

Thursday Theology: Eleventh Day Observations

Co-missioners,

Once again our editor weighs in.

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Eleventh Day Observations

by Jerome Burce

Here with a few reflections on this Eleventh Day of Christmas, one eye looking back at things completed and the other forward to matters pending—

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Well, They Tried...



From Canva

"The church was packed, the music grand, the preaching so very disappointing." Thus the note I got from a Crossings stalwart on December 26 about her Christmas Eve experience. She included a link to the website of the church in question, so I found the service and listened for myself.

The preacher, I thought, was a remarkably gifted and engaging speaker. He worked without notes. What he said was coherent and well organized. He was clearly at ease. He tossed in the humorous hooks that grab people's attention. I suspect he gripped the audience from start to finish, and I'll bet the majority went home saying, "That was just great."

Comes the question: will they still say that a few weeks from now if and when they recall the sermon's defining mantra? About halfway through the preacher brought some children up to memorize it ("So great to see the kids up there!"), and after that repeated it several times along the way: "Sometimes we just *have* to live like a shepherd," as in, "we have to get over our

soaring egos and our addiction to fancy, expensive stuff," etc. Emphasis, as my correspondent noted, on the "have to."

What the preacher didn't do that Christmas night was to put the benefits of Christ to use for the sake of the upper middleclass white people he was talking to, most all of whom don't want to live like a shepherd, nor will they, however much or winsomely their preacher may harp on them about this. (He'll harp on other things a week from now, I'm guessing.) I caught no mention of God's possible displeasure with this attitude of theirs. This is a bit surprising, since the preacher underscored how God is the One who *calls* us to live like shepherds. But apparently that baby in the manger has nothing to do with prompting God to overlook our self-regard and even less with nudging us toward a change of attitude.

Having said which, I'd better quit. I'm getting snarky. I need God to forgive this for the sake of the manged babe—that crucified man he's soon to be. Sometimes *I* have to live like a shepherd, enduring the nonsense the higher-ups spew. "Do that *for* me Lord Christ. Why else did the Father put you where he put you? Help me remember how you died for us all!"

I wish I could add that I heard better things myself this Christmas. I didn't. The service I hauled my family to on Christmas Eve ignored the story from Luke 2. Instead we got a snippet from Matthew's account of the wisemen. The preacher preached, and not a thing he said connected in any significant or memorable way with the children or grandchildren I was sitting with. I know this preacher. He's a kind and gracious human being, a well-loved pastor. If only he knew how to help people hear of Christ-for-them and to trust him.

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It Could Have Been Worse

Ed Schroeder made a bit of a name for himself in his later years by griping about theological deficiencies in the ELCA. He'd dash off screeds to the editor of *The Lutheran* (these days *Living Lutheran*). He'd send notes to pastors who didn't dig deeply enough for Law and Gospel in sermons he suffered through. Among these were preachers of considerable reputation who didn't take kindly to Ed's critique ("it's that Seminex guy again who thinks he knows so much better!"). Many, I'll bet, were the delete keys tapped the minute his name popped up in the inbox. Even Ed came to recognize this after a while. He was seen as a gadfly. "Reasonable" people deal with such creatures by brushing them aside.

I inherited Ed's mantle as Thursday Theology editor at the end of 2011. Over the haphazard course of my stewardship I've been careful to avoid taking pokes at the ELCA. "What's the point?" I've thought. "If they brushed off Schroeder, they'll scoff at Burce. Nothing will be accomplished except to prompt a few especially thin-skinned folks to post 'Beware of Crossings' memes on their Facebook pages."

Today I break that little rule of mine to make one more point about Christmas preaching.

Just over a year ago I ran across a post on Facebook's ELCA Clergy page entitled "10 things about Christianity that Jesus would refute if he returned." Among them were these items:

- "That the gospel says his death solved the problem of humankind's separation from God, instead of accepting that his life revealed the truth that there is no separation from God."
- "That the religion bearing his name was conceived by the theories and doctrines of Paul, instead of the truth Jesus lived and demonstrated."

- “That he was said to exclusively be God in the flesh, putting his example out of reach, rather than teaching that we all share in the same spirit that empowered his character and life.”
- “That people are waiting on Jesus to return to save the world and end suffering, rather than taking responsibility for saving the world and solving suffering ourselves.”
- “That people think there is magical potency in uttering the name of Jesus, rather than accessing our own natural powers and capabilities to effect change.”

What’s being peddled here is the un-gospel of the Really Good Guy Jesus who wants us all to make like him (though why not Buddha?) and “save the world” in the process. God, of course, has no issues with our endless dithering over this. Sin is not a thing to fret about, nor is implacable evil, I suppose. We can fix it, if only we try.

I didn’t scribble down the name of the person who wrote this. It must have been an ELCA pastor, else she/he/they would have had no access to the page I found it on. Comes the dreadful thought: if this pastor preached on Christmas Eve this year, what might they have said? “Unto you is born this day in the city of David an Example, Jesus the person to be like—so get to work!” And with that, the poor people they were talking to would be left in the darkness of the everyday reality this preacher refuses to face and won’t allow God to address as only God-in-Christ can.

