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Preaching to Horror-struck People

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What do you say in the face of horror? I think this is one of the most troubling questions facing preachers today. Whether it is the Sunday after 9/11 or the Sunday after a violent shooting in the town down the road, we as preachers have had to answer this. I want to wrestle with this and suggest a few possibilities.

First, though, let me define the problem more precisely. By “horror,” I am usually speaking of violence perpetrated by humans upon humans. This would include genocide, senseless murder, rape, and torture. These are acts designed to harrow the souls of witnesses and victims, cruelty for the sake of cruelty, what Ted Peters calls the sixth step to radical evil (the last being blasphemy: satanic rituals and the destruction of the inner soul).¹ They are a particular kind of evil, an intention of creating as much pain as possible.

I am emphasizing acts of horror rather than what I might call sorrowful acts. These would include deaths, whether through illness or murder with motive, disease, and despair. Acts of sorrow fill one with regret for a life lost, happiness cut off. Acts of horror push us to wonder whether one wants to live at all in a world where such is possible. Both include, at their root, the question of theodicy: how can a good God allow these to happen? But one can cling to a memory of a life well lived even in the face of acts of sorrow. Acts of horror tend to obliterate the idea of life as a blessing.

These are not, of course, fixed categories, and what for one might be an act of sorrow may be for another an act of horror. You, gentle reader, no doubt have your own images of horror that haunt you. I would ask that you recall those to mind, even as I share one of my own. I do this lest this essay revert to abstractions.

From the Canadian best-seller, Romeo Dallaire’s *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*:

We saw many faces of death during the genocide, from the innocence of babies to the bewilderment of the elderly, from the

defiance of fighters to the resigned stares of nuns ... For a long time I completely wiped the death masks of raped and sexually mutilated girls and women from my mind as if what had been done to them was the last thing that would send me over the edge. But if you looked, you could see the evidence, even in the whitened skeletons. The legs bent and apart. A broken bottle, a rough branch, even a knife between them. Where the bodies were fresh, we saw what must have been semen pooled on and near the dead women and girls. There was always a lot of blood. Some make corpses had their genitals cut off, but many women and young girls had their breasts chopped off and their genitals crudely cut apart. They died in a position of total vulnerability, flat on their backs, with their legs bent and knees wide apart. It was the expressions on their dead faces that assaulted me the most, a frieze of shock, pain and humiliation. For many years after I came home, I banished the memories of those faces from my mind, but they have come back, all too clearly.²

We say nothing, because there is nothing to say.

One may question whether there is anything to say in light of such horrors, and ask who, in fact, can legitimately speak. Holocaust survivor and writer Elie Wiesel has said “the truth of Auschwitz remains hidden in its ashes. Only those who lived it in their flesh and in their minds can possibly transform their experience into knowledge. Others, despite their best intentions, can never do so.”³ Yet even as one who has lived it, he has struggled with how to speak:

I knew the role of the survivor was to testify. Only I did not know how. I lacked experience, I lacked a framework. I mistrusted the tools, the procedures. Should one say it all or hold it all back? Should one shout or whisper? Place the emphasis on those who were gone or on their heirs? How does one describe the indescribable? How does one use restraint in re-creating the fall of mankind and the eclipse of the gods? And then, how can one be sure that the words, once uttered, will not betray, distort the message they bear?⁴

The majority of preachers are bystanders, overhearing the cries of anguish, and we lack even what framework survivors struggle to build. Can we speak so that our words will not betray or distort? Or are such anguished experiences simply to be framed by our silence?

Yet I believe our call to Christian witness in the world demands we talk of it. “You shall be my witnesses ... to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8). Will we really? My experience in the parish has led me to conclude many people live with these questions, that theodicy is one

of the biggest barriers for people's involvement in the church.⁵ These folks are the spouses of faithful attendees, the now-adults who as children grew up going to church, and the spiritual seekers who are looking for a path to follow. They know the churches as flawed vessels, communities that are not perfect but are still communities, whose kindness and fellowship they admire. They show up at Christmas and Easter, not entirely unwillingly. Yet they are not able to take the leap to calling themselves believers, for what kind of a god can they believe in the face of horror? Then, of course, there are the silent struggles of many in the congregation, as the ground of faith drops from beneath their feet, for some cause or another, with a suddenness that leaves them crashing in the dark. When we stand in the pulpit, our witness needs to include their needs. Yet we are witnesses not to one, but two key events: the horrors and Jesus Christ. How do we speak of both?

