

Crossings in Indonesia and Preaching from Old Testament Texts

Colleagues,

Back in 1963—that's 45 years ago—Armencius Munthe, Batak Lutheran pastor from Sumatra, Indonesia, was a grad student in theology at the University of Hamburg (Germany) at the same time as I was. We've stayed in touch over the years. On our last Global Mission Volunteer assignment—mostly in Singapore—Marie and I flew over to Sumatra to visit Armencius and his family for a few days. He'd recently retired from leading roles in Sumatran church life—bishop, seminary prof (or was he even president?) and ecumenical leader. We saw him “live”—even in retirement—in several of those contexts. Highlight, for sure, was to accompany him on a pastoral call out to a village where a dear Grandma had just died. She was lying “in state” on the dirt floor with family gathered round. We'll never forget what we witnessed.

Armencius has been on this Crossings listserve for some time. He's no stranger to our habits and predilections. So it came as no surprise last month when he sent an email saying that he's going to be doing “diagnosis/prognosis method” among his own pastoral colleagues. And might I give him a few tips. For this week's ThTh post, here's the correspondence that transpired.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear Ed, next week – 13/4/08 – I will give a lecture to pastors in Medan, here in Indonesia. They are from several

denominations but most of them are Lutheran. I will give them *Diagnosis/Prognosis* method. On 20 April 2008 the assigned sermon-text in all churches is Joshua 6:15-20. I would like to give a special explanation about it. Please help me how to explain it through *Diag/Prog* theory.

Thanks a lot. Armencius

Which prompted this from me. [Some German pops up here and there, but most of it is “easy” Deutsch.]

Dear Armencius, Every time your marvelous name pops up on our computer I remember our common heritage of theological study at Hamburg University in Germany in ancient days—1963, I believe it was. And our more recent time with you and your family when we visited you in Medan, Indonesia in 2004.

Here are some thoughts about Joshua 6 and Crossings method for studying texts—

- 1. First thought: It may be IMPOSSIBLE to preach a CHRISTIAN sermon from that text about the Fall of Jericho. Did the people who decided this have any idea what they were doing when they prescribed: “On 20 April 2008 the Textpredigt in all churches is Joshua 6:15-20”? Do they ever ask: “How can we preach Christ from a Christ-less text?” The assignment for a Christian preacher is NOT “Preach a Bible text” but “Preach Christ.” If you cannot find Christ, or find a way to get to Christ from an OT text, then that text is NO GOOD—never good—as a text for Christian preaching.*
- 2. There is no Gospel in this Joshua text (even though the name Joshua = the Hebrew name for Jesus!). It tells of God destroying a city as part of the Israelite holocaust of all the people of Canaan (v.21). At best that is pure*

Gesetz. At worst it is an early version of what Israelis today are doing to the Palestinian people living in Jericho now. [My own view is that this text is a text of Hebrews committing mass murder and genocide—the theology of the “Deuteronomist,” but not the theology of Yahweh.] Yes, there is salvation of a kind. Rahab gets saved, but not sola fide. Rather it is because of her “good works” in hiding the spies. Is that anything close to NT parainesis? I don’t think so.

3. To preach a Christian sermon from an Old Testament text is always a hard job.
4. It is very easy to preach a JEWISH sermon from OT texts, to talk about God, even to talk about sin and salvation. Most of the sermons I have heard in Christian churches on OT texts would fit perfectly in a Jewish synagogue. They do not proclaim Christ. They do proclaim God, but a Christ-less God. Very often Christ is never mentioned in the sermon. So they are Jewish, sometimes even Muslim sermons, but not the Christian gospel.
5. When I have challenged such preachers, they tell me: “But I am JUST preaching what’s in the text. If Christ is not in the text, then I’m still being faithful to the text when I don’t speak his name in the sermon.” To my ears that is a form of idolatry, putting a Bible text (because it is HOLY Scripture!) in place of the Crucified and Risen Messiah.
6. Yes, there is never any EXPLICIT Jesus-talk in OT texts, never any explicit mention, or USE, of his cross/resurrection in OT texts. Even the many “promissio” texts of the OT are still empty of Christ. And no surprise, Christ has not (yet) come to Fill-FULL those promises. That happened only when Christ came. The calendar dates are: from Bethlehem to Pentecost.
7. So if you are going to preach a Christian sermon on an OT

text, you first of all have to ask: where is THE promissio (yes, in its not-yet-fulfilled “promise” form) in this OT text? If the promissio is NOT there, can I find it in the context of this text? If I want to “stick to the OT text”—and preach a Christian (not Jewish) sermon, then my task is to find a way to get from the OT text to proclaim the NT Christ.

