



CROSSINGS Connection

WHERE THE GOSPEL MEETS OUR DAILY LIVES

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Epiphany: The Big Reveal

By the Rev. Dr. Bruce K. Modahl

God does what all new parents do. God shows off the baby. Parents come with that little bundle in the baby carrier as if to say, “Look what we got. Look what we did.” Babies never cease to be a wonder. Some of the wonder spills over to the parents. The parents show off the baby; the baby also shows off the parents. People see parents in a new light. That is no less the case with God.

In the Christmas liturgy we acknowledge that as we behold the God made visible, we are drawn to love the God whom we cannot see. God shows off the baby. The baby shows off God.

God does what all new parents do, but God does it in a way no new parent can. One set of new parents in the neighborhood erected a pair of giant plywood storks in their front yard to show off the arrival of their twins. The father erected the plywood storks. His wife bore the twins. This was him saying, “See, I can do something too.”

Mary had the baby. God lowers a star into the heavens—God’s front yard—to show off Jesus’ birth to the cosmos, God’s neighborhood.

Watching the cosmos are the Wise Men of our story. They are cosmos watchers. Part of the reason for showing off is to show others up. That is usually not attractive behavior when we engage in it.

But what God’s showing off shows up in the wise men is their yearning for something more than what they can discern from plotting the movements of the planets and stars, all so orderly and predictable. There must be something more to life than putting one foot in front of the other and one day behind the other. The new star awakens a desire for something more.

God’s showing off also shows up some unpleasant things. The Wise Men went astray. Despite the unconventional star, the Magi reveal a very conventional notion of power and where kings are born. They waltz into Jerusalem and Herod’s palace, where the music is martial,

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Ron Neustadt: “To God Goes the Glory”

My wish for Crossings is that it can cut through all the chatter. Because when the Word gets out there, I've seen the Spirit work with that and make a difference for people.

—Ron Neustadt

One individual has played a leadership role throughout the history of Crossings, but—as reflects his character—his influence has been behind the scenes and usually out of the spotlight. The Rev. Ronald Neustadt first met Crossings co-founder, Ed Schroeder, more than 50 years ago, when Ron was a student at Valparaiso University where at that time Ed taught theology.

Over the years, Ron and Ed collaborated in many arenas, most notably when Ron served as lead editor for *Gift and Promise*. Published in 2017 by Fortress Press, with three chapters by Ed and nine more from others in the Crossings community, the book gets to the heart of the Augsburg Confession.

Ron was the longtime pastor of St. Mark's Lutheran Church in Belleville, Illinois. Since 1982, the church has shared facilities and ministries with St. George's Episcopal Church. This is the longest continuing relationship between Lutherans and Episcopalians.

Ron graciously agreed to talk about his collaboration with Ed and about his hopes for Crossings.

CROSSINGS: What was your first involvement with Crossings?

RON NEUSTADT: Robert W. Bertram (Bob) and Edward H. Schroeder (Ed) were two of my seminary professors. In the late 1970s, Bob was

“Almost from the start, Ron was an essential part of Crossings ministry. He never complains; he never gives up. He is one of the saints who has kept me a Christ confessor. I pray God keeps giving Crossings people like Ron.”

—Cathy Lessmann, secretary for the Crossings board

approached by a group of businesspeople who were interested in discussing scriptures in a way that was applicable to their daily work and lives. That's how Crossings was born. Soon Ed and Bob were traveling to congregations around the country to lead Crossings workshops.

One of the churches was St. Mark's of Belleville, Illinois, where I served as pastor for 34 years. I recall how excited lay people were to take these classes and how willing they were to do a huge amount of work. Crossings was exactly what I had hoped for the congregation at St. Mark's. Practical and down to earth.

CROSSINGS: You led that congregation for 34 years. How did your path lead to St. Mark's?

RN: In 1974, after graduation from Concordia Seminary in Exile, or Seminex, I served as an associate pastor to a congregation in Elmhurst, Illinois.

After two years, my wife and I—along with our twin daughters—moved back to St. Louis. Over a ten-year period I worked for AAA as a dispatcher and then taught Latin and math in the high school I attended. There was a small group in Belleville, Illinois, who had left the Missouri Synod over the Lutheran Church controversy. They called me to be their worker priest. It was a small group of 40. They grew and I became the full-time pastor. And that was St. Mark's.

CROSSINGS: What did you enjoy most about leading St. Mark's?

RN: I loved teaching confirmation classes. I had wonderful students who asked such good questions. These were 7th and 8th graders preparing for

confirmation. These young people really got to the heart of the Christian faith.

