

“Let’s Roll!” The Mission of Christ the Insurgent, A.D. 2010

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+ In Nomine Jesu +

There are two main things I want to do in this hour. First, I want to take up a challenge that Ed Schroeder threw down in a paper delivered last year at a conference of the Lutheran World Federation. The challenge is to find a fresh way of talking about mission that uses down-to-earth English and also does justice to the fullness of what God is up to in the world in A.D. 2010.¹ I have a proposal along these lines for all of you to look at and to chew over, bearing in mind that what I’ll present requires much fuller development than sixty minutes will permit.

My second aim is to invite the Holy Spirit to shove some steel up the spines of the missionaries who are here in this room, right now. When it comes to one of our roles as missionaries, too many of us have spines like wet noodles—and I aim that critique at myself first and foremost. By the way, if anybody thinks the word “missionary” doesn’t mean you, you’re in for a surprise. That much I can promise you.

So again, the main things: a) fresh language for mission; b) a push in the back for missionaries: but before I get to them I’m going to do some pre-ambling for 15 minutes or so, amble as in stroll here or there, poke your nose into this or that. Bear with me, please. Most all of it will prove, I think, to be relevant. And if it’s not only relevant but also useful, then God be praised.

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Preambling: I start as I must with a word of thanks to the organizing committee for the astonishing privilege of standing before you this afternoon. The astonishment arises from the observation that I am not the scholar you might expect to be hearing from in this kind of time slot at this kind of conference. Instead I’m a pastor, chiefly that; one who tries to think about what he’s doing even as he serves a busy congregation filled with saints who are pretty sure they don’t pay their pastors to sit around reading books. Thank God they don’t object to their pastors taking time to write sermons, because for me that’s where the bulk of the thinking gets done these days, and out of it emerges somebody whom others are willing to put before you as a practical theologian with something to say, perhaps..

Theologian: that’s a person who plugs away day after day at two big jobs, this according to Crossings co-founder Robert W. Bertram in a paper he wrote almost 40 years ago.² Job 1 is to figure out whether and how the word of God spoken to people two and three thousand years ago continues to be the word of God for people today. Job 2, by far the greater job, is to keep pressing the one and only question that is absolutely essential to anything that can properly be called the mission of the Church per se. That question is

simply this: why the cross? What *need* is there, today, for the crucified Christ who hangs at the center of everything the Church is about or is supposed to be about? And if the need is there, what can you as theologian do to help people recognize that need? Or more to the point, what contribution can you make, as theologian, to the Holy Spirit's crucial mission of getting people to hang their hearts on this crucified Christ the way some shepherds hung their hearts on the mangled Christ so long ago, and presto, there they were, the first-ever Christian missionaries, rousing a ruckus in the streets of Bethlehem as they glorified and praised God for the *promise* that they heard and seen (Lk. 2:20)?

Speaking of promise: that long ago paper of Bertram's ends with the line that gave rise to the title of this conference. "God's promise, our mission." Or as Bertram puts it, *promissio* is the secret of *missio*. That, of course, is the way academic theologians talk to each other, they're expected to. The kind of theologian I am isn't allowed to talk that way. In fact a big piece of my daily work is to turn the wonderful thoughts of people like Bertram into the kind of language that ordinary people speak. I thank God every day that I got my start in the early '80s teaching theology in New Guinea Pidgin English. It's a down-to-earth language if ever there was one. It forces you as teacher to cut through the obfuscating verbiage that allowed you to slide through seminary sounding bright but not knowing much, and in doing so to find out at last what the wise ones you read and listened to were actually talking about. And then, when you return to your native English, you start to notice how the Church's language, especially in English, is loaded with opaque words—no, not high-falutin' words but down and dirty words, words, that is, that everybody tosses around though without quite grasping what they're all about. I think of them as "walnut words." They've been around, most of them, for as long as the church has spoken English, and over time and much use they've developed thick shells, shells that are hard to crack through, and even when you do the meat doesn't fall out very easily. You have to pick around in them with care so you don't make a hash of the meaning you're trying to extract. Still, the words are handy. And they're unavoidable. You can't sing a hymn or sit through a lection without breaking your teeth on them. So we take to tossing them around as a matter of course, without much thought, and it's the shell, not the contents, that people react to. If the shell is pretty and shiny they'll use it. If it's gnarly and moldy, they won't. It's how I *feel* about the word that matters, not whether, when it comes to the word, there's any "is" to the "is," as Bill Clinton might say.

Walnut words: sin, grace, faith—justification, God help us. I have long been convinced that a pervasive failure to penetrate such words, to think into them and through them, is responsible for all manner of nonsense that afflicts the church these days and plays havoc with its mission.

