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## *Natural Disaster*

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler**  
**Atlanta, Georgia**  
**The Second Sunday after Christmas - Year A**

*"Why have you treated us like this?" asked the parents of Jesus. "Why have you treated us like this?" -Luke 2.47-52*

I love the gospel story for today! It is the story of a little boy left by mistake by his parents at the county fair! It is also the story of young man breaking free from his parents' control and exploring the world on his own. It is the only story we have of Jesus' childhood or adolescence; and we do not need another one.

I love the scriptures because they describe ordinary things accurately for me. The gospel for today is about family and system dynamics. No one, not even the holy family, escapes those dynamics!

But there is another dynamic that is part of our lives today. In the past week, we have watched the gradual revelation of one of the worst natural disasters of our time. A tsunami has wiped out 150,000 people, in probably the largest natural disaster of my own lifetime. The event itself occurred suddenly and without warning. A huge wave of unstoppable water rolled out from the Indian Ocean, and it rolled over huge parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and India. It rolled back and another one arrived.

You have seen the horrifying results, on the television and in the newspapers. Yes, we have been busy celebrating Christmas, and we have been enjoying the steady roll of one calendar year into a new calendar year.

But we are sickened by the backdrop of this New Year. As of one week after the tsunami, more than 150,000 are declared dead. More are injured. Millions are without homes, without water, without the necessities of life.

If we pause to reflect, if we pause to pray, an inevitable question throws itself upon us, like another wave. Why did God allow this to occur? Was this wave God's will? Why did this happen to us? What was God doing to us?

It is part of our humanity to interpret the world through our own perspective. Indeed, it may be impossible to interpret in any other way except through our limited eyes and ears.

This is part of what the gospel lesson for today reminds us of! When Jesus was naturally exploring the world beyond his parents' household and perspective, when Jesus was naturally growing older and going his own way, his own parents had trouble understanding that change and development.

I love their question to the boy Jesus when they have finally found him back at the temple in Jerusalem. They thought that he had obediently left when they left, just as he always had. They thought he would be with them the rest of their lives. But he had lingered. He was not just left behind. He had deliberately missed the caravan.

And their question to Jesus was not about his safety or about his curiosities. Their question was self-centered and personally limiting. "Why have you treated US this way?" was their question. To them, Jesus' actions was not about him.

His actions were about them.

Every parent has similar tendencies. When our children misbehave, we feel somehow shamed. When our children do not find the right school, the right job, the right spouse, we somehow feel that we are the lesser.

This is a natural phenomenon, a natural family dynamic, in a natural family system. It is hard for good human adults to interpret the world, even their own children, through any lens except the lens of their own joy or pain, or confusion!

Well, the same sort of phenomenon has occurred this week. Our world has shifted and thousands of decent human beings have been killed. Why would God allow this?

There are two natural answers to the question. One is that the earth is still being formed. It was not just a water wave that occurred. The formation of earth is not in its final form. Our very land masses are never as solid as they seem. They are shifting as huge plates on the earth's crusts. One plate, under the Indian Ocean, shifted under another. It did not happen as suddenly as we might be thinking. It's been stretching and rubbing and sticking for thousands of years already.

What occurred, then, last week, was not a sudden capricious act of God from out of nowhere. God has been using this form of geophysical development for thousands of years. The act was actually part of God's continuing act of creation.

Now, this is not the way most of us see it when innocent people have died. We take it personally. This is natural for us. It is part of our limited human perspective. "Why did you treat us this way?" we ask. But God's perspective is much different and much larger.

Part of the spiritual life, part of the religious life, is to grow into God's perspective. Would that we might be able to see the way that God sees!

The second natural answer to the question is this. God has not promised the human race escape from death. We all will die some day. We do not like to consider that reality, but it is set before us daily. Death itself is a natural phenomenon in this growing world of God's.

It is an amazing planet we live on. Life is born and life dies. Yet, together, those two processes contribute to something enormous and tremendous.

God does not promise us escape from death. But God does promise us resurrection. God does promise us new life. This is the reason I am a Christian. Death is not the final answer for me. Resurrection, new life, is the final answer; and it should be the final answer for all!

No matter how the waves of death overwhelm us on this earth, there is another wave of life that also overwhelms us. It is so mysterious that we do not know what exactly lies on the other shore, after we have died. We know only that it is life; it is eternal life.

To the credit of good people around the world, charity and generosity have been as quick to arrive as the wave was. Just as an unstoppable wave of water hit those areas, so have unstoppable waves of money, medical help, and food. These are the waves of goodness of love, waves that are part of the indomitable human spirit.

Yes, natural disasters occur. Even evil occurs in the world. This is the world we live in. But waves of love and generosity also occur in the world. It is our role to be part of those waves.

I call these new waves, the waters of eternal life. There is no natural event so disastrous that it can drown love and compassion. These are the proofs of God's caring existence in the world.

Yes, the earth itself is groaning. It is groaning, said Saint Paul in Romans, chapter eight. We might even say that the earth is stretching and grinding. It is still being formed. It is crying out, too. It is waiting for the revelation of the children of God, said Saint Paul!

We are that revelation. We are part of new life, the eternal life of love. In that love, in the love of Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God. "I am convinced," said Saint Paul, "I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord," (Romans 8.38-39)

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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