

“Our Christian Faith and Haiti”

AS YOU KNOW, just before 5:00 pm on Tuesday, January 12, a terrible 7.0 magnitude earthquake devastated Haiti, the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere.

In moments, as the ground shook violently, buildings and homes came crashing down, entombing the people inside them. Rubble littered the land and gray concrete dust filled the air choking streets and throats.

After that earthquake, aftershocks then came in large numbers, bringing down still more structures. It's now almost two weeks later, and those aftershocks are still coming.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, those aftershocks may continue for months or even years more. Unfortunately, the island of Hispaniola which Haiti is on, is caught between two of the Earth's great tectonic plates. And, those plates are “shearing the island, crushing it, grinding it,” making it susceptible to earthquakes.ⁱ

Tragically, at least 111,000 people have been killed so far, by that earthquake and its aftershocks. And, according to news reports, one of the most insidious things about it, is that even people rescued from the rubble, have sometimes died days later, because toxins built up in their crushed limbs, damaged their kidneys and remained in their bodies.

Thus, while crush injuries often appeared non-life threatening initially, they have sometimes become deadly.ⁱⁱ Can you imagine how cruel that must seem to families? One day they are celebrating the rescue of their loved one from the rubble. Then days later, quite unexpectedly, they are grieving their loved one's death.

As reported, at least 111,000 people have died so far. Can any of us here this morning, even begin to imagine the death of so many people in such a short period of time?

That earthquake seemingly killed people without “rhyme or reason.” People often survived or died, merely because of where they happened to be at the particular moment when the earth shook. For those inside a building, even the difference of a few inches in position, could have made the difference between their death or ultimate survival.

AS YOU WELL KNOW, the international community, including our nation's own government, religious groups, and charitable organizations, are now engaged in a massive relief effort to aid the survivors of that

disaster.

As noted now for the second Sunday in our worship bulletin, both our *United Church of Christ* and our church's Board of Christian Outreach have been responding to this disaster, and they've requested your help in that effort.

I've read that overall, 3 million people in Haiti have been directly affected by that earthquake. In addition to the enormous death toll, many have been injured, and/or lost their homes, and/or lost their means of subsistence. Many people are still considered missing. And many Haitian children have become orphans.

AS PEOPLE OF CHRISTIAN FAITH, we believe that God is good. We believe that God is loving and cares deeply about the well being of us humans. We believe those things and we witness to those beliefs in our churches--through our preaching, our hymn singing, and our prayers.

However, when great tragedies like the devastation in Haiti occur, we find that our faith is challenged. For, despite our belief in God's goodness, we find that deep questions confront us.

For example, since the 12th of January, many Christians have been asking questions like these, namely:

- Where was God when this tragedy in Haiti took place?
- And, why didn't God intervene to save all those Haitian lives.
- Or, why didn't God at least give those people in Haiti some advance warning, so they could step out of their buildings and have a better chance of surviving that earthquake?

Those are very important questions. But, they're very difficult to answer. In fact, Christian theologians have struggled with questions like that through the centuries. Theologians have sometimes used the term "theodicy" which means "the justification of God" to describe their struggle with such questions.

Simply put, the underlying concern of such questions is this: If God is as good, as loving, and as powerful as our Christian faith teaches, then how is it possible, that there is so much evil and suffering in our world? How is it possible?

I think virtually all Christians struggle with this concern, at one time or another in their lives, and particularly when a loved one, or they themselves, are caused to suffer deeply.

In struggling with this age-old concern, many Christians eventually make their peace with it. They come to some measure of understanding regarding it.

YET, THERE ARE OTHERS who never find such peace. Deeply hurt by some loss in their life, such questions about human suffering and God's goodness continue to fester in their spirits, like an open wound. And, all too often, the response of such hurt persons, is to turn away bitterly from God and from God's church.

Over the years of my ministry, I have sometimes encountered people, who've been unable to "turn the corner" on this troublesome concern. Because of their personal loss, they find it extremely difficult to believe, that God really is good and loving.

My heart goes out to such people. For having lost a 20 year old brother myself, in a hit-and-run car accident, I think I have at least some inkling, of the pain and doubt such people experience.

Nonetheless, it is my prayer, that some day, such people will find healing for their spirits. And, that even in spite of their deep loss, they will eventually come to realize, how very much, our God really does love and care for them--and their loved ones.

IT SEEMS THAT CHRISTIANS WHO make peace with this age-old concern, tend to fall into one of two different groups.

In one group, there are Christians who believe that the suffering and evil in our world, are essentially a part of God's plan. Christians in this group believe, that God controls everything in our world. Thus, they see all evil as serving God's purpose--regardless of whether God creates the evil directly or God just permits the evil to happen.