The church's mission, the thing of things that it's sent and meant by God to do: when Bob Bertram talks about mission in his paper he does so in a way that is bound in 2010 to provoke snorts of derision, certainly in the secular world; in Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish worlds too; but also in corners of the Christian world. This shouldn't surprise us. To know Bertram was to know a confessing Lutheran, and all the more a classic, apostolic Christian. As such he identifies the Church's central, compelling mission as the proclamation of Christ Crucified—this Christ, nothing less; this Christ proclaimed as a necessary promise, a promise that must be out there, front and center, for people to hear if there's to be a future with God for any of us. Joel Osteen, for one, doesn't buy that. Nor, I fear, do the

folks who organize big-scale mission festivals—Global Mission Events, they call them—for the Lutheran church body I belong to. Osteen, in case you don't know him, is the latest and most dazzling champion of the so-called prosperity gospel that has long stained the fabric of American Christianity. Its mission—I say this by the way; I find it fascinating—is strikingly similar to the one that drove the old millennial movements, often referred to as cargo cults, in Papua New Guinea and other parts of Melanesia, the question being how do you shake the chains in such a way that the goodies will start pouring down from God on high or from ancestors across the seas, as the case may be, so that when the goodies do pour in you can enjoy, yes, *Your Best Life Now*. (That's the title of Osteen's big book, the one that turned him into a millionaire if he wasn't one already.) Over at the GME, meanwhile, the question is no, not how do you shake God down, but rather, how do you shake down the saints? Or more politely, how do you inspire a contingent of earnest, well-meaning American Lutherans to cut loose with their goodies in support of this, that, or the other worthy project—the digging of a well; the launching, say, of a weaving project—that will help some desperate faraway folks to start enjoying *their* best life now. Notice how in both venues, Osteen's and the GME's, the surface problem, Level One in the standard Crossings diagnostic, is a lack of stuff, be it my lack or somebody else's. For Osteen the underlying gut-level problem is a failure to trust that God is aching, just aching, to cut loose with the stuff. At the GME it's a lack of commitment to the principles of peace and justice that would drive folks like us to fork the stuff over. Of course if these are the issues—the only issues—then you don't need a Jesus to fix them, and you sure don't need that Jesus as we find him one ugly afternoon dripping blood from the spikes that some uniformed goon was obliged to pound through his wrists and his ankles. Why trouble people with an image that gross, especially when they're sensitive and caring people who *want* to please God? That being so let's spatter them, not with the blood of the Lamb—that's *so* last century Billy Graham—but with Bible verses and happy anecdotes, or with grave instruction in root causes. Let's challenge them to increase their faith so that the floodgates will open and the blessings start to flow. Let's call on them to live their best lives now as mini-saviors of the world, wise and caring people who will bless the poor and empower the dispossessed and leave behind a teeny-weeny carbon footprint so that 100 years from now the great-grandkids can breathe. *Sure* they can do it, if only they try.

Do I exaggerate? A little bit, perhaps. Even so, *Kyrie eleison*.

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Again, walnut words. I used to think the word to work on first with confused and shallow Christians was the word “sin.” I'm changing my mind about that, for reasons I don't have time to explore right now. In any case, I'm suggesting here that the better word to start with is the word “mission.”

Mission. That too is a walnut word, though not nearly so old as the others. It appears nowhere in the Bible, except in bad translations. Ed Schroeder writes that it shows up in Christian vocabulary only after the Reformation.³ I'll take his word on that.

Still, even in its shorter use “mission” has developed a thick tough shell. A pretty and pleasing shell, I should add. This shapes its use at the popular level I operate at, where any and every church-sponsored adventure is labeled a mission trip. That would include a

week with the teenagers in Disney World so long as they spend at least two hours while there picking up trash.

There is thickness at the scholarly level too, the one where people prefer to say *missio*, or these days, *missio dei*, the mission of God. Where did this term come from? According to Christopher J. H. Wright, an Anglican missiologist, it was coined by a German missiologist named Karl Hartenstein as a way of summarizing ideas he picked up from—who else—Karl Barth.⁴ Hartenstein introduced it in a summary report about the world mission conference that was held in Willingen, Germany in 1952. Along came another German, Georg Vicedom, a Neuendettelsau Lutheran who pioneered missionary work on my natal turf, the highlands of Papua New Guinea. Vicedom published a book in 1960 entitled *Missio Dei: Einfuehrung in eine Theologie der Mission*, in English “an introduction to a theology of mission”; whereupon, for whatever reason, the term took hold. Today *missio dei* controls the conversation at missiological meetings across the church’s spectrum, though what one takes it to mean will depend, of course, on one’s theological orientation. For some it describes and reinforces the Church’s traditional evangelistic enterprise, bringing Christ to the nations as some Lutherans still say. For others it illuminates any and all work that God is doing to bless and benefit the world whether Christian preachers are involved or not. In some interpretations it renders Christian preaching pointless. Ed Schroeder has been complaining about that at mission conferences for the past 20 or 30 years, blessed be he for complaining.⁵ To not much avail, I fear. Ed complains like a Lutheran, you see, and in the wider Christian world the classic Lutheran quack is the sound of an odd duck.

That doesn’t mean it’s a wrong duck. Luther was no dummy.

Missio dei. The mission of God, singular. It’s the singularity that constitutes the toughest shell around this particular nut. No one seems to get past it, or even thinks to. There is one God, therefore there’s one big mission. There is a three-in-one God, therefore all three persons have their fingers in the one big mission pot. The question is, what’s in the pot, and which-all of God’s human creatures are involved with God in stirring the pot? Some say his believing Christian creatures. Others say his human creatures, period. With that, the argument is on.

A plague, says Luther, on both your houses.

