

Living with Two Calendars

Colleagues,

For this Festival Day, the Epiphany of our Lord, also Christmas Day for Eastern Orthodox Christians, we pass along this gem from THE OLIVE LEAF, monthly newsletter of Mt. Olive Evangelical Luth. Church, Mukwonago, Wisconsin. Rather epiphanic itself, it shows forth the parish theology you can encounter at Mt. Olive under the pastoring of Steven Kuhl. Steve also some collateral callings, one of which is serving as President of The Crossings Community. Here he alerts his parishioners—and now our readership—to the two calendars Christians have for Y2K.

Peace & Joy!

Ed

LIVING WITH TWO CALENDARS IN A.D. 2000

The Circumcision and Naming of Jesus – January 1, 2000

Thoughts for Beginning the New Year

By Steven C. Kuhl

Calendars are a key ingredient in our lives. They help us to mark time and to organize life. They help us to set priorities and to remember what is important. Therefore, not everyone's calendar is the same. Nothing reminds us more of that than New Years.

For example, at the very time our secular calendar calls us to focus on the "wishful promise" of a new year (January 1, New Years Day), the Christian (liturgical) calendar calls us to focus on the "hopeful promise" of the child whose birth we

celebrated eight days earlier on Christmas. Just how different the focus is between the liturgical calendar and the secular calendar is evident from the strange and obscure event we as Christians observe on that day (January 1): "The Circumcision and Naming of Jesus." So strange is this observance that hardly anyone notices it. But you do!

The promise that the secular calendar presents is that of a world looking into an uncertain, nameless future, the identity of which is simply an impersonal number: "2000." The uncertainty in it all (this year anyway) is symbolized vividly by the acronym "Y2K." Never mind that the "2K" (2000) has its roots in marking the coming of the Christ, inaccurate though it may be. (Most scholars think Jesus was born around what would now be marked as 6 to 4 B.C.) That origin, for all practical purposes, has been lost. By contrast, the promise that the Christian calendar presents is that of a Church looking at a certain, named person and his accomplishments: "Jesus." Now the point is not to ignore one calendar for the sake of the other. As Christians we journey into "two times or futures," so to speak: the uncertain future of 2000 and the certain future of Jesus Christ. The point is to distinguish what each calendar promises and, then, to let the hopeful promise of Jesus take priority over the wishful promise of 2000.

The first task is to distinguish what each calendar promises. Frankly, with regard to the secular calendar no hopeful answer can be given. That's because, in part, it comes to us anonymously. It gives no hint, no indication, of what it will bring. In and of itself, the secular calendar places us, not even into our own hands, but into the hands of "Fate." True, when observed over the long haul, even "Fate" reveals something about the direction it is taking us-though we naturally hate to think about it, and usually don't. Fate's future is ominous, foreboding, foreshadowing evil. It is often said that "the only

certain things in life are death and taxes.” That saying is not just the grumbling of a cynic, but the summation of the world’s collective wisdom concerning “Fate,” a wisdom which is also echoed in the Bible. “The Preacher,” also known as [the O.T. book of] Ecclesiastes, summarizes this worldly wisdom with these familiar words: “Vanity of vanities ... all is vanity!” (Eccl 1:2) [“Vanitas” is the Latin word for emptiness.]

But for those who know and believe the biblical account, more can be said about this reality called “Fate.” “Fate” itself, even as the writer of Ecclesiastes also knew, is in the hands of God. (Eccl 12:13-14) Strange as it may sound, it is true. “Fate” is the world’s unenlightened description of the reign of God in ordinary history. It is an “unenlightened” description because it lacks God’s vantage point, the interpretive Word. It is a description of the “reign of God in ordinary history” because it is a description, not of God as he rules through Christ Jesus, but God as he rules lawfully through a fallen, selfish steward, sinful humanity, “using one sinner to punish another,” as Luther summarized it. Ironically, by placing “Fate” in the hands of divine providence, the Bible does not make it any less ominous, but only more certain – and foreboding – in the long haul.

One of the most vivid examples of Fate enlightened by the Word is found in Isaiah 10. It was the “year of Assyria,” so to speak. Assyria had attacked and conquered the nation of Israel. But as Isaiah interprets this calamity of history, he sees it not as the work of blind fate, no matter how chaotic and irrational it may seem by human standards. Assyria’s rise to power is the judgment of God upon Israel for her business elites’ oppression and exploitation of the poor in her midst. (Is 10:1-2)

Nevertheless, Assyria’s rise to power is by no means a sign of God’s favor upon it, even though that power comes from God.

Assyria is itself an arrogant, evil empire and only a momentary tool in God's arsenal to rain judgment upon a sin-sick world. (Is 10:5-6) The day will come when Assyria, too, will pay the consequences for its evil. But only when God is done using it for his purposes. (Is 10:12) When the time is right God will raise up another scoundrel (the year of the Babylonians) to punish Assyria. (Is 13:1-22. See also Jer 25:1-14) This is the flow of history as the Word given to Isaiah interprets it. What looks like "Fate" is actually worse. It is the judgment of God upon a sinful world: God using one sinner to punish another. It is what we sometimes call "poetic justice," that messy justice in which the only right outcome is that everyone is eventually proved wrong. (Pss 14:3; 53:3; Rom 3:10-11, 23; 11:32)

This is what the secular calendar by itself has to offer. People may party and wish for an Assyrian-like year. They may even get it. But they dare not be fooled. It offers no real and lasting hope. That's why on New Year's Day, the Christian calendar presents us with something different. It turns our attention to what seems to be an insignificant event, but which, in reality, is filled with real promise: "the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus." The text for the day is the shortest for any day of the year, one verse, and reads: "After eight days had passed [from his birth], it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb." (Lk 2:21)

Like all first century Jewish parents of newborn boys, Mary and Joseph had their son circumcised and named on the eighth day. This was not uncommon. But in the case of this child something profound and brand new is happening. Not just any child but the very Son of God is here being circumcised.

