

Lucre, Linus and Luke – Crossing the Current Financial Crises

What a fugly week this has been. And if you don't recognize that word, you can probably guess what it means and its origins. Or go to www.urbandictionary.com.

Ed just asked me in his own cryptic way if I would consider writing the Thursday Theology for this week.

My initial reaction was “you’ve got to be kidding me.” I recently resigned from the Crossings Board of Directors and withdrew my participation in the upcoming Conference (I was to lead a breakout session on pop culture and Crossings) because my work schedule for the next six to twelve months is hellish. (All this on the heels of the unexpected dying and death of my aunt – and that time off isn’t covered by bereavement policies.) I don’t readily quit any commitment, so this was not an easy decision for me. So how would I have time to write anything?

Why the purgatorial calendar? I work for a new company even though I sit at the same desk. Okay, mergers are hardly new but this one is different. By some accounts it’s the biggest merger in financial services history, and the current headquarters in the U.S. southeast is moving to St. Louis. Our legacy company lost our name, our stock ticker symbol, our legal existence and for the most part, our systems and processes. The other legacy company (the new “we” don’t like to use “us” or “them” – we use “NewCo”) lost their home. Even though they retain their name, this time it is they who have to move to keep their jobs. Some of them feel like they were the ones who were acquired. (I refrain from using actual names of companies in this piece

because I don't want to possibly violate any non-disclosure agreements. Besides, based on this past week, company names don't mean squat.)

The current crisis, which may have changed from the time of this writing (9/19) and its actual publication, is the latest in a series of mergers, acquisitions, bankruptcies, bailouts, finger-pointing and "oh crap" moments, all following the sub-prime mortgage disaster. You can't swing a dead cat without hitting some reporter trying to find a new angle on this market crash. Which may be a good thing because I'm totally exhausted from the Hurricane Ike coverage, which itself displaced the entire presidential campaign coverage. It's not that I don't care about the victims of the storm (some right here in my small town of Brentwood – now officially a disaster area – a thousand miles from Galveston), or the presidential race. I care passionately about these stories but I'm sick of the hyper-media with their OCD-like (obsessive-compulsive disorder) focus on the latest crisis, until they drop it in favor of the next great crisis. It's like "American Idol" or "Survivor" to the media – let's vote on the next crisis to spotlight, or let's kick your crisis off the island.

Everywhere I turn, the talk, walk, thoughts and collective psyche have been focused on where the future has gone. Water cooler conversation, normally reserved for diversions like television, movies or Formula 1 racing (it's rather painful watching the Cards and Rams this year) are superceded by job security, paying the bills, postponing retirement indefinitely. Even for those who have followed all the prudent advice based on lessons from the 1929 market crash and the Great Depression, the hard-earned and hard-invested monies – both interest and principal – are vanishing quickly.

It's even worse being at a financial services firm. Those

markets are what created the jobs we currently have. The belief within the industry has always been that market volatility is good because volatility means investment opportunity (for somebody), which means large trading volumes, begetting large commissions, which drive the entire industry. After this week's jolts, nothing is certain anymore. Trading can and will continue, but like the man behind the Oz curtain, there's no longer a "Great Wizard" ... merely another commodity that's like everyone/everything else. People are anxious, tired and exhausted – and I'm on edge, a lot. Fighting the impulse to hit something or scream because the rules have changed – are there even any rules any more? I remember 1987's Black Monday (October 19 – my mother's birthday) and the catatonia then. Fresh out of grad school then, I couldn't appreciate the depth of others' woes – to see a lifetime of savings wiped out in a single day. I appreciate it much better now having just checked my 401(k) statements.

I've been in the financial services industry my entire professional career and there are two things I've learned: (1) I am an IT (information technology) professional and not a financial professional, and cannot, do not and will not dispense financial advice; and (2) predicting the stock market is not an exact science because at its heart, the market runs on emotion. When people feel good/bad about a company, its stock goes up/down accordingly. When people feel good/bad about the entire economy, all the global markets move up/down similarly. It's about confidence, built on stability.

And no matter what crisis may come, we used to console ourselves with "at least it's not 1929 again". I startled some colleagues this past Monday (9/15) when I pointed out that no matter where the Dow ended that day, it would be the most momentous day in stock market history. Three events (Lehman, Merrill, AIG) piled up over the weekend for the markets to emotionally respond to in

one day of trading. But I pointed out even more – since the collective slide started by the sub-prime mortgage, the markets have been overvalued. Not in an academic, technical sense, but rather in the emotional sense of us overestimating our own health. It's like we're dying of multiple cancers and as the doctor tells about each one we keep thinking if we can lick the last one mentioned in the litany of diseases, we'll be perfectly fine.

