

Repentance and Apocalypse Now

Colleagues, September 11 fallout came closer to our home this week when one of our kids, the family breadwinner, e-mailed us: "Most all of the staff at [one of the foremost academic publishing houses] was notified today—out of a clear blue sky—that we're being laid off at the end of November. Company sales have gone into the tank since 9.11. A skeletal crew will stay and try to hold the fort."

Loss of livelihood is not loss of life, but it IS Apocalypse Now when it happens to you. And speaking of apocalypse, the Gospel for this coming Sunday is the apocalypse chapter from Luke. I'm slotted to be guest preacher at local congregation. Jesus' words, as Luke records them, sound like they came from today's newspaper. Christ the King Sunday comes next with Luke's Good Friday trialogue—Jesus and his two co-crucified—as the "Good News" for the day. Which it really is as Jesus creates Paradise on-the-spot in the very midst of the Apocalypse Now for all three. Though it is there for both of the bad guys, one gets it, the other doesn't. How come? In a word: repentance. Read the text. "We deserve the divine come-uppance we're getting." The other guy didn't think so. And if that's not enough, the next Sunday, Advent I, we start the new church year with more of the same, Matthew's apocalypse chapter 24. Seems we can't get away from the theme of God, the world's critic, and God's call to turn around.

So if, as some of you have told me, you're getting tired of this repentance drumbeat in ThTh, better stay away from church for the next three Sundays. And most of the Sundays thereafter too. When Luther hyped repentance—every day, he said—in the first of his 95 theses, he was not saying something new. He was just doing his job as a Biblical investigative reporter.

A decade or so ago Francis Coppola labelled his Vietnam war film "Apocalypse Now." Movie critics, as I recall, did give attention to the title he chose, but Christian theologians generally passed it by. One exception was in a Crossing course of that era. No surprise, it was a course on the book of Revelation. Coppola's film was required viewing. Then came the assignment to "cross" the theology of the Biblical book with this slice-of-life Americana.

The motif of apocalypse, not only in the Biblical book but also "Now," is that God is on the bench and we worldlings are in the dock. Yes, all hell is breaking loose—as in next Sunday's Gospel and the one for Advent I—but the focus in Christian apocalyptic is not the cosmic devastation. It's "da Judge." And Christian apocalyptic tells how to cope with that cosmic judge. Answer: the blood of The Lamb, aka Mi-cha-el (Rev.12), whose Hebrew name parses "the-one-who-is-like-God."

Since my first foray into the repentance topic nine weeks ago, a number of you readers have needled me with additional rejoinders, besides telling me that you're getting tired of my one-string banjo. So I'll address them in this posting. Here's four of them:

1. I'm getting tired of your repentance drumbeat. And Luther's 1529 precedent wears thin.
2. Ed, why so little Gospel coming from you in these repentance postings?
3. Repentance, yes, but what are we supposed to repent "of," and what would it look like, if we did do it?
4. "I hear you mixing your political opinions with your theological analysis of what is going on post 9-11. I suppose you could be really cynical about our somewhat "cautious" pursuit of this War and Bush's refusal to give in to the idiots who just want to drop an A bomb on Kabul

and see it as some sort of sinister plot. But I think the guy really wants to be 'responsible' and not be some trigger-happy patriot who will destroy any one who gets in our way. . . . Today's edition [#178] sounds like a pacifist, antiwar rag."

1. To #1

Amos is becoming my favorite prophet. He's a farm-boy. Protests that he never was a prophet, nor a prophet's kid, a PK. Yet the Lord led him to see something—an Aha!—and then commanded him to tell the folks what he saw. I've had no such special vision, no voice from the Lord saying: Go and tell. What I've seen was mentioned in earlier postings. I hold the Bible up alongside the TV screen, or Luther's Treatise on War Against the Turks alongside the daily newspaper—and last week, a discovery for me, Augustine alongside the reality of the American empire. Then I've "merely" told you what I see. Sure, lots of folks may not see it that way. But was it ever different when someone proposed to cross the Word of God with the world we live in, and be specific about it? As C.S. Lewis said somewhere, anyone making Christian claim in the public arena is either telling the truth or is a "poached egg." Hearers come to one or the other evaluation, and act accordingly. One of you cited John the Baptizer's name-tag—in Latin yet—"vox clamantis in deserto," and saw a parallel to recent ThTh postings. I don't propose to be such a voice crying in the wilderness, nor have I heard any voice coming from above. Yet John's call to repentance is either the Word of God or he too is a poached egg. That includes his jarring metaphor about God's ax being laid to the roots—about which more below.

