



Where Is God When Disaster Strikes?

| *Where should we look for God in situations of tragedy or disaster?*

Introduction

One dubious advantage of living in the age of information is that each of us has a much wider and more immediate sense of the many disasters that befall humanity, not only in our neighborhood but around the world. We have recently witnessed a tsunami, deadly hurricanes, and an earthquake that collectively took the lives of thousands of people, destroyed towns, fractured families, and wiped out the livelihoods of survivors. We watch the disaster unfolding in Iraq. Over 2,500 American military have died there; between 18,000 and 48,000 have been wounded; and between 35,000 and 39,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed, mostly women and children. We are numbed by the statistics that show that there are now some 40 million people infected with HIV/AIDS, that 15 million children have been orphaned by this disease, and that in 2005 alone 3.1 million people died from it. These numbers are of a magnitude that defies thought. Each person these numbers represent is an individual, a story, a web of relationships traumatized by pain and loss. And yet these are only a few of the larger and more dramatic horrors that unfold across our globe. In the microcosms of our own families we bear the secrets of a parent whose love is distorted by alcohol, the unclosed wound of a lost child, broken relationships, illness, violence we have never named, the trauma of divorce, broken dreams, lost jobs, uninsured children.

It is easy to list disasters, but it is much harder to find any obvious meaning in them. In order to bear these sufferings, we need to find meaning, and yet no edifying significance can be read off the face of a child raw with the loss of a parent. No natural theology arises from the stench of rotting bodies left in the wake of



flood or bomb. We are stuck in a barren land in which we long for goodness and justice, and yet when we look at the world and even our own lives we find injustice, pain, and suffering. Because our hearts find this schism between experience and meaning unbearable, we often rush in to apply a theological quick fix: "God's ways are not our ways." "This is punishment for their sin." "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." "God wiped out New Orleans because he hates homosexuality, and Ellen DeGeneres is from New Orleans."

Alternatively, we may just turn the channel. Where I exercise, there are always three television sets playing in front of the aerobic machines. We are simultaneously exposed to heart-wrenching news stories, an inane situation comedy, and a show detailing the redemptive powers of home or wardrobe makeovers. Each of these is mixed up every few minutes with images of food, clothing, medicine, or shampoo that promise to completely fulfill our deepest desires, perfectly alleviate our pain, and transform the world into paradise. Embedded in these juxtapositions is a rather appalling

spiritual practice. We are titillated by a kind of voyeurism of suffering and then immediately transported to lush images of food, sex, wealth, and leisure. Our ethical awareness of human suffering occurs in the midst of Lotus-land fantasies of pleasure into which “facts” are flashed about human carnage, already neatly packaged by political and economic expediciencies.

This is the spiritual landscape in which we live. We are surrounded by our own suffering and the suffering of humanity. But the onslaught of commercialized media anesthetizes us to this reality while much mainstream religion rarely offers little beyond trivializing platitudes. We want to flee suffering because it is unbearable to us, and so we become lost in ideologies, entertainment, fantasy, and busyness. Television is a great support to us in all of these efforts to flee the awareness of suffering. At the same time, we want to find a definitive meaning to give us certainty and strength in the midst of the disorientation pain causes. Preachers and politicians who offer a quick, clear, definitive picture of where God is in disasters satisfy this natural craving we have for answers. They are very popular in collective and personal times of disaster. But I am not sure Scripture supports either of these impulses.

God’s Answer to Job

One can find passages in Scripture that lend support to one theory or another about why we suffer. But this is part of the problem: dueling Scripture quotations do not really take us very far into the inner chambers of our hearts, where we grieve for our neighbors and ourselves. We might remember how strongly the Voice in the Whirlwind chastises Job’s “comforters” for trying to impose a sin and punishment theodicy onto him: “My wrath is kindled against you and against your two friends; for you have not spoken of me what is right, as my servant Job has” (Job 42:7). But what does Job do but call God to account, beg for the presence of God, and insist on his own innocence? Job does not really say much about God. Instead he steadfastly rejects the idea that his sufferings are punishment for sin. Job pleads for a way to understand the disasters that have befallen him, but he does not get an explanation from God. Even when God manifests to him and speaks from the whirlwind, God does not give Job what he asked. There are no explanations, no theories about why the world is the

way it is, no justifications that somehow balance the equation of God’s power and God’s goodness.

