

The Christmas Gospel according to St. John.

Colleagues,

I was asked to preach on Christmas Day at our congregation, Bethel Lutheran in suburban St. Louis. Which I did do. What follows is not exactly the homily, but some ramblings occasioned before, during(?) and after the fact.

1. There is no verb in the Greek NT for “preach.” The two main Greek verbs that often get translated with the English word “preach” are actually “verb-ified” nouns—keeryssein and euaggelizein. Namely, “to DO what a keeryx does,” with keeryx being “an official messenger making a you-better-pay-attention announcement” and “to DO the euaggelion,” which is “the good and new message.” So the preacher in the pulpit is “text-messaging” as that noun now gets verb-ified in today’s American English. If you opt for the verb “proclaim” instead of “preach,” as Fred Danker says we should when these two Greek verbs appear, then there is only one thing to be proclaimed. JUST the gospel. The proclaimable Gospel, when it’s being DONE, is an insertion into a specific time-space where it is not yet. Either not yet EVER been, or been—but forgotten, been—but not operative, been—but supplanted by the zillion other messages received since the last time THIS message was received.

One spinoff of that—especially for Lutherans—is that “preaching the law” is nonsense language in terms of NT vocabulary. God’s law is not something “insertable” into people’s time-space where it is not already operative. Why not? In the “old” creation, the de facto cosmos of all of

us, that law is universally and effectively operational—semper et ubique—all the time and everywhere. So when keeryssein and euaggelizein are being done, it is proclaimed into a cosmos where law, God's law, runs the show. Keeryssein and euaggelizein take place against the backdrop of that semper-et-ubique law. In the end it is proclamation "against" the law. It offers an alternative, so Elert taught us, to move from "Gesetzmässige Existenz" (law as the yardstick for everything) to "Christ-measured existence." Christ takes over as the measure of all things—finally and explicitly the yardstick for our life and callings in the always-and-everywhere "Gesetzmässig" world. Will that constitute conflict? You bet. How long? Until he comes.

So the law isn't preachable. It's already there. Sure, you'll have to call folks' attention to it when you're doing keeryssein and euaggelizein. For the Good News of Christmas comes "into" the law-FULL cosmos, but it is not "of" that cosmos, as John the Evangelist likes to say.

Since our law-FULL world is so semper-et-ubique, we readily forget that we're swimming in it. As a fish (probably) doesn't realize that its world is all water, so we with our "all" law existence, our "normal" environment. But humans are fish out of water (Darwin, you may have been on to something!). It's not that we swim around in air instead of moisture, but we're gifted with consciousness to ask about what's semper-et-ubique in our existence. That our personal cosmos is run by law is for most of us a no-brainer. Not just gravity that keeps us from flying off the planet, but the unending "you gotta do this, gotta do that" that fills every day. What renders humans back into fish-like existence, however—not back into the water, but back into unconscious UNawareness—is

that the one who is posting all this Gesetzmässig stuff onto our life-screen is God. The very same one whose image humans carry and the one who shoved us into this Gesetzmässig existence in the first place.

So that's why "Doc" R.R. Caemmerer, the guru of preaching for many of us, kept drumming into our heads that since the congregation before you on a Sunday morning is "all Christian," you might think "they already know the Gospel, so I need to proclaim other aspects of the Christian repertoire." Not so, said Doc. If there is no "explicit Gospel" in your sermon, it is a no-Gospel-sermon. And if you're not hustling the Gospel-Christum treiben, as Blessed Martin put it--there is only one other option for you to be hustling: "Gesetzmässige Existenz." And THAT message the folks do indeed know. It's semper et ubique in their lives. Their rightful response to such a sermon is "Enough already! That is really old hat. Don't you have anything Good and New to offer so that we might survive in the 24/7 law-FULL world that we're swimming in?"

2. I brought along show-and-tell items for the Christmas sermon. Artifact #A. Since the day's Gospel was John 1, I displayed Marie's 40-year old banner, on which she'd linked the John 1 text to the image of a total solar eclipse we'd witnessed way back then. The moon's total black disc covers the sun's disc on the banner, but vibrant and violent light--white, orange, red--from the sun flashes beyond the the dark circle. All this is sewn onto dark green burlap with the Johannine Christmas text in orange arching around the image: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out." It was too good not to use.

Artifact #B. A cell phone

Artifact #C. A small desk lamp with dangling cord and plug.

Before reading the John 1 text, I made two announcements. First I pointed to Marie's banner—now placed as the antependium facing the congregation on the pulpit—with “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out” circling the eclipsed sun.

