

Painful Hope:
Theology in a Time of Crisis
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These are notes I used for my talk. Not univocally, but also not equivocally ☺

Introduction: A recent story by the Associated Press on the front page of the New York Times (June 12th, 2020) is titled: “On the future, Americans can agree: it doesn’t look good.” A descriptive subtitle follows: “battered by a health crisis and boiling over with fury about racial injustice, many voters are mourning the past, worried about the present and fearful of what comes next. Americans are united, it says, by way of our “collective anxiety.”

The article does not waste as much energy as US-published articles usually do, these days, pummeling President Trump, but instead comments with some melancholy on Joe Biden, offering what I think is the most hope-full sentence in the article, which is: “[Biden] struggles to break through the crush of news and connect with young voters some of whom desire greater change than the promise of a return to normalcy that has fueled his campaign.”

Who are these people who want a greater change than getting back to normal, and do they include us?

In this talk I suggest that theology in this time of crisis must work on proclaiming a promised hope that is in many ways abnormal, uncomfortable, and even painful. And I suggest, further, that before this can happen we ourselves, as theologians, need be thrown into crisis by the living, meddling presence of God who melts us and molds us and makes us into creatures entirely new, again and again.

Part I: Pain, Normalcy, and Hope

(1) Theologians are called to speak words when there are no words.

(a) No words.

“there are moments that the words don’t reach
there is suffering too terrible to name . . .”¹

(b) the nature of our words

1. analogical, Thomas
2. raw and risky; about everything Annie Dillard
3. about what things we don’t understand are *about* (Madeleine L’Engel)

¹ Lyrics from Hamilton, “It’s Quiet Uptown” (Kelly Clarkson, 2016).

(2) Are we domesticating Christian hope (forgetting what it's *about*) by associating it, lately, with what's "normal"?

a. Our common language:

1. "if and when we get back to 'normal' in the fall. . ." *the hope is that we will get back to what was, regardless of what was*

2. "this might be the "new normal." We'll have to get used to it. *The hope is that we will get used to it*

"I know this must feel so strange, but ordinary is just what you're used to. This may not be ordinary to you now, but after a time it will. This will become ordinary." -Aunt Lydia, *Handmaid's Tale*.

b. (uncommon) theological language

1. hope is associated with what is *abnormal*.

Lions and wolves lying down together

Every tear wiped away from every eye

Everyone will sit under their own vine, and fig tree

(not, as I found argued online: "everyone will sit under their own vine, *in victory* writer said it was the only way of understanding that "made sense.")²)

2. Christian hope is not a panacea against pain, but deepens it
a. I recently wrote an article for Vancouver School of Theology in which I said "Christian hope makes the suffering of the present *less* bearable." Backlash (because we want hope to be normalizing?).

b. I think this reaction is related to whether we believe the Kingdom of God is only and forever an ideal, or we believe - hope against hope-that it can be actualized. Are we looking to be satisfied with proximate justice? To do our best and let God take care of the rest? Or are we convinced that there is a problem until every tear is wiped away from every eye, until "not one is missing" (Is. 40). Can we truly hope for what God has promised while simultaneously being realistic, I wonder? It would be a lot easier to have hope dangled like a carrot in front of us, just to pull us along . . .

for hope to make suffering more bearable it must be escapist. God at a distance (God is watching us god is watching us . we are doing our best, and can be satisfied

²https://www.reddit.com/r/hamiltonmusical/comments/b72vie/vine_and_fig_tree/ (accessed 6.6.20)

with proximate justice. Hope is normalizing. What can you do? We're doing everything we can. We're doing our best.

For hope to make suffering less bearable it must draw us into it. God participating in it. Divine transcendence about distinction, but not about distance. Hope doesn't normalize, it makes things more difficult/painful.

TRANSITION: it might be that the only way to do effective theological work in a crisis is to be thrown into crisis ourselves: crisis of looking foolish, crisis of being uncomfortable, crisis of being changed, crisis, even, of being in pain.

Part II: Looking for Trouble (as in . . . God's gonna trouble the waters . . .)

A. A little Barth: Crisis Theology and Theology of Crisis

(1) Too often we think of ourselves as called to respond *to* crises, as though we (as teachers, pastors, and leaders) will guide everyone through.

a. church leaders (like me) love to be heroes (forgetting that the job of Messiah has already been taken); OR we recognize that we are also affected, escaping (perhaps too much?) into efforts at "self-care."

b. but I wonder (and I think Barth would argue for this) if those who theologize are not called, in a sense, to be *more consistently* in crisis than those whom we serve. Constantly submitting to and being re-formed by God's living Word, that invites us into God's work of shaping the abnormal normal of the Kingdom of God.

