

THE HORIZON OF CARE

A sermon preached by Galen Guengerich
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City
September 10, 2017

In an article about humanitarian intervention, the political philosopher Michael Walzer observes, “There is nothing new about human disasters caused by human beings. We have always been, if not our own, certainly each other’s worst enemies.”

Walzer goes on to list a few of history’s most horrific mass atrocities, and then he makes the point that today’s atrocities tend not to happen in secret, even if they happen at a distance. He says, “In the contemporary world there is very little that happens far away, out of sight, or behind the scenes; the camera crews arrive faster than rigor mortis. We are instant spectators of every atrocity; we sit in our living rooms and see the murdered children, the desperate refugees.”

It’s true that human disasters caused by human beings remain very much before us — in Syria, Congo, and South Sudan, among many other places, including the nuclear disaster threatened by North Korean President Kim’s belligerence and the human disaster threatened by President Trump’s suspension of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals Act. But the disasters on our screens this morning are not caused principally by human beings, but by the forces of nature. We are instant spectators of these disasters too.

The recent floods in South Asia have affected more than 40 million inhabitants of Bangladesh, Nepal, and India, damaged or destroyed nearly one million homes, and killed more than 1,200 people. One third of Bangladesh has been under water. Two weeks ago, Hurricane Harvey tore into Texas with 130-mile-an-hour winds, dumping more than 40 inches of rain onto the Gulf Coast and turning Houston into what the poet Edgar Allen Poe once described in one of his poem titles as, “The City in the Sea.”

On Friday, Hurricane Irma demonstrated its credentials as the most powerful hurricane ever to emerge from the Atlantic by decimating Barbuda, Anguilla, and St. Maarten. Today, even as Irma lays siege to Florida, the Eastern Caribbean appears to have dodged Hurricane Jose.

There’s more. Dozens of wildfires rage in the Pacific Northwest, thus far burning upwards of 300,000 acres of land. Also this weekend, Mexico has been grappling with

the dual onslaughts of Hurricane Katia and the strongest earthquake to hit Mexico in a century, killing more than 60 people.

Three weeks ago, the sun was blotted out by the moon. There was darkness at midday over a sizeable swath of our nation. What's next, a plague of frogs?

Perhaps predictably, this confluence of events has led some apocalyptic-minded folks to speculate that Judgment Day may be just around the corner. I've seen at least half a dozen articles on the topic, including one in *The New York Times*. As the *Times* and others report, certain sectors of the social media world have been awash with a couple of verses from Luke's gospel in the Christian New Testament, which read, "There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken."

Here is my official position on this matter as a theologian and as a minister. This is not the end of time; it's the end of summer.

This is the season when wildfires burn in western North America and hurricanes form in the eastern Atlantic. We know these things will happen. We also know where earthquakes regularly occur and when eclipses will happen. The actions of the natural world are no longer a mystery to us, nor are they hidden from us.

And historically at least, they have had nothing to do with us. Hurricanes form in the eastern Atlantic whether or not anyone lives on Barbuda, or Anguilla, or St. Maarten. They come ashore on the southern coasts of the US whether or not there are refineries in Houston or high-rises in Miami Beach. Wildfires burn in the forests of the Pacific Northwest whether or not anyone plays golf in Oregon. Tectonic plates shift whether or not there are houses in Oaxaca or apartments in Mexico City. The natural world is profoundly indifferent to our preference for human life over other forces of nature. We shouldn't take it personally when the forces of nature cause human beings to suffer and even to die.

But we do take it personally, because the suffering and the dying get done by individual human beings — people just like us. Sometimes, the vagaries of happenstance require the suffering to be done by us. Inevitably, the time will come that dying will be done by each of us. The cause will probably not be a hurricane, or an earthquake, or a wildfire, but it will nonetheless be a force of nature beyond our control.

Even though most of us may not personally be suffering or dying at the moment, we still take it personally when people around us suffer and die. After all, their stories could be our story. It's not the numbers that linger in our hearts and minds, but rather the faces and voices of those who suffer from disasters, whether caused by nature or by human nature – or, as with the consequences of climate change, some combination of the two.

I'm thinking of the 41-year-old woman and her three-year-old daughter in Beaumont, Texas, who encountered Hurricane Harvey's high water while driving. After getting out of the car, the two were swept up by the current and carried to a drainage canal half a mile away. The mother valiantly tried to keep her daughter up out of the water. She succeeded in saving her daughter, but by the time rescuers arrived, she herself was unresponsive and later pronounced dead.

