

We begin the Season of Epiphany today with the celebration of Jesus' baptism, but why? Well, first, it symbolizes the official start of his ministry. That Jesus was baptized emphasizes the importance of this sacred rite. John called all people to turn back to God, and to go forth into the world bearing God's love and kindness. Jesus was baptized, and then spent time in prayer, a ritual that prepared him for ministry. As told in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus' baptism is significant — because of God's response. What we bear witness to today, is a profound Act of God.

Luke tells us that, there, as Jesus is praying the heaven opened, the Holy Spirit came down upon him like a dove, and in an intimate moment with his creator, a voice from

heaven spoke words that would forever shape his life and ours.

This intentional Act of God affirmed for Jesus and revealed to us who he is.

“ You are my Son”, the voice says, and then follows with, “the beloved”. Then, as a parent to an adored child, God expresses God’s delight, “In you I am well pleased.”

It is a tender, empowering and transformative moment. God’s words reassure Jesus of that which he has known inherently about himself his whole life: that he is called, that he is the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the World, and that God, his creator and beloved Father, loves him, delights in him, and is with him always.

In the church, Baptism is a sacramental rite we practice and honor. It offers an opportunity to commit oneself to following Jesus, to choose to turn toward God, and to join with the community of the faithful on a journey of bearing learning, loving, and serving. Christ's baptism reminds us of the mighty acts of God, in history that had the power to transform peoples and nations, and also the part each of us are invited to play in God's mighty acts on earth.

Before I answered God's call to the priesthood, I was a professional event manager. In that role I negotiated many hotel contracts on behalf of my clients. In every contract was a clause called an *Act of God Clause*. Now, In the legal spectrum of contracts, an *Act of God* is a major occurrence outside the control of either party

and which has the power to disrupt or cancel an event or services and essentially allows for the contract to be null and void. The most common Acts of God named are natural disasters such as earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, fires, or serious weather issues that could make it impossible for attendees to travel or for the event to take place. But Acts of God can also include things like war, civil disobedience, strikes, power outages, economic crashes and even pandemics. The key purpose of the clause is to protect both parties from liability and penalties in the event of an Act of God.

I remember vividly the events of 9/11, mostly for the impact they had upon all of us, but also because of how they affected my events. As the world came to a stop, every one of my event contracts for the next six months to a year were quickly and graciously

cancelled without penalty, because 9/11 was deemed legally to be an *Act of God*, although for most of it, it felt like an act of pure evil.

Although my clients and I were grateful, as a person of faith I struggled with the naming of such occurrences as *Acts of God*. While I understand the intention of contingency planning, and of the need to prepare for things that could or could not happen, calling such occurrences *Acts of God* seemed wrong. It put a negative context, even blame, upon God for things that seemed to me, God would not cause or desire for humanity.

When terrible, horrific things happens, it's natural that we would seek to make sense of them — to try to understand, to try to restore order to the disorder that has now consumed us and our lives. For example, we may understand that the fierce hurricanes of last

summer that devastated the Carolinas and Florida, and the horrific fires burning right now in Los Angeles, came about not out of overt or intentional human action. We may realize that the laws of nature don't discriminate among people, and that such tragedies are acts of nature, not the Acts of a God who would keep tabs and quotas on how much devastation can be wielded against humanity, or heaven forbid, a God who would send it intentionally upon a people. Such premises, which sadly are found inside of scripture, are unsettling.

The truth is that good and gracious people suffer injury and loss just as often as the ungracious do. And God cares for us all. Yet, without an explanation, or someone to blame — be it humans or God, we flounder in the abyss when the unimaginable happens, and it may be easier to point the finger, than

to sit in the ambiguity of a world where in chaos.

In his book, **When Bad Things Happen to Good People**<sup>1</sup>, Rabbi Harold S. Kushner posits that *when something terrible does happen, regardless of what and how, it angers and saddens God as much as it does us. And that, he says, is an Act of God.*

“Acts of God are evident when communities respond and rebuild after a tragic event; when those who have experienced profound loss are embraced by their communities, are seen, acknowledged, and honored as the beloved souls that they are. How people support one another, and how love, compassion and care gets expressed, irrespective of the event — or what we think may or may not have caused

it—is what truly matters” . This is God in action.

In our lesson from Isaiah we hear as the Lord, speaking through the Prophet, announces a mighty **Act of God**: God is here, with them, caring for them, and promises to redeem, restore and accompany them in every moment of their lives - the joys and the sorrows. We bear witness to God’s *true* character on display: one of faithfulness, forgiveness and love for God’s people.

***“O Israel, do not fear, for I have redeemed you”, says the Lord. “I have called you by name. You are mine.*** And perhaps with words a little tender for today, the prophet goes on, ***“When you pass through waters,*** says the Lord, ***I will be with you. When you walk through fire, you shall not be overwhelmed, nor consumed. Because,***



***you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you. Do not fear, for I am with you.”***

There is nowhere else in scripture that you will find the words “I Love You” spoken by the Lord so directly. And there is no time when human beings need to hear these words more, than in the face of loss, suffering, and devastation.

Kushner say that we all are plagued by the same existential and universal questions: “Questions of faith, wondering if God truly exists, and if God does exist, and is even slightly fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how it is that God could or would allow this to happen?”

He suggests a change to our perception of God, from one of all-powerful and

all-knowing, to one that acknowledges that God may not be able to control what happens to us. “Events, accidents, disease and tragedies are often random, and God cannot keep all good people safe. Now, this is a difficult concept to grasp, because it is our human nature to look for cause and effect, even when it is non-existent.”

The question posed is: “What if we could agree on the concept that God does not send bad things our way. Might it be a little easier then for us to take ownership of our emotions? Could it help us to manage our anger and devastation alongside God, without feeling that we’re in conflict with God” — the God who breaks into our lives, sees and names us, who meets us in our suffering and pain, and who we then may call upon for comfort and support, rather than an experience of judgement and punishment?

Some questions that arise out of our suffering may never be answered to our satisfaction. “Why does a fire engulf some homes and not others? Why does an impromptu change of plans result in someone escaping tragedy while someone else succumbs to it?” Why do some of us, regardless of how we live our lives, live to be healthy at 95, while others of us grapple with illness?

None of us can completely protect ourselves from the risk that is inherent in living. Not even Jesus avoided suffering and death. While we pray for God’s grace and protection, and do our earthly best to live life in a way that is safe and sustaining, life doesn’t include any Act of God clause. What it does include, though, is God’s promise to be with us through and in it all, the good times and the bad, and the invitation for each of us

to take part in God's mighty Acts of love and grace on earth.

In just a moment, we will join with one another to renew our Baptismal Covenant. With these words, we will profess our faith in God, naming who God is, and acknowledging God's mighty Acts done for us. And then, we will articulate the ways in which we, empowered by the Spirit, are called to live out our faith, and to play an important, blessed and necessary part in the tending and care of our neighbors and our world.

May we, like God gazing upon Jesus, gaze lovingly upon one another, so that in times of struggle and hardship, or in times of profound joy, in the depths of our souls we may know that we have been seen, known and loved — by one another, and by our God who is ever with us, from life, even unto death.

Baptism of our Lord 1.12.25  
Isaiah 43:1-7, Luke 3:15-17, 21-22

The Rev. Laurel Coote  
Holy Acts of God

1 Briefer.com. Kushner, Harold S. When Bad Things Happen to Good

People, excerpts.