

Harder to Believe, But Still True
Isaiah 62:1-5 and John 2:1-11
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Do you want to hear something hard to believe? (Read John 2:1-11). If you thought that was a little difficult to swallow, how about this? (Read Isaiah 62:1-5, subbing Haiti for Zion and P-a-P for Jerusalem). Pray.

As difficult as some people find miracles to believe, the transformation of Haiti from its current state to the condition Isaiah describes is, at least for me, harder to imagine than turning water into wine, or even passing a camel through the eye of a needle. Harder to believe, but still true. Of course, the prophecy is not for Haiti, but for ancient Israel, for Zion and Jerusalem, but how can we not apply it, as I did as I read it? We can only imagine what Jerusalem looked like after its fall, but we can see all-too-real images of Port-au-Prince all day every day. We can hear the words of Scripture that describe the desolation that followed the Babylonian invasion, but we can hear from their own lips the words and screams of suffering Haitians. Israel is now no longer God's sole choice for privileged status; the whole world can make that claim in Jesus Christ. And so it is reasonable to expect God to keep those same promises for all of God's chosen people, whether in the Middle East or the Caribbean. And yet, from what we know of Haiti's history, and the intransigence of the problems of socio-economic development, and now the gravity of the situation in Port-au-Prince, it seems like a real reach to think that

God can bring this one to pass. Harder to believe than your garden-variety miracle, but still true.

The lectionary is an amazing animal. There may be no more appropriate passages of Scripture for this Sunday than the ones that were long ago appointed for this day and which we read from Isaiah and John. Clearly, the situation in Haiti is graver than that of the wedding feast; not only the wine, but the water too has run out. If there ever were a time for Mary to prod Jesus to do something, now is it. I doubt Jesus could object; the hour has indeed come to pitch in ungrudgingly. It was not merely a wedding feast that was interrupted, but virtually every aspect of daily life, when the walls came tumbling down on Wednesday. But even though the context is different, the moment still calls for the timely hope of these stories, the hope that the best is yet to come, that restoration is not merely a dream, but a foregone conclusion. There is a time to reflect on why bad things happen to good, or perhaps simply innocent, people, but that time is not now. Now is the time to remember that all is not lost. There is a time to ask why or whether God permitted such a disaster, but those questions are not helpful now. Now is the time to remember that God is present in the aftermath, and has not forsaken, and will not, forsake forever a people.

It is also a time to remember that despite the future tense of Isaiah's prophecy about Israel, there is a sense in which we must believe that the prophecy is *already* true; that God loves Haiti despite its hurricanes and earthquakes, and

corruption. Despite all it has been through, Haiti is already “a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.” It is not, as some would say, cursed, but rather blessed like any other part of God’s good earth. It may a crown tarnished by deforestation, corruption, and violence, and a diadem hidden under grinding poverty, and now, collapsed buildings, but it, like every other corner of the world, is sacred space, and a source of blessing and bounty. Harder to believe than old myths and wives’ tales, but still true.

In the Gospel of John, the miraculous events such as the changing of water into wine are not miracles like they are in the other Gospels. It’s a subtle difference, but in John they are considered “signs,” signs that point to Jesus’ relationship with God, and to the fact that God is not done with humanity yet. The pulling of people buried for three or four days, such as ECFer Tim Callaghan experienced firsthand, are not miracles; they are signs, signs that God is not through with Haiti yet, and that therefore, neither are we. Tim wrote me this week from Port-au-Prince and said, “As bad as the situation is here, to see four people removed (alive) from the rubble was a moment I will never forget.” And as the Haitian priest, the Rev. Eric Toussaint, said from the steps of the collapsed cathedral just this morning as he described his own near-miraculous survival, “I watched the destruction of the cathedral from this window. I am not dead because God has a plan for me. What happens is a sign from God, saying that we must recognize his power - we need to reinvent ourselves.” The disciples themselves

could have said something similar as they watch Jesus die on the cross, the sign of signs. The survival of the Rev. Toussaint, one of Jesus' modern day disciples, is not a miracle, but a sign of the future God has in mind for Haiti. Harder to believe than putting it down to simply being in the right place at the right time, but still true.

A primary thrust of the latter section of the book of Isaiah is that Israel will one day be a light unto the nations, a beacon that will draw all other nations to worship and follow Israel's God, and the life of authentic justice and community to which that God calls the people. "The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory," we hear in tonight's passage. If we want to look for, and indeed work for, signs of hope, what we might reflect on, and work for, and pray about, is that a reconstructed Haiti, like the promise for Israel of old, can be a sign for other nations whose people suffer, whose politicians allow it, whose violence overwhelms them, whose natural resources are plundered – that Haiti can be a light to those nations if it can rebuild, if it can reinvent itself, with both structural and ethical integrity. Indeed, Haiti was once that light to other nations, as it became the only nation whose independence was gained through a successful slave rebellion. In the midst of this horrific tragedy is the opportunity for the afflicted to be a blessing, not for the first time, but once again. Harder to believe, but still true.

Our passage from Isaiah was likely written during the activities recorded in Ezra and Nehemiah, namely the reconstruction of the city of Jerusalem in the fifth

century BC, following the return to Judah. In those days, however, they were rebuilding more than just the walls of the city; they were rebuilding their religious life and institutions, and most of all, their faithfulness to the graceful commandments God had given them, the violation of which led to their suffering. What we learn from that period of reconstruction is that even though God promises restoration, it is God's people who actually do the building, whether of church buildings, or little yellow houses in Jazmin of Alajuelita, or the community of the faithful as we tend to one another. And just as in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, we must understand that unless we build according to God's designs, no structure, neither cathedral, nor simple, decent home, nor individual soul, will survive. Haitians, and the world which is trying to partner with them, will find their rebuilding more successful and joyful, if not easier, if they cede to God's wishes for human community; if they humble themselves to address the needs of the poorest and the most vulnerable; if they will concentrate on restoring the land as well as the people; if they follow the path of God's justice and mercy as shown by Jesus Christ, rather than the economic dreams of those with the money to invest. Harder to believe than the plans and claims of the World Bank and IMF, but still true.

In the Bible, there is an old tradition of God changing the names of the players in the story. You will remember that Abraham and Jacob's names were changed, and in tonight's passage, Isaiah says Israel's name would change. Those changes were

made to reflect the new circumstances in which God placed God's people, the new realities of blessing and possibility. For example, Abram means "exalted ancestor," but Abraham means "ancestor of a multitude," reflecting God's choosing of Abraham to bring blessing to the whole world. "Ayiti," meaning "land of high mountains" was the indigenous *Taino* name for the mountainous western side of the island before the arrival of the Europeans, and a perfectly fine name, but it is merely descriptive of the geography of the land and not the divine favor with which it is bestowed. What name will Haiti receive as God restores it? This week, in addition to keeping up with the latest news from Haiti, and grieving, and donating, and praying, let me invite you to spend some time thinking about what name new name Haiti will receive, for it, like Israel before it, can rely on the promise that "No more shall you 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. May God guide the Haitian people, and all who would come alongside them, to come out of this tragedy stronger and more faithful than ever. Harder to believe, but still true. Amen.