

Earthquakes, Tsunamis and the Temptation of Jesus

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Matthew 4:1-11

Every once in a while, events in the world trump the liturgical calendar and even the assigned readings. Such was the case in September of 2001 and such is the case this morning, the first Sunday in Lent. The assigned Gospel focuses on the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. It's the traditional reading for the first Sunday of Lent and draws a parallel between Jesus' forty days and our forty days.

Of course, Jesus' Lent was unlike any Lent we can engineer for ourselves. His fasting was unlike any fast we can cook up; His temptations embraced every way in which we are tempted, yet with this one important caveat: He did not sin. Jesus went one on one with the devil and won, not with a show of divine strength, but solely with the Word. He did it with His divine hand literally tied behind His back. He did it to rescue fallen humanity from the clutches of the devil, to make enmity with the ancient serpent on His way to His head-crushing victory on the cross.

But the events of the past few days are nearly impossible to drive from our minds; they command our attention. I was half-asleep when I saw the first news footage of the earthquake and tsunami that washed ashore in Japan, a twenty-three foot wave of water that swept in with frightening relentlessness, and then flush back into the ocean carrying with it burning homes, cars, buses, trains, airplanes, tress, animals, and as yet uncounted people. It didn't register with me at first that what I was watching was real, not some special effect in a made-for-TV movie. An earthquake over 100 times that our of big ones followd by a tidal wave traveling at the speed of a DC-10 made the biblical scenes of the Flood or the destruction of the Revelation seem all the more plausible.

It really wasn't until the next morning that I realized this actually happened in some part of the world. And then, as typical for these kinds of natural disasters, there is the slowly unfolding aftermath which is almost worse than the event itself – nuclear power plants

endangered, people trapped without food or water. I had that same feeling of helplessness as on 9/11 watching the buildings collapse. You see it but there's nothing you can do except to do as the small catechism says, make the sign of the holy cross and say, "Lord have mercy."

Commenting in the LA Times, a Jesuit priest from New York noted that events like the Japan massive earthquake and tsunami with the attendant destruction and loss of life in pose a greater problem for believers than for unbelievers. We are accustomed to saying things like, "I don't know what people who have no faith in God do." Yet for the unbeliever, it's really quite simple and straightforward. It's all about the massive forces of what the secular mind calls "nature." Biologist and outspoken atheist Richard Dawkins says that nature is simply a huge, impersonal bunch of brutal forces. Enormous tectonic plates grinding together with huge geological forces causing a tidal wave of water. We got a good glimpse of those forces at work toppling and sweeping away decades of building in a matter of seconds.

For all of our reliance on technology and the hope that science and good civic organization can save you, the harsh reality is that we are no match for natural forces. And that's about as far as the unbeliever can go or even needs to go. It's Man vs Nature, and in the end Nature always wins, and the tidal wave that washes away your city is a reminder of how insignificant you are in the natural scheme of things.

It's not so easy for the believer, however. We believe that God is merciful and gracious. We believe that He not only created all things in the beginning, but He also created each of us personally, and that He watches over, cares for and provides for His creation. He defends us from all danger; He guards and protects us against all evil. Not a bird falls from the sky apart from His notice. He clothes the lilies of the field and knows the number of hairs on your head as well as the number of your days. So when something like this happens, we begin to wonder if there really is anyone in charge of all this. Did this escape God's notice? Did He cause it? Why didn't He stop it from happening?

The events of 9/11 were a bit easier to wrap our minds around. Evil men with an evil religion did this. Man's inhumanity can always be explained by reference to man's inhumanity. For that matter, the Japanese people could probably better understand Hiroshima and Nagasaki than they can comprehend this. Those were acts of war. But the brutal, relentless forces of nature are quite another thing. If nature is so wondrously and intelligently designed, and we are the apple of God's eye and the crown of His creation, then why does nature seem hell bent on destroying us? And where is God in all of this? And what about when it happens to us?

