

Preaching the Christian Gospel from Old Testament Texts

Colleagues,

Two recent items of email-exchange have touched on the topic above. Here they are.

One is an email I posted to the pastor who had done the preaching at the closing liturgy of that Lutheran World Federation consultation (Augsburg, Germany) a few weeks ago. In my report to you on that LWF event I noted the 100% absence of Christ's name (or person or work) in the message offered. After a few exchanges with other LWF folks on the topic, it seemed time to write to the pastor directly. So I did that couple of weeks ago. No response yet. We never met face-to-face at Augsburg. After that closing service I tried to do so, but in vain.

The other item is a long appendix on the post to that LWF pastor. It's an email exchange with someone else, someone in Indonesia. But it is about preaching from OT texts. It's a conversation with Dr. Armencius Munthe, fellow-grad-student with me at the Univ. of Hamburg, Germany, decades ago. Armencius is retired bishop, sem prof—and some more things too—in one of the Batak Lutheran churches of Indonesia. He's still constantly on the go in pastoral and teaching tasks. So it came as no surprise when he sent me a request for “preaching help” on a tough text from the prophet Micah, that was assigned to him as a guest preacher.

Armencius was present at last year's Crossings conference and he learned (and liked) the six-step style of text study in preparation for preaching. He's got it down, but OT texts are

always tough. So he sends me a note.

All of these messages are here below. Starts with the LWF homilist, and then Armencius. Since Armencius and I are “old Hamburgers,” there’s a bit of German here and there in our exchange. But you can probably cope.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. In the most recent post from Armencius he tells of three recent pastoral visits he’s made to prisons on the island of Sumatra—worship, sermon, Bible study. “There are about 100 Christians in each prison. Some have Bibles, some do not. I’d like to distribute Bibles to them if I could. A Bible costs 40,000 ruppiahs, about 4 US dollars. That’s expensive in our country. Perhaps 160 Bibles are needed. Thank you very much.” [That’s Sumatran subtlety. My mentioning it to you is a RSV (Repeated Schroeder Version) of the same.]

To the LWF pastor.

Dear Pastor X,

I think you have heard that after returning to St. Louis (USA) from the LWF consultation in Augsburg I gave a report to my Crossings Community (an internet association of some 700 pastors and laity). In my report (Augsburg2009) I contrasted the two sermons preached at our consultation—the one on Sunday and the one at the very end of our consultation. I called attention to the fact that in one sermon Christ was mentioned many times—and (even more important) was “necessary” for the sermon to achieve its goal with us hearers, and in the second sermon Christ was not mentioned (nor needed) for the sermon to achieve its goal with us hearers.

Karen Bloomquist, LWF director of Theological Studies, and our host for the consultation, has expressed her unhappiness to me, that I did that. I think I was only reporting what actually happened and made no personal remarks about the respective preachers, although I made it quite clear that I thought the Christ-less sermon contradicted what the Augsburg Confession (and its Apology) confess as necessary for any Christian sermon. And I think that this statement is also a statement of fact, and not merely my opinion. It can be documented from the AC/Apol texts.

I don't think that you and I met when we were in Augsburg last month. It could have happened, but I am an old man and my memory is not so good anymore. I did try to speak with you after the closing liturgy, but I didn't succeed and our train departure was just one hour away.

Preaching a Christian sermon (where Christ's Gospel-promise is "necessary") on Old Testament texts is not easy. I know that from my own many years of preaching and from my teaching homiletics to students. Yet that is what must be done in Christian proclamation—on any Biblical text—according to the Lutheran confessions.

You may not know that in Lutheranism here in the USA, the Lutheran Confessions play a more important role than does Luther himself. In the constitutional documents of Lutheran churches here that is true, though not always in practice. So both in the ELCA and the Missouri Synod, it is the Lutheran Confessions, not Luther himself, which are the standard for what Lutheran theology is. And when there is debate—as there always is—it is the Book of Concord, not Luther, that is at the center when we wrestle with the "Ur-text" of the Lutheran heritage.

On preaching from OT texts I need to tell you this. St. Louis

has a large Jewish population. In my ecumenical engagement I have been in contact and conversation with Jewish rabbis and Biblical scholars. Even once I was on a TV series for a few sessions with such colleagues. I have heard sermons from these friends. And, of course, it is no surprise that Christ is not necessary (nor ever mentioned) in such homilies. The Torah is for them indeed fulfillable without Christ being in the picture. "Love God, love neighbor. Yes you can do it." I have not heard one of them preach on the Gen. 32/33 text that was yours—Jacob's wrestling with God before meeting Esau— but I know what I would most likely hear: "Yes, we too wrestle with God and we wrestle with the sister/brother in daily life. In both cases it is a reconciliation struggle. It is really just two sides of the same struggle. And yes, you can indeed do it. But it is difficult. Yet be of good courage. Strive to be Torah-faithful. God promises also to be faithful and that will bring a good outcome."