8. I can't find any way to get to Christ from this Joshua 6 text. As students you and I learned in Hamburg that Joshua is a book of “Deuteronomic History.” Its message is fundamentally Gesetz. And maybe even worse than that, legalism. Israel is preserved when they keep the law; they are destroyed when they don't. There is no promise-trusting that I can find in Joshua. I wonder if that may be one reason why Joshua is never mentioned anywhere in the books of the NT.
9. Why not tell your presbyters what I have said above. Make it your own thoughts. Tell them “I, Armencius Munthe, cannot find any easy way to preach a Christian sermon from this text. Can we work together to see if we can find a way? And if we cannot find a way, then let us discuss what we should do on Sunday April 20.” It may be that you and they will be able to find a way to do that. I cannot. If they cannot find a way to get to Christ from this Joshua text, then that very fact may be the most God-pleasing learning they will take home. That may well be a wisdom that they never had before. And possibly also for the committee that assigned that text as “Predigttext” for a Christian (even Lutheran!) sermon.
10. You might even be so brash as to ask: “If we cannot get to Christ from this text, should we refuse to use it as our Predigttext? What would any of the NT apostles do in such a case? What would Jesus do?”
11. That might also be something for you and your colleagues

to discuss. Zum Beispiel:

- a. Why is Joshua never mentioned anywhere in the NT?
 - b. Does that mean that none of the apostles, nor Jesus either, was able to proclaim Christ from Joshua texts?
 - c. Throughout the NT there are many “sermons” –from Jesus, Peter, Paul, etc.–that actually start with an OT text, for that was the only “Bible” they had.
 - d. So you might take one of these NT sermons and study how they do it. How to preach Christ from an OT text that does not mention his name.
 - e. One good example, I think, is Peter’s Pentecost sermon. He starts with a “Yom Jahweh” (Day of the Lord) text from Joel. The text ends in destruction and then has this final line: “[But] whoever calls on the name of the LORD will be saved.” Help your presbyters study Acts 2 to learn how Peter does it, how he gets from Joel to Jesus. If you succeed in that, they can say, It wasn’t Armencius who taught us this; it was St. Peter himself.
12. This might be helpful for you personally. One of our very best diagnosis/prognosis theologians in the Crossings Community is Jerry Burce, now pastor in Ohio USA. He was born and raised on the mission field of Papua New Guinea. Beginning with the current Church Year (starting in Advent 2007) Jerry has been leading the Crossings team in doing diagnosis/prognosis studies of the OT texts now assigned for Sunday services in our lectionary. He has spelled out a Crossings “method” for doing this. It’s called “How to Preach the Christian Gospel from Old Testament Texts.” It’s on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> Here is its URL” <https://crossings.org/thursday/2007/thur041207.shtml>
- I think it will be helpful for you. Jerry has his own

distinct style of speaking and writing, but I'm sure you will get the major points.

- 13. And then if you want to see samples of the Crossings team actually doing this with OT texts, go once more to the Crossings web site and click on LECTINARY TEXT STUDY. There are already 18 OT text studies there for the Church Year 2008. All of them are presented in the diagnosis/prognosis pattern. I think the best way to learn/understand diagnosis/prognosis method is to study these samples and "see for yourself."*
- 14. Two of the earliest samples of Crossings from OT texts are from our Crossings "Meister" and guru, Bob Bertram himself—now dead for already 5 years. They too are on the Crossings web site. Bob did a Diagnosis/Prognosis study on Isaiah 42. Go to the website and click on the "Works by Bob Bertram." When that list comes up, scroll down to this title (alphabetically coming under "B") "A Baptismal Crossing." The second one is a sermon on Psalm 118. The D's and P's are not identified in the sermon, but they are all there. You find that sermon at this URL: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2005/thur032405.shtml>*

