

“Shut Up, Already!” Part One

Co-Missioners,

The dates are January 26-29. That’s when the 2020 Crossings Conference is set to unfold. The venue as always is the Shrine of our Lady of the Snows in Belleville, Illinois. The [lineup of speakers](#) is, dare we say, dynamic. One of them is traveling all the way from Melbourne, Australia. Another was born and raised in South Africa. A third spent over a third of his working career in Papua New Guinea. A fourth was the first African American pastor to serve at Grace Lutheran Church, River Forest. Two more coach fellow preachers through weekly internet publications. Three others published books this year, one of which is a bestseller, the others deserving to be. Two of these three are podcasters.

To call this a richly experienced group is to indulge in understatement. Each will bring his or her gifts to bear on the topic, “The Broken Life.”

Thinking you won’t want to miss this, we point you already now to our [registration portal](#). We hope you’ll use it. We would so like to see you. So much the better if you bring a friend for a first taste of what Crossings has to offer when we get together in person. Chewy and challenging is one way to put it—nutritious too. Bread of Life as the menu’s main feature. The synonym for that is the Gospel of Christ Crucified.

As a way to whet appetites, we return you today to our conference this past January. Dr. Frederick Niedner, Gospeler par excellence of Valparaiso University, was our keynote speaker. The topic—“When God is Silent”—was as dark as topics get, choked with shadows that Christ is still intent on penetrating. Not that his agents are eager for the task, or all

that equipped for it either. The same is true, Fred argued, for this little band of agents who cluster under the Crossings banner. One sure sign of the darkness we all continue to walk in is our intense dislike of serious critique. Fred plunged into that in a way that bears re-hearing, much thinking, and even more praying. It's way past time that we made this available to you through our Thursday Theology channel lest it lie forgotten in the website cranny where it currently lurks.

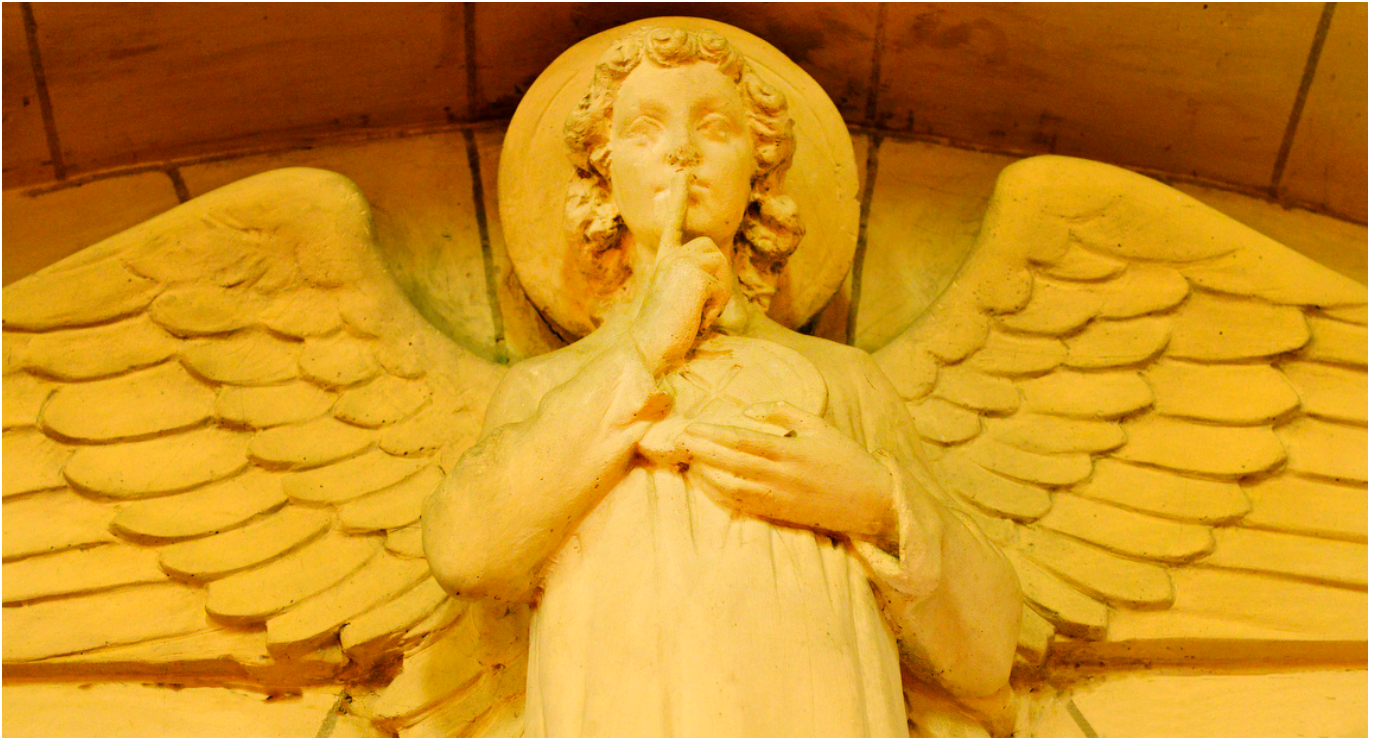
We send this in two parts, the second next week. The title we're dispatching it under is ours, not Fred's. For his, see below.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

