

Natural disasters aren't rare events in our world and neither, unfortunately, are human-made disasters. This year Hurricane Matthew struck Haiti, devastating a country that was making good progress in recovery from the earthquake they suffered several years ago. Wildfires in the west and east destroyed homes and businesses; and war in the middle east sent thousands of people fleeing their homes.

Often times when something like this happens we are at a loss as to how to respond. The very nature of an event like natural disasters or war, and the destruction they cause, is shocking. We may stare at the TV with our mouths hanging open, thinking, did I really see what I thought I saw? Did that really happen? Then the real questions begin to come: Why did this happen? Could it have been prevented? It seems to drive us crazy if we can't find a reason for what happened or if we can't find someone to hold responsible for it. It isn't enough to say, this was an awful tragedy, but these things happen. We want answers, we want explanations, we want to make sure that someone is held responsible. Heads will roll!

The question that occurs to me, and maybe to all of you as well, is, where is God in all this? I think especially in natural disasters like this, where trying to place blame is fairly futile, this is the question that people of faith come to at last. Where is God in all this? and, if God is all powerful and all knowing, then why didn't God stop this from happening? Doesn't believing in God mean that God will protect us from the bad and dangerous and evil in this world? I mean, why should we believe in God if God isn't going to protect us from harm?

People in Bible times had the same questions we have today. Now it may seem to us from reading the Bible that God was more present in Bible times, especially OT times, than God is today. We read about God speaking to people like Abraham, or God appearing to Moses, or even about God and Satan making a bet about Job. And, we may think, God was much more active and present then than now. But if you read the psalms you'll find that very often people then felt as we do, that there are times when God seems very close and times when God doesn't seem to be there at all. There are psalms that cry out to God, asking the very questions that we do today: where are you God, why didn't you protect me from this thing? My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? These questions aren't original to us today, and they aren't unique to Christians. This may be why there were "men from the east" who were waiting for a sign of things to come.

Our first story today is of the Magi. The story of the magi is found in the Bible only in Matthew—although there is an apocryphal gospel attributed to James that gives the story in more detail. "We Three Kings of Orient Are" is thought of as a Christmas carol, and the story is thought of as a Christmas story, even though on the church calendar the scripture really falls on a date known as the feast of the Epiphany. Epiphany is a word that means 'revelation' and the feast of the Epiphany celebrates the revelation of God through Jesus Christ to these Magi. Now there are differences of opinion about some of the details of this story, such as who they were and what was the star they followed. We don't even really know how many of them there were—we get the number 3 from the three types of gifts they brought. Scripture tells us that they were from the East, so that may have meant Persia, or present day Iran. I suppose they could have been from even farther east, but that's pure speculation on my part—and not really relevant to the importance of the story. What is thought about these folks is that they were the scientists of their day—with their science being astrology. They used the stars to try to find the answers to the questions that they had and also to explain and foretell major events in their world.

They came to Bethlehem with the news that signs in the heavens had informed them of the birth of a baby who would someday become the new "king of the Jews". They didn't seem to understand Jesus as the son of God at this point, just that he would someday be the leader of the Jews. This is the revelation they were given, that a new king had arrived, and like any good neighbor they came

hurrying over to welcome him and show him honor and respect that would hopefully lead to good relations between the Jews and their own people. Sort of a 'preemptive strike', if you will. I'm not sure that at first they understood his importance, or who might be upset at his arrival. They don't exactly sneak into town—in fact, they go straight to Herod to ask for directions. Herod, the one person who would be upset by this news—one of his titles is "king of the Jews", so he isn't very happy that a new king is in town. The magi do come to an understanding—it is revealed to them as they see the baby—and so they do sneak *out* of town.

Something interesting here, that's kind of academic, so bear with me, ok? Is that these people aren't Jewish at all- they are Gentile. Now, Matthew's gospel is generally understood to have been written in order to bring Jesus to a more heavily Jewish audience. So I find it interesting that Matthew is the gospel that tells of the first revelation of Jesus to a gentile audience. Without going too much farther down this road I'll just remind you that Luke's gospel, which is generally thought to have been written for a Gentile audience, has a story about the revelation of Jesus to the shepherds—a group of people who were undoubtedly Jewish. Huh. Do you suppose that it was the intention of the gospel writers to spell out to their readers that Jesus came for everyone—that Jesus reveals God to Jews and Gentiles alike? Jews being God's chosen people, and Gentiles being everyone else? Could it be because all people need the good news that God is with us, all of us? Could it be because we all have the same questions that the psalmist had, that the tsunami survivors have today, that come up whenever any of us faces tragedy—especially unexplainable tragedy?

That's the miracle of the baby in the manger. Jesus came to be God with us, God with all of us. God being revealed to us through a human being. If you want to know where God is in any tragic situation, look at the way Jesus reacted to tragedy: he wept. He healed. He stood firmly against evil. He was the original reformer, aiming not to replace Judaism but to make it better. Less rigid. More inclusive.

The second reading from Matthew includes a bit that is often referred to as the "slaughter of the innocents." It seems that when the Magi came to find the king they first came to Herod, who had no intention of letting another king take over. And so Herod ordered his people to kill any baby boy under the age of two—because that's how old Jesus was when the Magi came.

But once again Joseph has a dream, and in the dream he is warned to flee to Egypt to keep the child safe. Jesus was saved, but what about all those other children? Was Jesus the only important one to God? I don't believe that to be true but that doesn't answer the question. And we still have that question today: where is God in times of tragedy? Where is God when Aleppo is being bombed and children and their parents are being killed, for no good reason? Where is God when natural disasters destroy island nations over and over again, barely allowing the citizens to recover in between? Where is God when a toddler is shot in the back seat of his grandmother's care while they're driving down the road? Where is God when communities of people are forgotten by the rest of society or ravaged by drugs or any one of a number of tragic things that happen?

To me, in these times, in these situations, God *is* there, but not in the way we might imagine. I think God is there, in the suffering of the people but also in the person of Jesus Christ, who embodied the love of God and showed us how to embody the love of God as well. God is in us, inspiring us to reach out, to help with disaster relief or protest policies of injustice that keep communities oppressed and demoralized and traumatized by drugs, violence and poverty.

Imagine if someone in Herod's army had resisted the order to kill those children. Imagine if the church had stood against slavery from the very beginning, or resisted the Nazi regime. Imagine if everyone who was lonely, or chronically ill, or poor was met by someone whose mission it became to care for

them in a self-giving way. How much more would God be recognized in the world if we who call ourselves Christians took on the lovingkindness and healing presence embodied by Jesus Christ? Jesus came to all of us, shepherds, magi, Jews and Gentiles. If we claim Jesus as our own we must act on that relationship by representing him in the world. God cares for us very much but God also expects a lot from us. And with the example of Jesus Christ and the love of God supporting us we can be the people of light and hope that God calls us to be.

Happy New Year! May 2017 bring you new ways to receive the love of God in the world, and share the love of God in the world. Amen.