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Searching for Stars

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I. Feeling Disastered

The new millennium has dawned, and our hopes about what a new time would bring now look naïve; our fears about that new time misplaced. Barely half a decade into the 2000s, we're taking blow after blow: 9/11. The Tsunami. Hurricane Katrina. Earthquakes in Pakistan and Central America. They've got us staggering, punch-drunk, around our lives. As in previous millennia, we call out to God, asking how and why these things could happen and what God has to do with them. And, as in previous millennia, some among us have been bold to answer.

So why do so many of the things people say about God after a disaster seem either unhelpful or flat-out wrong? All too often, none of the popular theological responses to disaster feels anywhere close to right. The ones that don't feel malicious still feel impotent. Could people really mean them and, if so, shouldn't we try to protect ourselves from these types of people, especially when we're feeling so vulnerable? What is it about disasters that can bring out the worst in theology? What is it about God that makes disasters seem so—well—disastrous? Can we talk about God after a disaster? Should we?

For persons of faith, such questions feel both unavoidable and unanswerable. They are unavoidable because we can no more evade them than we can avert our eyes from the images of disaster that draw us, magnetically, into themselves with that peculiar and uncomfortable mix of horror and fascination. We *want* to watch and, because we are meaning-seeking creatures, we *want* to ask questions—even though we also want not to watch and not to ask. And they are unanswerable because try as we might, none of our answers satisfy—at least when we're honest about ourselves and about them. Disasters force us to confront the boundaries of our mental maps of the world. We see those maps' weaknesses and blank spots and we discover we can't correct the weaknesses without calling the maps' centers into question. Nor can we fill in blank spots without getting a distorted view of the rest of the map. So questions like, "Can we talk about God after a disaster?" both perversely attract us and leave us unsatisfied. They hex us and vex us—and in so doing, leave us feeling (pardon the wordplay) like wrecks.

"Wrecked" may be an especially accurate descriptor of what thinking after disaster feels like. Like sailors, we've piloted our theological ships into the rocks and reefs hidden just beneath the surface and they have torn holes in our confessional keels and ripped off our doctrinal rudders. Our ships are filling with brine because we couldn't see the stars we needed to navigate with. We've been *disastered* (from the Latin *dis-astrum*: "ill starred"); we've lost our guiding stars. We feel neither safe nor stable. Instead, we feel spun, confused, and—even when surrounded by others—alone. Bad theology to the contrary, we can't imagine that anyone deserved this and neither too-simple slogans nor too-abstract ideas seem likely to help us repair or right our ships.

Many essays get written after disaster. Some essays give easy answers, albeit answers more easily mouthed than believed. Other essays give sighs of resignation, albeit sighs more easily sympathized with than satisfying. If the solutions were really that easy, we'd be satisfied with them; if resignation was that helpful, we wouldn't feel the gaping holes in our lives nearly so painfully.

I am not interested in trying, through this essay, to patch the holes in our spiritual hulls with get-fixed-quick messages that have failed again and again. Neither am I interested in promoting an existential theology that resigns us to live forever among the rocks and reefs of disaster. I have no plan to answer all the questions that disaster forces upon us because I think such plans are either doctrinal or existential failures (or because I think such plans are existential failures because they are doctrinal failures). My experience with those kinds of essays is that even where they help for the moment they leave us more disabled and disastered in the future. But I do think there are better and worse questions to ask and ways to address those questions. So in this essay, I want to say something about both theology and disaster and so deal in some small way with the feeling of being disastered.

II. Theology as Therapy

Begin with the following claim: All theology comes after disaster. After all, the first story the church has to tell about human beings and their relationship to God is that having been created in and for paradise, we no longer live there. God used to walk in the garden with us, but

outside of Eden we strain to discern God's presence. So the first and primary relationship we were created for—the relationship with the one through whom we "live and move and have our being"—has been broken, and we experience that break as the first disaster. Theology comes after the fall; it comes after disaster.

