

Deliverance

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Exodus 14:19-27; John 6:16-21

I haven't heard much theological saber-rattling yet from the religious right about Hurricane Irma. Maybe the devastation and ruin left by that epic storm have been enough to silence even those usually quick to judgement. But the theological verdicts on Hurricane Harvey are now in.

The disgraced televangelist, Jim Bakker, says God sent Harvey Houston's way because an over-reaching mayor tried to subpoena some ministers' sermons. Rev. Bakker made this charge while promoting his "tasty pantry," a survivalist food kit designed to help one survive the Apocalypse. His sidekick and fellow pastor, Rick Joyner, chimed in that storms don't "happen by accident."

Radio preacher Rick Wiles said Houston got slammed by God because it "boasted of its LGBT devotion."

And in the one pronouncement I *did* read about Hurricane Irma, Pastor Kevin Swanson opined that God would alter the path of the storm if the Supreme Court acted quickly to outlaw abortion and gay marriage.

This kind of theological malpractice in the wake of weather disasters is not only incredibly sad; it's just plain stupid. What about all the churches that got leveled and all the good, innocent, God-fearing people who lost homes, and loved ones, and a safe, secure future? What kind of message was God trying to send *them*?!

Maybe it's time for a little Bible 101. God made a solemn promise, as I recall, the last time a flood of Irma's proportions drowned the known world: "And behold, I establish my covenant with you," says God to Noah, "and with your seed after you; and with every living creature that is with you . . . (Never again) shall all flesh be cut off any more by the waters of a flood; neither shall there anymore be a flood to destroy the earth."

And then God put a rainbow in the sky to remind God - not us, mind you, but God - never to do this again (Genesis 9:14-16).

So whatever caused the flooding that brought so much anguish and agony to the Caribbean, Florida, Texas, and beyond, I take the Good Book at its word: it wasn't God.

And yet, in our Old Testament lesson for today, we read the story of another flood or flood-like event that was central to Israel's escape out of Egypt. After a punishing regimen of plagues, Pharaoh sets the Hebrew slaves free. But no sooner do they make their getaway than he has second thoughts and sends his crack charioteers chasing after them.

Those storm troopers catch up with the Hebrews by a body of water called the *Yam Suph*, in Hebrew, the "Sea of Reeds." The mistranslation "Red Sea" crept into our English Bibles long ago, but the location of this Sea of Reeds--not specified in the Bible--was probably much farther north, near the Nile delta where Pharaoh and his minions lived.

In all events, as Pharaoh's finest came stampeding toward the Hebrews, God sent a pillar of cloud and fire--perhaps a thunderstorm--to hide them through a long, terrifying night. Then--and I'm quoting here--God "caused the sea to go back by a strong east wind all that night, and made the sea dry land."

The next morning, as the Hebrews made their escape through the marshy bottom that remained, the Egyptian charioteers went tearing in after them. But the tides shifted, or perhaps a storm surge like we saw in the wake of Irma, sent a 10 foot wall of water slamming into the pursuers.

Here, let the Bible take up the tale “The Lord clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.’”

“Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers.’”

“So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea.”

Thus, in the Bible’s own story of Israel’s great crossing of the sea, there are hints of the natural phenomenon God used to propel their escape. And yes, there is also the heightening of the miraculous in some parts of the story to make clear it was Yahweh, Israel’s God, who is effecting Israel’s deliverance. Usually it is only the later version of the story--the Cecil B. DeMille version--we hear about at church.

So which is it? Is God mysteriously at work in the world, even in so-called “natural events?”

Or is the story of Israel’s passing through the sea just another ancient folk tale about the victory of a mighty deity over the elements?

I believe the story is the former: a mysterious confession of faith. Yes, the living God--the God of Moses and the God of Jesus--is present in the storms of life bringing deliverance; just not in the way most people imagine.

I heard about one bright little eight-year-old who learned about Israel’s crossing of the sea in Sunday School. That afternoon over lunch, his mother asked what he learned.

"We learned about the time Moses went behind enemy lines to rescue the Israelites," the budding Bible scholar answered. Her curiosity aroused, the mother asked him to continue.

"Well," said her son, "when the Israelites got to the Red Sea, Moses had the engineers build a pontoon bridge. They all barely got across in time because the Egyptians were chasing them in tanks. So Moses radioed headquarters to send bombers to blow up the bridge. They did, so the Egyptians got stuck. And that's how God saved the Israelites."

There was a long pause. "Now son," the mother chided. "Is that really what the teacher said?"

"Well, not exactly," her son confessed. "But if I told it *their way*, you'd never believe it."

