

¹⁰ Cf. SEVERANCE, *op. cit.* 16.

¹¹ Cf. SEVERANCE, *op. cit.* 45.

¹² Meaning, “of brass”.

¹³ Amos 3:6 (RSV).

¹⁴ St. Luke 13:4.

¹⁵ Genesis 17:15-19; 18:1-15; 21:1-8.

¹⁶ St. Luke 1:11-20, 57-65.

¹⁷ St. Luke 1:26-45.

¹⁸ Exodus 7-9, *passim*.

¹⁹ That is, that characterized the Nile throughout history until the poorly-conceived construction of the Aswan High Dam in the latter part of the 20th Century.

²⁰ Exodus 14-15.

²¹ As a map of the Near East and Eastern Africa will show, the same major fault line runs under the Dead Sea and the River Jordan, down to and along the Gulf of Aqaba and thence across to Africa and down the Great Rift Valley and so explains the existence of all of those geologic formations.

²² Joshua 3:14—4:18.

²³ There were other, more minor, and temporary incursions as well.

²⁴ SEVERANCE, *op. cit.* 25.

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SERMON FOR MORNING PRAYER THE FOURTH SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

Lessons:¹

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the third Chapter of Amos.²

“Hear this word that the LORD hath spoken against you, O children of Israel, against the whole family which I brought up from the land of Egypt, saying, You only have I known of all the families of the earth: therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities. Can two walk together, except they be agreed? Will a lion roar in the forest, when he hath no prey? will a young lion cry out of his den, if he have taken nothing? Can a bird fall in a snare upon the earth, where no gin is for him? shall one take up a snare from the earth, and have taken nothing at all? Shall a trumpet be blown in the city, and the people not be afraid? shall there be evil in a city, and the LORD hath not done it? Surely the Lord GOD will do nothing, but he revealeth his secret unto his servants the prophets. The lion hath roared, who will not fear? the Lord GOD hath spoken, who can but prophesy?

“Publish in the palaces at Ashdod, and in the palaces in the land of Egypt, and say, Assemble yourselves upon the mountains of Samaria, and behold the great tumults in the midst thereof, and the oppressed in the midst thereof. For they know not to do right, saith the LORD, who store up violence and robbery in their palaces. Therefore thus saith [SETH] the Lord GOD; An adversary there shall be even round about the land; and he shall bring down thy strength from thee, and thy palaces shall be spoiled. Thus saith [SETH] the LORD; As the shepherd taketh out of the mouth of the lion two legs, or a piece of an ear; so shall the children of Israel be taken out that dwell in Samaria in the corner of a bed, and in Damascus in a couch. Hear ye, and testify in the house of Jacob, saith [SETH] the Lord GOD, the God of hosts, That in the day that I shall visit the transgressions of Israel upon him I will also visit the altars of Bethel [BETH-

ull]:³ and the horns of the altar shall be cut off, and fall to the ground. And I will smite the winter house with the summer house; and the houses of ivory shall perish, and the great houses shall have an end, saith [SETH] the LORD."

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the twenty-second Verse of the third Chapter of the Gospel According to St. John.⁴

"After these things came Jesus and his disciples into the land of Judaea; and there he tarried with them, and baptized.

"And John also was baptizing in Aenon [EE-nunn]⁵ near to Salim [SAY-limb],⁶ because there was much water there: and they came, and were baptized. For John was not yet cast into prison.

"Then there arose a question between some of John's disciples and the Jews about purifying. And they came unto John, and said unto him, Rabbi, he that was with thee beyond Jordan, to whom thou barest witness, behold, the same baptizeth, and all men come to him. John answered and said, A man can receive nothing, except it be given him from heaven. Ye yourselves bear me witness, that I said, I am not the Christ, but that I am sent before him. He that hath the bride is the bridegroom: but the friend of the bridegroom, which standeth and heareth him, rejoiceth greatly because of the bridegroom's voice: this my joy therefore is fulfilled. He must increase, but I must decrease. He that cometh from above is above all: he that is of the earth is earthly, and speaketh of the earth: he that cometh from heaven is above all. And what he hath seen and heard, that he testifieth; and no man receiveth his testimony. He that hath received his testimony hath set to his seal that God is true. For he whom God hath sent speaketh the words of God: for God giveth not the Spirit by measure unto him. The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand. He that belie-

In other words, God let them choose their own fate and then permitted them to have what they had chosen.

