

At the 10:30 am service on January 24, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon, "Haiti and Healing," based on Psalm 19 and Luke 4:14-21.

"Haiti and Healing"

The earthquake in Haiti affected me in the same way that 9/11 affected me. I was stunned and numb for days. The first title for this sermon was "Healing in Haiti" but I felt the need, perhaps my own need, to go beyond Haiti, and the sermon title now is "Haiti and Healing."

I thought of a number of scriptures and read the lectionary Gospel text for today. Jesus expresses his mandate for ministry in the latter. The spirit of the passage connects with Haiti. Jesus quotes Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Luke 4:18-19.

The passage concludes with a fascinating piece of drama. "...he (Jesus) rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" This is an amazing expression and embodiment of the message?

Jesus' ministry is about hope for the poor and release for those unjustly imprisoned (and any form of inappropriate captivity: personal or relational), sight to those who cannot see (we see this symbolized in the many medical personnel working around the clock in Haiti), and freedom for the oppressed. Oppression is not spelled out in the passage so one assumes it relates to unbearable burdens people experienced in relational, work and institutional contexts, like slavery. Proclaiming the year of the Lord's favor means that the God's realm of peace, healing and loving justice is among us in Jesus.

In "Haiti and Healing," we find that healing is affirmed in these words of Jesus and in many other passages in scripture. There's a Catholic organization in Haiti that links US congregations with churches in Haiti. It's called "Matthew 25 House." Part of the house collapsed and the other part and the soccer field at back have been used for a medical clinic and temporary housing. Thousands are being cared there. Their motto from Matthew 25 is the words of Jesus: "Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me." (25:40) The "it" in this chapter is this: "...for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me." (25:35-36)

Jesus' criterion for Christian living is practical. South African cleric and prophet, Desmond Tutu, is quoted as saying: "I don't preach a social gospel; I preach the Gospel, period. The gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ is concerned for the whole person. When people were hungry, Jesus didn't say, 'Now is that political or social?' He said, 'I feed you.' Because the good news to a hungry person is bread."

And that's what people of goodwill are doing in Haiti and we are grateful.

As I see things right now there are at least three ways to address the subject of Haiti and healing. First, a look at what is not helpful; second, what is helpful and third, what healing is for us.

First, while I want to respect a fellow Christian, Pat Robinson, I need to say that what he said was not helpful or healing. During a Christian Bible Network telecast, Robertson said the Haitians made a pact with the devil to free them from French colonial rule, implying that the earthquake resulted from this pact. The problem with his statement, besides its bad theology and history, is that it blames the victims. Also, there are many Christians in Haiti.

Another unhelpful statement is the casual remark that earthquakes are “acts of God.” The phrase is used in contractual and tort law. In the law of contracts, an act of God may be interpreted as an implied defense under the rule of impossibility, i.e., the promise is discharged because of unforeseen, naturally occurring events that were unavoidable and which would result in insurmountable delay, expense or other material breach.

While this may be a convenient expression for the legal system it gives the wrong impression of God. A God of love cannot act in ways that cause harm to God’s world and people in the world. We believe that God is merciful and just. And yet, one wonders why such disasters as that experienced in Haiti would happen in God’s world if one believes that God created the world.

A basic theological statement that could help in understanding the situation better is this: “God creates because God wills life.” Finite material creation is by its nature subject to limitation, vulnerability, mortality. What God wills is our life. Physical disasters, sickness and death are by products of a finite creation. The only way God could have prevented these events would have been not to create material reality at all.

Others would say that God would not create a world that destroys God’s own creation. God is life and love and creates life and love enacted in a world that contains good and bad. They simply cannot fathom God’s role in the creation of the world. The purpose of the church is to know God, understand God, praise God and encourage and support God’s love and compassion in the world.

Tragedies like that in Haiti are exacerbated by poor housing, depleted soil, limited resources and poverty. There are many causes of these. In more fortunate regions like ours we can better fortify ourselves against such disasters – with seismic retrofits, disaster preparedness, and the like. These contribute to our well being which leads to the second point.

