

When bad theology happens to good people

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[This](#) is almost unfathomable.

I lived in Tornado Alley during my teenage years, but they were quiet years for tornadoes. Honestly, I never took them seriously. Teenagers are invincible, after all. Whenever the subject came up we'd make jokes about trailer parks. It was classist privilege—I know that now, wrapped in a candy coating of “it couldn't happen to me.”

It could. It certainly could.

I don't know if crazy stuff is happening more frequently or if it just seems like it because I've been on this earth long enough for stuff to accumulate. Not to mention the effect of cable news and Twitter. But it's tiring. It's not even happening to me and it's tiring. I'm tired of telling my kids to [find the helpers](#). I've included the [Presbyterian Disaster Assistance](#) donation info so many times in emails to my church that I might as well incorporate it into the template on MailChimp.

But this post isn't about parenting or logistics. It's about bad theology that creeps in, even among those who studiously try to avoid it. My cousin lives in Moore, OK. For a little while folks didn't know if he was OK. He is. In his message he said that they'd recently moved to a new house. The new house is fine, but the old house is destroyed. *Whoa.*

And there it was, like a flash: Man. *Someone's* livin' right, I said to myself.

No.

No no no.

This is a good call for greater compassion on my part toward people who blurt out bromides in the wake of disaster, illness or suffering: *God needed another angel in heaven. Everything happens for a reason. We're being punished for our sin.* (Really. It's only [a matter of time](#).)

Linda Holmes, [writing in a completely different context today](#), talked about the difference between a reaction, and a thought, and a conclusion. A reaction is just that—an initial response, easily tweeted but not much of substance, unless we examine it, test it, develop it into a thought, and maybe in time, a conclusion. If our reaction doesn't survive that scrutiny, we should let it go.

The trouble with a lot of our public discourse, whether we're talking about Sunday night's episode of *Mad Men* (I gather something bizarro went down?) or dozens of people perishing in an F5 tornado, is that we don't get past the reaction stage. "Someone's living right" is a reaction. It's an understandable one—even though I don't see this cousin much, I don't want to see him suffer—but it's ultimately false. It's a product of the lizard brain.

So what do we do with our reptilian reactions? We hold them under the microscope. No, maybe they *are* the microscope, or the telescope, and we peer through to see if they bring other parts of our lives into sharper view. If they do, maybe they are worth keeping.

And if we're religious, we also press them like flowers between the pages of our sacred texts, and see what happens. Sometimes they crumble from the pressure. And sometimes they hang together.

But "someone's livin' right" doesn't hold together. Neither does "it's because of gay marriage." (Because seriously. In Oklahoma?)

The trouble is, when it comes to suffering, the *more* we work with our reactions and our thoughts, the *less* conclusive we become. Christian Wiman's latest book, written about his struggles with faith in the midst of cancer, is an elegantly devastating case in point. He writes in *My Bright Abyss*:

If God is a salve applied to unbearable psychic wounds, or a dream figure conjured out of memory and mortal terror, or an escape from a life that has become either too appalling or too banal to bear, then I have to admit: it is not working for me.

I laughed out loud when I read that. Yes: Who is this God who makes it all better? Who punishes the wicked and rewards the good with uncanny precision? Tell me, New Atheists, about the God you don't believe in. I don't believe in that God either.

And yet, like Wiman, I continue to wrestle in faith, even though conclusions are increasingly hard to come by. I continue because there is heart-wrenching beauty happening in Oklahoma—it's in the caring efficiency of hospitals and shelters; it's in the scrabbling through the rubble; it's in embraces between neighbors. That beauty is not the work of God. That beauty is God. That's all I can say for certain... and even that's not very certain at all.

*Originally posted at [The Blue Room](#)*