

How I Finally Got Advent

Colleagues;

Today's Thursday Theologian, of this very last day of Advent 2004, is Jerome Burce, pastor of Messiah Lutheran Church, Lakewood, Ohio. Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

How I Finally Got Advent:

Notes on a June visit to old stomping grounds

On the First Sunday in Advent, 1976, I inflicted the second worst sermon I've ever preached on the patient saints of my vicarage congregation. A week of tearing out my hair over texts and typewriter had produced 15 plus minutes of dreadful rubbish about "Advent ambiguity" or some such thing. I did not, as I recall, preach the Gospel that day. Not even close. Truth be told, Advent had me flummoxed. I didn't get it, this mix of moods, this back-and-forth snapping of the head along the line connecting past and future. At what or whom were we meant to be looking, Christ the judge or Christ the baby? What exactly were we anticipating, knee-knocking apocalypse or warm-fuzzied nativity? That I held such things to be antithetical was proof, of course, of my unfitness for the Advent pulpit, though any who may have tumbled to this at the time were too polite to point it out. I'm glad I didn't preach that year on Advent 2. John the Baptist simply confused me. I could not have begun to parse or situate his rant as preachers must, in such a way that on reading out the passage containing it one can honestly add the assertion "This is the Holy Gospel."

Some of us learn slowly, others more slowly still. Where Advent is concerned, include me in the latter camp. It's been three decades since that seminarian's debacle, and while I don't think I've abused any other congregation quite so badly, still, it suddenly hits me that only now, in this present Advent, am I hearing a thunk as the "gotcha" penny finally drops into place. It strikes me too that I can attribute the thunk to two crucial days of a three-week visit that I paid to some old stomping grounds this past June. Herein the tale I'll tell.

Some background. I'm an MK, a missionary's kid, born and raised on turf now known as Papua New Guinea (no comma between the P and the NG, the three words jointly naming the independent nation that governs the eastern half of the big island just north of Australia.) I'm also in my own right an RM, a repatriated missionary, having spent most of the '80s on a first pastoral call to the same area I was raised in, PNG's Enga Province, westernmost of the five key highlands provinces that contain a slight majority of the country's population. Late last year a society of other RM's, people I grew up among, commissioned my elder son and me to do a brief survey in PNG, the aim being to dig up some clues on how they, the RM's, might be of present help and support to the churches and the siblings-in-Christ that were and are still being born of the catechizing and baptizing they did in the 1950s and 60s. Simon and I jumped at the chance and headed west at the end of May.

That in extreme brief is how I found myself in June's third week inviting 45 pastors and two or three bishops of the Gutnius Lutheran Church-Papua New Guinea (hereafter GLC; G as in Gutnius as in Good News as in Gospel) to take a good close look at Luther's Small Catechism, Part 5, The Office of the Keys. Turns out that the siblings-in-Christ, some of them at least, were looking not just to be surveyed but also refreshed, it having been a decade or more, apparently, since pastors in

the area had had an opportunity to take an in-service course of any kind. I'd spent most of my stint in the '80s teaching at the GLC's second-tier seminary, the one that required no formal credentials of incoming students save the ability to read, write, and communicate in New Guinea Pidgin English. It was therefore decided that the old teacher, coming back, might just as well do some teaching. And so I did, with alacrity, recalling how those too few years at the front of a classroom had driven home the theology I had grasped, though not quite, not really, when I was the student. Tangentially: I will someday make the case that all American seminarians should be forced to operate for a spell in New Guinea Pidgin. With its limited English-like vocabulary it's easy to learn. It's also impossible to hide behind, lacking utterly those polysyllabic abstractions like "justification" or "eschatology" that can serve so usefully to cloak a student's (or a preacher's) essential ignorance of what the Word of God is fundamentally about. Pidgin's metier is image, picture-talk, parabolic allusion. A student in the '80s, wishing to convey how overjoyed he was that I'd come to see him at his internship site, told me that had he been a dog his tail would have wagged like mad as he watched me trudge up the path. Burial is "planim daiman," literally "plant [the] dead man." Confession is "autim sin," i.e. "out [the] sin." The best teachers know that images are the cruise missiles of pedagogy. Launch the right one, correctly targeted, and the hearer's memory will be forever cratered by the point you wish to make with it. Fire wrongly or wildly, and the resulting damage will be nigh impossible to undo. A few days into the teaching this June I began to notice that an errant missile seemed to be flying about in the pastors' conversation. The image was "tekewe" or "kisim bek ki," i.e. "take away" or "fetch back [the] key." The thing being described seemed to be excommunication, though I wonder now if it wasn't defrocking. The latter would make some sense,

the former none at all. It betokened a misuse, a dreadfully wrong application of the text that gives rise to the image. I mean Matthew 16:19, Jesus to Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven...." It was to address this that we reached for our catechisms.

