

# Thursday Theology: Fred Niedner on Preaching that Actually Works (Part 1)

Co-missioners,

For the past six weeks we've been reviewing the core insights of the Lutheran reformation as presented by Philip Melanchthon in Article IV of the Apology, his defense of the Augsburg Confession. Now our focus shifts to the matter of putting these insights to work in 2023 for the benefit of God's church and God's world.

Fred Niedner of Valparaiso University is among the most gifted preachers we know. He's also the author of an essay we send you in two parts beginning today. It's about preaching, yes; though more to the point, it's about delivering the goods we have in Christ Jesus to people who need them. This is the fundamental concern that drove the first batch of Lutheran confessors to take their stand at Augsburg. It also drives our present work at Crossings. Fred's insights on this "delivery" task are not to be missed.

Come January you'll be able to hear more from Fred on this very topic. He'll be one of the presenters at a Crossings seminar on preaching. We start on a Sunday evening, January 28, and end at noon on Tuesday, January 30. The venue is the Pallottine Retreat & Conference Center in St. Louis County, Missouri. If Christ Crucified is your passion, you'll want to be there. Emails with program and registration information will be arriving in your inbox within the next few weeks. That is, if you're on our mailing list. If not, you can subscribe to our mailing list by filling out the form on the bottom of our [home page](#).

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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## **Proclaiming the Sweet Swap's Gift of *Metanoia***

***How preaching can serve the church's continual practice of  
shedding the false stories in and by which we live, and  
inhabiting Christ's story instead.***

*(Part One of Two)*

by Fred Niedner

Individuals whose vocation includes a rhythm of preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ likely have a reasonably clear sense of what that work requires of them and what they trust the Holy Spirit to accomplish through the words they will speak. However, a sampling of sermons delivered around the world on any given Sunday suggests that preachers vary widely in what they attempt. Some seek to teach, others to entertain, encourage, exhort, scold, impart wisdom for more purposeful living, or assure listeners that we have wisely chosen the path to heaven while the rest of the world speeds haplessly toward perdition. One tired, old cliché says a preacher's job is to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. Few seem to remember that this language first arose to describe the work of journalists and newspapers. [1]

Justin Martyr, an early Christian apologist, described how urban Christians gathered on Sundays in his day to hear someone read from the apostles' memoirs or the writings of prophets, and then, "the president verbally instructs, and exhorts to the

imitation of these good things.” In 1915, Reinhold Niebuhr, then a rookie pastor in Detroit, lamented, “There is something ludicrous about a callow young fool like myself standing up to preach a sermon to these good folks. I talk wisely about life and know little about life’s problems. I tell them of the need of sacrifice, although most of them could tell me something about what that really means . . . Without an adequate sermon no clue is given to the moral purpose at the heart of the mystery, and reverence remains without ethical content.” [2] In many ways, preaching hasn’t changed much over two millennia, and every generation of preachers presumes that preaching should bring about significant reactions in the hearts and lives of hearers.

What does it look or sound like if preaching actually works?

Lutheran preachers learn that their task consists of proclaiming law and gospel, and doing so in a way that does not, even inadvertently, confuse the two, so that law gets urged on folks as the good news or the gospel sounds somehow like a list of obligations. Proclaimers who embrace the work and theological discourse of the Crossings community generally describe the preaching of law as the work of both undergoing and speaking about how God diagnoses the brokenness, lies, and unbelief of our human condition. Then, having lanced the festering boil, so to speak, and at last recognizing the truth that we have all landed in a toxic abyss, we hear the prognosis. Good news and hope begin with finding ourselves, even there, in the company of the crucified one—Jesus Christ. There, in the darkness, with the condemned on either side, Jesus says what he always says, now using the voices of preachers from among the baptismally crucified and resurrected, “The reign of God has come near. Repent and believe the gospel. Come with me. Together we shall live.”



From Canva

In the lingo of Crossings community preachers, it's called "the sweet swap," the happy exchange (*fro"hllicher Wechsel*) in which Christ gets our dying and death, while we get his life. Incarnate in Jesus Christ, God joins us on our side of all that has come between God and humankind. Jesus knows every beauty and joy of creaturely life, but he also suffers every manner of sorrow, pain, temptation, judgment, and God-forsakenness we do. He dies. He descends to the abyss, hell, as we confess in the Apostles' Creed. Then comes the breathtaking, gooseflesh-inducing part. Precisely because he joins us there, in our dying, we get his life, his life as God's beloved, his life as one who, even there in the darkness and despite those forever ruined hands, now lives and loves and heals and feeds and gives away all he has. That's our life now, the life a believer gets to live thanks to the sweet swap.

