



Sermon Preached by Greg Jones
"God is on the Ground in Haiti"
January 17, 2010
Psalm 46:1-7

The images coming out of Haiti are heartbreaking. People covered with concrete dust wander the streets because their homes have been destroyed. Others wearing bandanas and surgical masks carry a lifeless body. We view the landscape of collapsed buildings – some resemble a stack of grey pancakes, others lean at odd angles as if a giant has shoved them over from one side. We see people sitting under bed sheets in public parks waiting for water, food and a permanent shelter. The overhead view from a helicopter resembles a city that has been bombed.

In Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, the government was already fragile. Now we hear the numbing news: the Ministry of Finance building, destroyed; the Ministry of Transportation building, crumbled; the Ministry of Justice building, rubble; the Presidential Palace, collapsed.

Early in my ministry, I chaired a task force for the Kentucky Council of Churches designed to meet the needs of Haitian boat people who were being held in a detention center a few miles from our church. I went to Haiti during the dictatorship of Jean-Claude Duvalier, better known as Baby Doc, to learn more about the country and why people risked their lives in rickety wooden boats. I visited the Presbyterian mission workers who ran Holy Cross Hospital in Leogane, 20 miles from Port-au-Prince. At that time, it was the only hospital serving 100,000 people. Two days ago I learned that it was destroyed by this earthquake.

Yet what truly pierces my heart is the sight of dead bodies everywhere - on sidewalks, in the streets, outside the morgue and in makeshift medical stations. Especially heart-wrenching are the scenes of relatives searching the stacks of corpses as they hunt for their missing loved ones.

It is agonizing to watch, so when we have seen and heard more than we can bear, we can turn off the television; we walk away from the Internet. We can fix a cup of coffee or pour a glass of water and pull a snack out of the refrigerator. We can focus our thoughts on more pleasant subjects because we are sheltered from the moans and the heat and the putrid smell.

The people of Haiti have no such luxury. They must continue to live the nightmare, unable to escape the chaos, the sorrow and the fear.

Tragedies of this magnitude are unsettling and can strike a blow to our faith. They can alter our view of God and the world, especially if we believe that God controls every event. If we believe God pulls all the strings, then this earthquake becomes an act of God and we must

question why God would engineer such a horrific act. In Haiti, the question takes on even greater force: Why would God inflict more suffering on some of the poorest people on the planet?

Apparently televangelist, Pat Robertson pictures God as creating earthquakes to mete out punishment. He made the outrageous claim that this one was divine retribution. Robertson claimed, that years ago, the people of Haiti made a pact with the devil when they revolted against the French who occupied their land. Shocked that even by Robertson's standards this sounded deranged, the media quizzed some fellow evangelicals about his claim. They mumbled excuses, saying he may have misspoken. We could ignore the statement as one of ignorance, but Robertson is not dumb. His words are mean-spirited and designed to play well with racists

Interestingly, in the Gospel of Luke there is a passage that deals with a similar circumstance. During the lifetime of Jesus, a tower in Galilee collapsed and a number of people were killed. Apparently some people believed that it was no accident and those crushed by the tower were receiving divine punishment. Jesus said, 'Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?' Jesus immediately answers his own question, saying, "No, I tell you." Jesus does not provide a reason for the tower toppling, but he makes it clear that these people did not perish because they had it coming to them. Jesus taught that God is a loving parent who wants our lives to be rich and joyful, not a harsh judge eager to condemn and punish.

To understand the baffling puzzle of suffering in a world created by a good God, people offer various explanations. Robertson chooses the divine wrath theory which I find appalling. Not only does it ignore what Jesus taught us about God being merciful, it is blind to numerous examples of wretched people who live easy lives and virtuous people who suffer.

Some rationalize disasters by arguing that it is a way God teaches us lessons. They might say, "Perhaps God is showing us the dangers of faulty construction or the need to be better prepared for disasters." However, God could surely teach us such lessons with far fewer deaths, not to mention the fact that the lesson is completely lost on the tens of thousands who perished.

Others explain tragedies by claiming that what is bad today paves the way to something better tomorrow. I believe that God is working to bring good out of this calamity, but I do not believe that God caused widespread death and suffering in order to bring about something good.

Many people explain tragedies by stating that there is simply no suitable answer. Suffering is a mystery. This is what I was taught in seminary and what I believed for a number of years. I suspect it is what most pastors in mainline denominations believe. Today I think differently. My answer may not square with yours, but each of us must find answers we can live with.

As I stated following the tsunami in the Indian Ocean, it is vital for me to distinguish between God being the *only* power in the universe and God being the *supreme* power in the universe. If God is the only power, then freedom is an illusion and we live in a closed universe. Surely freedom exists. For humans, this means that we have the power to enhance life or degrade it. Freedom brings with it countless risks, but it also gives life meaning and vitality.

If God does not control human behavior, it is not difficult to imagine that God does not exercise strict control over all of the other elements of the universe. God is the supreme power, but God does not control everything that God creates.

As I have pointed out before, the opening words of Genesis can be translated, "When God *began* to create the heavens and the earth..." This is the notion that God did not create

everything once upon a time, but rather God is continually creating. The cosmos is not complete; God is continually bringing order out of chaos.

Contemporary scientists have helped us understand that we do not live in a static universe of fixed objects. We live in a dynamic universe that is constantly in flux. The forces that make life possible – wind, water, gravity, a molten core in the earth, shifting tectonic plates – sometimes create disasters. Perhaps God is still bringing order out of chaos and one day these forces will no longer cause catastrophes. Or perhaps earthquakes, hurricanes and tornadoes are byproducts of these life-creating forces and it can be no other way. Historian Will Durant put it like this: “Civilization exists by geological consent, subject to change without notice.”¹

Last Tuesday, when the earth shook in Haiti and the buildings began to topple, bringing widespread death and sorrow, I do not believe it had anything to do with God’s anger or God’s absence. I believe the suffering struck deeply in the heart of God; and the continuing misery causes God great anguish. In his crucifixion, Christ did not reveal God as an all-powerful super-father who fixes everything, but rather as a mighty loving parent who is by our side through the darkest valleys we must walk. As the Apostle Paul wrote, “Neither life, nor death...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God.”

For centuries, people of faith have turned to Psalm 46 when they were in the midst of a disaster. The first two verses boldly claim: “God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake. I have never been in a severe earthquake, but it must be a harrowing experience to have the earth shaking violently under your feet, buildings collapsing around you and no way to escape it.

It will require extraordinary determination to survive this catastrophic disaster. We pray that the Haitian people will find in God the resources to endure. God can give people courage to withstand tragedy. God can give people strength to persevere when they feel like curling up and dying. God can give people hope that help is on the way and a new day will bring unseen possibilities.

As the buildings collapsed, taking their victims, God was there. God was wrapping loving arms around them. God is there with those who continue to perish. God is with the relief workers who are bringing water, food and medical supplies. And God is calling each of us to do what we can to help the survivors.

For people of faith, this tragedy should remind us that we are all God’s children, and God calls us to care for those who are hurting. We read in the First Letter of John: “How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help? Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.” (1 John 3:17-18)

Living in a nation where we expect the government or the military or some authority to tackle our problems, I marvel at how the residents of Haiti who survived the earthquake quickly took responsibility for the rescue effort themselves. Some cleared debris from the streets; others began searching for trapped survivors. Pierre Constant, a 24 year-old who worked at the Transportation Ministry building, showed up at the collapsed structure wearing a motorcycle helmet and carrying a tire jack and began digging through the rubble to see if any of his co-workers who had been inside were still alive.² Well, we may not be in a position to pick up a tire jack and start digging. But we can pick up a check book and start writing.

Ironically, only two weeks ago, *The New York Times* carried an article about the areas struck by the tsunami in the Indian Ocean five years ago. It catalogued the vast improvements in housing and infrastructure that have resulted from the outpouring of gifts from around the world.

Accompanied by prayer, sending money is the most important thing we can do. Money makes a difference.

Although Haitians are poor and desperate, they are a gritty people who have withstood tremendous suffering many times. They have survived enslavement, they have endured colonial oppression, they have outlasted the dictatorships of both Papa and Baby Doc, they have withstood hurricanes and they will not be defeated by this earthquake. However, to insure that they will once more bend, but not break, we must give them the resources they need to rebuild.

The Old Testament prophets warned that God judges nations by the way they treat the poor. Jesus stood in that same tradition and went a step further. He said that whenever we give food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked, it is as if we are ministering directly to him. As we make our contributions, may we envision the hands of Christ accepting our gifts.

NOTES

1. Deborah Blum, "Civilization on a Fault Line," in *The New York Times*, January 15, 2010.
2. Simon Romero, "Morgue Becomes Mountain of Anguish," in *The New York Times*, January 15, 2010.