Conclusion:

This, I suggest to you, is one of the important points about **theodicy [thih-ODD-ih-see]**: God does not need to choose or direct that evil visit itself upon us. The possibility of unfortunate events is simply inherent in the type of world in which we live as creatures of free will.

Instead, He is normally very much in the position of the loving parent of uncontrollable children. All He can do with us is warn us of the likely results of our actions. If we heed His warnings, then we may either avoid the harms He has foreseen or, at the very least, mitigate the damage they cause. But if we ignore His warnings, then we bring upon ourselves the very harms He has warned us against.

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister²⁵
January 30, 2011.

¹ An Alternative Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised in 1928), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER, WITH THE ADDITIONS AND DEVIATIONS PROPOSED IN 1928 33 (Canterbury Press 2008); The Table of Lessons (The Table of 1922, As Revised In 1928), A BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxiv (South Africa 1954); A Table of Lessons (authorized by the Episcopal Synod), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER xxii (CIPBC 1963).

² Amos 3:1:15 (KJV).

³ Adapted from W. MURRAY SEVERANCE, PRONOUNCING BIBLE NAMES 23 (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers).

⁴ St. John 3:22-36 (KJV).

⁵ Cf. SEVERANCE, *op. cit.* 14.

⁶ *Id.* 67.

⁷ Jeremiah 1:1-19 (KJV).

⁸ Adapted from SEVERANCE, *op. cit.* 46.

⁹ Adapted from SEVERANCE, *op. cit.* 46.

Had they made the proper choices, in the face of the information God made available to them, then they might either have made themselves and their country unattractive targets for invasion and takeover or at least, they might have resisted those invasions with sufficient success as to mitigate the harms that resulted from them – such as the wholesale deportation of the populace. For one thing, the two Jewish kingdoms might have stopped their fruitless and destructive squabbling between themselves, which weakened them both politically and militarily and rendered them unable to respond effectively to the foreign threat.

For another, their decadent rulers and upper classes might have abandoned their selfish pursuit of wealth and luxury, and trained themselves to be the competent warriors and leaders that their ancestors had been. They might have stopped manipulating the political and judicial systems to their own profit, which alienated the people from them, and by good government and fair justice built more cohesive societies that would have been better able to confront the coming emergencies.

And above all, they could have turned from the worship of false gods, banished paganism from among them, and returned whole-heartedly to their Covenant with the one, true God, which would have given them the spiritual strength they so conspicuously lacked when they ignominiously collapsed in the face of the foreign threats.

But, despite God's many warnings to them, they did none of these things and, as a result, they suffered precisely the harms God had predicted would befall them. But note carefully, the only thing God needed to lift to impose on them His corrective discipline was His voice! He did His part when He warned them of what was to come and they determined its outcome by the way they responded, or more accurately failed to respond, to His warnings.

veth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."

Or,

Here beginneth the first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah⁷ [**dgerr-ih-MY-uh**].⁸

"The words of Jeremiah [**dgerr-ih-MY-uh**]⁹ the son of Hilkiah [**hill-KYE-uh**], of the priests that were in Anathoth [**ANN-uh-thawth**]¹⁰ in the land of Benjamin: To whom the word of the LORD came in the days of Josiah [**dgoh-ZYE-uh**] the son of Amon [**AMM-un**] king of Judah, in the thirteenth year of his reign. It came also in the days of Jehoiakim [**dgih-HOH-ah-kimm**]¹¹ the son of Josiah [**dgoh-ZYE-uh**] king of Judah, unto the end of the eleventh year of Zedekiah [**zed-ih-KYE-uh**] the son of Josiah [**dgoh-ZYE-uh**] king of Judah, unto the carrying away of Jerusalem captive in the fifth month. Then the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Before I formed thee in the belly I knew thee; and before thou camest forth out of the womb I sanctified thee, and I ordained thee a prophet unto the nations. Then said I, Ah, Lord GOD! behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child.

