

# What kind of God?

By Steven Chambers

May 18, 2008  
Trinity

Genesis 1: 1 – 2:4a  
Matthew 28: 16-20

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In the nineteenth century, one of the ways that some in the Christian community looked upon the world was with a great deal of fatalism. Characteristic of this view would be the statement of American evangelism of that time, Dwight L. Moody, “I look upon this world,” said Moody, “as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said to me, ‘Moody, save all you can.’”<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the arrogance of that statement, and its assumption that the world and its people need to be ‘saved’, when I came across it this week, it made me pause. I don’t agree with its theological presumption, but the image of the world – as a wrecked vessel – seemed to shed some light on events of the past few weeks.

At the beginning of this month, Cyclone Nargis hit Myanmar, inundating low lying areas and killing what the United Nations has estimated will be one hundred thousand people. Nations and international aid organizations, including The United Church of Canada and its partners, are offering support in many ways, but aid distribution has been seriously restricted by the government of the country. Then, last week, a 7.8 magnitude earthquake devastated parts of a fast-growing industrial and commercial center in China. Schools, hospitals, factories, and other buildings have collapsed, killing thousands. The death toll has officially exceeded 20,000 and is climbing daily. The earthquake destroyed up to 80 percent of buildings in the hardest-hit region. Landslides, power failures, and a near-total breakdown of communication followed. Five million people are estimated to be homeless. Tornadoes in Missouri and Oklahoma have, in recent days, added further to these devastating, natural disasters.

If the world is some great ship, it has been wrecked, devastated in several places, and human suffering is enormous. What are we to think? How are we to react? What are we to do?

If we employ the ‘lifeboat’ theology of Moody, we have a problem: it assumes that we can redeem something, that we can save the world, that God, in fact,

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Douglas John Hall, *God & Human Suffering: An Exercise in the Theology of the Cross* (Augsburg, 1986), p. 50, from Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (Harper, 1970), p. 256.

favours some to steer the lifeboat in the world of pain and disaster. But, wait, if there is something that can be done, to alleviate suffering in the world, if there is some boat that can sail to the aid of those who are in difficulty, isn't that the right thing to do? Certainly, as members of this church, we are engaged in acts of redeeming love. Through our gifts to the Mission and Service Fund of the United Church, we have already sent funds to aid people in Myanmar and China, through partner agencies there. And there were indications, late in the week, that these funds were getting to at least some places where they might be helpful. Our support, generous support, out of our relative wealth and security, seems like the smallest thing that we can do. Emergency aid is a lifeboat. We do it in other ways, for example in the benevolent assistance that this congregation provides for people in need in the community.

Lifeboat aid. Band aids. Emergency action. All of these are part of our call to care, but we get discouraged with imperfection, with inattention to real problems, with inability to solve structural dilemmas. And when the tragedy is of the natural order – a cyclone, a tsunami, an earthquake – we are left with our discouragement about how little our help might mean. We might even despair in faith: what kind of God allows such tragic events to happen?

What kind of God is the God of tragic natural events?

There have been many, many disturbing stories and photos in the news media over the past few days. They serve to illustrate and to describe how devastating these natural disasters have been; they remind us of the people in those places. The makeshift morgue in China, filled with children's bodies, covered in simple sheets or blankets, a reminder that tragically schools were among the buildings most affected. And the grief is penetrated further, when a parent shares the simple truth that, as part of Chinese policy, this child was their only child – not that having six might make up for the loss – but what a horrible, horrible moment in the life of the world. And in the other venue of tragedy, journalist Jane Armstrong's powerful words summarizes a further human tragedy. She wrote in *The Globe and Mail* yesterday:

Isolated from the outside world by a military regime ruthlessly determined to control the flow of international aid, and battered again by torrential downpours, the stranded victims of Myanmar's cyclone disaster are succumbing to hunger, disease and despair.<sup>2</sup>

What kind of God? It is more than a natural disaster, there is a disaster at the hands of cruel humanity as well. Myanmar is one of the world's most censored countries; "they're essentially at war with journalists," says Joel Simon the executive director of the Committee to Protect Journalists. The correspondent for *The New York Times*, is working under cover to ensure safety<sup>3</sup>. This is true in Zimbabwe as well, where a television camera person was abducted and beaten to death last year. What kind of God allows this to happen?

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<sup>2</sup> Jane Armstrong, "Hunger, despair take hold in Myanmar," *The Globe and Mail*, 17 May 2008.

