Sunday, November 5, 1989
IS GOD INDIFFERENT?
Romans 11:33-36

On Tuesday evening, October 17, an earthquake shook the northern part of the State of California. The destruction it caused dominated the news for days. A few weeks earlier, Hurricane Hugo caused an enormous amount of damage to the southeastern coast of this country. However, we knew the hurricane was coming. It had been tracked for days, and as it moved closer to land, it could be predicted with some accuracy where it would hit. Thus, preparations could be made to reduce the destruction. Windows were boarded up, and people were asked to evacuate the area.

Frequently, these kinds of natural disturbances are called “Acts of God.” You may remember some years ago when a hurricane caused a lot of damage in Florida, an enterprising lawyer with a creative mind decided to file a lawsuit for damages against the church on behalf of a client who had lost a lot of money through property damage. He reasoned that the hurricane was an “Act of God,” and since he couldn’t file suit against God, he did the next best thing — he filed suit against the church as God’s agent on earth. The lawsuit never made it to court.

Whenever hurricanes, earthquakes, and other powerful forces of nature show us how small and puny we are, a lot of what I call “Loose Talk About God” is heard. A few examples: Some of Jim and Tammy Bakker’s supporters seriously suggested that Hurricane Hugo was God’s way of warning the people who were prosecuting and testifying against Bakker to stop and let Bakker go free. Some went further and said the hurricane was God’s punishment on that part of the country for persecuting the Bakkers.

When the recent earthquake shook California, there were some who saw it as a signal from God. There were even some who tried to connect the earthquake to the trial of Jim Bakker. Others gave it different interpretations.

Loose talk about God. There are always politicians, speechwriters, and their political parties who want us to believe that God is only on their side. Some have even maintained that God has been banished from the public schools.

Other people talk as if they, and they only, own God. They talk as if their brand of religion has a monopoly on God and that God works only through them.

It’s nothing new. People, for thousands of years, have been trying to use God for their own purposes — controlling their children, keeping church members in line, convincing the masses that killing Germans or Turks, or the heathen or even people of other religions is God’s will. Untold human misery, physical and mental suffering, and even destruction and death have been the result.

Hurricane Hugo and the earthquake in California reminded me of a story that appeared in the news a few years back. Lightning struck the York Minster Cathedral in England. The force of the blast splintered the Cathedral’s 13th-century oak beams and sent the roof of the south transept collapsing in flames to the flagstones below.

The lightning bolt hit the Cathedral only three days after the consecration of the Reverend David Jenkins as Bishop of Durham, a town 60 miles north of York. Bishop Jenkins is a

somewhat controversial figure within the Church of England. His opponents argued that God was angered because he was made a Bishop and therefore sent the bolt of lightning as a divine warning.

The question then, of what caused the destruction, brought forth other theories as well. One person writing to a London newspaper said the lightning bolt was probably an accidental by-product of some Yorkshire farmer's prayer for rain. She went on to say, "For the God of storms is the God of harvests. Naturally, God sends rainstorms on request — it's hardly God's fault that the Christians insist on building their monuments directly in God's flight path."

Bishop Jenkins himself, with a smile, offered some other theories. He said, "My daughter asked me why people didn't say instead that the devil was so angry at my consecration that he set the church on fire." "There is room for miracles," he went on to say, "but YOU have to decide what the miracle proves." Jenkins believes that the bolt from the night sky was derived from "simple weather conditions."

Someone else commented that if God was really angered about the new Bishop's appointment, why didn't the lightning strike the Bishop himself, rather than causing destruction to a historic Cathedral? It reminds me of the mother who sent a note to her son's second-grade teacher. She said, "If my son Billy misbehaves, hit the boy who sits in front of Billy, and that will scare Billy."

Sometimes too, victims of earthquakes, hurricanes, and disease try to console themselves with the idea that God has reasons for causing something tragic to happen personally to them.

Rabbi Kushner tells the story of a woman named Helen, who noticed herself getting tired after walking several blocks or standing in line. She chalked it up to getting older and having put on some weight. Then she began to stumble and fall over things. So she made an appointment with her physician.

The diagnosis was multiple sclerosis. The doctor explained that it was a degenerative nerve disease, and that it would gradually get worse, maybe quickly, maybe gradually over many years.

When she got home, all she could think about was, why should this happen to me? Was God personally reaching out to punish her for something she had done? She said, "I've tried to be a good person. I have a husband and young children who need me. I don't deserve this."

Her husband tried to console her. He took her hand and said, "You can't talk like that. God must have reasons for doing this, and it's not for us to question God. You have to believe that if God wants you to get better, you will get better, and if God doesn't want you to get better, there has to be some purpose in it."

Helen didn't want to question God or be angry at God. But her husband's words only made her feel more abandoned and more bewildered. And on top of it all, she felt guilty for being angry at God. And suppose God had sent her this affliction, how could she ask God to cure her of it? If it was God's will that she be sick, would she be going against God's will if she tried to get well?

