

Joan and the boys stayed home on Thursday because of the ice, an unexpected gift from Mother Nature. Our phone rang at 6:00 AM, so I picked it up and it was Denis Ward, our school superintendent, calling to tell us school was cancelled. It was a recording, which I didn't realize until I was several minutes into the conversation and asking Denis about his family and the prospects for Danville's basketball team. So I woke up the boys to tell them they could sleep in, but they got up anyway and ate breakfast, then drove to the school to play basketball with their friends.

But it was a beautiful little gift, that ice, not really enough to be dangerous, but enough to frost the trees and glaze the country roads and make the bus drivers timid. By ten o'clock, it was 34°, the ice was melted and people were moving about. At lunch, I hooked up the television to the antenna and watched the news out of Haiti and wished Mother Nature had visited them as gently as she had visited us.

The other day, I overheard two people talking about Haiti, and one of them said to the other that she didn't understand why God had visited such tragedy upon the Haitian people. Then the other woman said the Haitians would be okay, that God never gives us more than we can handle.

Whenever I hear dreadful theology, it's all I can do not to correct it. Joan is the same way about poor grammar. I've never heard a George W. Bush speech in its entirety, because Joan would talk over him, following behind him, sweeping up the linguistic mess he left in his wake. I'm that way about theology. I wanted to interrupt the women and say, "Do you really believe God caused that earthquake?" then give them a little talk about tectonic plates and subduction and seafloor spreading. I once had an hour-long argument with Pat Robertson. He didn't say anything back. It was a little like my talk with Denis Ward. I have a lot of those.

I've always felt this need to defend God against bad press, though I realize God hasn't appointed me as the divine spokesperson. While what we believe about God has profound consequences for our happiness, we tend not to think carefully before making claims about God. We often parrot what we've heard others say, with little consideration for what it says about God or how it might affect others. And because suffering is such a mystery, we tend to make claims about God when people are distressed, often compounding their difficulties.

When I was in seminary, two of my friends attending with me met and married one another. They were a fun-loving, gracious couple and before any of us had children we would vacation together. They had three children, a little younger than our children's age.

Several years ago, the woman was diagnosed with a brain tumor and operated on, but died after a heroic struggle with cancer. My friend Jim and I went to the funeral last week, which was very small, mostly because her husband didn't want to expose his children to people who might say inappropriate things. During her illness, well-intentioned people had told the children God would heal their mother if they had faith, or that her illness was God's way of teaching them to trust, or God needed her in heaven, or God did this to her because she had faith and would be able to endure it. The father wanted to spare his children from that, realizing the pain and confusion it might cause them.

I'm not sure how or when it happened, but somewhere along the way in our human evolution, a very long time ago, we humans began to think God was responsible for everything that happened, whether good or ill, and we voiced that over and over again, especially in times of suffering and difficulty, so that it is now lodged in our minds as an inviolate, immovable truth—God is responsible for everything that happens. Though its intent was likely meant to comfort people by explaining the great mysteries of life, that belief has caused far more harm than good, crediting God for all manner of evil. *We simply must train ourselves out of the mistaken, destructive belief that everything happens because God wills it to happen and manipulates events and people and the natural order to bring it about.*

One of the most dramatic scenes in the Bible is in the book of Job. Job and his friends are speculating about God's role in Job's suffering and God listens to them, patiently at first, then apparently grows frustrated, hearing the various claims being made about him and asks them this question, "Who are you to make the purpose of God dark by speaking without knowledge? (Job 38:2) Who are we to attribute bad motives to God when we've made no effort to understand the world?"

Listen, friends, there is much evil and sorrow in our world. Continental plates shift underneath Haiti and 200,000 people die in a 7.0 magnitude earthquake because they live in a poor country where building codes aren't followed. When a 7.1 earthquake hit San Francisco in 1989, only 64 people were killed. Poverty kills, not God.

Cells in our bodies mutate and become malignant, turning against the very body that nourishes them. Sometimes our bodies forsake us, but God doesn't forsake us.

Roughly every 5 years, the temperature of the Pacific Ocean warms or chills significantly, causing drought, floods, and other weather disturbances mostly in developing countries and people starve and die and have their homes swept away. But the exact same weather pattern that brings calamity to one part of the globe brings sunshine to another.

The opportunities for great suffering are many and widespread, yet we continue to be surprised by chaos and evil. What is a wonder to me is how often life works out, how often our wondrously complex bodies do precisely the right thing at precisely the right time, how the creativity of men and women can stave off disaster, how the generosity of men, women, and children can bring hope and healing to those who suffer.

Within a week of the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, two Christian evangelists visited San Francisco. The first, Virgi Rosemond, preached through a bullhorn at a city plaza, saying, "Jesus said he would send earthquakes to godless places. This city is wicked, like Sodom and Gomorrah." Moral of the story: Beware of preachers bearing bullhorns.

Evangelist Billy Graham also toured San Francisco and when asked by someone why God caused the earthquake, said, "I don't think this earthquake was sent by God. God is loving and merciful. God gives grace, and peace, and strength."

Let's not forget that. God doesn't cause wrenching tragedy to befall people. Life does that. God inspires us to do something about it.