Sunday, January 16, 2005
GOD AND NATURAL DISASTERS
Matthew 5:43-48

On December 26, 2004, as the result of some geological timetable, the tectonic plates deep in the earth underneath the Indian Ocean shifted, causing an earthquake. As a result, an immense body of water moved thousands of miles across oceans and landmasses, across Indonesia, Sri Lanka, India, Thailand, and all the way to Somalia.

Scientists, journalists, and other observers described water moving at jet speed. People around the world watched in stunned disbelief as television displayed mountains of dead human bodies, some 30% of them children, and massive destruction of property caused by gigantic waves. Waves of water swept away Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Buddhists, Jews, agnostics, true believers, and unbelievers with indifference. The tsunami took no sides, even in decades-old enmities over national borders and differences in beliefs.

Entire villages were destroyed. The total number of dead people is still unknown. The latest estimates say that more than 150,000 were killed, with many thousands still unaccounted for. How many more people were injured and will die as a result of their injuries and the spread of disease, no one knows.

This was a very destructive earthquake. While it's no comfort, it's helpful to know that there have been other similar events. In 1201, an earthquake and resulting floods killed 1,100,000 in upper Egypt and Syria. In 1976, an earthquake in China killed 655,237 people. In 1931, the massive flooding of the Yangtze River in China caused more than 3,000,000 deaths. The flu pandemic of 1918 killed 20,000,000 to 40,000,000 people all around the world. It was not a natural disaster, but in four years, World War I killed 15,000,000 people. In six months, the flu killed more than twice that many.

Such events drive human beings to ask all kinds of questions. Are these random acts of nature? Are any acts of nature random? Maybe. Maybe not. Are they acts of God? Can there be a hidden order in what you understand as chaos? Some reporters called the December 26 earthquake the "wrath of nature." But nature does not possess wrath. Others said it was nature's fury. That also is not true. Nature has no fury. It is neutral.

When terrible and chaotic things happen, human beings want to know why. You want to make some sense out of what appears to be senseless. You want to believe that bad things do not happen to good people. You want a logical explanation for why people who don't deserve it are hurt, injured, or killed.

Let's begin with the geological explanation of the December 26 earthquake and then a brief history of how religion came into existence, how it changes, and how it will continue to change. This will give you some additional perspective.

According to geologists, planet Earth is some four and a half billion years old. During this time, it has most often not been a safe place for living things. During its first billion years or so, no life as we define it existed on this planet. Instead, a constant barrage of meteorites and other particles of an exploding and expanding universe relentlessly pounded the Earth's surface. Nature's raw power was visible in the liquified rock boiling near the center of the Earth.

As recently as 200 million years ago, the landmass on this planet formed a single continent. What is now South America was tucked up against Africa. Australia was the underbelly of India, and Antarctica was the southern edge of this single landmass. Over a vast span of time, violent earthquakes miles beneath the sea broke up that landmass into the continents that we identify today. These earth-shaking events occurred before there were inhabitants who could knowingly record or be hurt by them.

No sense of tragedy was associated with these powerful natural forces until 50,000 to 100,000 years ago when our earliest self-conscious ancestors finally emerged through the evolutionary process. Only then were there living beings whose minds enabled them to be aware of time as a record of the past and a window into the future. Expanded knowledge enabled human beings to know that yesterday's violence might well return again tomorrow.

The natural forces of storm, hurricane, earthquake, and flood were so powerful that human beings trembled in fear. Not knowing any natural causes, they sought to placate whoever or whatever might be in control of these forces that brought destructiveness and terror to them. Finding a way to deal with this trauma was the catalyst that caused primitive religion to emerge. Our vulnerable ancestors began to envision a powerful supernatural being who was big enough to control these devastating forces of nature. They assumed these forces were expressions of God's power and occurred by divine intention. Their need for security caused them to attempt to discover and obey the divine will and to please this supernatural being with respectful liturgies and sacrifices. That is why every human religious system has developed codes of conduct that are said to have been dictated by God. Natural disasters were inevitably understood to be expressions of divine wrath because human beings were not following God's rules.

Primitive religious leaders devoted their efforts to determining exactly what human beings had done to provoke divine anger. A consensus would be formed around some conclusions, and a reformation would be instituted designed to express both penitence and new resolve to please God and, in so doing, gain God's favor and avoid God's wrath.

Fortunately for these human interpreters, natural disasters were widely scattered in time and in places far away from each other so that human beings did not know about most of them. Thus, the illusion could be preserved that the adopted changes were successful and that God was pleased to be their protector again.

