

"WHERE IS GOD WHEN... PART #2:
TORNADOES, HURRICANES, AND OTHER 'ACTS OF GOD'"

(Psalm 46:1-5, 10-11, NRSV)

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[PROPS NEEDED: (#1) Series Intro Video; (#2) "West Wing" Video Clip; (#3) 2 slides for point 7]
 [Cornerstone U.M.C.; 1-19-25]

--I--

1. Read NRSV Text: Psalm 46:1-5, 10-11 and Pray.
2. **[WATCH SERIES VIDEO INTRO (Time: 0:35) -- ends on series theme slide]**
3. For the last few weeks, the world has watched in horror as parts of southern California have been engulfed and destroyed by at least 23 devastating wildfires in and around the Los Angeles metro area, driven by powerful Santa Ana winds of up to 100 mph.

A--To date, 25 people have been killed, 12,500 homes and structures have been damaged or destroyed, forcing over 200,000 people to be evacuated, all causing an estimated \$20 billion of damage -- the most devastating American wildfire on record.

B--And this is but one of many devastating natural disasters we can name over the last few years. What about...?

- 1--The 2004 Tsunamis that killed 228,000 in Southeast Asia. ¹
- 2--Hurricane Katrina in 2005 that killed 1400 and caused \$125 billion damage; ²
- 3--The 2008 China earthquake that left 69,000 dead & over 10 *million* homeless; ³
- 4--The March 2021 EF-4 tornado here in Newnan that damaged or destroyed nearly 2000 homes and left Newnan High School in ruins; ⁴
- 5--The 100+ people killed by the wildfires in Lahaina, Hawaii in August 2023, ⁵
- 6--The 246 people killed and \$124 billion in damage from Hurricane Helene in September of last year, making it the 2nd deadliest storm of the 21st-century; ⁶
- 7--And the list could go on and on.

C--And in the midst of natural disasters such as these, many people find themselves asking questions similar what a Red Cross volunteer asks the President of the United States in the 2000s TV series *"The West Wing"* when he visits a shelter following a following a midwestern U.S. tornado strike...

[WATCH VIDEO CLIP-- Red Cross kitchen volunteer asks President Bartlett *"What kind of a God would do such a thing?... What kind of plan could this possibly be?"* -- from "The West Wing," Ssn 5, Ep. #6, "Disaster Relief" (Time: 1:23; DVD Index: 29:07-30:30)]

D--Now, this particular disaster was fictional, but the sentiment expressed by this worker is real, & her words are ones I'm guessing that we've all either heard or said ourselves.

--II--

4. Well, today we're in the midst of a worship series "*Where Is God When...?*" in which we're wrestling with the question of why a loving and powerful God would allow tragedy, suffering, and evil in our world.

A--And though our goal is *not* to have it all figured out in two short months, my hope is that in our time together, we can come to a better understanding of how God *really* works, and be directed towards some spiritual tools that'll help us make better sense of things when bad things *do* happen.

B--Last week, we talked about the fact that when faced with sickness, disease, and tragedy, God not only *redeems* our suffering but gives us *hope* in the midst of it.

C--But even so, as illustrated by the questions of the Red Cross volunteer in the video, whenever we experience suffering, we humans instinctively want to find *someone* to blame, and since natural disasters are obviously outside of *human* control, who usually gets the blame? GOD, of course --so much so that most insurance policies call such events what?... "*Acts of God*"! ⁷

D--Yet, my question is: ...is that *really* the way God works? As I asked last week, does God sit up in heaven somewhere hitting a divine "SMITE" button, manipulating our natural world and *causing* tsunamis, earthquakes, wildfires, hurricanes, tornadoes, and other natural tragedies "just for kicks"?

5. You know, I can understand how people in the *past* would say this, because they didn't understand the forces of nature that produce these things, and so for them the only "logical" explanation was that "*God is mad!*" But I would hope we know better *today*.

