

God and Continuing Catastrophes

Colleagues,

After Banda Aceh's tsunami and New Orleans' Katrina and Pakistan's earthquake and the unending drumbeat of corpse after corpse in Africa, the Middle East—yes, worldwide—the cry goes up “How long, O Lord, how long?”

Marie and I are reading (out loud) our way through Jeremiah these days. Not much cheer there. Most often the “good news”—there'll be no gloom and doom, just wall-to-wall shalom—comes from the mouth of Jeremiah's adversaries. Of these folks (says Jeremiah) the LORD says “I didn't send them. They are lying prophets. Don't believe them.” [Some twenty times it is “lying” that is God's charge against them. Does that sound relevant for today's theo-politics?] And when it's Jeremiah's turn, over and over again it's the unholy trinity of “famine, pestilence and sword.” And none of that comes by accident or an act of “mother nature.” If you're committed to monotheism, there is finally only One who authors everything—catastrophes too. More than once we hear it in the Scriptures. One example, Deuteronomy 32:39.

Curiously Jeremiah never asks the Why-question of God as the catastrophes unfold. There is a Why-question, of course, but it is asked of his hearers: “Why don't you repent, stop provoking God with your wickedness, stop believing the lying prophets, change your ways, turn away from your idols back to the one true God?”

Brings to mind the first of Luther's 95 theses (whose 488th anniversary is just 11 days away!): “When our Lord and Master,

Jesus Christ, said 'Repent,' He called for the entire life of believers to be one of penitence." Luther goes on to say that this word from Christ is not at all speaking of the church's "sacrament of penance," even though Luther did deem that sacrament valid, and availed himself of it throughout his life.

Christ is here calling for something else, he said, something all-pervasive, a day-in day-out "posture"—first of all in the heart, then in "the outward signs—various mortifications of the flesh" that such a heart produces. "Mortification" sounds rather harsh. Yet it is flesh's mortification that is called for. A dying that's then linked to a rising. The posture of repentance is the posture—in heart and action—of turning away from "my will be done" to "Thy will be done."

Catastrophes—both those that we secularly label from "mother nature," and those abetted by human malfeasance—do indeed raise questions. But the question comes out different depending on our posture. If we posit ourselves in the driver's seat, on the judge's bench, then we ask God to justify himself when catastrophe strikes. It's the classical theodicy question: "God [theo-], are you being just [-dicy]?" But that's only "classic" for Old Adams and Old Eves, the first recorded Biblical folks who sought to put God in the dock to justify the catastrophe that had erupted in Eden.

Biblical theology has a completely different "classic" question for such a time. Biblical "catastrophe-theology" —starting in Genesis 3—puts the question to the humans: "Where are you? What have you done?" Jesus follows in that train when his opponents put the "Old-Adam" theodicy question to him—the man born blind, the tower collapse at Siloam, Pilate's murderous slaughter of innocents. Never once does Jesus answer the "old" question: "How can God be just in this catastrophe?" He turns it around as a divine address to the questioners, a Word from God to them:

“Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.” Whether the catastrophe is “natural”—though Biblically there is no such thing—or patently God-engineered as Babylon’s invasion of Judah, the message is the same. “You, not God, must justify yourself before the bench. So, what is your plea?”

The response proposed by Jesus in his first words in Mark’s Gospel for such a time as this is: “Repent and believe the Good News.” That’s the penitential funeral signalled in thesis #1 of Luther’s 95, a dying and rising, mortification and vivification, that leaves the addressee alive after it’s all over.

That prompts these corollary reflections on the “problem of evil.”

1. There is no Biblical “explanation” for the reality of evil—starving children, Columbine murders, tsunami catastrophes—in our experience. How can God let that happen? has no answer in the Bible. Some of the evil in the world can be “explained” as the consequence of human bad actions—environmental decay, the collapse of empires, cancer in chain-smokers, tormented children of abusive parents, etc. But that often just pushes the question back to asking Why did God let these people become that way?
2. The “mystery of wickedness” is Biblical language for the obvious fact of evil in God’s intended “good” world. But there are two ways to inquire about the problem of evil. If you think of the “problem of evil” as the question: “Where did it come from?” then there is no clear Biblical answer for the question. In the Genesis creation story there was a 100% “good” garden with all good creatures, and all of a sudden one of the creatures started acting and speaking contra-God. Where that critter came from (and he is a creature, not a deity) is a mystery. It ought not to have been there, but it was.

