

The 2011 Crossings Conference and President Obama's Address. Part II.

Colleagues,

None of you (so far) accepted my invitation at the end of last week's ThTh post to cross President Obama's State of the Union address with Matt. 4: 12-23, the focal text for last week's Crossings conference. Possibly because this week is Egypt-week. So I shall either have to do it myself or change the topic. Or do a bit of both.

I did get a few responses. Two of them cautioned me to be less certain, less Jeremiad-driven in crossing my own nation with the three diagnostic X-ray images we'd uncovered in Matthew 4:12-23 at the just-completed Crossings conference. They were the deep, deeper, deepest malady-mirrorings that Steve Kuhl had mined for us from the Matthean text: Business as Usual; (even worse) Sitting in Darkness; (worst of all) Dwelling in the Region of Death.

The caveat and caution expressed in ThTh 659 about the national mantra, "God bless [the people of] America," elicited second opinions, and an occasional Nathan-to-David finger-pointing, e.g., "You seem to take delight in the Jeremiad." Which may have more truth in it than I'm willing to admit.

Then came these lines:

"We in the church are the ones who bear a great debt of guilt, because we have been so ineffectual in helping our neighbors understand the dire straits they are in. So, yes, I will

continue to ask God to bless America and not be overly critical of Mr Obama, even if he doesn't understand what he says in asking for that blessing ... and I believe that the greatest blessing God could confer on us as a nation is a realization of how much we stand in need of his forgiveness for wasting our gifts, not caring for the poor, thinking that our armies can protect us if we are not truly in pursuit of justice as mirrored, for example, in Amos. "

Blessed with repentance! Yes, indeed, God bestow this blessing on us.

Back to "taking delight in the Jeremiad." Yet I don't think I "delight" in jeremiads any more than ancient Jeremiah did with his 52-chapters-long State of the Israelite Tribal Union message. With him too, tears were more appropriate.

I was also warned of the dangers of being a prophet, especially a self-designated one.

I have no memory of receiving a call to the office of prophet. Amos's line is my line: "I'm not a prophet, not even a PK, a prophet's kid." True, my vision may be impaired. But seems to me it's nothing special. Nothing exceptional—either plus or minus. No clairvoyance, no superman's eyesight. The crossover from the Word of God to the world of my country is simply there. It comes off the page, both of the scriptures and the daily newspaper. They intersect. They cross each other. The Biblical precedents, the Biblical per-spective—literally, "seeing through"—on world history chronicles just that: God seeing through world events, finally God seeing through us enveloped in those events.

My Doktorvater Helmut Thielicke regularly spoke of the Hebrew prophets as reporters on Israel's history, reporters with eyes wide open. Events rolled past, rolled over, the people of

Israel, but they regularly were blind to what was actually happening. So God sent them prophets, sometimes actually called “seers,” to tell them what they were not seeing, what was REALLY going on, namely, what God was doing in that history—to them and in the world around them.

But the prophets’ efforts seldom succeeded. The rare exception is in the book of Jonah, but there it is the UNCHOSEN people, the citizens of Nineveh, The God-ignorant, who finally “see” the light. For the chosen folks, the supposedly exceptional ones, the pattern persists that is the drumbeat in the book of Amos chapter 4: “I did this, and this, and this to you, for you—and yet you did not [see it, and] turn around.”

Another commentator said:

Concerning God not blessing America, I fear we are getting into the “I know what god is thinking/doing” business. Not possible. The prodigal in the pig pen was being blessed by God, although he surely didn’t think so at the time. As for America, as long as God is hearing our prayers, He is blessing us. Please, let’s not do God’s work for Him. He is quite capable. And as we know, regarding history both in and out of the Bible, His way of blessing, like everything else He does, is beyond our comprehension.. Please, let God be God.

Which prompted me to post this message in return:

Dear Pastor X, Don’t quite agree on that.

Not everything God does throughout the scriptures is “beyond our comprehension.” Much of it God “reveals” but human

blindness persists. Therefore, as Jesus says, you find the blind leading the blind. Which is, I suggest, Jesus' mantra for human history in the old creation. Also America's. Why shouldn't his word apply to our people too?

