

In the Gospel, this morning, Jesus alludes to an ancient story from Moses' time.

After fleeing Egypt, the Hebrew children wandered in the wilderness for forty years. Naturally, they grew tired of wandering, so they grumbled against God. In return, as the story goes, God grew annoyed at them, and sent poisonous snakes to teach the people a lesson.

Stories like this give God a bad name. God appears petulant – and the resulting message is unmistakable: bad things – like poisonous snakes – are God's judgment.

Or – the converse - that good things fail to happen because God does not care enough. In the end, God gets blamed – for both the bad and the absence of good.

Now, people started dying from the snakebites, so Moses begged God, please, stop. God instructed Moses to cast a bronze snake the size of some San Francisco street corner “art”, and to place the snake high on a pole so everyone could see it. That way, when a snake bit somebody, all the person had to do was look at the bronze snake, and be healed.

Some sort of community amulet. Speaking to Nicodemus, Jesus said, I'm going to be lifted up like that snake in the wilderness – all anybody needs to do is look to me.

On the cross, look at Jesus lifted high on the cross. Only Nicodemus doesn't understand – he can't grasp the simple concept of conversion – being born again. Being born a second time, only not of water, of wind and spirit.

Now, let's be honest: people do whine.

You know what I'm talking about. They whine. As in, you want a little cheese with that whine? Or, I hear the whambulance!

People especially whine when disgruntled in group. About the kids' school, or American politics, or even the church.

Not much has changed in the 3000 years, or so, since the Hebrew children whined their way through the wilderness.

What doesn't ring true is the immaturity of God. The story reads as though God and the Hebrews are children fighting over some toy – Can't God take a little grumbling? I mean, the people have been stuck in the wilderness for forty years. Is the God of the Old Testament eternally willful, toying with and reacting to our peevishness.

Such a god is the Glenn Beck god – Glenn Beck hinted this week that God caused the earthquakes and tsunamis in Japan as judgment.

Glenn Beck's god punishes people - the Japanese – for some slight or wrong they have no idea they have committed. Something they have done, or something they have left undone.

Glenn Beck makes me angry, but I'm wondering – Does he make me so mad because I think he is wrong, or because I'm afraid he might be right?

Do I subconsciously wonder why God allowed this tragedy? What other tragedies are in the future? Could I die at God's hands, suddenly and unexpected?

Death and God, have become inextricably linked. Inextricably linked, but I would submit they are so linked only because we understand each so poorly.

Each is a mystery, something we will never fully understand. Because each is a mystery, we link the two.

We think that if God is all-powerful, then death must be God's fault. Or, at least, God could have stopped death. The earthquake and tsunami, acts of God.

In her poem, Sometimes, Mary Oliver likewise links God and death:

I don't know what God is.  
I don't know what death is.

But I believe they have  
between them some  
fervent and necessary  
arrangement.

Mystery – both God and death are mysteries. We try to understand both, but we understand neither. The ancient writers tried to understand both, but they understood neither.

But linking the two, God and death, is not the answer.

In fact, an earthquake is just that: the quake of the earth, and not the movement of God. One tectonic plate presses against another, deep within the earth, pressure builds, and the plates that seem to have planned this event for decades, lurch forward to resolve their differences.

The earth quakes not because of God or judgment, but because of tectonic plates, the float of the earth – meaning that there is no subterranean meaning.

Snakes appear in the wilderness because snakes appear in the wilderness. The earth quakes because earth quakes. Tsunamis form, and what appears to us to be an act of God is nothing more than an uninspired transfer of energy. One that kills ten thousand people, innocent people, who neither grumbled in the wilderness, nor cursed God.

But the mystery of death is that it is – in the end – without fault, you see. Saying conspiratorially, God took her last night, does not actually mean, God took her last night. Rather, she became old, and her body failed her.

Death becomes personified, like spirit, it is the wind that blows where it will – but, Jesus is not speaking of death, when he speaks of wind; Jesus is speaking of Spirit, of life.

Jesus speaks of the poetic nature of God, observing simply that like wind, God cannot be controlled or apprehended.

Except in one way: the unimpeachable testimony of Scripture and the spiritual greats across all time is that God is neither petulant nor peevish.

Rather, and simply, God is love. (not – love is God, but God is love)

Where, then, is God when the earth quakes, when the sea is roiled? God is in the rescue, the extraordinary love, the self-effacing love, that like Jesus on the cross gives itself away completely.

Jesus – lifted high on the cross – for us to look at like the amulet snake in the wilderness – love personified, rescue in physical body.

That love replicated itself in Japan through people. When one woman, fearing for her baby, thrust her baby into the arms of a stranger, pleading with him, save my baby. The man took the baby, and saved the baby. Through others, while climbing the stairway of one of the sturdier buildings, helped others, at the risk of their own lives, stranger helping strangers escape the tsunami.

You want to see God? Look there, and not in the death,

The saving help of God, even through your hands. This morning, as we take a second offering to help those in need, and as we pray.

Don't ever imagine, God is not there – and don't confuse God with the death.

Rather, see God in the love, in the life, and in the hope.

In your love, in your life, and in your hope.