

# COME ON... GIVE US A MIRACLE

A sermon preached by Aaron Billard at  
St. John's United Church, Moncton, NB  
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Like many of you, I have spent the past week watching the major news networks' coverage of Haiti, and seeing the devastation that people are enduring as aid arrives from around the world in the form of supplies, people and money. Despite everything, it all seems to be not enough as the images roll by of children with no parents roaming the streets; helicopters dropping food as hundreds of people run towards them; and fireman from Los Angeles sifting through the rubble searching for life. To top it off, it happened in a country where there is a legacy of environmental disasters: floods and severe storms, and deforestation.

And like all of you, I followed closely the news updates on the search for Sgt. Mark Gallagher, who had been training police officers in Haiti's capital as part of a United Nations mission. He was a former spokesman for the RCMP here in Moncton, known for his willingness to help people. His wife Lisa said that his desire to help other people was what took him to Haiti in the first place.

While Sgt. Gallagher was still missing, I read some of the comments on CBC about his story. One woman simply wrote, "Come on... give us a miracle."

To understand the devastation in Haiti, we have to realize that it would be as if everyone in New Orleans had drowned, during their tragedy a few years ago. There are concerns about aftershocks and looting; and without a safe and secure port, there is great worry about how food will be delivered as

planes continue to bring in what they can to a devastated and demoralized people. One of the greatest ways for people to lose hope is to see bodies by the side of the road, as thousands have been carried away to mass graves, compounding this tragedy as people will never know for sure where loved ones are buried, and knowing that their final resting place was a shallow three feet deep mass grave.

Among the swirling news and heart break, we hear the words from the Psalmist, “Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains; your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord. How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.”

And we sigh collectively, “Come on; give us a miracle.”

The woman said that is not unlike Mary in John’s Gospel. She is the urger, the one who brings to the Lord’s attention that which is most needed right now: a miracle. She brings a compassion and sensitivity to Jesus in this moment.

Theologian Chung Hyun Kyung has suggested that Mary is much more important to this story than we usually think; after all, she raised Jesus to practice “compassionate justice.” Her action here “shows that ‘she is a woman with all the compassionate sensitiveness to other people’s needs, often lacking in men, especially those in power.’” (*Struggle to Be the Sun Again: Introducing Asian Women’s Theology*)

Yet here we are today. Each of us, for various reasons not excluding the daily reports from Haiti, have yet to be filled with the good wine. We strive for it, we hope for it, we do our best, but there is still something missing from life that helps it taste better, and indeed be better for the people on this planet.

Several days ago, I gave a tour of the church to a woman I had previously met. As we were standing in the sanctuary she said, “I was never raised to go to church. My parents had a bad experience with it. My mother belonged to a different church than my father, and he was raised in a strict religion, so they decided not to take us anywhere. But I feel like something is missing in my life.”

Last Friday night, Lori-Ann and I shared, what many young couples have come to call, Date Night for the first time in a long time. It was great to have supper and to talk without someone needing every moment of Lori-Ann’s attention. Lori-Ann is used to me being me, and before I left I had introduced myself to the couple at the next table, and after about five minutes of conversation, I agreed to do her son’s wedding. They too, were at a loss for a place that would honour them.

When I studied John’s gospel under the teaching of Father Gerald Caron in Halifax, I was constantly moved by his passion for this great book. Gerald would open each of our classes reading from the gospel of John. When one of the students complained that he didn’t open our class with a prayer, he lit up and said, “Ah, but I opened it with scripture, which is just as good.” Gerald often said, and I’ve repeated this before, that while we may not know precisely what happened back then, we do know that something happened, because here we are today, gathered together listening to these same stories. One of the things that he hammered into us was that John’s gospel is a book of signs. He often commented that he believed in the Jesus of this gospel - not the miracles. The miracles are simply signs of pointing to who Jesus is for us - they point to a larger meaning. For example, think of the sign of the miracle of the wedding at Cana - it points to something else beyond this story about

Jesus. It's about God's reign breaking through. When the guests are without wine, and there is only water in the stone jar; this story points to abundance.

In what ways is God working abundantly in your life? Are you abundantly loved? Are you abundantly cared for? Or, are you called to give of your abundance to people in our world who desperately need it to be shared, as Jesus did in the story with the good wine?

Robert Brearly writes, "Sometimes, the church has forgotten that our Lord once attended a wedding feast and said yes to gladness and joy. God does not want our religion to be too holy to be happy in." (*Feasting on the Word*) To put it another way, according to Richard Bauckham, "When John's Gospel speaks of salvation as life, the meaning is not mere life, but life in its maximal sense: life invigorated and intensified... Jesus gives life by connecting people with the divine springs of life from which the vitality of life is constantly sustained and replenished." (*The Lectionary Commentary*)

One could say that in this story, Jesus is asking us to live life in its maximal sense. It's not about being paralyzed by the pain and suffering of the world, as we are experiencing this Sunday, but rather to share in and of our abundance. Write a cheque to help with the efforts currently underway in Haiti, God knows our help is needed. But don't let it stop there. Share of your abundance with your children, giving them your time and energy. Give of what you have with someone you know who is struggling, whether they have articulated it or not. When we do that, we too can transform simple jars of water into feasts of wine.

