

“Shut Up, Already!” Part Two

Co-Missioners,

“Let all mortal flesh keep silence / and in fear and trembling stand...”

See below for the second and final installment of Fred Niedner’s presentation at the Crossings’ conference this past January. [Last week’s first installment](#) closed with a reflection on Job which bears reviewing as you step into this.

A reminder that we’re taking registrations for [the conference next January](#). God grant the honor and delight of seeing you there.

Peace and Joy,

The Crossing Community

Crossing in Silence Part 2

by Fred Niedner



Crossings Conference Address

Our Lady of the Snows Retreat Center, Belleville, IL

Frederick Niedner, 28 January 2019

I Frequently nowadays, I find myself sitting somewhere amid the seven days of silence Job's so-called friends allowed him. Another book I read a year or so ago, this one not even remotely about pastoral care, takes me into the silence with every remembrance of it. Daniel Mendelsohn, in a 2007 volume titled *The Lost: A Search for Six of the Six Million*, [1] tells the complex story of his attempt to learn what precisely had happened to six of his family members about whom family lore said only that they were "killed by the Nazis in the war." Mendelsohn traveled the world in search of surviving eyewitnesses to the Nazi atrocities in the Ukrainian village

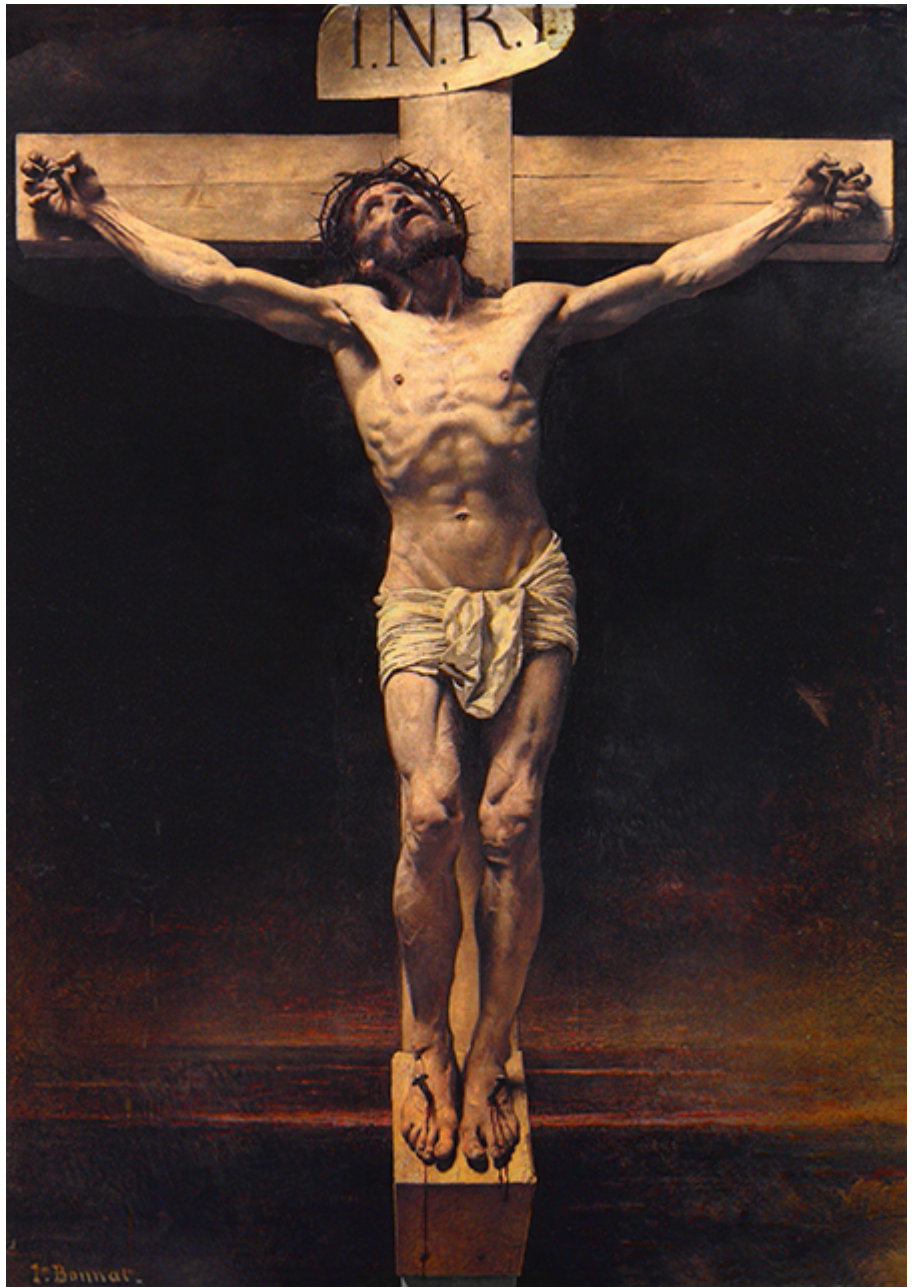
where his forebears had lived. Eventually, he learned the stories. Two of the six died in one of those oft-described scenarios in which the authorities herded all the Jews into a synagogue, stripped, humiliated, raped, and brutalized them, then boarded the doorways and set the building on fire. In this instance, according to Ukrainian eyewitnesses, they first forced the village rabbi to dance naked before the terrified assembly as soldiers demanded of him, "Where is your God?" [2]

