

Caller ID From the Source of the Universe: Another Providence Sermon

Jonah 2:1-9

Psalm 29

Romans 9:1-5

Matthew 14:22-33



Recently I have been reading some books written by folks like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens who have been labelled the “New Atheists,” and I am going to let you in on a secret. The secret is that these books are not about what you might think they’re about. Given the publicity that the New Atheists have been getting, you might think there must be some new knockdown argument that these people have worked out, and the New Atheists finally have proof that there is no God. But what I’ve discovered when I read the New Atheists is that they’re just the Old Atheists recycled. They have no new arguments.

There is some discussion of how science can explain everything we need to know, but any first year under-graduate philosophy student should be able to tell you why this is just not the case. There is also some discussion about problems that have supposedly been raised by contemporary biblical scholarship, but, again, any first year student in biblical studies at a decent seminary [like Trinity School for Ministry, where I teach] has a more sophisticated understanding of the Bible and contemporary biblical scholarship than these folks exhibit.

There is also usually an account of some of the horrible things that Christians have done in the name of God, but anyone who has studied any church history at all knows about things that make their stories seem tame. After all, it was Christians who wrote books like *Fox's Book of Martyrs*, not atheists. It was Roman Catholics who made Joan of Arc a saint, not Enlightenment freethinkers. The names of Thomas More and Thomas Cranmer, the sacking of Constantinople by the Crusaders, the hanging and drowning and burning at the stake of Anabaptists by just about everyone, and the pogroms against the Jews, shows that the committing of atrocious acts of Christians against one another and against those of other religions, has been an equal opportunity sport.

What should be no surprise is that the real argument that comes up time and again in these books is a problem that has been with us since at least the time when the Book of Job was written, the problem of evil and suffering in the world. As the old argument goes, if God is good, he would want to prevent evil and suffering. If God is all powerful, he could prevent evil and suffering. Since evil and suffering exist, it is clear that God is either not good or not powerful, or, more likely, there is no God at all.

Examples abound. The atheist Christopher Hitchens has written a book entitled *God is Not Great*. If you read the book, it is clear that what Hitchens really means is that God is not good. The New Testament scholar Bart Ehrman, who was once a born-again Christian, now calls himself an agnostic, and has written numerous books attacking orthodox Christian faith. However, he is quite clear that it was not biblical scholarship that made him abandon his faith, but the problem that bad things happen to good people.

Of course, this should not be a surprise. Anyone who has never had a moment when he or she has questioned whether God exists or God is good in the light of something bad that has happened in their life is either sheltered or is just not paying

attention. Christians worship a Savior who prayed that the cup of suffering might pass him by (and it didn't), and who cried out "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" from a Roman cross. A religion one of whose central tenets is that God the Father abandoned God the Son to death by crucifixion is not exactly naïve about bad things happening to good people.

What is odd about these books is that the critics do not actually seem to notice how it is that the Christian faith addresses problems of evil and suffering. I have yet to read the atheist text that even begins to consider seriously the implications of what it might mean that Christians believe in an incarnate God who was put to death by his own creatures, even the religious leaders of his own covenant people. Rather, all these books begin with assumptions about what the authors think God should do or what they would do if they were in charge of the universe. Since God has not created the kind of universe they would have created, God must not exist. Or, rather, the very fact that evil and suffering exists in the universe at all is definitive proof that there is no god.

In this sermon I want to look at this morning's readings to notice that the Bible actually deals with problems of evil and suffering in a way that these critics just do not seem to notice. For purposes of this sermon, I won't distinguish between moral evil and "bad things" that just happen to us—what philosophers of religion call "physical evil." By "evil," I just mean "bad things," things that threaten us, things we fear, things that cause us suffering, whether these things are caused by our own sins, by the evil actions of others, or whether they are physical disasters like earthquakes, cancer, or children born with birth defects. Christian theologians and philosophers point out important differences between these various kinds of evil, but I don't have time to go there this morning.

The Bible is not a philosophy text. Scripture does not give us a detailed theological or philosophical discussion of the

nature of evil, and how God deals with it. Instead the Bible provides numerous examples and short explanations for the reasons why particular bad things happen to particular people at particular times: God's judgment, human sin, the fall of Adam, the inexplicable suffering of innocents like Job or the blind and deaf that Jesus healed, the battle between good and evil in the Book of Revelation. However, while there is no detailed theological or philosophical theory, there is a general pattern that speaks to the question of how God deals with evil and suffering, and we can see those broad details in this morning's readings.