To understand the significance of this act we must understand the meaning of circumcision, at least as Jewish Christians, like

Paul, came to see it. In Jesus' day circumcision was not just a medical procedure or a mere naming ritual. It was an act of confession, an act that identified a person fully as a "Jew," meaning, undeniably subject to the law of God. (Gal 5:2-6; Rom 2:1) This as Paul came to realize was not the good news. The only possible spiritual advantage (symbolized in the act of circumcision) that the Jews had over the gentiles, according to Paul, was that they knew their "Fate." (Rom 3) Of course, as heirs of Abraham and Children of the Promise, they also knew – or should have known – that God promised to establish a means of salvation from this Fate. But that was not the purpose of circumcision. Circumcision was given by God, not as a sign of salvation, but of condemnation, as a sign of the need for a salvation yet to come. As such, Israel's males carried in their bodies a sign of the Fate that naturally awaits the whole sinful world. Essentially, through circumcision, a child was being condemned, inserted consciously into the world of Fate, into the mix of human sin and divine judgment.

Now comes the big question. Why would Mary and Joseph have circumcised Jesus? What could have possibly driven them to place the sinless Son of God in the middle of human sin and God's judgment . . . and not neutrally so . . . but in a way that places him squarely on the side of humanity, the condemned? The answer is that they possessed hope – hope that this Child was One who could save people from the Fate created by their sin and God's judgment.

This hope is expressed by Mary and Joseph as they name their son "Jesus," a Hebrew name meaning "Yahweh is saving" his people. As the text makes clear, this hope, expressed in the naming of Jesus, was not wishful thinking. Rather, it was an act of faith: not blind faith, but faith in the Word of God as it came to Mary by God's angel before the child was conceived.

Of course, the full ramification of what Mary and Joseph did on the day of Jesus' circumcision was not seen until Good Friday, when Jesus, on the cross, bore the Fate of world: its sin, God's judgment and death. Nor was the Word of God's Promise concerning Jesus fulfilled until Easter, when Jesus burst from the tomb as savior, conquering sin, judgment and death. What Mary and Joseph could only hope for – in certain faith – we have seen: Jesus is the savior of the world.

And yet, faith is still an essential part of our life, too. For, although Jesus has been shown forth [= Epiphany] as savior – already! – in his resurrection, we still live in a fateful world and still await the fullness of his resurrection for ourselves in our time. For this reason we do not circumcise, but baptize. In Holy Baptism we are united, not to an anonymous future, but to Jesus Christ, crucified and raised. Although we still live in that anonymous time which at the moment is called 2000, like Mary and Joseph before us, we live in this time hopefully. For no matter what Fate throws at us in 2000 . . . whether it be weal or woe, gain or loss, health or sickness. . . Fate does not have the last word for those of us who are in Christ Jesus: the last Word to us from him is always forgiveness, salvation and resurrection – that is assured!

So, when I bid you Happy New Year, that is not wishful thinking. For I know who you are: a people who have the hopeful promise of Jesus guiding you all along the way. Only one thing, then, needs to become your resolve for the New Year. Keep in close, constant touch with the Word of Promise; worship every week; and rejoice with Christ's people . . . for therein lies the secret to a promising future. Happy New Year.

POSTSCRIPT: Follow-up Reports

In two recent postings—ThTh 77 & 79—we did a little hustling.

One was a tincup extended for \$support to assist your editors in getting to the international missiology conference in Pretoria, South Africa later this month. A dozen of you have responded, putting \$1800 into the cup. Many thanks.

The second was a Macedonian call for a college prof to teach Western Civilization this coming semester at the Lithuanian Christian College in Klaipeda, Lithuania. Two responses came—both from the same family! So in two days (Jan. 8) Dr. Albert E. Jabs AND daughter Krista K. Jabs fly out from South Carolina to teach at LCC. They've gotchutzpah, these two. Classes start next week! Al just retired from many splendored years of teaching at Shaw University in North Carolina. He's a member of the Board of Directors of Crossings. Now in just a few days he'll be in the classroom again with 160 LCC students in the required Western Civ course. Krista, a recent graduate from Florida State University, doubles the gift from the Jabs household. She will be teaching business and economics. Floriat Krista! Floriat Al!

As mission volunteers these two foot the bill themselves for this whole ball of wax. People desiring to partner with them in this venture can send tax-deductible gifts (check or money order payable to "Mennonite Brethren Mission Service International, Jabs Support") to: LCC NORTH AMERICAN OFFICE, 204 — 1520 McCallum Rd., Abbotsford, British Columbia, Canada V2S 8A3.