

Disaster
“In crisis: care.”
Genesis 9:8-13

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Titanic

At Camp Dearborn where Laura and I met, the difference between boy's and girls camps could sometimes be detected by the variation in songs we liked to sing. Girls liked to sing about saving bunnies from hunters. Boys sang about disaster.

Division continues. One of those songs still *not* appreciated at home is *The Titanic*, which goes:

*O they built the ship Titanic to sail the ocean blue
And they thought they'd built a ship that the water ne'er go through.
It was on her maiden trip when the iceberg hit the ship.
It was sad when the great ship went down.¹*

A fun and happy melody containing absolutely tragic lyrics: tune and words don't seem to match.

Just the way it never matches when we in this world are faced with disaster.

“If I were in charge of everything, there would be no shipwrecks. Neither would there be tornadoes or earthquakes, droughts or hurricanes, wildfires or floods.” That's what we say.

“I wouldn't have them, so why does God?”

In and Out of Control

Since January of last year there have been earthquakes in Port au Prince, Haiti; New Zealand; and East Japan, killing hundreds of thousands and leaving many more injured, missing and without a homes. Massive droughts in Texas and worse in East Africa;² tornadoes ripped through the Midwest and South week-after-week during spring and early summer; wild fires are burning thousands of square miles in the Southwest; there have been devastating floods along the Mississippi and Red Rivers.

In the face of all these it's clear that there are an awful lot of things beyond our control. Some blame God asking how you can believe in a deity that would allow such things to happen.

Like it's God's fault: tort law and insurance policies call these things *ACTS OF GOD*.

This is not very good press for God...If you want to look at it that way.

But another way of seeing it comes from writers of the Hebrew Scriptures. They said that when God created, the heavens and the earth were without form and void: it was all chaos.³ Chaos forms the very basis of the created order and though much of creation made order out of chaos, *there will still be storms*.

It's not a matter of God's failing or capriciousness, deciding to visit any person or nation with calamity.

It's just the way things are.

The one story the Bible tells where God is fed up enough with human wickedness to use nature against us was in the days of Noah. Noah had one thing going for him. It wasn't that he didn't sin. It was just that he walked with God. He was the one guy who was willing to listen and live in accordance with God's decisions.

So God got his help and made it rain forty days and forty nights, drowning away all life that walked on the face of the earth except for two of every species and Noah, his wife, and his children's families.

Then when it was over God said to Noah, “Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.” This was the divine promise. Never. Never again a flood sent with the intention of harming anyone.

Notice God didn’t say there would never again be *any* floods. Floods and earthquakes are a part of the natural world. The same dynamics that give life also may work, from time-to-time, to bring destruction. The geothermal movements of the earth that make rich soil also cause occasional earthquakes and volcanoes. Meteorological changes that cause rain to water the earth also uproot trees and blow down houses. Try not to be in the wrong place at the wrong time...

Because these things just happen.

What *doesn’t* just happen, though, is the way people disregard what they know about the earth and its possibilities when it isn’t convenient.

What possesses someone to build a million-dollar home on the top of a sand dune? Why build structures along the San Andreas Fault as lovely as the setting usually is? Why flock to the Desert Southwest, filling swimming pool after swimming pool with thousands of gallons of water, and then press for water to be shipped from the Great Lakes to satisfy people’s incessant demand?

And why do people, through policy and practice, disregard protecting those who are without power, putting them most in harm’s way?

A verse of *The Titanic* that’s haunted me through the years goes:

*They were nearing close to England, they were nearing close to shore
When the rich refused to associate with the poor.
So they put them down below where they’d be the first to go.
It was sad when the great ship went down.*

Was that true? Were they actually locked away?

This has been debated since the wreck. But the statistics tell a story of disregard, conscious or not. In 1999 a London paper reported that, “...in first class over a third of the men, almost all of the women and all the children survived. In second it was less than 10 per cent of the men, 84 per cent of the women and all the children. But in

steerage 12 per cent of the men, 55 per cent of the women and less than one in three of the children survived. Interrogating the figures shows that - despite the strict 'women and children first' policy - a greater proportion of first class men survived, than of third class children."⁴

One of the reasons Port au Prince suffered such devastation was its poverty. A January report by the Brookings Institute says that the poor are most vulnerable, living in disaster-prone locations and poorly-constructed homes. In Haiti, rich neighborhoods suffered far less than impoverished areas in Port-au-Prince.⁵ It went on to say that when disasters hit poor countries they kill people; when then hit rich countries they damage property.⁶

It might be an oversimplification, but the point is made: those who are poor don't have the location, structures, or services to deal well with catastrophes. The vulnerable are routinely "put below where they'll be the first to go."

Considering the number of people who suffer preventable starvation, disease, and violence every day without a cataclysm, the real disaster is not what looks like God allowing another earthquake or hurricane.

For millions, there is disaster every day caused by the indifference of the human family toward those who need help most.

Some of the most important things Jesus said had to do with taking care of people. In the face of hunger, and thirst and all manner of need: he said "For as much as you did it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you did it (or didn't do it) to me." In the end, they must not be left below, where they'll be the first to go. Rather, when we care for them, Jesus says, we enter the Realm of God.⁷

Is there any wonder why our church leaders encourage and inspire us to give to the Advance – the fundamental mission program of our church; or to United Methodist Committee on Relief when disaster strikes? This is a piece of fulfilling who we are called to be: God's people joining the work of redeeming the world; unlocking the people from *down below*, bringing them to the safe places others enjoy.

God's Place, Your Place

The flood was over. The sun came out; the dove brought back the olive branch to say there was finally dry land. The ravens were sent and, finding a place to nest, did not return. And the ark rested on the mountain.

Then God made a covenant: I won't do that again.

Ever.

...And just to remind you, *when a storm comes*: look to the east after it passes. There you'll see my bow in the sky.

The rainbow will always say *I am at peace with you in the earth*.

Order made out of chaos.

What's left is the degree of peace you and I are willing to make for everyone.

¹ *The Titanic*. There are several regional variations on the song. According to Newman I. White's 1928 book *American Negro Folk-Songs*, "The Titanic" has been traced back to 1915 or 1916 in [Hackleburg, Alabama](#). Other versions from around 1920 are documented in the Frank C. Brown Collection at [Duke University](#) in [North Carolina](#). Early recordings include Ernest Stoneman's "The Titanic" (Okeh 40288) in September 1924 and William and Versey Smith's "When That Great Ship Went Down" in August 1927.^[1] According to Jeff Place, in his notes for the American Anthology of Folk Music: "African-American musicians, in particular, found it noteworthy and ironic that company policies had kept Blacks from the doomed ship; the sinking was also attributed by some to divine retribution."

² Linda Bloom, "12 million caught in Africa food crisis," *United Methodist News Service*. August 2, 2011.

³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*. Translated by John H. Marks. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, © 1961, rev. 1972. pp 50-51.

⁴ David Aaronovitch, "When the evidence fits the prejudice," *The Independent*. © Saturday, 11 April 1998 <http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/did-the-third-class-passengers-on-the-titanic-have-a-fair-chance-1155678.html>

⁵ "Build Back Better" in Haiti: Lessons from the Indonesian Tsunami. The Brookings Institution. January 21, 2010. http://www.brookings.edu/opinions/2010/0121_haiti_aid_kharas.aspx

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Matthew 25:31-46.