

Further Conversation on “30,000 More Charioteers into the Red Sea?”

Colleagues,

Last week's ThTh post (599) concluded by asking for help from the listserve readership to finish out the six-step CROSSING phase of linking President Obama's "30,000 more" speech and Steve's Kuhl's Biblical GROUNDING in the Gospel for Advent I. ThTh 599 had offered only the first three steps, the "bad news" crossovers between that Biblical text and the American scene. "Finish out" meant spelling out the last three steps, the "good news" steps, to bring the Gospel's own new prognosis as articulated in the Biblical text to the American scene. So I asked for some audience participation.

Only three responses have come in so far. One just citing a "secular prophet," with no comment. Here it is.

ROBERT BOROSAGE

Imperial Blues

President Obama made the best possible case for dispatching more troops to Afghanistan last night. But his speech left me with a haunting foreboding. Surely this is the way that great imperial powers decline. Their soldiers police the ends of the earth. There is always another enemy, always a threat – sometimes imagined, often real – that must be faced. And meanwhile, the productive economy declines, the rich live increasingly off investments abroad, the poor depend on public sustenance, the

middle declines.

Another arrived –from Steve Kuhl himself–promising something by next week Thursday–after he gets all those final exams graded from his students at Cardinal Strich University in Milwaukee.

And one from a pastor in Michigan “spelled it out.”

Granted, I had to tease it out of David Boedecker after he first asked for me to “just do it” myself. David is pastor of Christ Lutheran congregation in Marshall, Michigan. He’s been pastoring for “25-plus” years, he tells me. Our email exchange amounted to a trilogy. I reprint all of it below FYI.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

Dear Ed.

It’s not that I disagree with you, but I don’t know how to meld your “jeremiad” with that good old Lutheran question, “What does this mean?”

Ought one not pray (not proclaim) but pray for God to bless America with compassion, kindness, wisdom and dare we hope, righteousness? That’s what I pray for. I know America, its people and leaders have been unwise, unkind and unrighteous. I know that I also am a sinner in need of redemption. I know that God’s Law damns my own feeble attempts at self-justification so I come to Him empty-handed–worse, with my hands full of my failures and asking Him to nail them up on the cross and cleanse my heart and my hands with the blood of Jesus.

But where from there? I am not asking for simplistic answers. I

am asking "Jeremiah" for a direction. Repentance, yes—every day with every splash of water. I also saw the faces of those cadets. I have nephews who have been in Iraq and Afghanistan and one headed back there. I grieve over lives wasted and believe we must have a metanoia.

But (and I mean this sincerely, not arrogantly) suppose you are the president (take your pick, Barack or Bush). Do you simply write off the Middle East to duke it out? Do we concern ourselves with those who hijack planes and crash them into buildings? Do we concern ourselves with those who strap bombs to women and children and set them off in crowded streets? Are we our brothers' keepers when oceans separate us? Is America never a candidate as hand of God's justice? Do we do nothing right or righteous or even, dare I say, a bit more godly than the Taliban?

I do call my people to repentance (even as I hear that call myself) and pray that like ripples in a pond, what is preached in my pulpit finds resonance with other pulpits, other peoples, and we experience both the judgment of God and grace of God.

Your words have cut into me and my request is sincere. Thursday theology [has] been one of my teachers over the past years and I believe I am not too old or set in my ways to learn something new.

So, without trying to dictate what/how you write in Thursday theology and certainly not calling you out on what you've written, I am asking you to consider my questions for another installment of Thursday Theology. I am truly struggling to move from insight to action, to heed the Word, but I need a clearer trumpet.

Respectfully,
Rev. David Boedecker

David,

You ask for “another installment of Thursday Theology.”

That’s what I thought I was asking fellow-Crossers to help me do when I asked them (you included) to take the GOOD NEWS in Steve Kuhl’s last three steps—the Gospel’s New Prognosis for the sick-unto-death client (6th century B.C. Judah and 21st century USA) and formulate God’s Good Word for our nation. Instead of just “the nation” as a mass of folks, what is God’s good word for us to speak to those cadets whose grim and sombre faces we saw at West Point. According to the Jeremiah text, what’s God’s good word for them—for us all.

Next week’s ThTh 600 intends to report out whatever “youse guys and gals” send me as Good News for patients with such a deadly diagnosis, the very stuff you are calling for. So send something yourself. What does the Jeremiah text (with Steve Kuhl’s masterful steps 4,5,6) give you to give to your people in Marshall MI as God’s Good News for such a time as this? What did you already proclaim to them last Sunday when Jeremiah was the OT text and Jesus himself in Luke was the apocalyptic preacher to people of his time—and our own as well?

“Another installment of ThTh,” you say. OK, help me put one together.

Cheers!

Ed

Dear Ed,

Is it any different now?