"But the LORD said unto me, Say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak. Be not afraid of their faces: for I am with thee to deliver thee, saith [**SETH**] the LORD. Then the LORD put forth his hand, and touched my mouth. And the LORD said unto me, Behold, I have put my words in thy mouth. See, I have this day set thee over the nations and over the kingdoms, to root out, and to pull down, and to destroy, and to throw down, to build, and to plant.

"Moreover the word of the LORD came unto me, saying, Jeremiah, what seest thou? And I said, I see a rod of an almond tree. Then said the LORD unto me, Thou hast well seen: for I will hasten my word to perform it. And the word of the LORD came unto me the second time, saying, What

seest thou? And I said, I see a seething pot; and the face thereof is toward the north. Then the LORD said unto me, Out of the north an evil shall break forth upon all the inhabitants of the land. For, lo, I will call all the families of the kingdoms of the north, saith [SETH] the LORD; and they shall come, and they shall set every one his throne at the entering of the gates of Jerusalem, and against all the walls thereof round about, and against all the cities of Judah. And I will utter my judgments against them touching all their wickedness, who have forsaken me, and have burned incense unto other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands.

“Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them. For, behold, I have made thee this day a defenced city, and an iron pillar, and brasen [BRAZE-enn]¹² walls against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, against the princes thereof, against the priests thereof, and against the people of the land. And they shall fight against thee; but they shall not prevail against thee; for I am with thee, saith [SETH] the LORD, to deliver thee.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the First Lesson:

“Is a trumpet blown in a city
and the people are not afraid?
Does evil befall a city,
unless the LORD has done it?”¹³

In the Name of the Father, and of the ✕ Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

porting them to Mesopotamia.²³ But did God explicitly choose to have these invasions to take place, and did He investigate them in any way?

I suggest to you that these national calamities were simply two further examples of how God uses His foreknowledge to enlighten humanity through revelation. For God did not **need** to require, or even to encourage, either the Babylonians or the Assyrians to invade a neighboring state; they were perfectly able, and very inclined, to do that all on their own. That, after all, was how both those expansionist empires regularly treated all of their neighbors.

All God needed to accomplish His purpose was to **know** that those invasions would be attempted and then to **use** that knowledge in His attempts to correct His erring people, just as centuries earlier He had used His knowledge of the coming earthquake along the Jordan River fault line to enable His people to enter the land of Canaan [KAY-nunn].²⁴

Now if you remember, a few minutes ago I said that while natural and other disasters, as such, have no moral significance, our preparations for them or our responses to them may very well have such significance. So let us apply this observation to the Babylonian and Assyrian invasions of Israel and Judah.

From the perspective of the Babylonian and Assyrian rulers, those invasions themselves were moral acts because they proceeded from deliberate choices. From the perspective of the Israelites and the Judeans, they were not moral acts because they were visited upon them by outside forces. However, the whole reason that God sent a series of prophets to warn the Israelites and Judeans about the coming calamities was because they **did** have important choices available to them.

However, these events, that involve direct divine intervention in this world, are comparatively rare. God normally acts with considerable restraint and with a great economy of means. So many of the events reported in Scripture, that we are accustomed to think of as miracles, can be explained just as easily by God's all-encompassing ***knowledge*** of events in this world as they can be by assuming He was ***manipulating*** events in this world.

So, for example, the Book of Exodus tells us that God sent a series of “plagues” upon the Egyptians to force them to release the captive Hebrews.¹⁸ But some scholars think those “plagues” can be explained by natural events, each of which occurred at least in some years, as results of the annual inundation cycle of the river Nile.¹⁹

In this view, God did not necessarily send Moses to plead with Pharaoh and then, when Pharaoh refused, ***create*** the misfortunes that followed; instead, God sent Moses to Pharaoh at a time God knew could be used to take advantage of events that were about to happen anyway. The same economical use of infrequent but natural events can explain the Israelites’ crossing of the Sea of Reeds²⁰ and, four decades later, their crossing the River Jordan.

In the latter case, as late as the 1920s tectonic shifts along the geological fault line²¹ down which that river runs caused its mud banks to cave in and completely dam the river up for a number of hours, which fits precisely the Scriptural description of the Israelites’ crossing the dry river bed.²²

The same almost certainly applies to the calamities about which Amos was warning the Israelites of King Jeroboam II’s time. As Amos had foretold, on two major occasions neighboring foreign empires did invade Israel, seize its lands, and take its people captive, uprooting them and trans-

Introduction:

At first glance, today’s First Lesson seems to raise the ever-recurring problem of ***theodicy [thih-ODD-ih-see]***, or what is sometimes called “the problem of evil”. In its simplest – and perhaps a bit simple-minded – form, this presents the question, “Why does a good God let evil things happen?” or, sometimes, “Why does a good God do evil things?”

