

Reading the Hurricanes

Colleagues,

As it happens, I write this on Saturday, September 9. The first thing I saw on the *New York Times* website this morning were updates on Hurricane Irma. Photos hinted at horrors endured already on Caribbean islands. A graphic foretold of horrors to come along Florida's Gulf Coast. I am sinfully glad right now that I live in Cleveland, Ohio.

Such a time these recent weeks have been. Since when do four feet of rain descend at once from the clouds above? Yet that's what happened in Southeast Texas. Not that anyone who isn't a Texan is still bothering to recall this, cameras and eyes having swiveled to Irma. Even further from the notice of the general public are fires raging so fiercely in Montana that the smoke is reaching Denver. And in Mexico a monumental earthquake; in South Asia the worst monsoon floods in a decade, with 1400 dead and vastly more staring at famine.

It's hard to resist the thought that Someone Somewhere is mightily upset. Even the *Times*, that arbiter of all things sensible, succumbed to this inclination when it wrote two days ago of one island or another feeling Irma's "wrath." I'm sure an editor, if quizzed about it, would try to excuse this as mere literary convention. I would demur. I think that even the smart, the savvy, and the thoroughly secular are haunted by the premonition that something so inimical to human fortunes as a Category 5 hurricane expresses anger. Not that any of them are willing any longer to explore that.

Enter the professional God-talkers, the folks who manage every time disaster strikes to open mouth and insert foot. They do so as most things are done in America these days from two opposing

fronts, each sniffing its disdain at the other, each presuming to defend the Almighty's reputation, each proving itself an embarrassment to the God we know in Christ.

Here I point you to an item that one of my Facebook connections posted today. The author is a prolific blogger named John Pavlovitz, of whom I know nothing apart from his self-description as "a 20-year ministry veteran trying to figure out how to love people well and to live-out the red letters of Jesus," whatever that means. If the frequency with which his stuff shows up in my Facebook feed is any indication, the man has a following. He leans left.

In today's effort Pavlovitz takes a swing at the likes of Kirk Cameron, Joel Osteen, and their tutor in folly, Pat Robertson, for saying stupid things about God and the hurricanes. I won't trouble you with the details. [You can read for yourself.](#) Suffice it to say that I resonate to much of his complaint.

Not all of it, though. If loudmouths on the "evangelical" right say far more about the mind of God than anyone save a charlatan would dare, than Pavlovitz says too little. I'm familiar with this move. It's common to the left-of-center ministerium I belong to in the ELCA. God is good, the theory goes. If evil erupts, then God can't, by definition, be implicated in it.

Israel's prophets would find this bemusing. So would the all but secular Abraham Lincoln who knew his Bible better than lots of today's pastors. Schooled by the prophets, the president dared to imagine the hand of God at work in the horrors of the Civil War. He did so carefully, judiciously, with a humility at once tentative and profound. See in particular his [Second Inaugural Address](#). Wars are one thing, of course; eruptions of nature are another. That doesn't stop Joel from seeing God's agency in the onset of a locust plague. "The LORD utters his voice at the head

of his army; how vast is his host" (2:11). What separates Joel from today's fakers is a refusal to pin blame for the disaster—and lest we forget, locust swarms were and are disasters for communities of subsistence farmers—on a subset of resident sinners. Instead he calls on the whole land to "Return to the LORD your God; for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and"—this is missing from the Lenten refrain lots of us know—"relents from punishing" (2:13).

I should think Pavlovitz loathes the prophet Joel. If I parse him rightly, he'd argue that talk like Joel's does nothing in today's America except to magnify unbelief and feed ammunition to the scoffers. I'll guess too that he simply doesn't buy Joel's vision of what God is capable of. I wish I could ask him about this. I'd push him on where he stands with Hosea, Amos, and Micah, with Isaiah and Jeremiah. After that I'd want to ask him what Christ was for.

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This, of course, is my base complaint with both standard sides of our latter-day argument about God and nasty nature. Neither thinks to mention Christ, let alone to use him.

I say "of course" on the assumption that others in our wee Crossings community are way ahead of me in shouting the complaint at ears that will not listen.

Protestant America is addicted to generic God-talk. The god they seem to talk about the most is a construct not so much of prophets and apostles as of philosophers. This is the Glory-God, apprehended by contemplation of his attributes: omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence. Now and then righteousness pokes its nose in via all that talk about God being good. Too many, especially on the left, succumb to the silly notion that "good"

equates with "safe." How can it, when the object of its energy is someone bad like me?

Prophets and apostle speak by contrast of a God faithful to his promises. Yes, he flashes all that glory the philosophers extol. What makes him safe—the God we can trust, in whom we find our refuge, as Israel's poets liked to say—is his fierce determination to hang on to us when his glory lays us low.

Enter that second and subsequent glory of God in the flesh of Christ crucified. This is the One people wearing a Christian label need to be talking about in dreadful days of fire and earthquake, flood and storm. If only they would. If only they'd stop yammering about what God will or won't be up to in the meeting between Irma and Tampa, or between Harvey and Houston before that. They don't know. They're only guessing. The ones who yell that God is doing nothing are faking it as badly as the other crowd, the ones asserting that God is expressing Godself in yea and such a way. To the likes of Pavolitz I say: is it really unreasonable to imagine that a God who cares profoundly about sinners would allow a storm to knock some stuffing from a proud and haughty nation? And when they spit at me, I'll say, "Time out. Let's all stop guessing. Let's speak instead of what we know. Let's tell of Christ."

Here at last is useful talk. It centers on the person swallowed up in two competing storms, each so fierce as to make Irma appear as a passing spring shower. On the one hand is every sinner's anger at God, whether open or latent, all of it focused and directed at Jesus. On the other is God's fierce disappointment with every sinner, this too aimed squarely at Jesus. ("My God, why have you forsaken me?") He dies. How could he not? After that, the great astonishment of Easter as the earth spits him out to God's delight and our present hope and comfort. Come what may, there is nothing so terrible that it

will keep God from including us in the future that Christ now owns and governs with every one of us in mind.

That's one of way of putting it, at any rate. Were the night not so deep by now and the mind so cloudy, I'd put it better, and you could too. The point is that Christ is and was and always will be the one and only sufficient reason for counting on God, and for doing this especially when the storm hits, or the earth shakes, or the cancer erupts, or when anything else comes crashing in with intimations that The One In Charge is out to get us. To argue over that, whether for or against, is a silly waste of time. What needs to be said, not once but again and again, is that God, faithful to his promises, has worked through Christ to get his gracious grasp on us already. He will never let go. After which one adds, "Let's trust that!"

By the way, that's more or less what Peter says in his first Pentecost sermon. I find it suddenly intriguing that he draws his text for that from Joel.

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For all who suffer in these days, *Kyrie eleison*.

Jerry Burce