

Calamity! Almost by definition, calamity strikes without warning, out of the blue.

By definition, it wreaks unspeakable havoc; leaves in its wake wave upon wave of destruction, misery and grief.

A deep water oil rig explodes and burns, then spews oil continuously, day after day, week after week with no known end in sight. Extent of damage also still unknown. But we see the pictures; we hear the stories of all the lives affected.

Fish, dolphins, birds lie dead on the beaches. Friday's W. Post, front page: a bird entirely covered in thick brown oil, still apparently alive but for how long? Identified only as "a bird;" who could discern what kind of bird, under all that muck?

We see maps of the oil's spread; hear predictions of how far it may yet spread: to the Florida Panhandle, and around, up the coast of the Southern Atlantic states.

Fishing is banned in large parts of the Gulf. Livelihoods have come to a standstill. The future of fishermen, those dependent on tourists are unknown; or maybe all too well known.

Oil and tar seep into the coastal marshes, nurseries of sea life, source of food for marsh residents, human and animal. Yesterday, the Post's front page story was of a French-speaking Native American tribe, the Pointe-aux-Chenes.

For more than a century have found refuge and made a life deep in the south Louisiana marshes, isolated and safe from incursions of an unfriendly dominant culture. But the oil is seeping in toward their refuge. If it keeps coming, they fear the marsh will die and their way of life with it.

Calamity strikes! Pushing back against it we demand an explanation. Sometimes an explanation, a chain of causation can be found:

He had it coming. Anybody could see which way his life was going and how it would end. Another young man steeped in drug dealing, the cycle of violence and revenge in the streets of D.C., Chicago, Baltimore, L.A., gunned down, lying dead in the street.

She was a smoker, you know. There's your explanation.

He was diabetic; never would stick to his diet, though.

She refused to hand over the car keys, even though she was so obviously drunk.

He never went to class or did the reading. How could he have hoped to pass?

Sometimes there is an explanation. We can see *how* the calamity came about. A rational explanation gives us a sense of security. *We* will know how to protect ourselves and avoid such a calamity in our life. Even when the explanation can't change anything now. Even when the perceived chain of causation reaches far back into history.

About the oil spill, one Pointe-aux-Chenes member mused about Christopher Columbus, "the first scout of the civilization that would eventually drill an oil well 5,000 feet under the ocean and they not know how to fix it when it broke: 'They shoulda hang him.'"¹

That is, the Pointe-aux-Chenes' ancestors should have hung Columbus when he first made landfall, *then* this disaster would never have happened. A chain of causation, a reason for present calamity, even one that would require rewriting history, is at least of some comfort.

There's a deeper question, posed by this week's New Yorker cover: an oil executive stands with his back to us, facing a Congressional panel. His right hand raised to take the oath. The panel: a heron, dolphin, sea bird (maybe a tern), pelican, fish, all streaked and spotted with oil. They sit poised, leaning over their desk, ready to demand answers:

How could you allow such a catastrophe? How could you cause the destruction and suffering of so many innocents, creatures like us who in no way ever could be said to have brought this destruction on themselves?

We want answers deeper than the "how" of it, the chain of causation. And sometimes we can see a layer of underlying causes: greed, arrogance, envy, indifference, reckless disregard of others' safety and well-being. But, *Why?* Where do those things come from, and why are they part of our human make-up? Why are they *allowed* by the One who is ruler of the universe? Why is calamity *allowed*? Is there some root cause we could discover and understand, to make sense of it?

Two widows in the readings this morning will have had such questions in their hearts. One, the widow of Zarephath voiced the question to the prophet: "What have you against me, O man of God?" Even he, Elijah, cried out, "O Lord my God, have you brought calamity even upon the widow with whom I am staying, by killing her son?"

Her only son. The only son of the widow of Nain, as well. For each a double loss of life, for each already was without a husband and is now without a son. Women had no property rights in ancient Israel. These grieving mothers will have to survive on whatever charity might be offered. With no one to support and protect her, a childless widow is at risk of soon following both husband and son to the grave.

¹Washington Post, Saturday, June 5, 2010, page A-1.

Both Elijah and the widow of Zarephath have been faithful, obedient to God. They have survived drought and famine because of their obedience to God's direction, and by divine providence. The widow risks trusting Elijah's God: the jar of meal and jug of oil do not fail. But grace is followed by calamity, disillusionment, fear and anger.

Has the widow risked too much? Come too close to God and God's prophet, so that God now takes note of her sin? "You have come to me to bring my sin to remembrance, and to cause the death of my son!" she says to Elijah. Is the child's death the punishment of a wrathful God?

Or, as Elijah demands to know, is the Lord God simply a heartless, even cruel God, who has "brought calamity even upon the widow . . . by killing her son?" Is not the general calamity of drought and famine enough?

The narrator gives no direct answer; has no direct answer. Can tell us only that "The Lord listened to the voice of Elijah; the life of the child came into him again, and he revived." The *Lord listens* to the voice of Elijah, the prophet; the prophet whose calling is to listen to the *Lord* and speak the *Lord's* word. The Lord now listens to the truth of the prophet's protest; listens to the prophet who speaks *God's* truth back to *God*. Listens, and restores life.

Jesus, of course, knows this story. Already has cited it to his home town folks, in defining his own mission. (Luke 4:25-26)

Now, approaching the walled city of Nain, surrounded by disciples and a large crowd of followers, he sees another crowd coming out through the city gate. He quickly sizes up the situation: a funeral procession, the body of a young man laid out on the bier, a solitary woman the chief mourner. A widow has lost her only son and with him all hope for her own life.

"When he saw her, he had compassion for her and said to her, 'Do not weep.'" He had compassion. This is that powerful Greek verb (*splanchno*) that means *his guts were wrenched*. The pain of her situation hits him in the core of his being. So he reaches out, touches the bier, and the procession of death stands still.

He speaks to the dead man, who immediately sits up and begins to speak. Jesus has restored him to life, restores him to his mother. The procession of life swallows up the procession of death, and death itself is swallowed up by life.

Why had the young man died? What was the chain of causation? Was there some reason? The questions are neither asked or answered. We do not know, as so often we do not know. As so often we do not know why *this* child, *this* mother, father, brother, sister, lover, friend is not saved, healed, restored to life.

There is no reason, no great underlying *Why*, no explanation—or at least not something we could conceive of or understand now. We do not know.

But we do know this: at the heart of the cosmos is not chaos but stillness. Not death and corruption but the restoring breath of the Holy Spirit. Not wrath but boundless compassion, healing and grace, freely and generously given.

Even in the midst of calamity there is a way forward. Not, or hardly ever, in an instant, by a few words or a single touch. But the compassion of God in Jesus is infinite and abundant, far greater than anything we can imagine.

Ending at 8:00

More than this we cannot know.

This is enough. This is everything.

At 10:30

Into the knowledge of this, into this way of life, into the strength, power and purpose of this compassionate and healing grace, Gabriela Jade is baptized this morning. She has been born into a family of healers. Named for the Archangel Gabriel, messenger of God's saving love. Named for jade, a precious stone of healing grace.

She is baptized into a community constituted by and for the love of God in Christ: the community of God's unconditional love.

More than this we cannot know. What more than this could we ever really hope for, or need to know? This is everything.