

Angels for Advent, and Christmas too—The Message Makes the Messenger.

Colleagues,

I had hoped for my spouse to do the text on this year's pre-Christmas posting for ThTh. But then Mike Hoy, editor of the Crossings newsletter, gave Marie a better offer and published it already as the December 2007 Crossings Newsletter. It's already on the website: <www.crossings.org> "Crossings Newsletters. Christmas 2007." GO and see. Once you read it, you'll remember this Maria's own encounter with an angel—in Ethiopia 12 years ago—and her vision of how the Blessed Virgin's angelic encounter REALLY happened. So with Marie's message already out there, I now have to scramble. Here's something different, but equally good: Jerry Burce's "Semi-Random Notes," he says, on Luke's Christmas Gospel. Don't let his Greek-language parentheses dismay you. Many of them are decipherable for English readers. E.g., "Decree" is "dogma." Hmmm! "All the world" is "the whole ecumene."

In a sidenote he told me: "Chief reference is Raymond Brown's book, *The Birth of the Messiah*." Brown is the scholar-expert on Luke's Christmas story. Yet Jerry's got stuff here that Brown doesn't notice. [And one reason for that is Jerry's "Augsburg Aha!" lenses for reading the Christmas story, lenses not exactly patent in Brown's work, for reasons that Jerry could tell you about.]

But back to Jerry's own prose. If some of his references to the original text prompt a "That's Greek to me!"—skip it and press on. When he's talking English, Jerry is proclaiming all the way. His notes may be semi-random, but his "Look at this!" is not

random at all. It's on target. "Augsburg Aha!" one after the other. So open this package on arrival. ASAP. Don't wait till the 25th.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

Semi-Random Notes

Luke 2:1-20

1. v1-"In those days a DECREE (Gk: *dogma*) went out from Caesar Augustus that ALL THE WORLD (*pasan teen oikoumeneen*) SHOULD BE ENROLLED (*apographesthai*)." I.e., Caesar promulgates an "ecumenical dogma" whose upshot is a great writing down of names in a book of-what? Subjugation? The Doomed-to-Die? One source suggests that the chief point of a Roman census was to assemble property records, presumably for taxation purposes; which brings to mind the later efforts of William the Conqueror in his famous Domesday (pronounced dooms-day) Book. Woe, then, to the one whose name is written in Caesar's book. Note by stark contrast the character and outcome of the story's second dogma, this one promulgated by God through the agency first of angel and now of Christmas Eve preacher. "To you is born this day a Savior"-that was one of Caesar's titles, as ancient inscriptions attest-"who," however, "is" not Caesar (thank God!) but "Christ the Lord." The outcome here is a great writing down of names in "the Lamb's book of life" (Rv. 21:27). See also the reference, Hb. 12:23, to "the assembly (*ekkleesia*) of the FIRST-BORN-*proototokoon*, pl. of the sg.

proototokon in v7 (“she brought forth her FIRST-BORN son”)- who are ENROLLED (**apogegrammenoon**-the same verb as above) in heaven.” Sweet too is the news that God’s enrolling dogma is promulgated in the first instance to the supremely property-less, i.e. shepherds. Implication: whereas Caesar’s dogmatic concern is not for us but for our stuff and the getting of his grubby hands on a well-sized hunk of it, God’s heart is fixed squarely on our persons, his aim being at last to use his gracious hands to “wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rv. 21:4). Note finally that the scope of this second dogma, unlike Caesar’s, extends beyond the **oikoumene** to “the end of the earth” (**eschatou tees gees**), those eschatological limits of space AND time to which the apostolic heralds are directed in Ac. 1:8. Little Caesar (allusive puns intended) is forced to content himself with being ecumenical. God in his magnificent goodness insists on being nothing less than universal.