Crossing in Silence

by Fred Niedner



Chartres France 15 Aout

Crossings Conference Address

Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center, Belleville, IL

Frederick Niedner, 28 January 2019

"'To know God means to suffer God,' says a wise old theological saying. We suffer God when we experience his absence, when God 'hides his face', and we feel God-forsaken, as Christ did on the cross. The young Luther described this out of his own experience in 1519: 'By living, no-more-by dying and being damned to hell doth a man become a theologian, not by knowing, reading, or speculation.'" (Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, pp 23-24)

I am grateful to be here with a group of friends, or perhaps I should say family members, since the one thing that most surely ties us together is our baptism. I suspect most all of us here for this gathering share some critical strands of theological DNA as well. We're members of another kind of "family." I'm especially grateful to be among speakers that include Rob Saler and Liv Larson Andrews, two remarkable people whom I first came to know when they were students at Valparaiso.

I have already learned plenty from them and I know I will learn more this week.

Many others of you are old friends and familiar faces, while some are not, at least for now, and I am thankful to all of you for being “church” for me. I have a curious, tangled relationship to the institutional church, in large part because I spent my entire career as a theologian in a university that is officially neither *in* the church nor *of* it—and surely not in, with and under it—but merely next door, so to speak. Hence, when I attend gatherings of the Institute of Liturgical Studies, the Association of Lutheran Church Musicians, or Crossings, I tell myself, “*This*, this is my church.” Sometimes say it aloud. So thank you.

That said, I hope I am still one of you when we all leave here on Wednesday. I have a few questions to ask and some things to say that might, for some of you anyway, put me on a list of “suspect characters.” Because of that, and partly, too, because a colleague and friend back home who read a draft of this paper said it was the least humorous piece of mine he’d ever read, I have added an attempt at humor here at the beginning. The silence of God isn’t exactly a joking matter, but Father Gerard Sloyan, a Catholic biblical scholar, once began an address at Valparaiso’s Institute of Liturgical Studies with an observation that actually fits the general theological topic of my paper. Sloyan shared with us how Catholics have learned to tell the critical theological differences between all us Protestants. They watch how each reacts to some painful mishap, like falling down a flight of stairs. Lying on the landing at the bottom of the stairs, a Presbyterian will say, “Thank God that’s over!” A Methodist will say, “Goodness! I really must do that better next time.” And the Lutheran will say, “Dear Lord, *mea culpa*, I’m so sorry.” (It occurs to me the Lutheran might also instinctively ask, “What does this mean?”)

