

Commentary on the War: Toward Gaining Ground in the Ministry

Jesus the Arsonist: Easter as the Beginning of the End

David H. Petersen



I am thankful to call John Hrehov a friend. Late last year, he was showing me some photographs of some of his recent work on his phone. I had already seen them, but he didn't know this. As he showed me "The Arsonist" he said, "You talked about this on Issues. Jesus is the arsonist." I was flabbergasted. I have talked about Jesus burning the world on the last day with purging fire to make way for a new heavens and a new earth, but I'd certainly never described Him as an arsonist! Now I do, and I am not going to stop. That subtle change, one title, has helped me to see the end with greater clarity and eagerness. Hrehov's painting and that word have brought me comfort and served as serious inspiration for my thinking about the end, the temptation of idolatry, and the significance of the Resurrection.

Hrehov has generously allowed us to use "The Arsonist" as the cover for this issue of *Gottesdienst*. His style may not be familiar to our readers. On the surface, it is simple, but it requires real effort on the part of the viewer. It isn't as easily or quickly grasped as a Ducks Unlimited print or even a Rembrandt painting. Some have described his work as magic realism, and even though artists typically dislike being classified and labeled, I think there is some merit to it. The idea with magic realism is to put a bit of the supernatural into the real world. I was familiar with this in literature, but not in visual art. I have come to think that it works better in John's work than in what I have read. That is to say, I think images might better convey the fact that there are invisible realities in our mundane, everyday lives—and in our context, specifically divine interaction and intent—than novels do. And even if the image isn't immediately arresting, its study is worth the effort.

In "The Arsonist" we see an ornate, somewhat stylized house. There are lots of parallel lines, symmetry. This is a house that belongs in the real world but is awash in strange colors. It is as though we are looking through a purple and green lens. Are the colors symbolic or stylistic? I don't know, but they hint that something is happening. On the top of the house there is a weathervane in the shape of an angel blowing a trumpet. It is not a depiction of an angel, but of a weathervane. It could

easily exist in the real world and be seen by our eyes. It reminds us that there are angels all around us that we can't see. Some of those angels will blow trumpets on the Last Day. Finally, there is a man sneaking around the corner of the house with a flaming torch, the only point of light in the painting. It is clear from the title that he intends to burn the house down. The point is two-fold: there is more to the world, more to creation, than the eyes can see, and what we do see will not last. The ornate house is temporary. It is about to burn.

The allegory is subtle. Hrehov doesn't force an interpretation on the viewer. The arsonist could be a wicked man active in malice or he could be Christ Himself acting in love. Perhaps the flame is the Holy Spirit. Whoever he is and whatever it is that burns in his hand, the end is coming. The angel's message isn't only "Awake," it is also "Rejoice, and leave this world behind." Yet, as already related, Hrehov, perhaps in an unguarded moment, told me the arsonist is Christ. That probably wasn't dogmatic. My sense is that he likes ambiguity because he wants us to think about the possibilities, to engage our imaginations and, in this case, think about the temporary character of this mortal plane. Even if the arsonist is a criminal driven by malice or greed, or even if the arsonist is Satan himself, Christ is the Lord. What men mean for evil, He works for good—without fail.

Along these lines, someone once quoted Rolf Preus to me as having said, "God gives you children so that they will break your stuff and keep you from idolatry." I have used that line many times since. All of creation, including our bodies, is crumbling and decaying. It is not eternal. It must not be worshiped. Sometimes God hastens the demise for our benefit. He sends naughty children and arsonists to remind us of this most essential truth: there is only one God and He alone is to be worshiped: feared, loved, and trusted above all else. The trumpet will sound and we shall be changed, even as the world burns, and all His children will rejoice.

