

Sample Sermon on an Apocalyptic Text.

Colleagues,

Ron Neustadt is pastor of St. Mark Lutheran congregation in Belleville, Illinois, just across the Mississippi River from St. Louis, Missouri. At last week's monthly gathering of our ELCA ministerial association, he was the proclaimer for our opening liturgy. His text was last Sunday's apocalyptic Gospel from Mark 13.

You've seen Ron's name in ThTh posts before. Last year he and I team-taught a course in the Lutheran Confessions for some folks in Springfield, Illinois. We posted the class handouts to you ThTh readers for several weeks as we were cranking them out. [If curious, pull up the ThTh offerings for 2008 at <www.crossings.org> and check them out. First one was on January 24. The sequence comes under the rubric "The Augsburg Aha!"]

From what follows, you'll see that Ron hasn't lost his touch. In this homily he's putting the touch on all of us—especially us preacher-types—as he pushes that Augsburg Aha! and Jesus' words in the Mark 13 apocalypse right smack into the "touchy" center of his own pastoral calling. [Remember, the literal Greek meaning of apo-calypse is "un-veiling." When Jesus switches into apocalyptic mode, he's blowing the cover—not just on world history, but on our human interiors as well. Ditto for Ron.]

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

24th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 13:1-8

Thursday 12 November 2009

Dear Lord, what was I thinking? Why did I agree to preach this morning? When Freda asked me, why didn't I explain to her how busy I am right now?

Besides that, these aren't exactly the easiest texts in the world, you know. The "little apocalypse from Mark?" Dear Lord!

A voice: Yes?

Ron: Huh?

A voice [hereafter V]: I said, "Yes?" – You WERE talking to ME, weren't you? "Dear Lord" you said. Actually it came out "DEAR LORD!" but I interpreted it in the kindest possible way.

Ron [hereafter R]: Well, thank you. And, uh, ... I'm sorry for the way I said it.

V: Absolvo te. But let's get to the real problem.

R: And that is?

V: Your reluctance to preach. What's that all about?

R: Well, I AM busy. You should know that.

V: Oh, I know you're busy, all right. In fact, I'd say close to being overwhelmed. (As a matter of fact, so are all those dear children sitting out there. Why is it that you've done that to yourselves? Do you really think that you're going to make everything turn out all right by just trying harder and harder and harder?)

I know you're busy, Neustadt, and that's something we need to

talk about sometime soon – not because you say YES to so much, but because too often you say Yes in order to get approval from others (or avoid disapproval) and not because you are all that eager to do what you agree to do.

But that's another conversation. Right now, the issue is that there are people sitting out there who are busy, too – just as busy as you are – and some of them are facing their own apocalypses right now. And I want them to hear some Good News – honest to ME Good News.

R: I know. ... I know. But that's not making it any easier for me.

V: You're finding it hard to speak Good News to your colleagues?

R: It's not that I don't want to. It's just ... it ... it's just ...

V: I know what it is. You don't always trust MY Good News yourself. You find other things to trust in.

Don't think I'm unaware of how you have been content to rely on that set-up you've got with St. George's. [Ron's St. Mark Lutheran congregation has for years and years been happily yoked with St. George Episcopal in Belleville, all under one roof in mutually blessed symbiosis.] "Look at the size of those stones." Three buildings worth! And nice looking buildings, at that. And "Look at the size of that pipe organ."

And don't you think I'm aware of how you like to rely on your reputation? And on your rightness? And don't you think I know how you USED to enjoy looking at the balance in your retirement fund – and how you used to be impressed with that, too?

No wonder you sometimes have a hard time sharing my Good News with others. You don't always trust it YOURSELF. You've got OTHER things that impress you.

(silence)

R: What can I say? You've nailed me.

V: Only in the hope that you will not get nailed big time down the road.

R: Say again?

V: The fact is, there are apocalypses yet to come – and even they are but foreshadowings of the Big One.

And I don't want you to have to go through any of them, and get nailed, and have that be the end of you.

Au contraire, Neustadt. I want you to survive those apocalypses – all of them, even the Big One – and to have the peace of knowing now that you will survive them.

That's where you are only partly right when you say that I nailed you.

R: But you did nail me.

V: Yes, but only to have you turn away from looking at all those large stones that impress you so. Because if you keep looking to those things for your future, you're headed for some big trouble – because sooner or later they will all be pulled down. Not just your retirement fund, but everything.

THEN YOU WOULD HAVE ME TO ANSWER TO – and that's when you REALLY would have nothing to say!

R: That, I gather, is what you don't want to have happen.

V: Right. What I want to have happen is for you (and all my friends out there) to know that you (and they) can count on my son to see you through your apocalypses – even the Big One.

After all, my son knows the way. He's travelled it himself. . .
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Ah, my son. What that boy went through! Talk about getting nailed! Now there was an apocalypse ... Well, you know what happened. The point is, that was for YOU. That's how dear you are to us.

R: To both of you?

V: Absolutely. He'll see you through. He's promised. And he has my full support. (I can't tell you how proud I am of that boy!)

If you have any doubts about all this, take him up on his invitation. Eat and Drink. And don't forget what he has done for you. Don't forget how dear you are to us.

R: What can I say? Thanks!

V: It's my pleasure.

Now ... there are some of my friends out there (your friends, too) who are going through some little apocalypses themselves right now.

R: I know. Or, at least, I know about some. And I think I know what you have in mind.

V: Yes, you do. I have mentioned it, haven't I.

R: I'll do my best to remind them, dear Lord. I will do my best to remind them. . . .

"...the beginning of the BIRTHPANGS," you say.

V: That's right.

R: I'll do my best to remind them.

Ronald C. Neustadt
Belleville, Illinois