God gave Job what God characteristically gives humanity throughout Scripture: God gives God’s own self. As Adam and Eve leave the garden in shame and misery, God provides them with garments against the cold of the real world. When Abraham cowardly allows Sarah to be stolen for Pharaoh’s harem, God releases her. When Sarah turns Hagar and her infant out into the desert to die, God provides them with drink. There is never an explanation of why the children of Israel suffered in their miserable slavery for so many generations, but God does find Moses, a stuttering shepherd on the lam from a murder charge, to bring them out of Egypt. Through the voices of the prophets, God laments for the suffering of the oppressed and demands that Israel honor the covenant by acting with mercy, kindness, and justice.

For Christians, Christ himself is the great revelation of how God responds to evil: out of an intoxicating and apparently relentless love for humanity, God dwells with us in the midst of our suffering, bringing the incalculable sweetness of divine compassion into our midst as intimately as possible. Christ heals the sick; raises the dead; befriends lepers, tax collectors, and women; scolds the self-righteous; and dines with sinners—that is, all of us. When the Roman Empire responds to the movement that arises out of this revelation by torturing, exiling, and murdering the followers of Christ, John of Patmos has a vision that explains nothing. But he does envision a time when God “will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more” (Rev. 21:4).

Finding Presence Rather than Explanations

If we take these small portraits from Scripture as clues for where we might look for God in disaster, we find that we cannot look for God in theodicies. That is, we cannot look for God in explanations or justifications of disaster. We look for God in compassionate responses to disaster. There are several stories of Jesus responding to small, local disasters, including those of the widow of Nain who loses her son (Luke 7:11–15) and the leper in Mark who insists Jesus can make him well (Mark 1:40–45). In each of these examples the text uses a Greek word

to describe what is going on: *splagchnizomai*. This word means “compassion.” It literally means to have one’s intestines moved. As Amy Howe, a minister in Memphis, Tennessee, put it in a recent sermon: “We hear in these stories that Jesus is moved with compassion. . . . Jesus’ action comes from the very center of his being, his intestines are turned, his bowels of mercy are engaged. . . . We are given through the grace of Scripture a window into the very nature of God. An afflicted, worthless leper, a grieving and a valueless widow touch something in our Lord. God loves the afflicted, God loves the grieving, and God loves the outcasts of society. It is God’s very nature to be compassionate, to respond to God’s children in love.”

These scriptural clues suggest that in thinking about where to look for God in disaster, we should not be looking for explanations but rather for the divine presence. Looking to Scripture also suggests to us that this presence is likely to be most obviously mediated to us through one another. God liberated the children of Israel through Moses. God demands justice for the poor through the voices of Isaiah, Amos, and the other prophets. God preserves the safety of Israel through the courage of Jael (Judg. 4). Jesus, in painting a picture of judgment day, differentiates the sheep from the goats only on the basis of their ability to minister to Christ by ministering to the hungry, naked, imprisoned, and sick (Matt. 25). Jesus laid on his followers only one commandment, and that was to love one another. Although he characterizes his yoke as easy and his burden light, we have tended to find this commandment impossible to bear.

Like most of the rest of humanity, we prefer to lose ourselves in trivia rather than face the suffering of others or ourselves. When we are confronted with disaster, we are tempted to think in terms of judgment and justice. It seems easier to bear our own suffering if we think of it as deserved, as if we are all abused children. We prefer to believe that the world is orderly and the punishment is just rather than enter into a place of raw vulnerability where violation can occur to the most helpless and guileless. It seems much more satisfying to condemn the guilty and see in their suffering a divine justice than to penetrate to those regions of psyche and spirit from where forgiveness and healing spring. In our longing for a power at work in the world that transforms all suffering into justice, we show that our allegiance is often to “the ruler of this world,” the one who offers the authority and glory of all the kingdoms of the world to Jesus if



he will worship him, “for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please” (Luke 4:6).

Scripture does refer to a kind of power that controls and manipulates, one that understands justice and punishment as two sides of the same coin. But Jesus rejects the offer to worship this kind of power; he rejects participation in the kind of power that rules the “kingdoms of the world.” He brings to us a different kind of power and in doing so assaults our fantasies of power and judgment, fantasies that suffering and punishment should coincide.