We say nothing, because we won't.

Frankly, it is easier to ignore the greater horrors of the world. We know some of the struggles of our parishioners, and life is difficult enough already for many of them, what with health, financial, relational, and generational problems. Do we really want to depress them? Instead we aim for inspiration, three points and a poem, or these days, a Chicken Soup for the Soul anecdote. The only problem is a steady diet of these inspirational sermons means a whole area of spiritual needs (if I can call it that) is unaddressed, and for those whose faith has reached starvation levels, such inspiration is like being given oxygen when you're severely dehydrated. It is one thing to set the dreadful topic aside for a while, a healthy Kübler-Ross denial until such time as one has the resources to deal with it.⁶ It is another when that time never comes.

So, for example, a student found the majority of preachers he surveyed did not preach on the Gulf War when it occurred, their primary excuse being it didn't come up in the lectionary.⁷ Yet even from a lectionary perspective, these moments to address horror occur.⁸ In 2 Samuel 11:26-12:13a (lectionary reading for Pentecost 8, year B), Nathan says God will give David's wives to be raped as part of David's punishment for the death of Uriah and the taking of Bathsheba. Here women are viewed as property; rape as torture. When this lection came up, 8 out of 9 preachers I surveyed said they made

no mention of these rapes, preferring instead to preach either another reading or the bittersweet story of the birth of Solomon – out of David’s failure and sin, hope and promise. Well and good, that could be a fine sermon. Yet will the horrors never be addressed? Since rape is an act shrouded in shame and secrecy, I would be surprised if there were not women (and men) who had been raped in the congregation. By not commenting on this passage, the message we inadvertently imply is that sexual abuse doesn’t matter in the church, even, perhaps, that God is too spiritual to be concerned with rape. And the echo of the story of the Rwandan women can still be heard. When will we speak of it from our pulpits? Obviously we cannot always, and probably not often. Yet *never* is also too extreme an answer.

We must acknowledge our failures.

Who bears the guilt of such acts of horror? The perpetrators surely do. One can point out the contributing factors that perhaps help cause the perpetrators to do what they do, yet the guilt of the individual remains. Dorothee Soelle tells the story of a prison chaplain friend who meets with a young man who had killed his mother:

Our friend spoke with him once about how understandable it can be that such a thing could have happened, considering the poverty-stricken neighborhood in which they lived, the close living conditions, the broken families, with no hope for employment and wages, the alcoholic and drug-dependent people who saw no meaning in their lives. While our friend continued to count off the possible social influences which can lead to such a crime, the...man suddenly shouted at him: “Why don’t you cut that nonsense! I’ve killed my mother! That’s not something you can just talk away for me. The guilt belongs to me; it is mine; it does not belong to the conditions we lived in!”⁹

That guilt is real; clearly justice must accompany examination of horror. What possible form such justice could take, however, is another matter. Restitution is impossible, a tit for tat approach is horrific (“an eye for an eye makes the whole world blind”), and prevention of repeat crimes with the same individuals may be meaningless (the context will never arise again). Still, some steps toward particular justice must be made. This can be an affirmation of Christian vocation for those who serve in our justice system. Yet it is also too easy to see the violence as “out there” when it is all too likely

present among us; all of us have been cruel at one time or another, some of us in more explicit events, at least the vast majority of us fearing our own capacity for such evil. We need to acknowledge this in our preaching.