A third family member, a 16-year-old girl, along with several dozen other teens who somehow escaped immolation in the synagogue, was stripped naked and made to stand in line as the youth awaited their turn to step out onto a large plank placed somewhat like a diving board over a huge pit. Some distance away, Nazi troops with machine guns took aim at the teens who crept onto the plank one at a time and jumped up and down as they'd been ordered, all to make this little game of target practice a bit more challenging to the shooters. Mendelsohn doesn't reflect on whether those children might have prayed as they stood in line awaiting their turn on the plank, or whether they might have asked, as did Elie Wiesel, a teenager imprisoned at Auschwitz, upon witnessing yet another hanging, the same question the soldiers asked the doomed rabbi, "Where is God now?" Wiesel, as we know, answered, "There. Up there is God, hanging on those gallows," [3] amazingly enough, the very words we preach beneath the cross, I might add. And for all my praying, "Lord, I believe; help thou my unbelief," I can only say in response to Mendelsohn's story, "If *deus absconditus* couldn't see his way clear to come out of hiding to assist those children and countless others like them, he's not coming out, my friends. When you get into that sort of trouble, you're on your own. So please, please, please, don't bother God or mock those children with prayers about your misplaced car keys or help at winning a ball game."

The story that serves as the last straw, so to speak, in this portion of my talk is in many ways an intimate one that's not mine to tell. I will outline it only generally. Not long ago, a couple very dear to me, former students at Valpo, suffered the death of a child who perished in a way that science and medicine can explain, but theology cannot. After a perfectly normal pregnancy, this child was discovered at birth to have a known and named but exceedingly rare genetic mutation that left her unable to live outside the womb except in great pain and constant danger of infection. There was and is no "cure." The parents could not touch their child, much less hold her, but only look at her and listen to her screams of pain for all of the eight weeks she lived. How and for what does a parent or grandparent pray in that situation? For a child's death? For a longer life of incessant pain?

My biggest question here this week is this: Is this, too, a story of *deus absconditus* assaulting us, beating on us because of our sins, trying to kill us rebels and forbidden fruit thieves? Were the Nazis the agents of *deus absconditus* who brutalized and murdered those Jews in Bolechow, Ukraine, even as the Babylonians were said to be God's agents sent to assault and slaughter their forebears in Jerusalem centuries before? Does the God hidden in oppression kill our babies, and put them and us through hell in the process, just to get our attention and remind us of our sin? Our Reformation heritage says yes. And implicitly, so does the theology of *Gift and Promise* and the Crossings method of interpreting the scriptures. For us, the wages of sin is death, and for better or worse, some of us get uglier, quicker, more terrifying executions than others, but in the end they're all the same. It's punishment. Well deserved. You can look it up in Genesis 2-3 and Romans 6.

