

Reclaiming the Covenant after Disaster

Kathleen M. O'Connor

*William Marcellus McPheeters Professor of Old Testament
Columbia Theological Seminary*

Decatur, Georgia

Disasters create theological turmoil for anyone who cares about God and the world. The tsunami, Katrina, genocide in Darfur, war in Iraq, the earthquake in Pakistan, Kashmir, and India, and the mudslide in the Philippines—to name a few—force us to face “the boundaries of our own mental maps,” whether we are their direct victims or distant witnesses. But people smack in the middle of a catastrophe, whose world has crashed down upon them, who have been “disastered”—as Mark Douglas so strikingly puts it—are usually benumbed, silenced, and adrift in the vast violence and chaos that has been loosed upon them.

In such cases, good theology is therapy. I do not think theology is always therapeutic; sometimes it is abstract and removed from embodied life and human yearning. Not that long ago, some theologians rejected the idea that theology could be therapy. They thought psychological speech had diluted and displaced the church’s language of the sacred. Douglas reminds us that, at its best, theology is a pastoral, healing activity, never more needed, perhaps, than among victims of the disasters across the world.

But a disaster cannot be prepared for theologically in any real sense. We cannot get ourselves ready. If we can, we are not speaking of disaster. A disaster is more than sad or tragic happenings. According to trauma and disaster studies—an emerging interdisciplinary field—a disaster is disastrous when it exceeds the ability of a community to cope. The community is “wrecked” and so is its theology. Disasters overwhelm nearly everything that makes life meaningful. The impact of traumatic violence at the heart of disasters overwhelms people physically, economically, mentally, socially, theologically. Disasters not only destroy the physical world and resources needed to get on with daily life, they also leave hidden, long-term effects. Not the least of these is loss of trust in God, the world, and other people.

This is because the mind cannot absorb traumatic violence as it happens. Violence overwhelms the psyche; it cannot be taken in. Instead, memories of the violence haunt the mind, like a ghost, stomping around and agitating in repetitive reoccurrences of the violent memories. Cognitive psychologists report that traumatic violence imprints itself on the brain, something like the traces of a plow upon a field. The memories remain separate from the larger story of the individual or the

community. The result is loss of language to name what happened. Words may remain but words adequate to tell about the whole catastrophe cannot be found. This means that violent memories remain fragmented and unabsorbed into life, as in shell-shock. It also means that victims are often isolated from one another in their numbed condition.

To recover from disaster requires the re-creation of language, usually over a long process of healing. Renewed language must enable survivors to re-visit events, but gently, indirectly. It must discover ways to speak about what happened, to reframe it, and so to absorb it into the community’s larger story. This is the work of theologians and counselors, pastors and preachers, poets and artists. In the best of worlds, it would also be the work of politicians. Healing requires new speech but not made from completely new ingredients. To rebuild communal identity, victims of disaster, need continuity with their past traditions to reframing the violence and make it part of their story.

The biblical book of Jeremiah is an example of therapeutic theology born from the fires of military invasion, occupation, and deportation during the Babylonian period. Instead of marching straight into the disaster and speaking about it in factual, straightforward fashion, Jeremiah transposes the disaster into a world of poetry. The book talks about the invasion as the coming of a mythic “foe from the north,” a heavenly army, with horse like eagles and suprahuman warriors. This army does not attack a nation but another poetic figure, Daughter Zion. She is the city of Jerusalem, personified as a woman. A heavenly army attacks a woman, a tent dweller, defenseless before the onslaught. Jeremiah transposes the Babylonian invasion into a symbolic world. It presents the disaster at a slight distance from historical reality. This helps the community to face its traumatic past. It gives them words to talk about it without re-terrifying them. It does what Emily Dickinson says of poetry. It “tells the truth slant.”

One of the most certain consequences of disaster and even of individual traumatic events like the loss of a child or an automobile accident is loss of trust in God and the world. This is why disaster cannot really be prepared for theologically, as Douglas proposes. Maybe faith can be built up before hand, maybe a community can have a theology of suffering and the cross in place that will help

them survive, but it is the old theological traditions that collapse in a disaster. Beliefs about the meaning and order of the world that once supported people like confidence in divine protection, security in the orderliness of the universe, belief that God dwells among us and cares for us—these no longer apply. These went down with the buildings, with confidence in government, hope for support from neighbors. This is the theological crisis in the wake of disasters.

If the community of faith is to survive, it needs its own language and theological symbols, but rigid orthodoxy will not work because the old truths seem no longer reliable. The book of Jeremiah walks this theological tightrope in a myriad of ways. One of its most prominent therapeutic acts concerns the covenant. In the face of the nation's fall, how could God's covenant with the people be intact? Jeremiah does not reimpose the broken covenant; he re-imagines it. God is making a new covenant with them, "not like the old one." This one out-covenants the covenant. "I will put my teaching into their inmost being and write it on their hearts" (Jer 31:31-33). Jeremiah's new covenant is a highly therapeutic act for the victims of disaster. The new covenant revives their old tradition in an even more intimate relationship with their old covenanting God. It is a sign that the community is healing.

Questions for discussion

1. Have you had experiences when your world seemed to collapse partially or totally?
2. What helped you cling to or recover your faith in God in the midst of loss?
3. Did biblical passages help? Did you discover ones previously neglected? Did you imagine them in new ways?