This is both sweet and bitter “good news.” It is bitter to sacrifice our hope that justice prevails in history: that storms flood only the homes and villages of the guilty; that illness decimates only those who deserve or at least can bear it; that violence somehow reveals a secret, inner logic whereby a divine king metes out justice. It is bitter to give up looking for an explanation of our suffering and the suffering of humanity in the fiat of a divine master. But if we dig deeper into our hearts and look more clearly into one another’s faces, we may find something sweet in this good news. We find that there is nothing that can destroy the intimacy with which God has chosen to dwell with us. Our guilt feelings are like children’s sand castles before the tide of God’s love. Our most debilitating suffering and most humiliating abuse cannot push away the tenderness of our mother Christ as She nurses us and holds us, nearer to us than our own mother, more present to us than our own breath—even if in the dark we are unable to perceive this nearness.

Christ’s Example of Presence

The teachings and actions of Christ give us a kind of template of where to look for God in disaster. When

neighbors bring casseroles to the bereaved in the midst of grief, when strangers appear to pull the drowning from floodwaters or lift stones off those crushed under an avalanche, when eyes warn against a tide of rising hostility and defuse the threat of violence, when tender hands comfort and open pockets contribute necessities, we can be aware of the blowing of the Holy Spirit. When hearts become stable in the midst of disaster and face down their despair, when communities stand firm in the integrity of conscience and compassion as temptations to spiraling corruption rage, we feel the blowing of the Spirit in our midst.

When we practice compassion for one another, we bear witness to the deepest dimension of our faith: God is with us. But it must be acknowledged that this practice of compassion has not come easy to Christians. We are tempted away from this aspect of our faith. We are beguiled by self-flagellating guilt, old answers, numbing fantasies, glib ideologies. In order to develop the clarity of mind and heart that learns where to look for God in disaster, it is necessary to practice all the time. We practice when we attend in prayer to the places in us that condemn us or condemn other people. We practice when we maintain our sorrow for the tragedy on our television set even just one minute longer than is comfortable. We practice when we imagine the hell that is inside the head of someone on death row and pray for healing there. We practice when we consider a situation from the perspective of our opponents or enemies: not necessarily adopting it but at least trying to understand why it might make sense to them. We practice when we find time for silence in the presence of the divine. We practice when we can remember some scrap of beauty—an alpine meadow, a sparkling trout—when we feel hopeless dread pressing in on us. We practice when we remember, if only for five minutes, to be gentle with ourselves and with one another. We practice when we try to love God more than our ideas about God.

We learn where to look for God in suffering and disaster by bearing witness to our Savior, who did not overthrow the Roman government or create a germ-free world or remove the structures that maintain some in hopeless destitution. We do not see in Scripture evidence that God removes the causes of suffering but rather that God comes to us, with perfect intimacy, in the midst of suffering.

Our Challenge

We live in very dangerous times. They are dangerous in part for the same reasons human life has always been dangerous: everyone who was ever born will die, and this is grief and suffering for us all. But they are also dangerous because many countries in the world possess nuclear weapons capable of destroying life on this planet, and the leaders of these countries, including our own, are not so dependably prudent that this power can be trusted to remain forever unused. These times are dangerous because weather patterns are changing, and hurricanes and tornadoes are expected to become more frequent and more violent all around the world. Water and air are becoming polluted enough that a time may come when wars will be fought over these as if they were rare and precious commodities. The bitter hostilities among peoples are now armed with terrifying weapons and fueled by fanaticisms beyond the scope of reason or even self-interest.

It is important for Christians to consider how we are going to comport ourselves now and in the future, if and when these dangers are unleashed in our lives or across the planet. Now more than ever, it is crucial for Christians to remember Christ's commandment to us. It is important that we practice that commandment constantly, in all of the large and small decisions, activities, relationships, and emotions that constitute our daily life. When disaster comes to the microcosm of our individual lives or in the macrocosm of our communities and world, we must have practiced like "soldiers in the army of the Lord" to be able to remain anchored in the love of God. We must practice this love so that we can bear witness to the compassion that is embodied for us in Christ even in the midst of disaster. "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:38–39). In bearing witness for one another, we will discover within ourselves the nearness of God and the love of God for us in the midst of our disasters.

About the Writer

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