

God's Facebook and the Other One

Hark, TIME's year-end cover sings
"Zuckerberg is king of kings."
His FACEBOOK now makes us able
To undo the Tower of Babel.

Joyful, from all nations rise,
Linked as friends through cyber skies.
Near one billion at his fountain
["Zuckerberg" means sugar-mountain!]

But with his sugar can you cook
Recipes from God's Facebook?

I'm doubtful. I speak from hands-on ignorance—I'm not (yet) in the club, so far as I know. But I have worked through TIME's 24-page(!) cover story, cum many "faces." Zuckerberg's messaging cited there has a messianic ring. Is he promoting an alternate Messiah to the one who came via a manger? His own words, as cited by TIME, even have a clearly Hebrew-Bible messianic ring. Which is no surprise, since that is his heritage. The TIME article describes his outer-space Bar Mitzvah celebration not too many years ago.

What is Zuckerberg up to? "'We're trying to map out what exists in the world. In the world, there's trust. I think as humans we fundamentally parse the world through the people and relationships we have around us. So at its core, what we're trying to do is map out all of those trust relationships, which you can call . . . friendships.' He calls this map the social graph and it's a network of an entirely new kind."

Map out what exists in the world
Trust relationships—ALL of them.
A network of an entirely new kind

If that's not a messiah's agenda—the whole world, the human heart, a new human community—what is?

Yet, that wouldn't necessarily make Mark Zuckerberg a competitor to the Mangled Messiah, would it? All depends. Just how "soteriological" is the Facebook agenda? How much salvation? What all gets saved? What doesn't?

Just for fun, let's take Mark Zuckerberg's family name as the goal of the Facebook project. Mark is trying to get "what exists in the world" to a sugar-mountain, where "trust relationships (ALL of them)" are mountaintop sweet. Call it friendship. That is indeed a network of a new kind, a new map of what exists in the world. In the Hebrew scriptures that's called return from exile, coming home to the promised land. In the Christian gospels, that sounds like the kingdom of God.

But how do you get to that sugar mountain? To say it point-blank, Zuckerberg offers to lead us to the promised land via Sinai mountain. Au contraire, the Mangled Messiah's offer comes via Calvary mountain. Not only is the mountain route on the road-maps different, but the sugar-mountains at the end of the road are two different mountains. So it seems to me.

Is that what's really going on behind the face of Facebook? Well, consider this. Both offers make the same claim:

Map out what exists in the world
Trust relationships—ALL of them.
A network of a new kind

And, how in my head did this come to pass? Well, a funny thing

happened on the way to Christmas Day worship at our Bethel Lutheran congregation here in St. Louis this past Saturday. I'd been asked to be the homilist for the liturgy. Together with our parish musician, Steve Mager, we'd worked out "something a bit different." We were going to focus the homily on the carol "Hark, the herald angels sing." We'd dug into its history. Text by Charles Wesley 1739. Originally ten verses of four lines each and no "herald angels" in the original first line. Instead "Hark, how all the welkin rings," What's "welkin"? We had to find out. The tune we all know is by Felix Mendelssohn (Lutheran Christian with famous Jewish family roots) 1840. Composed by Mendelssohn NOT for this carol, but for a cantata he wrote to honor the 400th anniversary of Gutenberg's movable-type printing press in 1440. [Those three staccato notes in the tune were sung with exclamatory gusto to the syllables: Gu-ten-berg.]

And to make Wesley's poetry fit the Mendelssohn tune, you need 8-line stanzas. So someone scissored and pasted. 10 verses become 5 verses, and then, sadly, the five get shortened to 4 in the "old" Missouri Synod hymnbook and now only three in the hymnal in our pews. And super-sad is that the gutsiest verses messaging Wesley's Christmas gospel theology disappear as the text shrinks.

Here was the plan for Christmas Day. We'd have all ten original verses printed in the worship folder. My homily would announce that Wesley's original message would be the sermon for the day. And my part would be to walk/talk through his 10-verse proclamation and link it to us. Steve would google up an earlier tune, possibly the original from 1739. [He did find one in the 1863 "Episcopal Hymnal for Sunday Schools."] The choir would sing the first 8 verses to that tune and then we'd all join in for the last two, and I would then homilize. So I worked on the Wesley text. First two verses = his retelling the shepherd/angels part of Luke's Christmas story. In the next four

he's doing the "depth theology" of what all was going on, the cosmic story, the big story behind that shepherds-and-messengers encounter. Yes, in those four verses, "a new map of what exists in the world," but I didn't know that phrase yet.