A--For example, while we now know how essential weather patterns & systems are for survival here on earth -- they produce rainwater that fill our rivers, lakes & seas -- we also know that when these weather patterns collide with each other in our atmosphere, they can produce destructive things like *hurricanes, typhoons, and tornadoes*.

B--And while we also know that the land we live on resulted from earth's tectonic plates being thrust upward by molten lava from deep within our earth's core, that lava also sometimes spews up through fissures in those plates -- what we call a *volcano* -- causing either *devastation* OR the *healthy* creation of an island.

C--We also now know that when these same plates collide, they release great energy called an *earthquake*, and if that happens *underwater*, then that energy pushes giant waves over shallow land in what we call a *tsunami*, destroying everything in its way.

6. So the first thing we need to acknowledge is that God is not *really* the one's who's

"*causing*" the natural disasters of our world -- they are *not* "acts of *GOD*" at all!

A--No. These are simply the result of the laws and processes of nature at work -- laws that God designed for our benefit and nurture; but laws that also don't change or bend just because humans *happen* to be in their path. ⁸

B--And all of this means that the *proximate cause* of natural disasters is simply "nature being nature." Most of us (even non-religious people) will probably agree with this.

--III--

7. So the question then becomes: ... "*If God is a good and powerful God who doesn't cause natural disasters, then why doesn't He stop or prevent them from happening? You know, if He created the laws of nature, then why doesn't He suspend them occasionally?*"

A--Well, I believe both the scriptures and history itself contain examples where God does *just that* (or at least *seems* to) -- we call them "*miracles*."

1-- Remember Moses parting the Red Sea? ⁹ ...Elijah praying for the withholding and giving of rain? ¹⁰ ...Simon Peter walking on the water? ¹¹ ...Jesus calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee? ¹²

2--Even in history, we find other examples, such as the "freak storm" that scattered the great Spanish Armada in 1588, ¹³ OR General George Patton's "weather prayer" that gave his armies clear skies for air superiority over Bastogne during the Battle of the Bulge in 1944. ¹⁴

B--So, even though we could argue that miracles of nature occasionally *do happen*, we'll never know *why* God seems to do them for *some* situations and *not* for others.

C--But the more important thing to remember is that these miracles are not the *ordinary* way that God works, because doing that would mean God continually *circumventing* the very laws and processes He created to *support* life on earth in the first place. ¹⁵

--IV--

8. So, if God doesn't *cause* natural disaster, nor does He always *prevent* them, then what *does* He DO? Put another way, "***Where is God in the midst of natural disasters?***"
[CALL ATTENTION TO SLIDE ON SCREEN WITH THAT QUESTION ON IT: "***Where is God in the midst of natural disasters?***"]...

A--As we consider the answer to that question, I want to invite us *move* the question mark from the end of the sentence to right after the word "God." Now how does it read?... "***Where Is God? In the midst of natural disasters.***"

[PUT UP SLIDE ON SCREEN WITH MODIFIED QUESTION ON IT] ¹⁶

B--And that, in fact, is exactly the answer found in today's scripture from Psalm 46 (NRSV):

1--Vss. 1-3: *"God is our refuge & strength, a very present help in trouble.
Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the
mountains shake in the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam,
though the mountains tremble with its tumult"*

2--Verses 10-11: *"Be still and know that I am God! The Lord of hosts is with us:
the God of Jacob is our refuge."*

9. In other words, in the midst of things like natural disasters, while we're often busy complaining that God has left us, doesn't care, or doesn't even exist, GOD is saying, *"I'm right there... suffering with you; crying with you; holding you up when you can't hold yourself up. So don't be afraid, for I AM WITH YOU!"* ¹⁷

A--Yet, for us to experience God's presence in this way requires us to reorient our perspective -- to "*reposition our question mark*," so to speak; to change how we *see* things in the midst of tragedy and disaster.