St. Peter teaches us this very thing, even saying that we ought to hasten the end:

The day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night, in which the heavens will pass away with a great noise, and the elements will melt with fervent heat; both the earth and the works that are in it will be burned up. Therefore, since all these things will be dissolved, what manner of persons ought you to be in holy conduct and godliness, looking for and hastening the coming of the day of God, because of which the heavens will be dissolved, being on fire, and the elements will melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to His promise, look for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells. (2 Pet 3:10–13, NKJV)

It is the Resurrection of Jesus that is the beginning of the end. Jesus foretells that heaven and earth will pass away, but His Word will not (Matt 24:35). He Himself, in His body, underwent a destruction and a transformation. His old body passed away, and a redeemed or renewed body appeared (1 Cor 8:21). His appearance seems to have been different enough that He was not immediately recognized by the disciples, and yet it is His Body that is risen.

The connection between His death and resurrection, the Last Day, and our own coming resurrections is made most clear in Matthew's Gospel. Some of the signs that His return in glory is imminent as given in chapter 24 are fulfilled at the crucifixion in chapter 27. The sun goes dark (24:29; 27:45) and the earth quakes (24:29; 27:51), which results in graves being opened and the raised wandering into the holy city, even as the body of Jesus is being taken down from the cross. The end begins then.

The Resurrection suggests at least two dogmatic aspects of eschatology, that all men since the Fall face temporal death and yet also possess an immortal soul. Ironically, it is dying that causes us to face immortality. We were not made for this but have been afflicted by the sin of our first parents in the garden and have added our own sins to the mix. Christ takes up flesh to make Himself a mortal creature worthy of His Father's wrath and a fit sacrifice for our crimes. He paves the way through death for us by dying Himself, thereby redeeming and transforming our deaths into a passage that may be likened to sleep from which we expect to awake in a much happier place. The immortality of our souls, of course, is only good news if we are thus redeemed. The sad reality is that the worst day on earth for an unbeliever, no matter how horrific, is better than a minute in hell, and hell doesn't end; but for the baptized who trust in Christ, the best and happiest moment on earth can't hold a candle to what is to come and which will not end. The nicest, most ornate house on earth is a false, misleading dream. It cannot satisfy, and it will not last. But there are mansions in heaven with Christ that do satisfy and endure.

Lent begins with the stuff left from an arsonist: ashes. These are placed upon us with a reminder that we are dust and to dust we shall return. The Christian embraces this reality. He knows that Christ made Himself dust for us, was burned in His Father's wrath, and was buried in the earth. This He has done for our salvation, and He was raised for our justification. 1 Corinthians 15 is a chapter on eschatology.

Each one in his own order [at the resurrection]: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. *Then comes the end*, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and

power. . . . So also is the resurrection of the dead. The body is sown in corruption, it is raised in incorruption. It is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness, it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being." The last Adam became a life-giving spirit. (1 Cor 15:23b-25; 42-45, NKJV, *emphasis added*)

Our immortality is not a curse but a blessing. The leaving of this world and its destruction are not a tragedy but a triumph. The world isn't only what we behold with our eyes; it is also what we behold by faith. Jesus isn't only an Arsonist; He is also a Gardener and a Builder. He not only died; He also rose. And He not only came once in humility, and comes to us now in grace, but He comes also soon in glory. Come, Lord Jesus. Come quickly.



Taking Pains

Reverence is not primarily a matter of feeling pious, but rather of taking pains. – The Anglican Breviary

Mass in a Small Parish with One Server, Part 6

Mark P. Braden

In the Christmas 2021 issue of Gottesdienst, this column began a series on the rubrics for the reverent conduct of the Mass by a celebrant with a lay assistant. We continue the series this issue beginning with the Preface.



When the General Prayer is ended, *The Lutheran Liturgy (TLL)* provides a "may" rubric for the singing of a hymn.¹ If the altar was not prepared during the Offering/Offertory, it is prepared during this hymn.² At this point, the missal stand, if still positioned on the Epistle horn and oriented parallel to the front of the mensa, is moved to its position to the left of the corporal, placed at a 45-degree angle to the front of the mensa.³ This is true whether the Mass is being celebrated *ad orientem* (facing the east, or towards the crucifix/reredos, the celebrant's back to the congregation) or *versus populum* (facing the congregation).⁴

As discussed previously, we note again here that the ordinaries of the Common Service and Luther's *Formula Missae* are differently sequenced. Luther writes, "After the Creed or after the sermon let bread and wine be made ready for blessing in the customary manner."⁵