This is the Luther who early in his career, beginning, I believe, in his argument with Johannes Eck at Heidelberg,⁶ observes that God is busy in the world with two big projects, one that pleases and delights him and the other that doesn’t. The one project suits God’s nature as the God who loves his human creatures and wants to enjoy them enjoying him, above all as they trust him and revel in his mercy. The other is dirty work that God has got to do lest his dirty human creatures run riot and ruin everything God has made. The one is God’s proper work, *opus proprium* in Latin. It’s God’s grand rescue project, anchored in the crucified Christ. The other is God’s alien work, alien to his true desires for us; still it must be done, God’s *opus alienum*, directed at stubborn, willful creatures who flat out refuse to trust him.⁷

Here’s my proposal: let’s take this distinction and apply it like a nutcracker to the word mission. It stands to reason that where there is *opus* there is *missio*, that is, God sends others to do his work, and in that work he entangles human agents. We here take this to be

true of God's proper work, don't we? Lots of us are pastors. Every Sunday you'll find us at pulpits and at altars, why? Because God sent us there to preach and offer the benefits of Christ, yes?

So how about that other work, the alien kind? Well, let me illustrate. Some months ago my daughter got a parking ticket and failed to mail in the fine. I found out about this because the car was registered in my name, and I got the dunning letter. To learn more I went to the website of the Cleveland Municipal Court. Here's the statement I found myself staring at: "The mission of the Clerk of Courts is to record and process all matters decided in Cleveland Municipal Court. 'We Care.'" Love that last line. Translation, apropos to the situation I was in: "we care enough for your fellow citizens to keep scofflaws like you from dodging their obligations." Question: is it *only* the Clerk of Courts who cares that way? Is it only *their* mission to maintain order at the parking spaces on Cleveland streets? Answer: of course not. Not if I believe that God daily and richly provides folks with all they need to sustain this body and life," up to and including the law and order that enables the likes of you and me to find a downtown parking spot from time to time. Does the Clerk of Courts think that he or she is one of God's missionaries? I somehow doubt it. I'm pretty sure that had I said as much in a note of thanks included with my daughter's check—her check, not mine—he or she would have thought I was an odd duck indeed. But again, just because the quack sounds strange doesn't mean the quack is wrong.

Where there is *opus* there is *missio*. If there is *opus alienum* there is *missio aliena* (*missio* is a feminine noun), and if I add *dei*, the way Luther did to his *opus* talk, than I've got M.A.D. Go ahead, say it. MAD, as in Project MAD. So also with the other project, the grander project, *missio propria dei*, M.P.D. Though here, if you want to turn it into something you can say, you've got to add some vowels, the way we might if we were speaking Pidgin Hebrew. Try these, MyPaD, as in John 14, "in my Father's house, ergo in my house, there are many rooms" one of them with *your* name emblazoned on the door.

So then, two projects. Two grand mission projects that God originates and drives. Project MAD. Project MyPaD. The one creates and sustains the reality we know. It summoned us from sleep this morning. It sent us into another day's adventure of surviving in the world. By contrast the other project, the MyPaD project, exists for now only and always as a promise, an intimation of that which shall be, or so God says. I don't see the forgiveness of sins, I hear of it. I believe in it. So also with the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting.

Another Luther thought: God works under the form of the opposite.⁸ So MAD and MyPaD describe the ends, the outcomes, to which the projects drive. They don't as a rule describe our daily experience of the projects themselves. As a rule there is nothing alien, nothing strange, about life in the world as an agent of Project MAD. Fact is it feels familiar, and often homey. There's nothing maddening about a glorious sunset seen from the eastern shore of Lake Erie. Fact is it makes your heart sing. It also heightens the dismay when a storm blows in. There's nothing maddening per se about a farmer's bumper crop, anything but; yet such a thing will drive inexorably to madness, as Jesus observed in his tale about the rich farmer, madness as in folly, madness too as in wrath. So also today. Give an American farmer 10 bumper crops in a row, and in Year 11 he won't be talking to God anymore about the weather—why should I, says he—and God will not

be amused. Give a nation 50 years of unbroken peace, prosperity and unmatched social welfare, Project MAD objectives, all of them, and all of them delightful, and what you wind up with is Sweden, than which no country on earth has less use these days for God.⁹

MyPaD too refers to outcomes and ends that come to pass under the form of the opposite. God, you might say, has a sneaky way of doing things—and if you say that, you’re merely echoing Paul. So to get people home God flings people out, casting them as strangers to the ends of the earth. Think Peter and Paul and the rest of the apostolic crew. Think Boniface among the Germans, Xavier in Japan. Or how about those Westerners who, in the 1930’s, appeared with the word of Christ in what is now the Chimbu Province of Papua New Guinea? I’m told on good authority that the greeting they’d have gotten, standard in traditional Chimbu culture, male to male, was a man reaching out to coddle the other fellow's crotch and expecting him to coddle back. Look, I'm as Western as they get. I'll guarantee those newcomers didn't feel the least bit at home. Yet in and through their homelessness God made a home for Godself among the Chimbu, and there he planted the promise of the home that Christ is making for us all.