The catechism we reached for, by the way, was not just Luther's Small but an amplified edition thereof, the amplifier being Willard Burce, my father, who in the early '60s needed a basic theological handbook for Enga evangelists and so wrote one. I suspect his model was the Missouri Synod's old Schwann catechism, much maligned in my student days for its so-called proof-text methodology, but enormously useful, as my father has pointed out to me, for getting quickly at the "sedes doctrinae," i.e. seats or roots of doctrine, those strands of connection between the apostolic testimony of the first century and the Church's current teaching. This presumes of course that the current church, taking St. Paul seriously, wishes to refrain from preaching a gospel other than the one the apostles preached ("not that there is another gospel" etc.). Burce, for one, so wished for his evangelists so to refrain. His text, composed originally in the Enga language, got ten or fifteen years of heavy use until fashions changed, necessities intervened, and Pidgin replaced Enga as the primary medium for pastoral instruction in the GLC. Now in retirement, Burce recently overhauled his old text, updated it to address present PNG realities (much changed from the '60s), and produced parallel versions in both Pidgin and English. I had hauled copies with me this June. Resource-starved pastors-the happy few, attending the course-received them with joy. Rightly so, for they served us well.

The topic, remember, was the Office of the Keys, least of all the topics touched on in the Small Catechism, at least if the measure of least-ness is the amount of time that America's

Lutheran pastors will devote to it in their confirmation classes. First lesson for this Burce this June: that needs to change. Sleepy pastoral minds have long associated the Office of the Keys almost exclusively with questions of church discipline. This is as true in the GLC-PNG as it is in the ELCA, doubtless also in the LCMS. The big difference between GLC and ELCA pastors-here let LCMS-ers speak for themselves-is that the former, unlike the latter, still think about church discipline and try to exercise it. Has excommunication ever been discussed at any conference of pastors in the 17-year history of the ELCA? I'll bet big and bet not. GLC pastors, by contrast, wrestle with it all the time. They're obliged to by their universal take-it-for-granted assumption that certain behaviors, unrepented, necessarily render a person unfit for participation in the body and blood of Christ.

Taking a second or a third wife is one of them. So is permitting yourself to be so taken. So is lethal participation in inter-clan warfare. Many are the men and women who have been asked to take a seat on the fringes when communion begins. Presumably many have responded by taking no seat at all. And now I'm guessing a little: some pastors, wishing to uphold standards yet grieving over lost sheep, have slipped into swamps of ad hoc casuistry and legalistic calculation: yea and so many months for yea and such an offense, restoration to follow on yea and such terms, etc., etc. This was going on in the '80s. I saw no signs last June that habits have changed. Again I'll bet big that GLC pastors butt heads fairly frequently over the casuistic details. What they aren't doing-not yet, at any rate-is looking long and hard at the assumptions that give rise to their dilemma in the first place. But this makes, perhaps, for another story at another time.

It's worth noting that of the 45 pastors at the in-service course all but one or two claimed to be hearing private

confession on a fairly regular basis. Good for them. Good for the missionaries, both Western and Papua New Guinean, who got them doing it by ingraining the habit in Enga Lutheran culture. U.S. Lutherans would do well to be less sanguine about their sinning, more eager to have it attended to by a pointed word of absolution. This too, of course, is another time's story.

For now I concentrate on the matter that struck me most forcibly in June, namely the way the whole conception of the Office of the Keys had been squeezed down to the narrow and fundamentally miserable question of who's in and who's out-not in and out of the kingdom, mind you, but in and out of the kingdom's pale portents: a congregation; a wider church's pastoral roster. Thus the import of the expression, "tekewe ki," where the key is like the card that gives you access to the frequent fliers' lounge at the airport. Get rowdy, make a scene, insult the head waiter or maybe the head bishop, and guess what: the key is snatched from your trembling fingers and you're cast into outer darkness with the rest of the hoi poloi. Grovel sufficiently for the proper length of time and lo, the key shall be restored. If I exaggerate what I was hearing, I do so but slightly.

