

Message Delivered at Christ Church
January 16th & 17th, 2010
TEXTS: Isaiah 62:1-5; John 2:1-11
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

I want to begin this evening with some history...a story...one that we've heard before. But there are primal stories for each people, and this is one of our primal stories. It relates to the Isaiah reading, and maybe to some other things that have been going on over the last little while...

A long time ago, a man named Josiah became king of the land of Judah, the capital of which was Jerusalem. The kingdom of Judah is special to us because it's part of the Bible story; but in its time, really, it was just one more small kingdom nestled between two aging giants: to the southwest, Egypt; and to the northeast, Assyria. Josiah was a good king. He led a religious renewal that brought the people more in line with the teaching of the Torah. The Book of II Kings portrays him favorably.

But by this time, Judah, herself, had grown tired. Despite the spiritual renewal, they had become an enervated people; almost confused. They overestimated their own strength and power. When a Pharaoh named Neco brought his army up from Egypt to do battle against the Assyrians, Josiah over-reached. In an attempt to play a decisive role in the conflict between the two powers, Josiah raised an army against Neco, was defeated, and was killed in the battle at Megiddo.

It was a disaster, followed by a humiliation. A son of Josiah named Jehoahaz had been named the next king. Neco placed him under house arrest; deposed him; and eventually brought him back to Egypt where he died. Neco installed another son of Josiah named Eliakim as king, and demanded an exorbitant tribute that ruined the Judean economy. To add greater insult to the injury, he forced Eliakim to change his name to Jehoiakim.

Within ten years, the political landscape of the area had changed. Egypt was still sleepy old Egypt, but the Assyrians had been destroyed by a new people called the Babylonians under a vibrant young king named Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar forced Jehoiakim to become his vassal. But Jehoiakim was a poor king, who misunderstood the capabilities of his own people and the ruthlessness of the Babylonians. He rose up against Nebuchadnezzar, but died before the consequences of his actions came home to roost.

His son, Jehoiachin, became king, only to find Nebuchadnezzar and his army at the doorstep to Jerusalem. The city was besieged, and Jehoiachin—who understood better than some of his predecessors that sometimes the best thing to do is cut a deal--surrendered. And now the great indignity began: Jehoiachin and his family, and anyone of any consequence...the military leaders, the government officials, the artisans and skilled workers...were all taken away, back to Babylon. They left behind everything, leaving only the poorest of the poor in Jerusalem. The holiest site for all the Jews was desecrated. The King of Babylon took every bit of treasure he could find in the Temple back to Babylon. But before he did so, he rubbed salt in the wounds of the Jewish people by cutting into pieces all the golden vessels of the house of the Lord before their very eyes.

Nebuchadnezzar put his own man on the thrown in Jerusalem. A man named Mattaniah, who he forced to change his name to Zedekiah. Zedekiah was even more foolish than his two predecessors, and again rebelled against his Babylonian overlord. And this time,

Nebuchadnezzar returned without an ounce of mercy. For a while, Jerusalem held out. But only for a while. In a siege, nothing goes out of a city; and nothing comes in. After famine and disease had taken their toll, a breach was made in the wall, and the Babylonian army poured in. Jerusalem was destroyed. Here's what it says in II Kings: They "burned the house of the Lord, the king's house, and all the houses of Jerusalem; every great house they burned down...they broke down the walls around Jerusalem...and they took into exile the rest of this people...but left some of the poorest of the people of the land to be vinedressers and tillers of the soil."

I am not comfortable describing in the presence of children what the Babylonians did to Zedekiah, the remaining priests of the Temple, and the Hebrew army. If you want to know, read the last chapter of II Kings.

There was nothing left, and the Jews who were still alive were forced to walk, and settle in Babylon. "By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered you, O Zion." Zion is another name for Jerusalem. That's the beginning of Psalm 137, a prayer written by the exiles who had nothing where they were, and nothing to go back to. Nothing.

Now, there's an old saying that's offered in various forms..."God afflicts the comfortable, and comforts the afflicted"...you heard that one? I think it's a true statement. The witness of scripture is that when the Jews were comfortable, God sent prophets to afflict their conscience. But also, that when the Jews were afflicted—as in the Babylonian Captivity—God sent prophets to bring them comfort and hope.

God sent Jeremiah, who prophesied a new covenant between God and the Hebrews...one written on their hearts, not in stone.

And God sent Ezekiel, who prophesied that despite all the death, there would be a time of resurrection.

And God sent this person who wrote these words we read just a few minutes ago, who prophesied that a new servant would come who would carry his people; that a new light would shine not just for Israel but for all the world; who said that soon, there would be good news for all the people...that broken hearts would be mended, liberty would come to the captives, release to the prisoners, and comfort to all who mourn.

I want to give you a Bible assignment. Sometime this week read Isaiah 60 through 62. Read it out loud. It's the writing of a person of God who can't contain himself about the hopeful future God has in store for this devastated and homeless people. It's almost breathless in the way it builds. It's as if his stylus can't keep up with the images God is giving him, so that you can almost hear him stomp his foot near the end: "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God. You won't be called Forsaken, and you won't be called Desolate. You will be called "My Delight is in Her." "And I," says the Lord, "will be your bridegroom, and you shall be my bride."

These are the words Isaiah wrote to a people that had lost everything; whose city had been destroyed; who had nothing left; who wondered whether there was anything worth hoping for, and whether it was worth anymore putting one foot in front of the other. They resonated so powerfully, these words, that they were remembered, and written down, and included in the holy scriptures.