2. v7-“She wrapped him in swaddling cloths”- for a description of how newborns were handled, see Ez. 16:4 – and laid him in a MANGER (**phatnee**). The Lord appears in Is. 1:3, LXX [the Septuagint Greek OT]: “...the donkey KNOWS (**egnoon**) the **phatnee** of its master (**kuriou**), but Israel does not know her **kurion**.” Note then the later testimony of the shepherds, v15: what Israel knew not, the Lord has now MADE KNOWN (**egnoorisen**) to us. Here, perhaps, is a crack for some homiletical play, esp. if the Lord’s Supper will be part of the service. As the **kuriou** puts hay in the manger for the donkey, so the **Kurios** (capital kappa) puts the babe in the manger and hence the Bread of Life in paten and chalice for the silly, stubborn asses that we are, for us to eat, to live, and to bray our joy. (“Yes, O Tone Deaf One, the Christmas carols are also for you to do with this night

just as cheerfully and mightily as you can manage.”)

3. v8-“...watching over their flock by NIGHT.” Why night? See, perhaps, WisSol. [Wisdom of Solomon, in the OT Apocrypha]18:14ff., an extended reflection on the angel’s slaughter of the first-born in Egypt. “All things were lying in peace and silence, and night in her swift course was half spent, when thy almighty Word leapt from thy royal throne in heaven into the midst of that doomed land...” But as above, with the dogmas, the real interest here lies not in the similarity but in the contrast: whereas in WisSol the leaping of the almighty Word brings terror, tumult, and death, now the outcome is life, peace, and joy. In WisSol the almighty Word is like “a relentless warrior, bearing the sharp sword of thy inflexible decree..., his head touching the heavens, his feet on earth.” Now that Word is a baby in a manger.
4. v9-“the glory (*doxa*) of the Lord SHONE AROUND (*perielampsen*) them.” Does the Gk. (“lamping” around) hint at the sort of thing we see in the movies, where fugitives are caught in the menacing circle of the helicopter’s searchlight? The English “glory” is a tough word which seems to me to be edging its way toward obscurity. Is it still being used in everyday speech?-I’d hazard the guess that it meant much more to the average pew-sitter of 1907 than it will to the average pew-sitter of 2007. My own best stab at unfolding it, at least right now: glory = whatever it may be, whether for good or ill, that causes a person to rock back on the heels and say “Wow!” The Christmas preacher’s goal, of course, is to unfold the glory of the baby in the manger, i.e. to provoke a great “Wow” in the hearers’ hearts as they contemplate the mind-blistering wonder of the thing. See 9. below.
5. v9-“and they were filled with fear” (*ephobeetheesav

phobon megan*), lit., “they feared a MEGA FEAR,” no doubt as opposed to a small fear, of the sort that gets feared, e.g., when the phone starts ringing at 2 am. The King James Version, then, has it precisely right concerning the shepherds: “...and they were SORE afraid.” On the subject of great fears, see the continuation of the WisSol passage referred to in 3. above, where the Word’s appearance has the following effect: “At once nightmare phantoms appalled them, and unlooked-for fears set upon them; and as they flung themselves to the ground half dead, one here, one there, they confessed the reason for their deaths” (18:17-18). WisSol, of course, has it exactly right when it comes to the standard and expected consequence of a divine intervention in the dead of night. Pleasant? No. Appropriately feared? Yes. The phone does not typically ring at 2 am with good news. Nor does the spouse prod you awake at 3 am to share a pleasantry. In such a world, to find oneself suddenly encircled at 4 am by an angelic spotlight (see 4. above) is to know that destruction is at hand. How astounding then, are the angel’s words: *idou*—“behold, look, get-it-throug h-your-fat-fear-crazed-heads” -*euaggelizomai umin charan megaleen*, lit., “I evangelize-I ‘good news’-you [with] a MEGA joy.” This great joy is the direct opposite of the great fear. It consists precisely in this, that God’s nighttime intervention should turn out, this once, to be unaccountably and utterly good—so good, in fact, that it trumps the usual nastiness of all God’s other nighttime interventions: “For to you is born...a savior,” whose role (as Mt. points out, 1:21) is to “save God’s people from their sins” and from the consequences thereof. What’s more, the great joy, good-newsed to the shepherds, is now to be good-newsed to “all the people” (*too laoo*). Thus the Christmas Eve preaching, whose focus is on

evangelizing in the strictest sense. "Fear be gone, I give you joy." What joy? The joy of God's promise that his Bethlehem intervention is SO good that it continues even now to trump those dreadful interventions, small AND large, which still disturb the sinner's night-the prodding awake at 3 am., e.g., and the great fear confirmed as he groans the foul news of a heart attack in progress. Ah, but also for this wife and this husband-in the bleakness of THIS moment, especially for them-is born a Savior...

