

## GOD IN THE RUBBLE

A Sermon for the Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Year C, January 17, 2010

I think we were all shaken this week by the news about the earthquake in Haiti. I went to the internet and looked at photographs of Port-au-Prince in ruins. I saw horrifying pictures of collapsed buildings, devastated neighborhoods, people in shock, bodies lying crushed under fallen houses. Victims helping victims—trying to free those who were trapped, carrying the injured on stretchers, keeping watch over the bodies of loved ones or of strangers.

The scale of the horror is staggering. Have thousands been killed? Tens of thousands? Perhaps even a hundred thousand? In a country that sets the standard for poverty, with a rotten infrastructure now completely broken, the death toll is bound to grow in the weeks and months ahead. This is mind-boggling. And heart-boggling.

On the internet, I scrolled through dozens of photos; then down to where people were posting their comments on the photos. Most messages were brief, expressing great sorrow, praying for the victims, mourning, wondering what they could do. Before long I ran into comments about God, then conversations about God, and serious arguments about God. Some asked where God was. How God could let it happen. Others said that was a stupid question. One came to the rescue of God by saying, “If it weren’t for God, there wouldn’t be survivors,” as if that were sufficient comfort.

I read the comments about God with professional interest. Critically. Sadly, the comments that made me cringe were not those made by people who do not believe in God. I could sympathize with their attitude. It was not God’s detractors but God’s defenders whose comments bothered me.

What *can* we say, anyway? Or do we just blindly repeat the Creed? Shall we wait and see if there are some miraculous rescues this week, and attribute *them* to God’s hand? Will that make us feel good? Do we allow that this carnage was the will of God, that he at least *allowed* it to happen? Do we suggest that God will make something really nice come out of this? Or that the people of Haiti might have had it coming—as punishment for something some ancestors supposedly did? Or do we cast a blind eye on the whole thing, while we blindly repeat the Creed.

God is in big trouble, if those are the best answers we can come up with!

What *can* we say? Especially today, when the Gospel for today is a light-hearted story about Jesus and his friends drinking at a wedding!

Speaking of which, let’s think about that Gospel for a minute. Then we’ll return to the question of where God is, in the rubble of Haiti.

The story about the wedding at Cana is neither about marriage nor about wine. Both the wedding and what happened at that wedding are vehicles for a message about Jesus.

The story occurs at the beginning of the Gospel of John. You notice that it says this was the first of the signs Jesus did, and revealed his glory—and his disciples believed in him.

On one level, it is just a story about something marvelous Jesus did. He supplied his friends' need, he demonstrated generosity and power, people learned that it was good to do what he said, and so on.

But on another level, the story operates symbolically by placing Jesus at an event, a wedding, that marks the turning of the generations. Young people replace old people, don't they! (Good thing, because we are worn out!) And at that turning point in the world, in society, there is joy! Except in this case, in *this* world, ominously, the joy is just not there. This is symbolized by the wine running out, as Mary tells Jesus. You could also use the image of a record player slowing down, then stopping, in the middle of a piece of music.

But Mary, as a model of faith, looks to Jesus to bring joy back to the party. He surprises them by producing—from mere water, related to the rituals of the past—a better wine even than what they were drinking before they ran out!

That happens time after time, in the gospel of John. Jesus produces something new in people. He gives a new lease on life to people who are at the end of their rope. He brings into their lives, into the world, something new and exciting and good, something better than what they had before.

He calls it life, and a lot of good things come with it. Life, Jesus teaches, comes from knowing the Father. Knowing that *you* have come from God, that *you* belong to God, that *you* are going to God. Knowing that you have this gift of being a child of God, by virtue of accepting it from Jesus. That life, John the evangelist tells us, is "the light of all people."

It is different from the life we had when we didn't know we belonged to God. This life is ours by being born again from above, by the work of the Holy Spirit. It is nourished in us as we eat the bread he gives us. And when we have this life, we bear much fruit, fruit that gives glory to God as we love one another, serve one another, wash one another's feet, bear one another's burden.

And not just as far as the nearest border. John's gospel makes clear that Jesus came to draw all God's sheep into one flock, with one shepherd. One for all, all for one. One vine, one house, one people.

As the gospel of John proceeds, we learn what it means to see God in the world in a new way because we have the light of Christ. The greatest sign of all, it turns out, what makes it most clear, is that Jesus gets lifted up on the cross for our salvation.

That is a riddle, because you think the greatest sign is going to be when Jesus holds up a falling building to keep it from falling on somebody, kind of like Superman would, but instead what happens is that Jesus himself gets crushed. What kind of a sign is that?

Well, if the main sign in John had been Jesus holding the Roman Army at bay, or leaping a tall building at a single bound, then I would be writing a blog, too, that asked "Where is God in Haiti?" and concluding that God was AWOL.

But because the clearest sign we have about where to see God in the world is a man on a cross, I can see God in Haiti. He is still suffering, still seeking to redeem his people, still asking us to

come and help him. God agonizes over the fact that you and I didn't care a whit about Port-au-Prince until all fell down, and now we care.

But God still wants us, even if we are a little narrow in our concerns at times. God still wants, of all people, you and me to be his children, to enjoy his good will and to share it with others near and far. Even if we have fallen down on the job, when it comes to loving one another, it is never too late in the book for us to be redeemed ourselves, and to become strong for God in our service of others.

The most peculiar thing about the discussion on the internet about God and Haiti was that although many of the writers identified themselves as Christians, Jesus Christ did not figure in to their interpretations of what was going on. They were still thinking and talking as if he had never been born. It was all "God" this and "God" that. Didn't they get the memo?

I enjoy being a minister and wearing a clerical collar and preaching the Gospel, but if the Good News is that we didn't deserve an earthquake and somebody else did, etc., I had better start looking for a different job. Because I don't buy that.

If you want to know why the earthquake happened, ask a geologist. If you want to know where God was meanwhile, listen to Christ. Be prepared for him to ask where you are when your neighbor suffers. Allow him to draw you to himself, into his mission to give life back to this world, to replenish our love and our joy. Amen.

