

EPIPHANY III

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind. ... Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” Luke 4:18ff

As those of you who were here last week know, I didn't preach about Haiti then, though we talked about it and prayed throughout the service. The extent of the devastation keeps unfolding, as do the reactions and responses to it. And I want to begin this morning by repeating, in a slightly more formal way, several of the remarks I made last week during the announcements.

Pat Robertson, as we unfortunately know, called the earthquake a blessing in disguise, and claimed that it's a result of the Haitians having made a pact with the devil. The result, more fortunately, has been a proliferation of Pat Robertson voodoo dolls, the proceeds from the sale of some of them going to Haitian relief.

I want to say, unequivocally, I do not believe that God causes natural disasters or natural evils like disease. This is not radical or heretical theology. Yes, Genesis tells us that God caused a flood that decimated the earth. But Genesis also tells us that God makes a covenant with us never to do anything like that again. Moreover, the Genesis account of the Flood is what we call a myth: it is a story that explains something on a fundamental, but not a literal, level. Humanity did not cause the Flood, some greater force caused it (if indeed it happened at all.)

Furthermore, the early books of Hebrew Scripture have, as a major project, asserting the claims and ultimacy of their God, Yahweh, over against the pagan gods. And the pagan gods were all about nature, about crops and seasons and weather and so forth. So Yahweh had to be invoked in relation to nature as well, and to be shown to have great powers not only of creation but also of destruction. Having shown this power with the Flood, God promises to refrain from such powers in the future.

So if Haitians made a pact with the devil a couple of hundred years ago, but God doesn't cause natural disasters, did the devil do it? That seems to be the logical conclusion of Robertson's argument. But I don't think the devil operates this way either.

Another way to approach the problem comes from the gospel story about the man born blind. The disciples ask Jesus, *who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* Jesus tells them that the man's blindness was not the result of any sin, either his or

his parents. In other words, no more than natural disasters are illness or affliction caused by God, or by sin – at least, not by personal sin.

Now the *vulnerability of Haiti's infrastructure*, which has so many consequences for the chaos in the aftermath of the earthquake and the prospects for rebuilding – that's another matter. That vulnerability, the result of centuries of poverty, oppression, and corruption, is surely a result of sin – but systemic sin, not personal individual sin. Systemic sin is how I understand “original sin,” – that is, sin that transcends individual transgression and is caused by the broken nature of humanity – of all of us. An ancient saying expresses this succinctly: *In Adam's fall/ We sinned all.*

That means that, like story of the Flood, the story of Adam and Eve is not a story of factual events, but a myth about our human tendency to succumb to temptation, to taste of forbidden fruits, whatever they may be. The fruits of racism, slavery, and venality, for example. The fruits of political corruption and class privilege. Who of us is exempt here? Who of us does not benefit from a system that institutionalizes oppression and captivity, a system that remains blind to its own injustices? If Pat Robertson is correct that Haiti is cursed, then we are all, surely, cursed as well, for our participation in systemic sin and evil.

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I said to a parishioner recently that I consider my primary job as a preacher and teacher to be offering a few basic theological principals to help you all think about issues, events, and ideas that are critical in your lives. I think of this often in political-theological terms, if you will. Most if not all of us here share progressive values and instincts; how do those values and instincts fit into a theological frame? How do we claim the bible and Christianity for ourselves, and not yield all that to the religious right?

So, I when I described my preaching that way, my listener replied, “well, maybe you should *tell us* that's what you're doing.” I guess I thought my strategy was obvious. But if not, there it is. And that's what I've been trying to do this morning, give us some fundamental biblical theology to refute Pat Robertson: something that goes a bit beyond, *that's ridiculous!* Or even the more theological *Go to Hell Pat Roberson, Haiti Needs Help, not Stupidity*, as Paul Raushenbush wrote in the *Huffington Post*.

So, where do we find the Good News? Where do we find God and Jesus in the midst of the rubble and chaos and despair in Haiti? As I said last Sunday, I believe that's the proper question to be asking now. Not why does God cause earthquakes, but where is

God in the aftermath, and what does God require of us in response? What are we to do as God's heart and hands in the world?