And in the final four verses, we become the speakers, addressing the Manged Messiah ourselves. "Thee, thy, thine" 7 times. "Us, ours" 6 times.

All that Steve and I had worked out did indeed happen, BUT two days before Christmas, neighbor and colleague Fred Danker tosses his copy of TIME's "Person of the Year" issue on our table. "Preachers should not open their mouths until they've read this." Fred didn't know that that was to be my job in his/our congregation on Christmas Day. As if I didn't have enough to do already. Well, if Fred Danker says something is a "you've gotta," then you'd better pay attention. But I didn't get to it on Dec. 24, so at 5 a.m. on the 25th I did. And that became the context for our waltzing with Wesley at Bethel Lutheran congregation on Christmas day in the morning.

Something like this:

Wesley's original text.

1. Hark, how all the welkin rings,
"Glory to the King of kings;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild,
God and sinners reconciled!"
2. Joyful, all ye nations, rise,
Join the triumph of the skies;
Universal nature say,
"Christ the Lord is born to-day!"
3. Christ, by highest Heaven ador'd,
Christ, the everlasting Lord:
Late in time behold him come,

- Offspring of a Virgin's womb!
4. Veiled in flesh, the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate deity!
Pleased as man with men to appear,
Jesus! Our Immanuel here!
 5. Hail, the heavenly Prince of Peace!
Hail, the Sun of Righteousness!
Light and life to all he brings,
Risen with healing in his wings.
 6. Mild He lays his glory by,
Born that man no more may die;
Born to raise the sons of earth;
Born to give them second birth.
 7. Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.
 8. Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.
 9. Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.
 10. Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man:
O! to all thyself impart,
Form'd in each believing heart.

Verses 1 and 2 are Wesley retelling Luke 2:8-20.

"Hark!" Listen up! Pay attention.

Not angels are doing the heralding, but the "welkin," the heavens [German parallel term Wolken, the clouds] are ringing

bells to get our attention. Curious how the “herald angels” got into the text. [I never found out.] Wesley never mentions them in any of the ten verses. It is the welkin, the rooftop of the cosmos, that is doing the messaging. Messenger, of course, is the nickel-word meaning of “angel” in both Hebrew and Greek throughout the Bible. No celestial feather-friend—only rare references to wings. But in every case, God’s designated messenger with a message that always comes with a Hark! Pay attention. Listen up. John the Baptist is called “angelos” in the gospels for just this reason. Camel-skin, not feathers, was his cover-fabric.

It’s all about message. When I was a kid “message” was only a noun. Now it’s also a verb, an action. And that may not be all bad, for messages shape our lives. Zuckerberg is right, Biblically right: messages create trust relationships. They also create the very opposite. Words have power. For good or ill, we live from messages. That’s Biblical too.

When Bob Bertram preached the ordination sermon for our Bethel pastor Bill Yancey, his title was “The Message Makes the Messenger.” Well, “the message also makes the messagee,” the ones receiving the message. That is, it does if you hearken, listen up, to the message. For “hearkening” is the way into the human heart. The message you hang your heart on is the message that makes you you. So straight from the heavens (no more mysterious than cyberspace) comes a message. With the “hark! stay on message, this message.” “Peace, mercy, reconciled”—all this from the “welkin.” Better yet, peace, mercy, reconciled WITH the One who is the Lord of that welkin and on earth. And Joy and Triumph for “all ye” (us) to join. Universal nature (whatever Wesley may have had in mind with those words, but it’s clearly cosmic) keeps telegraphing the message. Hark. Pay attention. Listen up! To what’s happening in Bethlehem. Verse two concludes: “Christ the Lord is born to-day!” OK, how does

that birthing get us to the sugar-mountaintops of "Peace, mercy, reconciled"?

Thought you'd never ask. Now Wesley takes over the messenger role. Verses 3,4,5,6. He spells out what that word LORD means if/when the Manged Messiah is one's Lord. We need to remember: the word LORD doesn't mean boss; it means owner. Ownership restoration is under way throughout the welkin and the earth. Cosmic stuff. And you're part of that cosmos.

Verse 3. Here's who this infant is. THE owner showing up. Yes, "late in time," but nevertheless now come via a most unexpected birth canal. Even with that exclamation point (!) he's the one to behold. So not only hearken with your ears, but look with your eyes.

Verse 4. "Veiled" not only in such an un-royal maternity ward, but beginning here all the way to Mt Calvary. And hidden under that humanity, sub cruce tecta (as Luther liked to say: covered under the cross) is the deity in our skin. Not stuck in our flesh, but "pleased" to be there. Our God-WITH-us is our God-ONE-of-us.

