

## “Weather: Five Ways of Thinking About a Storm”

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Psalm 104:1-13

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*I know we've all heard the quip from Mark Twain who said, "Everybody talks about the weather but nobody does anything about it." And I suppose that's true. But in a way it's not true, because this morning I do want to do something about the weather, and in particular I want to talk about five different ways of thinking about a storm.*

*Weather has been on my mind a lot lately, and I'm sure it's been on your mind too. The last two weeks have been brutal weather weeks for America. First Hurricane Harvey in Texas, and then two weeks later, Hurricane Irma in Florida.*

*Millions and millions of people have been devastated by these storms – loss of homes, loss of businesses, and of course, the tragic loss of lives. And I don't know about you, but when a weather event happens like this, I can't stop watching CNN!*

*I want to know when it's coming, and I want to know what it's like, and then I want a full report on the aftermath of the storm. I can't stop myself. And today, more than any other time in human history, we are aware of almost every global weather event.*

*But weather, and particularly these storms, raised some important theological issues . . . and I offer them to you today in no particular order . . . five little meditations on storms . . .*

1.

*First and foremost a powerful storm raises the question: Does God control the weather? That's a theological question. Some people have the idea that God is this almighty, all-powerful, all-knowing, all-present person – sort of like a bigger version of you – who lives up in the sky, or beyond the sky, and everything that happens on the earth happens for a reason, because God is in control of every single earthly event.*

*This makes God the great puppeteer and everything, including hurricanes and tornadoes, are at the end of God's strings. Or God is like the Wizard of Oz, pushing buttons and controlling floods and causing droughts and hurling blizzards toward the earth.*

*The challenging thing, of course, is that you can find this view of God in the Bible, including the flood story in the Book of Genesis, a story that portrays God getting angry at the world and flooding the entire earth. I dare say that many of us received this version of God in our Sunday School classes as children.*

*Yet, a few of these Bible stories notwithstanding, when you examine this viewpoint more closely, it becomes a problem. You mean God sends a hurricane that causes flooding and four little children drown to death in Houston, Texas? Really? Is that what God does?*

*Or God sends a storm and a family is left with nothing, all their furniture, all their photographs, all their clothes are gone. Is that what God does? Or God sends heat and humidity that is so oppressive that eight elderly people die in a Florida nursing home. Is that what God does? Is that how God operates?*

*The answer some like to put forth is that God does these things, because God is trying to accomplish a higher good, a higher good that we just don't understand. Yes, the flood might "seem" to be bad, but it's all in God's plan and it will make people better and stronger and everything will be okay in the end.*

*Yes, the storm is awful, but people will learn what is really important in life, that's why God does these things. And yes, it might look like a tragedy to you mere mortals, but God is working a heavenly plan far beyond our comprehension. And you know what, maybe it's true, and if it's true, then it's true.*

*Maybe there is some grand mystical universal plan that will lead to an ultimate paradise for all God's children, including those killed in floods and tornadoes and hurricanes. I don't know. But if God really uses weather like this, then it sounds terribly maniacal, menacing, manipulative, and morally reprehensible to me. I need another way of thinking about God.*

*You see, I think God works in the world – not by using the all-controlling power of a dictator. No! I think God uses the power of love, and in the end, love is not controlling. God uses persuasive power. God uses inviting power. God uses encouraging power.*

*Weather happens. It happens every single day. Storms happen. And droughts happen. And floods happen. And I don't think God controls any of it. I think it happens, and when it happens, God is that presence urging us toward safety and mutual support and heroic rescue. That's God.*

*God doesn't flood people's homes in Houston or Naples; God inspires people to risk their own lives as they try to save their neighbors. God inspires people with strength to stand up again, clean up again, rebuild again, that's the work of God. God works by inspiring you last week and you gave over a thousand dollars! That's God. That's the power of divine love. Weather.*

2.