The key difference, as I know you know, is that our Augsburg 1530 confession claims: No, we cannot do it. Apart from Christ we are unable to fulfill the love-God commandment and the love-neighbor commandment.

I'm trying to remember how Luther exegeted this text in his Genesis commentary. I do not have it at hand any longer on my bookshelves. I wouldn't be surprised to hear him say such things as this.

- Yes, we wrestle with God—actually every day and hour—we live coram deo. We "must" live coram deo whether we like it or not. God is always there (whether we acknowledge it or not).
- To wrestle with God on our own resources is guaranteed defeat, finally death.
- Thanks be to God that Christ intervenes. He "wrestles with

God” in the “Froehlicher Wechsel” of Good Friday and Easter—and survives.

- Christ then offers that survival to us sola gratia. As he does to Thomas in John 20. It’s promissio. He encourages us to trust it. And “sola fide” it becomes our own victory in our God-wrestling. “Glaubstu, hastu. Glaubstu nicht, Hastu nicht.”
- From that victory in the God-wrestling match, we have strength and freedom to go and “wrestle” with the sisters and brothers and be reconciled with them too.
- Yes, it is not easy. It is a continuing struggle—both coram deo and coram hominibus. But Christ’s promise is strong. Its Easter power is sufficient for us—from here to eternity.

[Now that I have imagined Luther’s words on this text, I must actually go and check what he does with it. If you find out first, let me know.]

As a long-retired seminary teacher, I am sometimes asked for help by former students. Just yesterday came such a request from Armencius Munthe, a Batak Lutheran, now retired from being bishop and seminary professor in one of the Batak churches in Sumatra.

At the very last minute he asks for help. On Sunday (tomorrow) he is to preach two times in Medan, Sumatra, on a text from Micah. He wants to “necessitate Christ” in his sermon. But the Micah text is difficult.

In his request he refers to “Diagnosis and Prognosis.” These are terms used in our Crossings Community for text study. In the Diagnosis process we ask: “How does the text diagnose the human situation, the human dilemma, of that ancient context and does that give us insight into diagnosis of our situation (our context) today? We pursue that diagnosis in three steps: on the

surface, deeper (in the human heart), deepest of all (coram deo).

Prognosis then asks: What is the Good News offered by the text for healing and solving the dilemma at the time the text was spoken/written, and how might that be Good News for us as we wrestle with the same diagnosis?

We do, of course, hold to the Aug.Conf. conviction that Christ is necessary, the “only” Good News we know of that is “good enough” (=satis est) for healing our human dilemma coram deo (in whatever images, metaphors, word-pictures the text itself provides). So if step 1, 2 and 3 in the diagnosis process always brings us coram deo, the first step of the prognosis-series (actually a “new” prognosis, Good News, for the person/people just diagnosed), is always the crucified and risen Christ, articulated in whatever metaphors, word-pictures, images the text itself provides. [If the text itself—whether OT or NT—does not have an “opening” to get to Christ, then we follow Melancthon’s axiom (many times in Apology 4) for such texts: “Over and over again we say that the Gospel of Christ must be added.”]

From that first prognosis step (necessitating Christ), then follows the second prognosis step (healing in the heart: new faith, new hope, etc.) and from that comes the third prognosis step: healing of our relationships, our personal and public life, our callings in the world (once more in whatever metaphors, word-pictures, images the text itself provides). In terms of the Jacob/Esau text, “reconciliation between the brothers.”

If I haven’t completely bored you with this, and you wish to know more, Go to the Crossings web site (www.crossings.org) and click on Text Study. As you may know, Lutheran churches in

America follow a three-year lectionary for Sunday worship and each Sunday has three texts to be read—Old Testament, NT epistle, NT Gospel. So the Crossings text studies often present OT texts. You can see in those studies how our community seeks to practice “Christum necessare” when working with OT texts.

“Zur Information” I will paste below both Armencius’s request and my response.

Christ’s Peace and Joy be yours on Misericordias Domini.

Ed Schroeder

ELCA

St. Louis, Missouri USA

Dear Ed!

Next Sunday I will preach twice in Medan. The first Gottesdienst will be attended by at least 1.200 people. Could you please tell me how to see the Pericope of Micah 7:14-20 according to Diag- and Pro-gnosis?

Thank you.

Armencius

Dear Armencius,

Some thoughts.

Peace and Joy!

Ed

1. The text divides into two major parts.

IN PART ONE there are also two parts – A and B.

In Part A Micah is calling God to be shepherd with his flock “as in the days of old,” and the shepherd-sheep image dominates all of v. 14.

