On The Fourth Anniversary of 9/11, “Rays of Light”: Law and Promise in the Wake of Katrina

Colleagues,

Today’s ThTh posting is the work of Michael Hoy. Michael works bi-vocationally as Pastor of Holy Trinity Lutheran Church (ELCA) and as Dean of the Lutheran School of Theology, both of them in St. Louis, Missouri.Peace and joy!

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Ray Nagin, the Mayor of New Orleans, says that we are just beginning to see “rays of light” following the devastation that hit his city and most of the southeastern US coast 10 days ago. He warns that thousands of bodies may still be found under the murky waters.

Any “rays of light” from post-storm-progress in bringing aid to people who were without aid, and restoration of property to that which has been damaged, would miss the rays of light that come through the Law and the Promise.

Here are some clues to the Law’s rays – singeing though they be:

1. *Katrina is a name derived most likely from the Greek word "katheros," which means "pure" or "cleansing." (There are other derivations, but we'll stick with this early Roman reading of the name). Might it be God's "cleansing" of us? God's own critique? Only two groups referred to the storm as bearing "the wrath of God," both for disparate and I think horribly misguided reasons. The religious right saw the storm as the "wrath of God" on gays and lesbians in New Orleans. If this were not such a serious matter, I would laugh at the religious right. As it is, the religious right is part of the problem in America. It is the new version of the Deutsche Christen [the nationalist, Hitler-friendly, church of the Third-Reich] , against which we may want to see a "time for confessing." But let me save that point for a future article.The other group using the term is the Al Qaeda. They claimed that this storm was the wrath of God "on America." Here are terrorists who, sad to say, have the better argument for a godless country than our own religious right. They, the Al Qaeda, could benefit from greater humility in the judgment, knowing whose wrath it is about which they speak. Yet the judgment of God, in the final analysis, is on us all, and no one escapes its critique. Let's not so universalize that problem so as to continue to excuse an America that goes merrily on its oblivious path of self-centered-and-blind-existence, unaware that the day of wrath is at hand. Let's start with the log in our own eye, before we think about the splinter in our neighbor's – something that America is not very good at, even as we continue to take the splinters out of Iraq.*
2. *While there were several "warnings" that the storm was coming, the people who couldn't escape its path were those racially poor, homeless, and elderly, without even*

basic transportation, let alone other necessities of life. Those bearing the brunt of the storm were the poorest in our country. Mississippi is the poorest state in the union. That's a warning for all of us. We didn't care for these poor. We didn't provide for them. We may not have realized they were even there. Fleeing the storm will not spare us from those we left behind. God takes no pleasure in our injustice to the poor.

3. *The National Geographic October 2004 issue featured an article that spoke hypothetically of a storm hitting New Orleans and the cataclysmic damage it would cause. 80% of the city, it said, would be under water. Thousands would die. "The Federal Emergency Management Agency lists a hurricane strike on New Orleans as one of the most dire threats to the nation, up there with a large earthquake in California [that has happened, of course, on April 18, 1906 in San Francisco-it may not be the last time] or a terrorist attack on New York City [that, too, has happened on 9/11]. Even the Red Cross no longer opens hurricane shelters in the city, claiming the risk to its workers too great." Interestingly, though, it was the Red Cross that was most ready to step in and assist the poor people of New Orleans who were without food and water. Meanwhile, FEMA and other governmental agencies couldn't make up their minds that this was the right time to act. People suffered and died for 4 days during this bureaucratic mess! One legislator in New Orleans pronounced the judgment against this failure quite bluntly, "God would not be pleased." Right idea; wrong tense. God is not pleased!*
4. *On the day after the storm, the governor of Mississippi, Haley Barbour, was flying over Biloxi, MS, and said, "I can only imagine that this is what Hiroshima looked like 60 years ago." Did we learn from Hiroshima? The fourth*

anniversary of 9/11 is just around the bend. Did we learn from 9/11? Will the waves of refugees and the rising floods of gas prices help lead us as a nation beyond "God bless America" to "Lord, have mercy"? One can only hope. But if 9/11 didn't do it, if the former storms in Florida didn't do it, if Hiroshima didn't do it, I'm not betting on Katrina.Still, God's judgment cannot be avoided. You can flee, but you cannot hide. America, we need to repent. I say this as a fellow American. I plead it as a fellow American. We have failed to please God. We have only managed to make matters worse with our own delays. President Lincoln pleaded for America to repent 140 years ago in the midst of the Civil War. You'd think our own President would do the same, especially given the fact that we are very much in a war with God, one can we cannot win. How many lives, how many catastrophes, how much pain and sorrow will we suffer before responding as a nation?

