

Book Review

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BETWEEN CROSS AND RESURRECTION: A THEOLOGY OF HOLY SATURDAY by Alan E. Lewis. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. 477 pages.

This remarkable book is a pastoral meditation, from a Reformed perspective, on the three-day mystery of faith that Roman Catholics (and the longer liturgical tradition of the church) refer to as the *Tridium*. That deep liturgical claim—informed by the pattern from I Cor. 15:3-4—affirms that everything essential to faith is signified in the three days, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The three days must not be homogenized but must be kept discreet and distinctive, each for its own weightiness. This book offers a most poignant frame of reference for the current practice of ministry in our society. The subtitle (and accent) of the book indicate that the author, a faculty member at Austin Theological Seminary until the time of his death, urges the recognition of Saturday as a key reference point for faith and ministry.

I have been getting ready for this book for a long time. A while ago I read Douglas John Hall's *Lighten our Darkness*, one of his earliest books, and, I believe, one of his best. Hall proposes a "theology of the cross" for North American Christians and draws on Luther's deep engagement with the cross. Later, I read and pondered *Real Presences*, the difficult book by the irascible George Steiner, an English, Jewish learned man. On the last pages of his book is a statement I have quoted often in my own writing: Steiner avers that Christians (and Jews and atheists) all know about the Good Friday of "interminable suffering, of the waste, of the brute enigma of ending." And all know, says Steiner, about Sunday "of resurrection, of a justice and a love that have conquered death." But then Steiner goes on to speak of Saturday, "the longest of days,...between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other." More recently I have read *Mysterium Paschale* by that great, Barth-influenced Roman Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar. He takes something of a mystical approach to Saturday, and offers a stunning articulation of *kenosis*, the emptying of God especially voiced in Philippians 2. Only later did it strike me that a Reformed Protestant with Lutheran sensibility, a Jew, and a Roman Catholic all struggle, each in a very different dialect, with the unthinkable of Saturday that is largely skipped over in our easier conventional move from Friday to Sunday. It is a topic that our culture wants to consider not at all, but one that Christians, perforce, cannot avoid.

Lewis takes up this theme in hard thinking and accessible writing. The book is organized into three sections that unfold in a coherent design.

"Hearing the Story" is a meditation upon the New Testament material concerning the death and resurrection of Jesus. Lewis insists that believers cannot rush to Sunday, or imagine that Sunday negates Friday. Quoting D. M. MacKinnon, he writes:

There is no deeper misunderstanding of the *mysterium Christi* than that which insists, against all the evidence, on construing the resurrection as a

descent from the cross, publicly and unambiguously visible to all standing around, but made the more overwhelmingly effective by a thirty-six hour postponement. We all of us in different ways, in different situations, have to learn the extent to which we are prisoners of utterly misleading imagery concerning the nature of Christ's victory over the world and the manner of its manifestation. (32)

Facing the Pauline phrase, "he was buried," (I Cor. 15:3-4), Lewis judges: Death is given time and space to be itself, in all its coldness and helplessness (37). What an awesome phrase, death "is given time and space to be itself"! This is a demanding word for preachers who are mostly paid to speak Sunday assurances of happiness and well being as quickly as possible, without waiting for that "time and space."

"Thinking the Story" is a serious theological analysis of the issues by a focus upon Karl Barth, Jürgen Moltmann, and Eberhard Jungel. Of course, the power of Lewis's theological analysis is rooted in the radicality of Barth, who takes the cross with utmost seriousness and understands it, as does Lewis, on Trinitarian terms. It is the Trinity that permits Saturday to be a viable theological datum. The discussions of Moltmann and Jungel are dense, but Lewis's point is endlessly clear:

Jürgen Moltmann is preeminently an "Easter Saturday" theologian, committed to testing Christian convictions against the reality of suffering, death, and doubt. (215)

Jungel is *the* theologian of the grave of Jesus Christ. For him, God's death through Easter Saturday *is* the story to be told by the community of faith, the impossible possibility which for our sake and the world's we must today bring to thought and speech. (235)

"Living the Story" is the pay-off for the preceding, a most powerful effort at utilizing the theological claim of the foregoing discussion and bringing it into contact with lived reality. Lewis suggests that Saturday has come to fruition among us in Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl, the deep signs in our time of the abandonment of God. This section occupies nearly half the book. I find it both deeply moving and enormously suggestive for moving into and beyond these three signature events of the power of evil into many other occasions of deathliness that pastors must inescapably face.

Before he finishes, Lewis offers a surprising turn that gives additional authority (if any were needed) to his argument—his reference to his own cancer that led to his death in 1994:

Then let the author say that I embarked on this study—rather presumptuously, I now suspect—not having undergone in personal life anything that could without hyperbole be labeled an "Easter Saturday" experience; but that I conclude this project no longer in that fortunate (or impoverished?) condition. For somewhere in the middle of its writing (spot the seam!) this volume sustained an interruption of many moons, and the fabric of my personal and vocational history a long, disabling gash. Wistfully now I recall being publicly declared "at the height of my powers," just weeks

before whatever creative juices flowed through me were suddenly dammed up. Several years' worth of physical, mental, and spiritual energy drained away is the fatigue of disease, surgery, and therapy. And the impetus of life was arrested by a hiatus of waiting, demonic invasion, and near-termination, which in the circumstance almost demanded to be thought of as an Easter Saturday analogy. (403)

In the end this is not an abstract or speculative book on theology. This is a discussion that brings the Saturday truth close to concrete human reality.

Having identified the extremities of Auschwitz, Hiroshima, and Chernobyl and having faced his own Saturday, Lewis makes room for us to ponder the reality of Saturday in our lives and in pastoral practice. Of course Saturday has always been a lived reality that occupies pastors. Just now, however, its importance seems to loom peculiarly large among us. We are in a world that lives close to God-abandonment, and for the most part, the world wills to live there. Many folk sense this down deep, but have no words for it because the word Saturday is not much on our lips. As a consequence, the pastor is under immense pressure to speak a good word and to bring us promptly, without "was buried," to a happy Sunday. This book will toughen my own resolve to delay the utterance of such joy if or when it is premature in the midst of God-abandonment. Good news without honesty is not ever good news. We have learned that well in Clinical Pastoral Education. For the most part, we still have to learn it about the great public emergency of absence that now powerfully haunts among us. Other readers may be drawn by Lewis, as am I, to the Saturday truth that will not be wished away.