In short, the problem runs much deeper than we've been thinking. Combine that with our still unresolved actions/feelings about 9/11 and the cumulative costs of the war on terror, exposure of what happens when financial laws (designed to prevent a recurrence of the Great Depression) are relaxed or removed – we've got the makings a newer Greater Depression. (Sorry; got carried away by the hyper-media)

We could debate that last point for a few years, but what is clear is that we're experiencing financial and emotional quakes in that formerly-bedrock foundation of financial confidence. Followed by the "hyper-media" after-shocks which simply accelerate the downward spiral of confidence and market drops, we have the makings of extreme fear, loss, doubt.

I had thought about grounding my slice of life with one of this week's lessons, but Ed came at me with a different angle (partially to save time), and use Robert Bertram's "A Christmas Crossing" based on Luke, originally published in "Currents in Theology and Mission." (See <https://crossings.org/archive/bob/ChristmasCrossing.pdf>) I don't normally like to re-use the same scripture in my own Crossings essays, mostly to force upon myself a diversity of scriptural texts. I had used Luke 2:1-20 in my best Crossings paper (way back when there were semester-long Crossings classes about two decades ago) to speak the Good News to a fictional 65

year-old Bruce Wayne in the ground-breaking graphic novel “The Dark Knight Returns”, one of the main inspirations for the recent Christopher Nolan treatments of the Batman character in motion pictures “Batman Begins” and “The Dark Knight.”

But the Lukan Christmas story is also one of my very favorite Gospel lessons. It’s, as far as I know, the only scriptural text quoted by a commercial Christmas television special – by Linus in “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” I watched that TV special countless times as a child and a young adult, awestruck by contrast of truth, serenity, calm and peace of those words amidst the din of Christmas over-commercialization. Not until much later after I was baptized as an adult (at age 23, exactly 23 years ago this month) did I realize how much Linus and Luke helped pave the way for my own spiritual journey (and how much I enjoy doing Crossings on pop culture).

So I re-read the Lukan Christmas account, through the lens of Bob’s (he’ll always be Bob to me) essay, and can’t help but break my own rule and re-use it here, and provide an example of Crossings on pop culture, to boot.

Linus quotes scripture in response to Charlie Brown’s exasperated plea for the true meaning of Christmas: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

And in this story, I am one of the shepherds, to whom the Gospel speaks. Although a white collar worker, I’m toiling away in the distant reaches of an office, far from being an angel (from the Greek meaning simply “messenger”), sometimes at night (if on call), far from a holy place (not to say that it’s unholy). But I tend the information systems that help my company keep the financial markets humming... until they don’t hum anymore. The whole world is upside-down. What was clear – market stability,

prudent financial planning, investments for the future – have disappeared, into the night. Almost as if they were never there. The whole world is panicking from crisis to crisis, a fear not unlike the shepherds' as they saw the frightful visitor (angel of the Lord) appear before them as brightly as the night was dark around them. Everything I trusted with respect to personal finance and being fiscally responsible – poof! Gone, destroyed, no longer reliable. My own behaviors – reflecting stability and confidence – shot to hell as I revert to bad habits, becoming more irritable and short-tempered, searching for a calm port in these financial storms. I worry about every asset – money and time – and how can I provide for my family? How can we bequeath my children's generation such a huge debt? Rather than providing for them, collectively the burden of the government bailouts will be inflicted on them. How can I look them in the eye, years (not so many) from now when they see the world we left for them?

And yet, these fears, great as they may be, are not very similar to the shepherds' "phobos" – petrifying fear. As great as my fears are, they only touch upon my accountability to others, and perhaps to myself. From the Luke-via-Linus quote (I still hear that kid actor's voice in my head): "and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid." As an eight year-old I had never heard such wording. "Sore afraid." No one talks like that. That's even scarier than the Wolfman or the Mummy – and now I'm dating myself because these days it would be Freddy Krueger, Cloverfield, or... okay, the Mummy again.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Okay, definitely not the movie monsters; is it monsters of any kind? What kind of scary also talks about "great joy?" That's a whole different kind of fear, a different kind of accountability.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.” You know, we say these words so often they can easily lose their edge in the repetition. “Saviour” hasn’t lost its edge. It sounds good because simply it is. Save money. Save time. Or currently from the TV show “Heroes” – “Save the cheerleader, save the world.” Save souls. This notion is intuitive.

“Christ” – instinctively we know this word is good. It’s the second half of “Jesus Christ”, which we all know is the answer to every question asked at Sunday School. But “Christ” is the honorific that replaces the traditional moniker “of Nazareth.” It signifies the anointed, the one who the prophets said would come one very special day. God promised this future event and God’s chosen people awaited with great anticipation.

“Lord” – meaning owner. Of what? As God incarnate, this little baby is THE owner of, well, everything, including the birds and bees, fields and streams, flora and fauna, and as we are so quick to forget, us humans who have been blessed with gift of fashioning and creating. Creators of art, language, science, technology, finance – very much in the image of Our Own Creator.

