

## *Perhaps*

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Pullman, WA  
January 12, 2020

*In the quietness of this place, surrounded by the all-pervading presence of the Holy, my heart whispers: Keep fresh before me the moments of my High Resolve, that in good times or in tempests, I may not forget that to which my life is committed. Keep fresh before me the moments of my high resolve. —Howard Thurman*

### **Ancient Witness:** Job 38:1-18

On several different occasions—maybe when we were buying a house or getting an insurance policy—I would come across something I call the “God clause.” And the God clause goes something like this: “We are responsible for... except when it comes to certain acts of God such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, etc.”

And every time I read that clause and others like it, I always wonder, How come they blame all this stuff on God? I mean, it’s never the good stuff that they attribute to God’s activity—the Berlin Wall came down—yes, God has been at it again. Or the Jones family spent the whole day together today and nobody fought or lost their temper—a true act of God. No, it is always some huge disaster “of biblical proportions” as the newscasters say, that they put on God. And I want to say, Where did these people get this theology, anyway?

How is God active in the world, anyway? Well, personally, I affirm that God is living and present in the world, continually at work. This is different from, say, Deism, which claims that God’s activity was all in the beginning, creating and building the world. But like a clock-maker, God is finished when God winds up the clock and lets it go, forever, without any more contact.

Some people have found God’s activity in the unexplainable things that happen. Dietrich Bonhoeffer called this particular view the “God of the gaps.” We use science to explain as much as we can, and when we run to the end of our rope, when all else fails, we say, “God must have done it.”

In the early days, everything was an act of God—the sun comes up in the morning; plants spring up out of the ground, a plague wipe out thousands of people. God did it, because God is either angry or happy. And this, after all, is what a miracle is, is it not? Something that has been attributed to God. The Israelites escaped from their bondage in Egypt, and their theology and their values told them that this must be “of God.” And so when they go back and tell the story of their deliverance, they read into these events the activity of God.

Yet, in those days, science was non-existent, there was no sharp division between the natural and the supernatural that developed in more modern times. All of life was a wonder.

The problem, said Bonhoeffer, is that as our scientific knowledge grew, the arena of God’s activity grew smaller and smaller. God has been relegated to the “gaps” in our scientific understanding. And those gaps have been growing smaller and smaller. Today, if someone has cancer, for example, a doctor will attack it in a number of ways—chemotherapy, radiation, nutrition, even psychotherapy. But it is only in

those cases when they have done everything and they throw up their hands, and somehow the cancer goes away, will they say, “It’s a miracle.” Why? Because they can’t explain it. God of the gaps theology.

And whereas the ancient Israelite saw every healing as an act of God, many modern people will only acknowledge it in those one-in-a-million exceptions.

I agree with Bonhoeffer, that it is a poor theology which pushes God’s activity to the gaps. And whether we can explain it or not is a poor criterion for determining where God’s activity it.

And so, whether something is an act or gift from God really depends upon our perspective, not upon an event’s unexplainable qualities. The events which contributed to the Israelites’ release from captivity were miraculous because they reflected God’s values of love, compassion for the poor, justice for the oppressed and shalom for the earth. It was the Israelites’ unique perspective of God that made them miracles, not their “gee whiz” quality.

This reminds me of a story of a man walking in the woods. Suddenly he comes upon a bear. Huge bear. So he starts running. And the bear is running after him. Slowly the bear is gaining on him, and the man sees that it is no use, the bear is going to catch him. So he falls to his knees and starts praying that God might save him from this bear. He opens his eyes, and there is the bear, also on his knees, praying. And he’s saying, “Thank you, O Lord, for these gifts we are about to receive...”

Perspective. Whether something is an act of God depends upon our perspective.

The book of Job is about a man who is struggling for perspective to see God’s activity in his own life. Job is a good man, a righteous man. Yet Job is also subjected to incredible pain and suffering. His livestock were stolen, his servants were killed, his children die in a sandstorm. Yet, as the folk tale goes, Job did not sin. Job becomes afflicted with terrible sores, and in all his misery, Job wishes that he had never been born.

Now all the traditional theological answers were of no use to Job. The Deuteronomic principle of blessings and curses—that if you were righteous God would bless you, and if you were sinful God would curse you—this principle did not apply to Job.