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Time out for the big 64 dollar question. Is this MAD and MyPaD business something Burce is spinning from Luther’s overheated rhetoric and nothing more, or can it be grounded where all honest theology has got to be grounded, in the Biblical record of God’s dealing with people? The question these days will center particularly on the first of the projects, the alien one. To say that God aims to drive us mad will strike countless people as outrageous. Dare I say that Joel Osteen won’t believe it? Nor, I fear, will the folks at the GME. It will say to them that God is cruel, and mean.

With that in mind, let’s turn to the Bible’s first unmistakable mission text, not that anyone I know of has thought to describe it quite that way. Still, once eyes are opened, as happened to me recently, you can't miss it. It isn't Matthew 10 or 28, not John 20, not Acts 1. Would you believe, Genesis 3? It appears at the tail end, when all the big damage is done and said, and now it’s time to mop things up. Verse 21: “The Lord God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them.²² Then the Lord God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever’—²³ therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.

Where “mission” is concerned, the verb is “send.” Mitto, mittere, missus est in Latin. In Hebrew, shalach. Verse 23: the Lord God “shalached” him (*yishlachahu*, to be precise) from the garden. He did so for a reason: lest (v. 22) the man should “reach out his hand”—sorry, bad, obscuring translation. Here too the Hebrew verb is “shalach,” or again precisely, *yishlach*. Jerome noticed that way back in the 4th century, so that the Vulgate reads “ne forte *mittat* manum suam,” lest he *send* his hand.

In other words, the first thought of mission in the Bible is God imagining Adam’s self-appointed mission to turn himself from the mini-god he’s just become into an everlasting mini-god who will vie with God forever in calling the balls and strikes of good and evil. Talk about catastrophe! To prevent it God launches a counter-mission, a defensive

mission, the aim of which is precisely to alienate the man; to send him away; to block and frustrate his implacable desire to have life on *his* terms, not God's. And if the blocking and frustrating should enrage the man; if it turns him into a stranger dripping with contempt for the maddening God who keeps getting in his way, so be it. That's the price that must be paid, not because God is mean but because God is good.

Project MAD. Notice, it sends the man against his will—he has no choice in the matter—“to till the ground from which he was taken.” That's the mission. Away he goes, dispatched *as missionary* to fend for himself; to make his own home; to scratch out his own living; to dig his own grave, dust he is, and to dust he shall return, and no it's not just Adam. 23 December 1952. By now I've been nine months in utero, quite happy months, I assume, I don't remember. Suddenly there it is, the big squeeze, the walls of the womb pressing in and pressing down, over and over, and there I am being propelled by God-induced contractions down a path I didn't choose to take, and out I come by God's sending to join the rest of you in scratching out a living from the earth that will swallow me up. No wonder the first thing any of us did on this side of the birth canal was to cry. Whereupon a merciful God, using a nurse or a midwife, did for us as he did for the first man and woman, that is, he clothed our nakedness and eased our pain, and when in our case he tossed in a first suckle at mother's breast, it was downright comforting. The God of Project MAD is not without a heart. He may have pushed us out and away, but no, he hasn't quit caring for the creatures he made. God be praised for this ongoing providence. Without it we couldn't last in Project MAD to the extent that we do.

Back to Adam, Adam the First, that is. Being grownup, he has to go find his own food. Which he does, all the while developing his newly asserted right to distinguish for himself between good and evil, between, for example, the mushroom that nourishes and the mushroom that kills. Notice, the better he gets at this, the greater the distance grows between him and God, the less it seems to him that he really needs a god. Along come the mini-god sons, now turning their quarrel with God into a quarrel with each other. Before you know it one brother has “missioned” his hand (so to speak) to kill the other, and he in turn is “missioned” away to a starker alienation, a sojourn among strangers. Again God acts defensively. Like that helps. Pretty soon Lamech is bragging about his murders, and Lamech's granddaughters are having alien sex, as we'd say these days. “Drown 'em all,” says God, still playing defense. To this day even the pious find him hateful for having said that. Yes, the few are saved, but all too quickly God is playing defense again, now at Babel, this time against the maddening arrogance of Noah's offspring. So again he ramps up the alienation by confusing their speech, and notice how to this day nothing makes some arrogant Americans madder than hearing Spanish spoken on *their* streets, and if you flip back and forth between MSNBC and Fox News you'll find arrogant people using the same words to speak quite different languages, red English here and blue English there, and neither group is the least bit interested in trying to grasp what the other is saying, and don't think for a moment that God doesn't have something to do with all this, our own intra-American alienation. He who sits in the heavens cackles (Ps. 2). The defense is holding. These guys will never make it on their own, as they are, to the tree of life. Not a chance. They'll kill each other first and spare God the hassle.

Genesis 12: familiar, important turf. If we learned anything in seminary or in Bible classes taught by able pastors, it's that something very, very big happens at this point.

