

## “Our God Is a Category 5 God”

### Psalm 29

There’s not a year that goes by without the Earth shuddering, sinking, shifting, shrugging or doing something spectacular. We call these events “natural disasters.” The legal profession and insurance companies call them “acts of God.”

*Acts of God.* It’s a quite human reaction to some of these catastrophes. The psalmist agrees. “The voice of the LORD shakes the wilderness; the LORD shakes the wilderness of Kadesh. The voice of the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare” (vv. 8-9).

Acts of God appear in many forms: wildfires, blizzards, tornadoes, hurricanes, cyclones, typhoons, thunder, lightning, tsunamis, earthquakes, hailstorms, parish administrator’s retiring and more. This is Mother Nature’s witchy side, the nasty aspect of her otherwise benign nature. The ancient Romans, and especially the Greeks, were aware of the power of the feminine Earth and recognized numerous goddesses whose beneficence extended to specific spheres like lakes, trees, fruit, harvest, fertility, crops, the changing of the seasons and more. Artemis — with her quiver, bow and arrows — was the goddess of the hunt. Demeter was the goddess of harvests, healthy crops and fertile seasons. Her very name means Earth’s Mother.

But if you hesitated to fool with *Mother* Nature in the ancient world, you most certainly did not provoke *Father* Nature. The gods of the natural world were no joking matter. Poseidon, wielding his triton, was god of the sea, storms and earthquakes. The ruler of the gods was Zeus, the god of the sky, rain and thunder. When provoked, he’d hurl lightning bolts at the hapless humans who dared ignore his power and might.

Today, natural disasters — like Hurricane Katrina, which caused an estimated \$108 billion in damage — are so powerful that a rating of disaster was created to help us understand their power. Using the Saffir-Simpson Hurricane Wind Scale, meteorologists identify the strength of a hurricane in terms of categories, running from Category 1 (the weakest) to Category 5 (the strongest):

- Category 1: Very dangerous winds will produce some damage.
- Category 2: Extremely dangerous winds will cause extensive damage.
- Category 3: Devastating damage will occur.
- Category 4: Catastrophic damage will occur.
- Category 5: Catastrophic damage will occur — total destruction.

We could argue that David, when thinking of the “glory and strength” (v. 1) of God, would jump immediately to Category 5. No other category or classification could adequately describe the unparalleled, unmatched and unthinkable power of the God we worship. It is this power that the psalmist tries to describe.

When we think of the power of God, it is natural to make it *personal* in a “what-have-you-done-for-me-lately” sort of way. So, our rating of *blessing* — rather than *disaster* — might read like this:

- Category 1: We have our daily bread.
- Category 2: We don’t worry about material needs like clothing, food and shelter.
- Category 3: We feel useful or “actualized” in human society.
- Category 4: We have a strong network of family and friends.

- Category 5: Our worldview is anchored by a strong faith in God.

These suggestions reflect a view about the power of God in our lives *as persons*. If we move the discussion outside of, or beyond, our personal circle of life, who is God?

This is the question David attempts to answer in Psalm 29, and one gets the feeling that he would agree with the legal profession that earthquakes and hurricanes are indeed “acts of God.” “The LORD breaks the cedars of Lebanon,” he writes. “The LORD flashes forth flames of fire ... the LORD shakes the wilderness ... the LORD causes the oaks to whirl, and strips the forest bare” (vv. 5, 7-9).

I believe that God is using us, our category 5 God, to support the underdog and free the Ukrainians in their battle with an evil Putin. I want to share with you an excerpt from an article in the “Atlantic” written by George Packer . . . It wasn’t hard to meet American volunteers in Ukraine. In a hospital corridor in Lviv I ran into an anesthesiologist and Navy veteran from Chicago named Rom Stevens. In a cemetery in Irpin, where the civilian victims of Russian atrocities lay buried alongside fallen soldiers in rows of fresh graves, I met a retired paratrooper from Portland, Oregon, named Paul Wall; the International Legion had declined to admit him, so he was driving supplies to Ukrainian troops on the Kherson front. On a long train-ride I fell into conversation with a former Green Beret from Texas named Ramiro Carrasco Jr., who had just spent 10 weeks training Ukrainian snipers at a base outside Kyiv. These men were in their 50s and 60s. They had left behind families and jobs, and paid their own way to Ukraine.

