

THE ABSENCE OF GOD
When The Earth Shakes
Romans 8:18-28

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcjc.org/sermon/the-absence-of-god-when-the-earth-shakes/>

It was May 4, 2003, a Sunday afternoon. I had just been released from the hospital after successful prostate cancer surgery. At that point, I thought that recovering from surgery was the biggest challenge of my life. But later that afternoon, we heard that storm clouds had gathered in the Kansas City area. Our daughter and her family and our son, a college student at William Jewell, were right in a tornado's path. And then all the phones went dead. When we finally regained cell phone service, we learned that all were safe, but the tornado had ripped through the college campus. Joel had taken cover just in time. The tornado barreled through his empty apartment, ripping off one wall and the roof and leaving three walls standing. A huge fence post had gored his pickup truck, like a toothpick through an olive. He reported, "Just before the roar of the tornado, the sky turned green and light bulbs began to burst." My family was safe, but I was in bed, helpless to help, thanking God, but asking God why.

On a much larger scale, a little over a year later, on Dec. 26, 2004, a tsunami struck. An undersea megathrust earthquake caused the Indian Plate to be subducted by the Burma Plate, triggering a series of tsunamis, killing 230,000-280,000 people in 14 countries. Waves were at times 100 feet high in this, one of the deadliest natural disasters in recorded history.

Where was God in all this? Eugene Peterson has written that disaster turns people who haven't thought of God for years into budding theologians. Rumors begin to fly. God is absent, angry or dead [see the introduction to the Book of Joel, *The Message*]. One of the things which makes us human is that we like to create order and meaning out of events. That can be good or bad. We should be careful. For four centuries, theologians tried to figure out why the Great Plague came to Europe. And then they discovered rats were the cause!

It's good to remind ourselves--we do not control this world. Technology gives us the illusion that we do, but we don't! God is sovereign, but that does not mean He is up in the sky pulling strings, moving levers or pushing buttons, or clicking on "hurricane," moving the cursor over a certain country and clicking "send." This is not the God I know, or the God and Father of Jesus.

So what do we do/say about why God allows all these natural disasters? Physicist John Polkinghorne has reminded us that the processes of the world are so intricately intertwined that one cannot separate the good from the bad...it's a package deal [*Christian Century*, Nov. 30, 2010, p. 27]. For example, we enjoy southerly breezes on a cold day and north winds on a hot day. But if enough of the hot and cold air meet and begin to whirl, tornadoes form. Someone has pointed out that the only way God could clean up the mess of systems out of joint would be to take away our freedom in the process [William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, p. 26].

So perhaps it isn't whether or not we suffer disasters; it's the quality of our suffering. Catastrophe does not introduce anything new; it merely exposes the spiritual reality that is there,

under a thin veneer of “normal” [Eugene Peterson, *ibid.*]. Into this dilemma, the Apostle Paul writes about the liberation of the cosmos. In v. 18, he tells us to put in one column all the present suffering and in the other, the coming glory. Not even close! But notice. The two do belong together—suffering and glory. Nature, creation shares the stress which we feel individually. Creation is affected by sin. There is a decay, a futility and emptiness, a slavery and frailty to creation (vv. 21-22).

And in the midst of this, because of God’s saving work in Christ, there is this eager longing (v. 19), creation on tiptoe, watching eagerly, with outstretched neck, like a goose flying to warmer places. Just as individuals and all of creation share in decay, so they both share in the longing for liberation and healing. We are like expectant mothers—bearing all the discomfort for the birth that is to come (v. 22). (For the record, I’ve never been pregnant! But they tell me the pain is nothing compared with the joy of having a child!).

In the middle of all this quandary about “Where is God in the tornado/tsunami?” we hear v. 28. The best translation is “In all things, God is working...” And “work together” is the Greek word from which we get our word synergy. The God who would not spare His Son, who would give us His Spirit, who would go to the Cross is not a God who would toy with us. This is a God who weeps with us and is simply with us, not inflicting suffering but bearing suffering.

Some days, I have more questions than answers. On those days, my soul is restless, almost defiant. Other days, my soul is calm, trusting and quiet. But notice. I’m living in the same world, the same circumstances on both days! Isn’t it good to know that the same God is with me on both days? The same Savior has suffered for me and died for me? The same Spirit is inside me, praying for me and eventually renewing this broken world? God is God. And God is good.