

Desert Theology and Lenten Piety

Colleagues,

*[First of all a correction. Last week's ThTh—Richard Lyon's Crossing—went out mis-numbered as #192. It really was #193. And now to this week's #194.]*The February 2002 issue of our ELCA magazine THE LUTHERAN recommended “Desert Theology,” a six-page article, for our Lenten piety. There was a “real absence” of Christ in the piece, I thought. So I dutifully wrote a letter to the editor. I imagine that its chances of getting printed are slim. My colleague in these Thursday Theology endeavors, Robin Morgan, thought it was fit to pass on to you for your own Lenten reflection.

But Robin had one caveat: “Your critique of the article is on target, but you offer no alternate proposal for the malady which the desert theologian sought to address. To wit, today's multi-dimension madness of our over-stuffed agendas that chews us up, leaving no free time for anything except more stuff which generates more chewing. If he wrongly proposed God in the desert as remedy, what's your proposal?” I told her I'd try.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

I. First the Letter. Editor, THE LUTHERAN.

Who's taking care of the store? I'm referring to the “Desert Theology” article by Kerry S. Walters in your

February 2002 number. What he's proposing is clearly an "other" Gospel. Most obvious is that the Good News which the NT predicates to the Crucified and Risen Messiah, Walters predicates to the Desert as where to get it. Is that not "another Gospel?"

Examples: "Through the desert journey we are restored to our original likeness to God – our TRUE self." "We go to the desert to find the freedom and transformation offered by God." "When we trod -[he must mean "tread"] – on its sacred ground, we reclaim the image of God that we are." "It's from our sojourns in the desert that God's kingdom is built up in us." [For a second opinion check Luther's Small Catechism on the Kingdom of God in the Lord's Prayer.]

Where in this alleged good news of the desert is any "Christ-necessity?" Necessitating Christ is a requirement according to the Lutheran confessions for any proposal claiming to be Christian. That is really no surprise. That's got to be a yardstick for anything appearing in THE LUTHERAN, right?

Yes, Christ, and Luther too, do appear frequently in Walters' text, but the necessity isn't there.

For the Christ-component of the article, it is "imitatio Christi" [imitating Christ] that is urged upon us. To wit: do as Christ did. Go into the desert for prayer and meditation and be renewed by that experience just as he was. No mention, of course, of the Gospel for First Sunday in Lent. Here the desert is NOT the place where Jesus finds God. On the contrary, the desert is the place of God's absence. God's presence for Jesus, God's beneficial presence, is in the Word of God—plain old Bible passages. He draws on that source to refute the supernatural message

coming from The Voice of the desert.

Seems to me that Walters also misreads Luther's comments on Meister Eckhardt, the German desert theologian of the late middle ages. Walters may have some grounds in Eckhardt when he tells us: "The whole point of going to the desert is to meet God firsthand." Or when he urges us to seek "firsthand encounters with the living God." Yet Luther's question here is: on what grounds do you assume that such "firsthand" encounters with God are good news? Surely not for sinners. That's a constant theme in Luther. He found it constant throughout the scriptures. "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands—see the face—of the living God."

To claim Luther as support for finding God in the desert? Hardly. Luther called such "firsthand" encounters with God "deus absconditus" [God-hidden] events. What's hidden in all such firsthand encounters is God's mercy. Thus already at Sinai Israel's terror is their rightful response to their own firsthand encounter with God—in the desert. But here again it's the Christ-quotient that Walters doesn't use—and worse still, doesn't need—to make his recommendations. Maybe he doesn't even know the need for it. To wit, that apart from the heat-shield supplied by Christ the mediator, any firsthand encounter with the living God turns sinners into cinders. God as blazing fire is not a mercy metaphor.

And then those several paragraphs in the article about the human self—"false self, everyday self, old self, and how to find one's true self." The entire transaction is Christ-less. The desert does it all.

This desert theology, all six pages of it, is bad news,

not good news. It's frightfully close to Niebuhr's old adage about a certain sort of Protestant theology where "a God without wrath, saves humankind without sin, through a Christ without a cross." That's surely not the Christic Good News you want to commend to us readers for our Lenten discipline.

Even so, Peace & Joy!

Ed

II. Attending to Robin's caveat: An alternative to desert theology for today's multi-dimension madness of our overstuffed agendas that chews us up.

1. In the Gospel for the first Sunday in Lent the desert is the metaphor for the absence of God. The desert is not the solution.
2. If the absence of God surfaces in our overstuffed contemporary lives, then we already are in the desert. Deserts, ours too, are theologically deadly. Wastelands. Not that there are no messages coming from the desert. Messages abound. But the messages are demonic. Jesus heard them too, personified in the Voice of the Desert.
3. In his case the message was three-fold: First off: "If" you really are God's child [remember he encountered the Voice of the Desert immediately after he'd heard another voice at his Baptism calling him God's beloved boy], then why this desert emptiness in your life—no food, no drink, no nuthin'?"
4. Our parallel may seem the opposite—food, drink, work, stuff to the nth degree—but from all that fullness we still wind up empty. Full of emptiness. And when that rises to consciousness, we too ask:

“If I am God’s baptized child, why is my life a desert? Why am I—though surfeited—still running on empty?” Needed is to be emptied of such choking fulness. Not that the Gospel relishes emptiness. But if you’re not initially empty, St. John’s axiom is thwarted for you: “From his fulness we have all received—grace upon grace.”

