

Has God Left Some Wildness in Nature?

Psalms 74, 77, 89, etc.

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Is God to blame for hurricanes? Most of us dismiss as crackpots those preachers who declare that this storm or that is a judgment of God upon the cities that have experienced destruction. But at the same time, we pray for safety in the storm. We pray, sometimes, for rain or for sunshine. As a pastor I often get credit, jokingly, at weddings, when the weather is nice, and I get blamed when it rains. But seriously: Does God control storms?

Two of the most basic Christian—and Jewish—affirmations are that God is creator and ruler of the world. We can understand that to mean that God intended everything that has ever happened from the beginning, or that God built the clock and wound it up so it runs on its own—or something in between that is more dynamic. We can say that God has perfect freedom so that his creatures have none, or we can say that God in his love intended his creatures to have freedom. A question I hear discussed less than human freedom is the freedom of the creation itself.

Christians believe that the created world is *good*, but often in a romanticized Sierra Club calendar sort of way. Do we also believe that creation is *wild*—that it is beyond our control and maybe, because God wants it so, beyond God's control? The concept of Mother Nature is, of course, a pagan one, but we speak that way because it seems to us that the creation seems to have a mind of its own, like an unsubmitive wife. We find it more comfortable to say that Mother Nature has done something terrible to us than to say that God did it. And maybe we are onto something there. Maybe the creation has a freedom of its own.

Let's think about exactly what God *does* control.

- I wake up in the morning and choose between having cereal and making a waffle. Did God control that? Most of us would say No, he gives me the freedom to choose.
- I take Percy for a walk and he barks at the five turkeys on Justin's farm. Did God control that? No, we assume that even a dog has some measure of freedom even though he is acting mostly on the basis of instinct.
- What about the grass I walk on? Does God control how green or brown it is at this time of year? We don't think of grass having free will, but can we say that God allows the grass—or maybe the whole ecosystem—a measure of freedom?
- What can we say about things that are not alive? Father Joe says that a chunk of clay 50 feet wide and 25 feet deep fell into the sea from the edge of St. Andrew Church's property on Spring Street. Did God make that happen? Or does God give freedom to creation to shape itself according to natural forces? When we had a study group on science and religion we watched a lecture by a professor at Loma Linda University in California [Darrel R. Falk, "Creation and Evolution" in *Religion and Science: Pathways to Truth*, Wesley Ministry Network, 2008]. His campus sits on a bluff overlooking the Pacific, not unlike Clay Head or Mohegan Bluff. This scientist asked the question of what forces shaped the location of the campus. It was an interplay of two things: human freedom in history which resulted in the school's leaders being able to purchase that property, which they viewed as providential; and the freedom of wild nature which shaped the cliffs through the process of erosion by water and wind. It was the interplay of those two freedoms which God used to make the campus the way it is. You could say the same thing about Block Island: rather than imagining

that God sat in a studio like Jean Valentine or Eleanor Garrett painting this island on a canvas of reality, deciding where each rock and gully would go, we can imagine that God kept some wildness in nature and let the creation choose for itself how it would develop. That freedom interacted with human freedom to build and cut down and farm and erode and preserve to produce the island we have today, which we still think of as a gift from God.

So what do we say when we come to storms? Mythologically they have been identified with gods in many cultures. But do we have any reason to think that the behavior of storms is more controlled by God than the behavior of humans?

Last week we read together Psalm 46, “God is our refuge and strength... Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea; though its water roar and foam, though the mountains tremble with its tumult.” Notice that the psalm does not say that God will never allow the earth to change, but that we will not fear even when the earth *does* change. We will not fear even though the mountains deep in the ocean shake and make the waters roar and foam. The psalm does not say that God will not allow a tsunami but we confess that we will not fear even if one comes.

Hurricane Sandy reminded us that nature is wild and beyond our control. When you read through the book of Psalms you find many references to storms and waves, and what you discover is that the wildness of water is a symbol for the forces of chaos in the world. On the one hand, it might seem odd for ancient Israel to talk about waves and water since they did not live on the coast. For the most part, they left that to other people like the Philistines. The Israelites settled inland and they never developed much sea trade. For them, water was dangerous. They lived on mountaintops like Jerusalem and in fertile plains and alongside the Jordan River, and later around the lake called Galilee. It makes sense, then, that they would sing about God’s power over the forces of water like the assurance in Psalm 29:10 that “Yahweh sits enthroned over the flood.” That same psalm says “The voice of Yahweh is over the waters,” echoing the second verse of Genesis that says that the spirit of God moved over the waters of the deep at the time of creation.

Most Old Testament scholars say that the Hebrew account of creation reflects a way of thinking shaped by other cultures in the ancient Near East, with the difference that the Hebrews understood that there was only one God, not a conflict among deities. Historians of religion theorize that there was a proto-Indo-European religion that included the story of deities struggling against the forces of chaos, which are often related to water. They have a scholarly word for it—German, of course—*chaoskampf*. That story of struggle against chaos is found in Norse myths, Vedic literature in India, Greek myths, Canaanite, Babylonian, and Hebrew writings, and even in Japan.

