

Acts of god are not God's Acts

There is something about a natural catastrophe (an act of god) that brings out the best in people and the worst in theology! During this current pandemic crisis people are seen making great personal sacrifices in order to help people who are in need. Unfortunately, from a theological perspective, preachers may be heard claiming that God is afflicting the earth with COVID-19 to punish human kind for everything from gay marriage to lack of respect for the president to the general state of sinfulness in the world. While the preachers may be serving their political interests, it certainly does not serve us sinners who rely on a loving God for our redemption. Such ranting also fails to serve public policy in so far as blaming God for natural phenomena lends an air of inevitability to the calamity. Indeed, trying to ameliorate the situation is almost sinful in itself since it is trying to undo the justice of God.

Relying on the Old Testament: God-blaming preachers tend to rely on the Old Testament with its vivid imagery and its angry and vengeful God-language. Frequently they are people who have a very literal view of the events described in the Bible. Without getting into a lot of side arguments, it is useful to think of the Old Testament as a collection of books written by a primitive, prescience, tribal people who were trying to understand their place in the universe as they defined and redefined what it meant to be in a covenant with God.

Some of the books are deadly dull and hopelessly repetitive, of interest only to specialists. Other books are full of beautiful and intuitive poetry which speaks to us now with the same force that it spoke to tribal people of several thousand years ago. And who can forget the stories in the Old Testament that we first heard as children in Sunday School? They captured our imagination and became an addition to the fairy tales we learned in school. Few of us took those stories literally as children and one would hope that none of us do

today as adults. The stories were not meant to be taken literally, they were meant to teach moral and relational truths.

Sometimes, usually in a political context, people try to turn the Old Testament into a history book. That would be quite alright, there are certainly historically accurate references in the O.T., if they did not also believe in the inerrancy of the Scriptures. But the Bible is a human-made compilation. One may believe that it is inspired, i.e. that the breath of Truth from God infuses its' pages, but humans, not God, told these stories, wrote them down and translated them and retranslated them hundreds of times. The Bible, in both the O.T. and New is full of errors. That does not diminish the sacredness of the book, nor the essence of its' messages. To use the O.T. as a real estate document justifying Israel's holding of land in the Middle East, is, however, a stretch! The O.T. is not a land deed.

A note on science and religion: Preachers who view natural disasters as God's actions often have a mind-set that denigrates science and the scientific method. This allows them to ignore objective reality and to advocate whatever their personal views might be. This is destructive on two fronts. First it damages and impedes government and individual response to the disaster. Secondly, it makes a fool of God and greatly injures the Church. To the non believer it is simply one more indication that religion is no more than the "opiate of the people." Religion and science address different domains. The tools are specific to the domains being explored and understood. There is no conflict between science and religion. They are both part of the universe of which God is the ultimate creator.

Conclusion: Natural disasters are very challenging to individuals, governments, and churches. Let us renew our faith in a loving God, one who makes available to humankind all kinds of tools for understanding.