

Date: March 12, 2006

SUNDAY: Lent 2

SERMON: Acts of God?

Text(s): 1 Kings 17:8-24; Mark 8:27-34

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Some of you know that in that windstorm a few weeks ago, one of the large white pines in our front yard came crashing down. Very fortunately, it didn't hit the house, though it did take down our power, telephone, and cable lines and a couple of smaller trees. By some quirk of fortune, we still had electricity, even though the electric line was on the ground under the fallen tree.

Our homeowner's insurance paid about a third of the cost of removing the fallen trees, for which we were grateful. In many insurance policies there is often a clause that says something like, "Exclusions: Damages sustained by floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, or other acts of God." I don't know where the insurance industry learned its theology, though I suspect that's about the nearest God gets to any business conducted by the company—receiving the blame for any catastrophe or disaster not directly attributable to human action.

In this week's *New Yorker*, there's a very funny cartoon: a lawyer is sitting at his desk talking on the telephone. The caption reads, "*An act of God? Not a problem— we sue God.*" Given the fact that we have four lawyers joining as new members today, I realize that citing that cartoon may be risky, but I couldn't resist. I'm waiting with bated breath for the preacher jokes that are likely to turn up in my email.

The insurance companies are not alone in this theological finger-pointing. We too often point the finger at God to explain things like the cancer that strikes a loved one and snatches them away from us. Even if we don't directly accuse God of causing it, we at least ask, "Why did God allow this to happen?" We hold God accountable for the seemingly random tragedies that strike us, particularly when they have no observable human

cause.

The tendency to blame God for bad things that happen that are not directly the result of human malice or obvious failure is an age-old habit. It's an expression of the helplessness we feel when we're caught in the grip of forces beyond our control. We have to complain to someone, and God becomes as good a target as any other.

We see this finger-pointing in the story of Elijah and the widow of Zarephath which we heard this morning. Last week, we saw how this story of Elijah raised questions about the difference between Elijah's word and God's word. God's actions were bound to, but not limited by Elijah's. But as we saw, although God did not overturn Elijah's word, God did give Elijah a three-year seminary course out in the wilderness to try to teach Elijah that his own perceptions and will were not always identical with God's. Until the drought became too fierce, Elijah was sustained by wild animals, and then, was sent by God to be provided for by a Gentile widow, a worshiper of those very pagan gods that so aroused Elijah's wrath.

That's where our story picks up this morning. And it raises the very pertinent question: How does God act? Where do we look to see the "acts of God?"

When the widow's son is stricken with a deadly illness, both she and Elijah immediately revert to their "insurance company theology." Despite the demonstration of God's goodness and power in giving them a self-replenishing supply of flour and oil during the famine, when unforeseen disaster strikes, both immediately conclude that it's an act of God.

That it's a real disaster is without question. The widow's son was her social security system. She had no one else. There were no pensions for widows. Widows had no social place in many ancient cultures. Once married, she was the property and responsibility of her husband, and when he died, she became essentially a non-person. The death of her son

not only caused her the pain and sorrow of bereavement; it also virtually condemned her to a life of poverty and misery or even death. Better they both had died during the famine than she be left alone to face life with no means of support. So it's understandable, perhaps, when she lashes out at Elijah, and through him, of course, at Elijah's God, whom he represents. "*What do you have against me, O man of God,*" she cries out, "*that you have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance and cause the death of my son?*"

This is a very revealing statement, isn't it? Not only does she buy into that notion that when inexplicable disaster strikes, it's an act of God, but she also buys into the related notion that when bad things happen, they happen as punishment for something bad she's done. This is clearly not a rational position. But it's a very human reaction nonetheless. Something in this situation has triggered an attack of guilt about something in her past, though we never find out what it is. She knows what it is, however, and whatever it is, it still has power over her.

We all know what a common human reaction that is. Regardless of how sophisticated or educated we become, regardless of how rational we claim to be, in many of us, whenever something really bad or painful happens to us, at a very primitive, even irrational, level, there's a little voice that whispers in our gut, "I'm being punished." Some of us have learned not to pay attention to that voice, but many of us have not, and it can be emotionally and spiritually crippling. But I'd guess that we've all heard it or felt it. Which of us hasn't done something that we're ashamed of or feel guilty about? So it's not surprising that those hidden feelings of guilt or unworthiness should pop to the surface when a sudden disruption occurs in our lives. There's a line in Charles Wesley's great hymn, "*O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing,*" that speaks exactly to this point. Unfortunately, since that hymn originally had 18 verses, most hymnals pick and choose which of the verses they'll include, and

neither of our hymnals have included the verse that contains that line. But in that hymn there's a verse that begins,

*Christ breaks the power of cancelled sin,
He sets the prisoner free.*

Even cancelled sin, even sin that has been forgiven, as Wesley realized, still has power to oppress us with perpetual guilt, to bring it to our remembrance, as this poor widow tells Elijah. The gospel—the good news—is that Christ can break even that power—the power of cancelled sin— and set us free.