HOW DIAGNOSIS/PROGNOSIS WORKS

Here's how we learned the Crossings method, how we learned to see the pattern of the 6 steps of diagnosis/prognosis. Bob Bertram often would pun about those two Greek words and tell us:

Gnosis in Greek is a visual metaphor. Greeks gained knowledge by "seeing." Hebrews gained knowledge by "hearing." But we can use these Greek words for Biblical study. Dia-gnosis = God's law "seeing through" us like an X-ray, showing the full picture of the sickness. Pro-

gnosis is God's Good News, "God seeing us through" the sickness and bringing us to full good health, rescuing us from our sickness. In the hospital a doctor will make a diagnosis of the patient. He might also make a prognosis statement: "Here is how this sickness will proceed if we do nothing." If however, there is a remedy, some medicine (even radical surgery), he will offer it to the patient in order to bring about a different prognosis for the patient, a "new prognosis" of healing to come from the treatment.

15. The Lutheran Confessions gave us the diagnosis/prognosis pattern. In this way:

a. In the Luth. Confessions, Apology IV in the first paragraphs, Melanchthon gives the Lutheran hermeneutic for reading the Bible. It is to read the Bible with law-and-promise lenses before your eyes. He criticizes the Confutation-critics for reading the Bible with only "Law" lenses. "What God says we must believe. How we must behave. How we are to worship. And so forth. They never find the gospel in the Bible because they are always looking for words of law, requirements for which they will get rewards. No Gospel, no promissio—and therefore they never come to speak about faith!

b. Diagnosis = the law segment of the Lutheran hermeneutic. But LAW understood in a very Pauline fashion: Law exposes our sin, the sickness in our relationship with God. Our malady coram deo. Melanchthon in Apol. 4 says many times: lex semper accusat (the Law always accuses). Diagnosis and Prognosis are "medical" terms, yes. But so is the language of salvation (Heil!) in the Bible. Both the OT and NT terms for salvation are terms for

Heil/health. And the language for sin is also “medical” – UN-heil, “sick unto death.”

- c. So we keep asking a Bible text: What do you tell us of our human sickness? Just as a medical doctor does diagnosis of a sick patient. And we do not stop with just “surface” diagnosis, but keep asking the text to go to the very depth of the sin-sickness problem, always listening for a text’s own language, images, metaphors, word-pictures.
- d. As Lutherans we already know that the Grund-sickness is a “God-problem.” Sick-sinners are at odds with God and the situation is deadly. But we ask the text to tell about this in its own special way. Sample is the very last verse of John chapter three: “The wrath of God remains” on such sin-sick folks.
- e. We have learned that the diagnosis moves from outside diagnosis (behavior) to the inside (unfaith in the heart) to the God-side death-diagnosis expressed, for example, in those final words of John 3.
- f. The diagnosis keeps pushing for this D-3 depth level because it is there that Christ is absolutely necessary and no other helper can help. That is the heart of the Christian Gospel. That is what makes the Christian Gospel different from the gospel of Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etc. That is our Christian claim: the only remedy we know, we have heard about, for D-3 healing is the crucified/risen Jesus.
- g. If you stop your diagnosis at the second level, you don’t need a crucified/risen Messiah to heal it. Some good psychiatrist, counselor, or just wise grandmother can be your helper.