Indeed it does. The call of Abram, we like to say, though we'd do much better, I think, to describe it as the sending of Abram, or rather, the *re*-sending of Abram. Remember, Abram too starts off as a son of Adam, sent first, like every other ancient Mesopotamian—every modern American for that matter—to scratch out a momentary living in the ground from which all were taken, the dirt that all are headed to. We call it “making a future for ourselves”; and wouldn't you know, that's the very thing we're doing, though not in the way we think we're doing it. Again we notice how this first sending is rightly described as Project MAD, God confounding people and giving them the opposite of the object they're reaching for. Be this as it may, one day out of nowhere God interrupts the daily grind of dirt-scratching Abram and gives him a new mission, one that sends him into a new kind of future that no one else in all of Haran is able to imagine. Strictly speaking, it's an impossible future, one that Abram *cannot* make for himself, nor can he conceive it, not conceptually and certainly not literally. Sarai, remember, is withered and old, and so is he. There is one thing—one thing only—that he and she can do (if you can call it doing) to bring that future about, and that's to trust it. More to the point, they're to trust a *promise* that God will make this future *for* them.

“Go,” says God. And this, of course, is the launch of Project MyPaD. Notice, “Go” is the key verb, the key imperative. The minute we hear it we hear a mission in the making. We'd do well, I think, to add it to the MyPaD sending moment in our baptismal rites, not “let your light so shine,” but “*Go*, let your light so shine before others,” the light being *your* trust, *your* Abram-like confidence in the crazy, impossible promise that washed over you just now. Go to a future you cannot fabricate, to a living you cannot scratch out for yourself. And in your going, let people notice how you're clinging like a limpet to the hope of things that cannot be. God be praised if they label you a fool.

Famously, Abram goes. In going, he becomes the first-ever dual missionary, the first person we know of who spends his days caught in the tension between God's two great projects, the MAD project where you arrange your own future or try to, as in the episode with Hagar; the MyPaD project where you and Sarah wait with patience for God to keep his word and to make the future for you, the promise being that you and yours will wind up at last in a place called home.

Here's what Abram doesn't know, not that he has to know it: the road home will squeeze him through the eye of a needle, a quite impossible cross-shaped needle, and on it the bloodied corpse of a father's pride and joy, a dear son, a one-and-only beloved son, and no, it isn't Isaac.

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One last piece of clarifying and then, at last, the good stuff.

Look, folks, I don't get it. I'm pretty sure that most of you don't get it either. All of us, you see, are Abram types. We wouldn't be here if we weren't. Speaking for myself, I've never known a day when I wasn't, like Abram, a double agent, a two-faced missionary, if you will, on the hand a worker bee in Project MAD and on the other a baptized MyPaD operative. I don't know what it's like to live without the promise, or at least without the blessed tension the promise introduces to the spending of our days in a mad, mad, mad, mad world.

Life without the promise: that's what I don't get. And reading the Bible won't help me get it. That's because from Genesis 12 on the Bible is a Tale of the Two Missions, a tale recorded by double agents for the sake of other double agents as a way of helping them survive the tension they're already in without breaking faith. That shapes how the story is told; so we hear, for example, about the flip flop between terror and joy that the Israelite mother goes through on Exodus Day. What we don't hear about is her Egyptian neighbor's dark despair when she wakes up that same morning to find her baby dead. This helps to explain a weird phenomenon, the one where pious Christians with their noses always in the Bible keep undervaluing the promise as a gift for other people too, as if we have nothing to say to them, nothing that at least few of them might *want* to hear. Lutherans are notorious for keeping their mouths shut. We make jokes about it, shame on us, and our churches dwindle away. So does our spending on evangelism.

We Lutherans would do well to spend more time with the poets—not our poets, but their poets, the single-mission poets, M.A.D. only. They're the ones who can tell us what life without the promise is like. Take, for example, the ancient Greeks, than whom no one is starker on the subject of guilt. If you kill dad and sleep with mom you pay the penalty, period, and please don't whine about how you didn't know it was mom you were sleeping with. That's no excuse.

Or how about those poets up north, the ones with the nose for impending doom? The frost giants are bound to win, didn't you know, and the only dodge, available to a few (by no means all) is to lead the heroic life that will land you in Valhalla. There you can drink yourself silly with your pals and crow about your slaughters but only for a time. Valhalla itself is headed for the deep freeze, didn't you know?

Anyone been to the multiplex lately? Spent some hours, say, with the Matrix trilogy or any other tale of tomorrow that's been filmed in the last 20 years? Then you'll notice how our Hollywood poets have combined those Greek and Nordic laments and keep singing them, over and over and over again, all of them variations on the same basic tune: we mini-gods are making rotten choices. Because of that the world we've made has got to end, a few, a tiny few, surviving, but only if a butt-kicking small "m" messiah should suddenly appear. That's the Hollywood dirge, 21st century.