Then I held up the cellphone. “Message is now a verb in our language, not just a noun. That's what this little electronic wonder has done to our language. People now ‘message’ each other with this little box. If St. John were writing his Gospel today—and in American English—he'd likely use ‘message’ instead of the word ‘word.’ So I'm going to do just that as I read John's Christmas Gospel, a text many of us know by heart, that we've heard many times before.”

So now hear this:

The Gospel for Christmas Day 2007

*John 1:1-14*In the beginning was the Message, and the Message was with God, and the Message was God. 2*The Message was in the beginning with God. 3All things came into being through the Message, and without the Message not one thing came into being. What has come into being 4in the Message was life, and the life was the light-message of all people. 5The light-message shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome the light-message. 6There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. 7He came as a witness to testify to the light-message, so that all might believe through him. 8He himself was not the light-message, but he came to testify to the light-message. 9The true light-message, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. 10The light-message was in the world, and the world came into being through the light-message; yet the world did not know the light-message. 11The light-message came to what was*

his own, and his own people did not accept him. 12But to all who received the light-message, who believed in his name, he gave them the right to become children of God, 13who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. 14And the light-message became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

SERMON THEME: WHERE DO YOU TURN THE LIGHT ON? ST. JOHN'S ANSWER: IT'S ON ALREADY. LOOK OVER THERE (pointing toward the creche in front of the altar). John tells us: "It's been done already. It's over there." The true light that gives light to everybody was coming into the world—right there. That's the answer of the Christian gospel.

Every religion has its own message for answering that question. If you watched the CBS special night before last, you heard and saw 12 of the world's religious leaders answer that question. Five of them were Christian "keeryxes"—the Lutheran World Federation President (also our ELCA presiding bishop), Pope Benedict XVI, the Orthodox Patriarch of Moscow, the Archbishop of Canterbury, the President of the Southern Baptist Convention—all "official messengers" at the top. Joining them were 7 equally official "keeryxes" from other world religions—the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem, the Dalai Lama for Buddhism and voices equally at the top for Shintos, Sikhs, Hindus and Shia and Sunni Muslims. In the end the two brothers who put it all together concluded that "There is much more that unites us than divides us. Faith in some god and love toward the neighbor. Terrorism 'in God's name' (which triggered the whole two-hour production) has no place in any of the world's major religions."

Those were 12 keeryx voices for where to turn on the light in

today's darkness and confusion. None of the 5 Christian voices—so it seemed to me—got as specific as St. John does in today's Christmas Gospel in answering the question. But then the producers gave us what they wanted us to see/hear. So we don't know what else, what all else, the keeryxes might also have said. The Christians might well have been more Christ-specific, but it didn't fit the desired pattern. And that's not really surprising. If the paradigm hoped for by the producers was "Love God and love your neighbor"—all of it law, yes good law—then explicit Gospel as the Christian alternative to "Gesetzmässig" existence and "Gesetzmässig" religion will never fit the program—for the TV production.

But my real Aha! came long after I'd turned off the TV. There was a thirteenth keeryx making official announcements all through the 2-hour production—and he got even more air-time than any of the other 12. That keeryx was the commercials coming every ten minutes or so for several minutes each time. Nobody mentioned them as the 13th evangelist, but they surely were, and they constituted the most polished, professional and crafty keeryx throughout the show. Deceptively crafty, since they did not claim to be "competition" for the official 12. But, of course, they really were. They were the keeryx for the Religion of America. "To bring light, real light, into your dark lives, get this: investment counsel, "Icy Hot" pain relief, 60% off at Kohl's for the last 24 hrs before Christmas, mouth-wash, constipation relief, half-price Reeboks, Ford's year-end sale, Chevy's hybrid, Outback Restaurants, and on and on.

That was the most compelling answer to where the light switch was in the whole 2-hour program. This keeryx really was preaching—in the "telling you what to do" sense of the verb—to us. But it was mostly preaching to the choir, I suspect, for we already believe this message. So it was being reinforced and new bits were being offered to illuminate yet this or that corner of

our lives where some darkness still held sway.

And the answer is: True Light is STUFF. Here's the Gospel of the Religion of America: "In the beginning was stuff. Anything that counts is made of stuff. Stuff is the light of humankind. Whoever has stuff has light. More stuff, more light. And the light of stuff gives you life. More light, more life.

To which John says (and we really do know this ourselves): All that stuff parading as light is just more darkness. Not at all full of grace and truth, but of the opposite—law and the lie.

