

Where is God?

The scenes are becoming as etched in our minds as the falling of the world trade center buildings in 2001- thousands of people gathered in the New Orleans superdome waiting for help, the Episcopal congregation on the Mississippi coast celebrating the Eucharist in front of their shattered church, the countless interviews with families who have lost everything, the boats traveling up and down the streets of New Orleans- looking for bodies to recover.

As the natural tragedy of hurricane Katrina unfolded, many questions arose- not just the political question of why such a slow response and the environmental question of why so many natural barriers had been removed over the years, but also the more philosophical and theological ones; I suppose one could put these questions under the category of where was God, where is God in such disasters? several weeks ago the Washington Post published numerous articles addressing these interpretations:

Rev. Alex McFarland of the Focus on the Family ministry was quoted as saying: “theologians have debated for centuries how a good, wise and all-powerful God could allow so much evil and suffering. God did create a perfect world. But we humans introduced moral evil. And after God judged human sin in Noah’s flood, the weather patterns that we know today developed. As a Christian, I would say that God didn’t cause this but God did allow it, and we believe that God will bring a greater good out of this,”

Ted Steinberg a professor of history at Case Western Reserve University blames us. By building levees along the Mississippi and draining marshland, he said, the Army Corps of Engineers and local officials hastened the sinking of New Orleans and destroyed the barrier islands that protected the Gulf Coast. “Blaming God, “he said, “is moral hand-washing.”

In Israel, Christian journalist Stan Goodenough saw a connection between the removal of Jewish settlers from their homes in the Gaza Strip and Americans being forced out of their homes in New Orleans. He asked, “Is this some sort of bizarre coincidence? Not for those who believe in the God of the Bible...” “What America is about to experience is the lifting of God’s hand of protection; the implementation of his judgment on the nation most responsible for endangering the land and the people of Israel.”

What do you believe? Act of God? Just a weather system? Divine retribution? Where is God for you in the midst of this natural disaster?

My sermon this morning will attempt to answer the question of where God was in hurricane Katrina and its aftermath; why is there so much evil and suffering in this world? It's a task I need to approach with a great deal of humility. After all, unless one can see the beginning and end of all things, unless one knows the precise nature of the relation between divine and created freedom, unless one can fathom infinite wisdom, one can draw no conclusions from finite experience regarding the coincidence in God of omnipotence and perfect goodness. God said to Job, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell, me if you have understanding." (Job 38:4)

I see very dimly in the mirror of such questions and even my fragile attempts at explanation will surely not satisfy some or even many of you. But try we must, as God's created, and more importantly, as God's baptized, as the church, with Holy Scripture and Christian tradition as our guides. That is an important caveat for this sermon since much of the discussion about the personhood and nature of God is framed-at least in the media- from secular philosophical assumptions.

God is love says 1 John 4:16, "and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." Christian tradition asserts that God is not only good, but goodness itself, not only true or beautiful, but infinite truth and beauty; that all the transcendental perfections are one in him who is the source and end of all things, the infinite wellspring of all being. Thus, everything that comes from God must be good and true and beautiful including creation itself. Genesis tells us that God saw everything he had made and declared it very good.

Yet, inherent in the very act of creation, if it is to be a real creation, is autonomy; certainly there was autonomy in the Garden of Eden. God told Adam and Eve not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, yet they-with a little help from the serpent, chose to disobey God and eat of the tree; Thus the fall from God's intention's in creation; sin and evil are its fruits;

We exist today in the long melancholy aftermath of this primordial catastrophe: the world we live in today is a broken and wounded world. At

the present our universe languishes in bondage to the “powers and “principalities” of this age, which never cease in their enmity toward the kingdom of God. There is a kind of “provisional cosmic dualism within the New Testament: not an ultimate dualism-but a sphere of created autonomy, that strives against God on the one hand and the saving love of God in time on the other.

The very word “world” (kosmos) appears in the New Testament with two quite distinct and even opposed meanings. At times it is a synonym for ‘creation’ (ktisis) and so signifies merely the handiwork of God and the object of his redemptive care: ‘God sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.’(John 3:16-7); or Romans 1:20 we read: “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.”

But “world” is also used to indicate the present “order” that enslaves creation and that strives incessantly against God, jealous of its plunder. “He was in the world, and the world was made by him and the world knew him not.” (John 1:10); ‘be of good cheer,’ Jesus tells his apostles, “I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) The ‘cosmos’ in this sense is an empire of cruelty, aggression, envy, misery, violence, falsehood, greed, ignorance, and spiritual desolation: it is death working in all things, the power to dominate or slay, but not to make new. It is that present evil world, Paul says, to which we must never be conformed. (Romans 12; 2)

So, evil is real; evil packs a punch; we pray in the Lord’s Prayer to be delivered from it! But we must never forget even in the midst of horrors like 9/11, or the Tsaumni in the Indian Ocean last Christmas, or in the aftermath now of Hurricane Katrina, at the heart of the Gospel, is an ineradicable triumphalism, a conviction that the will of God cannot ultimately be defeated and that the victory over evil and death has already been won. This is the meaning of the cross. In Christ there is and will be a new creation. But it is also a victory, we are assured, that is yet to come. For now, we live amid strife of darkness and light, falsehood and truth, death and life. This world remains a field where the wheat and the tares have been sown side by side and so they must grow till the harvest comes. (Matt 13:38). Until then, as Paul says, all creation languishes in anguished anticipation of the day when God’s glory will transfigure all things. (Romans 8: 18-22)

So, where is God in these disasters that have rocked our world in the past four years?

Our God who so loved the world that he gave his only son... continues the work of the rescuing and restoration of his creation begun in the life, death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. Our faith is in a God who has come to save His creation from the absurdity of sin and the emptiness of death. Our God of love is not a God who requires our suffering to make a point, or to teach us a lesson. For while Christ takes the suffering of his creatures up into his own, it is not because he or they had need of suffering, but because he would not abandon his creatures to the grave. When we gasp in horror even at the death of one small child, we do not see the face of God who calls little Betty home because he needed her, but the face of His enemy. We can rejoice that we are saved not through the immanent mechanisms of history and nature, but by grace; and yes, there will be a judgment at the end of time and we may be assured that God will not unite all of history's many strands into one great synthesis, but will judge much of history false and damnable; meanwhile, no matter what it looks like, God continues day by day, hour by hour, to strike off the fetters in which creation languishes; and rather than showing us how the death the other day in New Orleans of a 20 year old diabetic who couldn't get his insulin shot was necessary for the building of the Kingdom, He will instead raise that young man up and wipe away all tears from his loved one's eyes-and one day there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor any more pain, or hurricanes, for the former things will have passed away and He that sits upon the throne will say, "Behold, I make all things new." As Paul reminds us, we may not see it, but we are assured in Christ that it is happening. So, we walk by faith into the brightness of the one who is our Morning Star, with hope in our hearts. Amen.