Individual sin becomes a means to address our universal sinfulness. Theologians jest that original sin is the one theological proposition they don't have to prove; all you have to do is read the newspaper. The ubiquity of sin is apparent. What does that mean in addressing horror? As one example, one can argue that all of us are potentially genocidal. Gerald Caplan, the writer of the report by the International Panel of Eminent Personalities organized by the Organization of African Unity on the Rwandan genocide, notes that the study of genocide tends to convince one that "under certain circumstances all humans are capable of perpetrating unspeakable crimes against humanity." As he writes,

You can't study this subject without wondering about yourself. And we all do. Most of the two dozen men and women who are the "pioneers of genocide studies" explicitly believe that they themselves are potentially capable of the most atrocious behaviour imaginable. In the words of scholar and author Eric Markusen, "The vast majority of perpetrators, accomplices and bystanders to genocidal violence are not sadists or psychopaths, but are psychologically normal according to standard means of assessing mental health and illness" ... What possible reason is there to believe they were fundamentally different from me? Or you?¹⁰

In too many sermons, the universality of sin is used as a straw argument as one point, in contrast, to the forgiveness and new life in Jesus Christ ... except that forgiveness and new life sometimes have a hard time taking hold. Christians are still sinners, often to the point of horror, which leads the skeptic to wonder if Christianity makes a difference in behaviour at all. One can argue that Christianity has never claimed to be about making bad people good, but about making dead people live. Yet cruel, living people is not an improvement over dead people.

These questions have been asked most poignantly by Wiesel. Robert McAfee Brown discusses the problem of Christian complicity with anti-Semitism in the Holocaust as raised by Wiesel:

The problem is agonizing: Why did Pius XII never condemn the death camps? Why were so many members of the S.S. also members

of Christian churches? How could there have been killers who went to confession between massacres? How could so many of them have received education in the church and in Christian institutions? ... “How do you explain that a person could be a Christian and a killer of children?”¹¹

Yes, one can argue they were bad Christians, but they were/are still Christians. “This suggests a frightening conclusion: “The sincere Christian knows that what died in Auschwitz was not the Jewish people but Christianity.”¹²

Against this background, Christians have moved to a confession of our failures, whether it be by Dietrich Bonhoeffer during the war, or Martin Niemoller afterwards. One can uphold the examples of Christians who acted courageously, but as Baptist theologian and pastor David Gushee points out in his introduction to his study of the righteous Gentiles (rescuers of Jews during World War II who risked their lives to do so), our few heroes remind us too much of our many non-heroes.¹³ He bluntly asks, “Can Christian faith produce righteousness?” Studies of rescuers suggest not: “Rescuers are not distinguishable from non-rescuers in any quantifiable measure of religious faith, affiliation, and commitment.”¹⁴ Even among those who were Christians, only a small group (along the lines of 20%, depending on the study) cite religion as even one of their reasons for rescuing Jews.¹⁵ As Gushee laments:

Royal priesthood? Holy nation? Community of saints? Transformed people of God? Firstfruits of God’s new creation? How broad and deep is the gulf between who we are in Christ and who we were during the Holocaust. How base and unholy, how unsaintly and untransformed we showed ourselves to be! Our house stands in ruin. A deep silence must descend on us, the silence of self-examination and repentance. Then we must go back to school, back to the classroom of Jesus Christ, and try to learn all over again what it might mean to bear that name in this world; try to learn the shape of authentic Christian righteousness and how to live it.¹⁶

We will give no false promises.

In returning to true discipleship, part of our struggle is correctly discerning whom it is we follow. Who is Jesus Christ for us today? There is so much that is proclaimed – and sold – under the name of Christian, that the listeners in the pew need us to be explicit about who is this God we proclaim. Is it “the Pagan Christ”? Is it the God

of “the Prayer of Jabez”? Or do we have any legitimacy, considering the “DaVinci Code”? So much is said in the name of religion that many of our listeners are, rightly, skeptics. After 9/11 I was deeply saddened by how many of my parishioners seemed to cling to what I call the parking-space God (pray and ask God for a parking space, and amazingly enough, one appears!). The most vivid example came in an email from a wonderfully committed and involved member, who sent the story of a man who was not in the towers as he would usually be because he had a blister on his heel and had stopped at a drugstore for a band-aid. Thank God for blisters, was the moral. Ouch!! If one is to believe God easily sent a blister to save this man’s life, what of all those blisters not given? There are so many of these types of stories about, it is a challenge to all preachers to help deepen the theology of our listeners, lest they end up in a deeper pit of despair.

