

“Did Osama Win?”

Colleagues

“Did Osama Win?” That was the caption of a NEWSWEEK feature article for last month’s tenth anniversary of 9/11. A strange article. But then again, maybe not so strange, just typically American. First off, author Andrew Sullivan begins with paragraph after paragraph signaling a “yes” answer, though without actually saying “yes.” Then at the very end he says “Not at all” and offers a “quickie-gospel” of hope to make Americans winners after all. Here’s how.

Osama the winner.

“How carefully Osama had set the trap and how guilelessly I—we—had walked right into it. We need to understand that 9/11 worked. It worked as a tactic to induce American self-destruction.”

“Only one word really sufficed to define the scale and gravity of what had taken place: war. And in that very formulation, in the depths of our psyches and souls, we took the bait. The bait was meant to entice the United States into ruinous polarizing religious warfare.”

“It looks obvious now. It wasn’t then. We were seized with righteous rage.”

“In our panic, fear kept spiraling upward.”

“Fear dominated . . . as a majority of Americans . . . supported the war that handed bin Laden exactly what he wanted. What he wanted . . . was central relevance to the power shifts in the Middle East, and U.S. troops in lands they could never understand and never fully win over. History has proven him right on that.”

“The fiscal costs of our actions are the reason we find ourselves today in a lost, jobless, debt-driven decade.” And the author’s chronicle goes on and on.

Yet when it comes to closure, we read this: “So, did bin Laden succeed? Not at all.” NOT AT ALL? And why not? “He didn’t banish American influence in the Middle East.” Is that supposed to be victory for the USA with its economy in shambles—and fear as unabated as ever? “His dream of a caliphate is more remote than ever.” Big deal. The “Asian models of capitalism” in “Turkey’s and Indonesia’s evolutions have shown a different way forward for Islamist democratic politics.” Huh? That gives America the blue ribbon?

This closure sounds almost like that caricature sermon of 29 and one-half minutes of hellfire-and-brimstone and then a thundering closing sentence: “Believe in Jesus and everything will be OK!”

Sullivan grants that fear in America has not yet been dealt with, though he’s unable to link that to Osama, won’t grant him victory here, here at the very jugular. “Bin laden . . . failed, in other words. But our own fear won. [Who, pray tell, triggered all that?] Fear stopped us, overwhelmed us, as our rationality deserted us. Yes, it was understandable, given what we endured that September morning. But we need to admit that our response was close to fatal. A bankrupted America that tortured innocents and disregarded its own Constitution is barely recognizable as America.” [No, Osama did not win!]

“We have survived and endured as a civilization because we have recognized our errors and corrected most of them. [Huh? Name one!] That capacity is proof that our democracy still lives. [Proof?] But fear is a tougher enemy than mere mistakes. It can only be overcome by hope. And hope is a choice, not a fate.”

“Until we decide to grasp hope again, the war will live on.

Within us all. Waiting for resolution.”

When he brings in hope to cope with fear, Sullivan is patently moving into theology. But, of course, when he speaks of fear, he was already on that turf. But the fear he’s talking about, nationwide and lethal as he depicts it, is—as Jesus had to tell his critics—still a shallow fear. Superficial. Under-diagnosed. Fearing the wrong thing, the wrong object. In Luke’s rendering Jesus tells his audience not to fear those whose threats, yes, even lethal threats, to “only” our bodily life, but we are to fear The One who is able to terminate our total existence, namely, our creator. “Yes, I tell you, fear HIM!”

In the unique alchemy of Biblical reality, Jesus is here repeating the primal OT axiom: God is the only proper object of our fear. Inherent in the first commandment—to have no other gods besides the only God there is—is the injunction to fear no other threatening power or person, except God alone. Makes sense: the giver of life and the taker of life is the same one (Deut. 32:39). So to fear bin Laden is already breaking the first commandment! Fearing a false god. Ouch!

But that is where we must move if we are going to cope with fear. Fear is a God-problem. When President Roosevelt told fearful Americans during World War II “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” he was articulating the American alternative to the Biblical “We have nothing to fear but God himself.” To be diagnosed as having “no fear of God” (Rom. 3:18) is something fearful indeed. Reciting the American mantra doesn’t make fear – even wrongful fear – go away. For fear is not the product of a decision. It is a response to something coming to us from the outside, in the end always a death-threat. And until that something-from-the-outside is undone, the fear can’t be eliminated. [For the full scoop on this, see Bob Bertram’s “Has America lost the ability to fear

God?" <https://crossings.org/newsletr/advent2000/inability.shtml>]

Sullivan recites the mantra once more, offering to trump fear with his own quickie-gospel of hope in his last four sentences: "And hope is a choice, not a fate. Until we decide to grasp hope again, the war will live on. Within us all. Waiting for resolution." Didja hear that? Osama hasn't won. Hasn't won yet. We can do it. Stop fearing. Start hoping.