The angst I feel is not just fiscal responsibility for my family and community, and to give to the needy. It’s that I too often trust only in myself to make prudent choices about my money and time. It’s not only my time and money; it’s God’s. It belongs to that swaddling babe in the manger. It’s a joint loss or joint profit. I bristle at the stereotypical televangelists because wealth or poverty seems capricious at best, reward for sinlessness and punishment for sinfulness at worst – a form of theological behavioral modification. In truth, it is my heart that is at stake. When I trust in (or as Martin Luther put it – hang my heart on) myself and my judgment to the exclusion of God, I no longer trust in God. It’s no longer just my problem.

God has lost me – my heart and soul.

And that's why Christmas is so beautiful. It's not just the light trumping the geophysical longest night of the year (in the northern hemisphere anyway), but also the thwarting all-encompassing darkness in which I lose myself – the financial losses are comparatively insignificant. God's response to God's losing me is to become one of us.

Big deal, some might say – especially skeptical folks who lean towards agnostic or athiest. Other religions talk of gods disguising themselves as humans mostly for their own amusement. And those stories can be wildly entertaining – think “Jason and the Argonauts”. The only problem is that I've got nothing riding on those stories. Those gods could care less about Charlie Brown or Linus or Sherman. We would be but pawns in their chess game. The manger baby? This God has got some (actually all) skin in this game.

“And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” A quick note about signs – I crack up every time I see “Monty Python's Life of Brian” because everyone was looking for signs, irrespective of true significance. (Cue the scene in which Brian runs away and drops a gourd and loses a sandal – should we all get gourds, or create a pile of sandals or walk around with only one sandal? Still hilariously painful after all these years.) But there's deep significance in these signs. All newborns love to be swaddled, but these clothes portend burial garments, and the manger (instead of a crib) foreshadows a displaced tomb. This story of God becoming one of us is very different from the mischievous pantheon of gods; this is but the beginning of The Story of God giving all for us: dying an undeserved death, then rising again, thus defeating death.

It's The Story of paying off debts with the ultimate sacrifice, and balancing the ledgers of hearts, minds, souls and bodies. It's The Story that becomes intertwined with our own stories in our here and now. No longer are there crises of spiritual bankruptcies – the price has been paid. Hence the "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men."

That's where Linus stops quoting Luke. There's a pregnant pause there, a time for reflection, for meditation, even a short prayer. I'm pretty sure there's no way this TV special could be made today unless it were on a dedicated religious network. But back in the 1960s there were the three big networks and any show caught a large percentage of eyeballs. It's amazing – a miracle – that a television show could share the Good News so prominently. And even though it's a Christmas special – the fact that no other Christmas specials have done so speaks volumes.

There's more to the Lukan Christmas account beyond Linus-as-messenger (angel?) and it's just as important. It's what the shepherds do after hearing the message.

"And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them."

After hearing the angel's announcement, the shepherds are invited to see the signs and believe, just as we are invited to believe, to have trust in God's generous payment of our debts. As much as God's gift of settling our accounts is offered to all, it becomes effective if we but trust in it – hang our hearts on it, as it were. Trusting in God-in-Jesus, rather than hanging our hearts on accounts and finances. Ironically, following the imprint on our currency of “In God We Trust.”

But after seeing and believing, what do the shepherds do? They return to their workplaces and daily lives – to their regular programming as it were – but changed. They glorify and praise God, doing their shepherdly duties but adding another task to their to-do list: to be messengers, that is, angels, of God's Good News. As I can also do the same: return to the desk that serves two different companies, do my daily work and continue the struggle of making responsible fiscal decisions and commiserate with colleagues, but without the dark night of analysis paralysis and what-if'ing myself to death. What had been dialogue of despair has been replaced by hope and confidence of God paying my God-debts for me. With any luck at all, some might notice the shift in my attitudes and behavior and ask about it. With that opening I might be able to open new dimensions in my work relationships. (By the way, I've never been a soapbox evangelist – leavening existing relationships is how God has blessed me with evangelistic opportunities.)

I started writing this as a response to an “Edwardian (a Schroederian?) Call,” with the initial reaction of “how the heck do I find the time to write about it?” After squeezing time (as precious a commodity as money) out of a hectic schedule and Crossing my own life here during these tumultuous times, the better question is “can I afford not to have the Gospel speak to my life?” In a very special way made possible by this Internet missive, I too am returning to my daily workspace (my home

computer), glorifying and praising God for all the things I have heard, as it was told unto me. Thanks for reading, and I hope you too share in the glorifying and praising in these dark times.

Sherman Lee

19-22 Sept 2008

Brentwood, MO