

Shock and Awe—at the Power of Death or the Power of Life?

Colleagues,

Amy Thoren is the seminary intern this year at our congregation here in St. Louis. But only half-time. The other half of her internship is with the Lutheran Campus Ministry here in town. Amy is something else! Not only is she amiable; she's awesome—especially when it comes to knowing the Gospel and then proclaiming it when it's her turn in the pulpit. She even knows how to parse “awe,” that term now secularized—actually demonized—in public rhetoric in the USA. I say “demonized” because there is no God-quotient left in the term as our leaders tell us what “we” are trying to do to the Iraqis. We're told that the goal is to render the enemy “awe-struck” about us and our military muscle. God gets robbed of his proprietary rights to the term. If that is indeed the case, you know who is in trouble—with God! Au contraire Amy. Amy knows how to parse awe. How else, but via law and Gospel? That itself is awesome—and rare in preaching these days. Seems to me—as Henry Higgins said of Liza Doolittle—“I think she's got it.” See the evidence below.

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

*Sermon on Laetare, Fourth Sunday in Lent
March 30, 2003*

by Amy Thoren

Epistle: Ephesians 2.1-10

Gospel: John 3.14-21

Two men are shown mercy. In Victor Hugo's Les Miserables, Jean Valjean steals precious silver owned by a priest who gives him a room for a night. After being caught and brought back to the priest's home, the priest lies to the police by telling them he gave Valjean the silver. Valjean is set free and appropriately shocked by the mercy shown him. He changes his life so drastically that he takes on a new identity and sets about looking for ways to serve his society. Javert, an upright officer of the law who has been looking for Valjean for years, becomes a spy in the French revolution. He is discovered but then set free by the very one he has been hunting. Javert is so shocked by this act of senseless mercy, so overwhelmed by his own guilt, that he takes his own life.

Two men are shown mercy. But notice how differently they react to the mercy shown them. Neither is condemned for his actions. Both are shocked and awed by the greatness of the gift. But while one man's life becomes truly life, the other can't accept the gift and chooses death instead.

Shock and Awe. It is a potent image, and the pictures on the news these days are intimidating. They do make me tremble and shudder. They show off our immense capabilities, and they impress upon me how fragile we are, and how fragile our environment is. Certainly this is the kind of shock and awe our administration is after.

At the Wednesday evening Lenten service last week Pastor Yancey spoke of the shock and awe he feels at the courage of so many to face these times, the courage to actually put your life on the line. This is life and death for so many people.

[Info interlude by EHS: As part of her campus ministry work Amy took a group of students to Germany during their spring break a week ago. The goal: to encounter church life and campus ministry there. Amy herself recently studied theology in Munich for a year. So she knows the territory.]

In Germany last week we visited a memorial to a small group of students who engaged in passive resistance to Hitler. They were caught passing out leaflets against the Nazi party and beheaded for it. And our students asked, What would I have done? Would I have had the courage to do the same thing? The willingness to risk and to lose one's life is nothing less than awesome courage.

I've been thinking about Shock and Awe in another way. In my very profound struggle to know how to preach in these times, I must ask you, my brothers and sisters in Christ, is it really shocking that humanity is once again up to the business of destruction? Given our history on earth, are we really shocked that tyrants still rule in our world? Is it really awe-some that peace is being sought by means of war? And that violence continues to breed more violence? These are new actors, space, and time, but the drama is not so different. To top it all off, players on nearly every side seem to have God backing them up. It's really nothing new. I am not shocked, still less am I in awe. I mourn and grieve for soldier and civilian alike, as already at home and abroad so many do.

And in the midst of all the talk and shows of power of dictators and well-intentioned presidents alike, I fear that the power of the cross of Christ gets lost. When it should shock and awe us.

Indeed God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

Author Annie Dillard has been quoted umteen times in sermons. She writes, "On the whole, I do not find Christians, outside of the catacombs, sufficiently sensible of conditions. Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? . . . It is madness to wear ladies' hats and straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets! Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return."

Picture this in your head and have a good laugh. But hear in it a great truth! The power of the gospel to change hearts and recreate us in the image of God should blow us out of our seats! This is shock and awe. That God so loved this world. That God would come into this warring world – into this world of darkness and sin. That God would choose not to be isolated from us, from our constant abuse of power, that God would choose not to be isolated from our pain and suffering at the hands of the abusers of power. That God would choose not to hole up in some sanctuary, apart from evil and danger. That Jesus would rather so intimately touch the reality of this world, even when it put him in danger. And the even more shocking punch line. That God in Christ would choose not to condemn this warring world. That Jesus would come with life and healing rather than condemnation. This should shock the pants off of us. God has drawn us out to where we can never return.

We are not condemned! And may we react by choosing life like Valjean rather than death like Javert. We are not condemned, we are set free. This freedom cannot be granted by any government; this is what allowed pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer to claim to be free even when imprisoned and later put to death by the Nazis. We who were dead are now made alive, we are

already free in Christ. But it's not a freedom to do whatever we want. It is freedom for love. Ephesians says we are made alive with Christ and created in Christ Jesus for a purpose, for good works.

The shock and awe of the cross is not what we expect. It is precisely opposite the powers of the world that flash across our TVs these days, and so the cross looks like weak resignation. That God could suffer and die – that the messiah would be crucified rather than insisting on political victory – these ideas didn't sit well with either Greek or Jew. And they can't possibly sit well with any politician today who confuses earthly power with heavenly power. In the middle of so many rulers' claims to God, let us speak of what we know. God's plans for the world have far more to do with the love shown to us on the cross than with any one political system on this earth. And God's love is not bound to any one nation, for God so loved the world. God's salvation reveals love that will not lash out in condemnation and fear, but that is willing to suffer and die. Brothers and sisters in Christ, may we all be shocked and awed by the power of the cross! You are not condemned! You have been given the power to become children of God. You are set free in Christ and so you are free indeed. This is not your own doing nor the doing of any government, so that no one may boast – you have been saved by grace. For we are what God has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, for love and mercy and healing and life. Amen.

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