

Epiphany 2C, Jan 17, 2009

John 2:1-11

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Where is God? In the Rubble of Haiti.

Today is the second Sunday of Epiphany. Christmas has come and gone. The Wiseman have visited and left their gifts. Last Sunday we celebrated the baptism of Jesus and the beginning of his ministry. To these Epiphany events, the long tradition of the church adds celebration of the first sign performed by Jesus as recorded by John.

Epiphany is the season of light, of sudden revelation and insight. John's account of Jesus turning water into wine is one of those sudden bursts of understanding that falls upon the disciples and by the time the story is finished their eyes have been opened. They begin to see that this man is much different from the other traveling preachers that roam the countryside of the first century. John says the disciples "believed in him". We don't know the exact nature of their belief but we do know that Jesus was the object of that belief and that creates all kinds of possibilities.

It's a fun text to preach on. John is filled with almost unlimited layers of meaning. Jesus isn't a magician or a vending machine that spits out your favorite beverage if you put in the right change. Jesus quietly and subtly finds a way for the wedding feast to continue. Jesus finds a way to avoid embarrassment and dishonor for the host, who should never have run out of wine in the first place. Wedding celebrations usually lasted for a week or so. Running out of wine would have sent all the guests home early and had the town talking for years.

And when Jesus gets busy he doesn't do things half way. Jesus provides more than a hundred gallons of wine and it is of the very best quality! It is certainly not what people expect and Jesus takes none of the credit. If this is a picture of who God is and what God does, it can make a preacher's job fun. God is extravagant. God is ready to meet our needs. God takes what is old (the Jewish jars of religious purification) and transforms them with new meaning and purpose. There are tie-ins to Holy Communion all over the place.

But in the middle of this week, the world changed. A country has been left in ruins and 100,000 people are feared dead with thousands more injured and homeless. The earthquake that struck Haiti came without warning, without reason, without regard to age or status. Thankfully, it appears that most, if not all, the children associated with the Haitian Timoun Foundation are alive. But some are injured and many of the buildings are damaged or destroyed. One of those buildings, the St. Joseph home for boys, collapsed and took the life of one of my friends, a young man named Ben Larson who was in his Senior year at Wartburg seminary. He was there on a January term project with other students and now his young wife of two years is a widow. The world has lost an amazing man of God.

But as much as I grieve for him and as many tears as I shed for his widow and his family, there are gallons more tears shed for all those other thousands upon thousands of lives that ended before their time in a place that has already experienced so much suffering and violence. In the end I am left numb, wondering with the whole world, "Why?" Why did such a thing have to happen here? Why did so many have to lose their lives and their homes and their hope?

The text for today gives me no answer to that question. I don't think any text gives us a satisfactory answer to that kind of question. The responses from some people this week have proven once again that every time we try to formulate those answers, we end up looking like idiots (at our best) or lying about the nature of God (at our worse). I usually avoid calling people out from the pulpit but this week demands it. This week Pat Robertson, a supposedly Christian television personality, lied about the nature of God. He said the Haitian people had made a pact with the devil in order to overthrow their French oppressors during the slave revolt that made Haiti an independent country. The implication is the Haitian people brought this kind of destruction upon themselves while God stood by watching with approval. May there be mercy for any person who makes such gross distortions of God's nature and such callus judgments against an entire nation.

Instead of asking "why" we would be better served by asking "where?" Where is God in such horrific scenes of death and destruction? If Mr. Robertson would actually focus on the "Christ" part of Christian, perhaps he would remember that the God we worship is the God who dies on the cross. In the gospel of John, the "glory" that Jesus reveals to the world is not fully accomplished until he is hanging wounded and bleeding and dying on a cross. When Jesus tells his mother that his "hour" has not yet come, it is a reference to this final time of solidarity with the human condition as the one who gives his very life in an act of love.

The situation in Haiti is certainly not the first, nor will it be the last, instance of widespread human suffering. The Christian response to "Where is God?" can be best answered by the epiphany of Jesus Christ on the cross. **God is with us in our suffering.** God feels the pain of a parent who loses a child. God feels the pain of every person who grieves the death of someone they love. God has not deserted Haiti. The God is more fully present there now than perhaps at any other time.

This way of speaking about God is mysterious and difficult to comprehend. It's not logical or rational but then neither is believing the man hanging on a Roman cross is the savior of the world. By our own effort we cannot accept this, but God promises to respond to our pleas for help. God is moved by our prayers and our cries, even if the only thing we can say is, "Why Lord?" Why? Why? Why?

God holds and comforts us while we ask those questions. I think it is best described in these words from Pastor Ryan Stout:

All I know is that God is with us in all of this, and He has promised that such tragedies, such horrors, such pain are *not* His will, and shall *never* have the final say. God has *married Himself to us* in Jesus Christ, and Jesus never abandons His bride! At this Table, in bread and in wine, the promises stand secure—and God does not break promises! He didn't want this, but He will see us through it.

And when our tears begin to dry, our hearts are set on fire to respond. Instead of blaming people for their own misery, we join with them in their pain and struggle. God moves us to act with an outpouring of prayer, of support, of assistance of any and every kind. Through our hands, and the hands of many, many others, God's work and will is done. Let us be about the business of filling jars with water -Jars that are transformed by God's creative power to bring life and healing and hope to hurting and grieving people. That's the Epiphany of God the world is waiting for. Amen.