1--In his book Who Needs God?, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, *"Religion is not primarily a set of beliefs, a collection of prayers, or a series of rituals. Religion is first and foremost a way of seeing. It can't change the facts about the world we live in, but it can change the way we see those facts, and that in itself can often make a real difference."* ¹⁸

2--You see, the Bible never promises that people of faith will be "protected" from tragedies or pain, but it does promise that God *will walk with us* and sustain us in and through them, ¹⁹ & will redeem & bring something good *out* of them. ²⁰

B--And that's why the only real *antidote* to the problem of tragedy and suffering in our world is faith in God through Christ, because only through such faith can we receive the spiritual and emotional "tools" we need to "*reposition the question mark*" of life's tragedies -- ...

1--...to see **good** where there only seems to be **evil**;

2--...to see **hope** where there only seems to be **despair**;

3--...to see **life** where there only seems to be **death**;

4--...to see **God** where there doesn't seem to be **anything** (or **anyone**) at all! ²¹

--V--

10. No, God doesn't go around *prompting* or *causing* natural disasters, because that's not in His nature or character as a loving God.

A--And He doesn't always *prevent* them either, because to do so would be to subvert the

very laws He created to sustain the natural processes of Creation.

B--But in addition to *redeeming* and giving us *hope* through our suffering (two things we talked about *last* week), a third thing He does is to *walk with us through* such things -- to comfort, support, and sometimes carry us when we can't carry ourselves.

11. So, let me encourage and invite you... don't wait until there's a tragedy in your life (natural or otherwise) to meet and follow the one who can help you make it through whatever it is you have to face in life -- today is a great day to welcome Him into your heart and begin trusting His grace!
12. And so, we end today where we began... asking "*Where Is God When...?*" Well, the answer is that God is not only the light at the END of our tunnel of suffering,... but He's also *present* to sustain us *IN* that tunnel, as well.
13. [PRAY for hearers to accept Christ]
14. [SUGGESTED CLOSING HYMN: UMH#707, "Hymn of Promise"]

ENDNOTES:

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2004_Indian_Ocean_earthquake_and_tsunami

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Katrina

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Sichuan_earthquake

⁴ <https://www.fox5atlanta.com/news/more-than-1700-homes-damaged-70-destroyed-in-coweta-county-by-ef-4-tornado>

⁵ <https://www.britannica.com/event/Maui-wildfires-of-2023>

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hurricane_Helene

⁷ The irony here is that while natural disasters are often termed "acts of God," no "credit" is given to God for years, decades, or even centuries of peaceful weather! In other words, in this way of thinking, God gets the "blame" for the "bad," but not the "credit" for the "good." Obviously the logic here is flawed, and points out why it is insufficient and a "cop-out" merely to blame God for some bad event of nature.

⁸ The reality is that when human beings come in conflict with the laws of nature, humans are almost *always* going to lose, resulting in human devastation and loss of life.

⁹ Exodus 14:19-22.

¹⁰ 1 Kings 17 & 18; and James 5:17-18.

¹¹ Matthew 14:25-33.

¹² Mark 4:37-41.

¹³ <https://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/HistoryofEngland/Spanish-Armada/>

¹⁴ <https://www.wwiimemorialfriends.org/blog/pattons-prayer>

¹⁵ Still another explanation as to why natural disasters occur on "God's watch" deals with **the effects of Original Sin in our world**. This explanation reminds us that the scriptures say (in Genesis 1) that when God created the world, He called it "*good*", which originally meant "*perfect; flawless; without fault*." But the scriptures also say (in Genesis 2) that when Adam & Eve sinned and caused what we call the "Fall" of humanity, the created order "fell" with them -- meaning that though the earth was still "*good*," it was no longer "*perfect*." And that just as God didn't go back and remake Adam and Eve to eliminate their *personal* and *individual* imperfections, so God likewise chose not to go back and remake the Fallen created order, either.

