

Disasters and Our Views of God

Genesis 18:1-5

(Yahweh is thought to walk on earth and engage with humans directly.)

Mark- 1:29-31

(Jesus reveals God as Healer.)

Genesis 1: 1-3

(God creates out of chaos)

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[X comes up and dramatizes what I say.] I am standing here on a point. I am content standing here, for I can enjoy a view in all directions. I really enjoy seeing all of you, seeing the big round window, the choir, the flowers and cross. If I stood here long enough, something unusual might happen.

I might lose my balance. Oops, I shift off my spot. To my surprise, I realize that I can move. I can go this way or that way. A completely new kind of existence opens up to me. Never had I dreamed I could travel so far. I can go as far as I want this way, AND I can make a trek in the opposite direction. Isn't this wonderful? I could go around the world if I journeyed far enough in one direction or the other.

If I continued to explore, one day I might meet up with someone who wants to pass me. [Y meets X.] I'm headed this way; she wants to go that way. We're sort of stuck. One of us needs to turn around. Oh, I guess we could hug and hold onto each other as we maneuver so that we can pass each other.

As we cooperate with each other, something critical happens. I fall down. To my surprise, I discover, through this crisis, another dimension. I realize that I can actually step off my two-dimensional line to let my traveling colleague pass by. Lo and behold! A whole new world is opened up to me: the land of several dimensions. If I could roller blade, I could travel everywhere! I could go at angles here and there. I could even join hands with others to make circles.

Enjoying others, [Z joins in.] hand in hand, dancing, I am so happy that I jump up into the air and make yet another discovery! There is another dimension: Up and Down. I can send a paper airplane across the sky. I can even fly through the air myself, in an airplane. What wonder are all these dimensions!

Now I truly can go anywhere. That must be the extent of possibilities! [Triangle rings.] I answer the telephone—would you believe, this is my daughter, who is in Chicago right now. I am here; she is there, but we are “together.” We have rather entered a fourth dimension of time. We're both in the same place at the same time while being thousands of miles apart.

What could possibly be next? A fifth, sixth, dimension? [X, Y, Z creatively leave.]

You are thinking, “Carolyn's gone a little more crazy than usual.”

You see, I wanted to get us in the *mood* for considering times in our lives when we've made a big discovery, almost as big as realizing that there's a whole new

dimension to life, either *because* we became off-balance or because we *intentionally* explored.

Specifically, I want us to consider our discoveries about God in our very own lives. First, let's take a brief look at two very different views of God in our Bible.

In the first Genesis passage we heard today, we are told that God shows up at Abraham's tent. The narrator tells us it's God and two angels who show up. But Abraham looks at these three beings at his tent's door and thinks that they are three men--they look like three men to him. Fortunately for Abraham, he is quite hospitable to the three.

A view of God has been presented here. God was understood as being able to walk on earth, to be experienced by other humans as a person. This down-to-earth theology is easy to recognize because God is called "Yahweh" in the passages with this view. God is imagined to walk on earth, to be a very personal presence.

In the Bible God is presented in so many other ways as well. For example, in the first Chapter of Mark we see Jesus healing Peter's mother-in-law. By the time Jesus heals this woman, crowds had begun to follow Jesus, even into the desert. In this Gospel Mark presents a view of God as Miracle Worker or Healer.

In just these two passages we see very different views of God. In one, God walks on earth interacting with humans. In the other, God Heals, God is Miracle Worker.

When some of us were children, we thought of God almost like a big Santa Claus, providing us with whatever we wanted. Or, some of us thought of God as a big Santa Clause who watched closely to see if we were naughty or nice. In other words, we were standing on a point of faith, looking from one spot, thinking of God as Provider of Good Things or God as Gentle Judge. Actually, we could hold both views at once--God is Provider of Good Things if and only if we are good. With this view of God, we might easily conclude that if something not-so-good happens, we are being punished--by God. We think, "I didn't get chosen to sing the solo in the school chorus; maybe God is punishing me for not practicing enough, or for hitting my brother yesterday."

