

## Column

Is the natural world comforting and beneficent? Or terrifying and hostile?

A character in Charles Williams' novel "Decent into Hell" – a young woman by the name of Myrtle Fox – is an apologist of the first view. Over tea, she prattles about how soothing trees and other aspects of nature are.

Miss Fox, of course, is not alone. Many people, I included, enjoy going out under the trees when the sun is shining, few insects are abroad and the temperature is neither too cold nor too hot. This planet we occupy is full of beauty and wonder, and we do right in celebrating it, as did the psalmist when he wrote: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord, which made heaven and earth" (121:1,2).

Likewise, the Victorian poet Gerald Manley Hopkins seems to be in Miss Fox's camp, when he writes: "The earth is charged with the grandeur of God." No one having seen a rainbow, savored a sunset or breathed in the beauty of a mountain vista could contest this assessment.

Yet, this robust and romantic view of nature must be tempered with reality . . . with, for example, what we saw during and in the aftermath of Hurricane Ian. Nature is not always beneficent. The world as presently constituted brings forth both sea-surges of delight and terror. The same tree that provides shade can bring death if it falls on your house.

How then might we look at what are commonly called natural disasters? Should they be viewed as signs of God's certain judgment on particularly wicked people?

Perhaps at times they are. God is sovereign and can rain brimstone on the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah if He pleases. With that said, Jesus gives a more nuanced view. In Luke 13 we find him addressing a question regarding the death of 18 people who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed (apparently a recent happening).

The biblical text gives no explanation as to why this tower collapsed. Whether it came about because of wet soil and an unstable foundation or from a seismic trimmer does not really matter. The question is: were the people who perished exceptionally wicked and thus their demise a direct judgment from the

Lord. The answer Jesus gives is instructive: “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”

In context, Jerusalem and its Temple were under judgment and would soon be laid even with the ground. All, therefore, needed the forgiveness and new life Jesus was offering. His kingdom path was the path of life. It still is.

Returning to the question of natural disasters and other calamities? The Christian answer is a big and comprehensive one. It affirms the goodness of creation, but also the far-reaching effects of man’s rebellion as pictured in Genesis 3. One of the effects of the later is that creation itself is out of sync with God’s plan and needs to be put right. “The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together until now,” says Paul in Romans 8:22.

The good news is that God has not abandoned humans or creation. Both will be put right in God’s good time. Our task in the present is not to deny the reality of pain or point a finger of accusation towards those experiencing it, but to follow Jesus’ example of reaching out a healing, helping hand to those in need and extending a Gospel invitation.

If ever asked where God is in the midst of human suffering, all we have to do is point to the cross. Nothing more needs to be said.

*O LORD, our heavenly Father, Almighty and everlasting God, who hast safely brought us to the beginning of this day; Defend us in the same with thy mighty power; and grant that this day we fall into no sin, neither run into any kind of danger; but that all our doings, being ordered by thy governance, may be righteous in thy sight; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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