

A NEW NAME

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

January 17, 2010

Scripture: Isaiah 62:1-5; Matthew 13:24-30

On Thursday morning *The New York Times* carried an op-ed piece by Pooja Bhatia, entitled *Haiti's Angry God*. In the editorial Ms. Bhatia who is on the ground in Port au Prince twittering dispatches and sending word from the front line said that on Tuesday night after the major quake, people were in the streets singing hymns like, "O Lord, keep me close to you," and "Forgive me, Jesus."

But Ms. Bhatia concluded, "If God exists, he's really got it in for Haiti," an observation to which I had a visceral reaction.

Pat Robertson, the television evangelist who blamed 9/11 on gays, abortion, and general decadence in New York, explained to his audience this week that Haiti's suffering is borne of a deal it had made with the devil during the French colonial days. And Keith Olbermann in a pique of rage implied that Robertson was the devil himself for saying such a thing.

There's no question that the devastation and misery that has befallen Haiti is mind numbing. And there isn't any soul with an ounce of human compassion who cannot empathize with the sadness of such a terrible disaster. Our own member Primerose Desroches, a native of Haiti worried for the safety of her mother and brother this week, until she received word that while their house had collapsed, her family is nonetheless safe and unharmed, staying with friends outside of Port au Prince. So many other worried relatives are dealing with a different outcome of their searches.

Echoes of the breakdown in communication that happened here in Manhattan on 9/11 come to mind, as relatives tried to call in following the quake and found cell lines dead and busy signals from overloaded telephone circuits.

We can remember as well the inhuman conditions in New Orleans at the Superdome following Hurricane Katrina, the lack of sanitation services, the inability to evacuate the injured, the inadequate medical attention that followed, the bodies left in the streets. It all came back this week in seeing the pictures of devastation in Haiti.

And only a few days ago we were celebrating Christmas, with a hopeful spirit and thoughts that perhaps we might be turning the corner on economic misfortune in this country. The New Year dawned with a positive note, and we began this fledgling decade of the teens expecting that things might be getting better, not worse.

So it's a shock to see the scenes of Port au Prince and the countryside of Haiti, and to read the Twitter messages that say, "Plaza Canape Vert Refugee Camp smells like human waste, creeping smell of death," or, "Every aftershock makes people cry and pray, no one can sleep."¹ "The streets are now the living rooms of the population."²

Whenever such tragedies occur; the Tsunami in the Indian Ocean of 2004, the earthquake of L'Aquila, Italy of last year, the destruction of Haiti this week, we ask fundamental questions about why such things happen, and where is God when innocent people suffer. Pat Robertson understands it all, and Pooja Bhatia wonders if God has it in for the Haitians. But neither has a faithful answer the way I see it. These are deep questions that have plagued humanity for time immemorial. And they drive us to our worst fears and our deepest hopes as well.

These questions about the nature and character of God were present in Israel in the time of Isaiah. Jerusalem lay in ruins, like Port au Prince, its homes sacked, its buildings fallen, its treasure looted, its sacred Temple destroyed.

Israel had been taken into captivity, the Babylonian Captivity, the cream of the crop, the best of Israel's leadership homeless and placed in servitude in a foreign land. Dispirited, ravaged, broken, embarrassed before its neighbors. The land lay barren and unproductive. Despair was in the air. They who felt that they had been married to God by virtue of the everlasting covenant now felt divorced from God and rejected. The laughing stock if not the pity of its neighbors, Israel's name had become synonymous with desolation and the forsaken.

Into this time of despair and lost hope, the prophet Isaiah spoke to Israel, words of encouragement and consolation. *Arise, shine, for your light has come...³ Lift up your eyes and look around, they all gather together, they come to you; your sons shall come from far away...your daughters shall be carried on their nurses arms.⁴*

You shall no longer be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called Hephzibah (My Delight is in Her) and your land Beulah (Married).⁵

Isaiah preaches to people who had lost hope, people despairing of God's care and concern, those made homeless by war's ravages and dispirited by the worst that can happen. Where does he get such hope, how does he come to such encouragement?

The questions that we raise about God's actions when all around us is despair, or where God is when the innocent suffer, are questions that take us deeper than we usually dive. They are more complicated than we may fully comprehend. And to some extent there is a certain hubris that gets us into trouble when we ponder these questions. And this is because we imagine God to be a perfect extension of us.