And then there's this, an item from Bollywood turf that I stumbled across by accident three years ago. It's a magnificent novel by an award-winning Indian author named Vikram Chandra, formerly on the faculty at George Washington University and now at Berkeley, where he teaches creative writing. The book's setting is Mumbai. It comes with a telling title, *Sacred Games*. Listen, please, to how it opens:

A white Pomeranian named Fluffy flew out of a fifth-floor window in Panna, which was a brand-new building with the painter's scaffolding still around it. Fluffy screamed in her little lap-dog voice all the way down, like a little white kettle, losing steam, bounced off the bonnet of a Cielo, and skidded to a halt near the rank of schoolgirls waiting for the St. Mary's Convent bus. There was remarkably little blood, but the sight of Fluffy's brains did send the conventeers into hysterics, and meanwhile, above, the man who had swung Fluffy around his head by one leg, who had slung Fluffy into the void, one Mr Mahesh Pandey of Mirage Textiles, that man was leaning on his windowsill and laughing. Mrs Kamala Pandey, who in talking to Fluffy always spoke of herself as 'Mummy', now staggered and ran to her kitchen and plucked from the magnetic holder a knife nine inches long and two wide. When Sartaj and Katekar broke open the door to apartment 502, Mrs Pandey was

standing in front of the bedroom door, looking intensely at a dense circle of two-inch-long wounds in the wood, about chest high.¹⁰

And with that, away we go into 900 utterly engrossing pages teeming with characters both major and minor, all of whom—this dawns on you when you get to the end—are like Fluffy the dog, slung into the void by greater powers attending to their own issues of alienation, and on the way down all of them are screaming the same questions in voices peculiar to each, and the questions are Why? To what end? What games are being played, and by whom, with me as pawn? And as each hits their particular version of the pavement, the questions hang in the air unanswered even as their brains go cold. Does anyone wonder what Luther's *deus absconditus*, the hidden God, is all about? Read this.

Read this, and then let's start as Christian preachers to blush with shame over the hash so many of us made last month of the Gospel text for the Second Sunday of Advent. It was, you may recall, a short little thing, Luke's three-sentence introduction to the ministry of John the Baptist, a text so brief that many preachers, I'm sure, made the bad mistake of thinking not much was there, and they looked around for other things to talk about. The passage starts with a list of big shots in Project MAD, ends with a quotation of one of Isaiah's great MyPaD passages, and in between them this line, the reading of which most of us botched. We botched it because we read it as double agents addressing other double agents for whom the promise is nothing they haven't heard before, so here's what came out: "[John] went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of *repentance* for the forgiveness of sins," emphasis on "repent," as in "must I remind you idiots yet again to grab hold of the good stuff you're merely toying with," to which the answer is, yet again, big yawn. Look, that's not what this passage is about. Notice, John went into *all* the region around the Jordan. That includes the Gentile region, the M.A.D.-only region, the region filled with Fluffies who are constantly repenting, indeed they are, repenting as in twisting and turning on the long way down, grabbing here, there, and everywhere for something, for anything, that will break the fall; that if nothing else will soften the horror of watching the pavement rush at them. Enter John, stage right, with his God-word for *them* of a new thing to turn to, a thing hitherto withheld from single-agent ears, and thus for them a bizarre, impossible thing, hitherto unimagined. It's a baptism of repentance for the *forgiveness* of sins—that's how the passage has got to be read, emphasis on "forgiveness," the *forgiveness* of sins as opposed to the counting of sins, the multiplying of sins, the futile, ridiculous denial of sins as you rant away at the powers that be. Forgiveness, says John, is the thing to repent not for, but *into*—the Greek is *eis aphasin*, *eis*, a directional preposition. "Turn here, not there, into this and not to that. That won't help you. This will."

The forgiveness of sins, preached by John to the crowds, to the lackeys, losers and pawns, the two-bit tax collector, the underpaid legionnaire, every one a Fluffy. The word snags them in mid-air. In the game the gods are playing—the Holy One here, the mini-god dirt-tillers over there—it's another new move, an unexpected move. On God's part it's the ultimate offensive move, a genuine game-changer. It's here that God is finally taking MyPaD public, truly public for the first time ever, public as in the promise addressed not just to Abram but to Abimilech too. No wonder Luke kicks things off with that drum roll of Project MAD officialdom, as if to say "It happened; it really did happen; here's *when* it happened."

Luke rolls the drum because for all the newness of the move, it's nonetheless a sneaky move, another piece of MyPaD sleight-of-hand, first a single wandering Aramaean way back when, now a nutcase preaching in the desert with his scruffy finger pointed at somebody born in a manger, a somebody sent and commissioned by God to pull off the sneakiest move of them all. The sneakiest move: it happens—so I contend—at a point in the passion narrative that double-agent Good Friday preachers habitually ignore, the point at which a Fluffy named Barabbas comes tumbling into view, slung there by Pilate in his spat with Caiaphas and company. A robber, John calls him, or according to Mark, a guy nabbed for murder in a failed insurrection, in either case a two-bit no-name loser, and in fact Barabbas is no proper name at all—a father's son, that's what it means. Could be it's nothing more than a smart aleck's feeble stab at hiding his real identity. Comes the question: which loser will we crucify? Whereupon Caiaphas—canny Caiaphas, the Project MAD enforcer who unlike Pilate knows a real threat to God's law and God's order when he sees one—Caiaphas picks Jesus. “Gotcha,” says God, the sneaky God who for Fluffy's sake has just pulled the ultimate fast one on himself. Watch now and marvel as his best enforcer slings the real Bar Abbas into the void, Bar as in The Son, the only-begotten, the best-beloved, Abba as in Father, capital F. This Barabbas is the real insurgent, God in the flesh of Fluffy-for-us, tumbling to his doom. Mark and Matthew record his scream as the pavement nears, eloi, eloi, why, why, why? He hits. Look, this is God-for-us slamming head first into God-against-us, an event even more profound than matter meeting anti-matter. It sets off a chain reaction at the core of the cosmos where the logic of Project MAD has just been smashed to smithereens—I'm speaking fancifully, of course. Less than 48 hours later there's a sudden explosion on the surface of the earth as we know it. We call it Easter.