This despair of the false god, the god who failed to deliver a parking spot/blister, lurks on the horizon for victims of horror and bystanders alike. Listen to these words on Psalm 27 by a Christian woman, written when she was 21, raped when she was 16:

“I have asked but one thing of the Lord” – that he keep his promises!
 If you are my protector, then protect me. If you cannot protect me, at least tell me so. Don’t pretend you can conceal me, protect me, or shield me. Don’t pretend to be a rock or a shepherd.... Hey Lord, remember the Psalm, I think it is 23, “The Lord is Your Shepherd, You Shall Not Want?” Well your lamb was mutilated. And I did / do want. I screamed / If you are real, God, / come now / and get these monsters off of me. / I did want, I prayed / I want you here / I want to live / I want to die and I want you to hold / me in your loving presence / I want you to deliver me from / this horror and violence / I want you to be the shepherd. / Wake the hell up / and see me! / I am crumbled by the side of the bed, can you see me? / I have been stripped of my clothes/ my innocence, my virginity. / Weren’t/aren’t you watching?? ... Where were you??? / Where were you??? / Where were you!!!¹⁷

Horror challenges us to recreate a believable God. As recounted by Blumenthal, Beth has struggled to salvage some kind of faith out of her shattered childhood beliefs. She has done so largely without the support of the church. She reads Wiesel and tries “to understand how he still loves and trusts God after the holocaust. I think, in some ways, we are on the same journey.”¹⁸

There are more people on that journey than I think we as preachers realize. One Holocaust survivor described the journey this way: “To many of us it seemed clear there was no God as we had previously understood Him to be. Or, put differently, if there was a God at all we had never properly understood Him or what He really is ... For many like myself it was rather a slow, long-drawn-out decision – like a process – how to believe, in what to believe.”¹⁹ We as preachers need to help our listeners in that process.²⁰

We can do this with greater honesty in our sermons, less theological abstraction, less retreat into the gods of nice phrases. As one preacher puts it,

Don't make promises God doesn't keep. Account for the shaky ground and patches of quicksand. Don't deny our disappointments or run away from our broken hearts. Explain the beast lying in wait, the damaged goods that can't be fixed, the trouble in the streets. Show us God in the horrors hidden under cover of night and the prayers that don't get answered. Make your words equal to our predicament. Give us faith as wild as the world. Describe that and we'll hang on every word.²¹

We witness to the truth, however small and fragmentary that may be.

There are numerous pastoral occasions where sermons on theodicy are needed: sudden tragic deaths, particularly of children; mass suffering, such as the recent tsunamis; the gassing of the Kurds; the Gulf War; the Iraq War; or Abu Ghraib. There are also Biblical texts like the suffering servant passages, the book of Job, and Lenten crucifixion passages. Yet these are at best exploratory sermons; they do not provide an answer. These sermons might include one or many of the following biblical responses to evil, briefly summarized: evil is caused by humans exercising free will, the enemy did it, the future will resolve it, God has been negligent, God has a hidden plan, suffering evil will teach us, love of God overpowers even evil, evil is a mystery, the cross is God's hidden work to redeem all evil, evil is the result of not following God's will.²² Some of these are more satisfactory than others, but all fall short. Why?

The real reason the responses do not work is that they do not do anything. In the face of the extreme evil of the holocaust, explanations and rationalizations in the defense of God or the human

being, no matter how well intentioned, must be seen as beside the point. The responses do not work because they do not stop the children from being burned. In the presence of burning children what one says theologically is finally beside the point. In the presence of the burning children the real question is, “what shall we do?”²³

Theodicy cannot be answered with words, it can only be “answered” by action.

This is the preaching point we can dwell on. This is our good news, if we have any in the face of horror: not an explanation, but a proclamation of what God is doing, how God is acting. Here our voices must be clear, lest we deceive ourselves, for God is not found manufacturing blisters or looking for parking spots, God is found in Jesus Christ. That is about all we can say.