First, then, let us look at the Psalm. Psalm 29 is a hymn of praise to God as Creator, and it focuses on God's sovereignty in creation, as well as the way that creation manifests God's goodness and care for his creatures, but also his sheer majesty and transcendence. The Hebrews were a pastoral people, a rural people. In the Bible, there are no detailed philosophical arguments for God's existence from the fact of the existence of the world like those we find in the writings of Thomas Aquinas, but the biblical writers seemed to have thought that it was obvious that God's existence, his greatness, and his goodness are evident in the world he has created. Time and time again, especially in the Psalms, the biblical writers proclaim a sense of awe, a sense of beauty, a sense of order, a sense of the fragility of creation that comes from observing God's creation. Notice particularly the water imagery in this Psalm: "The voice of the Lord is over the waters; the God of glory thunders, the Lord, over many waters." (Psalm 29:3-4) Notice also God's care for his creation: "The voice of the Lord makes the deer give birth." (v. 8). This awareness of the divine presence seems especially characteristic of rural and pastoral people because they are close to nature in their ordinary lives. Insofar as Western culture has become urbanized and cut off from nature, we seem to have become progressively secular.

My wife Jennie and I just returned from a vacation where we spent some time in Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado, and, as we got away from the city and were surrounded by nature as far as the eye could see, we found ourselves overwhelmed alternately with awe, by unspeakable beauty; we experienced a sense of tranquility, and a sense of our own smallness in light of the hugeness of magnificent mountains, and open skies, and meadows and plains that stretched for miles and miles. There were even some moments of genuine terror as we drove over the highest road in the Continental Divide and looked down over the edge of sheer mountain sides to drops of thousands of feet. I thought at the time, "There are no atheists in National Parks." John Muir, who was one of the pioneers in arguing for the preservation of natural spaces, untouched by human development, once wrote: "God's love is manifest in the landscape as in a face."

Of course, it is not true that there are no atheists in National Parks. Presumably, Christopher Hitchens or Richard Dawkins could visit Rocky Mountain National Park and return unchanged. But their refusal to see God's love in a landscape is sheer dogmatism. We have no reason to think that Dawkins' and Hitchens' perspective is the correct one and Muir's was not.

So that is the first element in the pattern. God is Creator. He loves his creation. He is sovereign over his creation, and his goodness can be discerned in his love and care for creation.

But if God is the good Creator who cares for his creation, then what about the "bad things" in creation, the things that threaten and destroy? Let's turn to Jonah. What we find in Jonah 2: 1-9 is in capsule form a description of how the God who is Creator deals with evil and suffering in his creation. That God is Creator does not mean that bad things do not happen. It does mean that God is present in the midst of our trouble, and that God brings good out of the bad things. It

means that God deals with evil by redemption.

The prayer in Jonah is a classic example of a Song of Thanksgiving. We can find similar imagery in the Psalms, for example, Psalm 34 and 40. Jonah recounts that he was in despair, but that he called out to God: "I called out to the Lord, out of my distress, and he answered me." (Jonah 2:2). As Jonah plunges literally into the watery depths, God saves him. We tend to think of the great fish in the story as sent by God to punish Jonah. But in the context we could argue that rather it is the fish that saves Jonah. As Jonah descends into the depths, God appoints the great fish to snatch Jonah from "the belly of Sheol." (v. 2) After Jonah was rescued from the watery deep, he prays, "you brought up my life from the pit." (v. 6) In consequence, Jonah responds with Thanksgiving. "But I with the voice of thanksgiving will sacrifice to you what I have vowed to pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord." (v. 9)

As with the recognition of God's presence in creation as the Good Creator, Jonah's response is one of faith. The New Atheists can easily make the argument that it is sheer coincidence when someone is rescued from or survives a near death experience. And, of course, there are lots of people who are not rescued and do not survive. But who is to say that Dawkins or Hitchens are right and the Book of Jonah is wrong? That the spontaneous feeling of gratitude that we feel when we come through the other side of some bad patch is nothing more than an illusion? Is not gratitude a fitting response when we find ourselves rescued from the depths? To whom do the New Atheists give thanks when they feel grateful for being alive?

Finally, let us turn to the gospel story of Jesus walking on the water in Matthew 14. If we put together the creation imagery of Psalm 29 and the thanksgiving imagery of deliverance from Jonah's Prayer, we have two indispensable clues to understanding this gospel narrative. In the story, Jesus' disciples are in trouble. They are in a boat on the sea. The boat is "a long way from land, beaten by the waves,"

and the wind is against them (v. 24). Then something amazing happens. Jesus comes to his disciples by walking on the sea, and, understandably perhaps, they have a case of mistaken identity. They fear he is a ghost. A concise way of describe their response might be, they were "freaked out." But then Jesus identifies himself: "Be of good cheer! It is I! Do not be afraid!" (v. 27) Peter responds by trying to walk to Jesus, but he begins to sink, and, like Jonah and the Psalm writers, he cries out. Just as God rescued Jonah from the watery depths with the help of the fish, Jesus rescues Peter. Finally, note how the story closes. As soon as they get into the boat, the wind stopped.