The reasons they gave for coming were simple and personal. When Ukraine didn't fall at the start of the invasion, Carrasco thought: *I'm here sitting in my beautiful home watching this on TV, and they're over there fighting to save their home.* "I need to go," he told me. Stevens had been about to embark on a two-month sailing trip with a Navy buddy when they looked at each other and said: "We can't go sailing when people are fighting and dying, and we can do something to help". Unlike humanitarians, these men had chosen sides. Europe seemed to have something to do with it – they didn't go off to risk their lives on behalf of Ethiopians or Yemenis. "Wars in Africa – we don't really assimilate them," Wall said. "But I lived in England, it's Europe, we're all brothers". Racial identity has played an undeniable role in the outpouring of Western support for Ukraine, and perhaps it tarnishes the value of the support. All of us should care more when those doing the dying aren't blond-haired and blue-eyed or parking a bike share as the missiles explode.

But the motives of these men were, broadly speaking, political. A tyrannical Goliath was trying to kill a democratic David. That's why Ukraine was worth the risk. Anyone with a human heartbeat who came and saw knew it. "They're fighting for an ideal," Stevens said: to "determine their own government, their religion, their culture." Carrasco put it in more basic terms. "Slaves can never defeat free people – it can never happen," he said. "Putin made a big mistake. He didn't know these people. Once a man tastes the taste of freedom; he won't let anyone take it from him."

I didn't know what these men thought of American politics, and I didn't want to know. Back home we might have argued; we might have detested each other.

Here, we were joined by a common belief in what the Ukrainians were trying to do and admiration for how they were doing it. Here, all the complex infighting and chronic disappointments and sheer lethargy of any democratic society, but especially ours, dissolved, and the essential things – to be free and live with dignity – became clear. It almost seemed as if the U.S. would have to be attacked or undergo some other catastrophe for Americans to remember what Ukrainians have known from the start.

But what would this mean to us, if we could not conceive of God as greater than any possible conception, if the idea of God did not also include a God who cares for and loves creation, and who loves us and is working through our American volunteers in the Ukraine?

Were God to be an uncaring God who left us to fend for ourselves, a God to whom we could not pray and communicate, would not that God be a lesser, inferior God to a God that can use us and our church through ministries like Lutheran Disaster Response and Lutheran Hunger Appeal in Poland and neighboring countries to support the Ukrainians?

Perhaps this is why David ends this hymn of praise with the words: “May the LORD give strength to his people! May the LORD bless his people with peace!”

A Category 5 God gives “strength to his people”! Do you need strength? Do you feel weak and powerless sometimes, unable to get out of bed, or to face the challenges of the day? Do you wobble in the face of the daunting tasks that await you, and wonder how you are going to survive? There were many mornings over the past twelve years when Paula would come to our Divinity office with a long list of tasks awaiting her, phone calls to answer, volunteers to coordinate, and a Pastor who needed help. Paula faithfully worked hard with a smile to keep our church functioning efficiently.

God gives strength. This is the promise of this psalm. A God who can do all the things, can certainly give you strength. God offers power and grace for the day. Annie Johnson Flint was right when she echoed in a song what David wrote in his:

*He giveth more grace when the burdens grow greater,*

*He sendeth more strength when the labors increase;*

*To added afflictions he addeth His mercy,*

*To multiplied trials, his multiplied peace.*

This Category 5 God will also “bless his people with peace.” We need strength, but we also need peace, the “peace of God that surpasses all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). As Corrie ten Boom reminds us, “There is no panic in heaven! God has no problems, only plans.” If we believe that, we can have peace. Our hearts can rest. We are in good hands.

David did not have any trouble finding a “big enough God.” His God was in a category all by himself: a category in which the God of creation alone existed — a God for whom anything was possible, and nothing was impossible.

This was his God, a Category 5 God.

And with a little faith, it can be ours, too.

May the peace of God . . .

#749 – O God of Love, O King of Peace