Yes, it is. The same place, same mess; same victims and victimizers. What is different? A sovereign nation, America, over-impressed with itself and its righteousness and often stuporous in its power and ability to enforce its will, often frustrated that other nations “don’t play by the rules” of warfare as though warfare had any rules.

The Biblical metaphor is not OT, but NT, wars, rumours of wars, chaos on earth and in the heavens. Are we not, unlike Jeremiah et al, living in the endtimes? If so, are wars no longer instruments of specific judgment so much as they are symptoms of a world not getting better, but worse?

The God-sized problem is humankind—American, Iraqi, etc.—our individual and consequent rejection of the ways and will of the Prince of Peace.

Why? Because His peace, like His kingdom, is not of this world. It cannot be. It can only summon us of this world into that kingdom entered only by grace through faith. We don’t get there by being right, only repentant.

Those faces—include cadets in gray, Angela Peacock, Ben Boedecker, US Army—are the faces not of charioteers, but of those sent by the powers of this world to subdue and contain those whom the powers perceive as enemies.

Those powers may be right; they may be wrong; they may be blinded to a better way.

I would not begin to equate Jeremiah the prophet with Jeremiah the Wright. No, not racism, not politics, but a reality in which the kingdom of God (i.e., the nation of God’s people) is not limited to ethnicity (of any kind) but to those whom God has called and chosen. God’s people exist in America—they express themselves by vote, by persuasion, by dialog, by prayer—Barack

may be among them, but he is not a prophet, nor is he the “agent” of God’s redemption or of judgment. He is simply caught up in the chaos of a world running out of gas.

Do we send “more charioteers” into the sea? That is for the commander in chief both to decide and to account for.

As for the charioteers—if in conscience they choose not to go, we honor their conscience, support their right to choose. Luther had the same problem regarding whether soldiers can be saved. I don’t think he got it any neater or tidier than we can.

Because the world is not tidy. It is messy and bloody with actions and attitudes co-mingled with pure, not so pure and purely impure motives.

Is God calling America to repentance? When has God not done so? Vietnam? Korea? WW2, WW1, Civil War, 1812, Revolution, French/Indian—is not all war God’s judgment on humankind’s unwillingness to respond to the grace of God that teaches, urges us to walk with justice before our God?

Conclusion: No one is righteous, no, not even one. Not me! Not you! Not Barack! Not any of the Crossings Community. Every human-born catastrophe is evidence that we cannot save, fix or redeem ourselves.

There is only grace: grace for preachers like me who do their best each week to turn hearts toward God, grace for presidents who amid myriad clamoring voices seek to be their brother’s brother.

Grace, alone, in a hopelessly messy world, where grace is the only hope we have; where we lay hold of the branch of Jesse and hang on for a rough ride, until by grace we reach the shore where chaos is no more (Revelation, when the sea and its tumult

is quelled).

That branch is cross-shaped—where Jesus crossed our chaos.

Till then: we hope, we pray, we vote; we offer our voice to the public discussion and hearing the call to repent, we pass it along in the confidence that in repentance, God's wrath is stilled and we turn to behold a Father's face.

I wish I had more time this week to wax more exegetical—but hearts in Marshall are breaking and I've been called to help bind them up.

Advent blessings and Christmass

Peace to you.

You may publish any/all/none of the above.

In any of those options, I thank you for troubling me.

David

P..S. from EHS.

Here's a thought. For next month's Crossings conference here in St. Louis they've got me listed for a session labelled "Reading Real Life through the Six Step Lens." Why not make this very topic the "real life" item to work on? We could continue this conversation face-to-face then and there. So if you don't have the energy or the time to send in something now, come to the conference and join the confab in a seminar room. We could make the two responses above—along with Steve Kuhl's promised piece next week—the grist for the mill to get us started. The more I think about this the better it sounds.

The major reason for you to come to the January conference is to engage the major league keynoters: Burrows, Kaariainen and

Burce.

When was the last time you ever heard a Roman Catholic theologian (Burrows) define the Christian mission task this way? "To retrieve the centrality of the gospel as promise revolving around the forgiveness of sin and mission as the church's task in making known God's promise to save the world." (President's Address to The American Society of Missiology, June 2009).

Or a Finnish "mish-kid" (Kaariainen) tell about engaging the Jesuits at Fordham University with his doctoral dissertation on Bertram's axiom: "promissio is the secret of missio"?

Or Crossings' own mish-kid (Burce) link his earlier mission ministry in Papua New Guinea to the mission today of his suburban Cleveland congregation?

Cathy Lessmann (Crossings office manager) tells me that two are coming from Singapore for the feast, and now a bishop from an African Initiated Church (check Wikipedia for the term) in Kenya has signed up. Even as only a foretaste of the feast to come, it promises to be a feast. Cathy says that places at the table are still available. Verbum sapiente satis.