Theology is not only what human beings have done since that first disaster. It's also what we have done because of that disaster. After all, "theology" is, by definition, words about God and our relationship with God. And all those words are how we have filled the space between us and God—the space that was created by our exit from Eden. Unable to commune consistently with God, we have turned to communicating about God. So lacking a sense of God's immediacy, we have done theology as a way of trying to make sense of the two apparently conflicting feelings that reside in us. The first is that we can be aware of a resilient goodness out there and that this goodness has a source. The second is that we are fragile, transient creatures who seem always at risk of being cut off from that goodness. Leather-bound armchairs and ivory tower appearances to the contrary, Christian theology has always been caught up in the types of questions that disasters force upon us because disasters drive us back to those two feelings.

As a result, we ought not treat the questions that disaster forces upon us as new or dangerous to our faith—or at least not as new or dangerous in themselves. They are echoes of the ancient questions that have long driven theological inquiry. Job asked such questions when his wealth, health, and family were taken from him. Jeremiah asked such questions as he faced the destruction of Jerusalem and the oncoming Babylonian exile. Jesus cried them from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Paul asked them, as did St. Augustine and Martin Luther and John Calvin and men and women throughout the ages. And if they had the freedom to ask them, we certainly do.

All this suggests at least two points worth making about doing theology after disaster. The first is that doing theology isn't about thinking abstract and obtuse ideas regarding metaphysical matters—or at least it shouldn't be. Instead, doing theology is a kind of therapy. It's one of the ways we deal with the demands that disasters place upon our psyches. It's a treatment for the suffering we see and feel. And like all good therapy, it isn't about giving answers, as if knowing the right thing would solve our problems. Among the countless pages written on theology, the valuable ones aren't so much attempts to build lofty and invulnerable if unlivable houses but to help us keep our feet when the waves sweep over us and to find our stars when the sky grows dark.

The second point follows from the first. It is that we err when we insist that new disasters demand new answers, as though we are the first to have such questions and centuries of theology-after-disaster are unhelpful to us in our new time of need. Much as sailors learn to make the night sky familiar so that when they can see only a few stars they can still sail, one of the sure ways to avoid feeling disastered may be to get familiar with theology ahead of time—especially if we're willing to treat theology as a therapy that always already comes after disaster. Like using a sailor's sextant, doing theology in anticipation of the next potential disaster takes practice, but also helps us find our stars after disaster (note, by the way, that it *helps* us after disaster but doesn't *protect* us from disaster). It would follow, then, that good theology provides therapy that actually helps. And like good therapy, good theology takes both time and effort.

Beyond the fact that they are attempts at answers rather than therapies (as if we shared in the mind of God), the various bad theological answers given immediately after disaster tend to be either too quick or too easy. And quick and easy answers tend towards cruelty and resignation:

- "God is punishing us" (or more likely, punishing "them," since one of our instinctive responses to disaster is to distance ourselves from it and those who suffer it) —as if the One worshipped by Christians were better described in terms of vengeance and destruction than love and redemption. God is just, but justice is neither arbitrary nor disproportionate, and we perceive disasters precisely as those events that are random and unfair.

- "This is all part of God's plan" —as if a little creative destruction should be no big deal in the grand scheme of things and we just need to get over our various senses of loss, grief, anger, frustration, and helplessness. God is at work in the world, but that work doesn't look like simple and comprehensible cause-and-effect equations. Besides, is a disaster really the time for a bold defense of God's sovereignty?

- "God is suffering with us" may be a good answer as far as it goes, but does it really go far enough? Are we willing to be content with a vision of a "God who cares" if that vision doesn't include a sense that God can actually do something about our suffering? After all, the clearest and most profound picture we have of God's willingness to suffer—Jesus' crucifixion—is also about God doing something about the suffering that comes from that first disaster. God is suffering with us and God is suffering because of us, but God is also defeating the powers that cause our suffering.

Rejecting cruel and impotent answers, where might we turn? Is there therapy that might help? Is there a balm in

Gilead? To get at those questions, I want to say something about disaster.

