

My friends, I've grown tired of watching the news this week. It seems to be about nothing except Hurricane Irma, unless it is about Jose, the most recently formed hurricane. I spoke about Hurricane Harvey last week in terms of our sacred obligation to do what we can to help those in need. Tonight, I'm afraid I'll sound like the news. It's another hurricane sermon tonight, but a very different one from last week's. Tonight, I want to ask a question: why did God create hurricanes?

We have to start by recognizing one of the many ways our Torah changed the world. Before the Torah, every pagan society had nature gods. There were rain gods, thunder gods, a sun god and a moon god—I could go on and on. Then along came the Torah and turned the pagan world upside down. The Torah rejected the idea that God is in nature, a belief system called pantheism. For the Torah, God created nature; God is not synonymous with nature. God is literally supernatural, which has nothing to do with ghosts and goblins. Super means above—God is above nature. But given the Jewish teaching that God is the Creator of nature, Harvey, Irma, and Jose might lead us to ask the question with which I began: why did God create hurricanes? Couldn't God have created a natural world devoid of

things like hurricanes and tornadoes, tsunamis and other natural disasters?

The simplest and most obvious answer is that we don't know what God could or could not have done. That level of understanding is beyond our reach in this lifetime. But let us not be satisfied with the simplest answer to what is really a profound question.

I think the answer is yes, God could have created such a natural world, but it would have been a world that we would quickly become bored with. Let me explain what I mean.

There are two ways to understand what I am about to say. One way to understand it is a limitation of God. The other is to understand it is a law of nature, a law of nature that God created, and that God does not violate. God plays by His own rules. Attribute what I am about to say to whichever you prefer.

For whatever reason, there is not such thing as a top without a bottom. There is no such thing as left without right. There is no high without low, no hot without cold, no soft without hard. I would even go so far as to there could be no good without at least the possibility of evil.

God created a magnificent world for us. As a matter of fact, as I was walking to my car on the Butler campus yesterday after teaching my Bible class, I noticed for the first time that a verse from the Book of Psalms is inscribed on the observatory: “The heavens declare the glory of God.” It is absolutely true.

But we do not need to leave this planet to see evidence of the glory of God. We can look at wonder of the Aurora Borealis. We can look at the beauty of the Arctic glaciers, or to my surprise when I first saw it, the incredible beauty of the Judean Desert. We can look at Mount Everest, or at the other end of the continuum, the Grand Canyon. God created nature with the ability to make the world glorious, even with regard to something as common as last night’s beautiful, pink sunset. Would we want to live in a world of olive drab, a world where colors had no vibrance, where sounds like a Beethoven symphony had no ability to touch our souls, a world as plain as a child’s sandbox? At any rate, it is a moot point. We do not live in a bland and tasteless world. We live in a world in which many natural phenomena can inspire awe in almost everyone, and evidence of God to those with a religious perspective. God created a nature powerful enough to form the Grand Canyon.

But God did not create a left without a right, a top without a bottom, a good without a bad. A nature that can form the Grand Canyon can form other astonishing things as well. This can include lightning storms that are more spectacular than any commercial laser show, but unfortunately, it also includes storms so powerful we call the Category Five hurricanes. That is simply the reality of the world in which we live.

The strongest piece of evidence that pantheism is wrong, that nature and God are not the same, is that nature has nothing to do with morality. Nature does not provide hospitals for the weak and infirm; they get eaten by the strong and healthy. Nature is amoral, but if I believe God had nothing to do with morality, I could not be religious. I do not speak from an ivory tower. Our family was hit twice by hurricanes during our years in Florida. I speak from experience. But I think that the real answer to my question, why did God create hurricanes, is that God does not create hurricanes, but God did create a very powerful thing called nature. Nature brings us glorious things and terrible things. Life does the same. Our task is to embrace life with all it entails. We thank God for its beauty. When it is ugly and hurtful and destructive, we become God's hands on

earth, repairing the damage, helping the victims, and I hope remembering that the sky that can bring such suffering will again bring beauty, beauty that declare the glory of God.