



Sharing the Good News!

Penn Northeast Conference of the United Church of Christ

WHAT IS GOD UP TO?

You may recall that back in August the four and one-half million member Evangelical Lutheran Church in America—these are our Lutheran friends—held a national meeting in Minneapolis and voted to allow clergy living in publicly accountable lifelong, monogamous same-gender relationships to serve churches where local Synods and their churches are supportive of such unions.

While this week-long meeting was taking place, a powerful storm front blew into Minnesota—and a tornado from this storm struck a Lutheran church, damaging its steeple. A nationally famous evangelical conservative minister (*not* a Lutheran pastor) who happens to serve a large congregation in Minneapolis declared that the tornado was a providential warning that what the Lutherans were getting ready to do was greatly displeasing to God.

In response to this fearless man of the cloth, who felt he could detect divine intentionality in natural events, another pastor from Minneapolis—this time a Lutheran—pointed out that most tornados appear in the Bible Belt, the region of our country least tolerant of homosexuals, while the fewest tornados occur in the Northeast, which is the place where people are the most accepting of lesbian and gay persons in covenantal relationships.*

Which pastor do you think was right? Which one accurately reads “the signs of the times” and is truly able to speak for God from what occurs in nature?

Far too often, it seems, we mortals try to tease out heavenly messages from the auspicious circumstances we encounter in nature and human history. Are we really able to do such a thing? *Or instead, are we reading our perception of God’s purposes INTO these events?*

Perhaps we feel justified in trying to discern God’s will in the hurly-burly of life because this is something that was done in biblical times. For example, the devastating destruction of Jerusalem in 587 B.C.E. was viewed by many pious Jews in the generations following as a sign of God’s punishment of Israel for centuries of spiritual and moral apostasy.† And Israel’s prophets were often inclined to read historical events as God’s will writ large in natural circumstances.

* As reported in *Christian Century* (9/22/09, p. 8).

† 1 Chronicles 9.1.

The problem is, signs can be read quite differently, as the controversy over the transcendent meaning of a Minnesota tornado illustrates. Does a yellow light preceding a red light at an intersection mean “hit the brakes” or “gun it”? Was the devastation caused by hurricane Katrina a sign of God’s wrath against egregious Mardi Gras sinning—as some preachers claimed at the time, or simply what happens sometimes when individuals and governmental agencies don’t take as seriously as they should the awesome power of nature?

I get uneasy when people claim to find a divine message in some historical circumstance. A man thinks he’s having a heart attack and goes to the doctor. The “heart attack” turns out to be indigestion, but in the course of the doctor’s examination a deadly tumor is found and is subsequently removed, thereby saving the man’s life. So the happy fellow announces that God *caused* the indigestion in order to get him to go to the doctor so his *real* medical danger could be found!

I have heard people speak like this time and time again. As a pastor, what do I say then to the woman who didn’t have a God-induced stomach-ache, and therefore didn’t get to the doctor before the tumor became inoperable? Why didn’t God “speak” to her? How does one offer comfort in this type of situation?

Jesus’ warning about seeking signs should give all sign-readers pause:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven. He answered them, “When it is evening, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, *but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.*” Then he left them and went away.‡

The “sign of Jonah” is probably an allusion to Jonah’s three days in the belly of the big fish, which is suggestive of the time between crucifixion and resurrection. This is *not* a current sign, but something that took place in the distant past that appears to be somewhat analogous to what takes place in Jesus’ lifetime. By itself the “sign of Jonah” doesn’t mean anything. Its meaning is created by the Matthean Jesus’ ability to recognize a similarity between two discrete events.

In being able to “read” signs we may find that “God is still speaking” to us, but it is God speaking personally through our imagination and faith—which is why not everyone “hears” the same words! Probably then it is best to let tornados simply be tornados, and for us to be less inclined to speak categorically for God out of the ambiguities of the mystery that life truly is.

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‡ Matthew 16.1-4 (NRSV via BibleWorks 7). Italics mine.