and comforting by telling someone to forgive and forget. But we are actually saddling them with a huge burden and an impossible demand.

The recent public outcry over the huge bonuses paid to the executives of insurance giant AIG is another example of how difficult it is for people to “just forgive and forget.” AIG was so mismanaged that it had to receive billions in federal bailout money to keep it solvent. But when the public found out that the very executives who had mismanaged this company got bonuses, they were not about to forgive and forget. Outraged, they demanded action. Congress responded by imposing a huge retroactive tax on the bonuses. The people demanded their pound of flesh and got it.

“Forgive and forget” seems most difficult in the context of family life. Try to tell children to forgive and forget after they have just had a bitter disagreement. They can’t simply forgive and forget, because they have got to keep living every day under the same roof with this person whose very presence continues to remind them that “Johnny stole my teddy bear!”

Try to tell a wife or a husband to forgive and forget when their spouse has been unfaithful to them. A grievous betrayal has been committed. If the marriage meant anything, the sin cannot simply be forgotten. To forget means that those marriage vows were not that important. The hurt cannot simply be forgotten. The wounded spouse has a right to her pound of flesh, and a right to make her spouse pay. To simply forgive and forget makes a mockery of their marriage and belittles the depth of their pain.

If there was ever anyone who had every right to get back and get even, get his pound of flesh and make his demands for justice, it was the prophet Jeremiah, from whose book today’s first reading is taken.

Jeremiah had dared to speak against the establishment. Contrary to the official prophets on the payroll of the king, Jeremiah warned of the coming doom because Israel had been so unfaithful.

Because Jeremiah had dared to speak out, the defenders and protectors of the establishment had him arrested and imprisoned. Locked in public stocks, he was mocked and beaten by his enemies. They could not bear to hear the truth of what they had done and what God was going to do to them.

Now, Jerusalem was falling. The Babylonian hordes had descended from the north. The walls of the city had been breached. The temple was burning. The king had been captured and along with other leaders had been led away in chains to the Babylonian captivity.

You would think that Jeremiah would have been delighted with the fate of his enemies. They were getting what they deserved. However, then he does something utterly strange. He takes what little money he has left and purchases a piece of land outside Jerusalem. How crazy is this? At a time when everyone else was selling, trying to abandon ship and get out of town with whatever money they still could get, Jeremiah does just the opposite. In the midst of destruction he bets on the future. He invests in the land that everyone else was abandoning.

Then he utters the remarkable words of today's first reading. Here in the midst of the shattering of the old covenant of Sinai, Jeremiah promises that God is going to make a new covenant. Unlike the old covenant written of tablets of stone, stone that could be broken and shattered, this new covenant will be written on people's hearts. As a result, they will *want* to keep it. They won't have to be continually told to shape up. It will be a *get to* instead of a *have to*, because God "will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more."

In the surprising forgiveness of this new covenant we see a foreshadowing of the same kind of forgiveness God worked in Jesus and continues to work among us today. Through Jesus' death and resurrection God forgives the sins of the world. But this forgiving is not forgetting!

God is not some sleepy old man in the sky who is oblivious to our sins. God is not like some enabling parent who always overlooks the alcohol abuse of his teenager. God is not happy with our sin, our betrayals, and our violence. But God loves us. God will not just look the other way and pretend that these things never happen. Someone must pay. Someone must suffer the consequences.

When Jeremiah decides to use his own money to buy a piece of land and redeem it from the ownership of the Babylonians, he demonstrates the essence of the new covenant. God forgives not by forgetting but by choosing to remember Israel's sin in a new way.

What Jeremiah did is what God would do for us in Christ. Instead of holding our sins against us and making us pay, God bites his tongue. God bites the bullet. God chooses to give up his right to get his pound of flesh from us. God pays, sacrifices, and suffers. God is the one who bleeds. God gets his pound of flesh—from himself, from his "only begotten Son," Jesus dies for us, suffering punishment intended for us and in exchange offering us forgiveness and new life.

Every time we begin our worship with the rite of confession and forgiveness, Jeremiah's new covenant is reestablished. Our sins are not forgotten. God remembers them. "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." We remember them. "We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves." But, then we are told the glorious good

news. God has chosen to remember them in a new way. The destruction we deserve God has turned into good. How? He “has given His Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins.”

God does not forget our sins but remembers our sins in a new way. God does not hold them against us. God forgives us.

When we believe this amazing promise, everything changes. We forgive those who have wronged us. We don't forget what has happened, but we choose to remember the wrongs in a new way. We no longer hold them against those who hurt us. Instead, we join God in breaking the painful and deadly cycle of getting back and getting even that so torments this world of ours.

Several years ago an incident happened on TV's “American Idol” that illustrated so well that forgiveness is not forgiving and forgetting.

A young woman named Mandisa was a contestant on the show. Judge Simon Cowell made several derisive comments about Mandisa's weight. Finally Mandisa told Cowell, “What I want to say to you is that, yes, you hurt me and I cried and it was painful, it really was. But I want you to know that I've forgiven you and that you don't need someone to apologize in order to forgive somebody. I figure that if Jesus could die so that all of my wrongs could be forgiven, I can certainly extend that same grace to you.”

Such forgiveness can do great things. Mandisa did not just forgive and forget. The pain was real. It could not just be forgotten and shoved under the carpet. Nevertheless, Jesus' forgiveness of her enabled her to forgive Simon. She would bite the bullet, she would give up her right to get back and get even, she would remember his sin in a new way and no longer hold it against him.

Such forgiveness can change people. Simon told Mandisa that he was “humbled,” and he apologized to her.

This is the new kind of life that the new covenant makes possible. Such forgiveness is not something we gotta do or else. That was life under the old covenant. Under the new covenant such forgiveness is a gift through which we can partner with God through Jesus in redeeming the world. What the world and people like Simon Cowell meant for humiliation and ridicule, we can change and transform into goodness and life. By refusing to demand our pound of flesh, by refusing to get back by getting even, but instead choosing to bite the bullet, to turn the other cheek, to be generous, to love our enemies, to be merciful as our Father is merciful, and to forgive but not forget, a new world begins to take shape in the midst of the old. The Kingdom of God begins to arrive. And what the world meant for evil, God has transformed into good.

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There—did you hear it? God’s deadly diagnosis matters. Why? Because when we realize how deeply we are in trouble, we are even more amazed by what God did in Christ and what comfort that is for our lives. I once heard the Christian rock group Lost And Found put it like this: “If the good news is not good news, then the good news is not the good news.”

Thanks be to God. Because of the crucified and risen Christ, it is good news.