

Abraham's Paradoxical God – God Most High and God Most Low(ly) [An offering from Frederick Niedner]

Colleagues,

As most of the Thursday Theology Tribe knows, several dozen members of the related Crossings Community gathered for a Second International Conference back in October 2008. The First International Conference (January 2007) had pondered the theme, “Honest-to-God Gospel for Today’s Church and World: Why Luther’s distinction of Law and Gospel matters more than ever.” This latest conference kept the same sub-title, but this time asked as its theme question, “Who do you say that ‘I Am?’– Getting Honest about God.”

For openers, the conference heard a keynote address by the Rev. Dr. Steven Kuhl, president of the Crossings Community board of directors, whose day job finds him teaching theology at Cardinal Stritch University in Milwaukee. Steve writes regularly for Crossings publications (Thursday Theology and Sabbathology) and instead of having spare time, or even a Sabbath, perhaps, he serves as interim pastor of Bethlehem Lutheran Church in Muskego, Wisconsin. He pursues this complex vocation with all the energy of a second-career pastor and theologian making up for lost time. Steve was once an up and coming aeronautical engineer, but he eventually found that work less than fulfilling and abandoned the science of air and hardware for pursuit of the Spirit who blows where it wills.

This ThTh entry comes as a “review” of Steve Kuhl’s keynote

address, "Abraham's Paradoxical Experience of God: Fear and Trusting the God Who Promises to Save Us from God's Self," which readers can easily enough peruse for themselves at the Crossings web-site:

<https://crossings.org/conference/papers/AbrahamsParadoxicalGod1.pdf>

Since the entire essay is so readily available, and because this reviewer has neither criticisms to make nor bones to pick with Steve Kuhl, what follows is a brief summary and a playful, theological engagement with the conference keynote address.

Today's quests to identify and know God don't differ substantially from ancient attempts to do the same, including those upon which we can eavesdrop in the Bible. New Age gurus, entrepreneurial eastern sages, fundamentalist ranters, and apocalyptic prophets all steer us to the deity whom the ancient king of Salem, Melchizedek, identified for Abraham as El Elyon, "The Most High God." Even agnostics and atheists bow before this exalted, mighty, and demanding ruler of the universe, for this is the one in whom they cannot believe or whom they can never know for certain.

This deity is real enough, Kuhl reminds us, but this is the God whom we meet also in the stories of curse and punishment that follow immediately upon the biblical stories of creation. The Most High God hates our cunning ways, our bloody violence, and all our other sins, and gives us leave to live in a world of serpents, thorns, pain, confusion, and death.

This God both is and isn't the same one Moses encounters in the burning bush scene of Exodus 3, the one who self-identifies in that moment as "I Am." This is the same God whom Melchizedek knows but agnostics don't in the sense that there is but one God, and that God has consigned the race that plays God, kills

brothers and sisters, and covers its nakedness with excuses to a life under the accursedness of getting precisely what it wanted. It is not the same God in the sense that the God whom Moses meets claims to be the God of Moses' ancestors, and that would include Abraham and Sarah, to whom God offered the sun, moon, and stars as signs of God's promise to bring blessing to a world that up to then knew only curse, and to do that blessing precisely through them—through their own flesh and blood.

Abraham and Sarah trusted this promise, though their flesh and blood didn't look all that promising at the time, and they became the parents of all who trust in this promising God and the promises this God makes, right down to the present day. This is the God who, as Kuhl reminds us, saves us from God's own curse, and thus from God's own self as the hidden but very real God known in a veiled way also to Melchizedek, the gurus, assorted religious entrepreneurs, and even atheists. When this promise-making God with all that history among Moses' ancestors appears in the burning bush, and Moses asks for a calling card, God says, "I Am."

"I am who I am," that's my name. So today, who do we say "I Am" is? We confess that I Am is the promising God, the one whom we see in the Christ, the one who, in the very presence of the worst death-dealing that God's own curse leaves us as the reward of our labors, calls us to trust in the promise of blessing that God chooses to work in the world, now in the flesh and blood of that crucified one.

Thus far the Rev. Dr. Kuhl has led us, and it's well worth clicking on the URL above and taking a brief but clarifying journey with this trustworthy guide through the promising tradition.

Now then, let us play.

The conference theme cleverly combines two stories, the Exodus account that Kuhl invites us to probe, but also the synoptic gospels' accounts in which Jesus asks the disciples what they and other have to say about him. Recall the critical moment in the story of Moses' call:

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exod 3:13-14)

We never get to see or hear the scene in which Moses must use the information he has sought here because he knows he'll need it. Imagine, however, the scene, either in the palace before Pharaoh or in the fields among the slaves, after Moses has announced his mission, and someone asks, "OK, Mr. Liberator. And just who exactly is this God who sent you with this crazy scheme?"

Moses has authorization to say one thing in answer to that question: "I am."

Can you hear Pharaoh laughing? Or his fellow-Hebrews, who don't take Moses for much of a fellow-anything?

And yet, God's little joke proves more truth than farce, as Moses will indeed become the only glimpse of God, the promising God of the burning bush, that Pharaoh will ever see. As for the Hebrews, we'll eventually watch how they react to the absence of Moses. In Exodus 32, when Moses has gone up the mountain and stayed for 40 days, the people don't say, "Come, let's elect a new leader." No, they make for themselves a cherub, a replacement sign of God's presence in their midst. Functionally, the absence of Moses is the absence of God.

God explains this to Moses back in Exodus 7:1 – “See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and your brother Aaron shall be your prophet.”

Such is the method and madness of the God who promises faithfulness to flesh and blood; and not only that, but embodies promise, faithfulness and blessing in the very vulnerable, accursed flesh to which the promise extends. Moses never made it to the promised land. Condemned for having let the people think he, not God, brought water from the rock (Num 20:1-13), Moses dies with the promise unfulfilled, but in the space-time understanding of the New Testament, not before he handed off the baton to the next flesh and blood embodiment of the promise (Luke 9:31). This one, too, would die, the promise seemingly, but only seemingly, unfulfilled, and he would hand off to another flesh and blood body, one that is both his own and not his own, the one into which we are all baptized. That body is all that today’s slaves and slave-masters see of the promising God who saves the accursed from God’s own curse by joining them beneath its killing pall.

When asked for the name of the promising God who sends us into a world that knows El Elyon and life-under-curse so very well, we, too, say, “I am.”

That answer always gets us crucified. But this time, we do the laughing. The joke, you see, like the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is on us.

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