*A second reflection . . . I don't think weather has a moral value. Hurricanes aren't morally good or morally bad. They're hurricanes. Yet, there are religious leaders out there saying that God sent Hurricane Harvey to Houston, because Houston has had a lesbian mayor and God was punishing them for accepting a gay person in mainstream society.*

*Do you think I'm making this up? You can't make this stuff up! I'm not making it up. Several years ago the Baptist minister, Jerry Falwell, told people that God sent AIDS to the earth in order to punish homosexuals. This kind of reasoning is sick. It's ridiculous. It's dangerous. It's sick.*

*For the life of me, I don't understand why some people have to have a faith that includes damning other people! Look there are a lot of policies and laws in Texas I don't like. I'm guessing there are*

*some polices and laws in Texas that God doesn't like! But when I start assigning moral blame to storms and tornadoes and cyclones . . . that is taking it too far.*

*Storms are not moral punishments. Again, do you find this kind of thing in the Bible? Yes, you do. You can find all kinds of stories about God sending down plagues and dropping disasters on entire cities . . . but this was a primitive way of understanding the working of the world, and a primitive understanding of God, and it's why we need to evolve our thinking when it comes to our faith.*

*We should ask rational, intellectual, scientific and spiritual questions about our world and the faith we're trying to live. When I do that, I see that it is fallacious to assign moral value to a storm, or for that matter, any other natural disaster.*

3.

*My third reflection is this . . . I don't think storms are given to us in order to inspire our humanity, but that said, in the worst of times, what you do see are people rising up to a new level of human compassion, and that is always a good thing.*

*Oh, I know, there are those who gouge at the gas stations or loot at the supermarkets. But in the vast majority of cases, what you see after a storm is neighbor helping neighbor, friend helping friend, even stranger helping stranger.*

*It's so interesting to me that in America there is this strong independent, self-reliant streak that people value. It's in our DNA as Americans. And there's something good about it. But let me tell you, not even fiercely independent Texans are going to recover from this storm on their own.*

*Nor can Florida. When disaster strikes, people need people. I'm not going to break into song here, but let me just say it: People who need people are the luckiest people in the world. There are two indispensable gifts in life: One is when you can help another human being. That's a gift.*

*And the other is when you reach a moment and you know, you feel it and know it, that you need some help yourself. I look at these storms and I celebrate the human spirit that is alive and well in communities and temples and churches and mosques all across this great country. But why does it take a storm to make us more compassionate and generous?*

4.

*My fourth reflection is this . . . and I know this has been controversial over the past few weeks . . . but I think it's time to name it . . . climate change is happening. I know that rescue and rebuilding after a terrible storm should be the priority, but we still need to step back and be honest about what is happening.*

*Honest about the science. Honest about the research. The reason why these storms are more intense than ever, and more frequent than ever, is because the air is warmer, the oceans are rising, and the warmer the air, and the more moisture in the atmosphere, the more intense the storms.*

*We are in a planetary crisis right now, and human activity has caused it. And if we have caused it, then God knows it's our responsibility to clean it up. And by the way, it's not just hurricanes.*

*Scientists are now talking about all kinds of “extreme rain events” that have been on the upswing for the last forty years in America.*

*The more carbon emissions, the more atmosphere heats up, more water evaporates, and then a storm. And then rain. And then more rain. And then even more rain. This is why part of my faith involves an attempt to take better care of Mother Earth. Maybe if we would think of Mother Earth more like the Virgin Mary, we would treat her with greater love, and more tenderness, and respect. Ecology and faith go hand in hand.*

5.

*My fifth reflection on the weather is this . . . storms are a reminder that there is still something outside of our human control. At times a storm is terrifying. But it also creates a sense of awe, wonder and humility.*

*Humility is a good thing. It’s an awareness that there is something bigger than you and bigger than me at work in the world. It can be a beautiful thunderstorm sweeping in from the Pacific Ocean. Or it might be the way a snowstorm flies across the Rocky Mountains, turning that landscape into an amazing silent carpet of winter whiteness. It’s awe. It’s wonder. It’s something bigger than us.*

*It’s the way sunlight feels on your skin. It’s the way cool air feels so brisk in New England during October. When you really pay attention to weather, you begin to see that there is something so much bigger than you at work in the universe, and in a strange kind of way, it makes you feel more human. After all, what is faith but that awareness that there is something bigger than us in the world?*

*Well, maybe Mark Twain was right . . . maybe we don’t do anything about the weather. Another humorist has noted that, “We shouldn’t knock the weather, because without it, 90% of us wouldn’t know how to start a conversation.” That might be true. But just think, the next time you’re at a party and someone asks, “What do you think about this weather?” Pull out a note card and say, “Well, I have five thoughts I would like to share with you!”*

*Friends, I love you all . . . let’s love another! Amen.*