

Mortality at the Manger 2006

Colleagues,

This week's post is a sequel to last week's. It too links the terms cancer and Christian—and Christmas. This time not among children in Shanghai, but in the flesh of a dear colleague of mine in N. Mankato, Minnesota, Dennis Ahl. Two months ago the diagnosis came in for him: pancreatic cancer – already metastasized. That immediately brought to mind Dom Helder Camara's caution, sent to me by another Crossings colleague, German pastor Jane Holslag, during my recent optic-nerve unpleasantness: "Say yes to the unexpected that criss-crosses your plans, wipes out your dreams, and gives a completely different direction to your day, yes, possibly to your entire life. These things do not happen by chance. Grant God the heavenly Father the freedom to chart the course of every day." In what follows Dennis tells us of that criss-crossing that came on October 21, and reminds us Whose Chris-crossed Name it is that connects us with that Father.

After seminary graduation (1968) Dennis Ahl taught with us in the theology department at Valparaiso University. It was a one-year appointment to plug a gap of a regular staffer gone on sabbatical. He endeared himself to all of us. He was a gutsy law-gospeller then, and never ceased to be just that in the congregations he pastored in the years thereafter. A few months ago he retired from pastoral ministry. During the decade ('83 – '93) of Crossings weekend workshops – The Word of God and Daily Work – Dennis invited us up to Minneapolis to conduct one with his congregation.

This week his Christmas letter arrived – like none other. We pass it on to you, with his permission.

As contradictory as it may sound, Dennis works the equation:

Mortality at the Manger = Peace and (even) Joy!

Ed Schroeder

“Christmas Greetings,” I believe what I am about to write is correct. If not, then the logic of what follows is messed up. Medievalists said, ‘In the midst of life we are in death.’ Luther said, ‘Nay, in the midst of death we are in life.’ Well, then, I must be in the midst of life because on October 2, I was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that had metastasized to the liver and the lymph nodes.

“There are some real benefits to being on Death Row. People say the nicest things about you, even if it kills them to say such nice things. I feel their pain. I have learned again something I learned before when I broke my right thumb; namely that the common, ordinary things of life of which we are completely unaware are probably our greatest gifts from God. Never before have I ever thanked God for regularity, a crampless gut, and a mouth and tongue without sores.

“Before starting on chemo, I felt quite good. I had my usual good appetite, food tasted good to me, and I was experiencing little or no discomfort – just a death sentence hanging over my head. Chemo has turned this upside down. I have come to the conclusion that oncologists believe that if patients have a deadly diagnosis, they therefore should feel deadly. And so they prescribe chemo. The scientist in me would have liked to have split myself into two: One taking chemo, the other not – to compare which route to death would have been more endurable.

“Before you waste a stamp on me next Christmas, you had better

wait for a letter from me because if you don't receive one, the post office doesn't deliver where I will be. Forget that stuff about how they deliver rain or shine...

"In the meantime, if you are praying for me, pray that God would use me as he did the blind man in John 9 to get glory for himself since oncologists are convinced they can't heal me – and even someone as cross-eyed as I would have to see God in his daily life. Or if God does not desire to get glory for himself by me, then pray that I might drink the cup as willingly as his son went to the cross.

"Meanwhile I'll sing the words of a stanza that didn't make the cut when hymns had to be cut to four or five stanzas: 'Laugh to scorn the gloomy grave and at death no longer tremble.' Whenever I have sung those words, two images have come to mind: I see the singer thumbing his nose at death or giving death the finger – for we have in God and the ascended Lord a God whose help knows no boundaries. He can put Humpty Dumpty together again even when all the king's horses and all the king's men can't.

*"In the Name of Him who came to save us,
"Dennis"*

[Here's the entire stanza for the two lines that Dennis cites. It's from "Jesus Christ my Sure Defense," which doesn't quite render the German original "Jesus, meine Zuversicht." Zuversicht is confidence.]

*Laugh to scorn the gloomy grave
And at death no longer tremble;
He, the Lord, who came to save
Will at last His own assemble.
We shall rise our Lord to meet,
Treading death beneath our feet. The original German is*

possibly even feistier:

*Lacht der finstern Erdenkluft,
Lacht des Todes und der Höllen,
Denn ihr sollt euch durch die Luft
Eurem Heiland zugesellen.
Dann wird Schwachheit und Verdruß
Liegen unter eurem Fuß.*

-Otto von Schwerin 1643