There is another kind of abundance, which I have become directly aware in this past week, and which has captured my

thoughts. What does it mean to be abundantly lonely? What does it mean to be abundantly poor? There are many among us, present with us, or at home, whose loneliness has transformed them into something else too. The strength of this church will be judged by how well we ease that loneliness. Some are isolated by age and illness. Some are isolated by economics and unemployment. Still others are emotionally drained and lonely within the crowd because we can't handle their illness or within a marriage.

Some scholars have noted a phenomenon happening in this story from the Gospel that just won't go away, no matter how much you have read this story or studied it. It's when Mary approaches Jesus at the wedding, and being his mother, says to him, "They have no wine" to which Jesus responds, "What concern is that to us?"

What concern is it to us? We often speak in the church that Jesus is fully human and fully divine. This, we pray, is a fully human moment when Jesus simply could not care less about how much wine there is or isn't. Carol Lakey Hess calls it "*the scandal of divine reluctance*" when Jesus seems to balk at helping people in need. She sees a tension between that hesitation, followed by an extravagant gift of the finest wine, and God's seeming absence or inaction in the face of human suffering and need, in any age or place: "In a world where for so many there is not clean water – let alone fine wine – where is the extravagance of God? In a world where children play in bomb craters the size of thirty-gallon wine jugs, why the divine reluctance?" Like Mary, perhaps we too have a role in the story: "This troubling text invites us to trust so much in God's generosity and abundance that we, like the perceptive mother of Jesus, nudge God with our observation: they have no wine." (*Feasting on the Word*) They have no wine. My God, they have no wine. And we say that until we ourselves are

motivated by the Spirit of God to do more than we thought we were able, more than we thought we were capable of doing, by not only raising awareness in this world but by actually doing something about it.

“In your light we see light,” writes the Psalmist. In God’s light, we see our true selves more often than not, needing a reminder of what life is all about. In God’s light, we see the people beside us more clearly, whether or not we agree with them, or even like them. In God’s light, we see our world differently, knowing how fragile this planet is, and how we are really at the mercy of the elements, despite how sophisticated our society becomes.

At the end of the day, I suspect that as much as we like miracles, we are also looking for signs. Signs pointing to the fact that in its most mundane moments, life is greater than we can imagine, by the simple virtue that we can inhale, fill our lungs with air, and exhale - a miracle in and of itself. We are looking for signs that the world really isn’t filled with thieves, drug dealers, murderers, or high-powered financial scammers who will steal your savings. Those people exist, and we may have even been hurt by them, but they are not the norm as we would be lead to believe by what we see and hear each day. We are looking for a sign that tomorrow will hold more potential than yesterday, and that we can be redeemed of our mistakes and move forward to a meaningful life, rather than be held back by our past. And I do believe, and I think you all do too, that we are looking for a sign that this faith of ours isn’t about chasing rainbows, self-delusion, wishful thinking, or is the product of superstition. When we surround ourselves with goodness and love, the sign points toward God at work in our lives and in our world - a God who walks beside us in our impatience, a God who celebrates with us when good news comes, a God who is pained when so-called holy people

exact judgement in the place of compassion, and a God whose heart breaks and whose tears flow when the world shakes, leaving men, women, and children to die or left in pain.

It's good to turn to each other in faith, and to look for the wisdom and the words of those who have gone before us, yet who have experienced our emotions, such as Teresa of Avila, who wrote:

*Christ has no body but yours,  
No hands, no feet on earth but yours,  
Yours are the eyes through which he looks  
With compassion on this world,  
Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,  
Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.  
Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,  
Yours are the eyes, you are his body.*

And all of you, each one of you, no matter if the earth shakes, and the world comes down around you, and your heart is broken, you belong to God in life, in death, and in life beyond death. Thanks be to God.

*See back page for "Prayer for Haiti"*

## **A Prayer for Haiti**

(January 2010) by Rose Marie Berger

Most Holy Creator God, Lord of heaven and earth, we bring before you today your people of Haiti. It is you who set in motion the stars and seas, you who raised up the mountains of the Massif de la Hotte and Pic La Selle.

It is you who made her people in your very image: Their gregarious hearts, generous spirits, their hunger and thirst for righteousness and liberty. It is you, O Lord, who planted the rhythms of konpa, Twoubadou, and zouk in the streets of Cite-Soleil. You who walk the paths outside of Jacmel and Hinche. Your people, O Lord, cry out to you.

Haiti, O Haiti: the world's oldest black republic, the second-oldest republic in the Western world.

You are a God who answers the cries of the suffering.

You are a God who sees, frees, and redeems your people.

"I too have heard the moaning of my people," you spoke to Moses. Now, Lord, speak to Chanté, Agwe, Nadege, and Jean Joseph.

Speak now, O Lord, and comfort Antoine, Jean-Baptiste, Toto, and Djakout. Raise up your people from the ash heap of destruction and give them strong hearts and hands, shore up their minds and spirits. Help them to bear this new burden.

As for us, Lord, we who are far away from the rubble and the dust, the sobbing and the moans, but who hold them close in our hearts, imbue us with the strength of Simon the Cyrene. Help us to carry the Haitian cross; show us how to lighten the yoke with our prayers, our aid, and our resources. Teach us to work harder for justice in our own country and dignity in Haiti, so that we may stand with integrity when we hold our Haitian families in our arms once again. We ask this in the name of Jezikri, Jesus Christ. Amen.