I'm thinking of Luis Gomez, a young man from Massachusetts who is waiting to hear whether his DACA renewal has been approved. According to the New York Times, Gomez says that he's the only one in his family without secure paperwork. He decided not to tell his family about the renewal to keep them from worrying. But for him, it's a tense time. He says, "I've been calling [about the renewal] and they're saying it's fine, but it might not be fine. When I talk to the person there, it's another Tuesday for them, but for me it's like, am I going to lose everything?"

I'm thinking of the four-year-old girl named Abrianna in Cleveland, who called 911 to get help for her mother, who was having trouble breathing and had become unresponsive. She told the dispatcher, "Mommy needs help." Abrianna didn't know her own address, and it took police 30 minutes to track the signal of the cell phone she was using. But they eventually found the home, and paramedics got to her mother in time.

Whether infant or immigrant, whether by nature's hand or human hand, there's lots of suffering going on in our world. Lots of people need help. Even though you and I may not be in danger at the moment, I wonder how we would react if we were the ones who needed help.

The Nobel Prize-winning poet Wislawa Szymborska was born in 1923, and she lived her entire life in Poland. With Hitler savaging Poland during her teens and Stalin serving as its overlord during her twenties, she experienced a full measure of the twentieth century's turmoil and tragedy. She once said, "We know ourselves only as far as we have been tested."

How will you and I respond when the testing comes? The contemporary poet Craig Santos Perez wonders the same thing. A native of the Pacific island of Guam, Perez teaches English at the University of Hawaii. In his poem titled "Care," he writes:

My 16-month old daughter wakes from her nap
and cries. I pick her up, press her against my chest
and rub her back until my palm warms
like an old family quilt. “Daddy’s here, daddy’s here,”
I whisper.

He goes on to point out that “here” is the island of Oahu, which happens to be 8,500 miles from Syria. But, he wonders, what if the Pacific trade winds suddenly became helicopters? What if flames, nails, and shrapnel indiscriminately came barreling towards him and his daughter? What if the shadows against the windows weren’t tree branches, but soldiers and terrorists marching? What would “Daddy’s here” mean then?

He asks:

Would we reach the desperate boats of
the Mediterranean in time?...
Am I strong enough to carry her across
the razor wires of sovereign borders and ethnic
hatred?

Beyond that, he says, what if we set out in a boat and didn’t make landfall? What if “here” capsized? Could he hold his child above rising waters?

The poem concludes:

I lay my daughter
onto bed, her breath finally as calm as low tide.
To all the parents who brave the crossing: you and your
children matter. I hope your love will teach the nations
that emit the most carbon and violence that they should,
instead, remit the most compassion. I hope, soon,
the only difference between a legal refugee and
an illegal migrant will be how willing
we are to open our homes, offer refuge, and
carry each other towards the horizon of care.

Whether at the hand of nature or human nature, suffering poses a test: are we willing to carry each other toward the horizon of care — wherever that horizon may be? It may be housing for a hurricane victim, or shelter for an abused woman, or a legal clinic for an immigrant at risk. It may be a place at dinner for someone who is hungry, or place in the

conversation for someone who is lonely, or place in the workforce for someone who's been laid off.

Our response to situations of need tests our moral integrity as human beings. People in need matter. If someone is in distress and we can help, then we should. As Michael Walzer puts it in his article about when to intervene, "In situations like these, anyone who can help should help."

Sixteen years ago tomorrow, in the wake of the terrorist attacks on 9/11, New Yorkers were the ones who needed help, among others. In my sermon here at All Souls the Sunday after 9/11, I invoked the Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, who wrote:

*I looked on the earth, and lo, it was waste and void,
And to the heavens, and they had no light.
I looked on the mountains, and lo, they were quaking,
And all the hills moved to and fro...
And all its cities were laid in ruin (Jeremiah 4:23-26).*

During the late 1940s, the theologian Paul Tillich invoked this biblical text in a sermon about the terrors of the Second World War and the strength that emerged despite its trials and tribulations. He said, "There is something immovable and unshakable which becomes manifest in the crumbling of our world. On the boundaries of the finite, the infinite becomes visible. This is why the prophets were able to face the shaking of the foundations."

In other words, when things come tumbling down, it's a good time to look around and see what doesn't. When hard times come our way, we gather here to declare what we know to be true — that our faith will endure even our greatest tests, that our hope will outrun even our greatest fears, and that our love will overcome even our greatest foes.

Today is a good day to breathe an extra prayer of gratitude for the good things in your life. Pay attention to the beauty of life however it comes your way. Reach out to the people you love and tell them so — and give them a hug.

Then look around for someone who needs help — your help. Do what you can to make a difference. Always seek the best that's possible.

No matter what disappointments lay behind us or what challenges lie around us, we face the future undaunted. We're prophets of possibility. We're here to help.