<sup>3</sup> *The New York Times*, May 18 2008

Retired Princeton philosopher of religion, Diogenes Allen, has suggested that “through adversity we can begin to discover God’s presence, either for the first time or in new and fresh ways.”<sup>4</sup> Rather than decry God, in the face of such tragedies, our first step would be to ask, what is it that we come to learn or understand about God in these events? Allen writes further, that although the natural world produces “immense beauty”, it can also produce “intense and brutal suffering.” God’s goodness does not seem to fit with natural catastrophes. How can we “reconcile God’s love with intense human misery”? Some might say it is impossible, and give up on God, some might avoid it, and give up on the struggle of faith and its truth, but Allen comes at the challenge from a redemptive perspective: such events, as horrible as they are, invite us to have renewed engagement with God. Allen doesn’t start where some theologians do and see such events as a result of sin, and thus claim for all humanity some form of estrangement separating us from God, the end result being a deterministic approach to natural tragic events. I, too, want to reject any sense that people get what they ‘deserve’. That’s a hideous notion which runs counter to God’s great love. Rather, such events hold within them, within the pain and the tragedy, the capacity that we might be shown solidarity, the oneness of humanity, a realization that we are one with those who have suffered and died. It does nothing to take away the tragedy, it does nothing to restore life, but it does place us with God in the midst of creation, in the midst of the reality where all humanity is one, where somehow new life can come even from death.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall cautions, however, that we not drive a wedge between the Creator and Creation when it comes to the difficult matter of understanding God and the presence of human suffering in the world. It is not helpful to see the world as a broken reality and the creator as the fixer. Such a distinction separates God and the world. By seeing the world as a ‘wrecked vessel’ – the view of Dwight Moody which attracted me initially - we might in fact engage in a ‘world negating’ approach, that sees only God as ultimately good. God called the creation good, as we heard once again in the reading from Genesis. To negate the world is to miss seeing our place, and our responsibility, and our hope in the creation that God loved into existence. To view the world in the midst of natural disasters, to be a shipwreck needing our attention and salvation, would perpetuate an arrogant proclamation. God is part of creation and calls us into ongoing creativity. Creation and creatures – all of us – are not apart from God.

Is it possible, that in the midst of tragedy and suffering, we might learn more about God and about ourselves? Is it possible that in addition to our efforts to provide a life boat, to redeem as much as we can, to offer safety and healing as much as we can, we acknowledge our limitation and still – still, learn more about God and ourselves?

This is Trinity Sunday – a time when God imaged as Creator, Son and Spirit can be lifted up to encourage our thinking. It seems to matter little in light of the pain and death and tragedy in the world. A doctrine like the Trinity does not seem to be life-giving in the midst of such a time as this. Some have questioned why we would bother with a three dimensional struggle to understand God. But others propose that the Trinity is one way that the Christian community can really reflect deeply on the world and its

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<sup>4</sup> Diogenes Allen, *The Traces of God: In a Frequently Hostile World* (Cambridge, Mass: Cowley Publications, 1981), p. 8.

perplexing reality. The Trinity is the communal expression of God and God's creation. It expresses interdependence and relationship. It reminds us of the integral way in which God loves the world, the world of God's passionate care and concern. It goes deeper: our very being is a part of God, there is no being without our belonging – to God, to the creation, to others. We are not alone. We live in God's world.

When a part of God's world is broken, in pain, flooded with natural destruction or shaken with earth's power – we too acknowledge the tear in the fabric of life. We acknowledge that our humanity participates with God in ongoing creation and we are called to loving care for this fragile world. We acknowledge that our humanity is broken – that injustice, oppression, censorship and greed run rampant in our world and we are called to confront what we can. We look for wisdom, we look for hope, we look for new life.

I came across a hymn that was written following the tsunami in southern Asia and Indonesia on the day after Christmas 2004. It is written by Tommy Shapard and published by the United Methodist Church in the United States. A few verses –

When in creation life is lost,  
the power of God seems weak.  
When young and old are swept away  
By rivers in the streets,  
we seek the wisdom that ordained  
the sun to rule the day,  
and pray to God that lives be saved  
and hope will find a way.

When in creation life is lost, we turn to God for peace,  
and seek the one who came to serve  
the greatest and the least,  
O Christ whose presence comes to us  
in the Spirit's flowing power,  
abide with us and give us strength  
to face life's darkest hour.<sup>5</sup>

Through the community of God, the creator, the Son, the Spirit, may we touch the hearts of those who are aching with prayers of compassion. May we find our place, our calling and our hope in a world so desperately in need. AMEN

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