We've got a bunch of bright six, seven, and eight-year-olds in this church. A dozen of them just got their shiny new Bibles. And I want them to know Knollwood is a safe place to ask hard questions about the Bible and life and God . . . *because it is!*

I'm thankful for teachers who taught me to study the Bible seriously enough that I came to see that there are different layers of witness at work in the same text: the story of wind and waves and tides, on the one hand; and the story of God's mighty, but mysterious presence, on the other. Because that's how I experience God's deliverance in my life: not with miraculous special effects worthy of a Steven Spielberg masterpiece or a Harry Potter movie, but in a gentle, hidden nudging and presence--and a surprising ordering of events--that raises the question of God in a compelling way.

Recently, I was privileged to speak with a member of our church who has weathered a life-storm of Irma-life proportions. Looking in from the outside, I don't know how she did it. But this dear sister survived a torrential flood, not because of her native skills or strength. No, she made it through because the living God kept showing up in surprising and unexpected ways: in the drop-in visit of a friend who brought just the encouragement or insight needed; in the words

of Scripture, hungrily read each morning, that spoke with uncanny personal meaning; in the alone, but not lonely feeling of being steadied and held by the Everlasting Arms.

That's how the miracle of her deliverance unfolded, as Jesus showed up for her, as for those first disciples on a storm-tossed sea, sounding his promise, "It is I! Do not be afraid." Or as he spoke in the idiom of her own heart, "I will provide. I am sufficient. Trust me."

That's how this courageous woman became a true believer in the grace and goodness of God. As our AA friends say it, "Religion is for people who fear hell. Spirituality is for people who have been there."

It was through that kind of testing that the Israelites' faith was formed as well. Not in miraculous acts that *compelled* faith, but in mysterious acts of deliverance that *invited* faith. I don't profess to know what exactly happened when the Israelites passed through the sea. But I know it wasn't sufficiently compelling to lock down their faith, once and for all. Because within two chapters of the Bible--not long after Miriam joyously sings, "The Lord . . . has triumphed gloriously and thrown the horse and rider into the sea," Israel is once more scared to death, complaining bitterly, and threatening to call it quits (Exodus 16:3-4).

But over time, indeed, over the course of a 40-year sojourn with God in the wilderness, Israel came to know that God could be trusted. So when she looked back over her deliverance by the sea, she could speak of being "walled in" by God's hand, on the left and the right, and of walking to safety on the safe, solid ground of God's unwavering faithfulness (Exodus 14:29).

As my friend said it, "Until we start to experience a lot of stuff, we're not sure (God's word) is true. But I've discovered that hard times can be a blessing if they draw you to the Lord so you don't have to be alone."

So no, I don't believe God moves storms around to our personal advantage, sparing our house or town while leveling somebody else's. Nor do I believe God uses storms to dole out

surgical strikes of divine judgement. Jesus said, "It rains on the just and the unjust," which I take to mean God showers divine favor and grace and goodness on *all* creation.

Or as Anne Lamont warns us, "You can safely assume that you've created God in your own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people you do."

And yet, *within* the storms that head our way, hit us hard, and lay us low, God is mysteriously present, working for hope and healing, liberation and deliverance: in the people God sends to help, like all those folks from faith communities providing the lion's share of the actual, hands on help in the wake of Harvey and Irma; in the miracles of timing when God leads us to be at just the right place at just the right time; and in the miracles of grace when Jesus shows up unseen, but as real as the goose bumps popping up on your arm, to breathe life into your faltering heart. If you listen closely, you might even hear his summons sound as above the roaring waves: "It is I; do not be afraid."

In Zora Hurston's novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a hurricane threatens Florida. Residents with resources and mobility, flee. But Janie and her husband, Tea Cake, remain in their rickety shack beside the lake.

Tea Cake expects "nothin' but uh lil blow," but he is wrong. Soon raging winds are battering their little home; the thunder crashes, the lighting flashes, and the water is on the rise.

As Janie and Tea Cake huddle in the dark, their thoughts turn to God. Hurston writes, "They sat in company with the others in other shanties, their eyes straining against crude walls and their souls asking if (God) meant to measure their puny might against his. They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes . . . were watching . . . God."

Maybe that's what faith is: watching for God . . . in the dark, until you see a glimmer of God's light, breaking into the stormy night of your need; or the "still small voice" sounds and calms your soul. And that's when you know--in the depth of your heart, you know--you are not alone.

Talk about a miracle! If a miracle is any experience in which God's presence and power are deeply felt, then surely that is one.

So that the real miracle is no longer what happens in the storm. The real miracle is what happens in you as in faith and courage, you reach out to take that strong, sinewy, yet unseen, hand.

*O holy Christ, come to us on the storm-tossed waves and surprise us with your grace.
For never are you nearer, than when we need you most. Amen.*

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