In the psalms you find evidence of that sense of the world, as you do elsewhere in Job and Isaiah and Revelation. Sometimes the waters of chaos are referred to as a sea-monster called Rahab, a dragon, or Leviathan. Psalm 89 (9-10) says to Yahweh, “You rule the raging of the sea; when its waves rise, you still them. You crushed Rahab (the dragon) like a carcass.” Psalm 74 (13-14) says “You divided the sea by your might; you broke the heads of the dragons in the waters. You crushed the heads of Leviathan.”

It’s not just talking about the creation or the exodus. It’s about chaos in nature and in everyday life. Think of the symbolic overtones of Moby Dick. One of the most basic story lines in movies is “Sin awakes the chaos monster” [Greg Mobley, SBL Forum, <http://www.sbl-site.org/publications/article.aspx?articleId=623>]. The hero or heroine does something wrong and the chaos monster that was waiting comes to life. The woman in Psycho steals from her boss and

somehow falls victim to the monster at the motel. The teenagers making out on a deserted road go too far and somehow it awakens the slasher. The kids let the Cat in the Hat in the door in direct violation of their mother's command and that leads to the emergence of Thing 1 and Thing 2, and the rest of the story is about putting them back in the suitcase. One of the themes that grabs people—maybe especially around Halloween—is that just below the surface there are forces of chaos that are just waiting for an excuse to re-emerge. The message of the Bible and the psalms in particular is that God is the only thing that keeps chaos in line; it is God who has defeated them and preserves order in the world.

When you find references to “the deep” or “the waters” or “the waves,” they are references to those forces of chaos. Often the Bible speaks about God defeating those forces, but at other times it speaks as if God is keeping them in check. Psalm 104(5-9) says that in the creation God covered the earth with the deep as with a garment, but at his rebuke the waters fled, at the sound of his thunder they took flight. Verse 9 says, “You set a boundary that the waters may not pass, so that they may not again cover the earth.” God separated the waters from the dry land. God ended the flood in Noah's day when the waters of chaos came down from above and up from below. In God's speech to Job (Job 38:11) he reminds the mortal that only God can say to the waters, “Thus far you shall come, and no farther, and here shall your proud waves be stopped.”

We usually think of the creation in Genesis 1 as God creating out of nothing—and logically it is necessary for there to be a time when God makes something out of nothing. We think of two distinct steps in the first two verses. First God creates the heaven and the earth, and then the Spirit moves on the face of the formless deep. But Hebrew scholars increasingly think that we should see it as one story which begins with the formless deep already there. Here's a translation of the first two verses by Rabbi Chaim Stern: “When God was about to create heaven and earth, the earth was a formless chaos, and over the chaotic water's face there was darkness. Then the spirit of God glided over the face of the waters.” The story in Genesis 1 is about God creating order out of chaos.

But the story is not about the end of chaos. You remember what happens to the waters: God creates a firmament—the upside-down bowl of the sky, a bell-jar of protection—to separate the waters that are above and the waters that are below and create a zone of safety where life can happen. Jon Levenson, a Jewish scholar at Harvard Divinity, wrote a book called *Creation and the Persistence of Evil* [HarperCollins, 1988] in which he said, “The *confinement* of chaos rather than its elimination is the essence of creation” [p.17]. Chaos was not obliterated. It was controlled, fenced in, held behind a firmament, and organized into structures” [Moble summarizing Levenson].

So here, I think is the way we think of hurricanes and all the chaos still present in the natural world. God never eliminated all disorder, because in his love of his creation, including us, he gave us freedom. That freedom includes to some degree the natural world of air and water—impacted as it is by our human freedom to increase the temperature and make changes to the land. What the ancient world feared as chaos, we of a more romantic period may call wildness. In either case, it is clear that the natural world is not entirely under control. God has left some wildness, some unpredictability in this world, and we would not have it any other way. This leaves us with a world full of mystery, and full not only of exhilaration but also tragedy. But God chose that world over one that was tightly controlled and free perhaps of tragedy but also barren of freedom and love.

And what has this to do with Jesus? That would require another sermon, but before we come to the table just remember this: that the Almighty subjected himself to our freedom, even allowing us to kill him, and subjected himself to what seem to us humans to be the whims of nature—drought and storm, famine and waves. What we remember at this table is that he became what we are, subject to all that we are subject to, in order to set us free and to make us what he is. The mystery writer Dorothy Sayers pointed this out long ago: “For whatever reason God chose to make man as he is — limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death — He had the honesty and the courage to take His own medicine. Whatever game he is playing with His creation, He has kept his own rules and played fair” [*Creed or Chaos?* New York, Harcourt Brace, 1949, p. 4].