

## A MESSED UP WORLD

“God was punishing them for their degenerate lifestyle,” one prominent television pastor was quick to tell the world after the last major hurricane bashed New Orleans. At the time I doubted his pronouncement of divine judgment, but let me admit that he might have been right. So might a bevy of his colleagues who identify deadly tornados and tidal waves and earthquakes and just about every other natural disaster as outpourings of heaven’s wrath. But I doubt it.

So I’m equally slow to get on the theological bandwagon of my fellow-pastors who are blaming the COVID-19 pandemic on God.

I realize that any serious Bible reader can put a finger on the hail and locusts and anthrax in the Egyptian plagues and say correctly, “God did it.” They can accurately remind us that God rained fiery brimstone on Sodom to stop their sodomizing, or that he flattened pagan Jericho with one mighty shake. God can wipe out any delinquent he chooses to punish. The Bible tells us he has done that on numerous occasions, and he is still the same God we read about in the good Book. If we get bad enough, he is more than able to send a flood or a wave of locusts to clean up the mess we’re making.

But I’m slow to blame the Almighty every time my water heater leaks or my apricot tree shrivels up or I catch the flu. I live in a fallen world—a world we ignorant humans messed up almost from Day One. Most of the troubles we suffer are our fault. God gave us paradise and we humans turned it into hell on earth.

If I feel the need to give somebody credit for all the virus deaths in New York or for the massive job layoffs in Seattle, who should it be? God? Or whatever political party I want to trash today? Or maybe the Chinese peasants who ate virus-infected bat meat they bought in that Wuhan water market over two years ago? Instead of divine retribution, perhaps we can trace this present disruption of our lives to human ignorance. All of us have plenty of that.

When all is said and done, why do we need to blame anybody? We live in a fallen world, a world rife with diseases and dangers of a jillion kinds, and nobody really needs to be singled out as the one who unleashed the present carnage. Instead of branding God as the virus-sender, in these troubled times we would be much wiser to reach out to him as the One who can help us get through it all. As the psalmist taught us to sing: “God is our shelter and strength, always ready to help in times of trouble” (46:1).