What this explanation would therefore say is that the natural disasters which exist today are *not* a product of some design feature of the created order (and therefore *not* part of God's original intention or design for our world), but are instead the result of the fallen, sin-filled state of our present creation. Our world is one that still contains *potential* for perfection (which the Bible promises for the future), but which at present is still infused with *imperfection* (Read Romans 8:19-21). In other words, the "Fall" of humanity into sin had effects on everything, including the universe we inhabit. Everything in Creation is subject to "frustration" and "decay." In this line of reasoning, corporate Sin is therefore ultimate cause of ecological/natural disasters, just as it is the cause of personal death, disease, and suffering. And we today are therefore the recipients of this fallen, imperfect state of creation -- which is still *mostly* good, but nevertheless still occasionally *harmful*.

¹⁶ This perspective was suggested by Peter Bolt in his devotional in The Upper Room devotional guide, December 29, 2005.

¹⁷ The phrase "*Do not be afraid, for I am with you*" appears at least 35 times in some form or another throughout the scriptures (Examples include Genesis 26:24, Isaiah 41:10 and 43:5, Jeremiah 1:8 and 46:28; and Acts 18:10). This means that God's answer to tragedy and pain isn't always (or even mostly) "*I'll take away your suffering*." Instead, it's "*I'll come down and suffer with you*." Consequently, He came to earth in the form of His son Jesus to be one of us -- to walk among us, show us the way, to show us that there is life and hope, and suffer with and for us, and weep in the midst of our hurting, and by so doing heal our brokenness. The Bible, in fact, is partly the testimony of God's people struggling with faith in the face of a world that's often difficult and painful. And its' witness is *not* that God *causes* pain, *nor* is it that God always *takes away* our pain, but that is present with us in and through our pain. Read about more examples of God's presence in the following scriptures: Psalm 23:4; Psalm 73:23-26; Matthew 28:20b; Romans 8:38-39; and Hebrews 13:5b-6a.

¹⁸ Harold Kushner, Who Needs God? (New York, NY: Summit Books, 1989), p. 33.

¹⁹ For example, most of the historical books of the Old Testament (such as 1 and 2 Samuel, and 1 and 2 Chronicles) are written from the perspective of people who have gone through "hell" and are trying to figure out how a God who made a covenant with them allow the things he did to happen. Consider, too, that more than one third of the Psalms focus are songs of lament or complaint (such as Psalm 13 and 22), and the books of Lamentations and Job are entirely written from this perspective. And how could anyone realistically think that Christianity is a religion that only promises happy, good things to its people when its founder (Jesus) was crucified (executed)?

²⁰ This concept of God redeeming tragedy for His own good purposes is expressed eloquently in Romans 8:28. The cross of Jesus is the ultimate example of this -- using the suffering and death of his son Jesus to save us. God takes our suffering and makes something beautiful out of it. Last week I mentioned the lyrics to a famous Christian praise chorus: *"Something beautiful, something good; All my confusion He understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strife, but He made something beautiful of my life"* (Song *"Something Beautiful, Something Good,"* in The United Methodist Hymnal #394).

As a result, tragedy and suffering and either make us "better" or "bitter" -- it can cause us to draw closer to God, or it can also cause us to push away from God. For example, as unwanted and tragic as they are, natural disasters cause millions of people to reevaluate the priorities of their life: hundreds of millions of dollars in aid is sent to help alleviate people's suffering who would probably not have done so without the tragedy; and Christian ministries have the opportunity to help, minister, counsel, pray, and lead people to saving faith in Christ. In these cases, God can and does bring great good out of terrible tragedy. He takes all of the suffering and evil of our world and folds it into His own divine purposes - He doesn't *cause* them, but does fold them into his purpose.

²¹ Like the ones from last week this response (that God is *with us* in and through our suffering and pain) is one that carries through every other dimension we're dealing with in this series -- this response adds to and builds on the responses from last week, as next upcoming weeks' will build upon these ones.