6. v14-"Glory to God in the highest (*hupistiois*, pl. i.e. the highest of the several degrees of heaven) and on earth peace *en anthroopois eudokias*, lit., in (within? among?) well-thought-of anthropods." (Well-thought-of by God, that is.) So sings the angelic army (*stratias*, v13). Note how, when the host of earthly disciples takes up the song at the Palm Sunday entry, Lk 19:38, they sing of "peace in heaven." Thus the joyous conversation.
7. vv15, 17, 19-The Gk bears witness to a conjunction between word and deed that gets lost in English. 15: "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this THING (*hreema*) that has happened..." 17: "...they made known the SAYING (*hreematos*) which had been told them..." 19: "But Mary kept all these THINGS (*hreemata*) and pondered them..." See also 1:38, Mary responding to Gabriel: "Let it happen to me according to your WORD (*to hreema sou*). Here is one of those overarching Biblical themes: "God speaks, stuff happens." It also appears to be Luke's way of signaling the point that John will make manifest: "The Word became flesh."
8. v16-"...they went WITH HASTE (*speusantos*)." Later on in Luke, Jesus to Zacchaeus: "MAKE HASTE (*speusas*) and come down..." Here Lk is tipping the theme that Mk in particular will underscore with his repeated use of the

adverb “immediately.” See e.g. the call of the disciples in Mk 1 and its parallel in Mt 4. The Enacted Word (*hreema*) of God, now enfleshed, is so intensely good, so dripping with promise, that it demands an instant response. “See this babe-for-you in the eucharistic manger? Don’t walk, run! As in Now!” -Dare we get that vigorous?

9. Note the three other reactions to the news of God’s good wording/deeding:

A. v18-“all who heard it WONDERED” (*ethaumason*). But as Lk will make clear (4:22, 8:25, 9:43, 11:14, 11:38, 20:26, 24:12; also several times in Acts) this is the head-scratching bewilderment of the faithless who typically are still trapped in their fear.

B. v19-“Mary kept all these things, PONDERING (*sumballousa*) them in her heart.” She is literally “tossing them together.” Does this signal a mixed salad of conflicting emotions, perhaps? Might it be the equivalent of the father’s distress in Mk. 9, “Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief”?

C. vv 13, 20-“Suddenly there was with the angel a great multitude...PRAISING (*ainountoon*) God and saying ‘GLORY to God...’” Again, “the shepherds returned, GLORIFYING (*doxazontes*) and PRAISING (*ainountes*) God...” This is the typically and distinctively Lukan reaction when God’s good wording/deeding in Jesus is not only seen and/or heard but is also believed. For “glorifying” see also 4:15, 5:25-26, 7:16, 13:13, 17:15, 18:43, 23:47. Note that the last is the glorifying of the centurion as he makes his pronouncement on the innocence of the dead Jesus. Also Acts 4:21, 11:18, 13:48, 21:20. For “praising” see 8:43, 19:37, and

esp. 24:53, when the disciples return to Jerusalem after the ascension. Also Acts 2:47, 3:8-9.

All three of these reactions are possible, Luke suggests, when a Christmas sermon is rightly preached. The last of the three, i.e. the glorifying and praising of God, is by far the preferred outcome. It cannot, of course, be commanded. Indeed, should we be so foolish as to tell the hearers that they OUGHT to be glorifying and praising God for all they've seen and heard, the certain consequence will be reaction (A), bewilderment and hardened fear. Thus our sole and exclusive task as preachers is to make like the angel (and thereafter, v17, like the shepherds) by "evangelizing the great joy." To repeat: "thus did God do in Christ that night; therefore so is God continuing to do for you in Christ THIS NIGHT." And if by the Spirit's pentecostal blowing the hearing issues forth in believing, then new nature will run its course and there will be much by way of "glorifying and praising God" in our corner of Northeast Ohio [=Jerry's home turf] that night. Therefore we pray, already now: "Open thou my lips, O Lord, that my mouth may show forth thy praise." And again: "Create in us-hearer AND preacher-a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right Spirit within us." Veni Creator Spiritus. Come, Creator Spirit. Amen.

Jerome Burce