

“Between God and a Hard Place”

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This sermon is a follow up on two previous ones: “The Earth without Us”, just last week; and “Everything Is a Metaphor” back on the last Sunday in March. Both of them were explorations of how we think about God, and even though we are cautious when we use that word, we can nevertheless that we can think about a power of the universe over which we have almost no control, and we can that by “many names”.

Last week, I challenged us to think about God in a different way, perhaps as the Earth itself, and how it is that we are in relationship both of those images. I suggested that if the Earth were God, there would be all the rules about how we are to behave, but they are not our rules. The rules belong to the Earth god, and they are ruthless and immutable.

I went further to say that the Earth God, on its part, may not even know we exist as a human species. Of course, that assertion assumes God “knows” anything at all, at least in the way human beings know anything. God doesn’t sit around and think about things and chooses to do some things.

The further challenge of last week’s sermon was the daunting proposition that we human beings may be nothing more, to the Earth, than a *virus* on the skin of the planet. Like the way humans respond to such a threat, the Earth God may simply eradicate it and keep living as a thriving, healthy life as an entity. The Earth would live on...*without* us.

So it is that today I proclaim that the human race finds itself squarely placed “between God and a hard place”. We might want to think about that, and think about us, as scurrying little bacteria on the planet and how we might want to act.

There are several parts to this discussion. The first is the question of the nature of God. For the moment we won’t get into the inquiry of God’s existence—that is another sermon. But we are presented with some cold, hard facts about our existence as the human race.

We know, for instance, that there are powers in the universe that go beyond us, in an almost infinite way. Even if God doesn’t exist (at least as we have previously imagined that), some awesome power and authority does exist within the matrix of our reality. We could even capitalize the word Matrix, like in the movie.

The difference here is that God is not a person and does not have a personality, acting in the universe in the same way a human being would act. In fact, God is not a human being at all, but there is something going on in our reality.

Which brings us to earthquakes and hurricanes and tsunamis and other “acts of God”. That’s what it says in the legal lexicon.

I found an essay from James Wood, the author of the novel “*The Book Against God*,” and staff writer at *The New Yorker*. Here is some of what he said:

In the 18th century, the genre of the “earthquake sermon” was ‘good business’. Two small shocks in London, in 1750, sent the preachers to their pulpits and pamphlets. The bishop of London blamed Londoners’ lewd behavior; the bishop of Oxford argued that God had woven into his “grand design” certain

incidents to alarm us and shake us out of our sin. In Bloomsbury, the Rev. Dr. William Stukeley preached that earthquakes are favored by God as the ultimate sign of his wrathful intervention.

“Five years later, when Lisbon was all but demolished by an enormous earthquake, the unholy refrain was heard again. One preacher even argued that the people of Lisbon had been relatively fortunate, for God had spared more people than He had killed.

“It was the Lisbon earthquake that prompted Voltaire (“Candide”) to attack Leibniz’s metaphysical optimism, in which all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds. The word here is *theodicy*, which is the justification of God’s good government of the world in the face of evil and pain, was suddenly harder to practice. But the preachers kept at it. “There is no divine visitation which is likely to have so general an influence upon sinners as an earthquake,” wrote the founder of Methodism, John Wesley, in 1777.

Have we made much of an advance on this appalling discourse? Our own earthquake-sermonizer, the evangelist Pat Robertson, [delivered an instantly notorious defense](#) of the calamity in Haiti. This was classic theodicy—that is, explaining God’s actions. First, good comes out of such suffering. This event in Haiti, said Mr. Robertson, is “a blessing in disguise,” because it might generate a huge rebuilding program. Second, the Haitians *deserve* the suffering. According to Mr. Robertson, when the Haitians were throwing off the tyranny of the French, they “swore a pact to the devil. They said ‘we will serve you, Satan, if you will get us free from the French’ ... so the Devil said ‘O.K., it’s a deal.’ and they kicked the French out. The Haitians revolted and got themselves free but ever since they have been cursed, because of their pact with the Devil, by one thing after the other.” The Dominican Republic, he said, had done quite well, and had lots of tourist resorts, and that kind of thing. But not Haiti.

We should expect nothing less from the man who blamed legal abortion for Hurricane Katrina. But even when intentions are the opposite of Mr. Robertson’s, and in a completely secular context, theological language has a way of hanging around earthquakes.

