The problem we face is how to cope with evil, be it natural disasters or human injustice. It is a riddle as old as the hills. Of all the brilliant philosophical minds of human civilization not one has yet explained satisfactorily why one community is Godsmacked while another is untouched. Or why cancer strikes someone who exercises, eats well, and doesn’t smoke? Or how to deal with a world strained by racism, terrorism, or a pandemic? Are these simply, as the insurance companies deem them, “acts of God”? Is this really how God works?

There is a strain within the Hebrew prophetic tradition which says this is *exactly* how God works. They expressed it in a phrase which is little used in our modern era: the wrath of God. Isaiah says: “Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown, scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth, when God blows upon them, and they wither, and the tempest carries them off like stubble” (Isaiah 40:24). *God blows upon them, and they wither*. Is there a better symbol for divine wrath than a swirling mass of 60-mph winds, bigger than the Mid-Atlantic states, accompanied by a storm surge of 6 feet or more, that just happens to come ashore at the precise moment of high tide?

Some of you may remember a satellite photo that appeared in the media not long after Superstorm Sandy. It was a night-time photo of North America, taken during the massive power failure. An unbelievably vast chunk of the continent covering the Mid-Atlantic states, extending as far west as Ohio was in total darkness. It looked as though some ravenous cosmic beast took a huge bite out of the country.

Elsewhere in North America, displayed in stunning satellite imagery, was the blazing glory of our civilization: the invention we proudly call the power grid. *Our* power! Human ingenuity banishing the darkness. Human cleverness pushing back the night. Except, of course, for that multi-state region swallowed up by the shadows. We once imagined ourselves masters of the darkness. How quickly that delusion faded!

Storms are a reminder of an uncomfortable truth: that just beyond the borders of our proud and self-congratulatory culture a fearsome chaos lurks. We expend much psychic energy trying in vain to deny such chaos exists. We like to pretend there is no such thing as suffering. Perhaps there is for other people, but not for us. We believe we are entitled (good people that we are!) to every comfort imaginable. We even allow ourselves to believe there is no such thing as death. In our foolish pride, we pretend we are going to live forever. Our ancestors never had that luxury. Maybe that is why the idea of God’s wrath made more sense to them than it does to us.

A big part of us wants to ignore God’s wrath. More than 70 years ago, H. Richard Niebuhr looked around at the church of his day and summarized, with incredible precision, the creed of a comfortable, self-satisfied American Christianity that has no room for the wrath of God: “A God without wrath brought [people] without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross.” Note that it is not just God’s wrath that this easygoing, feelgood Christianity abandons: it does not need the cross, either! Where there is no sin, what need is there for grace? And where there is no grace, what need is there for salvation? We foolishly, arrogantly think we can save ourselves.

This is where the disciples of Jesus found themselves on the Sea of Galilee when a “furious squall came up, and the waves broke over the boat, so that it was nearly swamped” (Mark 4:37). No doubt they rowed frantically and bailed water trying to keep the boat afloat. With enough effort, they thought, they just might make it to shore. And where was Jesus? Asleep in the stern! On a cushion. Oblivious to the chaos swirling around him. The disciples wake Jesus, asking “Teacher, don’t you care if we drown?” (Mark 4:38).

In their sandals, any one of us would be just as afraid as the disciples. Storms are seriously scary. The power of wind and waves, or thunder and lightning, of rain and hail is tremendous. At the mercy of the elements, we are puny, powerless, pathetic creatures. The disciples had every right to be terrified for their lives. This storm was way out of their control. There was nothing they could do to save themselves.

So, Jesus got up and rebuked the wind, saying “Quiet! Be still!” (Mark 4:39). At once, the wind and the waves subsided. Then Jesus turned to the disciples and asked them: “Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?” (Mark 4:40). Notice what happened: first Jesus rebuked the wind and the waves, then he rebuked the disciples. The wrath of God is let loose on the storm, eliminating the danger, then it is turned on the disciples, calling them to faith.

Now, it seems, the disciples are more afraid of Jesus than they were of the storm, for they ask: “Who is this? Even the wind and the waves obey him!” (Mark 4:41). This is the first hint that the disciples are starting to comprehend that Jesus is the Son of God who comes to let God’s power loose upon the world. God’s tremendous power is mentioned throughout Isaiah 40: “See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and [God] rules with a mighty arm” (40:10); “[God] brings princes to naught and reduces the rulers of this world to nothing” (40:23); “[God]…brings out the starry host one by one and calls forth each of them by name. Because of [God’s] great power and mighty strength, not one of them is missing” (40:26); and “[God] will not grow tired or weary” (40:28). Isaiah points out that God’s power is not limited by our world or by our understanding.

