

Terror and Repentance, Part II

Colleagues,

Today's posting consists of responses from many of you to last week's offering. The only words from me relate to what just transpired at our breakfast table this morning. First the bad news: On the radio we just heard that the US response planned for our enemies is now named "Infinite Justice." The sheer blasphemy of that has apparently escaped all the braintrust in Washington DC. Not only blasphemy, but stupidity, "infinite" stupidity. And its consequences—for us! Claiming to administer infinite justice is to invite The Infinite One to "go and do thou likewise" with us. And all that but 9 days after our own lethal encounter with that Infinite One. Granted, the return address of the Infinite One nine days ago may be blurred—Isaiah's word is "hidden"—but the apocalyptic destruction has clear addresses. The ancient Greeks, I believe it was, said: whom the gods would destroy, they first make mad. That's not a Biblical quote, but it still rings true. Favored Biblical imagery for such a time as this is eyes and ears. Check Isaiah's words in chapter 6: "[You] hear and hear, but do not understand; see and see, but do not perceive." And when the prophet asks "How long?" the answer is grisly.

Then the good news: We turned off the radio and moved to morning devotions. The hymn slotted for today [Aussie Luth. Hymnal #780] was written by Bonhoeffer. It's too good not to pass on.

*We go to God when we are sorely placed,
and pray to him for help, for peace, for bread,
for mercy, for us sinning, sick, or dead.
We all do so, in faith or unbelief. We go to God when he is
sorely placed,
find him poor, scorned, unsheltered, without bread,*

whelmed under weight of evil, weak or dead.

*Christians stand by God in his hour of grief. (Footnote:
Matt.25:40)*

God goes to us when we are sorely placed,

and feeds body and spirit with his bread.

For Christians and for pagans he hangs dead,

and he forgives all people through his death.

Upon such grounding,

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder

RESPONSES to ThTh 170

1. From upstate New York

On Friday morning, after working 12-hour shifts for the American Red Cross, I opened my e-mail here at the ARC and found your posting. It was like water in the desert. You see, for those of us (and I assume there are many on your mailing list) who demythologized the M & M's [money & military] long ago, in a strange way (and I hope this doesn't sound blasphemous), your clear word(s) on the matter fell like Gospel on the soul. It has to do with the prophetic message, clear and straightforward with no measure of self-interest or self-aggrandizement (which of course de-legitimizes it as prophetic) that ever so faintly allowed the morning star to begin to rise over our darkness. I began to "sober up" immediately—from my exhaustion and most of all, from the media. I've barely listened to it since and now all that matters to me is to

stay sober. There were few places of worship to which we could go yesterday and find 'sanctuary' from the civil religion that now threatens a complete take-over of the religious mind-set and so positions the church in this country for perils yet unknown. Thank you for your clear prophetic word at precisely (for us) the right moment. We're hopeful of staying in touch.

2. From Oklahoma City (sic!)

You're right- "repentance" is not a popular church theme these days. Have you noticed that when even "conservative" or "traditional" churches allow a change or two in the traditional Liturgy, often the first thing to change is Psalm 51 as the offertory? Although the words, "Repent for the kingdom of heaven is near!" are usually associated with John the Baptist, they're actually Christ's first commandment, then and to every generation since. To deny or even shy away from repentance is to deny the very need for the Messiah. However, I don't accept that the terrorist acts of last Tuesday were "the scourge of God" any more than I accept that the Oklahoma City bombing was or any other act of the evil one. God, my God, does not cause innocent people to suffer in order to make any of us better people or even to call an entire nation to repentance. St. Paul assures us that, "All things work together to the good of them that love God." That says it for me. There were enough references to the Lord, calls for prayers and reading from the Bible over the air waves to cause the adversary to spin on a spit. The Episcopal priest who performed the service from the National Cathedral called on the Holy Trinity by its descriptives and this was broadcast worldwide. Churches were filled this Sunday. What happened through the hijackings were acts of monstrous evil, (and Luther never denied the presence of evil or its intent), but through the awesome

power of the Spirit, we prayed in numbers as we never have before. Could it be that a grieving nation searching for comfort turned back to its roots and is turning back to the Lord? I would never have a single person whose heart was broken in these tragedies think for an instant that his or her lost loved ones were somehow divine “collateral damage” taken in order to bring our country to repentance. Christ is the perfect sacrifice; no other is necessary.