Taking note of Luther and Augustine was not intended to bring in the heavies to make my case. Rather, I reported

them to you as eye-openers for me. From Luther, the Aha! was that God can and does use villains as the rod of his anger in giving justice to unjust nations. From Augustine, the Aha! was about empires never ever being just since they must—by definition—impose their hybris upon another people. Whereupon the God of history finally executes divine justice and the empire crumbles. Seems to me that for Christians the only argument contra Luther's analysis would be that our nation's track record is immune to the divine critic and thus no enemy of ours can simultaneously be the rod of God's anger against us. Contra Augustine would be that America is really not an empire and thus his caveat is irrelevant.

My proposal in recent postings has been that their analysis is also true for us: God is the enemy, the critic our nation is confronting. To ignore that is to counter-sign our own death warrant. If that constitutes a one-string banjo, then so be it. It could also be a poached egg.

2. Why so little Gospel in recent postings on repentance? One of the recent posts presented Jesus' two different calls to repentance: his condemning call to repentance and his saving call to repentance. The condemning one went to the self-righteous crowd, who saw no need of repentance. Jesus himself put no Gospel into that call in any of the NT texts. The opposite was the case with his saving call. There he spoke big Gospel, but it went to a different audience—the folks who 'fessed up that they were sinners "in fact," which then rendered them sinners "in truth." The Rich Man/Lazarus parable also has "so little Gospel" for the rich man in torment, and for this skimpiness Jesus himself gives the reason: "If they will not listen to

Moses and the prophets (God the critic), neither will they be convinced by Someone rising from the dead (Gospel).” So the witness of the Resurrected One is not offered to them. That’s grim. Just as it was grim for the other thief on the cross, the guy who never even got the offer of paradise from the One in the middle. For Christians already plugged into the Gospel, there is additional impetus toward repentance, of course, even joy at going the repentance-route to make the sweet-swap. But how could anyone swap his sin for Christ’s righteousness, if he acknowledges no sin and thus has “no need for repentance”? So what’s to sweet-swap?

3. Repentance, yes, but what are we supposed to repent “of,” and what would it look like, if we did do it? From this question, asked by several of you, I learned one very surprising thing. Namely this: in most all of the NT references to either the verb or noun of repentance, there is no “of” anything. The verb and the noun just stand there naked. In the last NT book, Revelation, there are a couple “repent of” texts and in Paul I found just one . But all the rest of the NT references follow the pattern of Jesus’ opening sermon in Mark’s gospel: “Repent (period. No “of what?”) and believe the Good News.” So did the folks who heard the naked verb know what Jesus was talking about? It would seem so. When you zero in on the root meaning of repentance—not a feeling sorry, but a change at the core—Then the simple imperative says: “You’re on a dead end track. Turn around.” Does that need an “of what” to make sense?

Seems to me when folks ask: “Repent of what?” they chronically are asking a Pelagian question. Pelagius was an early Christian theologian who maintained that rigorous Christian behavior was the key to Christian righteousness. The core of the faith was ethics. So when people ask

“repent-of-what?” aren’t they asking: what is the bad habit, bad behavior from which I’m to turn away? That’s my experience. To cope with this mis-focused repentance, the standard Crossings paradigm for text study is helpful. Take the image that Jesus uses of a tree and its fruit—good trees/fruit and bad trees/fruit. “Repent of what?” questions are chronically asking about the fruit. And that should come as no surprise since Pelagianism, said the Reformers, is the original sin of the human race. [They labelled it “opinio legis,” the inborn notion that doing something good makes me good.] Pelagianism persists, call it the Old Adam in Christians too. It is this Old Adam who asks the “of what” when he hears the word repent: what do you want me to “do” that’s different? But Biblical repentance calls for a “root” job, it’s not a fruit-job. Remember where the ax was laid in the repentance call of John the Baptizer. God’s repentance call says: your God-connection, your God-disconnection, is what we’re talking about. Whom you are fearing, loving and trusting? It’s your heart, not your actions, your rootage is the operating table of repentance. Repent of what? is always asking about behavior. New Testament “metanoia” (the repentance term in Greek) does not focus on ethics. It says: turn your head around. In today’s lingo: Get your head screwed on right. When those NT repentance calls come without any “of what?” it must be that faith/unfaith is the agenda. Could even be that when Jesus links “Repent and believe the Good News” in one sentence, everyone in the audience heard: “turn away from the gospel you’re currently trusting and trust this New and Good one.” He doesn’t put any “of what” into the sentence. Their name is legion.

