

Surprising Things Happen! A Quartet of Surprises at Mid-Lent 2010

Colleagues,

“Surprising things happen!” That was our pastor’s refrain in his midweek Lenten homily last evening. He claimed that he got it from the OT reading for this past Sunday, Isaiah 55:1-9. Here the prophet reports on God’s own call to his depressed, repressed, and suppressed exiles in Babylon to come to a banquet. In the midst of exile, a lavish party? God, you’ve got to be kidding! “Not so, for my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways.” Surprising things can happen—and they do. For God “keeps” covenant—mercy, abundant pardon—even when we don’t. Surprise, surprise!

It’s a bit of a long segue perhaps from that to what follows, but four surprises came my way this past week—not unrelated to that super-surprise of mercy mentioned above.

Surprise Number One came just minutes before we left home for the Wednesday evening Lenten liturgy. It was an e-mail from “our overseas pastor and wife” in a mostly Muslim nation.

“I had the most amazing dream,” our Arabic tutor exclaimed as she walked into class the morning after Ash Wednesday. She is usually businesslike about our Arabic studies, but this was quite personal, and we wondered what she was going to say.

“In my dream I had Jesus in my room, and I was protecting him from the Jews. They were banging at my door, and they were

saying, 'Give us Jesus,' but I kept saying, 'You can't have him. He's not in here.'"

"But he was. Jesus was lying on my bed, as if he were dead. But he couldn't have been dead. Of course, he wasn't dead! But he looked like he was dead."

Here she reflected a common Muslim belief that Jesus did not die on the cross, but was taken up to heaven.

Witnessing to Muslims is against the law in this country, and transgressors can be imprisoned or deported, so I was limited in what I could say. I decided to venture a modest first response: "This is a very special dream, and on the night of Ash Wednesday, no less! You must write it down!"

Our tutor continued, "Jesus just lay there on my bed, and beside him lay the book of the Gospel, and it was glowing with light."

Muslims think of the Gospel as a single book revealed to Jesus from heaven but corrupted by Christians. They normally are not encouraged or even permitted to read it for this reason. The Qur'an, on the other hand, is everywhere present and popularly pictured as glowing.

"I was there by the body of Jesus, and I was putting dates around it," our tutor said. "He sort of flickered his eyes open, and he looked over at me, and he offered me one of the dates." At this point I ventured my second appreciative response. I said to her, "You were so much like the women at the tomb when they came to take care of Jesus' body. You in your Middle Eastern dress remind me exactly of them!" [She is what she calls a religious Muslim, wearing a face veil and long sleeves and dress. We have seen only her eyes.] "You were just like the women at Jesus' grave!" I said again. "You must write it down!"

In the ensuing conversation, I told her that I was getting ready to preach in chapel that morning, and that I would be sharing the Gospel. "Well, you tell them about this!" she urged. I had prepared a serious Lenten meditation on Romans 5:12-19, but this was too much. It was almost as if God himself had given this Lenten dream to a dear one outside his fold, and wanted it known. So, before I entered the pulpit, I felt I had to tell the story of our Arabic tutor and her dream. A week later she was still in the students' prayer concerns.

Muslims all over the world by the thousands are having dreams of Jesus, according to our visiting professor who has been lecturing these past three weeks. We heard of imams in Cameroon twenty years ago for whom this occurred, and it hasn't stopped. This Lenten season we invite you to pray for God's dear ones of Muslim faith who are dreaming of their Lord. Ask God that the living Christ might reveal himself to them in this and other ways. And ask God that we Christians might be ready to be faithful interpreters of dreams when the moment comes. What will you say?

A blessed Lenten season to you all.
Sincerely in Christ,
Your Overseas Pastor and Wife

Surprise Number Two was having in hand Vilmos Vajta's book, LUTHER ON WORSHIP. It was a first edition hard cover published in 1958. [Guess what the inside dust jacket listed as the price. \$3.50!] Vajta was a Hungarian Lutheran who because of the exigencies of W.W.II did his theological study—and doctorate—in Sweden. He was, I think, the first Director of the Department of Theology of the Lutheran World Federation.

Vajta wrote the book in German. [For a Hungarian, now a Swedish

citizen, what else would you expect!]. Ulrich S. Leupold, Canadian Lutheran liturgical scholar of the last century, did the English translation. In the book *Vajta* chronicles the consequences for worship that Luther drew from the Augsburg Aha! If you're involved in the ongoing hassle about worship these days, this is a must read. Wipf and Stock Publishers reprinted it (2004), but now you'll have to fork over \$19.20 (web price).

As a tease, here's his last Luther citation on the last page.

"Thank God, in our churches we are able to exhibit to a Christian the true Christian mass, according to the command and institution of Christ and in accordance with the sense of Christ and the church. Here comes to the altar our minister, bishop, or parish pastor who was rightly, openly, and publicly called and who before by baptism was consecrated, anointed, and born again a priest of Christ that needs no sectarian unction [Winkel Cresem]."Clearly and publicly, he chants the Words of Institution, takes bread and wine, gives thanks, and imparts them to us who are waiting to commune by virtue of the word of Christ: 'This is my body. This is my blood. This do, etc.' And we, that is, those who want to commune, are kneeling there beside, behind, and around him, men and women, young and old, master and servant, mistress and maid, parent and children, gathered by God, all of us true and holy co-priests, sanctified by the blood of Christ and by baptism anointed and consecrated.

