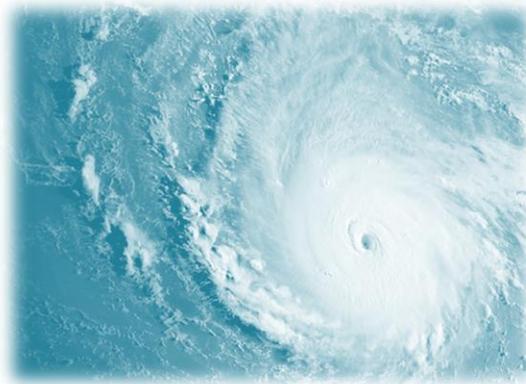


# DID GOT DO IT? DOES GOD DO IT?

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EXODUS 14:19-31  
PSALM 114  
ROMANS 14:1-12  
MATTHEW 18:21-35

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
Twenty-Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time  
Proper 19, Year A  
September 17, 2017



***Did God Do It? Does God Do It?***  
*(The preached portion of the sermon is in bold.)*

Since the dawn of religious awakening, the enlightenment of our human spiritual consciousness, an awareness that there really is the existence of a presence in the universe, a universal presence, humanity has attempted to address foundational questions about God's sovereignty traditionally described using ominous terms like omnipresence, omniscience, and omnipotence. This is the kind of theological language we often use to describe what we believe to be of divine or holy origin, the kind of awe inspiring transcendence that is the essence of pure mystery. Baseline inquiries such as "Why do bad things happen to good people?" are never far from our individual and collective inquisitive minds. This question provided the backdrop for Rabbi Harold Kushner's popular ground-breaking book published in 1981, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Kushner wrote this in response to the terminal diagnosis of a son who would not live beyond his teens. No doubt it was therapeutic for Rabbi Kushner. It has certainly been so for those who have read it. Is God in control of the universe in matters of nature such as storms, earthquakes, floods, disease, and even the evils wrought by the wickedness ironically inherent in humanity, considering our divine origin and substance, or so we believe? Dare we suggest that God willfully, with apparent malice aforethought, causes these kinds of tragedies? Can God intervene in them? Why doesn't God perform

**interventions when disaster looms, always striking us at the most inopportune times? Can I get an “Amen?” After all, these kinds of divine activities are common place in the Bible! Besides, it certainly appears that at the minimum, that God indeed allows these kinds of random, routine atrocities, or at the least does nothing to prevent or stop them in midstream. You know where we are going; you know where we are headed! After events like Harvey and Irma many wonder, “Did God do it? Does God do it?” Inquiring minds want to know! These are fair questions in the finite world of the human mind, in the limitations of our imaginations. The ancient biblical writer once asked in the second Psalm (2:1), “Why do the heathen rage?” The mythical figure Job once opined that the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike, providing what I believe to be the best, the most accurate and succinct theological assessment of Providence anywhere to be found in the Bible. And as we all know full well, theology rarely comes with such ease and simplicity. God is clearly revealed here as an equal opportunity employer!**

**Over the last few weeks, including the one we missed as we danced with Irma, we have been reading the great epic tale of Moses and his people’s evolving revelation of the very being of God. We see the illusive God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob first revealed, further unveiled as the great “I AM”, or “I am being that I am being!” Yet, despite being boldly on display in the most transparent of ways, in**

**an existential experience of a bush that burned, but was not consumed, God steadfastly remained the ultimate mystery. In the unfolding understanding of the Israelites, the pervasive movement of God was interpreted and referred to as Ruach, the Spirit or divine breath or wind, what the early Christians came to describe as Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, what prominent theologians have referred to in various ways as Holy Other, the Numinous from the Greek “pneuma” meaning spirit, and finally The Ground of All Being, to name some of the more significant theological adjectives. Even so with this being said, all of our language is finite and flawed, failing to grasp the essence of the greatest mystery forever wrapped in an enigma.**

