

Advent Letter from Bethlehem & Apocalypse Now

Colleagues:

I just received this e-mail from Mitri Raheb, pastor of Christmas Lutheran Church in Bethlehem. It got me thinking. Today's posting gives you both. Peace & Joy!

Ed

Sent: Wednesday, December 04, 2002

As Advent begins in Bethlehem...

By Rev. Dr. Mitri Raheb

It is Sunday morning, the first Advent. The streets of Bethlehem are deserted, very unusual for such a day and such an occasion. A strange silence overshadows the area. It is a silence crying loud towards heaven. The silence is disrupted every now and then with the sound of two Israel Military tanks roaming the streets and announcing curfew: Mamnou' attajawul. "Moving is forbidden. Leaving homes is forbidden." In other words, "You are prisoners. Stay where you are, otherwise you are violating the holy military rules. You will be put in prison."

I sneaked out to ring the bells of Christmas Lutheran Church at 10:00 a.m. For me this was an act of nonviolent resistance. We will not let them steal from us even the sounds of the bells calling for worship. At 10:30 Rev. Sandra Olewine and I

gathered at the church entrance for worship. We put our advent purple stoles on, although we were not sure if any one would be able to make it to church on this Sunday. At 10:30 we rang the bells, while the first 7 people were already gathered in the sanctuary. One of the young people asked if today is the first Advent, since he could not see the Advent wreath. He is right. We could not get pine branches to weave the wreath, since Bethlehem has been under curfew for the last ten days. But even under curfew and in spite of the lack of a wreath, we still wanted to celebrate the Advent of the Lord. We had to miss the Organ sound too. Our organist could not make it. He lives too far away from the church. But still at 10:40 there were 27 people gathered in the sanctuary. I could not believe my eyes. I knew how dangerous it is to be on the streets. But the 27 members, children, youth and adults came to celebrate the first Advent because they wanted "to obey God more than men."

As we were gathering, we read the words of St. Paul assigned for first Advent: "The night is far spent, the day is at hand: let us therefore cast off the works of darkness, and let us put on the armor of light." How challenging and comforting were these words. Challenging because the "night" of the 35-years old occupation is very long and seems endless. It feels as if we are still at midnight, in the middle of a long and dark tunnel with no light at its end. The day of freedom and life in dignity seems far and not at hand. How else can we explain the arrogance of the Israeli occupation, which reoccupied Bethlehem shortly before Advent and the Christmas Season, demonstrating that they do not care for the whole Christian World? If they wish they can smash the "little town of Bethlehem." It is too "little," compared with the might of their tanks. Yet there is comforting good news in St. Paul's words: The night has lost its power. The Gospel calls us and empowers us to cast off the works of darkness and of occupation. The light of right is

stronger than the power of might. The presence of the Church members, in spite of the curfew, was the best expression of this.

The first candle lit at Christmas Lutheran Church on this first Advent is an expression of the light of right. It starts small, one candle at first and then the second will follow and so on. What comforts us is that there are so many friends world wide lighting candles on our behalf, enabling us to continue to spread the light in a context of darkness, despair and hopelessness. So, when you light the Second Advent candle, please think of the power of light spreading all over the world; a light that will finally cast off the works of darkness and occupation, preparing for the coming of the Prince of Peace and the Source of Hope.

Dear Mitri,

Our time with you at Christmas 1998 provides many pictures in our mind when we read the grim-yet-gospelly messages that have come our way from you during these past months. Although our liturgies at Christmas Lutheran Church in 1998 had nothing of the conflict-context you have now, when you speak of the Sunday service above, I see myself there. What you and your 27 co-confessors drew from the Epistle reading on the First Sunday in Advent I is good news indeed. Perhaps in the full extent of the liturgy (your sermon, for example) you heard even more Good News from that text. Namely, good news, good enough for Bethlehem “bound” Christians to trust, even if “they” will never go away. Even if, worse still—and God forbid!—you and your people, your congregation too, die as the last (probably made in USA) Israeli tank someday crushes you all to death.

To sound so pessimistic, to say “suppose it never gets

better,” could sound faithless, but need not be. You yourself told us in one of our meetings that you’d still “plant my olive tree, even if I knew tomorrow was the end of the world.” Those words (like Luther’s precedent whom you were recalling) were a fresh confession of faith in the Gospel even if it never got better. In fact even if tomorrow brought Apocalypse.

Such feisty faith connects with Romans 13:11-14, your text for Advent I. The admonition in those verses comes from the language of apocalyptic. Paul could have said: “Beloved, it IS apocalypse now. Therefore know the time, wake from sleep, salvation is near, live accordingly.” In the three-year lectionary now widely used in the USA, the Gospel for Advent I (in each of the three years of the cycle) is no longer the Palm Sunday pericope of the old lectionary, but the respective “apocalypse chapter” of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. So we had a direct “apocalypse now” reading for our liturgy last Sunday. We were hearing from Mark 13 what you heard from Romans 13—know the time, wake from sleep, salvation is near, live accordingly.

If Jesus said it then, and Paul repeated it a few years after him, then today too is “Apocalypse Now.” And when we go to the classic Apocalypse of John, we hear the full bad news confronting THE Good News, that death will indeed have its way—via any one of the four apocalyptic horsemen: famine, plague, war or death. So the proclamation of Gospel is to anticipate openly that “they” will not go away, at least not before I do, and still proclaim salvation (i.e., victory) in the face of inexorable loss. If “they” were to go away, that would indeed be a “blessing,” but not yet “salvation.”