After all, we say, "If God were as good and kind and loving as we are, and if God really had good intentions toward us, God would do things our way, according to what we know is good." That is to say God would be like us only taken to the nth degree. The problem is that God is infinite in being and perfection, eternal, incomprehensible and most wise, boundless in mercy, love and grace, and were we to go as far as we could to the moral edge of the horizon and lean over to see what we can see from there, God would still be beyond our sight and located farther than our reach. "My thoughts are not your thoughts, and my ways are not your ways," God says.

There is a story of a Central European woman, who discovered that her horse was missing. Her neighbors said, "What a calamity. Your son cannot plow your fields without a horse." The woman responded, "Who knows whether it is a terrible thing or not."

Two days later the horse returned accompanied by a second horse. The neighbors rejoiced, "What a blessing," they said, "now you have two horses." Again the woman answered, "Who knows whether it's a blessing or not."

A few weeks later her son was riding the new horse, and it threw him, breaking his leg and crippling him. The neighbors were quick to offer their sympathy, "What a terrible thing, your son will always walk with a limp." And she replied, "Who knows if it is a terrible thing."

Not long afterward the king's soldiers came through conscripting men for service in a bloody war. When they came to the son and saw his limp, they did not take him. And the story goes on.

There is a sense in which none of us can fully comprehend the meaning of our life's events, not even if we stand on the shoulders of others to see as far as we can, for even then we are still earthbound and cannot see as far as God sees.

There is no question that the tragedy of recent days in Haiti is a situation of enormous human suffering that drives us deeply inside our understanding of what kind of God we have that such things happen in this world.

Jesus tries to help in the way that he does best, with a story that sheds light past the threshold of heaven, so that we may see farther than we normally would. It is the parable of the wheat and the weeds. I am grateful to Tom Long for his masterful treatment of this parable and of the problem I am struggling to address today in his Currie Lectures at Austin Seminary, last January. I owe whatever new insights I have about this issue and this parable to him.

The parable of the wheat and the weeds is a description in story form of the problem that sin and evil present to a world in which the innocent suffer. The kingdom of heaven, Jesus says, is like a sower who sowed good seed in a field, but while everyone was asleep an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat. So when the wheat began to mature, so did the weeds. The world is a mixed bag, and life is a mixture of wheat and chaff, grain and dandelion. We wish it were all wheat but it is not. And the weeds are a problem.

Their very presence begs us to ask the question of God who made all things, "Did you do this? Did you sow the weeds among the wheat, the evil amidst the good?"

And the answer is "No." The field was sowed with good seed. It was an enemy who came and sowed the weeds while we were asleep. And in a round about way, that is good news. God who is not the source of evil in life, nor of human suffering. These things are not tests that God has given us, nor do they exist to refine the soul, nor is it

God's will that suffering should occur. It is an enemy of God that has come and done this. And I don't know about you, but I hear that as welcome news.

We most of us want to connect the dots in life, to make order out of chaos, but it is not always easy to do. Some things come in opposition to all that we do for good. If we rush to the judgment that God is teaching us a lesson, or that we have earned what evil has befallen us, or that God has it in for the Haitians, then we haven't seen far enough across the threshold between heaven and earth. Always beware of easy answers to explain the complex ways of God.

Perhaps the most moving funeral sermon I ever heard was that of William Sloane Coffin given at the Riverside Church the Sunday after his son, Alex, died in an automobile accident. The sermon entitled, *Alex's Death*, is a praise of his son's life and an attempt to make comprehensible the incomprehensible. Coffin said,

For some reason, nothing so infuriates me as the incapacity of seemingly intelligent people to get it through their heads that God doesn't go around this world with his fingers on triggers, his fists around knives, his hands on steering wheels. God is dead set against all unnatural deaths. And Christ spent an inordinate amount of time delivering people from paralysis, insanity, leprosy, and muteness. ... The one thing that should never be said when someone dies is "It is the will of God." Never do we know enough to say that. My own consolation lies in knowing that it was not the will of God that Alex die; that when the waves closed over the sinking car, God's heart was the first of all our hearts to break.⁶

In the parable, Jesus speaks to his disciples, but he also speaks to Matthew's church who overhears this parable as well. And in Matthew's church, I suspect they were trying to understand the evil in the world along with the good, even the evil within themselves as well as the good, and their question was, "God, did you do this? Did you sow the weeds? Did you cause this evil? Did you bring on this suffering?" And the answer that Jesus gives is, "No, an enemy came and did this." This is not God's doing. God's heart is the first of all our hearts to break at human suffering.