It may not be common knowledge, but it's also no secret, that the general topic of this conference, plus the fact that I'm opening things up this morning with this talk, stems at least in part from my having written a review of this book, *Gift and Promise: The Augsburg Confession & the Heart of Christian Theology*, by Edward Schroeder, the esteemed teacher of many of us and a founder of the Crossings community, with chapters by nine of Ed's students, many of whom are here in this room. If there could ever be a fulsome description and analysis of the theological DNA that has shaped many of us here, complete with diagrams, this book contains these things. If you want to know or to mine the resources of the law-gospel theology that grows straight from Paul's letter to the Romans, with a smidgen of Galatians 2 and a bit of John's gospel, expounded upon in the Lutheran Confessions, and in particular Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, shaped into a system by Werner Elert at Erlangen and distilled by Ed Schroeder, this, friends, is your means of accessing the mother-lode. This theology is precious to me. It shaped me. I have preached out of it and used its resources to counsel troubled souls, including my own, all through my adult life.

That said, the discipline of reading this book carefully enough to review it responsibly forced me to admit to myself that I sometimes find myself unable, strictly within the bounds and resources of this theology, to honor Christ and his death and at the same time console devout consciences (to paraphrase the language of Apology IV). I not only admitted that, but had to carefully explain why, at least to myself. Something is amiss, or merely missing, either in this theology, or in me and my ability to grasp and apply it as balm for my own soul as well as those of some of the sorely troubled, aggrieved, consolation-seekers around me.

In my review, I pointed to two features of my theological

heritage that have increasingly troubled me in recent years. First is the juridical and forensic language and thought that permeates it. We talk endlessly and almost exclusively about ourselves as accused sinners standing in the dock, with God as the judge, jury, and executioner. We see ourselves as rebels who deserve the universal, even cosmic punishment for treason—hanging. The good news is, we have a savior, one who steps in and takes our just punishment, either as a quiet, willing sacrificial victim, or one who duels to the death, including his own, the righteous powers authorized to slay us.

Goodness knows, and we know all too well, that there's plenty of sin to be judged and punished in the world and in us. Of human cussedness, there is no end, either in breadth or depth. More and more, however, I am troubled by the need to find consolation for devout consciences that suffer and find themselves estranged from God for reasons that have nothing to do with sin, or at least no sin that has any connection to the suffering that occasions their estrangement. For all our lives, most of us have read Genesis 2-3 and Psalm 51 to mean that we are born condemned and deserve nothing but suffering and punishment because of the "sin" of our first parents, after which we are all children of a fallen humanity. We *know*, in the biblical sense, the truth of that diagnosis. It now seems to me, however, that the theology that informs the thought and work of the tradition in this room, call it Crossings theology, Elertian theology, or whatever, does not recognize alternate conditions of estrangement unrelated to sinfulness, nor does it pay noticeable attention to the fact that significant portions of the biblical canon not only recognize other kinds of separation between God and humankind, but also offer good news and solace for the lost and distraught whose separation from God is not juridical and forensic in nature, at least not in any essential or recognizable way.



The second issue I raised in my review is in many ways inextricable from the first, and to my mind, at least, it has important implications for the way we do theology. Our shared theology speaks often of “the hidden God,” *deus absconditus*. Moreover, it uses this term in two very different ways. On the one hand, the theology of *Gift and Promise* speaks of *deus absconditus* as the God who assaults us hidden in “sickness, poverty, war, famine, failure, oppression, pain, death, catastrophe, guilt, shame, and despair,” an assertion I here quote verbatim from our teacher Ed Schroeder, although not from the recent book, but from a 1993 essay titled “Encountering the Hidden God. (Just to be clear, Ed did not make this up. It is part of our tradition.)

The second type of reference to *deus absconditus* refers to the God we find hidden in weakness and suffering, but now not merely

our suffering, but God's own suffering, the God we find in Christ crucified. And this, we say, is the great, true, and ultimate revelation of God. Here, on the cross, God wants us to find God if we would know the truth of and about God and God's desires and intentions regarding us. "Theology of the cross" as Luther explained it and as we practice it is the work of seeing or relating to the first *deus absconditus*, the one who seeks to kill us sinners with storms, earthquakes, diseases, and accidents, only through the eyes of faith that finds and clings to the God hidden on the cross, who joins us under judgment and in our suffering and dying, and also promises life that somehow transcends all that, both now and beyond the grave.

