

Epiphany 2C  
January 17, 2010

St. Andrew's

Earthquake in Haiti on Tuesday this week

Isaiah 62.1-5  
Ps 36.5-10  
1 Corinthians 12.1-11  
John 2.1-11

I had a perfectly good sermon beginning to form in my head earlier this week. Then it was Wednesday and we began to get information about the devastation in Haiti from the earthquake on Tuesday. As the week progressed, it was becoming clear in my head that I wanted to do something different this morning. I fear I will not be the perfect rector described last week; this "sermon" may last more than the approved 12 minutes!

At some level, we all understand that this catastrophe in Haiti is not only humanitarian, it is theological. Not the theology that Pat Robertson is spewing, that Haiti got what was coming to it because they made a pact with the devil to follow Satan if only they would be freed from French rule. There is nothing remotely Christian in that kind of garbage and I think we all know that and need to denounce it.

This disaster, of what Bill Clinton called "biblical proportion," forces us to look, forces us to see the world around us with different eyes. Maybe it's overreacting, or maybe I'm feeling guilty for my own excesses, but it has been interesting to me how the prattle on Facebook has continued without pause this week. I was viewing some pictures from Haiti on the Fox News website and reading some of the reports, and found them interspersed with ads for auto insurance, secrets for whitening teeth, and reporting on the crisis on NBC for the multi-millionaire contracts of poor Jay Leno and Conan O'Brien as if they are similarly catastrophic events .

This disaster in Haiti, a country already the hemisphere's most impoverished, draws our attention to the conditions which make such loss inconceivable. The magnitude of crisis makes Hurricane Katrina and even 9-11 pale in proportion.

When faced with tragedy like this, one of the questions to arise is often: How could a loving God allow this to happen? Atheists love that one. The theological term for the response is: theodicy. The defense of God in light of pain and suffering in the world and the attempt to respond to the problem of evil.

That is in the consciousness of many this week and is different from Pat Robertson's view that God is actively punishing Haiti for its sins, not unlike what was told New Orleans was the reason for the destruction from Katrina.

Theodicy tries to make some kind of sense in a broken world of God's ongoing mercy and kindness and presence with us through it all. I'd like to say there are "answers" to the questions, but I don't think there are. The death of 50,000 people with bodies piled on the roads because there is no place to put them and 1/3 of the population either dead, homeless, or injured, is almost unimaginable. We might all wonder where God is.

One of the parts of the Bible which we use every day and every week but don't give much active attention to and very rarely finds itself in a sermon, is the psalms. Week after week we read them. They are an amazing body of writing which range from praise and thanksgiving to wisdom to royal procession to penitence to lament. The Sunday lectionary picks and chooses more than the Daily Office and we rarely, if ever, read any of the laments. I don't know if the lectionary authors were worried that the language was too harsh for our tender ears or didn't want us mad at God. But there are some deep laments in the Psalter and people who suffer loss and pain often express relief when they discover them. We may be uncomfortable with the words of anger and rage at God but they are human emotions and God can hear them. Jesus cried the words of lament in the first verses of Psalm 22 from the cross: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

The people in Haiti are living their laments. I have chosen two lament psalms for this morning. The first one, Psalm 88, is the lament of an individual in deep distress. It has been described as the only psalm which has no word of hope or confidence in it. I disagree; if you don't think God is listening and has the power to respond, then what's the point in lamenting?

We shouldn't be afraid of the laments; their emotion is so raw and powerful. Psalm 88 is on page 712 in the prayer book. This is the human condition. It is grim but not despairing; three times the psalmist cries out to the Lord. Even in the most dire straits, one may appeal to the Lord. **[Read the psalm antiphonally by side of the church – it is also printed at the conclusion of this document.]** This may be the most honest relationship with God and we've all felt it in some proportion when we wonder why there is suffering present in our own lives and in the world.

As the week has unfolded I've looked differently at the scriptures for today. One of the gifts of the Bible is that it has the ability to address our current situation. If it doesn't, if it spoke only 2000 years ago, then it is dead to us. But that's not the case. The gospel this morning about Jesus' first sign in John's gospel, is one that we sometimes joke about, being Anglicans and liking our wine, especially and coincidentally on "Wine Sunday." We preach about the extravagance of the miracle as John details for us that the water jars were many in number and large in volume, writes Carol Lakey Hess.

But it's also troubling in light of the week and the world in general. Jesus says, *What concern is that to you and to me?* Hess calls it the scandal of divine reluctance. Why does God the incarnate hold out? We see a country in shambles, death everywhere, and we believe in one who claimed to bring abundant life to those in need. In Haiti where there is limited water or electricity or fuel or medical care, let alone fine wine, where is the extravagance of God? Hess continues that no matter how we rationalize divine activity, we still want to tug at Jesus' sleeve and say: "They have no wine." Because we trust, along with the psalmist, that God wants abundance, we follow the mother of Jesus by prodding God for divine compassion and generosity.

Hess writes that theologians who grapple with theodicy, justifying God's goodness in face of suffering and evil, come to various conclusions. Some say that it is not yet God's hour; others say God relies on human compassion to do the will of God. Still others dare to argue that God continues to need the heirs of Jesus' mother to go on prodding divine generosity.

John Roth states that a religious perspective that allows room for quarrelsome protest against God can, in fact, be an asset and not a hindrance to moral commitments. I don't presume to have the answers, only faith and trust in God's mercy.

That brings us to Paul's letter to the Corinthians this morning about spiritual gifts. He doesn't specifically mention generosity in this passage but in the verses for next Sunday which immediately follow these, Paul writes that God has appointed in the church gifts of healing and forms of assistance. That's what Haiti needs from us today: generosity in forms of assistance. We use these gifts to build up the body of Christ for the common good; they have not been given to keep to ourselves. Some of us may travel to Haiti to help them recover over the next months and years. But most of us will remain 4000 miles away. The people of Haiti and the rescue workers need our profound and deep prayer. And they need our money. There is no other way to put it. It does them no good for us to pray that they have the resources to do the work necessary or that the heavy equipment arrives or that someone provide the clean water and food. Just like we put our feet to our baptismal covenant last week, we have to put our pens to this and make donations. That's the bottom line. Jesus is pulling our sleeve saying, "They have no wine."

There's an insert in your bulletins to donate to Episcopal Relief and Development or you can easily do it on line. Leave a check to ERD in the plate and we'll send it. We can take up a special collection. We can give our monthly loose offering to Haiti. It doesn't matter if it's one dollar or a thousand. It matters that we give what we can and it will make a difference. We are the ones who will provide the good wine in abundance. If not us, then who?

I want to conclude with the second psalm of lament, this one the lament of a community. We needn't be uncomfortable with the despair; Jesus has known it as well. God will hear our cries.

Psalm 44; page 645 [similarly read antiphonally; time of silence at its conclusion]

## 88 *Domine, Deus*

- 1 O LORD, my God, my Savior, \*  
by day and night I cry to you.
- 2 Let my prayer enter into your presence; \*  
incline your ear to my lamentation.
- 3 For I am full of trouble; \*  
my life is at the brink of the grave.
- 4 I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; \*  
I have become like one who has no strength;

- 5 Lost among the dead, \*  
like the slain who lie in the grave,
- 6 Whom you remember no more, \*  
for they are cut off from your hand.
- 7 You have laid me in the depths of the Pit, \*  
in dark places, and in the abyss.
- 8 Your anger weighs upon me heavily, \*  
and all your great waves overwhelm me.
- 9 You have put my friends far from me;  
you have made me to be abhorred by them; \*  
I am in prison and cannot get free.
- 10 My sight has failed me because of trouble; \*  
LORD, I have called upon you daily;  
I have stretched out my hands to you.
- 11 Do you work wonders for the dead? \*  
will those who have died stand up and give you thanks?
- 12 Will your loving-kindness be declared in the grave? \*  
your faithfulness in the land of destruction?
- 13 Will your wonders be known in the dark? \*  
or your righteousness in the country where all  
is forgotten?
- 14 But as for me, O LORD, I cry to you for help; \*  
in the morning my prayer comes before you.
- 15 LORD, why have you rejected me? \*  
why have you hidden your face from me?
- 16 Ever since my youth, I have been wretched and at the  
point of death; \*  
I have borne your terrors with a troubled mind.
- 17 Your blazing anger has swept over me; \*  
your terrors have destroyed me;
- 18 They surround me all day long like a flood; \*  
they encompass me on every side.
- 19 My friend and my neighbor you have put away from me, \*  
and darkness is my only companion.

- 1 We have heard with our ears, O God,  
our forefathers have told us, \*  
the deeds you did in their days,  
in the days of old.
- 2 How with your hand you drove the peoples out  
and planted our forefathers in the land; \*  
how you destroyed nations and made your people flourish.
- 3 For they did not take the land by their sword,  
nor did their arm win the victory for them; \*  
but your right hand, your arm, and the  
light of your countenance,  
because you favored them.
- 4 You are my King and my God; \*  
you command victories for Jacob.
- 5 Through you we pushed back our adversaries; \*  
through your Name we trampled on those who  
rose up against us.
- 6 For I do not rely on my bow, \*  
and my sword does not give me the victory.
- 7 Surely, you gave us victory over our adversaries \*  
and put those who hate us to shame.
- 8 Every day we gloried in God, \*  
and we will praise your Name for ever.
- 9 Nevertheless, you have rejected and humbled us \*  
and do not go forth with our armies.
- 10 You have made us fall back before our adversary, \*  
and our enemies have plundered us.
- 11 You have made us like sheep to be eaten \*  
and have scattered us among the nations.
- 12 You are selling your people for a trifle \*  
and are making no profit on the sale of them.
- 13 You have made us the scorn of our neighbors, \*  
a mockery and derision to those around us.
- 14 You have made us a byword among the nations, \*  
a laughing-stock among the peoples.
- 15 My humiliation is daily before me, \*

- and shame has covered my face;
- 16 Because of the taunts of the mockers and blasphemers, \*  
because of the enemy and avenger.
- 17 All this has come upon us; \*  
yet we have not forgotten you,  
nor have we betrayed your covenant.
- 18 Our heart never turned back, \*  
nor did our footsteps stray from your path;
- 19 Though you thrust us down into a place of misery, \*  
and covered us over with deep darkness.
- 20 If we have forgotten the Name of our God, \*  
or stretched out our hands to some strange god,
- 21 Will not God find it out? \*  
for he knows the secrets of the heart.
- 22 Indeed, for your sake we are killed all the day long; \*  
we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.
- 23 Awake, O Lord! why are you sleeping? \*  
Arise! do not reject us for ever.
- 24 Why have you hidden your face \*  
and forgotten our affliction and oppression?
- 25 We sink down into the dust; \*  
our body cleaves to the ground.
- 26 Rise up, and help us, \*  
and save us, for the sake of your steadfast love.