

Acts of God

Isaiah 43:1-7

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It was October 31, ten days ago, a night that should have been for trick or treating -- but instead of handing out candy, I was actually standing in line at the Walmart in Shelton. I had driven up there because they had power, and most stores didn't, and because I'd discovered I had done a woefully inadequate job of stocking up on appropriate nonperishable foods before the power went out. In fact, I'd discovered, pretty much all I had was the Halloween candy that I was now much too tempted to eat.

So I was up there looking for anything that would be tasty when cooked over a can of sterno, and I was now standing in line with my ramen noodles. And behind me a couple was having an interesting conversation. You have to understand, preachers keep their ears open all the time for anything that they might be able to squeeze a theological point out of, but what I was overhearing wasn't even going to take any squeezing. This *was* a theological conversation.

It went like this:

The wife said "So, why is a hurricane called an act of God, anyway?" And the husband said, "Seems stupid." And she said "Yeah."

And there was a pause.

And then *he* said "'Cause, really, you shouldn't say this is an act of *God*. I mean, **God**, really? God wouldn't do this." And she said "Yeah, but, well, *who* then?" And there was another pause.

And the husband finally said, "I don't know. Some other guy."

I liked that. I'll grant you, "*Act of Some Other Guy*" doesn't roll as nicely off the tongue as *Act of God*. But I tend to like Mr. Walmart's theology a little better.

Because let's think for a moment about that phrase, *Act of God*. It gets used an awful lot, but really only when things are *awfully* bad. Tornadoes are acts of God. Hurricanes. Tsunamis. And it's not just insurance companies who say so; even Karl Rove this week, writing in the Wall Street Journal, lamented

Sandy as an “Act of God” which he felt gave Obama a boost, and therefore was very definitely for him a *bad* thing.

Okay, so, sure, it’s just a phrase. But what are we revealing about ourselves when we say it? And what are we really saying about *God* when we say it?

If an Act of God is something horrendous, wreaking violence upon us, then what we’re actually saying when we say it is that at some level we think, we humans think, that our God is a God who believes that hurting people is a way to express Himself. At some level what we’re actually saying – when we say ‘Act of God’ – is that when something awful happens that terrifies people, that causes suffering, that hurts people, that’s God just trying to make a point.

And you know, there *are* actually folks who think that. After every awful event that’s happened in this country, there has always immediately been someone to tell us what we did to irritate God, or what message God is trying to send. You may remember that after Irene last year, one politician suggested that *that* storm was God’s judgment on the behavior of Congress. This week, after the double whammy of the Nor’easter, the New York Post just cut right to the chase: **GOD HATES US.** (They still managed to put a Victoria’s Secret model on the cover, though, to soften the blow).

Now maybe you don’t feel you have a New York Post view of natural disasters. Maybe you would never say that every tornado is God’s way of sending a message. But I would suggest that ‘Act of God’ theology pervades our thinking more than we realize. That is to say, theology that says that the rotten stuff that happens in our life was put there by God. That when something lousy happens to someone, when there is great hurt, that somehow God *intended* that. That’s what I call Act of God theology, and I think we slip into it way more than we realize.

Think of the things that we say to one another, things that are *meant* to be comforting. *Everything happens for a reason*, we say, when someone is going through something horrible ... which, when you break it down, is another way of saying *some bigger power than you has a reason for doing this to you*. Or we say *God gives us only as much as we can bear*, we even needlepoint that one on pillows ... which, again, is another way of saying *whatever it is that you’re living through, whatever loss or hurt, rest assured that God gave it to you*.

Lord knows we mean well with these phrases. God knows we mean well. But however well-meant, however gently said, phrases like that are still saying that that thing in your life, that really bad thing – that was an Act of God.

That awfulness that just happened to you, that fear, that hurt, that loss, that was *meant* to happen to you. There was a divine plan behind it.

And no matter how you slice it, that means that God is a God who deals in bad things. That means that God is a God who finds hurt and loss to be an excellent way of communicating with people.

I don't buy that.

I don't see God that way.

I'm with that man in Walmart.

