

Last week, as our nation held its collective breath, waiting to see where Hurricane Gustav would hit land, we were all reminded that it was exactly three years ago that Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans. This week marks the anniversary of the other major American catastrophe of contemporary history. Yes, it has now been seven years since the attacks of 9/11.

The tragedies themselves are awful enough, but each time one of them occurs, I find myself cringing, knowing that someone in my profession is going to offer their theological explanation for why these things happened. Of course, we are all aware of the comments of the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells, stating that God had punished America in both cases because of the “wickedness of pagans, abortionists, feminists, gays, lesbians, the ACLU, (I love that one) and the People for the American Way.”

Because Robertson, and before he died, Falwell, have made so many bizarre comments like these, it is easy to just be dismissive of them. But the unfortunate fact remains that many people understand God as having a direct role in these events, purposely choosing to smite people with whom God disagrees.

We need go no further than the presidential campaign for validation of this. I am sure you remember the upheaval that occurred during the primaries over the sermons of Barack Obama's former pastor, The Rev. Jeremiah Wright. In his sermon in the aftermath of 9/11, Wright said, “We bombed Hiroshima, we bombed Nagasaki, and we nuked far more than the thousands in New York and the Pentagon, and we never

batted an eye. We have supported state terrorism against the Palestinians and black South Africans, and now we are indignant because the stuff we have done overseas is now brought right back to our own front yards. America's chickens are coming home to roost."

Wright's suggestion that we had done this to ourselves was of course, highly inflammatory, especially because they were said in the midst of the pain and agony of that horrible event. Many heard Wright as suggesting that God was now smiting us for all we had done wrong, that God was behind this, and that God was not on America's side.

Hardly had the dust settled from that controversy that John McCain got his. Rev. John Hagee of the Cornerstone Church in San Antonio, Texas, having just endorsed Senator McCain and been praised by McCain, offered his view on the destruction of Katrina in an interview with Terry Gross. She said to Hagee, "You said after Hurricane Katrina that it was an act of God, and you said 'when you violate God's will long enough, the judgment of God comes to you. Katrina is an act of God for a society that is becoming Sodom and Gomorrah reborn.' She then asked, "Do you still think that Katrina is punishment from God for a society that's becoming Sodom and Gomorrah?"

"All hurricanes are acts of God," said Hagee, "because God controls the heavens. I believe that New Orleans had a level of sin that was offensive to God, and they are —were recipients of the judgment of God for that. ...There was to be a homosexual parade there on the Monday that the Katrina came. And the promise of that parade was that it was going to reach a level of sexuality never demonstrated

before in any of the other Gay Pride parades. So I believe the judgment of God is a very real thing. I know that there are people who demur from that, but I believe that the bible teaches that when you violate the law of God, that God brings punishment sometimes before the day of judgment. And I believe that the Hurricane Katrina was, in fact, the judgment of God against the city of New Orleans.”

It is also not just the Pastors of potential Presidents that hold such views, but also Presidents themselves. Let us recall that our current President believes that God is on America’s side. As he famously said, nations are “either for us or against us.” On one side there is an “axis of evil” and on the other side people who stand with us, who stand for goodness. If you still tend to pass off such theology as the view of a radical fringe, it may be good to note here that one of the most beloved Presidents in American history offered a similar explanation. Abraham Lincoln said that the Civil War was God’s judgment on America for slavery.

The idea that God purposely creates disasters to punish people is not then, just the view of a few whack jobs. It is espoused by many mainline pastors and respected world leaders. From where, we must ask, does such a theology come?

This morning, we do not have to go far for our answer. In that first account in Exodus, we hear about how the most important event in the history of Judaism should always be ritually remembered. We’ve had the opportunity for many years to take part in that Passover with our Jewish friends, recalling the events leading up to the liberation of those held in slavery in Egypt. But there is a seedy side to this story. The word Passover refers to the instruction Yahweh gives the Hebrew people today to mark

their houses with blood, so that Yahweh will “pass over” them, and then proceed to kill the babies of their oppressors, the Egyptians. The writer of Exodus believes that when Hebrews are emancipated, this has to mean death and oppression for the previous oppressors. A few sentences further on in Exodus we will read, “There was loud wailing in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead.”

Let’s also talk about the schizophrenia present in our Psalm today. In the first half of it, we hear all this wonderful stuff about dancing and singing and praise of God. But in the second half, the musical instruments turn into weapons of mass destruction. “May the praise of God be in their throat and a two edged sword in their hand; to wreak vengeance on the nations and punishment on the peoples.”

Pat Robertson and John Hagee are absolutely right. Our Bible espouses a “God punishes our enemies theology.” We cannot hide the fact that the text today says that God slays the chosen people’s enemies. In fact, it’s even worse than that. It says that God not only smites the perpetrators of the oppression, but also their innocent babies.

From today’s biblical stories also comes the theology of God in the hurricane, the notion that God purposely creates such phenomena to wipe out sinful people. I would also argue that it is this same theology, right there in our Bible, that allows a terrorist to create a religious justification for hating the Christian West. I would argue that if you are looking for the real reason behind 9/11 and events like it, we must begin with the theology of God smiting our enemies as we hear in today’s texts.