3. Someone sent this excerpt from FOR ALL THE SAINTS, Vol. III, Page 336.

“O Lord, remember not only the men and women of good will,

but also those of ill will.

But, do not remember all of the suffering they have inflicted upon us:

Instead remember the fruits we have borne because of this suffering –

our fellowship, our loyalty to one another, our humility, our courage, our generosity,

the greatness of heart that has grown from this trouble.

When our persecutors come to be judged by you,

let all of these fruits that we have borne

be their forgiveness.”

[Found in the clothing of a dead child at Ravensbruck Concentration Camp.]

4. Thanks for your REpentance article. I have been carrying it with me, REreading it and REpeating it frequently as part of my conversations on the “events of last week”. I note your temerity, or at least caution, lest your words sound too much like Falwell and company. What a difference though, when the critique is “mea culpa” [my guilt] and not “tua culpa” [your guilt]. So, for a prophet to speak

the hard word, the prophet must be in solidarity with those under the microscope. As Jeremiah might say, you need to have a piece of real estate in Jerusalem. And that, I think, is true of all of us these days. Even most of "the least of these" in our day have a stake in Wall Street and the security the Pentagon offered. And how healing for us that our Ultimate Critic has such a huge personal stake in us and in our world, being one of us.

I have been interested to listen for "your" theme (really, I know where you picked up that theme) in the preaching of others these days. I was surprised to hear so little of it in Billy Graham's message. He spoke of the deeper roots of this American tragedy as a mystery. Although he did repeat his common call for a spiritual renewal in America.

The Time Magazine special, in the main article, started out with something like this: "If you want to bring dishonor to a major power, you would want to attack their cathedrals." I thought that was reasonably perceptive, and even theological, for the secular press. However, it certainly did not identify the Master Mind behind the crumbling of the cathedrals.

So, thanks for "going to all the trouble".

5. [Here's one that will take your breath away and give you fresh oxygen.]Ed, Another R word, another Re word for you-Re-lax! Brokaw, Jennings and Rather are not the only talkers talking tonight. Fruit from your farm is ripening out in the provinces. Your Seminex offspring are shooting from the lip all over the world.

Tuesday AM I got the "call" to be the MC (no kidding) for the ministerial association's prayer service that evening at the big Assembly of God church in town. I think I was appointed because [our Luth. congregation] convened and

hosted the Shepherds' Meeting (Pastors praying together Tuesday AM's). In fact, 9/11 at 8:45 we were praying over one of the younger pastors who is in tremendous warfare. The anointing was so strong, I had to consciously keep my balance. I remember thinking the anointing was almost too strong, even considering our petitions. When I heard the timing of the first plane crash, I knew what else had been going on in our sanctuary that morning.

Since I was taught very young that "with responsibility comes authority," I began to plan (pray) with authority. Here's how it played out. The service began with the host pastor's welcome and prayer. We started "traditionally," singing Faith of Our Fathers and Amazing Grace to share common ground. Then I set 2 Chronicles 7:14 in the context of temple dedication and the Trade Center. As MC (mea culpa and/or media consultant), I shared the call to turn from our (not their) wicked ways and the promise of a healed land. My wife then led us into the "contemporary" If My People. The worship was awesome. She then moved into spontaneous praise and we went with her.