And for the import of that explosion, flip back one page in Luke's gospel to a passage Good Friday preachers do tend to notice. That's the one where Fluffy on the right twists as far as the spikes will let him, and in that twisting he repents *into* Fluffy-for-us. “Remember me,” he says.

You know the answer, of course. “Today you'll be with me in Paradise.” In Johannine translation, “Where I am going, you will be also. Welcome, fellow loser, to MyPaD, and if to MyPaD, then to Dad'sPad too.”

Easter means first and last that when Project MAD has run its course we're headed home to yes, The Best Life Ever, a life better by far than anything the average American begins to imagine when she hears the word “heaven.” Try John of Patmos: “I looked, and I saw a new heaven, a new earth, and the sea was no more...” When you crack *that* walnut open and pick out the meat, you're looking at one fantastic promise. God's promise. Our mission. Our proper mission, M.P.D.

+ + +

Folks, I'm watching the watch. It's what the guy at the podium has got to do when we operate, as we must—we have no choice—with the exigencies of Project MAD. If the guy rattles on, the schedule gets broken, the audience gets cheesed, and smoke starts pouring from the time-keeper's ears. Sniff the air at that point, and you'll notice how the acrid scent of alienation is starting to permeate the room. And if somewhere in the three hours'

worth of stuff still to cover lie things that God would have one say, he too can be expected to frown. That's how M.A.D. works.

This noted, let's get to the bottom line, the closing cadenza. God's promise *is* our mission. I speak now of the people right here in this room, people as bound, committed, and enmeshed as anybody else in that other mission, M.A.D. It's part of the genius—the sneaky genius—of M.P.D. that God keeps using the likes of us to pull it off.

One last riff on that notion of sneakiness.

Another way of describing God's proper mission would be to call it the Mission of Christ the Robber, Christ Bar Abbas who takes the robber's place; who in taking his place starts robbing like no robber has ever robbed before, or ever will. He robs God of his righteous wrath. He robs Adam of his right—his otherwise justifiable right—to say that God hates him. He robs Eve of her right, so often justifiable, to hate Adam; to despise him as a no account loser; to revel in her estrangement from him; to make the divorce permanent.

What Christ does, to put it bluntly, crudely even, is to steal the guts out of Project MAD. And here's the thing: no one save God knows what he's up to when he does this, least of all the chief operatives, the rulers of this age as Paul calls them. "If they had [known] they would not have crucified the Lord of Glory" (1 Cor. 2:8). After all, alienation is their stock in trade and the source of their power.

The mission of Christ the robber. In scholar-speak you would call it *missio Christi latronis*, M.C.L. Again, let's do the Pidgin Hebrew thing and insert some vowels, the same ones we stuck in M.P.D. Here's what you get: MyCaL.

My call, your call, our call together. It's to preach Christ, to push Christ, to peddle Christ. To live, and yes, to die with Christ, emphasis for now on "die." Observe: MyCaL kicked in for me at Holy Baptism, when the Holy Spirit grabbed this Fluffy by the leg and slung me into the void all over again, only this time I'm not screaming. Instead, like Paul and Silas in that Philippian jail, I'm singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to the astonishment of all. More to the point, I'm twisting, turning, repenting *into* the other Fluffies who are falling all around me and I'm passing on the crazy promise of life beyond the pavement. And if they believe—when they believe—I'm robbing them of fear and horror, of resignation and dark despair. Or so God intends for it to be where I'm concerned. God grant that it sometimes is.

Speaking as a pastor, I love Christian funerals. It's where I see the culmination of my call in tear-filled eyes and wavering voices that sparkle with hope even so. The contrast between that and the funeral where the promise isn't heard, or if heard isn't believed—I've been at some, presided at one or two—could not be starker.

I posit the following for your consideration. Christ, your Lord and mine, has earned the right to see every human being get the chance—at least the chance—of dying with him. Dying with him, as opposed to dying without him.

This too I posit, that when the church ignores or sets aside its proper mission it is robbing the Robber of his right, or is trying to. To use a walnut word of old, we filch his glory.

Osteen is a glory filcher. So are the scholars and church leaders who push peace, justice, and the preservation of the present world as the church's key task in A.D. 2010. So are pastors and congregations who keep shirking the basic task of evangelism, the passing of the promise; who make it their mission to coddle the insiders, and to hell with those are freezing in the dark for want of the Word that will warm them. Blankets? Sure, we'll pass out those—how kind of us to do so—but no, not the word. That makes us feel silly. It seems so empty, so presently unhelpful. They may not want it. We fear to give offense.

This reminds me that Christ Bar Abbas is not just a robber, he's also a rebel with insurgency on his mind. Jesus plays offense. He'll thumb his nose at Sabbath law and raise a ruckus in the temple to the consternation of his fellow Jews. He'll stomp on reason, logic, and the demands of justice, M.A.D.-style, to the horror of the Greeks. He'll preach the impossible and flash it from time to time with a miracle here and there, and if the poobahs deem this impolite or impolitic, if it moves them to murder him, so be it. For Fluffy's sake, that's what he came for.