I do not want to suggest that the witness of Jesus is not a profound message, with profound implications, that it can be powerful and world-shattering. But this message has limits, which mean we really cannot describe God very much at all. Jesus is the extent of our witness.

We are surrounded by theologies of glory, ready to deceive us: to believe that God is known in power, health, wealth, or happiness. But God is found under the sign of God’s opposite, the cross. God can be perceived hidden within the revelation of Christ on the cross:

God’s revealing is simultaneously an unveiling and a veiling. God conceals Godself under the opposite of what both religion and reason imagine God to be, namely the Almighty, the majestic transcendent, the absolutely other.... God’s otherness...is not to be found in God’s absolute distance from us but in God’s willed and costly proximity to us. In simpler language ... God is other than we because God loves – and loves ... without ulterior motive, spontaneously.²⁴

In fact, God may be perceived to be hidden in two ways: within Christ’s revelation and behind Christ’s revelation. The God hidden *within* Christ’s revelation is the source of our consolation. It is where we meet God, human, vulnerable, crucified, contrary to our expectations, but still the true God. God *behind* Christ’s revelation is unknowable; the God of everyday experience apart from Christ, what we encounter apart from the Word. This is the God whose mask we cannot penetrate, the God of creation and destruction.²⁵ This is, one could suggest, the God who “allows” horrors to happen. This is the terrifying God whom we cannot understand; to understand this God would be worse than not understanding.²⁶

That isn't easy preaching.²⁷ Most of the time we like to pretend we have a handle on God. We preach as though we can understand, at least partially, the God of the Bible and of life. This wild God, amoral (or more precisely, the source of morality unto God's-self), unpredictable, is not one we like to admit. Yet by presenting the opposite, a supposedly "good" God, omnipotent and source of all morality, judge and controller of the universe, a God who fits seamlessly into the seductive categories of Greek philosophy, a God too easily assessed and understood, we feed right into a theology of glory, before whom we are forced to understand the rape of the women in Rwanda as part of God's plan. Far better that we admit this hidden terrifying God, who exists we know not how alongside the God we do know in Jesus Christ. As Gerhard Forde writes,

The theologian of glory adds to the perfidy of false speech by trying to assure us that God, of course, has nothing to do with suffering and evil. God is 'good,' the rewarder of all our 'good' works, the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow of merit. But is this prettified God the God of the Bible? Is it not quite probable that just these attempts to whitewash God are the cause of unbelief?²⁸

However, even the cross, God *within* Christ's revelation, does not mean God is easily understood. The cross does not mean that all weakness and brokenness are holy; we are not to seek out suffering, like medieval penitents. The cross does not mean that since God suffers too, all suffering is holy. Marjorie Procter-Smith recounts, "A friend who was raped commented, 'It was reassuring to learn from a rape crisis support group that I was not the only woman ever to be raped; but knowing that other women had been raped did not make me feel better, or safer.'"²⁹ A crucified God does not mean all crucifixions are redeemed. Or as Forde puts it, "God is supposed to be more attractive to us because he identifies with us in our pain and suffering. 'Misery loves company' becomes the unspoken motif of such theology."³⁰

So we admit, then, in our sermons, the hidden God, the *Deus absconditas*. And we move beyond sentimentality in our preaching of Christ and the cross. We preach God active in Christ. What will that sound like? Here I see the gap between theologians and preachers. In content, perhaps, it might sound something like this, but a preacher would need to take these words and flesh them out, with stories and imagery and examples:

As fallen creatures and not creators we will *always* be threatened by God, who is hidden by the masks of divine majesty.... The only refuge is the word of the cross in the here and now. Through the *preaching* of the cross in the living present, not through theological explanations, we are defended from the terror of the divine majesty. Precisely against the threat of supposed divine timelessness and immutability we are claimed in the concrete word of the cross in the living present; through baptism and Supper we are washed and fed. We feel and taste the truth in the here and now. To believe means precisely to be claimed by the cross and its word, to cling to that and find one's assurance there. The 'solution' to the problem of God ... is not in the classroom but in the church.³¹

This is what God can be trusted for: the word, the water, the bread and wine, body and blood, the community of faith.

