

After the Earthquake
Luke 13:1-5

It's almost too much to fathom. A sunny tropical day turned to terror in the fury of the earthquake. A moment of death and destruction leaves dying in the carnage atheists and Buddhists and Jews and Muslims and Christians, black and white, rich and poor alike. It sweeps away good people and bad people alike, some, the young and the old. And for every story of miraculous escape there are countless more stories of terror and desperation.

On Wednesday, the death toll estimate was staggering in its imprecision: over one hundred thousand. Numbers so vast as to be incomprehensible.

How do we make sense of it all? Where is God in all this?

I've already heard some theological commentary about the earthquake, most of which I don't accept.

First, I reject the "blame the wicked victim" theology, which uses the Flood in Noah's time as its foundation. Of, course, there is wickedness in those areas affected, as there is in every nation, every city, every home, every heart. Our sin grieves God to be sure, but our understanding of God is not that his heart is bent on destroying the wicked, but rather, redeeming them. Even at the end of the story of Noah's Ark, the emphasis is on promises and new beginnings.

Pat Robertson, however, said, Says Haiti 'Swore a Pact to the Devil,' and this is why the earthquake. I think his response to such a tragedy is despicable.

This deal was first struck, according to Robertson, during Napoleon's time, so God evidently has taken his sweet time in acting.

A God who would cause a horrific earthquake? Because of something 150 years ago? I'm sorry, but I would rather believe in no God than a God like that. Does God really have the emotional make up of a two-year old who must break things to be satisfied when things don't go according to plan?

And, come to think of it, Robertson's view must imply that the power of Christ is paltry indeed compared to that of the devil: in 150 years, was Christ simply unable to undo the power of the devil?

Oh, by the way, Robertson also says that the Dominican Republic, which shares the island with Haiti, is wealthy and prosperous with many resorts . . . Robertson is one of very few economists who would call the Dominican Republic wealthy (62% of adults do not have high school diplomas and unemployment is well over 25%) and one of the very few who defines wealth according to number of resorts.

Robertson also says that we should send aid to Haiti, (and we should) but it is hard to follow Robertson's logic in calling for aid: if this is God's punishment, who are we to lessen the punishment by sending aid?

It seems that Christians should send aid only if we believe that God loves the Haitians and God calls us to alleviate suffering however we can, as an act of grace and mercy, which of course, I believe.

It is against the belief system espoused by Pat Robertson and others that Jesus speaks today: When that tower fell in Siloam, when evil Pilate had people murdered and their blood mixed with the blood sacrifice at the temple, the operative belief system was that God had caused it all, that all received just punishment for sins. We often find comfort in thinking God has punished others, come to think of it. But Jesus said, Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?

So, Jesus chastises such thinking. He asks for repentance. Repentance, which means turning around, looking at a situation through new eyes, God's eyes. And Jesus' belief is not in a God who relishes in the punishing of sin, but rather a God who desires to save sinners. Did you notice that the only people Jesus ever chastises are those who would put a fence around God's grace and mercy?

Well, another way of understanding the earthquake is from the "God is teaching us a lesson" theory. Let's reject this one as well. To be sure, lessons are learned, and faith is challenged and we hope, deepened, in response to an overwhelming event, but that does not mean the purpose of the event is to teach a lesson. Because the lesson comes at far too high of a price. I do not believe in a God who would destroy over 150, 000 people just so Lindblade will have a little more wisdom or understand things a little better. . . or whatever lesson, no matter how important, that might come to mind.

There is no lesson for anyone worth this cost. And to believe in a God who would do such a thing, seems to me, leads us to a belief in a God far different from the God revealed by, and in, Jesus Christ.

Jesus challenges his followers not to speculate on the cause of the fall of the tower, but to look to their own hearts, their own journey of faith. And to repent: to focus our lives again on what Christ wants for our lives.

I've no explanation for the earthquake, other than plate tectonics, that plates in the earth's crust keep moving, pressure builds up, and it snaps.

[Fifty years ago the movements of hurricanes could not be predicted, but now they can be, and so many lives are saved. In fifty years, I suppose earthquakes will be predicted. But that time is not yet. Our knowledge is not great enough.]

But I know this: I know what God wants Christians to do. To respond. With prayer and help and compassion. The response to a tragedy should not be idle theological speculation, including mine, but genuine sorrow and a genuine desire to respond.

And, by the way, even as we respond to an acute crisis such as an earthquake, we must never forget chronic problems: one billion people go to bed hungry every night.

What do I believe about the Earthquake?

First, we live within a created order that is imperfect, sometimes violent, sometimes unkind.

The symbolism of Genesis is that we live outside the perfect order of the Garden of Eden. When we are cast out to live in the world in which we live, God knows it is a dangerous sort of place. That's why God, whose love for his Adam and Eve is still immense, makes them garments of animal skins, to help guard against the dangers and cold they will certainly now face.

In other words, we live in a creation that is not yet the way God wants it to be, because the process is not complete. God is creating order out of chaos, but the time is not yet. St. Paul, in the 8th Chapter of Romans, adopts this view. He writes in Romans 8:18 *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. 19 The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. 20 For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope 21 that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. RO 8:22 We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.*

So, the earthquake, as horrific as it is, might be considered just another natural consequence of a creation that is not yet completed. It doesn't mean that God has abandoned us, or them.

When that tower fell in Siloam, when evil Pilate had people murdered and their blood mixed with the blood sacrifice at the temple, the operative belief system was that God had caused it all, that all received just punishment for sins.

But, let me repeat: Jesus chastises such thinking.

That being said, God demands a response. We are Christian people. We are partners with God in offering what is of God: hope and promise and healing and reconciliation and new

beginnings. Horrific tragedies such as the earthquake remind us again that as Christian people we are called ultimately not to comment, not to try to figure it out, but to respond. Respond with the love of Christ.

Our Christian faith teaches us that death and destruction are realities in our world. But so too are life and new beginnings, and resurrection.

And so, God's call to us in this tragedy is the same as in every tragedy: that we live out these promises of life and new beginnings and resurrection. Christians are not mere spectators and speculators of God's Will. We are God's partners in revealing God's love and bringing about God's will of healing and renewal.

God always offers opportunity for new life and new hope to grow even out of the most desperate times and situations. Whether it be one baby we cherish or hundreds of thousands destroyed in an earthquake, God loves them, and us, one by one, individually.

May we not grow weary in our mission, our compassion, our caring, our Christ-like response, in the face of so many tragedies and challenges. May we not be silly in trying to explain them.

And may we be trusting that the God of Jesus Christ, my God and your God, is a God who brings hope amidst despair, the promise of tomorrow when today seems so bleak, and a God who brings forth resurrection from even the most unimaginable pain.

And may our life of faith bear witness just to such a God. Amen.