

“Intercessions After the Storm:
A Reflection on the Work of Public Intercessions”

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Before Hurricane Katrina brought its devastations to New Orleans, Biloxi and the Gulf Coast, Hurricane Andrew had been the costliest storm in United States history. Andrew, which made landfall in South Florida on August 24, 1992, left more than 250,000 homeless and caused over \$39 billion in property damage.¹

At the time, I was a doctoral student at Boston University. During July and August of 1992, I was working as the liturgist for the Sunday morning service at Marsh Chapel, the University Chapel. In addition to our regular congregation, the services were broadcast on WBUR, the public radio station sponsored by the University, and on several other public stations throughout New England. I suppose I was something of a radio liturgist.

On the Sunday following the storm—August 30th—I offered various intercessions related to the storm, and my prayer drew strong reaction from one of our radio listeners. In his forthright letter, our listener, who, by his own admission was not a believer, wrote the following:

“Although I understand a wide variety of Christian belief pretty well, my brain crashed into a wall when the Pastor...asked God to show favor upon the victims of Hurricane Andrew, to save them from disease, hunger, and so forth. I cannot reconcile this with any consistent model of what God does or is. If God didn’t want these people to get sick and die, why did he dispatch, or not quell, the Hurricane? ...

I am *not* merely asking about the generic problem of Evil, or debating the existence of God ... I am simply at a loss to explain what consistent formulation of God’s role in the world allows for both the Hurricane and His intervention in its aftermath.

I would have understood had I heard, “God, Thou who didst unleash this horrible force upon us in punishment for our sin, teach us Thy Ways that we might better be in Thy Favor”...

I am not trying to be sarcastic, ridiculing, or demeaning: I am just dumbfounded as to what consistent conception of God’s responsibilities allows such a prayer to be offered. I’d be interested in your response. Thank you.”

His letter reached me a little over a week later. I was intrigued by it, and I was, indeed,

¹ “Hurricane Andrew Ten Years Later,” a special report, *The St. Petersburg Times*.
<http://www.sptimes.com/2002/webspecials02/andrew/>
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quite interested in making a response. I stopped and thought for awhile before sending the following response on September 17th of that year:

Greetings! I am writing in response to your letter of August 30th, in which you stated your concern regarding the prayer I offered that morning in Marsh Chapel. Thank you for sharing your objections, which have served to sharpen my own thinking.

Before proceeding with my reflections, I think it best to share my basic strategy for organizing public intercessions, as well as a copy of the prayer text in question. Generally, I arrange the prayers under five basic headings. This classic outline proceeds as follows:

We pray for . . .
the people of this congregation
those who suffer and those in trouble
the concerns of this local community . . .
the world, its people and its leaders . . .
the church universal – its leaders, its members, and its mission
(cf The United Methodist Hymnal, p. 877)

Many traditional outlines add a sixth category, offering thanksgivings and prayers for “the communion of saints.”

That day, under the second heading, I prayed as follows:

“We pray for victims of Hurricane Andrew. Grant them protection from the disease and chaos that follow the storm. Provide food and shelter for those left homeless, and grant encouragement and strength to those who must rebuild.

We pray also for those who are sick, hungry, and homeless through less spectacular causes. Grant them all that they need, O Lord; especially, grant them supportive community and friends.”

As you can see, I followed a parallel structure, praying both for those placed at risk by the storm and for others – less well noticed – hurt by the machinations of a government and a culture that leaves people homeless and without adequate food and health care. I was attempting to respond to the media coverage of the Hurricane Andrew disaster while at the same time refusing to be totally preoccupied by it. Thus, I would contend that the question “If God didn’t want these people to get sick and die, why did he dispatch, or not quell, the Hurricane?” should be expanded. On the basis of the prayer which I offered one could also ask, “If God didn’t want the homeless placed at constant risk, then why did he allow the formation of negligent and unresponsive cultures and governments?” The question should be asked: If every human action and decision is not strictly choreographed, then should we assume that everything else in creation, including the movement of storms, is determined by divine fiat? Whatever we make of it, at this time there seems to be a mystery present which we might call “freedom,” however inadequate that destination may be.

Quite correctly, you noted “I am not asking about the generic problem of

Evil, or debating the existence of God.” Clearly, you are discussing the believing community’s response to the problem of evil. The issues are related, but distinguishable.