For most of Christianity's history, the church presented this "happy exchange" as primarily, if not exclusively, having to do with one's afterlife and eternal fate. "Jesus died for your sins, so come with us (and do what we say) and you'll go to 'heaven' when you die. Otherwise, you'll end up burning in hell

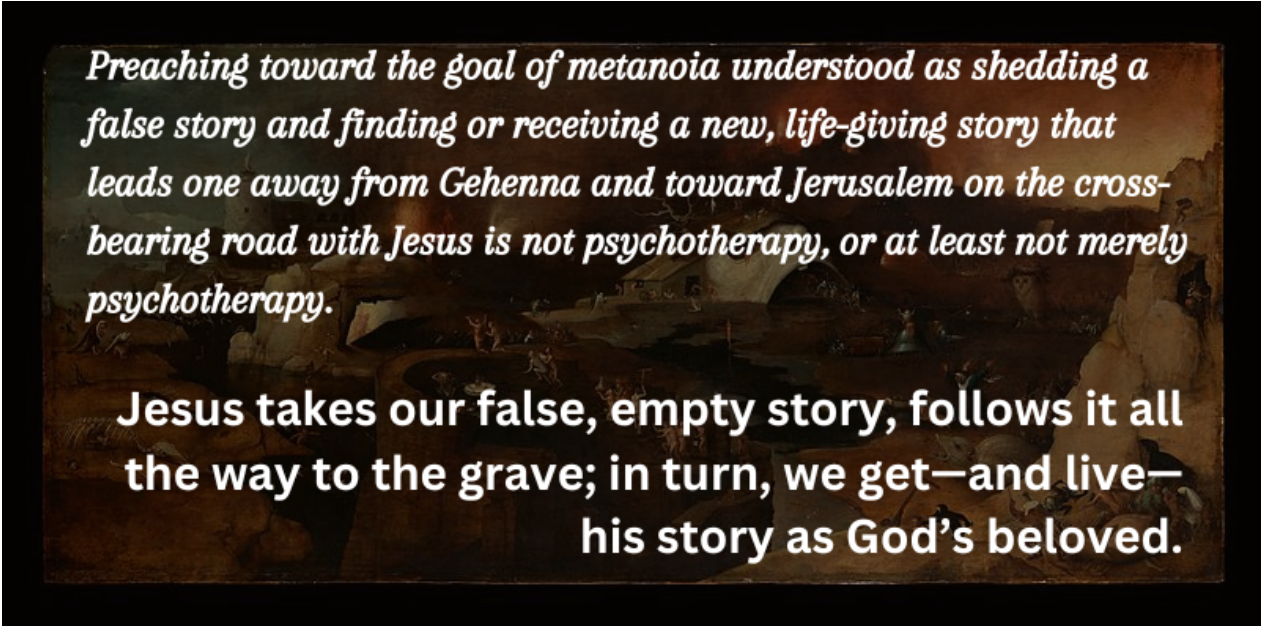
forever—or at least spend a few millennia in purgatory. Jesus gave us the keys to the pearly gates. Only we can save you.”

For a host of reasons, most people today no longer believe in hell or fear going to some awful “place” like Dante described. Hence, people don’t see or experience a need for the church and what it sells. This likely accounts for at least some of the empty pews and dwindling coffers in churches around the world today. It also explains what has happened to the content of preaching in much of Christianity over the last few decades. If we can’t scare the hell out of people, what do we talk about? To be relevant, some preach pop-psychology, tolerance, niceness, and the urgency of caring for the environment. Others preach thinly veiled politics and culture war ideology. They urge the faithful to demand justice and work to establish God’s kingdom in the here and now, but given our polarized context these days, we see and hear radically different visions of justice and God’s kingdom. Predictably, the devils in one camp’s visions are the saints in those of the other. [3]

A fresh look at the goal of preaching begins, perhaps, with a basic question that hovers over the church catholic and anyone charged with preaching the gospel: What exactly is the point of being a Christian? If it’s not about being right (while others are clearly wrong) and thus securing the correct ticket to the preferable afterlife, why bother? And if Christianity is little more than one more combative PAC or lobbying group, who needs it? Why persist in believing and talking about Jesus Christ, or hanging out with others who believe similarly? In Lutheran terms, why do we continue to belabor the discourse of law and gospel, diagnosis and prognosis?