**In the crucible of real time moments and perhaps especially in the aftermath of catastrophic events like Harvey and Irma and all the horrific events that unavoidably accompany our lives, both natural and unfortunately human engineered, as persons of faith our immediate questions inevitably ponder the presence or perhaps even more so in our faces the lack thereof of divine presence in the midst. The corresponding question always centers on the role of prayer and its efficacy. Does prayer make a difference? Can God be budged, moved, persuaded in any way to shift or alter any state of reality, any aspect of the natural order, even if as we believe that God is at their root, is their source, that in some way they are divinely**

created or inspired? Does God intervene in the world in certain instances, under any circumstances whatsoever? Intellectually curious, critically thinking minds not only want to know, but need to know, have to know? Our spiritual peace is not only at stake, but our foundations are oft shaken and shattered when these kinds of cataclysmic episodes tragically find their way to our doorsteps, a most unpleasant and unwelcome and most unfortunately lingering guest. Oh, how hurricane residual has staying power! My Systematic Theology professor at Southern Seminary back in the day, Dr. Frank Tupper, used to suggest regarding conversations about Providence, that in the machinations of the universe and in our world that God does not intervene, but rather contravenes in a limited participatory way. I tended to blow off this terminology as mere semantics, ignoring it until this very week. Interesting however, that I never forgot it! I never really understood the nuance, the subtle difference hinted by Professor Tupper. I must sadly confess that in yielding to the pressure of academia, back in the day I just wanted to pass a class; I didn't really care if I learned anything! As best I could understand, for all intents and purposes, and it is the slightest degree of separation, is that an intervention is a directly choreographed, intentional, premeditated act that substantially changes the essence or substance of a reality; on the other hand, a contravention allows, in the great mystery of God's universe, for the laws of nature to be maintained while at the same time mysteriously,

perhaps strangely, even amazingly or shockingly be apparently avoided or ignored in ways that enable or empower a change in an assumed law or rule, that make exceptions to a principle or reality, but always operating within the predisposed paradigms of the universe. This allows for the serendipity and spontaneity of the holy and still speaking Spirit of God to achieve the miraculous, working within the presumed parameters of the hard and fast laws of science and the supposedly invincible, immovable principles of nature, appearing to suspend them all. After all, as a friend of mine once opined, "It is the nature of nature to be nature!" Ah, but on the other hand, it is the nature of Providence to be providential, and that my friends means "being" forever shrouded in mystery, but present nonetheless. All of us, thank God, have heard of exceptions to the rules, of testimonials declaring healings and other inexplicable, unexplainable phenomena. There is no reason to ever doubt the authenticity, the veracity of such radical occurrences. Ironically, they provide just enough doubt for us to provide a space that piques our faith, allowing us to image, even invoke an active faithful participation, reminding us that God is in the midst of all that is, that God's presence is not our imagination or a hallucination, that our religious moorings are not merely an intoxicating opiate, ala Karl Marx, and that we are tuned into, plugged into a mystery beyond our limited comprehension.

Our Jewish brothers and sisters have long struggled with these theological polarities, wrestling intimately with the mysterious dance between the divine and creation, the human creature, created in the divine image certainly a significant component, a major player. We can certainly learn a lot from our forebears in the faith. One Jewish writer Yisroel Cotlar, has written a short article, “Do Jews Believe in Miracles?” While it is the perspective, the opinion of one individual, I think his answer is helpful and has merit, though in my estimation it should not be considered a definitively authoritative response. It is not the way I would have answered the question, and I take slight exception to some of the conclusions contained herein. Even so, I think it worthy of a hearing and so I have included it here for our purposes today. Pardon the masculine language, but unfortunately that is always the prerogative of the writer. The fuller question precipitating the article is “What is the Jewish standpoint on miracles? How important or unimportant is miraculous phenomena to the Jewish believer?” Cotlar answers in this way, “Allow me to rephrase your question in the opposite manner: ‘What is the Jewish standpoint on nature? How important or unimportant is natural phenomena to the Jewish believer?’ G-d manages every aspect of creation at every given moment. There are no rules He must follow. There are no forces He must contend with. All is in His hands. Nonetheless, He chose to create a system called ‘nature.’ An arrangement of fixed rules. An order of causes and effects. Why did he create nature? In order to conceal his identity and hide his footprints. He wanted a world in which things would

appear as if they run on their own, and thus, force Man to discover G-d on his own. In fact, the very word for nature in Hebrew, 'tevah,' also translates as 'sunk.' Nature is G-d's way of submerging His presence under a sea of scientific laws and patterns. And Man is a deep-sea diver given the task of finding G-d's hand which lurks beneath the veil of nature. And so, life is very similar to a game of 'Hide and Go Seek.' But every now and then, G-d emerges from His hiding place and breaks through the self-imposed shackles of nature. The sea is split. A scientific rule is broken. Mother Nature is proven wrong. Perhaps, a child is cured from an incurable disease. Or our nation is saved from a seemingly hopeless situation. And it is through these supernatural events that we realize that nature too is merely a creation of G-d ([http://www.chabad.org/library/article\\_cdo/aid/557651/jewish/Do-Jews-Believe-in-Miracles?](http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/557651/jewish/Do-Jews-Believe-in-Miracles?)). Cotlar has provided a creative analysis and quite frankly that is the best that any of us can do when we engage the mysteries of the universe and the Holy.