Of course, the problem of evil is a given in most any theological discussion. Yet, in terms of the covenant theology expressed in both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, the problem of evil is primarily God’s problem. Our narrative proclaims that God looked on Israel’s bondage and affliction, acted to set them free, and began to form a community faithful to a new vision. Even when that community rebelled, the story says that Moses interceded, in essence telling God, “You called this rebellious crowd, and promised to be good to them. I insist that you keep your word” (cf. Ex. 32:11-14). If this murmuring band was to be tamed, God would have to find a way. The Christian scriptures continue this theme, insisting that God addressed the problem of death (sin, alienation . . . evil) in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ and in the formation of a new covenant community, the church. In the church, we await the promised resolution of the problem, when homelessness – caused either by hurricanes or by negligence – will be no more. Again, however, the formation of “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev. 21:1-4) is primarily God’s work.

So, then, what of the faith community and our response to the problem of evil? Of course, we are not without our commission to respond. Ours, however, is an agenda much more modest than God’s. Quite humbly, with God’s help (always that!) we must do our best to avoid compounding evil, and to respond with intercessions on behalf of those victimized. These intercessions take many forms, including relief ministries, political action, speaking words of hope and encouragement, and to the offering of prayers.

What, then, should be done in the church’s liturgical assembly? Finally, I have arrived at your specific concern. First of all, our tradition cautions against speculating as to the cause and / or meaning of any particular tragedy. Surely, this is the teaching of the Book of Job! When we make such speculations (e.g., “God, Thou who didst unleash this horrible force upon us in punishment for our sin . . .”) at best we risk appearing self-righteous, as did Job’s “comforters.” (Are the citizens of Massachusetts less sinful than those in Florida? Are the people of northern Florida more righteous than those in southern Florida?) At worst, we risk causing tremendous harm. Note, for instance, the mainline Christian community’s refusal to describe the AIDS virus as an expression of God’s wrath. Such speculation into the counsels of the Almighty serves to increase homophobia, discrimination, and societal callousness. Thus, we avoid doing so, and brand those who do make such connections (e.g. Pat Robertson and Pat Buchanan) as marginal and dangerous.

I think my response gives a reasonable accounting for our Christian practice of intercessory prayer, even in the face of the Hurricane, and, for the most part, I still endorse what I wrote in 1992. As we saw once again with Hurricanes Katrina and Rita, such storms are media events and the media coverage evokes our compassion. That is good. Nevertheless, there are homeless in our cities every day, and every day refugees

come across the Chihuahua Desert into Texas and other parts of the American Southwest. If we're going to pray for the Hurricane refugees—as we should—then we should also pray about these others as well.

As we experienced in 1992, we still have persons, even Christians, who are quite willing to posit that sickness and tragedy manifests the judgment of God. In their view, New Orleans was devastated because God—finally—had grown tired of its debauchery (this even though the French Quarter seems to have fared better than much of the city!). Such misunderstandings will always be with us, and we will always need to resist them.

Today, in speaking of natural events such as Hurricanes, I might simply speak of “mystery” and not use the term “freedom” that I had used in 1992, yet whatever terms I might use, I would not blame a Hurricane on God. In speaking to a Christian audience today, I would also be more likely to make a more explicit connection between our intercessory work and our baptismal call to resist evil.

There are, however, deeper issues to address. Leaving Hurricanes aside for the moment—I find that we continually need to account for our general Christian *praxis* of intercessory prayer. How do we handle this potentially explosive topic, when some are assured that they can see God's hand of judgment in all tragedy? How do we respond when others tell us that prayers made with the right words in the correct amount of faith will always yield the results we seek? Because of claims such as these, some seriously compassionate Christians end up despairing of intercessory prayer altogether, and if they must offer them, do so in rather bland, non-specific ways. So today, more than ever, when I teach about the liturgical work of intercessory prayer I find myself stopping and asking students “Why pray at all?”

In response to that question, I will continue to insist that we are called to join with our high priest Jesus Christ in his intercessory work (Heb. 4: 14-16) and that, as with Jesus, such intercessory work also means “emptying [ourselves and] taking the form of a servant” (Phil. 2: 7), interceding, as it were, with our very bodies as well as with our words.

By the way, about six weeks after I sent my letter, my correspondent answered with a short note in which he thanked me for my detailed response and promised to devote some serious thought to my claims.

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