

God of the storm (Psalm 29)

Can our baptism compel us to help mitigate the world's disasters?

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Psalm 29 is a hymn to the God of the storm. It has new resonance in this year of hurricanes, floods, and earthquakes that have impacted so many in North America. I have been reading as if for the first time this poem that describes the LORD as the one who “thunders” and “breaks the cedars” and makes entire countries to “skip like a calf.” The LORD “flashes forth in flames” and “shakes the wilderness” and “causes the oaks to whirl” and “sits enthroned over the flood.”

The psalmist knew storms and floods and something of earthquakes. We are not so very far from our spiritual ancestors, and it is a comfort in some ways to know that they too knew of acts of God, as it were.

But there is a difference between now and then. Our storms are prone to become disasters because of human interventions, or lack thereof. In a *60 Minutes* interview after Hurricane Harvey, Sam Brody pointed out the difference between natural processes and human-made disasters. “Hurricane Harvey was a human-contrived disaster,” the Texas A&M professor of environmental planning explained. “If we have flooding, that is a natural process. A disaster is human induced because we've put so many people in these flood-prone areas.”

These storms magnified and made public a lack of infrastructure and protection that goes back decades. In Houston and Mexico City, they laid bare the lack of building

and zoning regulations or enforcement. The abandonment of Puerto Rico without any resources made evident something that had long been tacit: citizenship without representation does not actually afford protections to citizens.

Can we think of our baptism and our life as Christians as a call to engagement that can, in large and small ways, mitigate disasters? We will have done our jobs if the rains come down and the floods come up once in a generation or so, and then that's the end of the story. The reward for that work is only in heaven.