**As I have said many times throughout my preaching career, I am always fascinated by the amazing coincidences that intersect between the lectionary readings for the week and the real-time events that happen in our lives and in the world. Such is the case with this stretch of lections from the Hebrew scriptures. Last week, while we were either hunkering down or evacuating during the stressfully long and taxing days of Hurricane Irma, the Witness from the**

**Hebrew scriptures in Exodus detailed another excruciatingly painful text describing a slaughter of the innocents, this time, ironically, at the hand of an angry God, the final plague inflicted on the recalcitrant and stubborn Egyptians who refused to release the Israelites from bondage, indentured slaves all. Under no circumstances would the Pharaoh let this people go. It is a horrific text that paints a very poor picture of God, a deity that is both shortsighted and vengeful, needing a heavy dose of retributive justice to affect a desired end. Much like a God who would one day, in a most perverse theological interpretation of scripture, be accused out of necessity of having the audacity to dare and demand the punishment of God's own flesh and blood, God's very son, a child sacrifice in its own right, this God seems much more human than divine in what would have been a very cowardly and shameful act. Today, we read another tale of mass killing in the demise of that part of the Egyptian army that had the misfortune of finding themselves traversing the middle of the Red Sea when the parted waters suddenly closed shut around them, drowning horse and rider alike. The alternate response for today's service is Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21 which celebrates God throwing these evil, wicked Egyptian soldiers into the sea, proving the strength and might of God, a warrior deity indeed. "Pharaoh's chariots and his army God cast into the sea; his picked officers were sunk in the Red Sea. The floods covered them; they went down into the depths like a stone. Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power . . . Sing**

to the Lord, for God has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider God has thrown into the sea.” The word of the Lord! Thanks be to God! Folks, God never celebrates the horrific deaths of any created in the divine image and that includes Egyptian soldiers. Once again, a literal interpretation of these kinds of sobering texts reduces God to a manipulative, maniacal monster, whose actions no one could condone, that no one would support or sympathize. Imagine our response if those actions were wrought by any human being.

**When we encounter the numerous raw edged texts like these that we routinely read in the biblical narrative, we soberly realize that we have no choice, are left with no suitable option other than to diligently seek to uncover the context of the story in question, peeling back the many layers, enabling us to learn of the essential cultural milieu, the real time setting of that moment as best we can. Then and only then can we do the heavy lifting, the hard work of exegesis, demythologizing the content therein to provide an acceptable explanation of them. Any time we read a narrative in which God seems to exhibit human characteristics, human traits, a flag must be raised within us, something must register on our radar as a clear warning, calling that text into obvious question. It must be heavily scrutinized with the highest degree of objectivity. A God of goodness and grace, of peace and mercy, and extravagantly “wasteful” love does not slaughter babies, exacting an ounce of flesh**

**in the process. Neither does God wipe out perceived or realized enemies to protect the innocent. In the biblical narrative, to the victor always belong not only the spoils, but the telling of the story as well, complete with a conveniently built-in slant of a most biased and prejudicial perspective. In the ancient world God is always on the side of the winners. That is how they had proof, verification that God was with them and them alone. When we read epic tales like the ones before us today, what we are reading is the mythological embellishment, the exaggerated hyperbole of what perhaps could very well have been actual, historical events that really and truly happened in real time once upon a time. Perhaps a plague, a massive illness struck the most vulnerable, the children and aged. Remember this was a plague against the first born. Of course, a plague of this magnitude would have been particularly threatening to the at-risk infants of Egypt, all this transpiring at a most opportune time for the rebelling Israelites. These kinds of things happened frequently in the ancient world. They were routine, commonplace. Cures for transmittable diseases were nonexistent, this being the case up until recent history in the overall scheme of history. Think of the advent of modern medicine, especially and particularly the discovery of penicillin. Some scholars assert that the crossing of the Red Sea was actually the crossing of the Reed Sea, an accidental or even intentional mistranslation of the text. The Reed Sea is a very shallow body of water. The pursuing**