To anyone familiar with Psalms like our Psalm, and with stories like the Jonah story that include prayers for deliverance, this should be an "Aha!" moment. The story leads to one inevitable conclusion. It is what I want to call Caller ID from the Source of the Universe. When the telephone rings, we don't know who is calling, but if we have Caller ID these days, we can tell quickly: "This is Martha" or "This is Phil," or "This is someone I don't know." When Jesus walks across the water, when he rescues the disciples and Peter from the storm in answer to their prayers, it is as if the universe's Caller ID is providing an identification. If you know your Bible, only one character does things like this. When Jesus rescues his disciples from the storm, and calms the sea, Caller ID is saying "Your Creator is on the line."

That is why the disciples respond as they do: "And those in the boat worshiped him, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God." (v. 33)

So that is the third element in the Bible's general pattern of how a good Creator deals with bad things. First, God is good, God is Creator, and God cares for his creation. Second, that God is Creator does not mean that no bad things happen, but that even in evil and suffering and the threats of death and destruction, God remains with us, that God brings us through

the worst, and that God rescues and redeems. How God rescues and redeems is more of the story, and would involve talk of how God has chosen a special people, first Israel to whom he gave his law, and now the church, and we just don't have time for that in this sermon. But, finally, and most important, God redeems not only by creating and rescuing and redeeming a people and giving a Law but by becoming one of us. The Jesus who walks across the water to his disciples is the Creator who controls and calms the storm.

That Jesus is this Creator come among us is the heart of the story of how God deals with the bad things that happen. It is not just that Jesus calms the storm, but that he himself endures the worst storm that his creatures can throw at him. Recall another reference to the Jonah story in the gospels. Jesus stated: "For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." (Matthew 12:40) At the deepest level of the biblical pattern of how God deals with evil is the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. In the biblical account, the very Creator of the Universe, who loves and cares for his creation, who does not abandon but rescues those in distress, rescues them by himself becoming one of them, and goes through what they go through. As Jonah sank into the depths, so Jesus faced the cross, and the greatest evil that humans fear, death itself. As Jonah was rescued from the depths, so God the Father rescued his Son by raising him from death on the third day.

In one of my favorite essays, Dorothy Sayers refers to the incarnation of God in Jesus as "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged." ⁽¹⁾ If the incarnation is true, she says, then, for whatever reason that God made human beings, "limited and suffering and subject to death – He had the honesty and courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with his creation, he has kept his own rules and played fair," she writes. And, of course, a subset of the final theme is

that the followers of Jesus, his church, share in his death and resurrection as we become his disciples through faith and the sacraments. So from top to bottom, from beginning to end, the Christian version of how it is that God deals with suffering and evil is that God loves and cares for his creation, but also takes it seriously, so seriously that he provides rescue and redemption from evil and suffering in that creation by taking the full consequences of death and evil on himself, and coming out on the other side, and taking us with him.

That has interesting implications. It does not mean that we get to live in a world that we might have preferred to make up ourselves, a world in which bad things never happen, or that we never have to endure suffering or evil ourselves. It does mean that even in the midst of the worst that the world can throw at us, the God who came among us in Jesus is always with us. It does mean that the God who endured the cross asks of us nothing he has not gone through himself. It does mean that our way to participate in God's way of dealing with suffering and evil is to follow Jesus, which may mean taking up a cross as he did. But it also means, that, ultimately, God will deal with suffering and evil by redemption and rescue. Just as, in the story of Jonah, Jonah was rescued from the depths, some day the entire universe will be rescued from the depths, and will rejoice with Jonah's gratitude: "I called out to the Lord, and he answered me . . . With the voice of thanksgiving I will sacrifice to you; what I have vowed I will pay. Salvation belongs to the Lord!" (Jonah 2:9)

Now, again . . . I cannot prove to you that the Christian version of how to deal with evil and suffering is right, and the New Atheist version of how the world works is wrong. The New Atheists can always claim that Jesus was a deluded prophet, and his disciples just made up the story of his resurrection. I can say that there is as much faith involved in saying that evil is unredeemable (which is what the New

Atheists are really saying) as in saying that God deals with evil by rescue and redemption. And I also think that I can say that if the Christian version of things is true, if Jesus really is alive, it is not only the case that God is Great, but that God is supremely Good. And, finally, as a Christian, I think that the Christian approach has one great advantage. It gives me a reason for why I sometimes just feel grateful, grateful for things like the Rocky Mountains, and being rescued from distress. And it gives me Someone to whom I can say "Thank You."

1. *Creed or Chaos? Why Christians Must Choose Either Dogma or Disaster*. (Originally published London: Methuen, 1947).