Some religious traditions still reflect this mindset, but change is underway. For example, most farmers today that I know irrigate when possible. When I was a young boy growing up on a small farm in Missouri, I was puzzled when a neighboring farmer was praying for rain and my dad had freshly cut hay on the ground and he was praying that it wouldn't rain. There was another farmer down the road who knew how to use a barometer, and he would cut his hay when the barometer indicated little chance for rain within several days. He trusted his barometer more than his prayers.

What role does God take, if any, in natural disasters? This is still a puzzling question. Notice, for example, how the public media has interpreted this current tragedy. Except for some religious leaders, God has not been mentioned as a causative factor in the earthquake and tsunami. Instead, you learned that this particular tragedy occurred when the displacement initiated by the thrusting of the Indian plate beneath the Burma plate created waves so powerful that they devastated nearby nations and sent 30-foot surges to pound the east coast of Africa, half a globe away.

This past week, the Wall Street Journal reported that a meteorologist in Bangkok, Thailand, seven years ago predicted that this was going to happen. Unfortunately, government officials, fearful of washed-up tourist seasons, branded Mr. Smith a dangerous man with a screw loose. Now Mr. Smith has been called out of retirement to become an advisor.

You can't stop earthquakes, but you can create better warning systems. You can't avoid the mudslides like those that took place this past week in California, but you don't have to build houses where they are likely to occur. You can't stop all massive floods, but you don't have to build buildings in flood plains.

In spite of the world's increasing knowledge of why natural disasters take place, unfortunately there are some religious leaders who want you to believe that God's wrath caused the December 26 earthquake and tsunami and other previous natural disasters. Some believe this. It's one way of trying to make some sense out of what appears to be senseless. It's the age-old question: how can a loving God allow this to happen? The question is a valid one, but most of the religious answers are misleading, naïve, and too simple.

A chief rabbi in Israel said, "This is an expression of God's great ire with the world. The world is being punished for wrongdoing." Some organizations in India say the tsunami is divine retribution for the arrest of a prominent Hindu religious leader. Another Hindu leader was quoted as saying, "The misdeeds of past lives are almost coming to a boil right now." A Muslim leader in Omaha said, "This is a warning from God about misdeeds and mischief on earth and all kinds of sins." Too many Christian leaders have made similar statements.

In contrast, I like what one Jewish rabbi said when asked, "Where was God during the tsunami?" He said a more relevant question is, "Where was humanity? Why have we been so unwilling to take serious responsibility for the well-being of others on the planet?"

If you want to prevent the terrible destructions from natural disasters in the future, it is better to pay attention to the warnings from meteorologists like Mr. Smith in Bangkok than to religious warnings. I believe in the loving God that Jesus revealed in the midst of all of nature's destructive power and in the destruction that human beings cause by war and other human follies. For example, not long ago, Rwanda added more than 800,000 to the wave of its human death toll. I repeat, there is a place in all of this for an abiding faith in the loving God that Jesus revealed.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus had a lot to say about the God of love and how God wants you to live day by day. "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven.'" When you love your neighbors and your enemies, you are living up to what God expects of you.

Then especially note what Jesus said next: "For God makes the sun to rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous." He was saying that in what happens with the creation's natural energies, God is neutral. In nature, there is only impersonal, natural power, oblivious to human concerns.

Nature's power, such as was evidenced in the December 26 earthquake, also teaches what Jesus taught: our human life on this earth is inextricably bound together in a common destiny. You are to be friends with everyone, even those you consider your enemies, in this creation.

Human unity is not something you are called upon to create, only to recognize. Human beings belong to one another. That's the way God made you.

Where is God? God is present when human beings take care of each other and the planet Earth. Jesus died to keep it that way. Our sin is that we put asunder what God has joined together.

Where is God in this natural disaster? God is present in the millions of people, believers and unbelievers, who are making contributions and showing signs of caring. God is present in every act of kindness, every moment of love. This loving energy of God permeates every ounce of being.

As I listened to some media talk shows, I was amazed at how many people said something like this: "I am really angry at God and this is precisely why I don't believe in God." That's a strange, contradictory statement. It's as if some people need to invent God in order to blame him or her for something about which they are justifiably in despair.

I want to say to such people, stop thinking of God as some big person in heaven sitting there and making individual judgments about who shall live and who shall die.

Instead, begin to understand God as revealed in Jesus, as the loving, healing power at work in people's lives and through them, beyond them, and at work throughout the creation. Begin to understand God as the loving power within you. When you reach out to help, it is God reaching out to help.

On December 26, 2004, an earthquake occurred in the Indian Ocean, but an earthquake, a volcano, tornadoes, or floods can take place in any country at any time, and indeed they will at some time. Nature doesn't discriminate. Or as Jesus said, "God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous." What can you do in times of natural disasters and at other times as well? Jesus said, "Love your enemies." He also said, "As you did it to one of the least of these my sisters and brothers, you did it unto me." Amen.