Am I saying that the Bible caused 9/11? Of course not, but I am suggesting that

the way we read the Bible can lead to such horrid theology. Because if you believe that the Bible is a book written by God, that God is describing Godself throughout this text, then you have really have no alternative then to believe that God kills your enemies. That's what it says. It is also clear then, that as images of God, our job is to wipe out our enemies. That's why the people who perpetrated 9/11 feel completely justified in doing so.

But if that is what you believe, and that is how you understand what this book is, then you must believe, according to today's reading, at least one more thing. Because right there in the same sentence in which Yahweh tells us that He is going to kill the babies, he says something else. "On all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments: I am the Lord." There you have it. Yahweh clearly states that He is not the only god. Yahweh says that He is the God of the Hebrews only. The Egyptians, Yahweh says, have their own gods, and Yahweh is going to show them who is boss.

Now it's funny, but I don't ever remember John Hagee preaching about the pantheon of Gods. In fact, I believe he is rather adamant in stating that he is monotheistic. But there it is, right in the text, in fact, in the very same sentence in which Hagee bases his belief in a God who whips up hurricanes to destroy sinful people. God says there are lots of Gods. So it must be right. My friends, you can't have it both ways. If you believe that God killed innocent babies, if you believe that God smites your enemies, you need to finish the very same sentence in today's reading. Your God is also polytheistic.

In that one sentence, we see the problem with any literalist interpretation of

sacred scripture, whether it be John Hagee or Osama Bin Laden doing the interpreting. Even literalists choose the parts of the Bible they are going to accept. And in this case, they choose to accept the first half of the sentence, while rejecting the second.

I find such disregard for portions of our sacred text to be sacrilegious. If we are to take what we are reading seriously, there has to be another way to understand this. And for my soul, what is really going on in today's text is an ancient struggle to come to terms with the nature of God. The early Hebrews saw Yahweh as their god among many gods. As our text today points out, for hundreds of years Hebrews understood Yahweh as one god among many. The great lesson here for all of us is that those early Hebrews did not, as some do today, suggest that the Bible was the once and for all complete understanding of God. Instead, they understood that there is always more to learn. Because of this, their understanding of God continued to evolve. Eventually, they would discard the notion that they were a chosen people of a certain god, and begin to envision a single God of all people. This universal vision brought them to a place where they would reject the abhorrent notion that God turned evil people into salt or killed the babies of their enemies. Their vision of God changed.

Unfortunately, in an effort to justify our own feelings of hate for people we see as our enemies, some humans continue to resurrect this ancient vision of God that Judaism would eventually reject. Whenever you start to believe that God hates the same people you hate, than you can be assured that you have created God in your image, rather than the other way around.

This is exactly the issue at stake in today's Gospel. The early church has come

to the realization that God does not smite their enemies. They saw Jesus' life as their example of how they were to live out this new image of God. Jesus not only tolerated people that used to be the enemy, but he invited them to dinner. A few weeks ago, Jesus does not call for the ouster of a hated Canaanite woman, the arch enemy of the Jewish people, as his disciples ask him to. Instead, he tells her that her faith is stronger than Peter's. Sometimes, Jesus points out to us, the people who we see as not getting it, the people who we see as our enemies, are the ones with the most faith. But to recognize the goodness in others, we first have to let them in. The early church has done just that, but now they are dealing with the practical issue of living with and worshiping with people who see things very differently.

Sound familiar? It is not easy following the God of Jesus, the one who insists that despite our differences, we worship together. As we learn in today's Gospel, it caused arguments and fights even in the early church. It is much simpler to believe that God is on our side and kills our enemies. Because then, you only need to worship with like minded people, who understand God just like you. Such a simplistic, black and white vision of religion is very calming and reassuring to many. But it has nothing to do with religion as Jesus saw it.

This is perhaps the most important lesson that I take from today's readings. Whenever I catch myself separating from others based on what I believe, I realize that I have fallen into the same trap as John Hagee. Whenever I start to think about how much easier my life would be if all of you had the same theology I did, I need to remember that Jesus calls us today to live in the ambiguity of difference. Anyone can

worship with people who agree with them, but Jesus calls us to worship with people who write letters in the Lake Powell Chronicle telling the community that everyone at St. David's is not passing go, but going straight to hell.

It is also why on Robin Williams top ten reasons for being an Episcopalian, the number one reason is this; "No matter what you believe, there's bound to be at least one other Episcopalian who agrees with you." I disagree with our church... a lot. But on this one, I believe we have it right. Most denominations formed from a common belief structure. But the Anglican church began very differently. From the beginning, we have been a church of Puritans and Catholics, Lutherans and Orthodox. The church formed not to create a place of like minded people, but because we have always believed that we are called to worship together despite our theological differences. I believe that it is this understanding of the purpose of religion that holds the potential to save the world from ultimate extinction. If we are going to have any hope of living together harmoniously in an increasingly smaller world, we must abandon the archaic theology of God creating hurricanes to punish wicked people and begin to embrace the other, as Jesus. As Anglicans, we are in the unique position to lead the world into this vision.

We are called to be a church of diversity. We are called to embrace one another in our varied theological positions. We are called to reach out in love and concern for all those who the rest of the world has forgotten. That is the real theology of today's readings and that is a theology that can end 9/11's forever. Amen.