The impression is only the stronger because, both the King James Version and in the Revised Standard Version, the second portion of Verse 6, from which our text is taken, first use the word “evil” and then ascribe that “evil” to God: “Does evil befall a city, unless the Lord has done it?”

Theme:

This seems clear enough: Scripture, in the person of Amos, declares that evil may befall human communities and, when it does, it is because the Lord wishes them to experience evil. I suggest to you, however, that such a simplistic impression is subtly, but fatally, flawed.

For there are two kinds of “evil” which people may suffer in this world, and there are at least two theories, perhaps more, about God’s relationship to such evils. So before we can understand what Amos is writing to the subjects of Jeroboam II, we must take a short detour into those the natures of evils and into what causes them.

Development:

In life, people suffer from a whole range of harmful events and conditions. Some of those misfortunes are simply the result of conditions or happenings that are part of life in a physical universe, such as floods, fires, diseases, and other similar ills, the sorts of things insurance contracts refer to as

“acts of God”. This does not mean that God expressly wills those events to happen, or that He has specifically directed that they happen, it simply means that they arise out of the nature of the universe He has created.

Misfortunes of that sort have no moral significance, because morality, as such, pertains only to voluntary human actions. So moral philosophers refer to these unhappy events and conditions as “premoral” evils. On the other hand, it is those other events and conditions that result from choices exercised by human beings to which the concept of morality applies, so these are called “moral evils”.

However, we must be very precise in applying these distinctions. For example, although natural disasters *per se* are without moral significance, our preparations for them or our responses to them, being the products of conscious human choice, may very well have moral implications. So, too, may choices and decisions, made prior to those natural disasters, that affected the probabilities of their occurring or their severity when they did occur.

Let me give you an example, drawn from recent experience in New Orleans, Louisiana, where I live. The catastrophic Hurricane Katrina, which struck this area in 2005, was truly a natural disaster, and so, by itself, was without moral significance. It would be absurd to say that the inundation of the City and its surrounding metropolis was God’s judgement upon the New Orleanians for their sins, many as those sins were and are, any more than, as Our Lord pointed out, it was God’s judgement upon eighteen ancient Jerusalemites that the Tower of Siloam fell and crushed them.¹⁴

However, it is now beyond question that the disastrous flooding that followed that storm was the result of incompetent engineering – both in design and in construction – on the part of the U.S. Army’s Corps of Engineers, the agency that in the U.S. is responsible for flood control involving

navigable waterways. Indeed, it took the American Society of Civil Engineers, the country’s premier professional organization for the disciplines involved, only thirty days’ investigation to determine precisely what had been done wrong.

Negligence, recklessness, and incompetence: all of these result from human choices and therefore all of these do, indeed, have moral implications.

So that is the first point I wish to make: the evils that beset us in life are all uncomfortable and not seldom dangerous, but they are not all *morally* significant, that is, they do not all have implications for the principles upon which we should live our lives. And, just as some of those evils are simply the inherent price of living in the sort of created order in which we do, so, too, as we will see in a moment, those “premoral” evils were not necessarily sent from God to plague us.

For the second point I wish to make concerns the way in which God acts, or seems to act, in this world. Amos’s words to the ancient Israelites seem to imply a simple reward-and-punishment approach to life: if calamities befall the people, then the people must have been doing wrong because God has chosen to punish them. Yet is this a mature understanding of how God works in this world or is it the product of an early, overly anthropomorphic expression of Israel’s understanding of God?

There are certainly some events where God has unquestionably reached down into the created order and has either suspended or temporarily rearranged the normal laws of physics, biology, and the other sciences, in order to obtain a particular result He desires. Prime examples of this are the miraculous births of certain individuals whose lives were critical to the unfolding of God’s plan of salvation for humanity, such as Isaac,¹⁵ John the Baptist,¹⁶ and Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.¹⁷