God wouldn't do this. *Must be some other guy.*

I think I'm in good company on this one. Because it looks to me like Jesus said pretty much the same thing. There's a little passage in Luke's Gospel that I didn't make our Deacon read, because it would have just sounded weird and gruesome if she'd read it straight off the page to you. It's a passage where a bunch of people come and tells Jesus about a tower, a tower in another town, that collapsed and fell on a bunch of folks, and killed them. And you get the impression that these people are speculating on what those folks must have done to make God want to drop a tower on them. And Jesus says this, he says just this: "Do you *really* think those eighteen people were worse sinners than you?" And that's all he says. In other words, he's saying *Really? You think a tower collapsed because God wanted to make a point?* Doesn't sound like Jesus was too crazy about Act of God theology either.

It was the preacher and writer William Sloane Coffin who first drove this point home to me, in a powerful way that I've never forgotten. Some of you have heard me share this before, but this is one that bears repeating again and again. Coffin died six years ago now, but twenty years before *his* death, he lost his son in a terrible accident that sent his son's car plunging into Boston Harbor.

And twelve days later he preached to his congregation at Riverside Church. And what he reflected upon was the number of people, well-meaning indeed, who had said to him that he needed to accept that everything happens for a reason, that Alex's death was somehow God's will. And Coffin preached this: *Nothing so infuriates me, he said, as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels.*

*My own consolation lies in knowing that it was **not** the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.*

That sermon, preached while I was still in seminary, has stayed with me ever since – that heartbroken but faith-filled voice proclaiming that God is not a God who cause hurt, who wills sorrow, but whose heart breaks with ours when sorrow and hurt are among us. Whose heart broke last week with the children lost on Staten Island, the lives shattered in Rockaway, the grief in Easton. And that's what takes us to the scripture that I did ask Devin to read. More than any other scripture, it is for me a powerful reminder that the God whom we worship is a God who is present *with* us in the hurts and hardships of life – not creating them, not sending them into our lives, but walking with us through them, to strengthen us, to carry us, to love us:

*Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall **not** consume you.*

When Kate Braestrup, the author, was with us last year at about this time, she preached a sermon to us that was surely as heartrending to listen to as William Sloane Coffin's sermon for his son must have been. Kate was speaking of the loss of her tiny infant grandson, whose life on this earth was a brief eight days. And she said this:

*Where was God in this? God was **everywhere**. God was the tenderness in the hands of the doctors who removed the respirator from Drew's little mouth. God was the tears in the eyes of the nurse as he adjusted the anaesthetic. God was the woman who put her arms around me as I fell apart. God was my daughter-in-law's strength as she sang to the son that lay in her arms. God was the song that he heard.*

Those are acts of God. *Those* are acts of God. The tears of the nurse, the arms of the stranger, the strength that comes from miraculous places, *those* are Acts of God.

Which is why I feel absolutely confident in saying to you that I have witnessed Acts of God this week. Three different times this week, I've taken groups of kids and parents down to the beach to see what we could do.

And here's what I've seen: sand burying houses, and water lines way over my head, and pieces of decks and roofs and homes piled high in the marsh grass.

But those were not Acts of God. Those were not the Acts of God I've seen.

The Acts of God have been, well, the Acts of God have been what ended up being captured in a [video by our friend Brian Russell](#)ⁱ, whose house we dug out. Brian made a little video of our folks at work, filmed just for me to share with the kids as a thank-you. It's ended up all over Facebook; even posted on the Fairfield Police Department's page to inspire volunteerism. And the Acts of God you'll see on it are this: kids shoveling sand, moms hauling debris, teens looking into the camera and talking about how right it feels to help, how good it feels to do good.

Those are Acts of God.

An act of God is not to be found in the whirling winds of a tornado, in the thundering crash of waves, in the fall of an enormous old tree.

God's actions are to be found in the loving actions of those around us, in our own loving actions. God is at work in the strength that comes from within us when it most needed, in the kindness of strangers, in the compassion that comforts us.

God is at work in the work of *people* who are doing what is right, working to rebuild lives and homes and hope. God is at work right now down on the Beach, where hundreds of people, many from this church, are toiling right now, in a townwide effort to love our neighbors as ourselves.

That, folks, *that* is a real act of God.

Amen.

ⁱ <http://vimeo.com/52896300>