The book of Job deals with this, though not in any way that is satisfying to those who want simple answers. Job suffers horribly at the hands of the devil. He loses health, wealth, and family for no apparent reason. Job's friends try to offer an explanation for God, but they're dead wrong. They think God is angry with Job. They're wrong. God is pleased as punch with Job and is holding him up to the devil as an example of faithfulness in the midst of suffering. Job never gets an explanation from God. When God finally appears on the scene in the late chapters, He offers no apologia, no explanations. He simply says, "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know. Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I said, "This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?"

And what about when they don't halt, and the waves keep coming and swamp your city and sweep away everything in an instant? The Jesuit priest in that news article said that anyone who tries to explain this in terms of God is either a fool or a liar. The man is right. God offers no explanations, nor should we attempt to fill in the silence. Like Job's friends, we're going to be way off the mark. When Jesus was confronted with tragic loss of life, whether by men or by accident, He simply said, "Repent, lest something worse happen to you." That's what Job did at the end of God's speech. He repented. "Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know."

Jesus spoke of earthquakes and natural disasters as the "birth pangs," the labor contractions of the new creation being born. Not the death throes, though that's what they look and feel like to us labor pains. Painful and difficult, but in the end there is good news. A new birth. Life.

The apostle Paul wrote similarly in the book of Romans:

Rom. 8:18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. 20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. 23 And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies. 24 For in this hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what he sees? 25 But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience.

What we witnessed on Thursday evening was the creation groaning in the pains of childbirth. It is a creation that is subjected to futility, to decay, to corruption, not because that's how God made it, but because Sin has brought discord into God's harmony. The brutality of nature that Richard Dawkins delights in extolling is not evidence there is no God but the evidence of a fallen and corrupted order. And in that fallen created order, violent and deadly things happen.

Does God cause it? No. And in the rare cases He does, He lets you know about it. Does God intervene? Obviously not, at least not to the extent of protecting us from earthquake, flood and fire, not to mention war, pestilence and famine. Pick your death. What He does instead is work good through such things, through all things, through the good, the bad, and the ugly. The earthquake flattens your house and the tidal wave that washes it away.

He trumps all things through the death and resurrection of Jesus, who absorbed all of the world's Sin and decay into Himself and took it all to His grave in order to raise it up for good. God was in Christ, His Son, reconciling all things to Himself in Jesus' death. That death is the Tragedy that embraces all tragedies, the Disaster that redeems all disasters natural and man-made. And it is only through that redeeming death of Jesus that we can view events like that of this past week as the birth pangs of the new creation rather than death throes of the old.

This is not an explanation. There are no explanations. Science can tell us what happened, and there is much to study and learn. But no one can say why it happened, except that the whole creation is subjected to decay and destruction. The earthquake and tsunami also remind us that natural theology will only get us so far. Enough of the silliness of how we can worship God in a beautiful sunset or a lovely mountain setting or a sunny day at the beach. The power of an 8.9 earthquake that moved the island of Japan 8 meters closer to us and the wall of water that followed it is only tiny little reflection of the power of God who created all things and who can destroy all things. This was creation's power at work. That was nothing compared to the power of the Word.

And that brings us to Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. Fresh from His Baptism, Jesus is led by the Spirit into the wilderness. The way of the cross goes through the wilderness. He is tempted by the devil, the father of lies, the source of all evil. The devil comes to Jesus in His moment of weakness and vulnerability. He is hungry, thirsty, tired. That's when the devil pounces on you – when you are weak, hungry, exhausted.

Jesus is tempted by power, by celebrity, by glory. He is tempted to use His power to destroy stones to make bread. He is tempted to make headlines by jumping off the top of the temple and being caught by angels. He is tempted to compromise His mission in exchange for the glitter and glory of this world.

He is tested and found worthy. He meets the test with His divinity tied behind His back. He repels the devil with nothing but the Word. What you and I have as baptized believers. The Word. The Truth of God repels the insidious lie. The Word crushes the old evil foe with the death of Jesus.

The devil would have you believe that God is not in control, that God is not merciful and gracious, that God does not love the world or He would prevent every tragedy and disaster from happening. But that's not how God loves the world. He loves the world by sending His Son to do battle with the devil, the darkness, the death. He conquered and in Him we more than conquer so that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is Christ Jesus our Lord.

“God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear though the earth gives way, though the mountains be moved into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam, though the mountains tremble at its swelling.

The Lord of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress.”

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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