For starters, we find useful clues for addressing these questions in Jesus’ talk about how easily we can waste our lives. In the New Testament gospels, Jesus talks plenty,

especially in Matthew, about the ways in which taking the wrong fork in the road leads to outer darkness, weeping, and gnashing of teeth. A couple times he mentions Hades, the Greek underworld, as a potential destination. More often, however, he speaks metaphorically of lives that end up in Gehenna (the Valley of Hinnom), the smoldering landfill outside Jerusalem. Thus, Jesus intimates that even if there's no place called hell where devils with pitchforks taunt the eternally damned, it's very easy to waste the one life a person gets as flesh and blood on this earth, to spend it on emptiness and folly, toss it into the dump. Perhaps the most stunning waste of life conjured up by the mention of Gehenna comes in remembering that the cult of the Canaanite deity Molech once practiced child sacrifice there (cf. 2 Kings 23:10; Psalm 106:37-38). In Israel's memory, Gehenna is the symbol of all the ways human beings have sacrificed their own and others' lives to gods of their own making on altars of greed, desperation, ideology, hatred, and war. There are no do-overs when we sacrifice our children and throw away our lives. This tragedy has eternal consequences.



*Preaching toward the goal of metanoia understood as shedding a false story and finding or receiving a new, life-giving story that leads one away from Gehenna and toward Jerusalem on the cross-bearing road with Jesus is not psychotherapy, or at least not merely psychotherapy.*

**Jesus takes our false, empty story, follows it all the way to the grave; in turn, we get—and live—his story as God's beloved.**

*Christ's Descent into Hell – Hieronymus Bosch (circa 1450–1516)*

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

That said, Jesus spent his own life hanging around the landfill, which had outposts wherever he went, saying to those who had landed there but could still hear, “The reign of God is near, not far at all from Gehenna. Repent, believe the good news. Come with me. Together we will live—truly live.” That, too—repenting, coming along, living that life—also has eternal significance.

The New Testament’s word for repentance is *metanoia*. Every student of *Koine* Greek knows that *metanoia* means a radical change of mind or heart. It’s an attempt to render the Bible’s older, Hebrew words. One is *shuv*—Turn around! Come home! Another is *niham*, which means to have compassion, but also to be sorry for what one has caused or what has transpired among us. Together, this family of words and the preaching that has urged these measures on people has left listeners with instructions to think differently, feel differently, admit fault, or experience regret. Ultimately, however, unless there’s an accompanying story of some kind that allows one to view repentance happening in actual and specific circumstances and behaviors, these expressions leave us with little more than pious, vague abstractions. Happily, we all know such stories. Think of David after hearing Nathan’s parable about the poor man’s ewe lamb (2 Samuel 11), or the resolve that forms in the mind of the wastrel son as he eats pig slop in the far country (Luke 15).

In the field of psychotherapy, *metanoia* commonly means the work of shedding a false story by which one has scripted or directed one’s life, and this is a step toward finding and adopting a new and healthier story. (Parents, teachers, and peers told me I was stupid, incompetent, and worthless. I believed them and have lived accordingly. But it ain’t necessarily so. Forget all that. Take up your pity-pallet and walk!) In many preachers’ circles today, it’s fashionable, and for good reason, to bash



psychotherapy as the goal of preaching. However, preaching toward the goal of *metanoia* understood as shedding a false story and finding or receiving a new, life-giving story that leads one away from Gehenna and toward Jerusalem on the cross-bearing road with Jesus is not psychotherapy, or at least not merely psychotherapy. It's a way to preach and practice living in real, day to day life the "sweet swap" of our redemption. Jesus takes our false, empty story, follows it all the way to the grave; in turn, we get—and live—his story as God's beloved.

*—to be continued*

## Endnotes

[1]

<https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2014/today-in-media-history-mr-dooley-the-job-of-the-newspaper-is-to-comfort-the-afflicted-and-afflict-the-comfortable/#:~:text=Dooley's%20famous%20journalism%20quote%20is,and%20critical%20of%20the%20press.>

[2] Quotes from Justin Martyr and Niebuhr appear in Casey Cep, "What American Christians Hear at Church," *The New Yorker*, October 7, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/news/on-religion/what-american-Christians-hear-at-church>

[3] The Pew Research Center report on current preaching in the United States discussed in the New Yorker article cited above (note 2) appears here: <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2019/12/16/the-digital-pulp-it-a-nationwide-analysis-of-online-sermons/>. Curiously, or maybe not, it nowhere discusses whether sermons generally contain "good news," or what the primary goal of preaching around the country seems to be in various contexts.



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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use**  
A publication of the Crossings Community