

Reading the Bible in Mission to the World.

Colleagues,

Episcopalian and ELCA Lutheran pastors in Cleveland, Ohio, get together now and then for liturgy, listening and learning. Last week I was the Lutherans' "offering" to their Episcopal colleagues for this spring's "Lutepisc" gathering at Messiah Lutheran in the west-Cleveland suburb of Fairview Park. My assigned topic: "Our Common Conundrum: Reading the Bible in Mission to the World."

The premise was that the sexuality-fracas for both denominations these days is patently a conflict about how to read the Bible. Second premise was that, even apart from that fracas, both of us—with our shrinking denominational memberships—are fumbling Christ's mission mandate.

The presentation went something like this:

1. The president of the American Society of Missiology calls me a "late-in-life" missiologist. After nigh onto forty years being "just" a theology prof, the mission bug has bitten, and in the 16 years since retirement, that bug has kept me itching and scratching. Within the ASM, where I've been a member even before retirement, I've sought to link the "Augsburg Aha!" of those years as theology prof to the nitty-gritty of the mission world. Most of you know that from reading these ThTh posts. So within the ASM (and its international counterpart IAMS) my one-string-banjo keeps strumming the tune of "Augsburg Catholicism" [AC] as the best melody for mission theology and practice. My monotone sometimes ruffles feathers in the ASM club, but I'm really

just strumming for “equal time.” That is equal time for Augsburg Catholicism alongside the other two major tunes in the missiological music world—monotones in their own way—of Roman Catholicism [RC] and Calvinist Catholicism [CC]. The Calvinist banjo (as I told the ThTh readership last summer) dominated the entire program at our 2008 ASM assembly. Four speakers from Princeton, all strumming the CC tune and then an RC guest from Europe whose opening photo for her Powerpoint presentation was none other than Karl Barth, the CC superstar of the 20th century. Her ecumenical pitch was to link her RC missiology to that of Barth’s CC. Which she did indeed do. But that common cantus firmus between CC and RC is another topic.

2. Since I’ve been hobnobbing with the missiologists I’ve added the word “context” to my theological vocabulary. So what is our American context on this first week in March 2009, the specific turf where Christ’s “so send I you” puts us? American economy in shambles, foxes guarding the hen-house, war never-ending—you add to the list. What’s under the surface of our American context?
3. Parker Palmer, America’s brilliant Quaker social analyst and teacher, was interviewed on Bill Moyers’ Journal two weeks ago. “Our American daily life is built on illusion,” he told us. He then launched into a discussion of faith as a misunderstood word. Faith is not a set of beliefs we are supposed to sign up for. It is instead the courage to face our illusions and allow ourselves to be disillusioned by them. It is the courage to walk through our illusions and dispel them. He states that the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is fear – fear of abandoning illusions because of our comfort level with them. Was he optimistic about America’s future? Not yet. Not until we get widespread awareness—and then “confession”—that “the party is over.”
4. A few days ago Steve Hitchcock sent me an article by

Walter Brueggemann [Theology Today, Vol. 65 (2008) 285-311)]. "Prophetic Ministry in the National Security State." Here's the abstract that preceded the full text:

"Faithful Christian preaching in the United States is in the context of the ideology of the national security state, an ideology that permeates every facet of our common life. In that difficult and demanding context, this essay urges that Christian preaching must go back to basics, that everything depends on the mystery of faith, that 'Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.' From that elemental claim, it is proposed that at the center of faith and faithful experience is an abyss that in the Old Testament came as the destruction of Jerusalem and in the U.S. national security state comes to be epitomized as '9/11.' Focusing on the abyss, according to that ideology, evokes denial about going into the abyss and despair about ever getting out of it. The prophetic rejoinder to such denial is truth telling, and the prophetic response to despair is hope telling. This truth has a Friday tone, and this hope has a Sunday flavor. Such truth and hope expose the ideology of the national security state as a promise that cannot be kept and invite alternative discipleship that issues in joy and freedom outside that system of death."

Note Brueggemann's words "the ideology of the national security state." Ideologies are soteriologies, proposed ways of salvation ["Heil, Hitler!" did not mean "Hail to Hitler." It meant "Heil (salvation) comes from Hitler."] They offer their own gospels. They call to their own style of discipleship. But it's all phony. Even worse, a system of death. Brueggemann tells us that they make "promises that cannot be kept."