- h. And if you stop just at the first level of diagnosis—our sickness in broken relationships with people and the environment (call it ethics)—there are other helpers who can teach us how to behave better. No need for a crucified/risen Messiah here either.*
- i. Therefore we don't ask a text "What good news do you have?" until we get to D-3—to the God-problem that necessitates Christ. It is THEN that we ask the text: "In the face of this D-3 depth-diagnosis, do you have any Good News for us? Any Good News that will heal the specific diagnosis you have just given us? Good News that will "fit" the Bad News in the very same language, images, metaphors, word-pictures that came with the Bad News?*
- j. As Christians we already know that the only answer there is Christ crucified/risen. But we ask the text to give us its own distinctive words for speaking that to the people.*
- k. After that is spelled out we move back "up" to ask the text: What is your Good News for the D-2 of diagnosis? What Good News comes from the Crucified/Risen Christ to heal the sickness you showed us at the D-2 level? What are the Good News words/metaphors, images, word-pictures to overcome the Bad News language we had in D-2?*
- l. And after that we move back "up" to the first level of the original diagnosis and ask the text: What Good News do you have for this beginning level of our earlier diagnosis? Our life out in the world? Ethics, praxis, our many callings, our conflicts in daily life? The danger here is to slip into legalism and simply say, "Do THIS instead of doing THAT!" The way to avoid that is always to ask: Do I*

see (can I show) how this “good work” grows from the Good-News of level 2, and how that level-two comes from the good news at level 3, Christ crucified/risen?

- m. One thing I often do is to use the image of a tree (as Jesus himself did). When the tree is healthy, the roots (God-side) are OK, the tree trunk and branches are OK (=the human heart), and the tree is bearing fruit that is OK (human actions/life in the world). When the tree is sick, you do not try to repair the fruits, nor the trunk, but you go to the sick “roots” to see if you can heal them. For if you do not heal the “roots,” none of the rest of the tree will be healed at all. So first the roots need to be healed. Therefore first we need to get to the D-3 Diagnosis. THEN we preach Christ to heal the roots. When the roots are healed, then we preach about healing as it moves through the rest of the tree, and finally moves out to the branches to make good fruit.*

Peace and Joy!

Ed

After Armencius had conducted this seminar with those pastors in Medan, he sent me a report concluding with this:

Some pastors asked that I should write a book about “Diagnosis and Prognosis”, because it is “ganz neu” [totally new] for pastors and laypreachers here. I will think about it. What do you think about it?

Here’s what I thought about it.

Armencius, First of all I am overjoyed by your report. Now to

your question. Here's what I think.

A "book" is not a good way to learn a skill, to learn HOW to do something. Diagnosis-prognosis exegesis is such a skill, a "praxis," a "Kunst" [an ability]. You need a Meister—not to TEACH you information as a book might do it, but to SHOW YOU how to do it. That is the way a master painter "teaches" art studentd HOW to do it. By modelling it—just DOING it—in front of their eyes. Then asking them to do it as the Meister watches. Then the Meister showing them how to do it better the next time.

You don't learn how to play Fußball/soccer from a book. You don't learn how to play tennis from a book.

You need to practice, practice, practice— with the "coach" [Meister] watching or playing with you to "show you" how to do it better when you have done it "not so well."

One idea: The next time you are in the USA, bring one or two promising "students" along with you and set aside some days for the current Crossings leaders to conduct seminars with your team.

Second idea: You invite one or two of our Crossings leaders to come to Indonesia and as a team all of you together conduct such seminars with pastors and lay preachers (and even laypeople who are not laypreachers)—as far and as wide as you can.

Now I will ask the same question: What do you think about it?

Schoen Gruss von Haus zu Haus! Dein Ed

Which elicited this on May 9:

Ed,

I've learned of the Crossings Conference October 19-22, 2008. I would like to attend. And I could bring also one Laypreacher along with me. But the problem is budget. It is very expensive actually. I am no longer teaching in our seminary, but I still help some students at the HKBP [=Protestant Christian Batak Church, with 3 million members] at the seminary in Pematangsiantar in their Master Program. Nowadays I am invited by churches/congregations very often. Tomorrow I will conduct a seminar for 40 presbyters, how to prepare good sermons.

Next week I will go to Samosir Island. There is a special seminary for presbyters ecumenically, attended by 175 laypreachers and some pastors, also in connection with sermon preparation. On 6 June a pastor invites me to conduct another seminar, how to explain the text. This will be attended by 150 presbyters. Next July I will go to Jakarta to give a lecture about homiletics, and so on.

There is a good opportunity to teach Diagnosis/Prognosis everywhere.

Thank you for attention. Armencius.

Colleagues: Is that a Macedonian call or what?