**Egyptians were severely encumbered, weighted down beyond capacity with their heavily armored chariots. As they entered the drink and became mired in the muck and silt of this shallow sea, full of a thick entanglement of reeds, hence the name, they were completely bogged down, thwarted in their efforts as they attempted to catch and subdue their quarry, the somewhat more fleet-footed Israelites who, in comparison, were not overwhelmed with excessive baggage, traveling as lightly as would be expected of a people fleeing an enslaving adversary.** Marlus Johns (later in Coffee Hour) reminded me that it could have possibly even indeed been caused by a hurricane like storm, the force of which manipulated the water in much the way that the water was sucked right out of Apalachicola and Tampa Bays. Astute observation! **The story, over years, centuries of oral tradition, before finally being written for all time, thus takes on its larger than life aura, a literal life of its own. A documentary shown on occasion on the History Channel even validates the potential occurrence, the very real possibility, even probability of these various plagues, phenomena detailed beyond literal comprehension in the Book of Exodus, describing them as events taking place within the assumed boundaries of the natural order. One thing that we know full well about God is that God works within the natural, scientific parameters ordered by the universe, that is, if we truly believe that God created it and has dominion over it. Oh wait; somewhere it says that it is humanity that was given dominion! But,**

**I digress; I often do!** Some theological lightweights have dared to suggest as an explanation for the radical miracles described in the Bible as merely being a matter of distinct dispensations, offering a simplistic solution to a complex problem. It is anything but a one-dimensional, compartmentalized issue! Going to great nonsensical, irrational lengths, their argument is that biblical times were of a different dispensation, a period in history in which God acted decisively and prominently, with crystal clarity for all to see, transparently performing grandiose acts of might, miracle, and magic, all magnificent in the scope of their magnitude, all orchestrated in a most pronounced and demonstrative, verifiable way to avoid any confusion about their divine source. Think Cecil B. DeMille, stuff with show-stopping quality. Then, suddenly, God just doesn't do it that way anymore! Since those magical days of miracle and wonder, we are now living in a different dispensation in which God no longer behaves in the manner that God apparently once routinely, randomly behaved. Really! Seriously! That dog just won't hunt! That's just nuts! Why do we go to such excessive lengths to prove something that simply cannot and will not ever be proven because the argument is fallacious?

**All this brings us back to today and our own curiosity about God and God's participation in our planet, particularly whether or not God shifts reality based on our prayers. Let me say clearly, that the value of prayer is not up for debate here. Citing the medical community as a shining, sterling example, along with all of us persons of faith as**

steadfast witnesses, giving our own unique testimonials, all can heartily attest to the power, the veracity of prayer. It is foundational to our relationship as beloved faith community. We have no doubt that it informs and impacts life as we know it and live it. That being said, prayer can never become or be reduced to a panacea, a crutch we naively lean on with the expectation that things will always, if even, ever remotely, go our way. Common sense gained through life experience and the inevitable, proverbial school of hard knocks has taught us that we do not always get what we want, that for which we ask, the desires of our hearts, and that if we did, we learn quickly through our experiences that what we receive at our request might not be so good for us in the long run after all. In terms of praying about natural phenomena such as hurricanes, God is not going to interject self into the machinations or movements of natural events, disasters or otherwise. We here in the South Shore region are very fortunate, incredibly lucky that Irma suddenly shifted inland, turning away from us, unfortunately inflicting her wrath on others, infecting them with the full fury of her blunt force trauma. I mean, after all she was a perfectly formed storm, a ten among the most notably historic hurricanes on record! This was not an answer to prayer because God does not answer one person's or a group's prayers, rewarding them at the expense of others. God does not bless some in ways that automatically, unavoidably curse others, inflicting misery on them, although it is normal, a quite natural response to