Another highlight for me was pastoral visitations. I'd call on people who were in distress. You would sit in people's living rooms and speak with them. I experienced such honesty in those conversations. On my desk at St. Mark's, I kept a note to myself: *When you get discouraged, make house calls.*

"The most impactful sermon words I heard from Ron came about 17 years ago when we began worshipping at St. Mark's. Ron said something like, 'Christ absorbs the critique of the cross.' Those words might seem like standard fare for the Crossings community, but they were revolutionary for me. Ron was the messenger of the Promise that day. It started me on the road to understanding the words we hear so often but don't always absorb—that Jesus died for me."

—The Rev. Candice Wassell, former co-executive director at Crossings, currently Senior Pastor at Faith Lutheran Church, O'Fallon, Illinois

CROSSINGS: You collaborated with Ed Schroeder in teaching several courses on the Lutheran Confessions. Any examples that you think are illustrative of Ed's theology?

RN: I would say Ed's teachings weren't so much "Ed's theology" as Lutheran Theology. Ed had a way of expressing complex theological concepts in "nickel words." In other words, in simple, everyday language. For example, he'd speak about "the sweet swap," aka, Fortuitous Exchange: Jesus saying to us, give me your sin and guilt and death. In exchange, I will give you life and forgiveness and joy. Ed's language was down to earth as he expressed the Christian message and Lutheran theology.

CROSSINGS: For nearly two decades, you contributed dozens of weekly text studies. Now that you are retired, what are your hopes for Crossings?



PHOTO © BETHANY DREHER

The Rev. Ron Neustadt enjoys one of the stories told about Ed Schroeder at Ed's memorial service in June 2019.

RN: It's the best kept secret of the Lutheran Church—and I hope it doesn't get kept secret anymore. That is my hope. Its message is practical. It takes the scripture seriously. It also takes the human experience seriously.

Here is a way of reading scripture that gets at the word of God contained in scripture while also addressing human life and the lack of joy in people's lives. Crossings addresses that lack of joy with the word of life presented in the scriptures.

Crossings' focus on the core of the Christian message draws people together. Ron says he experiences this firsthand at the annual conferences, where he enjoys seeing people who share hope in the promise. "What a difference Crossings has made on my life and the lives of others," he says. "*Soli Deo Gloria*. To God goes the glory. It's not modesty; that is the truth."

"Ron recognized my gifts and helped me thrive. As I have had the opportunity to mentor an associate in his first call, I channel my inner Ron Neustadt. He shared with me the Crossings text study using the diagnosis-prognosis method, which has been instrumental in my preaching and ensuring that the demands of the law are named and the good news that is the Gospel gets communicated in a relatable way."

—The Rev. Mark Marius, Pastor, Trinity Lutheran Church of Santa Barbara, California, and former intern at St. Mark's Belleville, Illinois

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the march lock step. Herod was afraid and all Jerusalem with him. No wonder. Herod killed two of his own sons because he feared their designs on his throne.

In contrast, Mary's baby shows off a God who comes vulnerable to our lodgings. God wields power not the way our Herod authority would have it but the way the prophet Isaiah predicted it. He took our infirmities and bore our disease, our dis-ease, upon himself. Herod's authority put him to death. God's power raised him to life. God promises that as we live in Christ we too shall be raised.

And then what did the Magi show off? Joy. They knelt to him. They opened to him gifts fit for a king. Joy, worship, and offertory are faith's

response. And then they returned home. Back to star gazing? I hardly think so.

The Magi returned as we return every week to infiltrate those places where Herod authority is practiced: neighborhood, work, school, family. We are redeployed by God to practice God's brand of redeemed authority, which seeks out strays, includes the excluded, forgives sins, which seeks not to be served but to serve.

Every week we encounter the casualties of Herod authority, the casualties of might makes right, keeping score and getting even, preserving position and place. We are redeployed to bring to earth the Father's heaven for these casualties. In doing so we hit upon the Child's most favorite taste in material gifts: My body given for you; my blood poured out for you.

Message from the Executive Director

Crossings Film Series Relaunches

I hope you will take a few minutes and visit crossings.org/film. There, you'll find 14 new videos of interviews with a range of individuals in the Crossings community. Their personal stories, observations, and insights are enlightening and inspiring. You will also find five new short episode videos in "Faith Seeking Understanding." Written and narrated by the Rev. Dr. Steven Albertin, this film series answers questions at the heart of the Christian faith.

Crossings is grateful to Matti Neustadt, whose generous gifts underwrote the filming and production of these videos, along with the previous film series (still available for viewing). I'm grateful as well to Bethany Dreher and Ron Coulter of the Crossings staff for attention to detail in producing these new videos.



Sherman Lee
Executive Director

Your Gift Now Will Double in Value

When you make a year-end gift to Crossings, it will be matched dollar-for-dollar because of a generous challenge gift from Kathy and Mark Helge. Your gift along with others will make it possible for seminary students, new pastors, and others to take part in the January 2024 seminar on the theology and practice of preaching. You may make a secure gift online at crossings.org/give.



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QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER

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