5. Illusion and Denial. Denial that the party is over. Denial that capitalism – like communism when the Berlin Wall fell – died when the Wall of Wall Street fell. Humpty-dumpty. Goliath with head severed. Illusion that “All the king’s horses and all the king’s men” could indeed put Humpty-Dumpty together again. But it will take trillions of dollars, we are told, and we can do it. Illusion. And beneath illusion and denial, at an ever deeper level, blindness. Not seeing God, America’s creator AND critic, giving our empire its comeuppance.
6. Even worse. One OT passage that Brueggemann does not cite—among the many many in his full article—is for such a time as this. It’s in the story of the Egyptian army pursuing the Israelites through the Red Sea. Why did the empire’s military power collapse and the unarmed Israelites escape unharmed? “God knocked the wheels off their chariots.” If our people didn’t catch the meaning of Francis Coppola’s movie about Vietnam a few years ago, “Apocalypse Now,” will they do so now? They could, says Brueggemann—at least those in Christian congregations could—if there were “prophetic preachers” in those congregations. More on this below.
7. And what are we Lutherans and Episcopalians doing about THIS context in which we and our people live? Very little. For the Clevelanders I read three headlines from “Episcopal Life” Feb. 2009, the national newspaper of the ECUSA. Ditto from the ELCA. They were all about the sexuality fracas—and for the Episcopalians, the church property and jurisdictional snarls that have arisen therefrom. We are immersed in the sound of silence. How to interpret our common silence—both in preaching and in mission? We may be stuck. Even more severe, we may be “struck” with a speech-impediment that we cannot cure. The prophet Amos tells us of a “silence” of the Word of God in

his day. Not only that no one was picking up any signals from God in those days, but possibly even worse, that no one was able any longer to utter God's message, to let God's voice be heard. The whole nation was smitten deaf and dumb. The Biblical record reports that God has also knocked off the wheels from churchly chariots—not just those of national security empires.

8. When the Word of God deserts a land, it doesn't simply evaporate. Its departure is God's judgment on the land it deserts, but it then moves somewhere else. Luther called that the "Platzregen" effect. Here's a quote from 1520:

"Germany has never before heard so much of God's Gospel as now. There was scant trace of it in our earlier history. But if we let it pass by without thanks and honor, I am afraid that we shall have to suffer plague and grimmer darkness. My dear Germans . . . make use of God's Word of Grace while it is there. For know this, that the Word of God's grace is like a "Platzregen" (a sweeping thundershower and downpour), which never returns to where it has already been. Paul brought it to Greece; from there it has also gone and now they have the Turks (=Muslims). Rome and the Latin lands have had their visitation, but it has gone. And you Germans must not think that you will have it for ever, for it will not stay where there is ingratitude and contempt. Therefore let all take hold and keep hold who can."

9. The Platzregen in Ethiopia. I then read out loud to the Clevelanders the "in-betweeners" I had posted to this listserve a week or so ago about the Platzregen in Ethiopia, that e-message from Dinku Lamessa Bato, national coordinator for University Student Ministry. Dinku told us of the 185,000 newly baptized during the one-month evangelism campaign in the course of the 50th anniversary

celebration of the establishment of the Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus earlier this year.

10. If this is indeed our USA context—both for Lutherans and Episcopalians—if Palmer and Brueggemann are right in reading the signs of the times, how to proceed? Has the Platzregen actually departed? Will there be no more “Word of God” to be heard, no matter what we do? It’s happened before. Depends on whether there is anyone left to proclaim it. Even in Amos’s day, God “took him” [same Hebrew verb as Elijah being taken in the fiery chariot], Amos tells us, took him from his farmer-calling and sent him to bring the Platzregen one more time to Samaria. Brueggemann’s call for “prophetic preaching” indicates that he thinks that still could happen in our parched land. So what is “prophetic preaching?” He puts a twist on what “prophetic” means. It is not what fundamentalists say: predictive history about the end-times, Armageddon and the rapture. Nor is it what liberals have made of it with their mantra of “speaking truth to power.” Rather it is “truth-telling” (that’s law-diagnosis in Lutheran lingo) and “hope-telling” (the Gospel promise) to God’s own people, to our own congregations. Back to our fundamental Christian mission. Finally back to the Bible—with the Bible’s own proposed lenses for how to read the Bible. And then how to read the world.
11. We’ll follow that sequence, I told the Clevelanders. Not first “back to the Bible and then to mission,” but vice versa: first the mission agenda, then how to find THE Gospel in the Bible, then back to the world with that Gospel. So three phases:
12. Duplex missio dei. God’s double mission in the world. God’s two administrations (diakooniai in Greek) and two covenants (diatheekai in Greek), as St. Paul spells out his own mission theology in 2 Corinthians 3-5. [If you’ve

been reading these Thursday Theology posts for even a little while, you know what the Clevelanders heard on this topic. So I won't repeat it here.]

13. Using this bi-focal lens to read the Bible and answer the question: Why Jesus? [Ditto]
14. Ash Wednesday's second lesson, just last week, 2 Cor 5 and the mission particulars—theology and practice—now that “God has entrusted to us Christ's ministry of reconciliation” for the world. [Ditto]

And that triad brought the presentation to closure. Should you wish to review those three phases, you might check the key terms on the Crossings website <www.crossing.org> using the internal Google system to track them down.

Peace and joy!

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