So we cracked the catechism and here's what we found-Luther's words first, then Burce's in amplification:

"The Office of the Keys is that special authority which Christ has given to his church on earth to forgive the sins of repentant sinners..." (Luther). "Here are some parts of the work of administering the Keys: Preaching and teaching God's Word. Forgiving sins. Administering Holy Baptism. Administering the Lord's Supper. (Mt 18:18; 28:18-20; Mk 16:15; Lu 24:47; Jn 20:22-23; 1 Cor 4:1; 11:23-28; Eph 4:32; 1 Pt 2:9). Those acts open the door of heaven to penitent sinners." (Burce)

Those who once memorized the Small Catechism know that Luther's sentence goes on to talk about withholding forgiveness from the impenitent. The amplification faithfully reflects on this. That I omit these parts in my quoting is quite deliberate, the point being to draw the present reader's attention, as mine was instantly drawn, to the priority of the positive. God's proper work, Luther elsewhere calls it. Forgiving sins, a concept Burce arms with exactly the right image: opening the door.

I happened while introducing this to be standing with my back to a door, one that opened most happily on a marvelous vista: first a valley, then a row of hills, then another row of higher hills, and beyond them, in the far distance, a stretch of bona fide mountains. These tugged the eye, inescapably. Then they begged the imagination to leap them o'er, as an old poet might say.

I spent the next couple of days milking the image for all it was worth, again and again swinging that door on its hinges and inviting my pastoral colleagues to think of the far side of those far mountains as the future, or more specifically, as the only future that really is a future because it belongs to the One who owns the last word on what and whom the future finally contains. "The Office of the Keys," said I (and I taught myself as I said it) "embraces the totality of the Church's purpose. It encompasses everything that pastors properly do, not only hearing confession but also preaching a sermon, baptizing a baby, visiting a shut-in, teaching a Sunday School class. This assumes, of course, that at heart and center of all these activities is the proclamation of the Christ to whom the future belongs. 'Come to me all you who are weary and heavy laden,' i.e. you for whom the future is dismal. The point is to kick the Jesus door open for such folks and to entice them to step through to his future. The Office is not about handing out keys to the nice and retrieving them from the naughty. It's about

'opim dua' (open [the] door) and 'pasim dua' (fasten [the] door), and if and when you swing the door shut on someone, it can only be for the purpose of jarring their attention so they'll sit up and notice the next time you swing it open."

This too: "Christ's future is not only the future beyond sight, though it's surely that. It's also the foreseeable future of tomorrow and next year. It's the valley of illness, perhaps, that you're about to plunge into. It's the hill of grief and sorrow that lies immediately beyond. Notice how the path to the far horizon leads first through these. Understand that these too belong to Christ who occupies them already, the great Good Shepherd in that valley and on that hillside, rod and staff already in hand to comfort and protect you so that nothing else you encounter there will separate you from the love of God. To tell people of this-to urge them to trust it-that too is what opening the door is all about."

Did the brothers get it? I certainly hope so. The world they serve the Gospel to is a fairly bleak one, its inhabitants far less able than Americans to pretend, however briefly, that they can craft or control whatever tomorrow might bring. I discovered this June that PNG, ever an adventure, is rougher and tougher now than it was in the '80s. Then crime was a nuisance. Now it's a steady threat. The country feels poorer. Roads have decayed. Coffee groves are fewer and shabbier. (A recent NPR bulletin: of the \$4 you spend on your Starbucks concoction, one cent reaches the third-world grower's pocket.) Shopping and entertainment options in provincial centers, never many, have declined noticeably. The number of educated yet hopelessly unemployed young adults has mushroomed. One guesses that most are not only frustrated but wretchedly bored. To ease the pain they reach these days for marijuana or home-brewed papaya hooch, both of them unknown two decades ago. A local businessman I crossed paths with mourned the increasing

incidence of suicide among recent university graduates. General health and nutrition standards are slipping. The AIDS virus has teamed up with a nasty pack of older killers like pneumonia, malaria, and TB, all still vigorous and very busy. Peace on earth is a fantastical chimera, especially in the heavily-populated provinces of the central highlands where the basic social unit is the patrilineal clan. Clans are touchy creatures, quick to take offense. Inter-clan warfare has always been the region's most intractable social problem. This too is worse than it was, guns having been introduced to arsenals that were once composed exclusively of bow, arrow, and spear.

