

Christmas and the Heart of Darkness

Colleagues:

Some clippings for the Sixth Day of Christmas 2004. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

1. In the Gospel for Christmas Day, John 1: 1-14, suppose the word WORD were translated TALKING. [Introduction: This text is St. John's Christmas story. Doesn't have any of the visuals we know. No shepherds, no angels, no Mary and Joseph, not even a baby in the manger. How so "Christmas story?" "Thought you'd never ask," John might well say. Think of it this way. The Christmas creche is the story St. Luke tells. You can reproduce it in a Christmas pageant. John's Christmas story is a much bigger production. Cosmic, you might say. But how can you "pageant" the cosmos? Impossible. Since we're part of it, we can't stand back and "produce" it. But you can talk about it, you can story-tell it. Which is what John does. "OK, keep one eye on Bethlehem, but now pull back, waaay back, to get the big picture. HERE'S what's going on in the cosmos when THAT is going on in Bethlehem." EHS's translation cum comment.]

" In the beginning was the "logos" [Danker's Lexicon for that Greek word for WORD: "An utterance, chiefly oral"] OK, in the beginning there was an utterance, chiefly oral. [A tad simpler] In the beginning someone was talking. The talking came from God's direction. It was God talking. God

was talking right from the very beginning. Everything that came into existence happened by God talking. And if God wasn't talking nothing happened. When God was talking LIFE happened, LIFE that was the LIGHT for all people. [God's sound waves become life waves become light waves.] This "talking" Light shines into the darkness [=turf devoid of God's voice, "tobu wa bohu" in Hebrew], and the darkness cannot counteract it. [When push comes to shove, this light wins. But darkness doesn't disappear. It regroups for another day.]

[That's John's rewording of Genesis—and then he connects to Christmas. But it's still about talking. A human talker. The one we usually call the baptizer. But in this Gospel he's mostly John the talker, the guy on the witness stand.]

"The talking God sent a man. His name was John. He came to be a talker to get on the witness stand and talk about the Light that goes on when God's talking. His goal was that all might trust that LIGHT by means of his talking [instead of trusting darkness]. John himself was not the light. His job was to tell folks where the LIGHT was.

[And now zeroing in on what's happening in the cosmos down in Bethlehem.] "The true light, the real thing, that can pull anybody, everybody, out of darkness, was moving into the world. The talking God was now IN the world (not OUTside talking it into existence as at the beginning). Even though the world came into being through God-talking, when God-talking showed up in person IN that world, nobody recognized him. The talking God came to his own turf, but his own folks didn't welcome him. However there were a few who did, who entrusted themselves to his name [call it faith]. When that happened God gave them the right to call

themselves God's own kids. Their birth does not depend on blood-lines, nor on normal procreative processes, nor even having a male father. Their birthing comes from the talking God [who says—as John's Gospel later will say point-blank—"Trust my beloved Son and you become my beloved kids yourselves."]

[Now comes the punch line about what's happening in Bethlehem.] "The talking God assumes a human body (with all its plusses and minuses), pitches his tent to live where we live. Result: We get to see his glory, the "GLOW" that comes from God Father's unique son. [Greek for that son: "mono-genes" = the only one with "genes" like that.] How so genetically unique? He's full of God's Grace-talk and God's Truth-talk. [Danker on Greek word for truth, "aleetheia." Actually a negative term with the "a" (=not) in front of "leetheia" (=escape notice). So this truth is "hiding nothing," no "cover-up," both about the reality of planet-wide darkness and our own involvement in it.]

[To come to closure the evangelist adds vv. 16-18.]

"From his fullness (from the overflow) all of us have received grace upon grace. [Now a retrospective about God talking at at the very beginning and some God-talking thereafter before Bethlehem.] God was talking before through Moses. That God-talk was law. [Didn't displace the darkness. May even intensify it. Thus not good enough for folks in darkness.] God-talking in Jesus is something else. Grace and Truth together. [Good news for benighted folks, yet no cover-up about our darkness.]

"No one has ever seen God. [No wonder, since God is "an utterance, chiefly oral." You hear a voice, but to "see" it, the voice needs to be embodied.] Only in the "unique

genes" of God's Son is God so embodied. The Son's talk comes straight from the Father's bosom. He's the one who "exegetes" [that's the Greek verb] the Fatherly heart for us. [Danker on this verb: "gives us the details."]

That's what the rest of John's Gospel does: gives us the details.

2. Christmas letter excerpts from a pastor in Thailand: CRASH SCENES OR CRECHE SCENES

[After several paragraphs about friends and associates who "failed" in 2004, he concludes:

I could have included other stories, some about family members, some of you, in this recitation. I could have written about me. It has been a mixed year for most of us. I could say the same thing about the USA or Thailand.

I think we're going to come through this. I am optimistic. But for the moment it's an unfinished Christmas symphony.