God's blessing (and cursing) business has rather specific parameters according to both the O and NT. God reveals, but folks are blind, ears stuffed up, hearts hardened. The signals don't get through. Especially with reference to what's going on in the world, the issue is "reading the signs of the times." Some folks never seem to do that, read them right. E.g., Pharaoh himself with ten shots at "seeing" what was going on—God NOT blessing Egypt—and he never really did.

The constant drumbeat of most of the OT prophetic books is just that: the chosen people NOT seeing what God is plainly doing in their history, even when the prophets, who DO see it, try to tell them what they ought to be seeing in the world—events that roll over them. E.g., Amos with the Northern Kingdom folks chapter 4:6 ff. Jesus with his critics. Mt. 16:3. Hitler-era German folks, Christians included, who didn't read the Hitler-era aright—that God was NOT blessing Germans with the Fuehrer's leadership, but destroying them.

I can't imagine Bonhoeffer saying yes to your proposal. Especially "Please, let's not do God's work for Him." I thought that just because humans are created to be God's images—and all the more so when sinners get the "right to be called children of God" (John 1:12), that this was our calling—doing God's work in the world, esp. articulating God's word—of law (mirroring to the world the divine diagnosis that worldlings need to see and hear) and of Gospel (what God in Christ offers the same worldlings to see and hear—and trust).

God is sending us American folks our own set of plagues—Tucson,

Katrina, al Queda, drug-addiction, health-care crisis, Wall Street greed, our own Iraq/Afghanistan/Pakistan self-destruction, the national debt, Abu Graib, Guantanamo. Where is there any political leader or, even more tragic, any Christian pastor, who says anything about it, about what God is doing here—definitely NOT blessing America?

Sure, these may in some respect be “natural,” but Who is orchestrating the sequence? Who of God’s images is telling even church people that the same God who used Nebuchadnezzar (the rod of God’s anger, ala Isaiah) against the Israelites, is hammering us with similar rods/plagues today? Especially we preacher types are following the path of silence, and our children/grandchildren, who will have to live in the apocalypse that always comes after such blindness, will learn the meaning of “visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation.” Will they not point their finger—God’s own finger of judgment—at us: Why were you so blind? Didn’t you read the Bible? Didn’t you believe what you read?

That may not all be “perfectly” clear, but totally opaque it surely is not.

I’ve been in error before, and that could be true this time too. But if the Christian scriptures suggest a “happier” reading of human history—ours included—I’d like to learn where those texts are for greater clarity about the Word of God “crossing” the USA.

*Even in the face of those realities,
Christ’s peace and joy! E.S.*

In last week’s post I mentioned a question coming from the floor

as Ron Neustadt and I were doing show-and-tell on phase two and three in the process, namely, TRACKING Jim Squire's high-tech job at Boeing working on F-16 fighters and CROSSING him at that very slice-of life with the Matt. 4 text we had for our conference. The question was: "Aren't those F-16s God's F-16s?" It came from Jerry Burce. He sent me this addendum:

Ed, I fear you may have misinterpreted the question I shouted out during your probing of Jim about whether the F-16s he helps to fashion are God's F-16s. The point was not at all to spring him from a D-3 morass [=the Biblical text's deepest diagnosis] but rather to exacerbate it. (I should have clarified on the spot, yes.) For doesn't the terror and wrath of D-3 arise precisely from understanding that there's no out whatsoever, not even the one that says "OK, I'll quit my high-paying instrument-of-death job and go work in a soup kitchen instead?" Time was when the guys most to be pitied were the ones who churned out chariots for Nineveh and Babylon.

On the one hand they're making the very tools God will use to carry out his judgment, so that in making them they're serving God. On the other hand they'll catch it in the neck for the devastation and murder that their chariots cause, woe being unto Nineveh and Babylon for their pride and cruelty. In other words, judgment if you do, judgment if you don't, with wrath and gnashing of teeth at God for the bind he puts you in.

Isn't that what Jim and his co-workers face, and not just them but all of us who are caught up in the empire's service these days, if only as taxpayers? Judgment if the army you help to underwrite gets used. Judgment too if it doesn't get used.

It would have been interesting indeed to hear Jim ruminate along such lines.