Then I shared the promise and turning of Mark 11:24-25. Believe, receive, forgive, be forgiven. We then gave the Holy Spirit time to convict us individually and corporately. Selah. . . . So re-penting and re-membering no more, we were made ready to stand upright before Him to pray with the power which He delegates to the ones whom He makes righteous. Then we were ready to re-present the poor and needy.

One by one, my prayer partners came up to pray for a "focus group." The dead, injured, the dying, the rescuers, the peacekeepers, medical people, families, America's kids, etc. . . .

The presence of God was so strong and sweet. Following the Holy Spirit's cue, [we moved] into "Jesus, Prince of Peace, holy is Your Name." Re-penting leads to re-joicing. Even the angels were re-joicing Tuesday night. One R word always leads to another. "There is no other place I'd rather be," many people were saying. That's because they know the message of the medium. May we be faithfull, misspelling intended. Peace!

6. You bring us reality. Yes there is room, plenty room for us to wake up and repent as well as to seek justice against those who did this. So few people have any understanding, or will admit understanding, any of our failures even the early ones like abuse of the American Indians or acceptance of slavery and accommodating it (read the constitution). And the consequences of both are still with us, just like this horrid act can be traced back to our offenses against others. In some ways it is a gift from God. For what I have feared is the destruction of one of our cities by an atomic bomb in the back of a Toyota shipped from anywhere. You . . . force us to deal with the reality of our God and the meaning of his love.
7. Actually your Th Th piece reflected what I have been saying to and praying for all week with people. That's not just because you instructed me thoroughly. This dynamic/ dialectic is the only way to stay in dialogue with (God in) all the scriptures (not just a bowdlerized version of them) and all of life (not just a Hallmark version of it). Thanks for speaking up in this public/ community venue. Blessings,
8. The theme of Repentance is one that I have been focusing on with my people as well. And, so far, I have listeners (Thanks be to God!), even appreciative listeners, but it isn't an easy listen. To me, more disheartening than the

actual attack is the poverty of our national discussion on how to respond. Does one "Jihad" beget another? Does one act of self-righteous indignation justify another? That's the rhetoric I hear, as your "re" words display. Even the so called "evangelicals" (I'm referring to Jerry Falwell whom I heard on TV last night), who talk about this as a "wake-up call for revival" don't understand repentance. It's a wake-up call, he says, for the godless liberals, abortionist, homosexuals, ACLU, but not for him, not for the wealth-producing, defense-securing system that is America, and not for the average, good, hardworking people of America. How we use straw men (the short-comings of tax collectors and sinners) to veil our eyes of our own need of repentance.

That blindness is the real danger that confronts us now. The god of America, symbolized in the twin golden calves that fell down, is now to be vindicated unconditionally, and vindicated in the style that the god of the terrorist used, cocksure determination that we are right and our might will be the proof. What is the difference here between these two religions? None that I can see, at least not in a way that really makes a difference. For neither side has the courage to repent, to question their "way of life," and in that fear of repentance we find that these two religions are at root really the same religion. It is most unfortunate, that we the so-called "Christian West" are not using our biblical, prophetic and Christological resources, but instead, we are dipping into the tool box of that "old time religion," old-time as meaning "old Adam and Eve," the religion of standing in the presence of God's wrath and doing nothing more than pointing at one another's sin, remaining blind to our own sin and remaining hopelessly locked into its consequences.

As you noted of Luther, our ultimate hope (then as now) rests not primarily in our military strength—though that no doubt will make the front page news—but in a little band (a remnant) of repenters, whose efforts may never break the light of day, but which may nevertheless break the day of doom—this time, anyway. We can only hope. What's striking to me is how this idea is so vividly depicted in the OT lesson for this Sunday. (Exodus 32:7-14) Moses, of all people, arguing the PROMISE against God's wrath. That's the job of the remnant. But that arguing isn't to be kept in secret—Holy Writ to wit—and neither do we keep it in secret. In that regard, we have something very important to bring to the agenda of the day: Repentance. It may be irritating to many, but it may catch the imaginations of just enough to make a difference. To that end and in that hope, we continue with the boldness, the boldness of the cross, of dying to self and rising to Christ, the boldness of repentance.

