

Katrina: How to respond to tragedy?

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

For the second time in ten months our attention has been commanded by a natural catastrophe—there was the tsunami this past December in Southeast Asia and now Hurricane Katrina on the Gulf Coast. As I write, Hurricane Ophelia is bearing down on the North Carolina coast, where my family has vacationed for decades.

Church response to Katrina has been strong and helpful: offerings directed to relief services on the ground, efforts at resettling displaced people, and lots of hands-on aid. The congregation I serve teamed up with Holy Name Cathedral and within a few hours filled a semitruck with diapers, peanut butter and granola bars to send to victims.

Meanwhile, there is pastoral and hermeneutical work to be done. There is nothing more distressing to the human spirit than the suggestion that in the final analysis nature cannot be trusted, and that if the creator God is involved in the natural world, it is not apparent how.

In this issue Walter Brueggemann points out that there is no one teaching on the meaning of natural disasters in the Bible and that a generously biblical approach will at least acknowledge four dimensions of the topic, from the prophetic to the pastoral. Our trust that “God finally prevails over chaos to sustain life and keep it safe” does not mean that suffering and death will not happen to innocent human beings, as every pastor regularly witnesses. It means that, from a Christian perspective, there is a dynamic going on in and through even the most horrific suffering that will finally be redemptive.

Canadian theologian Douglas John Hall writes: “God’s problem is not that God can’t do certain things. God’s problem is that God loves! Love complicates the life of God as it complicates every human life” (*God and Human Suffering*).

As I was pondering all of this I witnessed another way that love complicates our lives but also redeems them. I watched as my daughter and her husband took their daughter to college. It is an old drama. These parents love their firstborn so much

that they are going to do a most extraordinary thing: they are going to let her go. They will take her to college in another state, they will help her settle in, maybe even make her bed for the first time, and then they will get in the car and drive away, leaving her alone. But she won't really be alone. Their love will remain with her. In time she will understand that their leaving her was not abandonment, but the full expression of their love.

They are experiencing a deep theological truth even though they may not name it. The finest thing love can do is give the gift of freedom. It is not without pain, nor is it without risk. But genuine love lets go, backs away, gets in the car and drives off, and allows a beloved child the freedom necessary for her authentic personhood, with all the risk that entails.

There may be a prophetic word to be spoken about Katrina, but from my perspective it is not about the sinfulness of Mardi Gras or about God's wrathful judgment on the sins of the flesh. Rather, the prophetic word concerns the human refusal to be responsible about the environment and global warming; it concerns the human engineering that violates nature's wisdom about rivers and deltas; and it targets the political insensitivity that issues evacuation orders to a population one quarter of which has no way to evacuate, and then essentially abandons them.