Fear and hope are opposites, yes. One anticipates death around the corner, the other life. When the proper object of fear (God) is in the equation, then the word "faith" is the more frequent Biblical correlative opposite. But hope and faith are Siamese twins. Faith is what your heart is hanging on now. Hope is that very heart-hanging projected into the future.

But neither one is a choice, a naked decision. Each is a response to something coming from the outside. Fear, proper fear, God-focused fear, is the fitting response to the word of God the critic. [But God-the-critic is hard to sell in the USA where our knee-jerk conviction is that God is committed – yea, obligated – to bless America.] Faith/hope is the fitting response to God's word of promise. But you don't "choose" hope. You can only have hope when you've heard a word that trumps the word that elicits fear. Sullivan has no such word, not even in some secular format. His hope has no foundation. It floats in the air. He's calling us to be hopeful by merely choosing it, even though his entire chronicle before his quickie-closure is a jeremiad that can only elicit fear. Even if it is fear of the wrong thing. Without some ground for hope – even shallow god-less hope – such calling us to "decide to grasp hope again" is ostrich-with-head-in-the-sand. Biblical term for that is blindness. And not fearing God is blindness big-time.

One of the earliest semester-long Crossings courses, offered

somewhere in the 1980s, was Course #507 "Crossings from Ephesians: Hope Needs Success." The Biblical text for that course was the 2nd lesson for the Ascension of our Lord, Ephesians 1:16-23, where the apostle prays "that with the eyes of your heart enlightened, you may know what is the HOPE to which he has called you," then goes ballistic in portraying the success, Christ's success, that grounds this hope. "The immeasurable greatness of God's power FOR US who believe . . . in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand . . . far above all rule and authority and power and dominion and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all."

It's the theology of Christ's ascension, his victory parade. Victory over what? Victory over death, the ultimate enemy, the terrorist at the end of the chain of all human fears.

If just reading the apostle's hyperbole doesn't leave you breathless, nothing will. And what it says is also breathtaking – success beyond all successes. Raised him from the dead. That's the biggie. Head over all things. All things under his feet. Every name that is named. All the names at the end of the fear-chain – not only in this age, but also in the age(s) to come.

Even low-level hopes needs some success somewhere. Christian hope "is built on nothing less than" that Christic success. With death undone, what's left to fear, but God's own self. And that fear, that rightful fear, is itself trumped by God's own self at Christ's Easter and Ascension. Here coming to us from the outside is "the immeasurable greatness of God's power FOR US who believe . . . in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand."

But to get to that hope, brother Sullivan, we need to let go of the skinny hope you propose –“that our democracy still lives on.” Whether that is de facto true right now, or that it will remain to be true, is not so obvious, precisely in view of the chronicle of defeat that you give us in 95% of your article. But even if it should prove true, for a while, at least, our national future would indeed really be hopeFULL if we were to switch our fear to fear’s proper object.

How about this whimsy? We switch the mantra printed on American money from “In God we trust” to “It is God we fear.” And from that proper fear, we might just be open for switching our hope too. So on the obverse side of our money we put “In God we hope.” Law and Gospel on every penny, every dollar bill!

Biblical word for such turn-around – to right sort of fear, to successful hope – is repentance. Biblically understood, repentance is not breast-beating, but “simply” turning around, to a better fear, a better hope. Though the actual turning around is not simple, of course. It’s a crucifixion. But then, when hope’s words come in, it’s Easter. Spelled out in the ThTh 695 segment on Repentance. “that the old Adam in us. . . . should be drowned by daily sorrow and repentance and be put to death, and that the new man should come forth daily and rise up.” (Luther: Small Catechism).

But could an entire nation do anything like that? ThTh posts in the past have reported Abraham Lincoln’s bold move to do just that during the suicidal carnage of the American Civil War. Congress even passed the resolution! If/when (God forbid) the carnage gets closer to Washington DC, as it did during the Civil War, who knows what a gridlocked government might not do.