All this in a country that is 95% ostensibly Christian (www.adherents.com). It seemed to me that many are on the hunt right now for more useful alternatives. Bear in mind that Papua New Guineans are as prone as Americans, Russians, ancient Romans, and yet more ancient Israelites to utopian fantasies, those spasmodic aches for an appearance on earth of this, that, or the other version of the peaceable kingdom Isaiah has been telling the Church about these past few weeks. Such dreams are by no means exclusive to Judaism or Christianity. Anthropological historians in PNG have recorded outbursts of millennial frenzy that predate any contact whatsoever with missionaries.

As with all such frenzies, the aim was to secure desired goods by demonstrating one's fitness (or the fitness of one's group) to whoever was thought to be running the cosmic shipping depot-gods, spirits, ancestors, principalities, powers, take your pick. Prophets trade on the future. Like Monte Hall of "Let's Make A Deal" they point to doors with the promise that the good life lies beyond. They offer keys-the right incantation; the correct ritual; the sufficient morality; the hot stock tip, the perfect diet-that will allow the lucky few to step on through to happiness and joy. Of course they never get it right, not

least because none have the slightest clue what to do with the overwhelming evidence of intractable sin that stares us daily in the face, so they opt to ignore it. This aside, I've often wondered how much the steady failure of pre-contact prophets paved the way for the eager welcome that Christian missionaries received in most parts of PNG. Surely some saw them as the vanguard of kingdom-come-to-earth. If nothing else they afforded access to steel, an improvement in daily life of a magnitude comprehensible only to someone who has actually tried to split a tree with a stone axe.

But these days stone axes are great-grandpa's bad memory, and it's obvious to all that steel does not the kingdom make. Nor do roads, or helicopters, or gold mines, or high schools, or parliamentary democracy. Nor do churches, at least not the ones the missionaries established. Those who attend them are still sinners, dull, unpleasant, fractious, bossy; as prone as anyone else to mishap and injury, illness and death. The evidence is abundant that many Papua New Guineans, Engas among them, are weighing classic Christianity in the balance of their expectations for life right now, and are finding it badly wanting. So what else is new? Christ crucified disappoints no more badly there than he does here, and on both sides of the Pacific he disappoints badly indeed. At some point-and PNG Christians are at or beyond this point-the import of the cross has got to sink in. When he said his kingdom was not of this world he meant it.

One response to the disappointment in PNG is a present outburst of religious experimentation, akin, I should think, to the protracted 19th century madness of upstate New York. I spoke with researchers at the Melanesian Institute, an ecumenical think tank that tracks religious activity in the country. They told me of splits in every one of the major denominational groups; of new Muslim mosques and Mormons on the troll; of

masses descending on the faith-healer Benny Hinn; of resurgent interest in the old animism, especially in those features of it that involved witchcraft, i.e. the promise of control over one's environment and, more to the point, one's enemies. Charismatic and Pentecostal expressions of Christianity, nascent in the '80s, have exploded everywhere in the country and certainly in the Enga Province. A variant of the old American tent revival is suddenly popular. We passed one in progress. My son visited a place called Irelya, home to a motherchurch of sorts for Enga Lutheranism and for a long time the site of GLC headquarters. His tour guides showed him special prayer houses where the super-faithful gather for night-long sessions of something, exactly what he couldn't ascertain. Hopes were high there that the Holy Spirit would name a new prophet at a forthcoming youth conference.

I stopped in one day to see the GLC's first bishop, now retired. Where he lives there was once one congregation, solidly Lutheran. Now there are six or seven, some affiliated with overseas holiness groups, others of strictly local invention. The bishop shook his head as he talked about it. So did the principal of the seminary that hosted the in-service course. Not so long ago he was commissioned to gather information on what the new groups and movements are teaching. Turns out that much of it is blatant heresy-heresy precisely because it despises the door of Christ crucified and gropes for other openings to the future that might prove more immediately productive of God's goodies, spiritual or material. Most of the heresy is very old heresy, recurrences in the Enga Province of notions that doubtless troubled the saints in 3rd-century Antioch. Bad ideas refuse to die. Like crabgrass or cockroaches they are with us always, to the close of the age.

And so is Christ, of course. With us, that is, to the age's conclusion. That was June's good news. It's December's too.

