

Pardon My Imprisonment – Anticipating Ash Wednesday.

Colleagues,

Though tempted to focus ThTh 503 on the theology of President Bush's "State of the Union" address earlier this week, I resisted that concupiscent (?) yen. Or so I thought. But then I thought about what all might not be said. And pretty soon Well, here it is.

[Next time (maybe) "Some More Thoughts on the Augsburg Aha! – The Augsburg Confession Itself–Class Session #2." The Ron-and-Ed show in Springfield, Illinois]

The president's speech revealed the "state" of our president. And the state of the president of the USA "is" the state of the union called the USA. He does indeed incarnate our nation. His faith is our national faith. The deities are progress, capitalism, consumerism (e.g., "stimulus" package needed so we can spend more—even if our children/grandchildren will someday have to be sacrificed to the Molech of paying for our bacchanal billions-for-binges), the American way—all under the mantra of "freedom and liberty" (with coercive force, if necessary).

Our president's gospel is indeed the Gospel of our nation. No wonder Teddy Roosevelt labelled the US president's office a "bully pulpit." We may hype our separation of church and state. But if the president is not preaching to us the gospel we do believe, he'd better get better speech-writers. The state of the union address is a sermon to the already "converted," the true believers. "This is indeed what we all believe, right? These are indeed our gods, right? Well, then, let the people say 'Amen!'" And we do. Even though we may "gritch" about the proclaimer, the

proclamation does articulate our national faith.

Repent? Turn around? You've got to be kidding. Nor do any of the candidates striving to be our next president ever come close in the tsunami of words rolling over us these days. Yes, they all are calling for "change." Of course. But it's rearranging deck-chairs on the Titanic. Repent? 180-degree turn-around from these dear deities? No candidate talks like that. None dare to talk like that. You can't get elected by calling the people to desert their gods. Unthinkable.

Better expressed biblically, it's "impossible." Not only that we don't, or won't, turn away from these deities. We can't—even if we wanted to. We're unable, incapable. That's what the Bible is talking about with its language about humanity "in bondage" to sin. Not in bondage to misbehaviors, though that may well be true. But "worse than that," in bondage to "principalities and powers"—as the NT designates them. Forces—real but most often invisible—in the managerial sphere of our lives, over whom we have no control. THEY own us. It's not "we own them" —so that we might conceivably someday dis-own them. And most of the time we willingly consent to that ownership. Regularly deem it benevolent. Serve it with (most) all our heart, (most) all our soul, (most) all our mind, (most) all the time.

So it is seldom that we even think about breaking their hold on us, let alone seeking to be free from them. These "values," these "rights," are just that—"right!" Godly, for sure, "endowed by the Creator." Especially for Americans "freedom" itself is at the top of the list. Who could want to be free from freedom? Insane. But when freedom, our primal American shibboleth, slides over from being a gift to being itself the Giver, when it "owns" us, a demonic switcheroo takes place. We slide into bondage and cannot free ourselves. The deities of FROGBA—the Folk Religion of God Bless America—seem to be so winsome most of the time. And

they are. But when they become de facto deities—when we “can’t imagine living without them”—then they have crossed the line. And so have their worshippers.

St. Paul’s strange-sounding mantra for cherishing the good stuff of life, but keeping it out of the God-box, was “having as though we had not.” (I Cor. 7:29-31). Bob Bertram’s version of that was to praise such gifts, but “limit their soteriological pretensions.” Which being interpreted in Shroederese: “keep them out of the God-box, from assuming the role of savior.”

In order for us to be “free” of principalities and powers, they have to be conquered. Some outside lord—outside of us—has to intervene and “lord” it over them, if it is to happen at all. Self-manumission from slavery never happens.

Many deities come in under the term “God” in the Folk Religion of God Bless America. Some were mentioned in that list of “-isms” above. If we had ears to hear, we would get the message from THEIR bully pulpits. It is just one word, “Gotcha!” Once we hear that word—and “fess up” to it—the proper response is to invoke an other deity, an other Lord, the “true” God with the words: “Kyrie eleison! Lord have mercy.”