To believe in a personal God does not mean that we believe God causes bad things to happen to us. In our loose talk about God, we don't often think through the implications of our statements.

St. Paul wrote to the Church at Rome as recorded in the New Testament, "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable are God's ways." And remember Jesus said, "God makes the rain to fall on the just and the unjust." We can paraphrase, "God allows earthquakes and hurricanes to occur among the just and the unjust."

There's a mysteriousness to God that is always beyond us, and yet as Jesus demonstrated and taught, underneath it all, God loves and cares for us. God is indifferent, yet at the same time dwells within us, and we dwell in God.

God is like life itself — the older we grow, the more mysterious life becomes. We sometimes say to a young person that when she grows up, she will know more — but that is only a half-truth. In general, an increasing experience of life only deepens the sense of mystery. The more we know, the more the mystery grows. To put it in another frame of reference — in a sermon some months ago I quoted Dr. Lewis Thomas, who wrote, "What is the greatest of all the accomplishments of 20th-century science?" and his answer to his own question was—"The greatest accomplishment of 20th-century science has been the discovery of human ignorance."

The Biblical scholars that I've been reading lately point out that our Jewish mothers and fathers, and our Christian ancestors as well, had their faith formed by mountains, deserts, and tough terrain, and thus became aware of and celebrated a sense of God's indifference to the assorted and puny hand-wringing anxieties of human life. Our religious ancestors discovered in the vast resources of divine disinterest, a freedom and a joy that cut through much of contemporary pop theology.

I agree with a theologian who wrote, "I find myself increasingly uncomfortable with some of the current images of God as often found in books and workshops that mix popular psychology with a theology almost totally devoted to self-realization. They seem to reverse the first question in the catechism I studied as a young person. Rather they seem to believe that the chief end of God is to glorify men and women and to enjoy them forever." The catechism put it the other way around. "The chief end of human beings is to glorify God and enjoy God forever."

He went on to say, "I really don't want a God who is solicitous of my every need, fawning for my attention, eager for nothing in the world so much as the fulfillment of my self-potential."

We human beings, especially in today's world, have a tendency to put ourselves, our problems, and our desires at the center of the universe as if we and our personal successes or failures were the measure of all things. We regard our humanity and our present age as the final goal of God's creation. Humanity, as we know it, is a magnificent beginning, but not necessarily the last word.

Here's some wisdom for you. An individual said, "Before I was 20, I never worried about what other people thought of me. But after I was 20, I worried endlessly — about all the impressions I made and how people were evaluating me. Only sometime after turning 50 did I realize that

they hardly ever thought about me at all." So often we presume ourselves to be at the center of everyone's attention and end up performing for an audience that isn't there.

In a society that emphasizes the limitless possibilities of the individual self, it comes as astrange freshness to be confronted by a God self-conscious, indifferent to the petty desires that consume us.

A study of history and science can give us some of the humility we need.

H.G. Wells, in his book Outline of History, a lucid account of the history of humankind written in 1920, wrote: "Not only is space, from the point of view of life and humanity, empty, but time is empty also. Life is like a little glow, scarcely kindled yet, in these void immensities."

A modern-day physicist, Freeman Dyson, reading what H.G. Wells wrote, responded: "It was important for Wells and for me, that the stage is large and humanity small. An awareness of our smallness may help to redeem us from the arrogance which is the besetting sin of scientists." The same can be said for those of us who claim to be religious. We need a sense of perspective which can lead to humility.

Another scientist wrote: "Ninety-nine percent of all the species that have lived on earth have died away, and no stars will wink out in tribute if we in our folly soon join them."

Is God indifferent? To many of our petty and puny selfish and self-centered interests, yes! But the indifference of God turns out to be another form of God's insistent love. John Newton, the ex-slave ship captain who wrote the words to the hymn "Amazing Grace," knew this well when he spoke of a "Grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved."

Melinda Craighead found this strange indifference of God to be a healing presence, especially as she experienced the sandstone flats and underground kivas of the Pueblo Indians. She wrote, "When I came to New Mexico in 1960, I found the land which matched my interior landscape. The door separating inside and outside opened. What my eyes saw meshed with images I carried inside my body. Pictures painted on the walls of my womb began to emerge." She discovered the Great Mother in the awesome beauty of the desert, brooding over a world still in the process of being born.

At the same time we talk about the indifference of God, we affirm that God's spirit lives in us, and we live in God. The creation is saturated with God. And there is mystery here as well. Who among us can comprehend the kind of love that dies on a cross and does not fight back? Who among us can comprehend the kind of love that forgives one's enemies? We can only stand in reverence, awe, and gratitude in the presence of that kind of love.

"O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are God's judgments and how inscrutable God's ways! For from God and through God and to God are all things. To God be glory forever." Amen.