

God, Where Are You Now?

A sermon at Newtonbrook United Church on Sunday, January 31, 2010

By Rev. Allan Baker

The Rev. Dr. Bruce McLeod, former Moderator of the United Church of Canada, began one sermon at Bellefair United Church with words something like;

Events of the world interrupt our plans.

Bruce went on to say that he had planned to speak on the lectionary text for the day, assuming that is what people had read prior to attending worship, but “*events of the world*” meant that a relevant Sunday sermon had to address an urgent issue in the hearts and minds of the congregation.

Twenty days after an earthquake in Haiti - that’s where we find ourselves this morning. I’ve heard people raise questions about God’s involvement in this terrible tragedy. So, rather than a sermon based on 1 Corinthians 13, this is a reflection on where we might find God when the earth trembles; hurricanes roar, or forest fires flame. As William Willimon has written; “*A great trauma makes theologians of us all.*”¹

So God, where are you now when this terrible tragedy has happened?

First, let’s deal with the science. As people who live in the 21st century we now know considerably more about earthquakes and plate tectonics than we did even 30 years ago. In fact, the theory of plate tectonics was a change in the science of geology that began in the 1960’s. **Even in rock-hard geology, stuff changes!**

It is now fairly common knowledge that the surface of the earth is made up of seven or eight major plates – depending on your definition of “major”, and a number of smaller plates. Haiti is located on one of the smaller tectonic plates. These plates continuously slide around the surface of the earth, bumping into one another. One of the results of these collisions is the building of mountain ranges, and the existence of volcanoes. The Rocky Mountains on the west coast of North America are, for example, a result of the collision of the North American and Pacific plates. Those layers of rock that we see high above us when we drive through deep mountain valleys were, at one time, at the bottom of the ocean. The collision of tectonic plates has forced these sedimentary rocks thousands of feet into the air.

Even a short drive from here to Guelph Ontario will demonstrate the fact that even the rocks are not “firm.” The next time that you travel the 401 west, and reach the top of the Niagara Escarpment – which is a fault line – I invite those who are not driving to observe the rock cuts on either side of the road. You will see that the lines in the layers of the limestone are like waves – they have been twisted by the pressures exerted along this fault line. The rocks that began as mud on the bottom of an ancient seabed, in horizontal layers, have been bowed.

What we know about what happened at 4:53 pm on January 11th is that 25 km west south west of Port au Prince an earthquake of magnitude 7.0 happened. Geologists say that there is a “fault line” – something like a big crack that you might see in the top of your banana cake – that runs through Haiti and the Dominican Republic.² It is similar to the famous San Andreas

¹ William Willimon, in “In The Aftermath”, ed. James Taylor, page 104

² <http://www.who.edu/page.do?pid=9779&tid=282&cid=66766&ct=162>

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Fault in California, and the fault lines that are present in the Vancouver area of British Columbia. This fault line is a result of the movement of tectonic plates.

The story from science informs us that the earthquake that shook Haiti on January 11th is a normal occurrence. Earthquakes can crush the concrete symbols of human dominance of the environment as readily as we can crumple a piece of paper. Geologists tell us that earthquakes are a part of the normal pattern of renewal of the surface of the earth and that they assist in maintaining the carbon balance between atmosphere, hydrosphere and lithosphere.³

In short, the story from science tells us that the surface of the earth is always in motion. Change is constant. The earth is not, "terra firma", a Latin phrase describing the land portion of the earth as being "solid." That is in contrast to how we humans prefer to think of the earth; solid and unchanging. Our rock.

So God, where are you now when this terrible tragedy has happened?

In our United Church of Canada's New Creed we affirm our faith by saying that: "*We believe in God, who has created, and is creating.*"⁴ Our faith tradition in the United Church of Canada sees creation as an on-going process, where God is actively involved. Change is continuous. **Our faith is in an eternal God, not the transitory earth.**

Our United Church of Canada Song of Faith⁵ begins with the words:

God is Holy Mystery,
beyond complete knowledge,
above perfect description.

Yet,
in love,
the one eternal God seeks relationship.

So God creates the universe
and with it the possibility of being and relating.
God tends the universe,
mending the broken and reconciling the estranged.
God enlivens the universe,
guiding all things toward harmony with their Source.

Grateful for God's loving action,
We cannot keep from singing.

³ <http://www.lifeinuniverse.org/Platetectonics-05-02-01.html>

⁴ The complete New Creed can be found on page 918 of Voices United.

⁵ See the United Church of Canada website for the full Song of Faith: www.united-church.ca

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That is a bit about the God who we believe in; a God whose love is also described in Paul's letter to the Corinthians. That letter is about relationship – and interconnectedness.

There are those who have said that God created this particular earthquake to punish the people of Haiti. This leads me to ask about the characteristics of God – what kind of God would kill thousands of God's children? Is that an act of love?

I would welcome a conversation if your perspective is different, but I cannot believe in a God who would kill thousands of innocent people.

How could one worship a God who might intervene at any time and deliberately cause an earthquake; a tsunami, a hurricane; a deadly snowstorm; or a six day ice storm - such as the one that occurred in eastern Ontario and Quebec in January 1998? How could one worship a God who might intervene vindictively in natural processes for God's own purposes?