While we’re brainstorming such a nation-wide endeavor, why not hustle “just” American Christians to do so, folks for whom

“fearing God, repenting, trusting God’s promise” is not alien rhetoric? Especially here at the end of October, with Reformation Day coming up in a few days. Remember that very first one of Luther’s 95 theses: “When our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, said ‘Repent,’ he called for the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Well, then, at the very least, “Lutherans, remember ”

Such an idea—Lutherans, remember!—has precedent. Marvin Huggins of the Concordia Historical Institute has recently unearthed and sent me the text of a parallel plea “just to Christians” during the Civil War from the patriarch of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod, C.F.W.Walther. Marie and I have translated it from Walther’s German. It’s appended below. You’ll be able to make the crossing to today’s world without assistance. Until such a repentant turn-around in America’s fears and hopes takes place, it’ll be increasingly difficult to avoid saying yes to Sullivan’s question, “Did Osama win?”

How about asking “Did God win?” For God to win – win us, that is – and for God’s success to be “success for us,” as the apostle puts it in that hope-hyped text from Ephesians, there’s only one way that’s hopeful. It’s that number one thesis of the famous ninety-five.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

[Front page. First article.]
Der Lutheraner [The Lutheran]
Volume 18. St. Louis, Mo. August 20. 1861

Der Lutheraner is published biweekly. One year’s subscription costs one dollar for subscribers outside of St. Louis. In St.

Louis the cost is 5 cents for each issue.

Editor's foreword to the 18th volume of the Lutheraner.

A time of God's severe visitation has come upon our land. A bloody civil war has broken out among us, a war which already has swept thousands swiftly and suddenly from time into eternity. [Ed. Hostilities began on April 12, 1861] The future lies grim and dark before us. God has now finally begun to punish our people for their sins with his hard rod and, as it appears, this rod is still held high overhead for new and ever harder blows.

O dear Christian Lutheran reader, let us humble ourselves under God's mighty hand! Far be it from us in this current disaster encompassing our entire land, simply to see this divine punishment as coming because of the non-Christians and unbelievers.

Let us take to heart especially now what St. Peter once wrote to Christians in his day in a time of great and widespread turmoil: "The time has come for judgment to begin with the house of God," that is, with the church, the believers. (1 Peter 4.17)

It is not only Satan who in such times zeroes in on the church at large and on individual Christians to make them fall into apostasy; God himself begins the judgment specifically with his house, his children. Granted, it is not to bring them to ruin, but much more to galvanize, to strengthen and to confirm them.

But this can only happen if we do not respond as Pharisees, "We thank you, God, that we are not like other people." Rather, in deepest humility and genuine contrition let us admit that we too have carried wood to the fire of God's wrath, which now threatens to consume our land and its present-day incomparable prosperity. So what do we say?

The Lord says, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded." (Luke 12:48) And we Christians are precisely those people, for more has been given and more has been entrusted to us than to the poor blind children of this world. So it is from us that much will be required, from us more will be demanded. When we examine ourselves, we see all manner of sin and faithlessness. We are lackadaisical about the word of God, deficient in love, humility, gentleness and patience, mean-spirited, addicted to things of this earth, at peace with the world, lethargic in prayer and watchfulness, ungrateful and dissatisfied, and the like.

Rather than being those who rushed to the wall to stand in the breach against God's judgment on behalf of our land that he not destroy it (Ezek.22:30), we have instead joined in tearing down that wall and making the breach even wider. For surely, had Christians been more faithful, had they rightly understood and exercised their callings in the world, what has now happened would not have happened.

O dear Christians, let us then not idly wait for a general repentance within our entire American Nineveh, but rather in view of our own large share in this common guilt, simply do our own repentance from the heart. That would be the most effective thing we could do for our native land, so that once more "God's glory may dwell in our land. Steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other." (Ps. 85:9-10)

Did the Lord not say of the city of Sodom – as Abraham besought the Lord, "Suppose ten righteous are found there"—"For the sake of ten I will not destroy it"? (Gen. 18:32)

If God would not have destined Sodom for destruction, had he

found only TEN righteous people in it, who through genuine repentance and with cries for mercy day and night would have rushed to the wall and stood in the breach, how much less would God give our America up for destruction, how much more would he not call to that flood of catastrophe already rushing toward us: "Thus far shall you come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped," (Job 38:11) if only the THOUSANDS of believing Christians who doubtless are still here would awaken and in true repentance acknowledge first their own sins and then the communal sins of our people with fervent, unceasing pleas for grace and rescue in the name of Jesus, and turn to the merciful and long-suffering God!

To God the Lord, who remembers mercy when judgment occurs (Hab.3:2), whose church still stands when all around it staggers and totters and whose Word remains even when heaven and earth pass away, to him be humble praise and thanks that in these days of gloom and doom, he has not let our "Lutheraner" be silenced. May he grant our modest journal to continue to bring witness to the truth granted us in God's Word into many homes and hearts and in its small way aid and abet the building of God's Zion here as well. May God grant this for the sake of Jesus Christ, his dear son, our Lord and Savior. Amen.