I speak, of course, from my own context here in the USA which may seem to you as different as ice is from fire when

compared with your tyrannized ghetto life in Bethlehem. But there are some parallels. I too live in a highly militarized context, a nation with the most mega-military machine ever manufactured by human hands. Many think of that as our claim to fame. Biblically viewed, it is our shame—a cause for repentance, not rejoicing. I am not the enemy-object of that military power, as you are. Supposedly my nation's military power operates to defend me, to preserve me from the very threats that terrorize your daily life. And in doing so my nation's supposed preservation is linked to your people's devastation. [I have spoken on that frequently since September 11, 2001, and won't say more here. If interested you can check]

The point in NT apocalyptic texts, so it seems to me, is Good News—Good News centered in Christ—in the face of the four horsemen who never go away. They appear to be eternal. Like the armor-plated curfews of Bethlehem, they always return. To survive them you have to survive death. The N.T. apocalypse material, beginning with that in the synoptic Gospels, claims that in Jesus a “proleptic” apocalypse has happened. Proleptic = one that comes ahead of time, beforehand, finessing the final one, “heading it off at the pass.” So in Jesus, specifically the “apocalyptic” events of his Good Friday through Easter Sunday, a Judgment Day has occurred that “heads off” the Last Judgment. That's good, of course, only for those who trust him for it. To wit, trust his Cross/Easter apocalypse as their own when their final one comes. And that “final” one comes many times in individual lives—many times before the “last” Last Judgment comes. Such as whenever one of the 4 horsemen rides into our lives and has his way with us.

So if there are many “final” judgments before THE final one, why call the former final? It's all related to the Judge. Who

is THE judge? THE answer, of course, is God. [But in the rhetoric of current American political leadership you would never guess that, even though our president professes to be a born-again evangelical Christian. For if God were acknowledged as THE judge, then our first posture would not be to assume we are his agents in the war of Good vs. Evil. Rather we would see ourselves as folks standing in the dock before that judge and hearing our own case tried before the divine bench. And hear the divine verdict that comes to every empire without exception: "Mene, mene, tekel, parsin": You have been weighed and found wanting. The apocalypse now that you threaten to inflict on another is the apocolypse now I will return to you. Lincoln believed and said that a century and a half ago. Since then most Americans have weighed our nation and found it righteous. But self-ascribed righteousness always-repeat, always-fails before the divine bench. Check the Pharisee and Tax-collector parable. But I digress.]

To survive apocalypse, you need to survive before the divine bench. That's the bottom line. Any one of the four horsemen may indeed "get" you, but if you've got credentials valid before the divine bench, you survive your own personal apocalypse along with the "final" Last Judgment at the far end.

After our Advent 1 Sunday service, where our pastor did not preach on the Gospel text, the past president of our congregation (Peter) cornered me in the narthex, held up to me the Mark 13:24-37 text printed in the bulletin and asked: "Ed, what is all this stuff? Sun and moon darkened, stars falling. All this to take place in this generation. Nobody knows when the day or hour is, not even Jesus. Keep awake. For what?"

I gulped. "Good questions. Wish the pastor had preached on that text for you, Peter." "Well, he didn't. So you tell me." I punted. But one of these days I'll have to 'fess up. Absolutely fundamental to any answer is the overarching Gospel claim that in Jesus a "merciful apocalypse" has been offered to folks, all folks, who can never pass muster before the divine bench with their own self-righteous resources. Easter says that the divine judge has said Yes to Jesus's Good-Friday personal apocalypse and validates it as good for all who trust him for it. Trusting this apocalypse, they can then trust the Judge in every instance when the four horsemen ride into their lives. I.e., trust that judge's mercy to trump the dead-end verdict that would otherwise seem to apply.

That means trusting the Judge's favor when the horsemen claim to be executing the ultimate verdict themselves. The issue is one of dominion. Who's in charge. Does death (and death's executors including tanks, rockets, missiles and suicide bombers) have dominion over me, or does the Mercy Messiah? On this one, as you trust, so it is for you.

So there are really three apocalypse eras in New Testament chronology: past, present, future. The merciful proleptic one of Jesus at Jerusalem in the first century, the one(s) we bump into sometimes daily when all hell breaks loose and life is shattered even though we keep on breathing, including the one that finally bumps us off when we do not keep on breathing, and then the "last" Last Day that is the final windup.

For each and all, the same counsel applies, whether from Rom.13 or Mark 13: read world history with a "third eye," the eye of The Judge and his Beloved Son (faith); stay focused on where apocalypse survival is to be found for the long haul

(hope); Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and live daily life wearing that outfit (love).

It's finally about salvation in both Romans and Mark – saving or losing your life. Bob Bertram (nearing his own personal apocalypse) taught us how to read Jesus's outrageous aphorism that seeking to save our life, we will surely lose it, but whoever loses it "for my sake (the sake of the Gospel), will save it." Note, Bob pointed out, it's not "win-win," but "lose, lose." "Everybody loses. No exceptions to memento mori. But there are two different ways to lose. One is to lose period. The other is to lose, comma, with another clause that follows."

Christmas inserts the comma after the memento mori. Yes, it's a wild claim. No wonder its first promoters called it Good News. Incredibly good, and wildly new. The new of the Nativity crosses over and crosses out mortality's period. So the Nativity gospel claims. Wild as it is, we trust it, and hope that you do too.

Peace & Joy!

Ed