I'm not sure that on that first Sabbath in Babylon—with their feet sore from so much walking, and with no understanding of how to be a people without a Temple; and everything

they knew gone--the Jews were ready to hear much about God's vision for their future. Mostly, my experience is that if there is something to grieve, then grieve is the first thing that needs to be done...even before hope. If you're looking for some other Bible reading tonight, read the book of Lamentations. That first Sabbath weekend in Babylon, and maybe even for quite some time, I think Lamentations may have been the book they read from.

But again, hope is the great gift the Jewish people have given to humanity. And following their lead, we believe hope is something that can return. And Isaiah wrote words like these to remind us that, eventually—sometimes after much struggle—it can.

The Diocese of Haiti is the largest diocese in the American Episcopal Church. It has more communicants than any other diocese. I imagine that today, some of them will gather amidst the rubble of Port-au-Prince to worship the Lord. They'll read these words of hope the same way we did. And my hunch is that they may mean something more for them than they do for us.

It is hard to put words to the sadness and tragedy of the events this week. And I don't think I'm going to try. The images we've all seen may be enough.

But really, where one gets stuck is that it's not just the earthquake. I just don't very much have the words to describe the kind of deeply dark and relentless poverty that marks the lives of our Haitian friends. There is no way to describe what it's like to live with no electricity; no clean water; inadequate sanitation, food, and health care; ineffective and corrupt government; no way to describe what it's like to be a people that's been kicked around by others, and sometimes by their own. I can't describe what it does to one's soul because I, myself, can't understand it. It's so far removed from the life I live...and really, the lives all of us live...that it is simply beyond our comprehension. In places like Port-au-Prince, people like you and me live on the absolute razor-thin edge of survival. The system is as fragile as an egg shell, and if one thing interferes, the whole thing falls apart; it's like a reaction that can't be stopped.

It is utterly heartbreaking, and beyond our imagination. We've all been touched by what's happened. And we all want to do something. And it's so big that we run the risk of falling prey to the belief that we can't do anything about it.

But in my own spiritual life I've experienced that big steps are pretty difficult; but little ones, taken one at a time, are manageable and eventually lead somewhere good.

So here, we're going to stick to our belief that we can do something about it. And here are some small steps we're going to take...

First, as you know we've made one mission trip to Haiti. We have another trip scheduled, and we're still planning to make that trip. Now...we don't know if we're going back in March the way it was scheduled; and we're not quite sure exactly where we're going. But as of now—and this could change--the trip is still on. The best we can, we're going to keep showing up, and do what we can do. You know, we read from the Wedding at Cana today. It's a great story of how Jesus shows up, and does what needs to be done. So we're going to follow the lead of our Lord: show up, and do what needs to be done.

Secondly, we're making a special offering this weekend. Let me explain it. The loose plate offering today is going to Episcopal Relief and Development for the purpose of providing assistance to Haiti. ERD is the social outreach arm of the Episcopal Church. They are well-trained in responding to crises, and effective in the distribution of funds. And let me be clear here...they don't just help Episcopalians or Christians. They help anybody. What this means is that all the cash, and any designated checks you write are going to ERD. And then, whatever we give at worship this weekend will be matched from the General Operating Budget of Christ

Church. So how this works is that if we give \$5000 in the plate this weekend, we'll send a check to ERD for \$10,000. The children in Sunday School and the youth at youth group are also making a special offering. And if you can't do anything tonight, then go to the website and there's a link directly to ERD where you can.

Right now, unless we know exactly what we're doing, to be in Haiti we'd only get in the way. But we can support people who do know what they're doing, and that's what our offering will accomplish.

So we're going to keep showing up and get as dirty as we can, and we're going to make an offering. Here's the third thing we're going to do: We're going to hope. We're not going to hope that earthquakes never happen again, or floods, or hurricanes. The earth is alive, and those things will always happen; and sometimes, they will happen near where people live.

But we'll hope that people of faith everywhere will be appropriately unsettled at the injustice and poverty under which too many people live. We'll hope that for a bit, because their lives are disrupted our own lives are disrupted. We'll hope that those in Port-au-Prince who have no place to sleep find some rest, and that those of us throughout the world who rest easy will find it a bit more difficult to get to sleep tonight because we've got something on our mind.

We'll hope that people of faith everywhere will do what they can to change things, and then, do a little bit more.

We'll hope that those who suffer will know, quickly, that they are not alone. And we'll hope that those who don't suffer never lose faith in the possibility that we can make a difference. Nathan Dungan is coming to teach about money again in a couple weeks, and one of the things he likes to say is "How we use our money can help change the world." He's right. But it's more than that..."How we live our entire lives can help change the world."

This reading from the Gospel of John is all about Jesus making new things happen...new wine; new creation; new life. So we'll hope that Haiti never recovers to what it was, but recovers to something new.

And we'll remember deep into the dusty places of history, stories forgotten and times long gone, and hope that if the Lord has saved a people before, and brought them back home, as Isaiah speaks to...the Lord will do it again. And that this time, we'll be God's helpers.

I doubt today that there is much hope in Port-au-Prince. Right now, there's too much there of everything bad. Few people have the resolve to move so quickly into hope after such disaster. But with others, we'll do our little things--which when you put them together aren't very little at all. And we'll hope that it's possible for hope to happen.

And until our friends in Haiti are able to hope for themselves, we'll do it for them.