III. Disaster and Reorientation

Disasters aren't simply the causes of suffering; after all, many things cause suffering that we wouldn't necessarily call disasters: just punishment, strenuous exercise, a heavy workload, parenthood, etc. Instead, disasters are disastrous because they carry with them the threat of still more unwarranted suffering. They threaten the ways we relate to others: loved ones can be lost; neighbors can cause pain; strangers—especially in huge numbers—can be killed by events we all-too-casually refer to as "acts of God." They threaten the way we understand ourselves: as secure or stable or safe. And they threaten the way we view the world: where there was once order, we see chaos reign; where once we saw the loving hand of an omnipotent God, now we see cruelty and impotence (which is why the theological answers above, though bad, are unsurprising).

I think this is, in part, why disasters can be so personal: the tragic loss of one's own child can feel every bit as painful and uncontrolled and chaotic as the deaths of 250,000 people halfway around the world. Disasters prey on the very things that are most important to us: our relations, our selves, our resources for going on in the world. They hide our stars—the bright lights of our world—from us and threaten to remove them from us forever.

If this is what disasters do, then Christian theology provides at least two modes of therapy for us, one that comforts and another that challenges. The comforting mode of therapy is this: that at the very heart of Christian theology is an attempt to respond to disaster. It is the belief that in Jesus Christ, God has defeated all those things that threaten us. Relationships that have been sundered are not beyond the power of redemption. Lives that have been lost are not beyond the power of resurrection. Meaning that has been lost is not beyond the power of restoration. Sin, death, and evil are still part of our world; disasters make this clear. But they do not rule it, and their powers in it are ultimately limited by the one who has defeated them. So we will still experience alienation, loss, and confusion, but we will not be ruled by them. And in that time when God completes what God has begun in the resurrection, they will be no more.

Believing this at any time can be hard enough; believing it after disaster can be well-nigh impossible. In its facile form, it is literally too good to be believed. But belief isn't something we just have or don't have. Instead, belief is something we do—something we practice and, in practicing, grow in. Through a lifetime of long, patient, and sometimes hard practice, we learn to believe. And if the witnesses of two millennia of saints are any indication, as we learn to believe, we develop the type of resilient faith that can help us not only to face disaster but to give comfort in prayer, word, and deed to those who have been disastered. So if disasters disable us by hiding our guiding stars from us, then this mode of therapy is an attempt to gain a sense of agency—a sense that we can do something—by treating disasters as real but refusing to see them as the ultimate truth of our situations. None of us see as many stars as we would like while seeking guidance, but through patient practice we learn both to see more of them and to share their light with others.

There is also a challenging mode of therapy, which is more difficult and more controversial. It is this: disasters teach us that some of the lights we've been using to guide our lives are neither fixed nor permanent. That is, being disastered can push us into a process of critical reevaluation and reorientation. In the process, we learn to love some things differently (letting loose relational bonds that are too tight and practicing loving neighbors and enemies that we have heretofore rejected), to see our lives more honestly (as always vulnerable but always bound to God), and to engage the world more humbly (as full of complexity and mystery beyond our understanding). Disasters can remind us that we can be too attached to the world, which is passing away. In this challenging mode of therapy, it is our suffering itself that is therapeutic, our being disastered that is reorienting.

I do not know whether all of us can or should enter into this challenging mode of therapy (nor even how well I can), and I am certain that we should enter it only within the context of careful and insightful pastoral care. After all, this mode of therapy—like all potent treatments for suffering—can go horribly wrong as it tempts us to answer the question, "Why is this happening?" with the claim, "Because we deserve it"—a claim that only returns us to a theology of cruelty. At its core, though, this mode of therapy is an attempt to put into practice the conviction that God can bring good even out of disaster.

For if God is sovereign and if God's will is for the redemption of the world, then God will have much that is disastrous from which to bring good. This side of the fullness of the Kingdom of God, disasters will come and we will never be fully prepared for them. As a result, our stars will always flicker and, at times, disappear in the night. But there will be a dawn when a new and bright star will shine unquenchable and glorious.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Have you ever felt disastered? If so, how did that feel and how did the experience change you?
2. What theological answers to disasters have you heard? What did you think about those answers?
3. What do you think about the idea that theology should be understood as therapy?
4. What do you think of the two modes of therapy described in Part III of this essay?