In Part B, those “days of old” are identified as the time when God brought them out of Egypt (v.15) and God is called upon to “do it again.” In doing it again God would do to the nations (the ones who have held Israelites captive in exile) what he did to Egypt at the time of the exodus. They will be shamed, speechless, deaf, licking dust like snakes, crawling on the ground. Even more severe (v.17) they shall have to confront God face to face—trembling, in dread, in fear.

This is definitely not GOOD NEWS for the nations. And the last lines of v.17 are Diagnosis-3 in the Crossings model.

Then comes PART TWO, v. 18-20. All about God’s mercy, forgiveness, compassion. All of this is “Prognosis” stuff (solution to the problem). But it has no Christ-focus, of course, here in Micah’s message. It is a statement of hope, of trust in God’s promise. But the promise is not yet fulfilled. Christ is the one who finally fulfills those words about mercy, compassion, forgiveness. V. 20 is the key to all this expected GOOD NEWS, namely, God’s promise-mercy-covenant with Abraham and his offspring (Jacob—and others).

In order to see the connection between the Abraham covenant and Jesus, you need to go to the NT, to the several places where Paul makes the connection—Romans and Galatians. Or also to those dialogs in John’s Gospel where Jesus and his critics are arguing about “Abraham and his connection”—both with the people who are criticizing Jesus and with Jesus himself.

So even BETTER “from the days of old” is the Abraham covenant,

better than the miraculous deliverance from Egypt, that also happened in the “days of old.” For linked with the Exodus from Egypt is (always) the Sinai covenant. And Sinai is NOT Good News for sinners. Sinai offers mercy (chesed) ONLY to commandment-keepers, not to commandment-breakers, people who are sinners. That is stated explicitly in the very terms of the Sinai “contract.” Verses 18 and 19 of your preaching text show that Micah’s audience are sinners and need mercy, need something BETTER than Sinai. And what is Better than Sinai? God’s covenant with Abraham, which is “sola gratia.”

So you might frame your sermon according to “The Days of Old.—Two Different ‘Days’”

FIRST DAYS OF OLD

Exodus and Sinai. Good news, yes, but not Good Enough (for sinners).

D-1 Yes, they were rescued from Egypt, and received the law at Sinai, but they failed. Look at all that Micah has been saying in his diagnosis of them for the first 6 chapters. They have “:failed” their part of the Sinai covenant. In what sense is that also true of us Christians in Medan today?

D-2 They have become like “the nations,” and the “nations” are transgressor nations. And Sinai says that “God visits the iniquities of the fathers upon the children,” on all those people (Hebrews or Goyim) who do not “love me and keep my commandments.” Is that diagnosis true of us too?

D-3 So the same sort of destruction that comes upon “the nations” is coming upon Israel—and it did. Vv. 16 and 17 also describe what happened to Israel as God sent them into captivity and exile. When we Christians stray from our Good Shepherd, Christ, then we too “stand before God face to face—trembling, in dread, in fear.”

BUT, there is the Abraham covenant. Something even better “from days of old,” better than Exodus/Sinai– even “older” than Exodus/Sinai.

It will not come automatically. But when God himself fulfills the Abrahamic promise, THEN it is present for sinners to receive and enjoy. For all Sinai-commandment-breakers. It never (yet) happened in Micah’s day. Nor anywhere else in the OT times. Although a prophet like Isaiah gives us a picture of such a “shepherd” rescue in his Suffering Servant songs, esp. Is. 53.

So now to the Prognosis.

GOD’S “SECOND DAYS OF OLD.”

P-1. The best thing Israel received in the Days of Old was not Sinai, but God’s promise to Abraham and Sarah. When was that promise fulfilled? God “shepherds” his people, fulfills his Abrahamic promise, in THE GOOD SHEPHERD who gives his life for the sheep, Jesus of Nazareth. See John 10 for details. Micah’s words v.18, 19, 20 give you his own terms to describe it to your congregation.

P-2. Glaubst DU, hast DU. When you trust this Good shepherd, all the Good Things he brings (v. 18-20) become your personal possession. That is real freedom from all oppression. First of all the “oppression” of being burdened by sin and guilt, but then also even freedom from the “nations,” the principalities and powers, that may still persecute Christians. You, Armencius, have told me many stories about such situations in Indonesia. But they cannot destroy us. Though they may still be active, Christ has defeated them and their days are numbered.

P-3 Now we go back out into the world “hearing the voice of the Good Shepherd, following him” wherever he leads us—joyful and genuinely “free”—sharing with others the forgiveness, mercy,

compassion that has been given to us. Even to our enemies who are persecuting us today here in Indonesia. Telling others about the “good voice” of the Good Shepherd, so that they may hear it too, and after hearing it, join us in following him. You have told me, Armencius, how that is actually happening with many Muslims throughout your country, although we in the West have never heard about it.