In such faith and trust, our teaching, proclamation, and manner of living honors the death of Christ as necessary and sufficient for our salvation, and thus do we comfort penitent hearts and console devout consciences. In this particular circle of believers, we "cross" biblical texts using this theology as the grounding for our method. We find somewhere in the text or its context the signs of our confronting the assaults of *deus absconditus*, we expose our faithless fighting back against those assaults, and then find ourselves slain, killed by the wrath of God, only to discover at the same time that the crucified Christ has died with us, and we with him. Having found ourselves so bound to Christ, we then see and know ourselves and God differently, and finally, bound together in Christ, we embody his cruciform love in and for the world.

As I have already confessed, that very Crossings matrix has nursed and nurtured me all my adult life, starting way back when it was still called, "programming a pericope." Mostly, this mother's milk has satisfied. But in recent years, I have sometimes found myself hungry and empty despite offering and receiving this fare. In my review of *Gift and Promise* I alluded to events and their implications that have come to haunt me in

recent years, and I will speak of them momentarily, but my discomfort really began a few years ago when my colleague Ronald Rittgers, one of today's foremost reformation scholars, shared research he was doing in preparation for his book, *The Reformation of Suffering: Pastoral Theology and Lay Piety in Late Medieval and Early Modern Germany*.

In Rittgers' study of the way both pastors and lay people of the Reformation era sought to comfort penitent hearts, every example of pastoral care offered to the dying and bereaved consisted of reminding the suffering and the grieving that their circumstances were the consequence of sin, and that God inflicts these things upon us for our good, to bring us to repentance and pull us closer to God, to purify us. Such pastoral practice, by the way, is built into the core of our particular theological tradition, Article IV of the Apology, which, in describing the confessors' understanding of God's law as contrasted with the opponents' view, says that the law "requires . . . works that are placed far beyond the reach of reason, such as, truly to fear God, truly to love God, truly to call upon God, truly to be convinced that he hears us, and to expect help from God in death and all afflictions. Finally, it requires obedience to God in death and all afflictions so that we do not flee or avoid these things when God imposes them." (And if you don't think they took that last line seriously, you should hear some time about the practice of rebuking or even punishing women who in the midst of childbirth asked for relief from pain. Did they think they could flee, or did not deserve God's curse?)



My own pastoral heart, such as it is, was much discomfited by these reports of pastoral care, and I asked my colleague if he knew whether any of those Reformation era pastors had ever read Job. Indeed they had, Rittgers assured me, only they did not read Job as he presumed I read Job. He was right. In their reading of Job, Job's friends proved themselves cowards and failures for seven days until they finally ended their silence and proceeded to instruct Job concerning the divine intentions and lessons in his suffering the loss of everything, including the death of all his children. In my reading, however, they behaved as true friends only in the time of their keeping silence with Job in the dust and ashes. The moment they began to heap all their theodicies on Job's miserable head, they became his accusers, and indeed, his enemies, thinking all the while they served as God's faithful justifiers and friends. The Reformation-era readers also seemingly ignored both the beginning and end of Job as the canon presents this drama to us. In the beginning, Job is declared righteous, and even God does not contest that judgment or characterize the proposed treatment of Job as punishment. Nor does God administer Job's torture. Most significantly, in the end, God dismisses all the friends' arguments as offensive folly. Only Job, who refused and shook his verbal fists at all their attempted theodicies, spoke rightly, says God.

—to be continued.

Endnotes:

[1] Cresset, Vol LXXXI, No 2, Advent-Christmas 2017, pp. 31-34.

[2] Schroeder, "Encountering the Hidden God," AREOPAGUS- A Living Encounter with Today's

Religious World, published by Tao Fong Shan Christian Centre, Hong Kong, Pentecost 1993.

[3] Oxford Studies in Historical Theology, 2012.

[4] Apology of the Augsburg Confession, IV:8 (Kolb and Wengert edition, p 121).

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