5. The second word from the Desert Fox urges Jesus to cope with emptiness by putting God to the test, tempting God to pay off, or else. It’s the Sinatra syndrome that may still leave God in the mix, but God is challenged to “do it my way,” or there will be no other way. Jesus’ own response is that to “tempt the Lord thy God”—to offer God an alternate proposal to the one he’s chosen for dealing with us—is to turn the tables around, put God in my box and then dangle him from my string. In decalogue language, that’s breaking the first commandment. Our parallel, with lives stuffed wall-to-wall, is its own form of tempting God. Tempting God to catch us as day-in day-out we jump off the pinnacles of our olympic agendas, challenging him to prevent us from going splat! on the pavement below. Eventually we will splatter, since given Gods’ design for human fueling, we can’t run on empty forever.
6. The final temptation of overstuffed agenda-itis is to run with it, worship the Desert Fox himself and howl along adding our own voice to the Voice of the Desert. The deafening noise (some of it called music) of today’s western culture bellows this cantus firmus into our ears 24 hours a day. The last temptation is to join up, sign up, and declare the tempter’s proffered fulness to be our salvation, worshipping it and acclaiming it the kingdom of

heaven.

7. The Biblical image that contrasts with the desert is the tree planted by the stream—Psalm 1, Psalm 23, and more. Such first-hand experiences may be hard to find in daily routines, but the metaphor might still point to a genuine option. Water and live vegetation are the clean contrary to dry sand with its dessicated fossils. Perhaps like this: Lent is for checking our thirsts and above all checking what we're drinking to assuage them. No accident that the upcoming Gospel this weekend is Jacob's well with Jesus' diagnosis of waters that never quench, and his own that always does—and does so once and for all. "Never thirst again," he claims. Look at your commitments calendar—or watch just an hour of TV ads—to find today's phony thirst-quenchers, the Jacob's wells of the new millennium.
8. Well, you may say, I could just turn off the TV. [Yes, even the Olympics. Ouch!] But that commitment calendar can't just be switched off. How to get Living Water to keep us from choking there? One term St. Paul liked is "mindset." There are two ways to be minded, he claimed, two ways to "mind" the business of our daily lives. His proposal: consciously switch on the "mind of Christ" as you look at tomorrow's list of "gottas." That might even allow you to scrub a couple of them. But for those that can't be scrubbed, the mind of Christ applied to them speaks: Your life does not depend on your success or failure in any, or all, of these things you've "gotta" do tomorrow. "Your life (right now!) is hid with God in Christ." So do what you've got to do, but do so "free" from the mindset that you've "got to" save yourself in the process.

9. Is that risky? Of course. Even secular freedom is risky; the freedom of the children of God all the more so. For the risk we run when functioning under Christic freedom is that we'll still be critiqued—by others, our own conscience, even God—when we don't do everything we were “supposed” to do. But Christic freedom arises from faith. It is the confidence, not only that we will survive if/when others, our own conscience, critique us, but also that we'll survive the divine Critic. Fact is, we trust that we're already now beyond divine criticism—also for unfinished agendas. How so? Re-enter the Christ-necessity factor. “There is now no condemnation [from God!] for those who are in Christ Jesus.” Call it perfect freedom.
10. The Christic mindset can even “free up” some time to revise agendas. Maybe even to go to some National Park desert for R&R. But you don't go to the desert to find the Good News and escape the rat-race. It's the other way round: The Good News meets us first in the cluttered desert we already live in, since Christ came into that very desert and silenced the voice of the Desert Fox (for us!). Word and sacrament are this alternate voice now present in our deserts. The Gospel does not offer escape from, but survival in, the desert. Appropriating Christ's fulness and freedom in our daily-life deserts opens the door for R&R among the sand dunes—and under the tree along the stream. But you need to take your Christic mindset with you. If you don't, neither the desert on its own, nor the green tree either, will supply it.
11. So take your Gospel with you as you enter your own desert. Those three OT texts that Jesus cited are

still pretty good for desert encounters. Christ-confessors even have these three texts “improved” by a Christic-coating. To wit:

1. Not to live by bread alone, but by the Word that comes from the mouth of God, a. k. a. the crucified and risen Messiah.
2. Not to tempt the Lord our God to deal with us by any other way than the way he has chosen, the crucified and risen Messiah.
3. To worship the Lord our God and seek to serve him only. Who is that Lord? Thought you’d never ask: The crucified and risen Messiah.