(2) Barth's understanding

(a) All theologians should ask themselves the question: "how are things with your heart?"³

(b) Crisis is not generated by the self (either by a consciousness of sin or an appreciation of one's self-worth), but by the other (transcendent, distinct, Subject) who is God.

(c) Crisis happens when God's Word is perceived/discerned by us.

(d) Barth understands the transformative crisis to be experienced as a discovery. The discovery of discoveries. What we discover is: that God is *this* God; that God does *these* things.

1. What we discover: That God's works are wondrous, that God is gracious and merciful, that we are recipients of grace.

³ Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 83.

2. *This*, Barth says we will say, “I did not know.” *This* “I could never have found out by myself!” It is “the beginning of wisdom” that inspires “the fear of the Lord”⁴.
3. With Jacob we might say: “surely God is in this place, and I did not know it!” (Gen. 28). When we are thrown into crisis, everything now becomes different.

EXAMPLES

Rain pick up Vanessa story

Temptation/deliverance story

Wiman “shard of glass” story

- (e) Our discovery gives way, according to Barth, to fear of the Lord—the kind of fear that replaces being afraid (“be not afraid”) and moves us to change and to act.

When the right fear of the Lord takes possession of our hearts, we are both lost in amazement and struck by awe, even terror. For we discover that God, since the beginning of time, has not hated or threatened you and me, but has loved and chosen us, has made a covenant with us, has been our helper long before we knew it and will continue this relationship . . . The fear of the Lord springs from the discovery that it might be high time to awake from sleep, to arise and live as the people we really are . . .”⁵

- B. How is it with your heart? Do you know who you really are in relation to the God who is other than yourself?

Part III: Something’s Blocking Our Crisis

Normally, I would jump to the next question: where do we see this crisis causing Word? I’d probably throw in Barth’s famous comment about God speaking however and wherever God speaks: through a Mozart Sonata, Pureland Buddhism, Russian communism, or even a dead dog. And then I’d mention that

⁴ From Barth’s “The Beginning of Wisdom,” sermon on Psalm 111 (*Deliverance to the Captives*, Wipf & Stock, 133).

⁵ “Beginning of Wisdom,” 114.

Barth got annoying to a lot of folks at this point, such as Reinhold Niebuhr. How do you know if it's the word of God, is the question. "you'll know it when you see it," Barth basically answered. But I'm increasingly dissatisfied with this answer for different reason than you might expect. One of Niebuhr's concerns was that Barth's approach could fund abusive tyrants who projected their own agendas onto God. But Barth actually guards pretty well against such abuses by insisting on christocentric interpretations, and that "God's Word always sides with countermovements against injustice."⁶

God's Word is **P**articular -

"Reality which does not become truth for us obviously cannot affect us, however supreme may be its ontological dignity," Barth acknowledges. "In Jesus Christ Christians have already come into being, but in themselves and their time they are always in the process of becoming."⁷ It is following the command of God - the crisis-causing Word! - that continues us in this process.

Preferential -

"The command of God is self-evidently and in all circumstances a call for counter-movements on behalf of humanity and against its denial in any form, and therefore a call for the championing of the weak against every kind of encroachment on the part of the strong."⁸

(our testimony to it is) **P**rovisional--

"We can never look back upon a genuine previous conversion and instruction without its necessarily compelling us to be more serious than ever in our present circumstances, to prepare ourselves for fuller openness to truth, to inquire more searchingly than ever before: *What* ought we to do?"⁹

The more serious impediment to our being thrown into crisis (discovering the wondrous works of God that we have not known before), I believe, is that we have given up on believing God is our helper in this world because it is so very difficult to make out what that means. Very few of us listening to a lecture like this would believe God is interested in helping us find a parking space, and we for good reasons try to ward off thinking (when we

⁶ III/4, 554. **Note: I cite this incorrectly in the taped lecture! My apologies.**

⁷ *Church Dogmatics CD IV/2*, 307.

⁸ III/4, 554.

⁹ *CD II/2*, 647.

suffer for things happening that we don't like) that God is punishing us. We have long ago taken down the "Footprints" beach poster¹⁰ from our walls and have a more sophisticated understanding of how God relates the world.

I've been meeting with a lot of pastor groups online, and I've been having conversations with them about this. They have been lamenting that their people seem to be "functional atheists" in so far as they claim to believe in God but don't think God is involved at all in their day-to-day lives. They understand, rather, that God has gifted us with this world and all its possibilities but it's handed it over to us to care for, to enjoy, to take responsibility for. I don't like the term "functional atheist" being applied to people who confess to believe in God, but I do think there's a lot of deism going around. What the pastors are noticing is that many of their most socially active people don't want to think, much, about God's relationship to the coronavirus, to police brutality, racism, or their day-to-day lives because they think to do so is to punt on our responsibility for the world and its healing. They have understood that a mechanistic understanding of God's power isn't workable, but have yet to replace it with an alternative. Are we being helpful to them, as theologians?