[That's a very lengthy STEP 1 in the Crossings paradigm]
DARKNESS ON THE OUTSIDE.

Move to STEP 2. DARKNESS ON THE INSIDE.

Biblical prose talks about "deep" darkness. That's darkness "in here," not just out there. Darkness in Biblical vocabulary is not a nothing—the absence of light—but a something. People can be "full of darkness, love the darkness [3:19]," opt to "walk" in it. Darkness "overtakes" people [12:35]. "Whoever says he's in the light and hates his brother is in the darkness still. . . . The darkness has blinded his eyes." [1 John 2:9].

Darkness is not just the absence of light, but active opposition to light. "The Light shines into the darkness, and the darkness does not/cannot stop it." But it sure would like to. If it could, it would. It's a turf war.

The darkness John is talking about in today's text is power, deadly power, but attractive power. We've just mentioned the "power of stuff" to con us into thinking it will give us life. We saw that last evening in our own Christmas Eve family celebration—14 of us gathered around the supper table first, and then the Christmas tree. We're all baptized, know the reason for

the season, even believe it (mostly). But we had to “finesse” the “True Light” agenda into the noisy and sometimes hilarious table conversation. You can guess who keeryxed this message: “Enough already. Let’s segue to Christmas carols, to Luke’s Christmas story.” Which then was read in five different languages, because the grandkids can do at least four, and then condo neighbor Fred Danker did the Greek version.

But we had to work at it, because thick slices of darkness are inside us too. We found all sorts of other stuff to talk about on this special evening, stuff that couldn’t really be squeezed under the rubric of being “amazed at what the shepherds told them.” We were soon to be more amazed at what came out of those wrapped packages under the tree. And “treasuring all these things and pondering them in our hearts?” Or “glorifying and praising God for all that we had heard and seen as it had been told us?” That was a big, big stretch. Other stuff—even other good stuff—was vying with the Light. It didn’t extinguish the light. But if it hadn’t been for the Christ-corona shining out beyond the edges of the disc of darkness, the True Light could have been eclipsed. And we along with it.

The worst thing, says John, about darkness on the inside is that Lightless = Lifeless. When the Christ-light goes out, the God-life goes out. And when the God-life goes out, you’re coming to

STEP 3. Even worse still, DISINHERITED. No longer “God’s kids” (v. 12) Creatures created to be God’s own kids wind up orphans. If we were created to be images of God, genetically “designed” (sic!) to run on the light-energy that is God’s own life-energy, then disinherited darklings are most pitiable indeed. Like this desk-lamp I have here, disconnected as it is from any electrical wall socket. For such a lamp to seek to turn itself on is folly indeed. Look, when I seek to take the plug and plug the cord into the lamp itself, nothing happens. So with God’s human light

fixtures too. Darkness plugged into darkness remains darkness still.

STEP 4. THE LIGHT-BRINGER: GLOW-RY IN THE FLESH. God-Glow in a human body. “The divine GLOW became human flesh and started shining in the human world.” Electricity as power. Think of power companies. An ice-storm comes and the “power is off.” There has to be a generator. John the Baptizer wasn’t the Generator. He pointed to Jesus. Jesus said, I’m not the primal generator either. The one I call “Abba” is. But I’m the place for you to plug in to the Abba-generator. [12:45f. Whoever sees me, sees him who sent me. I have come as light into the world that whoever believes in me may not remain in darkness.]

STEP 5. BELIEVING AS LIVING, BECOMING GOD’S KIDS AGAIN There’s an inside glow to replace inner darkness. “Believe in the light that you may become sons of light.” (12:36) Whoever believed in him he gave the right to become God’s kids (again).

STEP 6. LIVING AS A WITNESS. The inside glow generates an outside glow to push back the darkness. John the Baptizer is our role model. “He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.”

We’ve already been singing it in our Advent candle-lighting carol these past Sundays: “Into this dark world your Christ-light now show. Let others see your life aglow.” And just two days ago: “For truly our God no longer delays; Let your light shine these holy days! Christians be joyful with one accord! Near at hand is the Lord.”

Where do you turn on the light? It’s already there. It started at Bethlehem. The generator is now running—is still running. There is DC and AC electricity as power-source for your life. Dead/Darkness Current and Abba’s Current, Abba’s Alternate

current. When darkness gets you—outer, inner, thick, deep—disconnect from wherever you're plugged in, from whatever feeds darkness. Then go to the wall socket marked AC— Alive Current.

It's God's own Christmas present. It's for every other darkling too. It's yours when you plug in.

So . . . Plug in! And then go and glow.