

# West Point Cadets, Obama's Speeches and Jeremiah 33.

Colleagues,

I asked for help last week to finish the six-step crossing task between the Jeremiah text we heard on the first Sunday in Advent (as laid before us in Steve Kuhl's study of that text) and President Obama's speech before the cadets at West Point Military Academy. Only two responses came back to me, one from Peter Keyel and one from Steve himself. Peter connected the three Good News steps to the situation. Steve took it from the top and did the whole six-rung stepladder. Here are both of them.

Peace and Joy!

Ed

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Hi Ed,

I didn't give you a submission earlier, because I really wasn't sure how to do it. After reading the conversation between you and David (ThTh 600), something clicked, and I decided to give it a try. Here it is:

**Step 4: Promissio:** *I Will Cause a Righteous Branch to Spring up for David* The righteous branch that has sprung up for David is also the righteous branch that has sprung up for us-Jesus Christ. His righteousness becomes ours on the cross, and even America's sins are not too great to separate any of us from that new righteousness: "I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me" (Jer. 33:8). Still today, especially today, when no battle plan or troop surge can bring

*us safety, Christ reaches out and is the only source both of salvation and safety.*

**Step 5: Confessio:** *Embracing the Promise of God: “The Lord is our righteousness” (v. 16)*

*When one embraces the Promise of God, there is no room left for any other. No longer is our trust placed in America, Obama or the Pentagon. Although these and their forms of righteousness will pass away, God’s Word does not, and holds us. Shielded by that Promise, the cadets do not need to fear the death that awaits in Afghanistan because they know their vindication is through faith in Christ, not in their deeds there. Instead, they are supported and buoyed by that righteousness given to them from Christ in Word and Sacrament. God will be with them in Afghanistan and when they come home.*

**Step 6: Missio:** *Saved and Living in Safety (v. 15)*

*The cadets facing deployment to Afghanistan will be threatened by human enemies. However, bereft of the rod of God’s wrath, these enemies can be seen for what they truly are: our lost brothers and sisters. Even as the cadets execute their assigned left-hand task, the promise-trusters among them bear a second, right-hand task: spreading the Promise that all are loved and forgiven by God. That will seem impossible at times, especially when serving as a cog in the gears of retribution. And yet, trusting in Christ, they can find opportunities to spread both the Good News and the promised healing to a broken people. Even our secular authorities acknowledge that military might cannot win the day-that it will take building trust and safety with all of the Afghan people. Buoyed by Christ’s Promise, our soldiers can risk their lives not to kill our enemies, but to love them.*

Peter Keyel  
Pittsburgh, PA

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West Point Cadets, Obama's Speeches (West Point and Nobel) and Jeremiah 33.

### A Preliminary Crossing

For Thursday Theology #599, Ed began to "cross" the West Point cadets as they listened to President Obama explain why he was sending 30,000 troops to Afghanistan (the tracking) with my "grounding" of Jeremiah 33:14-16. He prefaced that by reminding us that "crossing" isn't simply about text studies (a law/promise exegetical unpacking of the already "crossed" lives of our biblical forebears) but learning from these text studies (as grounding) how to unpack and repack our lives with that same law/promise wisdom. The textual "grounding" is meant to be used like steel wool being rubbed onto glass tubing (the particular historic lives that can be "tracked" for their particular specs) with the hope that sparks, connections, "crossings" are made. Crossing, therefore, is not an abstract application of general principles. Rather, it asks: Learning how God has dealt with his people in the past (the biblical grounding), does that give us clues (crossings) as to how God is dealing with us in this particular situation today (tracking)? Therefore, crossing is not third-person gossip, it is second-person address that takes seriously the actual first-person responses of the people being crossed. Keep my grounding of the text close at hand as I seek to learn clues from it for crossing Jeremiah's law/promise wisdom to the West Point cadets.

**Diagnosis: Insufficient Righteousness**

**Initial Diagnosis:** Crossing these cadets with Jeremiah 33

presents a dilemma of sorts. I don't know these cadets. I have no way of asking them what they may be thinking about. Maybe they were in church on Sunday and heard the text of Jeremiah read. Maybe they didn't. But I do have the image of their stoic faces in mind—and those faces say something. What they say, I think, can easily add up to what Ed (following my grounding) points out in the initial diagnosis part of the crossing. There is obviously a human enemy. There is obviously physical danger. But worse, there is also obviously a debate at home about whether this assignment is right! Jeremiads are plentiful enough. Why else would the President take all this time to make his case to these cadets, who are simply to follow orders anyway? Why else if there is not a question of the righteousness of it all?

**Advanced Diagnosis:** Neither does it take any great stretch of the imagination to think what might be going on underneath the countenances of those stoic faces. For example, as part of the tracking, Chris Matthews of MSNBC "Hardball" was chastised for suggesting that those stoic, expressionless faces signaled a sense of "if not resentment, then skepticism" about what the President was placing on them, suggesting Obama was giving this speech "in enemy territory." It was quickly pointed out to Matthews that the cadets are instructed to show no emotion for any speech—and Matthews apologized. Indeed, it would seem that cadets are simply to block out, lock up, any thoughts, yea or nay, of the righteousness of this assignment. They will simply proceed on orders as though righteous. Evidently, not only cadets, but the public in general has become quite adept at employing stoic resolve to the inevitable orders that are being set before them. How else could the cadets function? How else could, we, the public, function?