The outpouring of concern and aid for Haiti is extraordinary, of course. Charitable organizations are collecting record sums, in record time. That's most heartening. People find it easy, often, to be generous in times of crisis. Charity is forthcoming when charity is needed. But our gospel imperative is to move beyond charity. Jesus, in his first public teaching as we hear it this morning, says nothing about charity, and charity as a concept does not feature prominently in his teachings at all. Jesus wants to talk about justice. Jesus wants to talk about transforming society altogether.

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Now, transforming society altogether, is, of course, a daunting task. It can seem too overwhelming even to contemplate. But if we are to take Jesus' seriously, and claim his vision, his hope and promise for the world, as our own, then we must contemplate it, my dear friends. And moreover, we must act on it – must act on that imperative to transform the world, beginning whenever and wherever we can.

And a place to begin, a place to find inspiration, is in faith. And for that inspiration we need look no farther than the faith of the Haitian people themselves. Here are some accounts of that faith as reported in **The New York Times**.

The Sacre Coeur cathedral, another grand structure, also lay in ruin, with a large, perfectly preserved Christ on a cross bearing witness to the destruction below – and a woman's body lying across the street atop a mattress, her head resting on a pillow, sheeting draping over her.

“It may seem like a strange moment to have faith,” said Georges Verrier, 28, an unemployed computer expert, his eyes moving from the body to the church. “But you can't blame God.

Mr. Arisson stood propping up his severely wounded girlfriend, Darphcat Charles, whose head was wrapped in bloody gauze, her eyes bruised and her face swollen, infected and grimacing. “My position is God bless, and send us, please, oh Lord, a doctor to plug the hole in my beloved's head.”

Another man attending the evangelical service introduced his wife, eight months pregnant, who sat on the pavement blank-faced. “A concrete block fell on

her stomach, and we don't know if the baby is still alive," said the man, Ricot Calixte, 28. "Prayer can help, I think. As I still breathe, I have faith."

Voice scratchy, eyes bloodshot, arms raised to the sky, the Rev. Joseph Lejeune urged the hungry, injured and grieving Haitians who gathered round to close their eyes and elevate their beings up and out of the fetid Champ de Mars square where they now scrambled to survive.

"Think of our new village here as the home of Jesus Christ, not the scene of a disaster," he called out over a loudspeaker. "Life is not a disaster. Life is joy! You don't have food? Nourish yourself with the Lord. You don't have water? Drink in the spirit."

"Here we start every day with what I call my 'cup of hot coffee service,' " he said before the Sunday prayers. "We don't have the real beverage, of course. This is a prayer to wake us up and fortify us as we look ahead and think, 'What, oh what, next?'"

He paused, wrinkling his nose at the wafting odor of human waste, and added: "A church in a bathroom, that's what we are. For the moment."

Now, that's what I call faith! Faith and hope in the midst of disaster. Surely that's the Good News. If we find ourselves faint of heart, and we all do now and then, we do well to remember such stories of transforming, transformative, faith. Such stories belong not only to ancient saints and martyrs. Such stories of faith emerge in our midst every day.

Some of us from St John's went to First Baptist on Centre Street last Sunday afternoon to help them celebrate the opening of their rebuilt space. It was a lovely occasion, well attended, with splendid music and great gratitude expressed by members and leaders of the congregation. When the time came for the offering, a young man got up to speak. He said that he had joined First Baptist after the fire, and was inspired by the faith and commitment of the small congregation. He said that while they have not yet rebuilt their sanctuary, they realized when the offices and social hall were complete, how blessed they were. "It would have been enough. It would have been more than enough," he said. "And so we are taking up our offering today for the people of Haiti." I'm sure we all dug a bit deeper in our pockets after hearing that!

The theme of all this, and the good news, is gratitude. The amazing, really incredible, capacity of the Haitians quoted here to give thanks in the midst of unimaginable catastrophe and destruction. The gratitude of the people of First Baptist, Jamaica Plain, for the many blessings that have arisen from the ashes of their ruined building. And then, their recognition that gratitude should, indeed must for those of us who follow Jesus, gratitude must inspire action, must inspire not only generosity but also a commitment to justice.

Indeed, from most of us, that's where our commitment to justice, to our common work for the bringing about of God's dominion, starts. In the recognition of our privilege, our understanding that we are blessed not through our own efforts or our own merits, but by the grace of God. And if we are so blessed, how then can we not work for the transformation of the world, until God's blessings rain down in equal measure on all God's children?

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Alleluia! Amen

