

Seeing God

Job 40:6-42:6;

What do I say, or how should I respond, to a person who says these horrible natural disasters (tornados, tsunamis, etc.) are God's punishment? Why do people say that? First, there is some of that kind of language in the Bible--about God punishing Israel for faithlessness or punishing Israel's enemies for being Israel's enemies.

Those tending to read these texts in a literal way may find it tempting to apply that same analysis today. And sometimes, this temptation is too great to resist, even when it is a tongue-in-cheek framing of the recent earthquake and hurricane flooding along east coast as God trying to get the attention of the Federal government. And on a more sinister note, there have been many other calamities, especially in nature, that have been characterized as God's response to humanity's failures. Some have suggested that AIDS—a different kind of natural disaster—was God's punishment for homosexuality.

In western culture, it is often so difficult to hear God's voice, so difficult to feel the authenticity of religious experience, that people give in to a temptation just to make up God's action's and God's communications—and give it our own interpretation. That's what I think much of this kind of talk is.

What is there to say to someone who calls natural disasters God's punishment? I'd say that "I don't think that tornados, tsunamis, or hurricanes are any kind of communication from God to us--any kind of judgment from God—and certainly not any kind of punishment. How could you face the people of Joplin, MO and say that to them; or the people of Japan; or the people of North Carolina or New York; or the people of Texas and the SW US suffering through a horrible draught or heat wave? You have to, at least, be consistent.

Two things you can say about so-called *Acts of God*—natural disasters. They are equal opportunity devastators. They are natural events and the people affected were certainly in the wrong place at the wrong time

In all honesty, human beings contribute to some of the destructive capacity of natural disasters. We contribute to soil erosion which can lead to mud slides. We contribute to global climate change which might well contribute to the severity of some storms. We insist on living along the ocean shores and near rivers which makes us susceptible to flooding. That's not necessarily to blame people, but the more of us there are, living in all sorts of places, the more dangerous natural events bump into us.

We are complicit, both individually and as societies, in epidemics such as AIDS, heart disease and diabetes. We are complicit as a culture in the increase of some mental and emotional disorders in our modern world by many of our choices. We are complicit, at least to a certain extent, in the economic disasters that have befallen our world. We are also victims of these disasters. But being complicit is not the same as being fully to blame and certainly does not mean God is punishing us for misbehavior or wrong belief.

There are consequences for actions. Sometimes we pay them right away, sometimes only later. Sometimes the consequences we pay seem unfair or unjust as when someone betrays us or when a dream falls apart through no apparent fault of our own. We experience consequences when we hurt someone and feel their anger and pain, even though we may have done what we felt was right in the relationship.

Natural disasters are not limited to the weather. Take Job, the Bible's great example of a righteous person who suffered disaster in his life. Everything in his life just blew apart through no apparent fault of his. Most of the book of Job—almost an epic poem—consisted of Job's friends trying to teach him what he had done wrong, what he had done to deserve his fate. Throughout, Job denied his fault and persisted in proclaiming his righteousness. Job grew more and more frustrated with his friends and with God.

After forty chapters, God surprised everyone by showing up. Interrupting the last of Job's *counselors*, and with an ominous voice out of a tornado, God said to Job, "On your feet and be a man! It's my turn to question you!" OH MY!! Then for two chapters, God showed Job the wonders of creation and reminded Job how ignorant and small he was. And Job's response? "I'm pretty ignorant and small. "I think I'll be quiet now, God." But that wasn't all of it—not at all! Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind with a mighty expression of God's own power and creative might.

Job made two responses to God. The first, was to just be quiet, to sit in silence, but it was the second that holds a key for us. Its traditional translation is, "there I despite myself, and repent in dust and ashes." This was certainly an honest and understandable response to the awesome mystery of God's power that was made clear to Job. A translation that is perhaps more accurate to the written text is, "I reject or recant my words." These words of his that Job now recants reflect his assessment of himself as puny and of no account. Throughout, God has been telling him to stand up. "Be a man," with the clear implication that God who created Behemoth and Leviathan, and so much of the wonder of the world, also created humanity "only a little lower than the angels" (from Psalm 8).

The key phrase for Job, often translated, "I repent in dust and ashes" is more accurately read, "I repent concerning dust and ashes." God called Job, and by extension each of us, when blow apart by the disasters of our lives, when beaten down by those often unfair and even capricious events, not to fold up and sit in dust and ashes—at least not to stay there indefinitely, but to stand up, be a man, be a woman. "Gird up your loins" and speak out.

When someone tells you that the disaster in your life is God's punishment, you tell them that God makes rain to fall on the good and the bad alike. Nobody in the Bible ever seemed to ask the question "Why." When disaster struck, they tended to ask, "How long?" They seemed to understand that storms happen and sometimes our worlds are shaken. But God always reminds us of two things. First, "I have made you just a little lower than the angels." What matters most is how you respond to the storms. The second is that a house built on solid rock will stand when the winds blow, the waves rise, and the earth trembles. That house will stand.

Lead us, O God, to seek the solid rock so that, no matter what happens in our lives, we will respond with courage as your beloved children, in Jesus' name. Amen."