**Final Diagnosis:** I have no clue if the cadets at West Point or the public in general can entertain the possibility that the

righteous wrath of God might be operative behind either the human enemy we face or the words the Jeremiads express. But, then, that hardly matters. For the truth of such things doesn't depend on either the cadets or the public believing it. Indeed, it is often part of the effectiveness of wrath, human as well as divine, that it leaves just enough room for skepticism about its existence and just enough appearance of our own security and self-righteousness that it can't be seen. Might that not explain much of the rhetoric that fills the air today? Surprise is not only the cherished strategy of the human enemy, including terrorists; it is also often the strategy that accompanies God's wrath. And yet, truth be told, God does reveal his wrath to the nations in outward tangible ways: such as frustrated military campaigns, fiscal crises, determined enemies like Al Qaeda, body bags of soldiers, and PTSD (Post-traumatic stress disorder) that destroys lives and breaks up families. Jeremiah thinks so (remember the ominous words of Jer. 33:5) and so does St. Paul (Rom. 2:1). Not being able to see the wrath may be equally a function both of stoic resolve, operating on the assumption of righteousness, and of the lack of revelatory signals in history from God.

### **The Gospel's Offer of a New Prognosis: Sufficient Righteousness**

**Initial Prognosis:** While evidence abounds for Jeremiah's kind of diagnosis in the American war situation, where is the evidence for Jeremiah's kind of prognosis in our world, the promise as expressed in Step 4 of the grounding? Where is Advent happening: the offer of the promised Righteous Branch who is able (worthy) to deliver us from the wrath of God? Where is the promise of Jesus Christ crucified for our transgressions and raised for our justification or righteousness proclaimed? If I may be so bold, I would say, "here!" Here in the work of the Crossings Community. Here the promise is being sent forth over the World Wide Web for all to see. Here is a community dispersed

throughout the world speaking that promise out loud. But there may also be other signs. Take, for example, not Obama's West Point speech but his Nobel Peace Prize speech. To the world audience (and hopefully the cadets were listening) Obama raised to public view the ghost of Reinhold Niebuhr, even though the name of Niebuhr was never mentioned.

Niebuhr, recall, is that Jeremiah-like prophet of repentance and grace who in the first half of the 20th Century didn't mince his words about the realism of human sin and the folly of the liberal (self-righteous) ideology of human progress. But neither did he shy away from asserting the power of gospel promise to transform "children of darkness into children of light." Moreover, look where the explicit reference to Niebuhr, as the unspoken source of the speech's realism, comes from: from news journalists, who think they discern something of Niebuhr's paradoxical message of sin and grace inching its way into the public square by none other than the President himself, described by one journalist as a Christian who is not a "Christianist." That is, a Christian who is not a sectarian partisan who uses faith as a wedge, but a "serious Christian" who is concerned about trumpeting the "audacity of hope" in the midst of "tragedy," wondering if a more realistic phrase to capture Obama's message wouldn't be the "tragedy of hope." [I'm referring to a Niebuhrian analysis of Obama by Andrew Sullivan—"I'm a conservative!"—on THE ATLANTIC website at this address: [http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the\\_daily\\_dish/2009/12/the-tragedy-of-hope.html](http://andrewsullivan.theatlantic.com/the_daily_dish/2009/12/the-tragedy-of-hope.html)

if>.] Could this be the seeds of Obama's Christian tutelage under Jeremiah Wright bearing fruit? True, Crossings people may find more in Niebuhr than what journalists have found. Indeed, Crossings people may find ways to improve on Niebuhr's own articulation of the audacity of the promise. But yet, the emergence of Niebuhr's ghost, I'm suggesting, is no small matter

in the prognosis at this time.

**Advanced Prognosis:** Is the ghost of Niebuhr (and the Jeremiah kind of promise it suggests) also accompanied by faith? Answering “yes” to that question is central to any Christian prognosis. For the kind of realism that the promise intends is not real at all until it is real FOR YOU, real in the heart, real as faith. The realism of faith overrules the realism of stoic resignation because realism of the promise overrules wrath with forgiveness. In Jeremiah’s words, the realism of the promise is that it creates “thanksgiving,” stoic countenances broken by the promise with the cracking of a smile. The article I referred to above doesn’t talk about thanksgiving, but it does talk about hope-which could be a kind of thanksgiving, an anticipated thanksgiving. What is characteristic of hope is that it is audaciously realistic. That realism, it seems to me, is the one-two punch of repentance-and-faith: transferring our hope away from human potentiality (repentance) and into the promise of God in Christ (faith). I’m not sure if there is a lot of evidence of that happening yet, either among the cadets or out there in the public discourse. What I remember from Obama’s Nobel Peace Prize speech is that he is still appealing to a deep belief in human progress: albeit, thanks to Niebuhr, a more sober, more realistic assessment of that belief. Could that be the beginning of repentance born of faith? That doubt about human potentiality-about our potentiality!

**Final Prognosis:** Of course, after all is said and done, it is obvious that the human enemies, Al Qaeda and the Taliban, have not been deterred one iota by all this talk of promise and faith in Christ-at least, not yet. Indeed, truth be told, the resolve of these enemies against us may actually be encouraged by all this sober talk of realism, repentance and faith. And yes, all this talk of repentance does, then, also play right into the hands of those in our midst who would in the name of patriotism

and national pride, wittingly or unwittingly, become enemies themselves of the promise. And even more, those cadets may very well still need to go off to war. Let none of this sober realism be denied! After all, this is the risk of faith borne as the cross in daily life. But then, we must also remember this. None of this talk of promise, repentance and faith was ever undertaken simply that we might defeat these human enemies. Rather, it was undertaken to disarm these enemies of that most powerful and secret of all weapons that the world will ever face—a weapon our enemy possesses, if it possesses it, without knowledge or righteousness: the wrath of God against us. Who knows? Maybe by repentance and faith that weapon of God's wrath will backfire in their hands to the amazement of us all. And if it doesn't, and for some divine reason God sees fit to remove us as power from the world political scene, we can know this: we can dwell in the land before God in the safety of his steadfast love.

Steve Kuhl