**determine that we have been blessed whenever we are spared any of life's slings and arrows, though in reality we know deep down and must acknowledge that this level of belief is actually more founded in our grateful gut-reactions, our basic feelings of relief rather than any divinely mandated activity wrought in our midst. Were our neighbors to the east any worthier of the unexpected and unpredicted impending doom than us? I think not! Were they any more sinful? Any more wicked? Any less blessed? Surely there were faithful folk to the east of us who suddenly discovered they were now in the cross hairs, the eye of this meandering storm. Always remember that God is always with humanity in the worst of our circumstances, our most horrific scenarios, our most hideously atrocious situations no matter what they are, suffering right there along with us, right beside us—read the stories of Holocaust survivors, remember the victims of 9-11. Even though God may not remove those horrific obstacles, even the worst atrocities from us, we believe, we place our trust in God that we are in God's eternal and loving arms.**

It is also important to remember that it is in the Hebrew scriptures where the seed of this flawed supply and demand theology about the consequences of sin was first developed and extrapolated, fully revealed and expounded. It was believed that natural disasters were the residual of the recalcitrance and disobedience of a sinful humanity, a direct result

of the misbehavior of the people. It was a theological quid pro quo of the highest order. There simply was no grace in it because it was all about judgment, only serving to make the human creature cower in fear, eliciting nothing more than the negative residual of the ever dreaded and dreadful guilt and shame that always elicits paralysis in the ones being punished! It was believed back in the day that a holy God needed to be appeased because “He” was a vengeful God who needed to be pacified and placated like a little temperamental child any time that God perceived to be offended. The ancients were guilty, because of the limitation of language, of characterizing God in anthropomorphic terms, describing God as possessing humanlike qualities, reducing the Holy to human. Ironically that is always a temptation by those divinely created in the image of the Holy! It was only natural that this idea was then, in some ways seamlessly conveyed, carried over into the Christian scriptures. In the Gospel of John, the disciples inquire of Jesus, “Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind” fully believing that the man’s sightlessness was a direct result of his or his family’s sin. In the Ten Commandments from Exodus (20:4-6) we read that the sins of individuals, the iniquity of the fathers will be punished for generations, to the third and fourth specifically. Hatred of God seems to be the prevailing concern at the heart of this declaration. None of us believe that we will be punished for the sins of others, even our kin, though we do know that bad behavior can be passed down emotionally, physically, spiritually, and psychologically. Child sexual abuse coming to mind quickly as just one

repugnant example. In many ways, the ancients certainly had a handle on realities that in recent centuries we have clearly been able to verify.

In the Mishnah of the Talmud, the Jewish teaching on the tradition, an exposition on Jewish life including the sacred texts, we find an interesting commentary on prayer offered through the lens of a couple of simple illustrations. They are equally simplistic and valuable in their teaching! In the Mishnah it is written, “When one builds a new house, and acquires new vessels, he says, ‘Blessed is he that kept us alive (and sustained us and brought us to this time).’ Bless upon the bad which contains the good, and upon the good which contains bad. He who prays over what has already happened, this prayer is in vain. How? If his wife was pregnant and he said, ‘May it be your will that my wife give birth to a boy.’ This prayer is in vain.” The reason being, of course, that the sex of the child has already been determined and cannot, will never be changed by any amount of praying. The next example goes thusly, “If he came on the way and heard the sound of screaming in the city, and he said, ‘May it be your will that these are not the children of my house.’ This is a prayer in vain” (Mishnah Berakhot 9:3, Blessings from the Babylonian Talmud). The reason being that these children do belong to someone and thus will not suddenly, magically belong to someone else, including the concerned and, no doubt, embarrassed parent making this ridiculous plea. What these ancient writers were trying to convey is that we need not waste our time and energy, perhaps even God’s, that we do not need to expend our best

efforts, praying for things that are already irreversibly set in stone. **We always need to exercise care and caution about our prayer life and the desires of our hearts. Yet, pray we must, and we do so praying that the grace of God goes with us no matter. Yes, pray without ceasing and leave it up to God to sort out our prayers, separating our pure and our selfish motives, for God already knows what is best for our lives, our circumstances, our world. And, do not be dismayed when the petitions you raise seem to fall on deaf ears. No matter the response, we believe by faith at the core of our very being that God hears and God cares and is with us no matter the circumstances or consequences of whatever comes our way, whatever might befall us. It is the blessed hope of our faith that God is always with us, especially and particularly in the midst of our misery.**

**In the name of the One who creates, redeems, sustains, and is with us in the midst of everything, the good, the bad, and the ugly as we live and move and have our being. Amen and amen.**

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