I don’t think the word “orthodoxy” has ever popped up in a conversation I’ve had with other ELCA pastors. It sounds so cold, so mean, so judgmental—so “Missouri.” I’ve also had few if any discussions with pastors who aren’t in Crossings circles about better and worse theology. Is this simply because I

haven't shown up for those discussions, or is it the case that they just don't happen? If the latter, then this church is in trouble. By "church" I mean those gatherings of people who show up in the pews on Sunday. What they hear will depend on the operative theology of the person talking to them. Some theologies drive the delivery of Good News. Others do not. Does the "wider church" care?

Pity the starving saints these days.

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On the Other Hand...



Saint John the Baptist
[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

As the Lord told Elijah on Horeb, there are plenty of folks out there who have refused to bend the knee to Baal. In these days of our Lord Jesus Christ, they're spilling Gospel. Most all of you who read this can name at least a few such people. Many more, God grant.

One such Gospel-spiller is Chris Neumann, from whom you've heard a few times in recent years. Chris is on the Crossings Board these days, serving as treasurer. A year and a half ago he started preaching now and then at his home congregation. He has just been added to his synod's pulpit-supply list as a lay preacher.

Here's how Chris delivered the goods on the Second Sunday of Advent a few weeks ago. The text was St. Mark's brief account of the ministry of John the Baptist.

After set-ups involving a) preps for showing a house he wanted to sell and b) the opening and main acts of a rock concert he once attended—

This morning, we get a similar feel as John the Baptist arrives on the scene, complete with his camel hair outfit and bizarre dietary habits, functioning as the crazy opening act in what will turn out to be the most incredible show ever. An upcoming act so good that John knows right away he has no chance of ever eclipsing it. Doesn't deserve to even be on the same stage. So how did John go about "preparing" the people for the upcoming headline act? Did he have them scramble around to justify that they have done enough of what God demands? No, he didn't.

Instead, he preached repentance. A mindset change. He baptized them into the forgiveness of sins. It's no wonder so many people went out to see him. Forgiveness? Are you kidding me? Deal. Up until this point, it was 'do it or else/don't do it or else'. It had been that way from the beginning of time. You eat the wrong fruit – out you go. Worshiping idols? Ignoring the prophets? – ok, fine. You've earned yourself a good long stay in captivity. Suddenly a new option is available. Forgiveness. And it's free.

This isn't easy to grasp. We still struggle to accept it in today's world. Case in point: this past week we drove out to cut down a Christmas tree. On the way to the tree farm we passed a correctional facility. Truth be told, I didn't have the slightest notion of stopping in to visit anyone. Wouldn't give it much thought if simply driving by, much less pause the family fun to do so.

Does God want me to do things like visiting the imprisoned? Yes, of course he does. Along with a multitude of other things I regularly fail at doing or not doing. Are any of the failings something I need to quickly shove in the washer at the last second to hide? No.

Do I need to defensively itemize the food I dropped off at the hunger center, or the couple times I gave away five dollars on the freeway offramp? Don't forget that coat I dropped in the collection bin—it was a nice one. The scales still have to be tipping in my favor—I would insist it. Do I need to bother with any of that justification in hopes God doesn't first notice my failures and tag me as a goat? No, I don't.

That is the utterly amazing message John the Baptist, all-star opening act, is dishing out this morning as a means of preparation. God Almighty is making good on his promises. He has arranged in Jesus Christ the ultimate superstar, who will deliver the performance of a lifetime, culminating in bleeding his life out in agony for us on a cross. All to secure for me and for you the forgiveness that makes us tidy and clean in God's eyes. That is the way of the Lord. Believe it and head home today with a smile.

[Quick comment: what Chris has just laid out in down-to-earth language is the *scandal* of the Gospel. "Thanks to Christ, there's nothing you *have* to do." Operative theologies on both left and right bristle at this. "Well, *of course* you've got to do something." Chris promptly challenges this by describing how things *do* get done—]

Folks, this is just the beginning of the story—the start of a new church year. I can't encourage you enough to keep coming. Come see the whole show. Come see the headliner in action. It is incredible stuff. You'll catch him embracing riffraff. Walking on water. Commanding the weather. And yes, dying on a cross. His own hand-picked crew of disciples don't even seem to get what's going on. And yet you'll hear about an obnoxious blind beggar screeching after Jesus to be merciful, an unexpected episode highlighting exactly what John preached this morning. Week after week, you'll find Jesus refusing to give up on anyone. Come hear about it and trust in that same mercy and forgiveness.

When you do, the same Holy Spirit that John guaranteed

Jesus would give to you will be right here too, to build you up with confidence and hope when you leave as forgiven saints. The good works that result from this renewed faith of yours are not done in order to prepare...you do them because you are prepared. Big difference. Glory goes to Christ, who makes that so.

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God grant more of such speaking in the Church he holds dear as 2024 unfolds.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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