But I ask today that we think about some of the implications of this theology, implications that have haunted me and now I'm troubling you with them, though perhaps not all of you for the first time. If there would have been no death, no suffering, no pain, not even any weeds in the garden except for sin, then God, our *deus absconditus* tormentor, must have originally created a vastly different universe than the one we live in, one in which nobody would have ever ached or



suffered or died, except for our transgression. A woman's body must have been quite different in the original plan, with babies popping out painlessly and effortlessly. Thorns and thistles would not exist, or perhaps their seeds would naturally stick to designated thistle plots and never sneak into a farmer's field to create chaff and all the annoyance and economic waste that goes with it. Planets in the universe must have been made of different substances, things that didn't form tectonic plates that crack and shift and give rise to earthquakes, tsunamis, and

all the death they cause. Gravity, too, must have behaved differently so that its pressures didn't melt the core of planets and cause occasional eruptions of molten stuff that can wipe out whole cities, perhaps even entire civilizations and countless species of life when enough dust gets into the air and it sticks around for a few years. And, of course, our theology presumes that after and because we sinned, God threw some kind of wrench into the workings of the genetic code, so that randomly, some children never get to live for more than brief moments of unspeakable pain, others get struck down after slightly longer times. And then there is the rest of creation, including the lions and tigers. What would they have eaten, had there been no death? Is nature red in tooth and claw because of us? Come to think of it, except for death, could even the Garden of Eden have had soil that could sustain life? Doesn't humus require some dying? Lots of years of dying?

A brief excursus, perhaps . . . It seems to me Genesis is ambiguous about whether or not death enters creation only because of sin. True, the threat in the prohibition against eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil is, "In the day you eat of it, you will surely die." So, they would be struck down upon disobeying, but we don't really know if the story means to say humankind was naturally immortal and would never have died except for disobedience. I actually think not, first because there is that other tree, the Tree of Life, which now must be kept inaccessible. It would have served no purpose in a death-less world. Second, the vision of fruitful, painless procreation, with no one ever dying, and everyone needing to eat . . . Well, you can imagine the eventual problems there. Mortality makes us crazy and turns us against each other in countless ways. I suspect immortality might have done the same. Sooner or later, we would have had to vote some folks off the island.

Forgive me if this offends you. My point is this. If the second Genesis creation story isn't history, it is theology. And as theology, it is, at least in part, a form of theodicy. It says we suffer and die because someone sinned and ever since, we've all been tainted and got caught up in it together. Perhaps we've lived inside that story so long and so habitually it seems unquestionable and fully sufficient truth to us, but we have to make at least two points about it. First, if you don't believe we're all caught up in depravity and cussedness, and that it's deadly, you haven't been watching the news or paying attention to everything that goes on in your own heart. That story which has created the world of meaning we inhabit speaks truth. But second, theology, including Genesis, is always made on earth, not in heaven, and thus, like any painting, image, icon, narrative or film that would teach us truth and fashion a world for us, no single piece of it can account for absolutely everything, especially God. As with any image or metaphor, any single piece of theology can lead us astray if we mistake it for the last or only word, which is why we name images mistaken for the whole truth "idols" and sternly forbid them.