Why opt for a more deistic/ transcendent God than a theistic/ also-immanent one?

- (1) because omnipotent/theistic God is associated with "supernatural" rather than "natural"/science
- (2) allows us not to shirk our responsibility
- (3) God doesn't seem very nice
- (4) but also: inconvenient Ps. 139 Is. 40 –even crucifixion and prodigal son– enough already! God's unboundedness seems to violate our integrity, our freedom.

Maybe we feel smothered; we need to admit are all deists compared to Calvin: "each year, month, and day is governed by a new, a special, providence of God . . ." God's providence is "a watchful, effective, active sort, engaged in ceaseless activity" . . . Hence, "nothing takes place without [God's] deliberation" (I.16.3).

But at what cost do we let go of providence?

Cosmodicy (Bill Greenway)¹¹

¹⁰ <https://www.etsy.com/listing/191629932/the-footprints-in-the-sand-poem>

¹¹ See William Greenway, "*On Evil and the Problem with Cosmodicy*," *Insights* (Spring 2006;) and *A Reasonable Faith: Why God and Faith Make Sense* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox), 2015.

Part IV of V Seeing Angels

Only if there are angels in your head will you ever, possibly, see one.

-Mary Oliver, "The World I Live In"¹²

a Jewish Prayer

"Days pass and the years vanish and we walk sightless among miracles. Lord, fill our eyes with seeing and our minds with knowing. Let there be moments when your Presence, like lightning, illumines the darkness in which we walk. Help us to see, wherever we gaze, that the bush burns, unconsumed. And we, clay touched by God, will reach out for holiness and exclaim in wonder, 'How filled with awe is this place and we did not know it!'"

How do we speak better words about Divine providence?

Good thing DF has written a book ☺

David quote: "Providence depicts the entire series of divine actions that are directed towards the good of creatures. These include **"ordaining, endowing, blessing, guiding, ruling, forgiving, reconciling, inspiring, prompting, healing, sanctifying and promising."**¹³

Temptation/ deliverance/testing?

Returning to the examples of Me and Wiman . . .

Eg. It is the particular ways of our particular Christ, for example, that lead Christian Wiman to say that Jesus feels like a "shard of glass in [his] gut," not allowing him to ignore the homeless or to engage them as sub-human.¹⁴ (You don't get these kind of reality-rattling "graphics" without particularity!). Painful hope!

(2) Could it be the case that our hope lies not only in God "overruling" the world, but also by actively and deliberately drawing us into its sufferings and struggles? James Cone argues that to be people of hope in the suffering

¹² <https://sacompassion.net/poem-the-world-i-live-in-by-mary-oliver/>

¹³ David Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, (298).

¹⁴ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss*.

world, they may not write off all together the possibility that suffering can be redemptive. Though I tend toward Joseph's solution when he says to his brothers what you intended for evil God used for good, I wonder if suffering looks different when I understood as part of God's providential work. Reflection on such things, Cone would say, takes "imagination." "People without imagination," Cone quotes Reinhold Niebuhr as saying, "really have no right to write about ultimate things. Certainly it takes a special kind of imagination to understand the truth of the cross. Only poets can do justice to the Christmas and Easter stories and there are not many poets in the pulpit."¹⁵

Part V. Christian Hope in *this* Moment of Crisis

How does the Hope to which we are called throw we (the privileged¹⁶) into Crisis? (article story answer: not by comforting us, but by calling us to discomfort, pain, solidarity, and joy. Still, someone said: Great article. Very inspiring. But I still don't know what to do)

Picking up the cross and following Christ: what does this look like for the privileged?¹⁷

1. Picking up the cross and following Christ, as people of hope, looks like honoring every person, in their particularity, as irreplaceable. We need not only name the fact that there are no words, but to say words when there are no words. Many pastors are modeling that. Ted Wardlaw, my president in Austin Seminary, recently wrote a public letter reminding us that, even when there are no words, it may be healing just to say each others' names.¹⁸ George Floyd. Cynthia Rigby. **Think of what happened when Adam looked at even called her woman, joyously exclaiming that "you are a bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh!"** It seems to me that if I look someone in the eye and say, for example: Tripp Fuller, "you are bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh," I would never want to harm him. I would always want to look out for his good. I would live what it looked like to love my neighbor as myself.

