

Matthew 14:13-21
Isaiah 58:6-10

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Fourth Sunday in Ordinary Time
January 31, 2010

THE HANDS OF GOD: THE HAITI TRAGEDY

If you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted,
then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be as the noonday. *Isaiah 58:10*

Jesus said to them, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat." *Mathew 14:16*

The images are seared in memory. Men, women and children sitting cross-legged in debris-littered streets. People staring from pain scarred faces at a pile of rubble where loved ones are entombed, thousands of grasping hands reaching for water or the hope of food. A father smoothing over his young son's hastily built grave, while writing the child's name in an oval of wet cement. A child clutching a stuffed animal at the airport, still traumatized and sobbing uncontrollably. Before and after shots of once rustic villages that now resemble the after effect of a nuclear bomb. Bodies tumbled like Auschwitz corpses into mass graves, and rescue workers with faces masked against the all pervasive stench of death. And across the world a thousand million blank, helpless faces staring over and over at nature's carnage.

The single most active moral question in the face of tragedy, especially from people of faith is "Why?" It is not a question that an atheist readily asks. Yet atheists come up with the right answer more easily than people of faith: earthquakes happen—period!

A problem for us Christians is that while we can assign blame or causality in terms of moral evil—tragic consequences that are the outcome of human choice—we cannot as easily assign causality to natural events. So we press beyond the event to the designer, the intentions of the creator, and the question becomes: "Why did God allow this?" And it's at this point that we often come up with a range of very thin, very unsatisfying, very suspect scenarios: God is punishing us (all of us, or just some of us?), and how does one tell the difference? God sends tragedy to make us stronger, periodic afflictions coming like Spring training that builds resistance to adversity, character and teamwork; or, God is angry at the world and vents once in a while. The trouble with all such "answers" is that they're ultimately far more a reflection our own human nature projected on God than they are God's nature. Besides, they are just plain wrong.

So why did this tragedy happen?

An earthquake happens because a sudden, massive upheaval (or subduction) of the earth's outer layer displaces earth's crust in a series of rippling folds and fissures. The irony is that were it not for these monumental forces, the earth itself would be a cold, barren and lifeless waste. And none of us would be here. For the most part, earth's surface is benign and wonderfully providential, giving us food and the materials that contribute to our communities and cities from its bucolic splendor. But earthquakes, volcanoes and tsunamis are among the fine print in our rental contract. Were God to intervene and stop nature's indigestive upheavals, nature would stall, the earth freeze over and all meaningful life would vanish. Why, then, doesn't God just make a perfect habitation where no malarial carrier bites, no infant is snatched from the cradle in the still of night, and earth does not rupture at the seams causing untold havoc. Well, God has. We call it heaven, but in the grace of free will it is reserved for those who choose to be there and seek to live a life after the image of God in Christ, choosing moral goodness over self serving evil. These last two Saturdays we said farewell to two such faithful servants, Vernon Lunger and Dr. Ralph Cantafio, who chose that option long before their passing.

“But. . . but . . .” I know, a string of questions, even angry challenges still linger. And the answers may not be satisfying, but they must be faced. One reason for the catastrophe is human complacency, such that while we build increasingly safe dwellings and infrastructures in earthquake prone regions like California or Japan, our economic systems don’t run to providing for them elsewhere. Nationalism and constructed boundaries divide the human family. Paul understood that Christ made no such distinction—“There is neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, in Christ Jesus,” he wrote. Haiti has long been embroiled in corruption that disinherits and disenfranchises its own people. The question becomes, if the world community contributes to building a better Haiti, can the Haitian government rise morally to sustain it. All of these are gospel questions that Jesus came to address. God has answered all these issues through the teachings of Jesus about how to live together as the worldwide family of God. But our faith, as other faiths, is still a long, long way from achieving a maturity that lives Jesus’ principles out. And this is a not unfair criticism that ant-religionists often level at us. God is not to blame here.

Then there’s the perennial question of suffering. To say that suffering has a purpose would be to say that it is part of an agenda, which implies a source. While natural phenomena caused the earthquake, and humans contributed to its effects by unsafe buildings, the question to ask is no longer “Why?” Suffering just *is*, as inadequate as that may sound—rather ask, “What do *we* do now?” There is only one answer, an answer that stops short of assigning blame (which takes us nowhere), but instead invites us on a path through it. That is, to take the ever extended hand of God, and move through the tragedy with those stricken.

In our texts this morning God points us not to supernatural intervention (all that would do is sidestep our responsibility to act compassionately. When God chastises Israel through the prophet Isaiah, it is because the people have yet to grasp that living faithfully has to impact the whole of life. When Jesus “feeds” the multitude it is not Jesus who provides the food or miracle. It is the people’s faithfulness in passing bread on from one to another. Recall last week how we said that the heart of a biblical passage is at its center. This feeding of the multitude in Mathew 14 is a perfect illustration. Look at the precise middle where the disciples complain that there is nothing to eat, and Jesus says “*You* give them something to eat.” And from the little that they imagine they have, all are fed from five loaves and two fish, and afterward twelve baskets full are left over. That’s a miracle, all right, but not from Jesus’ hand. Whenever calamity strikes, or threatens, God always sends us. We are here precisely for each other. If anything comes close to the meaning of life, that is surely it—in God’s name, for each other. And God will not desert us, just as God never deserts those in death who have sought to been faithful.

We are always the hands of God to the world. Indeed, it is true to say, God has no hands but ours.
Amen.