"Here we are in our indigenous, hereditary, priestly honor and ornament, have (as described in Rev. 4) our golden crowns on our heads, harps in our hands, and golden vials full of incense, and we have our pastor proclaim the Word of Christ, but not for himself or for his own person. He is the mouthpiece for all of us, and in our hearts and with steadfast faith we all, with him, address the Lamb who is for us and with us and gives us his body and blood according to his own institution.

This is our mass, the true mass which will never fail us.” –WA 38, 247

Surprise Number Three was Matthew Bear, chair of our congregation’s worship committee, informing me that way back in 1652 Jakob Fabricius [=Latinized rendering of Schmidt!], a Pomeranian Lutheran pastor and hymn-writer, turned the 28 articles of the Augsburg Confession into a 28-verse hymn. In just four rhymed lines per confessional article (to the tune of “Now Thank We All Our God”) he did a shrink-lit rhymed rendering of the whole thing, from Article 1, the Triune God, to Article 28, The Authority of Bishops.

Matthew Carver has tried his hand at rendering Fabricius’ 28 stanzas into English. You can find it all, Carver’s English and Fabricius’s original, at this URL: <http://matthaeusglyptes.blogspot.com/2010/02/gott-vater-son-und-geist.html>

Here’s a sample, the fundamental Article IV Justification.

Fabricius

4. Kein Mensch ist nach dem Fall, der dürffte sich verlassen
Auff eigner Werk Verdienst, er muß im Glauben fassen,
Was Christus hat gethan, Der uns bey GOtt versühnt,
Und leben hat und Gnad durch Seinen Tod verdient.

Carver

4. No human since the fall,
Thus dead in sin unsightly,
Can trust his worthless works.
By faith he must cling tightly
To what Christ Jesus did,
Who reconciled our race

To God, and by His death
Earned us both life and grace.

Go and enjoy the other 27—and don't miss the "footnote" verse 29 that Fabricius adds at the end.

Surprise Number Four was also about justification, namely, a fifty-year-old essay [Una Sancta 17, Easter 1960] by Bob Schultz, "Baptism and Justification." It surfaced, of all places, at St. Louis University, a Jesuit institution, this past Friday. [Quick background: Fred Danker and I show up for a noon brown-bag seminar with the Jesuits regularly on Fridays during the academic term. The discussion focuses on an essay that the SLU theology department is considering for publication in its journal, Theology Digest. Last Friday's essay was on justification, commemorating the tenth anniversary of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, signed off in Augsburg a decade ago by the Vatican's chief ecumenical officer and the president of the Lutheran World Federation.]

Bob Schultz's discovery of fifty years ago got into the discussion: Justification had a very different meaning in the sixteenth century. Here's what he found:

"We use 'justify' to mean a man has excused himself or, passively, that a man has been excused. Either he has not really done anything wrong or he was not responsible for what he did. Transferred into the language of the courtroom it means that a man is acquitted. Thus a man accused of a crime may 'justify' himself by proving that he did not do it or that he is not responsible for having done it. One thing is clear: the man who has not done anything at all is the man who finds it easiest to justify himself in court." This modern usage of the word 'justification' has little relationship to the sense in

which this word is used in Lutheran theology. Here the word is used to describe what happens to the man who is a sinner. He is not innocent; he is guilty. The man who is justified by faith has both done that which the law condemns and is responsible for having done it. . . .

“From the later Middle Ages until the seventeenth century [justification] is used [for] the entire process of trial, examination by torture, and execution of the condemned criminal. This is the picture which the word ‘justification’ produced in the minds of Luther’s hearers. . . .

“Elert offers a number of examples to illustrate this usage. The Diet of Augsburg of 1530 at which the Augsburg Confession was read and presented did not only discuss theology. It also discussed and adopted the reform of the penal code proposed by Emperor Charles V. The proposed code contains the word ‘justification’ ten times. In some of these instances it refers to the entire trial of the accused, including the examination by torture or the ordeal. In these cases it is theoretically possible that the accused would be found either guilty or innocent.

“It is, however, a peculiarity of the legal language of the time that the word ‘justification’ is no longer used whenever it becomes clear that the accused is innocent. For ‘justification’ carries with it the sense of guilt and execution and is used three times in this sense in the code of Charles V. Typical of this usage is the rule that the accused is to be allowed three days to consider his sins, to mourn, and to go to the confession before he is ‘justified.’”

So what does it mean to be “justified by faith”? Answer: To have

your death sentence carried out by being connected to Christ. Connected to Christ means dying AND RISING with him! That's the cosmic difference between being "justified" by law and being "justified" by faith, the difference between a dead sinner and a resurrected one.

What a concept for the middle of Lent!

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder