

January 17, 2010

This is the season of light – Epiphany – but we have had a very dark week watching the events unfold in Haiti following their earthquake on January 12<sup>th</sup>. On a morning when we feel despair over the dead and the dying, we are told about the happy miracle of new wine. And as we listen to stories of death and the sad need to bury thousands of bodies, John tells us a story about a joyful wedding. There is overwhelming tragedy in Haiti, and it doesn't feel like we are in much of a mood to talk about happy occasions of weddings and miracles. Or, maybe this is just what we need to hear. Maybe it is luck that we were assigned these readings today.

Actually, when Isaiah speaks in the reading today about the situation he faces in Jerusalem, it may not be so far from what we have been seeing and hearing on the news this week. Isaiah could just as well have been overlooking the city of Port au Prince, as the city of Jerusalem when he says that **“he will not keep silent or rest until the vindication of the city shines out like the dawn.”** Isaiah is looking at the ruined city of Jerusalem to which a few hardy souls, the righteous remnant, have returned from exile. The place looks forsaken and desolate, Isaiah writes. He was the man on the ground in Jerusalem.

The people of Haiti feel forsaken too. Through the miracle of modern communication techniques we are able to feel as though we are right there with the suffering people. The news reporters on the ground show us the misery, the hunger, and the pain on the faces of the Haitian men, women and children. We have seen on TV (or on the Internet), pictures of supplies piling up at the airport. We have felt frustrated along with the Haitian people that it has taken so long for the food and water and medical supplies to be distributed.

As has never been so in the past, reporters on the ground in Port au Prince give us all a front row seat to the suffering in Haiti.

But Isaiah, our man on the ground in Jerusalem, is not a reporter. As he looks out over the ruined city of Jerusalem he sees something different than do the eyes and cameras of news reporters. Isaiah is a prophet of God. And so his words come from God. He tells the people of the promises that God has made them; promises that a time will come when they will not be known as Forsaken and Desolate. **“But instead you shall be called ‘My Delight is in Her’.”** Isaiah assures the people that The Lord loves them and will not leave them comfortless. Isaiah does not tell the people that they have brought this misery on themselves because of sinfulness. Some have suggested that is the case in Haiti. Why do we have a tendency to blame the victim? We want there to be a reason why this happened. We want to find order in the chaos.

The events of this week have brought us face to face with the problem of evil.... **again**. This conundrum always rears its ugly head in times of great tragedy. If God loves and comforts us then why do these things happen? If God is Good how can God allow all this death and destruction? We ask this over and over again, especially when the tragedy comes close to home, and the answers never seem to be clear. We fear that God is more interested in being all mighty than all loving. We may think that we are being punished for some sin that we don't understand. Why else would these things keep happening? It has always been human nature to think that disaster, drought and war is God's punishment for our disobedience and sinfulness. God knows, we are still hearing that explanation this week from some.

In the Book of Job, that fallacy is explored and put into story form. Job's friends quizzed him closely when his family was killed, and he became ill. Following the traditional belief that God dictates every occurrence they said to Job, “What did you do to deserve this, Job. You must have done something!” They could not fathom that there might be a disaster that God did not

personally orchestrate. Job, we discover, did not do anything wrong. God was not punishing him. Bad things just happen.

The problem of evil is simply stated as this: Either God is all Powerful, or God is all Good. He cannot be both at the same time as an earthquake demonstrates. **Either** God is all powerful and so, sometimes God makes bad things (or lets bad things) happen to poor defenseless and innocent people. The all powerful God has a bigger plan than we can understand, and we just have to accept it. **Or**, God is all good, loves us and comforts us, but cannot stop the earthquake or flood or evil person who bombs a building. The argument logically points to the conclusion that it must be one or the other.

I, for one, am not willing to believe, based on God's words and our experience, that God lets people suffer and die because God has bigger fish to fry. God has said that he needs each one of us to be Christ in the world. Jesus came to tell us through his life and the Spirit, that each of us is a blessing to another. Jesus makes the point over and over again in his ministry that sinners, the poor, the outcasts, the sick, and even the children...everyone...is a blessing of God for someone else.

Paul says so too... today! Paul says we each have important gifts to bring to each other. Just like the Magi brought valuable gifts to the baby Jesus, each one different and each one highly prized, we have gifts to offer each other as part of our lives together in faith. Here's a point that we don't often hear that Paul makes in this passage today. He talks to the people of Corinth and reminds them that they used to be led astray by having faith in little carved idols which do not speak. But, he says, that since the coming of Jesus, who brought us God's Holy Spirit, we now can hear the voice of Christ is what we say to each other through the Holy Spirit.

One of the most helpful books I have read about dealing with tragedy and trying to understand how a loving God could allow such things to happen is Rabbi Kushner's classic "When Bad

Things Happen to Good People”. To boil down to its essence, what the Rabbi says is that Goodness is what God is all about. It is God who is near us when we face the most difficult times of our lives, if we allow God to be near. The Rabbi says that if he has to choose between believing that God is all powerful or that God is all Good, he will choose Good because he has been overwhelmed by God’s goodness. And this man has seen tragedy. His young son was accidentally killed, but despite this awful experience, he knows that God is Good. That is a miracle – to not become cold, cynical and despairing in the face of losing one’s own child.

And this brings us to the miracle at the wedding at Cana. The miracles in the Gospels give us all sorts of trouble because we are intelligent beings, who do not just blindly have faith in something because someone has told us to. But we are never asked to follow Jesus blindly. John’s Gospel is the one that emphasizes light. “The light shined in the darkness and the darkness could not overcome it.

The healing miracles, we say, are so much easier to understand. We have, many of us, experienced miracles of healing personally or in someone we love, and so we can understand that sometimes, miraculously, people are healed from their illnesses. But this one, water into wine? How can that be helpful? The people of Haiti right now don’t need wine, they just need water. That would be miracle enough. Let me suggest a way through this miracle which can help us find it illuminating.

Rather than trying to compare the events of the wedding story with what you know about real life, try to enter into the miracle story by identifying with the emotions and the feelings that the events raise in us. First we are told that Jesus is just another guest at the wedding along with his mother. If we were there, we could just sit down and have a conversation with him. Jesus is not aloof, but a regular person. And then the wine runs out. In a wedding feast in the first century this is a big deal. Wedding feasts go on for three days, and having enough food and wine is important. The steward, the person who is charged with making sure that this does not happen, would have been in a state of panic. Jesus does not make the wine run out

or stop it from happening. It is not his job. He is a guest. Things happen. The bride and groom are probably very disappointed and perhaps angry with the steward. We aren't told any of this, but that is how it would happen at an important party, a marriage feast, in our day too. And so, the wine runs out... for Jesus too. He experiences this disappointment right along with us, side by side. Are you seeing a parallel here with the events of the day?

But then, Jesus is asked by his mother, and he makes the miracle come to pass. We don't know how it happens. We are not expected to understand it, or to figure it out. Water in jars turns to wine, the wedding is provided with not only MORE wine but with **the best wine**. After we experience disappointment, anger, loss, and whatever else can happen to us in this human life, we will experience through Jesus the miracle of abundance. The story is an allegory for what God can do, and has done in our lives.

God does not prevent disasters. Earthquakes happen. Illness happens. Jobs are lost. Relationships come to an end. But God stands by us in this loss, and then when we least expect it, God gives us a new life, in abundance. Our job is to not just walk out of the party when things get bad, slamming the door behind us. If we do that, we will never see that the miracle has happened.

They are already experiencing small miracles in Haiti this week. Some lucky ones have been pulled out of the rubble alive. I use the word "luck" on purpose because we do not understand how or why certain people live and how the miracle happens. We cannot say that the survivors are blessed, because then what of those poor innocents who died? Would we dare to say that they just weren't blessed enough. NO! Miracle is as good a word as any to use to describe those lives that have been saved.

Those reporters with their modern equipment have wrought a miracle too; they have let us see so clearly what the people need, and need right now, that we have miraculously pulled together and become compassionate. Just seeing Bill Clinton, George W. Bush and Barak

Obama working together to bring their resources to bear on this disaster is a small miracle in itself!

The thing is, because we have miracle and mystery in our lives, and because we do not understand our world or God completely, there is room for us to believe that God CAN be **both** all Powerful and all Good. No, it doesn't make sense logically. No, we do not have scientific evidence of the fact, but we have experienced God's powerful working in our lives. We have experienced God's goodness. And we have the prophet's words of promise to hang onto each day. Evil may seem to have won the day, but the miracle of abundant life is stronger...as long as we don't leave the party. We have to stick around to see the miracle when it happens.