Once upon a time I would have predicted a triumphal ending, a crescendo up to be big chords at the end. I would have intimated that what we're going through is really a blessing, a prefiguration of the climax of the symphony. I no longer want to try to predict the way the symphony will end. My faith is much starker than it used to be. Christmas is much more a festival of incarnation than of nativity, much more about God's involvement in crash scenes than creche scenes.

3. Christmas letter excerpts from a senior colleague in California FAILURE TO EVOLVE

Consider that two of our five children are in their 50's; five of the grandchildren are in college, and one has completed college and joined the work force. The others

are growing up fast—and we worry about the world in which they're growing up. Here's poet Denise Levertov "On the Mystery of the Incarnation":

*"It's when we face for a moment the worst our kind can do,
and shudder to know the taint in our own selves,
that awe cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:
not to a flower, not to a dolphin, to no innocent form
but to this creature vainly sure it and no other is god-
like,
God (out of compassion for our ugly failure to evolve)
Entrusts, as guest, as brother, the Word."*

And so we pray the ancient Advent prayer:

*Oh come, Desire of nations, bind In one the hearts of all
mankind;
Oh, bid our sad divisions cease, And be yourself our
Prince of Peace.*

God bless us, every one!

4. The earthquake and tsunami. Our attempts to make contact with Christian siblings (4 e-addresses) on the island of Sumatra have not yet succeeded. >From others in the area have come these two postings:

A. From an Aussie, Eddie Trotter, a pastoral colleague from our days in Bali 5 yrs ago. Bali is part of Indonesia. Bali post-Christmas notes
Thanks for your Christmas greetings. I trust that your celebrations went well & that 2005 becomes a good year for you and yours.

Much of the world is reeling directly or from

reports of the catastrophe of December 26th's Richter 9 earthquake off Sumatra, with the ensuing killer tsunamis.

Here in Bali, we are grateful to have felt no effect. Wave action is normal, the tidal mark is as usual. Just noticed a couple of mild tremors, normal for here. Bali is in a "shadow" area from the epicentre. The West Australian coast was more exposed.

Indonesian Vice President Yusuf Kalla said on Monday night that maybe 20,000 people could have died in Aceh alone, where communication with a large section of the coastline closest to the epicentre is still not established. Unfortunately his guesstimate looks like being well below the final count in this tragedy, with those same areas not yet reached at time of writing! Let alone the threat from diseases!

On the good news front, Christmas celebrations across Indonesia went without any reported incidents. Again thousands of Muslims joined about 100,000 military & police deployed to protect churches. In Bali neighbourhood Hindu security also assisted. (This story may not get into the Western media.) Even in Ambon Muslims joined Christians in the celebrations for the first time there in recent years.

Our annual combined [Nusa Dua, Legian & Sanur—three English-speaking congregations] Christmas Eve at the Grand Hyatt Hotel in Nusa Dua was well attended, despite terrorist threats. Our "angels" wore guns.

However, tourist numbers have been down here again,

although there had been an upbeat forecast based on airline / hotel bookings. It seems there have been a lot of domestic & overseas cancellations. Ironically numbers of Australians planning to holiday in Bali took heed of the government's travel warning for Indonesia & transferred to Phuket, Thailand, just in time to be caught in the devastation there.

More next time. Meanwhile have a grace-drenched New Year! Shalom.

B. From Pr. Martin Yee, Lutheran Church in Singapore Greetings from Singapore. Thanks for your concern. Yes, this earthquake and tsunami is devastating, many of us here are "traumatized". Some parts of Singapore also shaken by the quake aftershock tremors altho no tsunami reached our shores thanks to Sumatra's shelter.

However the Indonesian island of Nias was not so fortunate as it is on the flip side of Sumatra to us altho same latitude. One of our former LCS Co-worker Michael Christian is a missionary there right now. Yet to hear from him as communication to that island was cut. Michael is my good friend and former colleague pastor at Jurong Christian Church. I have been to that island with Michael previously and it was jolted by a Richter 7.8 quake offshore when I was there a few years ago. The ground moved under my feet and it was scary stuff. But this is Richter 9.0!

Some Singaporeans died and were missing too while holidaying in those areas, as thousands of Indonesians, Thais, Indians, Sri Lankans and hundreds of Malaysians. I have been to the Aceh

province before with Michael meeting and fellowship “secretly” ethnic Indonesian Christians in that fundamentalist Muslim state. That Aceh province was badly devastated by the quake and tsunami.

My wife Betsy just came back 2 weeks ago from Madras India after a missions trip to help some street kids there and she could hardly believe her eyes what has happened after she left them. She is wondering how they are now, as they stayed near a shelter home near the sea.

As I prepare for my sermon on Jan 16th from John’s Gospel 1:19-42, I hear Jesus asking “What do you want?” v38. What do all these suffering people want? What do I want? Have I found the Messiah, the Lamb of God?

Tough questions in the eye of a storm!