In the other group, there are Christians who do not see God as being in control of every aspect of our world. Christians in this other group believe, that God created us humans with freedom and our universe with natural laws. They believe, that we humans and our universe, often do follow our respective courses, without divine intervention.

Christians in this second group believe, that as human beings exercise their God-given freedom, they sometimes make bad decisions, which bring harm to themselves and others. They also believe, that as the natural order follows the laws God created, that order sometimes gives rise to earthly disasters and dangers, which also harm people.

DESPITE CENTURIES of trying, I don't think anyone has been fully able, to resolve the concern of why there's so much evil and suffering in our world, when God is so good, loving, and powerful. The problem of theodicy continues.

But here's something I've noticed. Christians in those two different groups, tend to fear very different things.

In the first Christian group, the great fear seems to be, that people will think that God is not all powerful and not completely in control of everything on earth.

In the second Christian group, the great fear seems to be: that people will misrepresent our loving God, by wrongly blaming our God, for the evil and suffering in our world.

My sense is that people in the second group, tend to be more comfortable with ambiguity. They maintain their Christian faith, in spite of their perception, that there are many “gray areas” in life, which are not readily explainable or attributable to God.

LET’S CONSIDER some of the thinking in those two groups, as it might be applied to Haiti’s terrible earthquake disaster. I’ll begin by considering that first group, which maintains that God controls everything in our world, and that evil and suffering usually serve some purpose of God.

CHRISTIANS in that first group, may well believe that Haiti’s earthquake, was sent by God--or at least permitted by God--in order to punish Haiti for human sin. They might wish to liken the death of Haiti’s 111,000 people, to the sudden, punitive death of all the first-born sons of Egypt, when God delivered the Hebrew people, from their Egyptian bondage so long ago.

As divine punishment for human sin, does God cause [or permit some other supernatural force to cause] the destruction, disease, and death of people? That certainly is not an article of my own personal faith. But, I think there are a number of Christians who believe that God does do that.

Consider, for example, Pat Robertson, the televangelist with the 700 Club. Robertson is a Protestant Fundamentalist. On national television, Robertson stated his view that Haiti’s devastating earthquake was ultimately the result of a pact which the people of Haiti made with the devil in the 18th century, to help them secure their freedom from France--which they finally did secure in 1803.

Robertson’s spokesperson has since said that Robertson didn’t really mean that the earthquake was the result of God’s wrath.ⁱⁱⁱ However, despite that disclaimer, it’s still the case, that Robertson was essentially blaming the victims for their earthquake. And, it’s still the case, that Robertson was suggesting that some kind of supernatural force was punishing Haiti for past sins, and apparently with God’s permission--or at least God’s unwillingness to interfere with such supernatural punishment.

Personally, I don't believe in any supernatural devil figure. And the danger for Christians who do, is that the stronger they assume such a devil figure is, the more they turn our Christian faith into a religion of two competing gods, instead of a monotheistic religion of one supreme God.

IN THE FIRST GROUP of Christians, some may believe that Haiti's earthquake was just one more instance of divine punishment for sin, in their ongoing countdown: to the return of Christ; to the cosmic battle of Armageddon; to the destruction of our planet Earth and humankind as we know it; and to their own sudden rapture into God's blissful heaven, beyond all such earthly concerns.

For some Christians, such an apocalyptic view of Haiti's earthquake, may be very appealing, particularly if they've already given up all hope on our world, and they don't care very much, about the well-being of their fellow human beings, whom they don't expect will be raptured. But, once again, this is not a belief I can embrace.

In that first group, some Christians may believe that this earthquake was actually created by God in order: to test people, to turn people to God, or to improve people's characters.

--For example, some Christians believe, that God "entrusts" certain people with suffering, disease, or the loss of their loved ones, in order to test the depth of their personal faith.

--Some Christians believe that God sends pain, in order to break people of their selfishness and self-assurance, so they will turn in humility to worship and serve God more fully.

--Some Christians believe that God sends suffering, in order to perfect our personal characters and souls. In that view, each of us humans is like a block of wood, which God, the divine woodcarver, is chiseling into shape. All our pain then, is thought to be God-sent, or God permitted, for our own perfection and good.

I won't take the time here, to comment on each those three different views. But, I will say this: Once again, those are not views which I can embrace, as part of my own Christian faith.

Also, I would have great difficulty applying any of those three views to the current Haiti disaster. For one thing, I keep thinking of all the young children in Haiti, who were suddenly turned into orphans.

Once can ask: did God send that earthquake [or permit it to happen] in order to test the faith of those children, to break their selfishness, or to perfect their personal characters--and all at the expense of their parents' lives? I, for one, cannot believe any of those things.