5. *A couple of sobering biblical illustrations to make the point: One from the book of Job. The mysterious counselor Elihu speaks to Job who cries out, "I am innocent" (34:5), "the mighty are taken away by no human hand" (34:20). Even nature itself is God's nature (37:1-12). Job has no counter-response to Elihu, as he does to the previous three "friends." In Ch. 38ff., Yahweh chimes in. Job's final response: "I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes." Of course, if you want something from the New Testament, there is always Jesus' own reading of the newspapers in Luke 13:1-5, with his refrain, "unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."*
6. *We cannot justify our existence. How appropriate that Luther noted the economic theology that seems to speak so well to our own time of indebtedness (in so many ways, but also concretely), that the God who "out of pure,*

fatherly, divine goodness and mercy" gives us everything we need from day to day is the one we abandon. And so, when God comes collecting ("For all of this I owe it to God to thank and praise, serve and obey him"), our pockets are bare. We have nothing that we can bring to make things right with God. We try passing the political buck on the failures to respond, but (as was said by another Missouri-based president, Harry Truman) "the buck stops here." He pointed to himself. We can't afford to.

Now for the Gospel's rays – the Light that enlightens the world (using the same corresponding numbers, in reverse order).

6. *We cannot justify our existence. But there is One who is our justification. Luther went on in the economic language into the second article of the creed to say that Jesus is "my Lord." And he defined Lord as an owner – a new owner, one who buys back rejects (call us Hummers). On his cross, this Lord takes our response that we can't afford to make, and says the buck stops with him. Maybe now we can begin to hum.*

5. *To be a Christian, one under this new ownership, our first, foremost, and daily response is precisely to repent. We can be free to do that, now that our Lord has turned the corner for us all. Repentance is a gift we get to do, not just an obligation we have to do. "Repent, and believe the good news," Jesus said. He gave us reason to turn.*

4. *America wants to pride itself on God-language. But right now it uses the God-language that brings condemnation rather than justification and sanctification. We can't get to the promise without the cross, and our passing through it. But we get to bear our cross. That is at the heart of the promise. Theologia crucis [theology of the*

cross] is the path for us, not theologia gloriae [theology of glory]. History, it is said, repeats itself. The new history we forge as a faithful people repents itself. Trusting the cross, we can take truly new bold steps into God's future.

3. *Let's start with a candid admission (confession): we blew it in New Orleans. President Bush says that he is going to get to the bottom of the blunder in failures to respond. That's like closing the barn door after the horse has already gotten out (or more accurately, after the poor creature has already perished in the flames, or the barn has collapsed). We can confess the truth because we trust the truth of forgiveness. All of this after-math that tries to get us into the positive ledger while someone else takes the blame (a negative ledger) is not going to work. It also makes the problem worse, because it is putting the focus on ourselves, more justifying of our existence, rather than seeing the focus as the devastation that has already happened because of our neglect, things done and left undone. Confess is what we get to do because of the Lord Whom we trust who will forgive.*

2. *The first of the beatitudes begins with the poor: "Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:1; Luke 6:20). Someday there is a leveling, sooner than we think. How can so many poor be right in our own backyard, while we are touting the banner of "Christian America"? Maybe we all need to see just how impoverished we are. "The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me," Jesus said (John 12:8). He said it to Judas, who probably wasn't listening, too busy justifying his own existence, counting his money. Jesus did not intend that the poor*

> *should be neglected. But he did see that there is a way to care for them that comes through the lens of his [Jesus'] passing through death and resurrection for all.*

The wrath of God is abated by the One who take the rays of destruction for us, refracting them through the lens of his cross. Apology IV of the Augsburg Confession provides a promising beginning to an exegesis of 2 Corinthians 3 (para. 133ff.), which dear mentor Bob Bertram (+) explored further in his soon-to-be-published "Postmodernity's CRUX: A Theology of the Cross for the Postmodern World." We cheapen the Law's critique, hiding under the veil of Moses, engaging in either legalism or antinomianism (Luther saw them as two foxes with their tails tied together), but do not get past our "opinio legis" (our leaning toward the law) in our reading of Scripture or our living of life – all along missing the truth of what the Law says. We keep the veil of the Law over our eyes because we think we cannot stand the brightness of the Law's glory – and we are right. We, by ourselves, cannot. But Jesus the Christ, who takes the radiating sting of those rays of glory into his own death on the cross, frees us to see his glory on the cross – and to share in that new glory for us and for all. He is our Ray of Light, our glory.

As the motto at Valparaiso University says, "In your light, we see light." (Psalm 36:9) Ray of Light, Jesus the Christ, help us to see the logs in our eyes, and to reach out to a hurting world in humility and grace.

Michael Hoy