Verse 5. It's about healing. [Note who has the wings!] Peace, Righteousness, Life, Light. All of these are God-connection terms. God-friendship restored.

Verse 6. What needs healing is humankind's congenital birth-defect. The absence of all those God-friendship terms above. The congenital birth defect we all carry is that we are born to die. Needed is a raising, a resurrection from that no-exceptions birth defect. The Manged Messiah, like us with our own kind of death-marked birthing, has himself a double birthing. In Bethlehem from Mary, in eternity from the Father. In that combo of double-birthing he effects our raising. Call it a "second" birth. A life restored, now from God's own DNA, that, as this

Jesus later will say, is one that “though you die (from that first-birth’s defect), yet you shall live.” Yes, that is the wild claim emanating from Bethlehem.

In verses 7,8,9, and 10 Wesley gives us our lines for response. All four verses have us doing what the shepherds did at the end of the Lukan story: “Glorifying and praising God for all that they had seen and heard.” Note well that very last word: “heard.” It started with “hark” and it ends with “heard.” They got the message. They were hanging their hearts on it. They HEARD it. From “heard” to “heart” is only a one-letter shift. Interestingly enough, the shepherds thereby take over the original job the welkin-messengers had as the story began. “Glorifying and praising,” you may remember, was what the “angeloi” were doing. So Wesley brings us into that band of angels, transforming us into messengers ourselves. And what does he have us say?

7. Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman’s conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent’s head.

Come, Lord Jesus. Do ownership transfer with us. Casa mea, casa sua. My home, your home. Let that ancient gospel-promise from Genesis 3 come true for us. The serpent is not just “out there,” but has residence within us as well. Do your home-ownership transaction with us.

8. Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join
Thine to ours, and ours to thine.

Do it now. Apart from our original divine DNA, what’s “natural” for us is still ruined nature. Join us to your rescue operation.

Give us a new “natural.” Your “natural.”

9. Adam’s likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.

Re-image us. Note the word “efface.” In the Facebook operation of the Mangled Messiah, old faces are swapped for new faces. Give us, Lord, a new face, from your very own facebook. What a sweet swap that is. Not at all just “saving face,” but swapping faces. Getting a saved-face to replace the Adamic one where the serpent’s “nature” also shows up on our face. Don’t just show us YOUR face. STAMP it (feisty verb) on us in your face-swapping.

10. Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man:
O! to all thyself impart,
Form’d in each believing heart.

Let this sweet-swap, this move to your sugar-mountain happen not only to us, but to all. It’s all about what’s going on in the inner self, the heart. That’s where believing/unbelieving happen. Not in the head, but the heart. It’s all about heart and hearken and heard.

The message your heart hearkens to and hears makes you who you are. The first Christmas messengers, Wesley, and in these last verses we ourselves have stayed on this message. Peace, mercy, reconciled. That’s the Bethlehem offer. It claims to map out what exists in the world. To heal trust relationships—ALL of them—beginning with the ruined one at the root of all trust-relationships. [If only Zuckerberg would have thechutzpah to transmit the message for fixing THAT one!] It claims to create a network of an entirely new kind.

With the offer comes the invitation: Hang your heart here.

That's, sortuv, how the homily went. There were more ad lib references to the TIME magazine story. For the hymn of the day following the homily the congregation made Wesley's words their own (in the abbreviated version in our hymnal) sung to Mendelssohn's melody.

For next week's post I ask you colleagues who are Facebook insiders to join the conversation. Can Zuckerberg's friendship-messianism be baptized for the Mangered Messiah's purposes? Even if he may have messianic pretensions with his creation, does that necessarily spill over to folks when they sign up? It's happened before that a messiah's followers didn't actually go where he sought to lead them. Is there wiggle-room on Facebook? Does Marshall McLuhan's famous adage about television decades ago, "the medium IS the message," apply to Facebook too? Is there an implicit message—a gospel, even—in the very medium, even apart from any Zuckerberg-hype, that has already supplanted Luke's Christmas gospel?

How about that primal focus on trust-relationships? Can human trust-relationships flourish if the God-distrust relationship (Augsburg Confession, Art.2) isn't fixed first? What sort of sugar-mountain do you get to via Sinai-mountain's second table (social-network-friendship big time!) when you ignore the first table (primal friendship big-time)? I invite Facebook insiders to send me your prose to help compose next week's posting.

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder