

Tragedy and Faith

Unedited manuscript of a sermon by
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Ever since Tuesday, January 12th our senses have been bombarded on every direction with news coming from Haiti. It's hard to get our heads around such a massive earthquake that has devastated the most densely populated regions of Haiti. As we know, the disaster directly touched 3 million people, one third of Haiti's population. There is still no official death toll, but some estimates run as high as 200,000 – 250,000. As of yesterday, they moved to search & recover mode, from search & rescue mode. It seems at times, does it not, that Haiti is a magnet for disasters, civil violence, hurricanes, famine, and extreme poverty. And yes, Haiti is considered to be the poorest nation in the western hemisphere.

Social and political commentators, from the United Nations to our Government leaders to the churches, remind us that the battering of Haiti will continue to have its effects far down the road. We are called upon to remember that Haitian people will continue to need helping hands in the months, years and decades to come.

At times, as I expect with many of you, my mind has been numbed by some of the statements coming from people. The

Boston Globe, immediately following the hurricane, as the folk attending The Shack studies discovered, had statements which read like these: One blog quoting Matthew 24:6 *“when you see such things happen remember the coming of the Lord is near.”* Another... *“You can all pray all you want... it will not help any more than reading The Three Little Pigs out loud! ... you dimwits.. your GOD that you think created this earth created the earthQUAKE!! And now you pray for these people that got screwed by your GOD in the first place?”*

I think of Rev. Pat Robertson, the southern Baptist minister, who in 1988 offered himself as the Presidential Candidate for the Republican Party in the United States. You may recall the same Pat Robertson suggesting that God was punishing Americans with Hurricane Katrina. Haiti’s problems, Robertson maintained on January 13th, stem from the fact that he believes they are cursed by God.

Listen to his words based in part on Haiti’s history, *“Something happened a long time ago in Haiti, and people might not want to talk about it...”* *“The (Haitians) were under the heel of the French... And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, ‘we will serve you if you’ll get us free from the French....’ And so, the devil said, OK, it’s a deal... Ever since, they have been cursed by one thing after the other”* (Huffington Post, Jan. 13).

The assertion, rooted in part in history, is grounded in the truth that beginning in the 17th century the French brought enslaved Africans to Haiti, working them on the islands plantations until 1791. In 1791 the enslaved Africans revolted, defeated the armies sent by the French Emperor,

freed themselves, and established the independent nation of Haiti. Most Haitians are Catholic, and “yes”, many practice that belief in conjunction with the native elder African religions which the Haitians call Voodoo. Voodoo, with which those of you familiar with the James Bond books and movies will know, comes from a West African spiritual system of faith and ritual practices which attempt to explain the forces of the universe. In line with other native spiritual practices, deities are honoured, and ancient and recent ancestors are venerated. (*Babylonian dictionary*) Unfortunately, some Christians historically and continually in sermons, castigate such native spirituality as “devil worship.”

As I read the Boston Globe and Pat Robertson’s words, I could not help but think that if Robertson truly believes that Haitians had to “*make a pact with the devil*” in order to free themselves from the slavery of the good Christian nation of France, what does that say about the God which Mr. Robertson worships and serves?

So we ask, “*How could this happen?*” “*How could God let something like this happen?*”

In his book, *The Master Story Teller*,² Dr. Sheldon Mackenzie, retired New Testament Professor of Memorial University, and a personal friend, write in one of the chapters titled, “What Sort of a God Is God?”: “*We have been taught that the power of God is able to do anything and everything...*” He continues, “*The problem is we haven’t been taught the sort of power that is God. And so we make it up for ourselves, in terms of the power we know something about...*” He asks the question, “*In what sort of God do you believe?*” Then the questions! Hear them! “*The sort of God, who could*

prevent tragedy, but doesn't?" "The sort of God who allows tragedy to take place, for some peculiar reason of God's own? In whatever form it may take? The sort of God who is indifferent to pain, heartache, loneliness and tears?..." May I add earthquakes! (Page 98)

These are questions written before the tragedy of these days, and yet they are relevant questions! Surely, out of the darkness, to those of us within the Christian faith, comes the reminder that God's grace has the last word.

We sometimes forget that much of the faith of the Bible has been forged out of tragedy! One only has to think of the Babylonian exile when the Jewish people were carried off as captives to Babylon! One only has to look at the crucifixion! My mind turns at times such as this to Psalm 137 written during the exile; remember the people ask, *"how can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land* when so much of the world, for the slaves in Babylon, for the people of Haiti whose world has been turned upside down. How can we sing when we know that our world will never be the same again? (v.4) How do we worship with buildings reduced to ash, wounded bodies, corpses being dumped into common graves, child after child being left orphaned, "Civil War surgery," as one Doctor expressed it – the removal of limbs without the benefit of anesthetic? How do we worship with sadness, anger, revulsion, and shock washing over us time and time again? How realistic the Psalm! Notice the hate of the writer. So distraught; we hear him asking that the little Babylonian babies have *"their heads crushed against the stones."* (v.9) If honest, we can identify!

Again, the writer of Lamentations gives us an example of how a person of faith struggles with doubt and despair. The devastation of the Babylonian exile has shaken the faith of the people to its roots. The author pours out his grief, and, even anger at God! Then seeing the light, which the darkness cannot put out, makes the magnificent statement of faith, *“the Lord’s unfailing love and mercy still continue; fresh as the morning and sure as the sunrise.”* (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Some time ago, Aaron referred to Elie Wiesel’s book, *Night*. Wiesel writes of being placed in a concentration camp at Bauna, and then Auschwitz, at the age of 15. In the course of the narrative he tells of two Dutchmen being arrested for smuggling arms into the camp. The SS believe that they had, as their accomplice, an eleven-year-old boy. Weisel writes about the torturing of the little boy in an effort to get the two men to talk. They refused! We watch as a hastily constructed gallows is put in place. Ropes are placed around the necks of the men and the little boy. Everyone in the encampment is called in front of the makeshift gallows. The men and the boy climb up on the chairs. The two men raise their arms in the air: *“Long live liberty!”* The man standing behind Weisel is heard to ask the question: *“Where is God?”* The chairs are pulled. The two men die instantly. Their body weight is great enough to break their necks. Not so for the little boy. His body was not heavy enough to cause him to die immediately. And so the entire encampment was called upon to watch as he dangled in mid-air, dying the slow agonizing death of strangulation. Listen to Weisel’s words: *“For more than one half hour he stayed there struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. Again, I heard the same voice from behind me saying, “Where is God now!” and I*

heard a voice from within answer, "Where is He? He is here! He is here hanging on these gallows."

Do you believe that? God is here hanging on these gallows! God is in the midst of the suffering of the people of Haiti. God is in the midst of our own suffering and pain!

We will continue to wrestle with questions? Why Haiti? Why evil? Why suffering, personal, communal? This we do know, and I speak as one who, for most of my ministry reaching back into the 50s', has wrestled with God, even as God has wrestled with me! From the very depths of my being, I say -- God does not cause suffering in order to bring about some greater good! We know from experience that God does not cause tragedy of any kind. We know as well, and with certainty, that God is not able to prevent tragedy.

These then are the truths of our faith: God suffers in our suffering. In the words of the Psalmist, *"If I ascend up into heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in the depths of hell, behold, you are there."* (Psalm 139:8) The truth of our faith: God can be trusted. *"The Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continues...."* The truth of our faith - the light is greater than the darkness. *"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot put it out..."*

Yes, on Tuesday, January 12th, life for so many Haitians and others changed. The earth shook, buildings fell, and people died. How many were wounded? Will we ever know? With them, we are in shock and grief!

In the silence, hear the word that God, alone can speak, *"Be still and know that I am God."*

The truth of our faith, that the God of Jesus Christ has rendered impotent “the last enemy” who cannot rob us of life. *“For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* (Romans 8:38-39)

So Jesus stood in the synagogue of his home community and read from Isaiah 61:1-2: *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has chosen me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free the oppressed and announce that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.”* Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. All the people in the synagogue had their eyes fixed on him, as he said to them, *“This passage of scripture has come true today, as you heard it being read.”* Luke 4:18 -21 TEV)

May the words of the writer of Lamentations speak to us, each one: *“The Lord’s unfailing love and mercy still continues, fresh as the morning and sure as the sunrise.”*

That is my prayer for you, for the people of Haiti, and for me. And why? Because that is our faith! Thanks be to God! Amen.