The second question the parable answers is, "Then what can we do?" "Do you want us to go and gather the weeds and pull them up, straighten things out? Rid the world of evil?" And the answer is no, let the weeds and the wheat grow together until the harvest.

Now as Tom Long points out, the flat footed interpretation of this parable would be to adopt a moral laissez faire perspective on ethical interaction. "They're selling drugs across the street from the middle school." "What should we do?" "Well, you know how it is in the city. Weeds and wheat growing together. Leave it alone."

Or there's corruption in Albany, senators on the take, skimming off the top, bribes to award contracts. "What should we do?" Well, you know how it is with politics. Nothing we can do. Weeds and wheat together. Leave it alone."

But ethical quietism is not the gospel. That is not what this parable is teaching. Criminal behavior, wrongdoing, those battles which oppose the goodness and justice of God must be fought.

But what the parable does imply is the fact that we live amidst ambiguity in this life, and much that we find difficult and painful and confusing with regard to evil and human suffering is not answered in a timely way to our satisfaction. We are forced to make an uneasy peace with some of the realities of life. Weeds and wheat grow together sometimes. And some questions will always be with us at least in our time.

This is because love puts restraints on power. And God is loath to separate the weeds from the wheat until the harvest. God's patience puts ours to shame, and God sees possibilities where we see none. It is to our advantage that "a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench."⁷

Given the choice between an all powerful God, and an all loving God, I will take the limitations of the all loving God over the all powerful God, at least for the time being.

But will it always be this way? No, there will come a day when righteousness will shine like the sun.

Which brings us to the last part of the parable, which has to do with last things. At the time of the harvest, the wheat and the weeds are gathered up and separated, and the wheat is taken in, while the weeds are burned.

Some weeks ago, I mentioned Pope Benedict's essay in which he said, "There is a lot of talk in the New Testament about fire. The fire is Jesus Christ. The fire burns the stubble and impurities away from human life and refines it in justice and hope." In the light of that fire the darkness of our questions are illumined with heavenly light and the impurities and sorrows of our nights are bathed in heavenly warmth.

In the end God will separate the wheat from the chaff, and he will purify the imperfect until it is perfect in him, bright shining as the sun. Then every tear shall be wiped away, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

The Christian witness in the face of human suffering, in the face of tragedy, and in the face of death is that the world as we see it now will not always be this way. In Jesus' resurrection the power of God's love overcame the loveless power of this world, and ever since, nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

What we have seen in recent days, the devastation of an island, the suffering of so many people, the deaths of tens of thousands is horrific. And any attempt to explain it in terms of punishment or that God had it in for Haiti, or God had lessons to teach, or that what has happened may be a blessing in disguise is not a faithful understanding of God or of God's ways. It is not the will of God that any should perish.

What we can do is roll up our sleeves and offer our hand in support and assistance, write a check to help with the delivery of immediate aid, put together hygiene

kits that people have been asked to assemble, and pray for the sake of those who are suffering, homeless, injured, and despairing.

In the end, we must hold out the faith that the words given to Isaiah at a similar time of despair for Israel, may become the hope and reassurance that speaks as well to the people of Haiti.

The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give.

You shall no more be termed Forsaken, and your land shall no more be termed Desolate, but you shall be called (Hephzibah) My Delight is in Her; and your land (Beulah) Married, for the Lord delights in you, and your land shall be married.

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¹ Pooja Bhatia, Twitter, January 14, 2010

² Richard Morse, RAMHaiti, Twitter message, January 14, 2010.

³ Isaiah 60:1

⁴ Isaiah 60:4

⁵ Isaiah 62:-3-4

⁶ William Sloan Coffin, *Alex's Death*, The Riverside Church, January 23, 1983.

⁷ Isaiah 42:3