Interestingly, in his speech after the catastrophe, President Obama [movingly invoked](#) “our common humanity,” and said that “we stand in solidarity with our neighbors to the south, knowing that *‘but for the grace of God, there go we.’*” And there was God once again.

Awkwardly, the literal meaning of Mr. Obama’s phrase is not so far from Pat Robertson’s hatefulness. Who, after all, would want to worship the kind of God whose “grace” protects Americans from Haitian horror?

The president was merely uttering a version of the kind of thing you hear from survivors whenever a disaster strikes: “God must have been watching out for me; it’s a miracle I was spared, that I survived,” whereby those who died were presumably not being “watched out for.” That President Obama did not really

mean this — he clearly did not — is telling, insofar as it suggests how the theological language of punishment and mercy lives on unconsciously, well after the actual theology has been discarded.

Or has it? If the president simply meant that most of us have been so far luckier than Haitians, why didn't he say that? Perhaps because, as a Christian, he does not want to believe that he subscribes to such a non-providential category as luck, or to the turn of fate's wheel of fortune, which is really a pagan notion. Besides, to talk of luck, or fortune, in the face of a disaster seems flippant, and belittling to those who have been savaged by such bad luck. A toothache is bad luck; an earthquake is somehow theological.

A 27-year-old survivor in Haiti was quoted thus: "We have survived by the grace of God. What happened is the will of God. We are in the hands of God now." A survivor's gratitude is combined with a kind of theological fatalism. This response is entirely understandable, uttered in a ruined landscape beyond the experience of most of us, and a likely source of pastoral comfort to the (minister's) desperate flock. But that should not obscure the fact that it is little more than a piece of helpless mystification, a contradictory cry of optimistic despair.

Terrible catastrophes inevitably encourage appeals to God. We who are, at present, unfairly luckier, whether believers or not, might reflect on the almost invariably uncharitable history of theodicy, and on the reality that in this context no invocation of God beyond a desperate appeal for help makes much theological sense. For either God is *punitive* and *interventionist*, or as *capricious* as nature sometimes seems to be, or even *absent* as to be effectively nonexistent. We read in the Bible, which frequently uses God's power over earth and seas as the sign of (God's) majesty and intervening power, supports the first view; and the history of humanity's lonely suffering decisively suggests the second.

We become sad and even though we have become spared. We have used metaphors recently to attempt to understand what God is and how God operates in the world. And we are always confronted with the reality that this discussion is really a matter of life or death.

I hope this discussion doesn't come off as a series of mind games, especially, perhaps, a cosmic poker game. In fact, the stakes are very real; indeed, the future of our very existence as a species is on the table. We can still make decisions of how we want to respond to the bet, to play the game—or even if we play it—but the time has come to make a move.

I apologize for all the mixed metaphors I have used today, but as we remember from another recent sermon, "everything is a metaphor for something else". And now, here's another, from the great poet Anne Sexton. She uses the sea, the island, the rowboat, and of course, a poker game, in her account of "*The Awful Rowing toward God*". Hear all of the metaphors here. The future of us all is right on the table.

I'm mooring my rowboat at the dock of an island called God.
The dock is made in the shape of a fish,

and there are many boats moored at many different docks.
It's OK, I say to myself.
With blisters that are broken and healed and broken and healed,
Saving themselves over and over,
And salt clinging to my face and arms
like a glue skin pocked with grains of tapioca,
I empty myself from the wooden boat and onto the flesh of the island.
"On with it!" he says.
And thus we squat on the rocks by the sea and (we begin) to play—can it be true?—
A game of poker.
He calls me and I win because I hold a royal straight flush.
He wins because he holds five aces.
A wild card had been announced,
But I had not heard it, being in such a state of awe,
when he took out the cards and dealt.
As he plunks down his five aces, and I,
sitting grinning at my royal flush,
He starts to laugh,
the laughter rolling out of his mouth like a hoop and into mine
And in such laughter that he doubles right over me,
Laughing a rejoiced chorus at our two triumphs.
Then I laugh; the fishy dock laughs; the sea laughs; the island laughs—
the absurd laughs.
*Dearest Dealer: I, with my royal straight flush,
love you so, for your wild card—
That untamable, eternal, gut-driven, and ha! ha! ha!
and lucky love.*

The one way we can look at our relationship with the Divine is that the Divine is a *joker*, and the Divine pulls cards out of its sleeve, and says this is the way we're going to play the game. And in the end, I will win and you will win also, if you're willing to play the game. May it be that we all are willing to play.

Amen.