What is helpful and thus healing for Haiti itself? Basically, it is all the practical help pouring into that poor country. The General Secretary of the National Council of Churches, the Rev. Dr. Michael Kinnamon, says, “The destruction around Port-au-Prince is so massive it can’t yet be measured. What is clear is that the toll in lives and property will go beyond our ability to comprehend it. The situation has few precedents in our lifetimes, and our response to it must also be unprecedented.”

The Spirit of God is in every plane, medical and military personnel, food distributor, water provider, church worker (included our Presbyterian Disaster Assistance personnel), and every dollar sent and responsibly spent over there.

Helen Morita sent me an article from ODE, a magazine for intelligent optimists, which states: “And now for the good news.” It’s a realistic plan for the reconstruction of Haiti by a group called Architecture for

Humanity. They say: "It is an overwhelming situation to be in. It is also not the time for architects to show up thinking they can rebuild. People are trying to find their loved ones not think about what their lives will look like in 5, 10 or 15 years."

And yet they are pragmatists in that they know that they too need to exercise their trade. While mourning the loss on the one hand they have also formulated detailed plans for rebuilding with the people for periods from weeks to months to years. We hear a lot about nurses and doctors and we should at this time but it's reassuring to hear how the bricks and mortar guys are contributing to the healing of Haiti. Every profession is needed for the healing.

Healing stories abound and God is in the midst of the healing. We cannot understand why so many people have died and have been living with pain because medical supplies were not there to relieve the suffering. We can only echo the words of Kinnamon, who writes: "Tragedies like this one are impossible to understand, and we need to remind ourselves that God is also shedding tears at the pain and suffering of God's children in Haiti."

Perhaps there is healing in tears which moves me to my final point about healing for us. Scripture says we laugh with those who laugh and we cry with those who cry. It's important to acknowledge our tears for the people of Haiti. We cannot ignore what is going on in other parts of the globe and especially in situations like this.

But then the Psalm comes to us which says, "Weeping may linger for the night, but joy comes with the morning." (30:5). Not so fast, but the point is well taken. What gives us joy and contributes to our healing is knowing that while we cannot be in Haiti we are encouraged by those who are there and we support them in every way we can, through concern and giving whether prayer and/or practical support locally and/or financial support. The point is: we are in the situation because we are in God's world.

There's another dimension of healing. I actually heard a doctor weep during an interview this week. After working for over a week there he said it was the first time he had cried. Doctors keep a certain emotional distance in order to get the job done but they are human too. May God strengthen and comfort them. God bless all the workers in the field. Although we are thousands of miles away from Haiti the images of mass burials and amputations without anesthetic, described as similar to what took place in Crimea and the Civil War, affect us as well. We too are stunned and numbed as earlier mentioned.

While we continue pray for Haiti and do what we can it is important for us to draw aside and sit silently and experience God's healing. What's helpful for me is to pray in all the ways I know how: comprehensive prayer, meditation and contemplation and mostly to literally surround/envelope myself with God's healing light and to sit in that light and invoke its healing energies. Whatever works for you, you are encouraged to do it.

Healing happens when we acknowledge our own pain and we take it to God in prayer. We know the rest: speak to a friend, therapist or spiritual director, go for a walk in nature and be healed by the wind, rain, sun, rocks, foliage or surf, embrace loved ones, play with your pets, meditate on Jesus' mandate for ministry read earlier and engage in deeds of peace and loving justice, think through theology and see yourself as loved and love others. This is a prime time to be connected and reconnected to healing the energies of God.

I went online and found a Haitian prayer. It says:

Lord,
Thank you that you have given us the name Christian.
Now, give us strength to carry it.

God heal Haiti, God heal the people of Haiti, God heal the helpers in Haiti and God heal us. God bless all with strength! Amen