2 Picking up the cross and following Christ, as people of hope, looks like shaping a new normal that is not "normal" but abnormal, consistent with the

¹⁵ This is an excerpt from my AAR paper (2019) on David's book, a version of which will be published in the *International Journal for Systematic Theology*.

¹⁶ I'm assuming most of us hearing/reading this have a fair amount of privilege.

¹⁷ Mtt. 16:24.

¹⁸ To see the full letter, which also does a beautiful job of reflecting theologically on the metaphor of "breath," go to: <https://www.austinseminary.edu/about/news/homepage-post/~board/whats-new/post/june-3-when-there-are-no-words-a-message-from-president-wardlaw>.

desires of God. It is about working for justice, peace, and inclusion, but not only because these are things we should do for one another. **When I understand that I share in the bones of the flesh other particular ones, I do things for them not out of obligation or even a sense of principle, because I am for them. Like the dumb sheep in Matthew 25 I don't even realize when I serve because my service is an extension of who I am as one who is with and for the world.**

3. Picking up the cross and following Christ, as people of hope, looks like taking on the foolishness that comes with refusing to be realistic. Setting aside any practical notions of proximate justice and believing God's peaceable kingdom can actually become an on-the-earth reality (as MLK and James Cone believed),¹⁹ we stand with Abraham and believe God's outrageous promises. Because we have angels in our head we see a skyfull of stars, a wallet of grandbaby pictures, every knee bowing, every tongue confessing, every tear wiped away, not one missing, no one left behind. **We look each other in the eye say each other's name and serve one another from the glorious, bounteous feast of the Kingdom of God. And we believe the madness that forgiveness of one another is possible *in our very own church, in our very own communities, in this very world that God so loves.* Because there it is, in the third article of the Creed, with us (not up with the Almighty Father or with Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord – but with US).**

4. And one more: Picking up the cross and following Christ, as people of hope, looks like refusing, anymore, to separate out minds and souls, souls from bodies. Despite the fact that we've taken the blood hymns out of privileged peoples' hymnals because of the good critiques we've made of substitutionary atonement, etc., it is impossible to separate out the Gospel promises abundant life (Jn. 10:10) from the realities of broken bodies and the blood of Christ. If this crisis has taught us anything, so far, it has taught us what can be done with zoom and what cannot. The number one downside to online-only learning I'm hearing is that we don't have time to teach in the spaces, to reconcile the spaces as bodies that need to check in with one another. Avatars cannot take communion because you need to be able to chew and swallow to take communion. Teachers and preachers: **BODIES and EMOTIONS** our part and parcel of our learning and our formation in worship and classrooms.

We need more than an effective but temporary survival strategy until we can get back to "normal." We need a new way of doing. We are called not only to be story-survivors but story-shapers.

5. Need to ask ourselves, and one another, every day: **How are things with my heart?** Christian mindfulness doesn't assume we will always believe our answer to Jesus' question "do you love me?" (Jn. 21). Before we feed lambs and tend sheep today, we ourselves must be transformed/thrown into crisis

¹⁹ James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, Orbis: 2011).

by God's living Word. And tomorrow, again, that particular one –Jesus Christ–will come to draw us into the sufferings of the world and grant us, there, abundant life.

Appendices (A Prayer and a Benediction):

*A Pentecost Prayer following the murder of George Floyd*²⁰

The Spirit cries out,
LET ME BREATHE!
In your streets and into your hearts,
I yearn to blow free.
But you are a stiff-necked people,
kneeling on my neck.
Where injustice stands over the downtrodden,
let me breathe.
When racism blinds you to others' experience,
let me breathe.
As bigotry finds voice in the high places,
let me breathe.
When avoidance and convenience sanction unanswered wrongs,
let me breathe.
Each time privilege cloaks unseemly truth,
let me breathe.
Every time inhumanity poses as righteousness,
let me breathe.
Let me breathe "from Stone Mountain of Georgia," from "Lookout Mountain of Tennessee," from "every hill" and "molehill" and from every "mountain side."
Let me breathe in YOU, for I am the Lord God,
and I am choking, panting, gasping to be heard,
in all languages, in all places, for all people.

A Franciscan Benediction

May God bless us with discomfort
at easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships
so we may live deep within our hearts.

²⁰ Written by my friend, the Rev. Karl Travis. Karl has been in hospice care for several weeks, supporting colleagues, friends, and former parishioners via text messages, email, and facebook.

May God bless us with anger
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
so that we may work for justice, freedom, and peace.

May God bless us with tears
to shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them and
turn their pain into joy.

And may God bless us with enough foolishness
to believe that we can make a difference in the world
so that we can do what others claim cannot be done
to bring justice and kindness to all our children and to the poor.