

Wasn't it just a few weeks ago that we were rejoicing at the end of the decade of the Ohs - or as columnist Leonard Pitts dubbed them, the "Uh Ohs"? We were filled with hope for the New Year, although I remember saying in that sermon that surely there would be "uh oh" moments in the year to come. Little did we know then the magnitude of what would literally shake our world less than two weeks into the new year.

On that Sunday, we read from the Christmas gospel of John: "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." But now, as we watch with helplessness the pictures coming out of Haiti, we wonder what that really means - when into this season of illumination and revelation has come a heavy dose of reality of what we face in this world of ours - what God faces in this world of ours. It's way too simplistic to say that everything is going to be all right; God is going to make it all work out in the end - when for the dead and the trapped and the mortally injured, it's not going to be all right. It's not going to be all right in Haiti for a long, long time, especially since it was hardly all right before the earthquake. So what do we, as people of faith who have just come through the Christmas season, singing joyfully of the birth of Christ into the world, have to say in the face of such tragedy?

Before the earthquake happened, I was thinking about Epiphany and about how to build our worship services around our theme of light - and hunger. Remember how in Advent, we lit candles and went exploring into our inner depths to discover our spiritual hunger, our deepest longings. Back then I said that in Epiphany we would address issues of physical hunger and need. We would direct our light outwardly and shine a spotlight into all the places in the world in need of hope - which is what the whole season has been about, after all. This is the message of Epiphany.

The gospel readings for the season of Epiphany are, in fact, flashes of light, snapshots from the life and ministry of Jesus, that help us see more clearly how God works in us and our world. Although the first of the series, the story of the wedding at Cana, seems almost ridiculous in light of this week's events. The story is told by John as the first of the "signs" that would reveal the glory of Jesus. But turning water into wine in order to save a wedding reception from social disgrace seems pretty trivial. At this point, wouldn't it not be much more appropriate miracle to start turning wine into fresh drinking water for Haiti?

I know, that's not the point of the story. The point for John is the inauguration of the messianic age in Jesus. And as a sign of this new age, a story about the extravagance of God's care, the abundance of divine mercy, the richness and quality of the heavenly banquet here on earth. Still, Haiti needs water, and food, and medical supplies, and all the basic needs that you and I take so for granted. So where is God now, Epiphany 2010? Where is the miracle today?

The answer is: look around. The answer is all around us. We are the presence of Christ in the world; we are the light of world in the midst of the darkness. Epiphany is the time when we shine a spotlight into all the places in the world in need of hope. It is never difficult to find such places, but today the need is even greater and our calling is not to just shine the light and look, but also to be the light and do. The quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. that I included in Keeping in Touch says it all: *Life's most persistent and urgent question is, 'What are you doing for others?'*

Of all the e-mails and resources coming from churches, denominations, and all kinds of organizations, the one that I found most helpful is from the Presbyterian Church USA. "Respond to the Earth quake in Haiti: Give. Act. Pray". (<http://www.pcusa.org>)

The giving part is simple. You've surely been getting a ton of information about how to donate to relief efforts. There are many worthy organizations; some of them are included in the Beatitudes Society website (<http://www.beatitudessociety.org>) that I included in Keeping in Touch.

It is always wise to check out the record of any charity: how much of your contribution goes immediately to the disaster site and how much goes to administration? For instance, 100% of all gifts made to ELCA Disaster Response, designated for Haiti Earthquake Relief, will be used for immediate relief and ongoing recovery. (<http://www.elca.org/Our-Faith-In-Action/Responding-to-the-World/Disaster-Response.aspx>)

Another good one, in light of today's gospel, is "Living Water International: Giving a Cup of Water in Jesus' Name." (<http://www.water.cc>) You should also know that Thrivent Financial for Lutherans (<https://www.thrivent.com>) will match \$1 for every \$2 donated by members up to \$1 million, which would generate \$3 million for Haiti. If you're a Thrivent member, this would be a smart choice. This is how we turn water into wine; this is how divine abundance is made manifest. From our abundance, we give generously

We also act. While there are many volunteers and professionals on the ground in Haiti, we often feel helpless to actually do anything. But there are things we can do. One of the most urgent appeals (and one of the simplest things to do) comes from Church World Service for baby and hygiene kits to be sent to Haiti. (http://www.churchworldservice.org/site/PageServer?pagename=kits_main)

Baby kits include: diapers, diaper pins, clothing, and two blankets, one of which can be hand-knit or crocheted. Hygiene kits include: towels, washcloths, soap, band-aids, toothbrushes, and other personal items. Information can be found on their website, but I've also downloaded it tonight, if someone is willing to organize the effort. This does not mean that we abandon other projects and other needs. We'll continue to collect socks and other supplies for Welcome. What a situation like this does is remind us of how much we have. And out of gratitude, we act swiftly.

And we pray. For all who are suffering, including the family of seminarian Ben Larson, son of former bishop April Ulring Larson from the LaCrosse Synod. Ben was a senior at Wartburg Seminary in Iowa and was in Haiti serving as a teacher for his January Term project. While no life is valued over another, when there is a connection, the mind-numbing pictures and videos and news reports become even more real and more personal. I think about our own teaching parish student, off doing a January project, and feel the wrench in my gut as I think about Ben's family, friends, and seminary community.

We also pray for people like Pat Robertson, who would be funny if there weren't people who listen to him. To say that Haiti is cursed and is being punished for making a deal with the devil is not only ridiculous, but cruel and decidedly un-Christian. And we must be vocal in our response to such nonsense. But Robertson is not the only one who believes that it was God behind the tragedy. In an interview, a Haitian official expressed the belief that God had caused the earthquake, for unknown reasons: "only God knows." To this brand of theology, we must also say "No! No!! No!" God does not cause earthquakes or any other disasters. We know the science of why earthquakes happen. We also know the human, political contributions to poverty that make a country vulnerable to natural disasters. So we can't blame God.

Instead, we must be the presence of God. Through our prayers, and our actions, and our giving. This is the Christmas story: that the Divine presence is not just out there somewhere, but is living and breathing and working in and among us. This week we are also reminded that Epiphany will soon give way to Lent, when we remember that this Divine presence is not only among us, but also suffers with us. God's heart is breaking over Haiti, as are ours. God hears the prayers of the suffering, and hears our prayers for them. God will not abandon the people who suffer, and neither will we.

Let us pray:

God of compassion,
please watch over the people of Haiti,
and weave out of these terrible happenings
wonders of goodness and grace.

Surround those who have been affected by tragedy
with a sense of your present love,
and hold them in faith.
Though they are lost in grief,
may they find you and be comforted.
Guide us as a church to find ways of providing assistance
that heal wounds and provide hope.
Help us to remember that when one of your children suffers
we all suffer;
through Jesus Christ who was dead,
but lives and rules this world with you.
Amen

— Bruce Reyes-Chow, Gradye Parsons and Linda Valentine

<http://www.pcusa.org/>