When Luther proposed vicarious repentance, a few

Christians doing it for the sake of the many who would not, and then even expected that it would “work,” he was simply being Christian. The one who finally runs history is not the King of Assyria, nor Suleiman, nor Osama, nor the US president nor our military muscle. It’s God. “The Bible tells me so,” he could have said. With that God you can communicate. When God is mad, the communication that works is: Repent and believe the Good News. That message comes from One for whom God has special affection. And the masses of the unrepentant, says the Bible, could all benefit from that. Remember Abraham and his conversation with God over Sodom. Says God, after Abraham whittles him down to rock bottom: “For the sake of only ten righteous—aka repentant—ones in Sodom I will not destroy it.” What can Christians “do” in the face of today’s apocalypse now? There’s one answer. Which brings us to politics.

4. Finally the needle that I’m just ragging on George Bush. Don’t think so, I’m talking about the nation’s need to repent. And that applies even to a non-chosen nation. Here Amos is a precedent. In his first two chapters he spells out God’s coming judgment on six (yes, six) non-chosen nations in the Middle East. Every one of them is guilty of the injustice/hybris that Augustine cites as Rome’s deficit. And God is their enemy. And then Amos moves to the now-separated 2 nations of Judah and Israel. Their justice record is just as awful as the first six nations, so their fate is the same, as God says (20 times!) “I will do such and so to give them their just deserts.” God can deliver such justice to the unjust nations either in a great cataclysm [“Prepare to meet your God.” 4:12] or parcel it out in little pieces of “one damn thing after another.” [6:19f.] Were Amos on the American scene this

week, we would probably hear his grim commentary: "Does a plane fall apart in the sky, unless the Lord has done it?" [3:3-6] Poached egg? If you are linking the Word of God to your own world, how do you avoid politics, at least the politics of God in action in our world? President Bush's address to the UN this past weekend sounded an awful lot like Amos. He too was doing a "theology of world history." Here's how our local newspaper recorded one segment of it:

"This threat cannot be ignored," said Bush, clenching his fist. "This threat cannot be appeased. Civilization itself, the civilization we share, is threatened. History will record our response, and judge or justify every nation in this hall."

Augustine and Luther's addendum would have reminded him that the threat is coming from God as well as from the human enemies we confront. And that divine threat can indeed be ignored—as happens all over, and is happening across the planet today, when humans do not repent—but the consequences are disastrous. But Bush is right in that this threat—especially with the addendum "from God"—cannot be appeased. Yet the divine threat can be defused with repentance and then "sweet-swapped" with a crucified Messiah. Bush's last sentence also needed only the divine addendum: "[The God of] history will record our response, and judge or justify every nation in this hall." Even without mentioning God and just settling for "history" as the final evaluator, Bush was into deep theology, but sadly not 'deep enough.' Clearly not as deep as Lincoln went when he called the nation to come to terms with God the critic. Even deeper is the Biblical claim that the God of history not only WILL judge/justify nations in the future, but is busy doing so RIGHT NOW for the response "nations" have made in past history. That's what Luther

and Augustine call us to see when anyone affirms that “every nation is judged or justified.” Not merely tomorrow, but today. What apparently makes it difficult for Bush—and the non-silent majority he speaks for—to see God as our critic is the Manichaen dualism in, with, and under his theology of history. “In this world there are good causes and bad causes,” he told the UN, and there was no doubt about who was on the side of the good. So how could history, even more the God of history, be against us?

Summa: we do need to get God “for” us. But it’s not going to be done by national Pelagianism. We have another word on how to get God to be “for” us. And when God IS for us who can be against us? Segue into Romans 8 and Paul’s Gospel proposed there vis-a-vis every Apocalypse Now.

Peace & Joy!
Ed Schroeder