To my GLC pastoral counterparts, many confused and dismayed by the muck and furor swirling around them, I said simply this: hold your ground. To you is granted the high and holy office of standing watch at the Jesus door. So exercise it. Keep swinging the thing on its hinges so people, finding it open, will look on through and step on through. Other doors will disappoint. They're bound to. A kingdom-come-to-earth tomorrow does nothing for people who are dying today, a point that lots of Christians seem intent on forgetting, also in America. In any case, the future that Isaiah imagines for us is a future only God can produce. Who else will dissuade lions from eating lambs, asps from biting babies, or Enga clansmen-Americans too-from killing each other? And how will God produce this future for us except via the One who alone attends to our flagrant unfitness for it through the forgiving of our sins? To point this out, by the way, is to exercise the other side of the Office-the alien side, Luther would say-where one shuts the door on those who fancy that their sin is not an issue; as if God is obliged to populate his future with them as they are, in their present condition of mind and heart. God will not be mocked. That's what the shutting of the door proclaims. This Jesus door, by definition, is for sinners only. If you can't or won't accept those terms go try another. Of course, paths that dodge the Crucified One are at best short paths to a truncated future. They'll get you through the valley, perhaps, maybe halfway up the nearest hill. They sure won't get you to the far side of the far horizon, not even close. Some who try them will tumble to this. The moment they do, swing that Jesus door open all over again, and lead them through.

That, more or less, is where I left it. I hope it helped. I pray in any case that a solid core of GLC pastors will continue faithfully to preach and teach the Word of God, to forgive sins, to administer Holy Baptism, to administer Holy Communion-

in other words to exercise the Office of the Keys on the Church's behalf. I pray for the sake of the Enga Province right now that they and others will keep the Jesus door open. How else shall there be an honest and a real future for the people who live there? May all who read this pray these things as all.

For my part I'm back these days in the parish I serve doing as my colleagues are doing in PNG-and realizing of a sudden that I've figured Advent out. There's nothing ambiguous or confusing about it. (Whatever was that addled seminarian thinking?) Plain and simple, Advent is 'opim dua'-nothing more, nothing other, nothing less. Liturgically it opens the door on a new church year. It does so by putting readers at lecterns and pastors in pulpits all over the world, reading out and preaching the Word of God that tells of the future-God's future; a future that God is determined on Christ's account to include us in, lions and lambs, snakes and toddlers, the biting and the bitten alike, all of us created anew and knowing nothing any longer of devil, death and sin. "Fling wide the door," the congregation sings (Lutheran Book of Worship, 32), and I understand at last that they're singing to me. "Crank that door, pastor! Let the king of glory through. Show us our future." Here, I think, is the Church's grandest statement of the Gospel as that Gospel bears on present time. We blare it out for four Sundays in a row. Then we spend the rest of the year explaining why we were so bold in Christ to say the things we said. Along the way we encourage the faithful to function as true prophets in their own right, dropping their signals here and there that, no, they are not content with the world as they find it, nor do they imagine for a moment that God is. Even so they'll trudge their daily paths with confidence, knowing that God will make all things new, themselves included, in God's good time. While they're at it they'll share the wealth of their spectacular future, beginning with the simple matter of treating each

other-the stranger too-as persons who also have a future in Christ. That's another way of saying that they'll forgive each other's sins.

Anyway, it has felt this Advent as if I were back in that Enga Province classroom, swinging the door to and fro, always leaving it as wide open as it will go. Again I'm getting it. By the grace of God and the will of the Church I'm an officer of the Church's Keys which are Christ's Keys. Using them, I get to provoke young men into seeing visions, old men into dreaming dreams. (Women too. Of course women too!) So that's exactly what I've been up to these past few weeks, with lots of help from old Isaiah. It's been a blast.

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Addendum, from the catechism discussed above:

"Christ gave the Office of the Keys to his church-

- because he loves the world (Jn 3:16)*
- so that his people will continue to preach the Word, administer Baptism and the Lord's Supper, and forgive people's sins in his name until the Last Day (Mt 24:14)*
- so that his people in the world will continue to have saving faith in the Savior, Jesus Christ (Jn 17:3, 6-15)*
- so that people will continue to receive eternal life through the Word of God (Jn 8:31-32; 20:31)*
- to prevent the devil from destroying the Christian church on earth (Mt 16:18)*
- so that the church will grow (Acts 2:47; Eph 2:21)."*

To which let us add: Thanks be to God.