9. I found the long theological argument disagreeable on several levels. Not all of the victims of Tuesday's terrorist attacks were Christians. This tragedy transcends all regions and we should mourn the losses as countrymen and as fellow human beings. Attempts to link political/military actions with divine inspiration have been practiced throughout human history. Human nature is weak, greedy and self-serving. Furthermore a large majority of the population is unable to think for themselves or does not wish to think for themselves but rather wish to be led around blindly like sheep. The inability to think for oneself allows the perversion of religious ideology. Therefore it is not unusual to see attempts to use religion as mask for deeper flawed human nature.

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Having said of all this, it is clear that members of this planet who do not respect fellow human life, whether their beliefs are seated out of ignorance or well-honed hatred, should be exterminated in an expeditious manner.

10. In conclusion an item that one of you forwarded to me from Rabbi Arthur Waskow: In 1984, when the nuclear arms race was in speed-up mode, The Shalom Center built a sukkah between the White House and the Soviet Embassy in Washington.

We focused on the line from the evening prayers – “Ufros alenu sukkat shlomekha” – “Spread over all of us Your sukkah of shalom.”

And we asked, “Why a sukkah?” – Why does the prayer plead to God for a “sukkah of shalom” rather than God’s “tent” or “house” or “palace” of peace?

Because the sukkah is just a hut, the most vulnerable of houses. Vulnerable in time, where it lasts for only a week each year. Vulnerable in space, where its roof must be not only leafy but leaky – letting in the starlight, and gusts of wind and rain.

For much of our lives we try to achieve peace and safety by building with steel and concrete and toughness. Pyramids, air raid shelters, Pentagons, World Trade Centers. Hardening what might be targets and, like Pharaoh, hardening our hearts against what is foreign to us.

But the sukkah comes to remind us: We are in truth all vulnerable. If “a hard rain gonna fall,” it will fall on all of us.

Americans have felt invulnerable. The oceans, our wealth,

our military power have made up what seemed an invulnerable shield. We may have begun feeling uncomfortable in the nuclear age, but no harm came to us. Yet yesterday the ancient truth came home: We all live in a sukkah.

Not only the targets of attack but also the instruments of attack were among our proudest possessions: the sleek transcontinental airliners. They availed us nothing. Worse than nothing.

Even the greatest oceans do not shield us; even the mightiest buildings do not shield us; even the wealthiest balance sheets and the most powerful weapons do not shield us.

There are only wispy walls and leaky roofs between us. The planet is in fact one interwoven web of life. I MUST love my neighbor as I do myself, because my neighbor and myself are interwoven. If I hate my neighbor, the hatred will recoil upon me.

What is the lesson, when we learn that we – all of us – live in a sukkah? How do we make such a vulnerable house into a place of shalom, of peace and security and harmony and wholeness?

The lesson is that only a world where we all recognize our vulnerability can become a world where all communities feel responsible to all other communities. And only such a world can prevent such acts of rage and murder.

If I treat my neighbor's pain and grief as foreign, I will end up suffering when my neighbor's pain and grief curdle into rage.

But if I realize that in simple fact the walls between us are full of holes, I can reach through them in compassion and connection.

Suspicion about the perpetrators of this act of infamy has fallen upon some groups that espouse a tortured version of Islam. Whether or not this turns out to be so, America must open its heart and mind to the pain and grief of those in the Arab and Muslim worlds who feel excluded, denied, unheard, disempowered, defeated.

This does not mean ignoring or forgiving whoever wrought such bloodiness. Their violence must be halted, their rage must be calmed – and the pain behind them must be heard and addressed.

Instead of entering upon a “war of civilizations,” we must pursue a planetary peace.

Shalom, Arthur