Where was God in Rwanda? I don't know. There is absolutely no answer that makes any sense whatsoever as I think of the women Dallaire describes and what their last moments must have been like. I cannot preach any kind of God that is understandable. I can cry out to God, lament, fling out my questions – indeed, honesty compels that I do so – but I cannot preach this God as any kind of “good news.” Yet alongside this gaping wound I can point to some signs that do say God was there:

Victor Munyarugerere, a Catholic lay counselor married to a Tutsi woman, used creative tactics to save the lives of about 270 people. Dressed up as a priest and doling out bottles of whiskey and wine to soldiers at checkpoints, he shuttled carloads of children, women and men to safety at the Hotel des Mille Collines in Kigali. “I decided that I preferred to die saving people,” said Munyarugerere. “Tutsis and Hutus are all children of God.”³²

Note that Munyarugerere did not believe that God would save him from death. His faith was not in a God behind the cross, but God within the cross, a God who loves and therefore will be present in the midst of horror, willing to suffer horror in Godself if that is the cost of loving God's own children.

Is that what preaching in the face of horror looks like: a mostly empty God-shaped hole that sometimes holds only the bare remains of the body of Christ? Are those small fragments enough?

Enough for what? Enough to get up and go to church each Sunday? Enough to get up in the morning? Enough to call oneself a believer? Enough to change one's life?

Maybe it is. Ultimately it is not up to us to paste these fragments together to make a whole. Luther said it cannot be done, that there will always be the hidden God. Our theology hinges on the salvation offered to us by Christ alone, through faith alone. It is not up to us to determine if that faith is enough. God says it is.

Notes

- ¹ Ted Peters, *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), p. vii.
- ² Romeo Dallaire, *Shake Hands With the Devil: the Failure of Humanity in Rwanda* (Toronto: Random House, 2003), p. 430.
- ³ Elie Wiesel, *From the Kingdom of Memory: Reminiscences* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990) pp. 166, 187; cited in Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 20-21.
- ⁴ Elie Wiesel, *A Jew Today* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 15; cited in Daniel R. Schwarz, *Imagining the Holocaust* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), p. 53.
- ⁵ To what extent is this statistically provable? In 2000, Reginald Bibby found 96% of Canadians reflect on the question of why there is suffering in the world, nearly 80% "often or sometimes." Reginald W. Bibby, *Restless Gods: The Renaissance of Religion in Canada* (Toronto: Stoddart, 2002), p. 103.
- ⁶ One may contrast this with the Gypsy approach to their genocide in the Holocaust, which the Roma term "Porraimos" or "the Devouring." Generally they have chosen "not to bother with history at all, because to forget ... is the Gypsy way of enduring." Clendinnen, *Reading*, p. 8. I assume this is not an option open for Christians; our very existence is dependent upon historical memory.
- ⁷ David Buttrick, *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), p. 9.
- ⁸ The large number of horrific texts is another whole problem, beyond the scope of this study. As Terence Fretheim says, "the texts themselves fail us at times, perhaps even often. The patriarchal bias is pervasive, God is represented as an abuser and a killer of children, God is said to command the rape of women and the wholesale destruction of cities, including children and animals. To shrink from making such statements is dishonest. To pretend that such texts are not there, or to try to rationalize our way out of them...is to bury our heads in the sand."

