

What about God, Hurricanes, Punishment, and Sin?
Jonah 3:3-4:3, John 9:1-6

We are now a year removed from Katrina's destruction, and two days removed from a storm whose possible bite on Carteret County proved not even to be a canine's bark, but more like a kitten's meow.

And we are relieved that this time at least the storm passed us by. And, as the retrospectives this past week have reminded us again of the devastation in the Gulf a year ago, we know again that the generous response from this church and so many others was indeed appropriate.

What is jarring, however is to look back and see that many people of faith, within days or even hours of Katrina's landfall, were claiming it to be a tool of God's punishment or a tool of God's teaching.

Pat Robertson said it was because of all the abortions in America. A rabbi in Israel Avraham Shmuel Lewin, said it was because America encouraged Israel to give up the Gaza strip. Chuck Colson said it was to remind us to keep vigilant against terror, to show us how vulnerable our cities are. Kind of a rough way to send a message, but be that as it may. And, a group called Repent America said it was because New Orleans has a reputation for being friendly to gays.

We notice something right off the bat: Robertson and the Rabbi and Chuck Colson and Repent America all blamed someone else's sin for the Hurricane. I could find no religious leader, Christian or otherwise, who said, "maybe it was my own sin that caused this." No, it was always someone else's.

Trying to find a message in Katrina, they never found a message that might apply to them. Are there sinful behaviors in America? Indeed, but not just abortion and homosexuality. If we're going to be quick to claim a natural event, such as a hurricane is God's punishment, we might well ask God for some clarity as to which sin it's for. I suspect God is unhappy about many things, not just one or two. I suspect God

doesn't much like the divorce rate among Christians. He doesn't like racism very much, nor economic injustice. If we must say God is going to punish sins through hurricanes, then we must make sure it's not just the sins we find more offensive than others that we expect God to punish. Anyway.

Now, could God have sent the hurricane, or an earthquake or a tsunami as punishment. Well, of course.

God has the freedom to do what God wants. Of course, God could presumably have simply appealed to sinful hearts or sent new prophets, but that's not how many Christians today seem to want

God to act. They seem to prefer a God of hurricane and lightning, earthquake, and flood to a God of gentle sunshine and graceful deeds.

Maybe God does send a hurricane as punishment.

But I do not think as a Christian I have the right to proclaim this as absolute and revealed truth. There is mystery to the ways of God, but for us to dare to claim with certainty that we know this or that activity is God's vengeful wrath strikes me as dangerous and incorrect.

To be sure in Scripture we find instances of God's awesome power used for destruction. The expulsion

of Adam and Eve from the Garden. The Flood. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The fall of the Kingdom of Israel in 586 BC because of the sinful and wayward ways of that nation.

God is a God who thirsts for justice. God is a God who expects us to live moral lives. God is a God who despises sin. Make no mistake about that. However no where do we see God acting on a whim or in a petulant way. He acts only after every other way has been exhausted. And when God does act it is unmistakable as to why and how.

But we who live today simply do not have the wisdom or the insight to state with confidence that God is raining judgment or punishment upon any person or

any nation. Else pretty soon whenever anything bad happens to someone we don't like, we smugly proclaim, "God's punishment." And then don't have to deal with what it means to love one's enemy, for what it means to be humble enough to realize we ourselves might fall short of God's expectations ourselves.

As Christians, we veer into dangerous territory when we claim this or that destructive activity to be the will of God, or God's punishment, or God's vengeance upon certain people or nations. The best we can do, it seems to me, is to proclaim God as a loving God, merciful God, compassionate God.

God, in fact, in Scripture is revealed as One who doesn't hate our enemies nearly as much as we do, as a God who is loving and kind to us, and in fact even to these enemies of ours. This is the belief behind the book of Jonah. Never mind the big fish or whale or whatever it was, the meat of the story is this: Jonah is called to preach to Israel's enemies, to go to the City of Nineveh.

And Jonah doesn't want to. So, he heads in the opposite direction. But then ends up at Nineveh, thanks to the fish and God, who sent the fish, to rescue, as it turns out, Jonah at his most sinful.

So Jonah begins to preach: his preaching is filled with the delicious prospect of destruction upon Nineveh. His preaching goes something like this, nah, nah, nah, non nah yah, in forty days God is going to destroy you.

But then, to Jonah's everlasting disappointment, the folks of Nineveh repent.

Which leads to Jonah's quarrel with God. Jonah has no quarrel with a God who will destroy Jonah's enemy, but Jonah doesn't like it one bit when God is gracious to that enemy. And so he chastises God ***"I knew that you are a gracious and compassionate God, slow to anger and abounding in love, a God***

who relents from sending calamity.” And Jonah didn’t like it one bit when God was going to offer that forgiving love to Jonah’s enemy, never mind that Jonah had extolled God when God had rescued him just a few days before.

And the prospect of God being so forgiving is more than Jonah can bear: “Now, O LORD, take away my life, for it is better for me to die than to live.”

Jonah would rather die than see God’s mercy used on Jonah’s enemies. Well, he didn’t really mean it, it was just a temper tantrum, because to see God’s mercy at work just really, really, made him angry. And some people today simply can’t bear the thought that God might still be filled with mercy and kindness.

And Jesus. In his day, folks believed in God's mercy, but they also saw God's punishment behind every calamity. Man born blind? Either he had brought it on himself, or it was his parents' fault. Someone was to blame. And if God is God, he must be punishing someone. That's what they thought.

So, Jesus, who was it? Neither, Jesus said. But look. Here's a tragedy. And here's an opportunity for you to see, yes, see, what God is really like. And so he restores the man's sight, complete with the symbolism that we don't really see God until we see God as one who wants to forgive, wants to restore.

Now, make no mistake, God hates sin. He hates sin because sin makes our lives less than what they could be. And sin leads us to hurt other people. And yes, more often than not, the bad choices we make have consequences.

That's why as Christians we stand up for morality, for righteous living. But to invite people to live lives transformed by the love and righteousness of Jesus Christ is not the same as proclaiming that God punishes every sin, that God is going to zap you if you don't watch out.

To be Christian is not to be accepting of every behavior, but to be Christian is to look upon

everyone, no matter what their behavior, and see someone whom God loves, someone whose heart God can transform.

I don't claim to know why Katrina or earthquake or even Ernesto. Why God created the natural laws which say that water evaporates and low pressure systems rotate, why God created a world in which geologic plates slide and suddenly break and quake the earth, is beyond me. St. Paul, in Romans 8, acknowledges that we after all do live in a fallen creation. And we await with longing the new creation. And in the meantime live with the birth pangs, the labor pains, if you will, of the world that is to be.

But I will say this. God's grace is undeterred by any physical challenge or any natural catastrophe and there is nothing on earth that can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

And a theological point of view that emphasizes God as the one who brings vengeance and punishment is a point of view that obscures the truth of God that Jesus' life, teaching, and sacrificial death proclaim.

What challenges are you facing today? Physical? Mental? Wrestling with sin? Is the way forward unclear? If you believe nothing else, I invite you to believe God still loves you, God is working even within the

circumstances of your life. I invite you to believe God is still working for the best for you, no matter what you have done, no matter where you are today. Yes, it is true that sometimes we punish ourselves. And sometimes the world, or life punishes us, either fairly or unfairly.

But God is with us. As one who loves, forgives, and shows us again and again the path that leads to life abundant and eternal. Perhaps the best WE can do is reaffirm over and over again, amidst storm and earthquake and sin, God in Christ, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, reconciling the world to himself. What do you think? How do you make sense of God and grace and calamity and sin?