AS YOU'VE PROBABLY GUESSED, I'm a Christian whose views fall very much within the second group I've described. I am among those Christians who believe, that God created us humans with freedom, and our world with natural laws.

I also believe, that we humans and our world, very often follow their own respective courses, without them being completely overturned by divine intervention.

I believe that our world is, in many ways, a "good" place--as God originally created it. However, I also believe, that our world can be a very dangerous place.

As I've observed in life: even the most saintly Christian persons, can be struck by disease. Also, people are sometimes in the wrong place at the wrong time, such that they become innocent victims, of some natural evil--such as Haiti's death-dealing earthquake.

Also, I believe, that unconsciously or by intention, we humans are responsible, for creating a good deal of the evil in our world, which hurts other people, and even ourselves.

WHERE WAS GOD when God's son Jesus was being crucified? In my view, our loving God was agonizing with Jesus as he suffered. In fact, I believe that our compassionate God was the first to weep, when Jesus died on that cross, at the hands of human ignorance, selfishness, and cruelty.

In this month of January, with the observance of Epiphany not far behind us, we might also ask:

--where was God when the wise men visited Christ's cradle, and then all the babies up to age 2 in Bethlehem, were summarily slain--in King Herod's evil attempt, to rid the world, of God's infant son.
Where was God in that situation?

Once again: I believe God was suffering with those Bethlehem families, whose little ones fell victim to Herod's cruelty.

As a matter of personal faith, I believe our loving God cares deeply, for all of us. But not only that, I also believe that our God was at work in those Jerusalem and Bethlehem tragedies--just as God is at work in all earthly tragedies. I believe God was at work, to create or rescue something good out of the evil which had taken place.

And what good did God create? In the case of the Jerusalem tragedy, God raised Jesus from death. In the Bethlehem tragedy, God enabled Jesus to survive, so he could grow up, to teach our world about God's love, and become our world's savior.

ONE OF MY FAVORITE biblical passages is Romans 8:28 which was in our scripture reading this morning. In the *Revised Standard Version* translation, that passage from the Apostle Paul begins this way:
We know that in everything God works for good...

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And so, I believe it is. God may not always intervene against deadly natural forces or our human freedom to create evil. But wherever evil does occur, I believe that our God is busily at work, seeking to bring something good out of it.

My personal Christian faith, leads me to believe, that God doesn't create the evil or intend it. But once the evil has occurred, I think God often works: to deepen people's faith, to lessen their selfishness, and to strengthen and improve their inner being. God does those things, so people can better withstand evil, and so more good will be created in our world.

EVER SINCE THE HAITI EARTHQUAKE STRUCK, our news media have been filled with reports of the international aid effort which is currently going on. Certainly, there are joys, sorrows, and great frustrations regarding how that massive aid effort is processing.

But, despite all the logistical and other difficulties which that effort has encountered, I can't help but be deeply touched, by the massive display of human compassion in our own country and around our world, which has now been generated, to help those in Haiti. Hearts and pocket books have been thrown wide open. And, many have traveled to Haiti to use their skills to help others.

And, that's how I personally believe God often works. I see God working in the hearts of people and through their hands, to bring about something good, even in the midst of the worst disasters and the greatest suffering.

I DON'T CLAIM to have resolved, the age-old concern about God's love and earthly evil--which Christian theologians have long struggled over. But, I have come to a personal place of peace, regarding that question.

Thus, instead of dwelling on that question, I now tend to look beyond it. I now tend to look beyond it, to discern the good, that God is trying to bring about, in the aftermath of evil.

Also, I ask myself, if and how, I might play a role, in helping to bring about, that God-inspired good.

Those are my personal Christian beliefs. What are your beliefs about these matters?

ENDNOTES

i. Michael Blanpeid, associate coordinator for the USGS's Earthquake Hazards Program, quoted by Brandon Griggs in a January 14, 2010 news report entitled "Experts warned of Haiti earthquake risk" for CNN. <22 January 2010>
<http://www.cnn.com/2010/TECH/science/01/12/caribbean.earthquakes/index.html>

ii. Madison Park in a January 21, 2010 news report entitled "Crush injuries can be deceptively deadly" for CNN. <22 January 2010>
<http://www.cnn.com/2010/HEALTH/01/21/haiti.rhabdomyolysis.crush.injury/index.html>

iii. Jack Tapper in a news report entitled "Pat Robertson Blames Earthquake on Pact Haitians Made with Satan," ABC News, January 13, 2010 <19 January 2010>
<http://blogs.abcnews.com/politicalpunch/2010/01/pat-robertson-blames-earthquake-on-pact-haitians-made-with-satan.html>