True enough, the pieces of theology of which I speak are in the canon, and we call them all together "word of God," a collection of things our forebears fought over for centuries and finally bequeathed to us with the promise that while there may be—indeed, there probably is— "word of God" all over the place, here is a measuring stick (what *kanon* means in Greek) developed over many centuries to assist in discerning what God is most likely trying to do or communicate at any given moment. Moreover, the scriptural canon of theological treatises in numerous genres written by prophets, poets, lawgivers, priests, and storytellers has multiple, divergent theologies, including some that engage one another and sometimes intentionally oppose each other. For example, whoever wrote 2 Kings 23 said that God

was so furious over the sins of Manasseh, it didn't matter how faithful his grandson Josiah was—and Josiah was the most faithful king who ever ruled in Jerusalem, said that same writer—God's wrath was such that God simply had to wipe out Jerusalem. Totally. *But*, whoever picked up the Isaiah tradition at chapter 40 says that if Jerusalem and her people's destruction was punishment from God, they got at least twice what they deserved. Therefore, declared that theologian, God has repented (*nhm*) and now means to comfort (*nhm*) the scattered and broken victims of Babylon's assault. (Or was it really God's?)

All the way back in Genesis 8, God despairs of curse and punishment as an effective means of reforming humankind. Not even wholesale nuking with floodwaters works, as Noah and his offspring will soon demonstrate. So God swears off such tactics, hangs up God's bow—and in the text it's a warrior's bow, despite its colorful beauty. From now on, God will try blessing instead of curse. Eventually, a distant grandson of Abram and Sarai and member of the people of blessing, crucified in the flesh but alive in the spirit, would go to preach to all those—an entire, populated world—who drowned in the failed experiment to banish sin with punishment (1 Peter 3:17-22). Folks debate what he would preach to the damned. I believe Jesus preached and preaches the same thing everywhere. "Come with me." And yet, through all their/our generations, theologians among the people of blessing claim to have witnessed God rampaging about with bows and arrows, swords and pestilence, famines and earthquakes, heaping curse upon curse.

Yes, the canon of scripture and our shared confessional theology together invite us to glimpse the hidden God in every sickness, poverty, war, famine, failure, oppression, pain, death, catastrophe, guilt, shame, and despair, and thus they also tempt us to believe that we can discern and apply the message a hurricane, earthquake, conquistador, carcinoma, or genetic

mutation bears. Because we are tireless meaning-makers amid the chaos of this world and hopelessly addicted to theodicies that say all suffering is just, especially if it's yours (and not mine), we habitually presume to know the mind of *deus absconditus*. The Bible will always back us up.

But be careful. Read Job, all of it, regularly, and practice rigorous suspicion of all those who know God too well, including the ubiquitous voices of Job's friends holding forth all around us, and inside us.

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How, then, could I have used our theological tradition to offer consolation to my dear former students who could only watch and attempt to pray as their infant daughter's brief, painful life played out, if not to tell them that God's wrath had just happened to land squarely on their child, and on them? If we could preach to the souls of the children slaughtered by the Nazis, what would we say? How would we comfort them? If this was not one of *deus absconditus's* attempts to make someone a better person or drive them to repentance, how do we account for what happened? And how do we comfort their once trusting but now broken hearts?



Within our canon we have other theologies that account for our suffering and the experiences many know all too well and which the Bible describes as the absence and silence of God. Sometimes that absence is described as abandonment due to sin, as in

Exodus 33, where God is depicted as so angry over the production of a golden cherub that abandonment becomes necessary lest a surprise fit of rage result in the nuking of the whole people. Elsewhere, as in many psalms of lament, the silence and abandonment of God is simply that, silence and abandonment, and, out of the depths, deserted souls cry for help that so far hasn't come, even though plenty other psalms promise that the faithful are never abandoned or forsaken, but heard, answered, rescued, and granted long, satisfying lives (Ps 91). Indeed, these latter psalms seem to mock the abandoned.

