

SERMON: January 17, 2010

Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Texts: Psalm 36:5-10; Isaiah 62:1-17; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11

WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES – WHERE IS GOD?

It has been a devastating week as far as the news is concerned. The eyes of the world have turned to the small nation of Haiti? An impoverished nation already devastated by years of natural and man-made disasters is left in ruins after a 7.0 magnitude earthquake. We may never know how many lives were lost in the rubble. I've seen estimates of 50,000 and up. But the reality of a disaster of this magnitude is that not one of the estimated 6 million people living in Haiti, will be untouched by the depth of loss. Loved ones have been lost, homes have been destroyed, and access to the basic need of human life has been significantly diminished.

The first question that is always asked at times like these is "what can we do?" Nations around the world are trying to offer support in a variety of ways. Individuals from around the world are stepping up to give to a number of disaster relief agencies. Two related options that are available to us are the Lutheran World Relief and the ELCA Disaster Response.

What I want to explore this morning goes beyond an economic response. I want to explore this from a theological perspective. What does our faith teach us about events such as these and how can scriptures help us to put all of this in perspective?

I will confess to you that as a pastor and as a pastoral care provider, I struggle with time like these. I, like many of you, feel a deep sadness when I hear stories of individuals whose lives have been impacted. I, like many of you, ask the question, "where is God in the midst of this?" Furthermore, I get angry at some of the responses and statements I have heard uttered by others in the midst of this.

I am embarrassed as a pastor when I hear someone like Pat Robertson say or suggest that natural disasters such as these are sent by God as judgments for some past or present sin. He has done this before, so I guess I shouldn't be surprised, most notably with the events of 9-11 and hurricane Katrina. However, I believe that these words misrepresent God. The God that Pat Robertson seems to represent by these statements is not the same God that I believe in or have experienced in my life.

I am saddened when I hear a woman suggest that the reason that the Haitian child she was in the process of adopting had survived is that God was watching over her. I do not wish to deny her the joy that she is feeling. However, what does that statement of God's protection say to the mother who is grieving over the infant son who did not survive, that God chose not to watch over him? Again, a God who would arbitrarily decide that one child would survive and another would die is not the God I believe in or have experienced in my life.

I feel downright anger when I see someone named Susan state in a theological discussion on Facebook that she is confident that she would have survived the disaster in Haiti because she knows the Lord and lives by his word, while those who were killed did not know the Lord. What does this say to Reverend April Ulring Larson and Reverend Judd Larson, ELCA pastors who are grieving the loss of their son, Ben? Ben was a fourth-year student at Wartburg seminary who was in Haiti with three other Wartburg students to teach theology to lay leaders at the new Haiti Lutheran Church. I don't know the details of his death, except to say that he died in the earthquake while the other three survived. In a press release, Ben is described by his parents as "gentle, in love with Christ, in love with people, in love with life." What explanation would Susan give to the tragic loss of Ben's life? The God that Susan believes in is not the same God that I believe in or have experienced in my life.

It is better, in my opinion, when faced with such unimaginable tragedy, to say nothing at all than to offer explanations or religious platitudes that do not help people when they are in the depths of despair. They do not help. In fact they can also do damage to people in the midst of physical, psychological and spiritual crisis. So how does our faith help us in the midst of this? Do our scriptures for today offer us any words of wisdom or comfort? I will suggest to you that they have a lot to say with us.

Our First Reading from Isaiah contains words of comfort spoken to the people of Israel who are returning to their home land after years of captivity at the hands of the Babylonians. What they discover is that their homes, their fields and their cities have been destroyed, not from natural disaster, but from a man-made disaster rooted in a human thirst for conquest and war. The prophet offers these words of hope in the midst of despair: "*you shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate; but you shall be called My Delight Is in Her, and your Land shall be called married; for the Lord delights in you.*" It is a promise, a vision, that ours is not a God who seeks to destroy, but rather a God who seeks to rebuild and restore. These words encourage us to say that ours is a God who is there in the midst of the rubble and the ruin seeking to bring comfort to lives that are broken. As Luther Seminary professor David Lose writes:

The biblical witness urges us to seek God not above tragedy – controlling the fates of nature and humanity – but rather amid tragedy, suffering with us and for us...God is present – not causing chaos but entering into it, not standing over us but holding tightly onto us and promising never to let go. Wherever there is human tragedy and pain, the incarnate and crucified God is there.

(Davis Lose, *Preaching after Natural Disaster*, at www.workingpreacher.org, 1/15/10)

Referencing Paul's discussion with the community in Corinth as how we are the Body Christ, Lose also states that:

God does not only suffer with us, however, but also works through us. Paul's assertion that we are the body of Christ is, when you think about it, a bold and profound statement of faith. To confess that we who are broken, limited, and sinful

are those persons through whom Christ is active in the world is incredibly empowering, as God simultaneously sanctifies, commissions, and sends us into the world to bear and to be Christ's healing and helping presence. Even in the face of a calamity this immense, we are not helpless.... We are the body of Christ and agents of God's redemptive land restoring love in the world.

(Davis Lose, *Preaching after Natural Disaster*, at www.workingpreacher.org, 1/15/10)

Even our Gospel lesson can speak to us in the midst of disaster. In the wedding at Cana, Jesus responds to a real need. Now the need for wine at a wedding banquet is not the equivalent of people needing water, food, shelter or medical care in the aftermath of an earthquake. However, it isn't what Jesus does that is important in the story as much as what this event says about who Jesus is. Ample wine at a wedding is considered in NT Times to be a blessing. By turning water into wine, Jesus shows his divine nature, one which is connected to God's desire to bring abundant life to all of creation. As children of God and believers in Jesus Christ, we can trust that there is more that is promised to us in this life and in the life to come. We must ask ourselves, how can we be a blessing? How can we be agents of God's love for all of creation? How can we be the miracle that brings new life to a people who are consumed by death and despair?

My wife, Mary shared with me that in one of her classes this past week the discussion turned to the disaster in Haiti. One girl shouted out, "Do we have to talk about his again! What do I care about what happens to the people in Haiti?" How does a teacher respond? How do we respond?

If that young girl were here this morning, my response would be, "how could we not care?" We are all part of God's creation. We are all part of God's vision. Our lives are interconnected, interwoven, and not separate from each other. When one fellow human being suffers, all of humanity suffers. When an entire nation cries out in grief all of creation cries out in despair.

I think the passage that speaks to me most of all of our lessons for today is Psalm 36 where we read:

*Your love, O Lord, reaches to the heavens;
And your faithfulness to the clouds.
Your righteousness is like the strong mountains,
Your justice like the great deep;
You save humankind and animals, O LORD.
How priceless is your love, O God!
All people take refuge under the shadow of your wings.
They feast upon the abundance of your house;
You give them drink from the river of your delights.
For with you is the well of life, and in your light we see light.*

These are the words that speak of the God that I know and believe in.

These are not the words of a vengeful God.
These are not the words of a punitive God.
These are not the words of a God who arbitrarily saves some but not others.

These are words that speak of a God whose love flows out to all of creation.
These are words that speak of a God to whom we can turn for comfort in times crisis.
These are words that speak of a God who invites us to experience the abundance of God.

This is the God I believe in. This is the God that I believe is present in the lives of the Haitian people and those who seek to bring help to them. This is the God who invites us to be agents of his love and his abundance, whenever and wherever God's people are in need.

This is the God I believe in. AMEN.