We are with this ThTh posting just a few days away from this year’s super-early Ash Wednesday with its full season of “turn-around” texts, beginning with the Ash Wednesday Gospel’s roster of “turn-arounds” for “practicing your piety.” (Matt. 6) All of them but variations on the “standard” one recited regularly on Sundays in our congregation. Right from the git-go this formula admits that the “Gotcha!” is true. “We confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. . . .” Not just in bondage to bad habits of not loving God or neighbor—as bad as that indeed is—but in bondage to powers, “-isms,” that do indeed run our lives, displacing both God and neighbor in the process.

Six times that Matt. 6 text refers to the Father operating "in secret." Sometime it's the "Father who IS in secret," sometimes the "Father who SEES in secret." "Kryptos" is the Greek term for secret and cryptic that text is at first glance. But maybe not totally. If the topic is repentance—and it is—then the cryptic [=hidden, not pin-point-able] places are the control-centers of our lives. They can't be seen, you can't actually "put your finger on them." But their engines are running and they are running the show. The "crypt" is the stage where the show is running. Jesus' call to repentance in Matt. 6 is a probe into the crypt. And it's not just Jesus. He tells us that his line of vision is God's line of vision, God "seeing" into the crypt and spotlighting the other deities that have usurped God's primordial turf there. And their engines are running.

They are principalities and powers, the invaders into the control centers, the aliens in the crypt. When the Ephesian epistle locates these p-and-p's in the "heavenly places," I don't think it's directing us to look up into the sky. Rather the heavenly places are the places where "heaven-and-heaven's true God" are to be in charge. Not up there, but down here "in the crypt," inside our skin, at the human control-center that the Bible calls "the heart." It is with this metaphor that the Ash Wednesday Gospel concludes: "For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."

Gearing up for Lent is getting our own engines running, especially the auditory ones. 'Tis the season to tune up in order to tune in to God's "crypto-gram," the message from God's center to our own. First diagnostic of that crypt, then with offering a new prognosis.

The collect for Ash Wednesday and the Psalm for that day couldn't be more sharply focused. "Create in us new and honest [=no self-deception] hearts," we pray in the Collect. And the

Psalm asks for “truth in my inward being . . . wisdom in my secret(!) heart,” concluding with “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and confident spirit within me.”

It’s a pleasant English language gift that the words “Lent” and “repent” rhyme. Who’s in charge at the control-center? That is Lent/repent’s first question. After identifying the aliens, the next step is baptism-revisited. In Luther’s prose: “What’s the life-long sign that comes with baptism?” Answer: (with metaphors recast) “That the aliens at the control-centers within us be drowned and die with all their machinations and, again, a new human come forth and arise, who shall live under God’s righteousness-management, ‘clean’ from here to eternity.”

Brother Martin, we may ask, are you making this up? No, he says in his Small Catechism, I copied it. Here’s the original “We are buried with Christ by baptism into death, that like as He was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.” (Rom. 6)

If you can’t get the Holy Roman Empire to repent, Luther counseled his readers in the face of the Moslem jihad of his day, remember the Abrahamic finesse, how the patriarch whittled the numbers down (and God’s mercy up) in interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah. “Would you spare that evil empire, God, if there were 50 righteous ones there? How about 45? 40? 30? 20? Maybe just 10?” And God always said yes. Finally, “For the sake of ten I will not destroy it.”

“Surrogate repentance” was Bob Bertram’s tag for Luther’s proposal to try the Abrahamic finesse. Repentance on the part of a remnant works rescue for the unrepentant as well. How about that for this year’s Lenten discipline? [I wonder if we could stick with it for 40 straight days in our own household—in addition to walking that Siegfried Reinhardt Lenten path on the

Crossings website.] “God be merciful to me and all the rest of us in bondage to those p-and-p’s of our empire, those encrypted aliens within us too, with their engines running.” And God said: “For the sake of ten who repent, I will relent.”

Yes, Sodom didn’t survive, but Vienna in Luther’s day did. Sodom’s fate came to pass not because God’s mercy was untrustworthy. It was rather that hardly anybody deemed it worth trusting. What if 600-plus listserve receivers—or just 50? 45? 40? 30? 20? or just 10?—deemed it worth trusting in our own case? What all might happen, both in, and to, the one remaining empire in our world today?

Peace and joy!

Ed Schroeder