I'm reminded too of the apostolic hero of St. John's Gospel, not Peter, but Thomas, the guy who bears the ultimate witness to Jesus crucified for us and risen from the dead. Thomas also makes an appearance when Jesus heads for Bethany and the raising of Lazarus, the particular assault on Project MAD that will seal his doom. You'll recall, I'm sure, how Thomas turns to the other disciples and goads them into coming along. "Let us also go," he says, "that we may die with him." Or in 21st century American English: "C'mon boys. Let's roll."

And that's the charge I leave you with: "Let's roll."

Let's roll by grasping our MyPaD identity as robbers with Christ, our larceny aimed at the deadly certainties that people live and die with today in Project MAD.

Let's roll by remembering that MyCaL is not to rule the world, still less to save the world in the sense of postponing its demise, but rather to undermine and trouble the world with the promise of an Easter world, secretly in the making; a promise—let's face it—that lots of people can't bear to believe, though some will. At which point, says Jesus, the angels in heaven start clapping their hands..

Speaking of those dear disbelievers—Bob Bertram's wonderful term¹¹—let's roll by honoring them and thanking God for them. They're out there in their untold millions, attending to their single agent mission of caring for the only world they know. They care, so many of them, with breathtaking skill and generosity and basic human decency. Yes, let's work with them as the fellow agents in Project MAD that indeed we are. But then let's roll by commending to them as much of that M.A.D. care mission as they'll allow us to hand off, and by daring in Christ to concentrate on the mission both proper and peculiar to us as God's double agents, no, not digging wells, but turning on the tap of living water. If we don't do that, no one will.

Among ourselves, let's roll by rising up when other MyPaD operatives start bending the knee to Project MAD imperatives; when they set aside their proper mission for the sake of playing nice, or respecting others, or padding the endowment fund. Let's roll by complaining the way Ed Schroeder complains when the real deal promise is missing from sermons, from meetings, from publications and classrooms where it out to be found. Let's

roll by objecting when the word “gospel” gets tossed around among colleagues in uncracked walnut form, as if everyone knows what everyone else is talking about when they use the word. Fact is, they don’t. This too is a fact, that they won’t like it at all when we dare to point this out.

So let’s roll also by sucking it up, so to speak; by understanding all over again that MyPaD is God’s offensive mission; that you can’t play offense without giving offense; that you can’t play holy robber without inviting suppression. Let’s roll by going with Thomas not to live with Christ but to die with Christ in whatever form that dying may take.

Let’s roll by roiling the mini-god masters of Project MAD with our promises of things impossible, gifts of God beyond their reach, their control, their power to fabricate. They make it their aim to squelch such dreams. Let’s defy them. Let’s fall for Fluffy, let’s reach for Fluffy, let’s refuse to quit when Fluffy herself, lost in her alienation, should bite the hand that seeks to grab her. “So be it,” says Jesus, as he shows us his hands. “For Fluffy’s sake don’t you dare dumb down the promise. Tumble on!”

And to all these ends, let’s roll by begging the Holy Spirit, font and source of all things impossible, to purge and fortify our own hearts, re-turning us day after day into the promise of Christ for *us* and all that this portends. Then let him sling us into whatever piece of the void he would have us occupy and trouble this day with our serene confidence in God, the very God who will push us away and wear us down and drive us to death as the hours, the days, and the years fly by; the God who even so has long since proved his righteousness, the new kind, that is; the MyPaD Easter version.

“You’re going home,” the Spirit says. “You’re going home. Be not afraid—and pass the word.”

God’s promise. Our mission. Let’s roll.

+ Soli Deo Gloria +

Endnotes

- 1 Edward H. Schroeder, “Lutheranism’s Crying Need: A Mission Theology for the 21st Century” (online: http://www.crossings.org/archive/ed/Augsburg_Mis_EHS09.pdf, accessed January 2010), 4.
- 2 Robert W. Bertram, “Doing Theology in Relation to Mission” (online: <http://www.crossings.org/archive/bob/DoingTheologyinMission.pdf>, accessed January, 2010)
- 3 Schroeder, *op. cit.*, 3.
- 4 Christopher J. H. Wright, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative* (Downer’s Grove, Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2006), 63.
- 5 For a sampling of Schroeder’s critique search on “*missio dei*” at www.crossings.org.
- 6 In the proof of Thesis 16. “Heidelberg Disputation,” in *Luther’s Works V. 31* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957), 51
- 7 Paul Althaus touches briefly on this distinction in several places in his overview of Luther’s theology. See, for example, at p. 120. *The Theology of Martin Luther*, tr. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963).
- 8 *Ibid.*, 119.

- 9 Why this is so merits a paper unto itself, a central focus of which would be an exploration of dimensions to Paul's "the law brings wrath" and Melancthon's *lex semper accusat* that receive too little attention.
- 10 Vikram Chandra, *Sacred Games* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2007), 3.
- 11 Robert W. Bertram, "Postmodernity's CRUX," in *A Time for Confessing*, ed. Michael Hoy (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 173