- Terence E. Fretheim and Karlfried Froehlich, *The Bible as Word of God In a Postmodern Age* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998), p. 100. His essays in the book are most helpful in suggesting approaches in dealing with such texts.
- 9 Dorothee Soelle and Fulbert Steffansky, *Not Just Yes and Amen: Christians with a Cause* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983) p. 18.
- 10 Gerald Caplan, "The Genocide Paradox," *The Walrus* (October 2004, 68-77), p. 73.
- 11 Robert McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel: Messenger to All Humanity* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), p. 171.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 171.
- 13 David P. Gushee, *The Righteous Gentiles of the Holocaust: A Christian Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), p. xi.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 163.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 175.
- 17 David R. Blumenthal, *Facing the Abusing God: A Theology of Protest* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1993), pp. 228-29.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 232.
- 19 Reeve Robert Brenner, *The Faith and Doubt of Holocaust Survivors* (New York: Free Press, 1980), p. 93. In this fascinating study of faith, holocaust survivors self-reported the status of their beliefs before, during, and post Holocaust. In this study more than one in four of previously observant survivors lost their faith in a personal God. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
- 20 Some examples of such sermons include "The Grand Puppeteer: On Omnipotence" by Rev. E. Lee Hancock and "Rachel's Consolation: On Grief" by Rev. Dr. Bonnie Rosborough, in E. Lee Hancock, ed., *The Book of Women's Sermons: Hearing God in Each Other's Voices* (New York: Riverhead, 1999). See also Barbara Brown Taylor, *God in Pain: Teaching Sermons of Suffering* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), and *When God is Silent* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1998). Almost anything written by Annie Dillard expresses both the wonder and horror of the world, and ponders what that means about God. I would also recommend Frank G. Honeycutt *Preaching to Skeptics and Seekers* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001). Although Honeycutt does not give a sermon dealing with theodicy, his many insights help one approach the task. He does advocate that to preach effectively to those outside the church one must deal head-on with the reality of suffering. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

- ²¹ Michael Heher, “Words to Match” in *Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion* (Summer 1999): 102; cited in Honeycutt, Preaching, p. 27.
- ²² Murray Haar, “God, the Bible, and Evil after the Holocaust” *Word and World* 19/4 (Fall 1999): 372-380, 374-75.
- ²³ Haar, *God*, p. 376. Another example of this inability to answer the question of theodicy is given by Robert McAfee Brown: “Wiesel describes a conversation with one of the judges in the Eichmann trial. Asked if he understood the Holocaust better, now that a verdict against Eichmann had been rendered, the judge replied, ‘understand the Holocaust? I hope I never understand it. To understand would be worse than not to understand.’ By which he meant that if one could understand a universe in which the Holocaust made sense, or develop a concept of God in relation to whom the Holocaust could be ‘justified,’ that would be a universe in which the judge would not care to live, that would be a God in whom he would not want to believe.” McAfee Brown, *Elie Wiesel*, p. 143.
- ²⁴ Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context: Jesus and the Suffering World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), pp. 20-21.
- ²⁵ Deanna A. Thompson, *Crossing the Divide: Luther, Feminism, and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004), p. 62. Thompson bases this distinction of the two ways God is hidden on an article by Brian Gerrish “To the Unknown God’: Luther and Calvin on the Hiddenness of God,” *Journal of Religion* 53 (1973): 263-93. While I am not a Luther scholar and am unable to discern if this distinction is indeed present in Luther’s writings, I still believe these to be helpful categories.
- ²⁶ See McAfee Brown, endnote 23.
- ²⁷ Eventually these distinctions need to be heard not only in our preaching but also in our worship. Theologian Marjorie Proctor-Smith notes that “contemporary public prayers generally express confidence in both God’s goodness and God’s power. The dominant notes are thanksgiving, confession (or request for pardon), and petition ... the tone is respectful and polite, even in prayers requesting pardon for our sin, which generally appear to assume that God will forgive us. Petitions are usually nonurgent in tone ... which appears to leave no room for expressions of outrage grief, or lament.” Survivors of abuse and those aware of such suffering “thus often feel like illegitimate worshipers in a traditional mainstream Christian worship service. Expressions of confidence in God’s goodness and faith in God’s power to protect and care for us ring hollow indeed.” Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Praying with Our Eyes Open: Engendering Feminist Liturgical Prayer* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), pp. 72-73.

- ²⁸ Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being A Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), pp. 84-85.
- ²⁹ Procter-Smith, *Praying*, p. 81.
- ³⁰ Forde, *On Being a Theologian*, p. viii.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 75.
- ³² "Rwanda Hopes Scars Will One Day Heal" *Edmonton Journal*, 11 April, 2002, p. A17.