

Choice words: Speaking of disasters

From the Editors in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

At first Job's friends were in good form on their pastoral visit: sensing the great suffering of their friend, they sat in silence with him for seven days and seven nights. Their mistake was to open their mouths and offer advice. In the face of a great tragedy—like the tsunami in South Asia or Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast—the natural response is to want to make sense of such unspeakable suffering and pain. But as the book of Job demonstrates, at such times humans have a wisdom deficit. Who is wise enough to put things in meaningful perspective or offer words that make things better?

Some try, and like Job's friends they tend to spew forth windy words—like the fulminations of fundamentalists who declared that Katrina was God's guilty verdict on America for the “sin of abortion,” or on “a wicked city . . . that had its doors wide open to the public celebration of sin.”

As David Bentley Hart argues in [*The Doors of the Sea: Where Was God in the Tsunami?*](#) believers are fools to respond to the challenges of skeptics by connecting human or natural evils to the will of God. Even though God can bring good out of evil, the wisdom of the biblical faith is that suffering, death and evil have no “ultimate value or spiritual meaning at all.” The cross of Christ represents not the validation of pain and suffering, but their ultimate overthrow. That is the gospel truth that needs to be preserved in the face of all determinisms that make suffering a theological necessity. If the only options were believing in no God at all or believing in a God who causes a Katrina to happen, many of us would be atheists.

Yet some words must be spoken—on behalf of those whose lives have been turned upside down and who have lost any sense of security or normalcy, and especially on behalf of those who never made it out of the storm, who were abandoned and drowned. Katrina exposed the ugly underbelly of poverty and racism in the United States. Close to 30 percent of the people in New Orleans lived below the poverty line, and when disaster struck, it was, as usual, the people farthest from the center of power and wealth who bore the brunt of it.

“From the city the dying groan, and the throat of the wounded cries for help,” Job complained. Who will answer their cries this time around? We can respond not only with charity, but with public policies that give those who were dislocated a real chance to rebuild their lives and have hope for the future. For their sakes, it is time to speak.