Here was Job—as righteous a man as you will find—who is anything but blessed. “Though I am innocent, I cannot answer God,” Job cries. “For God crushes me with a tempest, and multiplies my wounds without cause.” (9:15-17)

Job’s friends, like Elihu, try to offer him all the traditional platitudes and answers, such as, “It’s all part of God’s wonderful plan” or “God is teaching you a lesson” or “You must have done something wrong.”

But all of these answers which are bound by earlier patterns of thinking are discredited, when God says, “Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?”

No, instead of traditional understanding, Job finds his answer in the whirlwind, the indiscernible mystery of God.

Many of us, too, like Job have inherited a tradition which sees God's purpose behind all events, an image of God who controls everything—  
It rained—God must have wanted it.  
It flooded—God must have wanted it.  
A baby dies...—God must have wanted it.

Most of us were taught about an all-powerful deity. We inherited what has been called “supernatural theism.”

We can be content with these traditional answers, or like Job, we can seek God in the whirlwind and have our assumptions challenged. For in the whirlwind, God's activity is not obvious in the results. What ends up happening is not easily connected with God. In fact, it is often baffling and mystifying.

I find it much more compelling (and biblical) a theology which affirms that God is always present and continually active at every moment and at every place. But God is present in a manner which also does not make God responsible for everything that happens. Another way to say this is that God is always in the mix of things, yet God alone does not determine things.

Early in my spiritual journey, I found Process Theology helpful. One writer, Charles Hartshorne, wrote:

*It is not God alone who acts in the world, every individual acts. There is no single producer of the actual series of events: one producer to be sure, is uniquely universal, unsurpassably influential. Nevertheless, what happens is in no case the products of [God's] creative acts alone. Countless choices intersect to make a world...*

Another, Charles Birch, said:

*There are things a God of love cannot do. The God of love could not change the decision of the rich young ruler to whom Jesus spoke. When persuasion failed, coercion did not take over... The biblical image is of one who stands at the door and knocks, who never forces entry... At each step in the evolutionary process of the universe, of a life, there is an appropriate response.*

If we want to discern God's activity in the universe, it seems to me, we need to give up the image of a controlling, omnipotent deity. Philosopher, Alfred North Whitehead, wrote:

*More than two thousand years ago, the wisest of men proclaimed that divine persuasion is the foundation of the order of the world, but that it could only produce such measure of harmony as amid brute forces it was possible to accomplish.*

To look into the whirlwind is to see that God's activity is always hidden from view. God's presence is on the interior of all things. And seeing God's imprint on events is at best an imprecise and humbling enterprise.

The Muslim mystic, Rumi, wrote a poem when God says:

*Your body is away from me,  
but there is a window open  
from my heart to yours.*

*From this window, like the moon,  
I keep sending news secretly.*

This is how God works—completely behind the scenes. From the outside it is very difficult to discern, if not impossible. This is a continual activity of the Sacred Reality. As Rumi put it,

*Every instant a revelation comes from heaven to our innermost souls.*

Ram Dass, the wonderful spiritual teacher and author, passed away earlier this week. I remember hearing him tell a story about a man who had a beautiful horse.

*One day, the gate was left open and the horse ran away.*

*People said to him, “You must be very sad, what a terrible thing.” He said, “Perhaps, but you never know.”*

*Later, the horse came back with a beautiful stallion. Now he had two horses.*

*The people said, “You must be very happy, what a wonderful thing.” “Perhaps, but you never know,” he said.*

*Then both of the horses ran away.*

*The people said, “You must be very sad. What a terrible thing.” “Perhaps, but you never know,” he said.*

*Then both of the horses came back with a huge herd!*

*The people said, “OMG! You must be very happy, what a wonderful thing.” “Perhaps, but you never know,” he said.*

*One day his son was out riding one of the horses and fell, breaking his leg.*

*The people said, “You must be very sad, what a terrible thing.” “Perhaps,” he said, “but you never know.”*

*Now, about that time the King was conscripting young men into his army, but his son was exempt because of his injury.*

*The people said, “You must be very happy, what a wonderful thing.” The man said, “Perhaps, but you never know.”*

Like Job, we really never know the details—which events conform to God’s will or not. There are many brute forces which come into play.

We may never really know when the purpose of God is being realized or not. But we don’t have to. We can be content to know that in the mix of things—in the whirlwind of life—amidst the apparently wonderful and terrible, the good and the bad—it’s enough to know that in the mix of all this, there is a

Sacred Presence, a Wisdom, that is speaking to the heart of all things, gently and persistently calling forth love and harmony, courage and peace.