Elijah's response to the widow's angry and fearful question lets us know that he, also buys into that insurance company theology. The woman blasts him with her angry, anguished question, and he takes the case right back to God. He's not taking the rap for this tragedy. "*O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying by killing her son?*" I can't believe you'd do such a terrible thing, God. What perverse pleasure can you get for killing this poor woman's son when she's been so good to me and has trusted your word that you would provide for her needs during this famine? Then he literally wraps himself around the child and begins to intercede for him with God.

If Elijah's theology was defective, at least he wasn't afraid to let God feel his anger and his sense of outrage. We're often afraid even to do that, aren't we? We feel that we have to act pious and say, "Well, I don't understand all this, but I'm sure God must know best, so I'll just have to accept this awful thing as God's will." If there's anything constructive to learn from Elijah's response here, it's that we'd probably all be a lot healthier emotionally and spiritually if we did let all our hidden anger at God for the inexplicable disasters that overtake us, come out in our prayers.

The Psalms, which are all liturgical prayers— human speech to God that address

every conceivable condition of human life—often do just that. They are full of angry complaints that God is either not paying attention or has it in for us, or is out to get us. The speakers in the Psalms often whine or point the finger of blame at God for their troubles or are full of self-pity or expressions of violent anger. Psalm 137, for example, is a lament for the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians, and in it, the psalmist prays, “O Babylon, you devastator, Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rocks!” Are any of us honest enough to give vent to such furious anger in our prayers to God? I’m glad such prayers are in our Bible, for I think that what such prayers teach us, is that by giving honest voice to our terrors, our bitterness, our anger in our prayers, we go a long way toward disarming those feelings. We get them out of our system, so that we don’t literally have to dash our enemies’ babies against the rocks. We give all that rage, all that fear, all that anger to God, who can be trusted to know what to do with it. And in so doing, we ourselves are freed from the destructive power of such irrational emotions.

On the Sunday after the attacks of 9/11, at the American Church in Paris, we actually prayed one of those psalms, Psalm 10, as part of our worship. It starts with the familiar lament, “*Why, O Lord, do you stand far off and hide yourself in times of trouble?*” and ends with a plea that God will “*break the arm of the wicked.*” Afterward, people kept remarking on how therapeutic that was. We could start the healing because we had prayed out our hurt and rage.

What Elijah and the widow at least begin to learn was that, in fact, the child’s deadly illness was not God’s work after all. “*God listened to the voice of Elijah; the child’s life came into him again, and he revived.*” There’s the real “act of God,” you see— not the cause of the disaster, not the taking of life, not the punishment for some past sin, but the giving of new life. And what is more, it is when Elijah

himself really invests himself in the widow’s plight, when he takes her burden on himself out of compassion and human concern, that the real acts of God come into play. And the widow, too, says to Elijah, when he presents her son alive back to her, “*Now I know that the word of the Lord in your mouth is truth.*” God is the author of life, not death. New beginnings are what God is about, not hopeless endings. Floods and droughts are not the acts of God, resurrection from the dead is. And that kind of new life begins to become visible when we reach out in compassion and invest ourselves in sharing the burdens of others.

The widow may now understand that Elijah’s God is a God of life and not death, but I’m not sure Elijah fully understands yet. As we’ll see next week, he’s got a long way to go and some hard lessons before he really gets it.

But already, the thread of grace is visible if we will see it. The God who called Abraham of old, the God who appeared to Moses on Mt. Sinai, the God of Elijah the angry prophet, and the God of Jesus is a God who asks only for our unconditional and implicit trust. What we see in all these stories, though it takes us a lifetime to learn it in our own lives, is that God is faithful to us through floods and droughts, through the storms of human rage and war, through the disasters of family breakdowns, illness, the infirmities of old age, and any other of life’s woes that the insurance companies can’t protect us against. And that divine faithfulness is the ground of our hope.