By the time some of us grew to be teenagers, we probably adopted another view of God. Perhaps our grandfather got sick. Our extended family came together to pray; church members prayed for healing, and Grandpa got well. If we had a Santa Claus Provider or Judge God, we added another dimension to our God. God became, like those around Jesus, Healer, even Miracle Worker. God became one who would answer prayer if we believed enough. [walk in line]

When we left home or went to college some of us probably intentionally explored what we believed. We may have encountered those with different views of God. Some of us no doubt, away from home, were lonely. One day we may have heard a college chaplain refer to God as Divine Friend. Hmm. A Divine Friend isn't needed to provide things, or to judge us as naughty or nice. A Divine Friend isn't needed for Healing. A Divine Friend is there--quite simply and profoundly there. There's mutuality, love, responsiveness. A whole new dimension of God has been introduced--God as Presence.

Then, there is an earthquake. Tens of thousands of people die. Several hundred thousand people are wounded. A whole city is in ruin. Our faith truly falls down. We ask, "Where is God?" We hear some television preacher talking as if God were Santa Clause, meting out punishment to a whole nation of people. How could that be? We discover that our Provider God, God as a Kindly Judge, Healer God, and even our God as Divine

Friend do not to suffice. Why were certain people saved when others died? What kind of a Friend are You God? In fact, we might ask, “Are You there?”

This may be where some people are today as we consider our view of God in light of the recent earthquakes in Haiti.

How do we combine the reality of very bad things--whether personal crises or huge communal disasters--with *any* view of God?

I am aware that as a preacher I’m sort of expected to defend God. That is, I’m rather expected to explain how God is and how bad things are not incompatible with a loving God. I want to tell you straight away that there have been times in my life when I don’t know so certainly *that* God is or *how* God is. Perhaps that’s why I have spent so many years of my life thinking and writing about different ways we can think of God.

However, there are certain things of which I am convinced. One is that God is good and good for all. I do not think that God arbitrarily helps some and not others or wants safety for some and not for others. I believe that God desperately wants good for every single creature on earth. God wants it to work out well for all.

I personally find that it makes most sense to consider nature as neutral. Nature, our earth, delivers rain, sunshine, tornadoes, earthquakes—and rainbows. None of these natural events are disasters for the earth; they all keep the earth following its way of being. I do not think that nature gets angry and sends a quake. Nature is neutral.

So, we have God and nature. God is good, all good for all. Nature is neutral.

I **do** believe that evil exists. I would call a terrorist attack evil. Bad is intended, even if the attacker perceives in their own mind that their action serves some good. I would call abuse of one human by another evil. We are meant to be kind to each other. Conflict is inevitable; but conflict need not lead to intentional inflicted pain. We can resolve conflict civilly.

However, I would not call a hurricane or earthquake evil. It is nature at work.

What power, then does God have to protect humans and other creatures? If God wants good for all, *can* God hold back seas? I would say “No.” However, I do imagine that God persuasively and lovingly works to take the world as it is and seeks to bring forth the very best from that.

Several years ago I heard a rescue worker talking on the radio, after the tsunamis in the Indian Ocean. He said he worked to receive aid and to get it where it needed to go. He told the interviewer that he was like a “choreographer of chaos.”

At that moment, when I heard the aid worker liken himself to a choreographer of chaos, I was like the dancer who was so happy she jumped up and discovered a new dimension. I found a new dimension to God. It made sense to me to consider God a Divine Choreographer of Chaos. In fact, God is depicted in this way in the very first sentences of Genesis. In the Bible’s first creation story God is thought of as creating order out of Chaos.

I do not think that God can hold back earth’s tectonic plates, so that they do not move, as they were created to, even if a city is in the way. Neither does God zap naughty people or save nice people. God cares. God is there. God is doing absolutely all God can with persuasive power to get what needs to be gotten to people--not only food and water and medical supplies, but also courage and strength and hope. God works with what is and helps it to become what it can be.

Someone commented to me last week that he had heard a Christian musical piece entitled, “Do Not Be Afraid,” but said that he IS afraid. He explained, “To say, ‘Do not be afraid’ is to say, ‘Don’t be.’” I don’t think God can make all challenges go away. Belief in God does not necessarily take away all fear. Yet, as we face all the chaos, tragedies, sadness, and challenges in life, we might find that we believe in God as one who helps us to have the *courage* to dance, in spite of it all.

Some people in Haiti are singing right now in order to regain hope, in order to thank God for their blessings, and in order to build community. For some—in Haiti and elsewhere—God is experienced as their Dance Partner. They don’t blame God for upsets and tragedies, but *find* with God something very important—courage in the midst of life’s challenges, courage to move forward and eventually even to dance.