3. There is a second way to approach the “problem of evil.” That’s when you see the “problem of evil” as “How can we cope with it and survive?” For that question there is a Biblical answer. Not till the New Testament does it become “perfectly clear.” It is the Crucified and Risen Christ. At the end of the epistle to the Ephesians the apostle counsels for coping with evil. It’s battle language. It calls for the “whole armor of God.” As the individual items of that armor are mentioned, they are all Christic-gospel pieces: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit. Perhaps ringing the changes on the “mystery of wickedness,” he puts them under the rubric of the “mystery of the gospel.”
4. Daily-life God-experience is ambiguous. There is good stuff and bad stuff. Some of it very good, and some very bad. The bad stuff, the very bad, can urge us to the conclusion “God’s responsible for evil.” For clearly there is no mercy and goodness from God to be seen in many life situations. That is what the phrase “Hidden God,” a Biblical term, points to. Luther recurred to that image often. It did not mean that there was no God-evidence on hand in such life-experiences. Rather it meant that the God-evidence on hand was not good news at all. Just the opposite. If the God we meet there—in catastrophes, for example—is indeed the same God, the merciful Father of Jesus Christ, then that God surely is hidden. The only way to cope with Hidden God encounters is to flee to “God revealed in Christ,” and to TRUST this Word from God, and finally NOT TRUST the opposite “word” coming from our encounters with God hidden. It amounts to the confession of Jairus: Lord, I believe, help thou my unbelief.
5. That is why in ancient days folks would hold up a crucifix before the eyes of dying people. It is impossible to deny the negative experience of death —possibly even God-

forsakenness, as in Jesus' own experience— but even in the face of that experience it is possible to “believe, to TRUST,” the word of that same crucified Jesus as God's final Good News word to me. And to trust that this Cross-word will outlive the death-experience. That amounts to trusting that Christ's own Easter will (as he promised) be my eastering. That because he lives, I too will “outlive” my own death.

6. In his dogmatics Werner Elert says this about our own experience of evil:

a. Evil regularly approaches me “personally,” i.e., some person (often a “thou” whom I trust) makes the offer, suggestion, that I follow an alternate path from following God. [Lady Macbeth was Elert's example giving “advice” to King Macbeth.]

b. That offer regularly finds within me a set of ears for whom that evil offer sounds plausible, possibly even a good thing to do. [Macbeth says: Hmmm, that sounds interesting.]

c. Surrounding this one-on-one relationship with an individual person-tempter, however, is the experience that the power of evil on the scene is much bigger than just the human actors. It is a power that far exceeds what these “mere humans” could generate. Evil is not just wily “flesh and blood” fellow humans, but “principalities & powers,” entities of evil of cosmic dimensions.

d. There is nowhere on earth that is immune to evil. Thus in our day it has equal access to Pyongyang and to Pennsylvania Avenue.

7. All this is regularly summed up in the Biblical word “devil.” Although that word is singular, the operators are manifold—“rulers of the present darkness...spiritual hosts of wickedness,” etc. There are several job-descriptions in

the Bible for this Power of Evil. In the creation story it is Tempter (“Listen to me, not to God. You’ll like it.”). The word Devil (diabolos in Greek) means wrecker/destroyer, one who brings chaos into God’s orderly cosmos. Satan (Hebrew term) means prosecuting attorney, the accuser. Father of Lies is another (Jesus uses it in John’s Gospel), the guru of lying prophets. Prince of this World (power-broker) “managing” people and places in the fallen world where God’s own lawful management has been usurped, and Christ’s mercy-management has not yet arrived.

8. Christian resource for all such encounters with evil is Christ. Luther’s famous hymn “A Mighty Fortress is our God” is all about this. Read or sing it once with this focus. Christian confidence in such encounters comes from Christ whose Cross and Resurrection has (a) discombobulated this Destroyer, (b) prosecuted to death this Prosecutor, (c) exposed the Liar’s lies, (d) slapped the Tempter’s mouth shut, (e) displaced the Prince of this World to reclaim that world (and all of us in it) as his own—and to bring it and us back to our rightful “owner and creator.”

9. And in the face of catastrophes (hurricane Wilma now coming around the corner) the same Good News—the last verse of A Mighty Fortress—fits:

*God’s Word (aka Christ) forever shall abide,
No thanks to foes, who fear it,
For God himself fights by our side
With weapons of the Spirit.
If they take our house,
Goods, fame, child or spouse.
Wrench our life away,
They cannot win the day.
The kingdom’s ours forever.*

Peace & Joy!

Ed Schroeder