Is there a Christian soteriology (depiction of salvation) that speaks to this experience? [4] I believe so. True enough, Matthew's gospel is all about sin, atonement, and forgiveness. To some extent, so is John's. Mark's gospel, however, is in many ways the simplest and purest theology of the cross in the New Testament. Fashioned as good news for persecuted believers facing brutality and death, often alone (an audience much like the Christians in Endo's/Scorsese's "Silence"), Mark's gospel is not about sin, but about living and dying amid God's silence and absence. The writer of this gospel shaped it as an answer to one of the canon's great cries from the depths, the one in Isaiah 64, "O, that you would rend the heavens and come down, God! Come from wherever you hide and show up in our world, our desolation, our suffering. Show us and the world that you care." There follow some suggestions for what that might look like; they come mostly from believing in *deus absconditus*—God could shake things up, light some fires, stomp on our enemies.

Mark's gospel begins with the very thing for which the prophet begs, a heaven-rending, and the son of God slips into the world quietly, unnoticed. He carefully keeps himself hidden, and even when he rides into Jerusalem acclaimed a successor to David, no one notices. He retreats to Bethany. When he returns for the festival, he faces wild, untrue accusations, betrayal by a

friend, an unjust trial, and finally, execution. He doesn't make speeches as in other gospels, but remains silent. In the end, alone in the darkness and abandoned by everyone, he speaks only the words of a psalm of lament and abandonment, "My God, my God, why . . .?" And once again, when the heavens, this time as depicted on the great tapestry of the temple curtain, are ripped open, a voice declares him "son of God." There, on the cross, in the darkness and emptiness, is the great revelation. Somehow, God's presence is—and is known—precisely in God's absence, as the son of God joins all of us who fall and die in the darkness, abandoned by everyone. And then, whoever else falls into that abyss, or you whenever your time comes, finds the crucified one who landed there first is there to meet you. You are never alone, not even in hell—otherwise known as the absence of God.

The rest of the crossing we do with that text is to observe the charge of the *neaniskos* (the "young man") who meets us at the tomb. "Go to Galilee, there you will see him, even as he told you," and soon enough, re-reading Mark often enough, you realize he also meant, "Go to Galilee, there you will *be* him, even as he told you." Which means we who are the body of Christ roam about here in the darkness, in the absence and silence of God so many suffer, often including we ourselves, embodying the crucified one who broke the silence and ended the abandonment. None of us is alone. Precisely in the absence of God we know God's presence.

A postscript – because theology is made on earth and not in heaven, at some point, taken to its logical conclusions, every theology finally leads us into absurdity and despair. Our well-worn theology of *deus absconditus* and the God who under the law assaults us and seeks our death cannot ultimately account for a universe filled with countless threats to life, including human life, without making of God a malignant manipulator who plants time bombs in the genetic code and teams up with monsters who

slaughter children because, well, no one deserves to live. Neither can it account for the vision of God who appears in the canon claiming a reputation as “gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, even repenting of the evil I sometimes threaten.”

On the other hand, aside from the absurdity of saying an omnipresent being has somehow gone missing, constructing a working theology around a deity who has absconded into absence and silence is to flirt in certain ways with having a theology without any God at all. Why, or to whom does one pray, if no one hears or responds?

In the end, both the canon and our own experience suggest we need more than one way to speak about God and understand our circumstances. No one who lives in the real world can escape the ravages of human sin, and thus we live in desperate need of forgiveness and reconciliation we receive solely in our dying with the crucified Lamb of God who bears the sins of the world. In a cold universe where powerful forces, neither benign nor malignant, collide and in so doing make human life as meaningless and expendable as those of ants or lice whom no one thinks to rescue, we also live in desperate need of company and comfort from One who knows the darkness, emptiness, and loneliness of abandonment, who sits with us in silence, dust, and ashes, and when he speaks, says, “I am with you always. Come with me.”

In either desperate need, we honor Christ the crucified, and we say what we must to console devout consciences.

Endnotes:

[1] New York: Harper Perennial, 2007.

[2] *The Lost*, p 259.

[3] Recounted in Elie Wiesel's memoir, *Night*.

[4] One starting point for such a depiction of salvation might begin with noting the literal meaning of the Hebrew scriptures' word for saving or salvation – the verb is *yada*, which means "to give room, or make a place" (for someone).

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