[Btw. Jerry was the first presenter at last week's Crossings conference. His "Setting the Foundations: How Distinguishing God's Law and God's Gospel brings Jesus' Real Benefits to Bear on Real Lives in the Real World" is so super I'll put in a plug for it here. To have it before your own eyes, GO to the Crossings homepage Click on Conference. Click on Papers. Click on 2011. Scroll down to "Setting the Foundations." Jerry also has a sidebar on "enabling grace" (mentioned above) as grace "not yet good enough" for what needs to be done. While you're at the 2011 site, look at the rest of what's there. Solid stuff built upon the foundations that Jerry so masterfully laid out for us.]

So much for feedback.

If we take President Obama's message as his own "tracking" of American common life today, how might that look when "crossed" with the Biblical "groundings" in Matt. 4:12-23? Steve Kuhl's sextet for the grounding was: Business as usual. Sitting in darkness. Region of death. Kingdom of God. Repentance and faith. Fish for people.

So possibly something like this:

THE BAD NEWS

Step #1: Facing economic hardship? Stick with business as usual. Produce more money. Money will make things happen. Money, nowadays not even paper with numbers printed on it, but just electronic elves bouncing back and forth between computers through cyberspace will do the trick. The law of "pay-back" (God's law of pay-back) has been repealed.

Step #2: "Sitting in darkness." Illusions, illusions, illusions.

Especially the illusion that no attention to consumption and greed is necessary.

Step #3: "Sitting in the region of death." Aren't all those national plagues death messengers? Surely not life-messengers, not blessing-messengers. If God's no longer blessing America, what's the other alternative?

THE GOOD NEWS

[Might one be so bold in secular multi-religious (and irreligious) America not only to do the diagnosis above, but also offer the Gospel's new prognosis to an entire nation? May seem impossible, yet that's what Jonah did for Nineveh, proclaiming God's word—diagnostic and prognostic—to a nation for whom Israel's God of mercy was an unknown god? It has happened in more recent times, in the USA, when President Lincoln called the nation to a day of repentance in the midst of the Civil War—and Congress went along with it.]

How to proclaim good news to a nation is at root finally no different from proclaiming it to an individual, for the nation is people. The formula is quite simple: offering the merits and benefits of Christ to folks in need in such a way that (quoting Burce) "brings Jesus' Full Benefits to Bear on Real Lives in the Real World (of America)."

Possibly something like this:

Step #4: If you're going to invoke God to bless America as your final words to the American people in your State of the Union address, what all are you asking for? The Christian answer is: you are asking for the Jesus-rescue from the "reign of death." In NT vocabulary that is "the Kingdom of God," God's mercy-management offer to folks mired in the reign of death, who have "No Exit" signs posted on every wall.

Step #5: The common creed we Americans share is bereft of any space for repentance. If nothing else, from the greed which even the secular analysts said was the deeper diagnosis of Wall Street's debacle. And if you're going to talk about faith "in government," or in the God our dollar bills say we trust, then what's called for? The answer is in the two imperative verbs sprinkled throughout the NT: "REPENT and TRUST the Good News of the Kingdom that has arrived in Jesus."

Step #6: Everybody is following somebody. "Come and follow me," is the Jesus invitation. And everybody is always fishing for something. Infiltrate daily life "fishing" of business-as-usual with people-fishing, If it's hard to envision this on a nationwide scale, at least the "already fished" folks could huddle, fashioning nets explicitly for their fellow citizens using Matthew's six spools of thread for the catch.

Is there a nationwide way to "fish for people" so that they do indeed survive – possibly even on into eternity? That's what the already-netted will be talking about. But suppose Nineveh won't have a re-run in America. Suppose it won't happen that "everyone . . . believed God, proclaimed a fast, put on sackcloth" and the king, going one step farther, "sat in ashes." Then what? Then Luther's counsel could be the topic within the network, counsel he offered when 600 thousand Muslim troops stood outside the gates of Vienna in 1529. A Christian remnant does the Nineveh script and God may, just may, let the "repent and believe" of a few count for the rescue of the many. It's happened before.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

P.S. Anybody out there want to volunteer as speech-writer for President Obama and offer him a text for this sort of message for next year's State of the Union?