

Theology of a South Pole Rescue

The sailboat is at anchor in front of the cabin here on Puget Sound. But my eyes are on the South Pole station Webcam where news of a rescue in the South Pole is under way. The report on my screen puts it this way:

“The journey will involve flying one small, ski-equipped plane more than 1500 miles into the icy polar night, landing in pitch dark, picking up the sick person, refueling, and attempting to lift off without freezing to the runway.”

Other news, as well as direct information from grandson Max (who is on his second season at the South Pole) as well as Hannah, tells us that they are OK. Everyone (only 46 now able-bodied left to work the Station) has jobs to do preparing for the arrival of the plane. Hannah, no doubt, is working with the medical team (although she runs heavy equipment as well). Max did runway-leveling last time he was at the Pole but my guess is that he will be part of the fire lighting crew preparing runway lights for the approaching plane.

As in many do, people offer “thoughts and prayers.” It’s a way of saying that it’s out of our hands, we can’t do anything, we hope and we care. That’s a lot. Some think that cumulative prayers can make a difference...change a bad outcome into good. The theological idea is that God is sort of a whimsical spirit that/who/which changes outcomes for some while ignoring others. Bad theology.

Are we to dare say, in cases where prayers and hopes are dashed, that it was God’s idea, or God’s neglect, or God’s rejection? We dare to raise the question of whether God is involved at all, or if so, how? When preachers and even wise theologians try to answer such questions, it usually takes long sermons—probably a series—or a book—maybe volumes. There was a time when any bad or sad event was blamed on some failure of persons involved [like some said that the Orlando massacre was due to a fault of the victims]

The question was alive in Jesus’ time. We can’t know whether it was answered by Jesus, or whether ancient wisdom was quoted. It’s just a few words, part of another paragraph, but memorable theology:

“He makes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and unjust alike.”
(Matthew 5:45)

Good stuff happens. Bad stuff happens. Sometimes we find the “black box” that tells how it happened. Watch out for those who try to pin the “why” on some idea of God’s activity.

So here is a drama being played out. A lot of intense feelings. Imagine the pilot or crew as part of your family or close friends. Or, imagine the person(s) needing this emergency evacuation. Sure, we pray the best. We want everyone to do his or her job. We hope the meteorologists have given accurate information. We hope the mechanics have checked everything out. There’s plenty of hope for everyone and plenty of fear for those who go there.

As the Director of Polar Programs said:

“We are very, very concerned and will be until this is over.”

Yes, concerned, very concerned. We wait, as humans do. There are so many unknown moments where life is in the balance, where prayers are being said, where people wait. May faith, hope, love, concern—and internal human courage—abide. Maybe that is the place for theology—that there is something God-given in human life that allows us to feel concern and to live forward through whatever is ahead.

Art Morgan, Waiting, June 21, 2016

Note: Before I could get this off Max e-mailed that the plane is “on the deck.” Theological options are, “Thank God, Praise Allah (same thing), Hallelujah (angels and such like that), or “Say Yay!” (A local favorite.) Keep all options open. They have 1500 miles to go until they are out of there! We remain concerned.