Isaiah reminds us, too, that all is not lost. The God of powerful wrath is also a God of infinite mercy. God’s own son, Jesus Christ, came into this fallen, chaotic, wrath-battered world to redeem it. Responding to the reality of sin, God permitted the green and ordered paradise of Eden to descend into chaos, but ever since then God is engaged in the slow and deliberate process of repairing and rebuilding the world, of reclaiming and restoring God’s people. This happens through the amazing grace we come to know most completely in the person of Jesus.

Isaiah talks of God’s wrath, but in the very same chapter, he speaks of God’s mercy: “But those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint” (40:31). How is it possible that God embodies both wrath and mercy? One answer is to point out that we cannot understand mercy, in its deepest dimension, without first acknowledging wrath. Were there no such thing as wrath, the opposite of mercy would be indifference. Would we really want to live under a God who feels no anger, who can muster only indifference towards the bad things in this world? Would we want to worship a God who looks at an abused child or a power-mad dictator and responds with a shrug of the shoulders? Mercy would have precious little meaning were there not such a thing as wrath to act as a counterweight.

There is a certain amount of wrath floating around in this fallen world of ours. From time to time, certain people, regardless of guilt or innocence, may be ambushed by that wrath. They may be Godsmacked. But we believe that God is the first to weep at their misfortune, even as God surely wept to see Jesus dying on the cross. And we believe that God has a plan. The plan is that those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, mounting up with wings like eagles. Because of Christ and his cross, we focus not on the wrath that pulls us down, but on the mercy that lifts us up again. As recipients of compassion from a merciful God, we can be quick to use our talents and treasure to build up whatever is broken down in this beloved, God-touched world of ours!

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank You that You, the everlasting God, the eternal Creator, cares for me, Your child. Let me never wander into foolish pride, thinking I know everything about You, for Your ways are unsearchable. When I am weary, please bring to my remembrance that in You is my hope and strength and that You do not grow weary. Praise Your holy name! In Jesus' name, Amen.

**Godsmacked**

Sunday, February 4, 2024 [Isaiah 40:21-31](https://biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+40%3a21-31&language=en&version=NRSVUE)

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN Mark 4:35-41

Pastor Carl Wilton served a congregation on the Jersey Shore in a community hit hard by Superstorm Sandy (2012). Punishing winds and waves blasted a new inlet through the barrier beach, cutting the parish in two, and half the community was underwater. Roughly a quarter of the congregation fled their homes. Some could not return for months. A few never returned. The electricity came back on after five days, but it was years before families completed repairs to their flooded homes. Soon questions started.

Did God arrange that perfect convergence of winds, high-pressure system, wobbly jet stream, and warmer-than-usual ocean waters? Was it God who set the hurricane on a collision course with a nor’easter becoming the much-heralded superstorm? If God does arrange such anomalies, what on earth was God up to? Did the storm’s highly unusual right-angle turn indicate divine judgment? There is an ancient line of reasoning, imprinted deep within our brains, which says that God uses natural disasters to deliver a dreadful message, like the plagues of Egypt. If that was the case, then what was God trying to say?

Pastor Wilton talked to a former church member who returned to lend a hand with recovery efforts. He told Wilton how, after driving through heavily damaged areas, he could think of only one word to describe the magnitude of the destruction: “Godsmacked.” Ever feel like you’ve been Godsmacked? We’ve all had those moments.

Writer Nathaniel Philbrick reckons: “In all natural disasters through time, [humans] needs to attach meaning to tragedy, no matter how random and inexplicable the event is.” Anyone who lives through a disaster inevitably asks, “Why?” Why did it happen? Why did God *let* it happen? What role does God play in the hurricane, the wildfire, the cancer diagnosis, the layoff, or the divorce? We ask to make some sense of tragedy.

Isaiah says God “sits above the circle of the earth and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers” (Isaiah 40:22). This makes it sound like God is a casual observer or a distant deity who fails to see or care about our suffering. While we may be tempted to think that way, Isaiah allows no such easy explanation. Earlier, he promised the exiled Jews returning from Babylon that God would feed them “like a shepherd,” gathering the lost lambs of Israel in a loving embrace (Isaiah 40:11). The good-shepherd-God who hugs those lost lambs tight knows their heartache, fear, and desolation. Surely God knows when we struggle with disease, disaster, depression, and death. Right?