

“The Day The Earth Shook”
Psalm 46
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When four hurricanes hit Florida last year in a matter of weeks, we wondered how long it would be before we would again witness this kind of devastation. It did not take long, did it? As one reporter said, December 26, 2004, was the day the earth shook. A massive earthquake trembled the earth’s crust off the western coast of the Indonesian Island of Sumatra, disturbing every open body of water in the world. Shock waves were felt more than 3,000 miles away.

The total loss of life and property will not be known for months. To date, over 160,000 people have died in eleven countries and millions have been displaced. Illness and outbreaks of disease could push the death toll much higher. The World Health Organization estimates there are more than 500,000 people injured and in need of medical care.

When Secretary of State Colin Powell traveled to Indonesia to survey the tsunami damage in Banda Aceh, he said, “I have been in war and I have been through a number of hurricanes, tornadoes and other relief operations, but I have never seen anything like this.”

It has been three weeks since the killer waves crashed these foreign shores and yet the media attention has not subsided. If anything, it has increased as relief efforts are underway.

All the information I’ve read and pictures I’ve seen have prompted me to ask a question I would like to explore with you today. What do natural disasters reveal about life? Let me begin our thinking with these ideas.

First of all, they reveal how powerful Mother Nature is. I gained a new respect for Mother Nature’s power on April 3, 1974. This was the day that one hundred forty-eight tornadoes ripped through the south and Midwest, killing 315 people and injuring over 5,000 others. Historians ranked this series of storms as the second worst in the Twentieth Century. Sixty-four of these tornadoes were F3 or higher. They struck with an intensity and frequency that was never thought possible.

I was a student at Southern Seminary in Louisville and shall never forget that afternoon. Walking from class to my dorm room around four in the afternoon, I noticed the sky had an eerie yellow cast and there was no air stirring. Soon after entering my room, someone in the hall shouted that there was a tornado bearing down upon us. We ran to the basement while this F4 tornado passed over and then went outside to see the results. I could hardly believe my eyes. If I had not known better, I would have thought someone dropped a bomb.

Stately old trees were sucked out of the ground lying on their sides. Automobiles were lying on top of each other or on parking lot fences like matchbox cars. Houses in the neighborhood looked like they had exploded. I had never witnessed that kind of devastation.

I wonder if the Psalmist had a similar experience. Perhaps Psalm 46 was written in the aftermath of an earthquake or great flood. Whatever it was, you can sense his awe of nature’s destructive power as the usually gentle and hospitable earth turned violent.

“God is our refuge and strength, an ever present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth gives way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its water roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging” Psalm 46: 1-3.

Secondly, natural disasters reveal how vulnerable we are. Man is no match for the forces of nature. Recent videos taken during the tsunami remind us of this.

I agree with Michael Elliott’s assessment of this latest disaster. “This earthquake reminded us that there are primal forces of nature that no amount of our wizard technology is able to confine.”

Similarly, the Interpreter's Bible notes, "Notwithstanding all of man's pride and parade, he is in many ways an alien on the earth he claims as home and is reminded of his puny strength when caught in the wild elemental dance of nature."

Thirdly, natural disasters reveal how good people are. I've seen it happen repeatedly and it has certainly occurred again. Nature's worst brings out man's best.

I am overwhelmed by the level of compassion, empathy and generosity that has been displayed by people all around the world. There has been no shortage of volunteers willing to go help the displaced or people willing to give money to help meet their needs.

The Center for Disease Control and Prevention traditionally runs with a skeleton crew between Christmas and New Year's. However, when CDC Director Julie Gerberding checked her email the day after the deadly waves hit South Asia, she found hundreds and hundreds of messages from employees begging to be sent to the disaster zone to help. This willingness to help on the part of her employees has begun the longest and most complex operation in the agency's fifty-nine year history.

Those that cannot go have not let that stop them from helping. Money has been pouring into relief agencies at an astounding rate. To date, over fifteen billion dollars has been pledged or given and the figure increases daily.

Reading about the relief efforts and money given reminded me of Isaiah's dream. "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us His ways so that we may walk in His paths. The law will go out from Zion and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between nations and settle disputes for many peoples. **They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation nor will they train for war anymore.** Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord" Isaiah 2:1-5.

There are times when I have seen Isaiah's dream for peace fulfilled, be it ever so briefly. Do you know when they occur? After natural disasters and the most recent has been no exception. Enemies are turned into friends and barriers are broken down when people are hurting.

One of the countries that has taken the lead in helping the tsunami victims is Australia. They have pledged a substantial amount of money and aid. Soon after the disaster occurred, the Australian military was in Indonesia delivering fresh water to the victims. The Australian Foreign Minister, Alexander Downer, set up a meeting with his Indonesian counterpart, Hassan Wirajuda to discuss what more Australia can do to help. "Australia and Indonesia have had their differences over the past fifty years," Mr. Downer said, "but I want the Indonesian people to know that if ever there is a disaster in their country, we will always be there to help."

How encouraging it has been to watch people from every major religion and nationality work together to heal wounds and comfort the grieved. Such cooperation has to make God smile but also wonder why it takes a disaster to mobilize people to help one another and live in harmony. Why can't we live like this every day? We could and if God had His way, we would.

On this historic weekend when Civil and Human Rights are on our mind, let us pledge anew to do our part to fulfill Isaiah's dream as well as that of the Twentieth Century prophet, Martin Luther King, Jr. May we boldly carry the torch of compassion, freedom and justice as we do our part to usher in the era of "peace on earth good will toward men" that the response to this disaster has begun.

Finally, natural disasters reveal how much we need God. This was certainly true for the Psalmist. He was overcome with loneliness and fear as his world came crashing down upon him. He needed companionship, strength, hope and assurance in those turbulent times and was not too timid to ask for them or proud to receive them. Neither should we be.

This is why I call upon everyone in our church not only to give sacrificially to help alleviate the suffering of our brothers and sisters in South Asia, but to pray for them daily. Ask God to be their "refuge and strength, a very present help in their time of trouble." Ask Him to calm them with the image of a peaceful river that flows by a dry and safe dwelling place, far

removed from the threat of natural disaster. Ask Him to strengthen them with the awareness that even a raging tsunami cannot sweep away the firm foundation of faith. Ask Him to speak softly to them in the stillness of the night to let them know they are not alone and never will be.

While you are at it, ask Him to show the rest of the world that healing wounds, rebuilding lives and restoring hope are not distractions from life's weightier responsibilities. These are man's greatest responsibilities.