According to the Bible, Jesus was asked if God punished sinners by causing disasters. Jesus rejected that concept. "*Or those eighteen on whom the tower in **Siloam** fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem?*"⁶ The answer from Jesus was a straightforward, unequivocal "NO".

I agree with Jim Taylor – if Jesus saw it that way, it is good enough for me.⁷

What could we count on if God were to arbitrarily interfere with the processes of nature? Sometimes gravity might work? Sometimes the water would flow unpredictably – even uphill - so that it might accomplish some unknown purpose of God's. How could we live in such an unpredictable world where God might, at any moment, decide to change the rules of life on earth?

I do not believe that God decided to have an earthquake in Haiti on January 11th. But, where is God now when this terrible tragedy has happened?

My faith tells me that God has created a world where there are certain natural processes and we human beings have been given the freedom to know how to live knowing that earthquakes happen, for example. If we decide to live on the San Andreas Fault line, we ought not to blame God for the fact that our home might crumble.

Surely a loving God would want us to know that change is a constant in life, even the rocks of the earth move and change. Surely a loving God would want us to know about the processes involved in plate tectonics, the formation of floods, and tornado development so that we could make decisions to preserve our lives. This is the God who instructs us to, "CHOOSE LIFE".⁸

⁶ Luke 13:4

⁷ James Taylor, "Not Acts Of God", Wednesday, January 20, 2010

⁸ Deuteronomy 30:19

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Yes, we do live in a world of uncertainty and of danger. We also live in a world of beauty, diversity and of compassion. We live in a world where the frozen earth of winter holds the fragile blossoms of springtime flowers. We live in a world of joy and a world of grief.

That is where I see God being present in Haiti.

Joanna Macy writes:

“There is gospel in our grief. It says we care. And that profound caring springs from our profound interconnectedness – an interconnectedness that weaves the web of life out of which we come – a web out of which we cannot fall.”⁹

Many people are praying for our sisters and brother – God’s children – who live in Haiti. At the same time, we all know that our prayers remain empty if we do not inhabit them. That is where I see the God of Hope in this tragedy. People have engaged in actions to assist our sisters and brothers in Haiti; who are other parts of the body of Christ. People are demonstrating the truth that when one of us suffers, we all suffer. Through their prayers in action, people are demonstrating our interconnectedness in this web of life.

For the past two weeks we have heard and discussed the 12th chapter of Paul’s letter to the church at Corinth. That chapter dealt with the variety of gifts that God has shared with us as human beings, and how each of us is called to share those particular gifts.

In Haiti I see God being present in the body of Christ as rescue workers use their gifts to attempt to locate people trapped beneath the rubble. I see God being present in medical teams that rushed to Haiti, setting aside their lives for a bit, and donating their gifts and skills to enhance life. I see God being present in the people who are in Haiti for the long term; in orphanages, in reconstruction programs, in education programs – all dedicated to bringing meaningful life to our sisters and brothers who live there. As we say in our Song of Faith – this is God “mending the broken”

So God, where are you now when this terrible tragedy has happened?

The God who I see present in Haiti is not the god who is envious or boastful; the God who I see in Haiti is not a god who is irritable or resentful, I or who rejoices in wrongdoing – or who would add additional punishment to God’s children in the poorest nation in this hemisphere.

The God who I see present in Haiti is the God who is patient and kind; the God who does not insist on God’s own way, but who rejoices in the truth. This is the God who bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things.¹⁰

The God I see in Haiti is the God of Love.

Hymn # 229 (V.U.) God of the Sparrow

⁹ Joanna Macy, in *Earth and Spirit*, page 182, ed. by Fritz Hull

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 13:7

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Prayers for God's Family and Creation – January 31, 2010

O God; Your Spirit surrounds us with the gifts of grace and love.
As this day, and this week, unfold,
We pray as we journey that we will be aware that each of us
Has been given gifts of the Spirit for the common good.
May your love be in our lives, and on our lips;
In our hearts, and in our souls, In our thinking, and in our actions.
May our prayers lead us to sharing your love.

We pray for our neighbours who live, have lived, and have connections with the nation of Haiti. As one of your children suffer God, so we all suffer, for we are all a part of your earthly family. We are all connected in mysterious ways to each other for we live in a small world.

Creator God, you have breathed life into this world,
And into each of us; you sustain all of life.
And yet, Holy Mystery, we live on a planet where both beauty and danger are found.
A planet composed of tectonic plates that shift and slide,
And shake the terra firma so that buildings buckle,
Bridges collapse, and people are crushed, maimed, and wounded for life.

Healing God our prayers go out to the people of Haiti; for the lives lost in Haiti, each one loved by you, break our hearts, loving God. For the crippling poverty that afflicts millions of Haitians, break our hearts, loving God. For our silent complicity in the sinful structures and systems that lead to oppression and injustice, break our hearts, loving God.

May we be moved by compassion and share our gifts and our wealth willingly and generously, so that our neighbours may know that they are not alone. Though they may be lost in grief and shock, may they find you and be comforted by the knowledge of your abiding love,
And by the hope that we share in Jesus the Christ.

God of mercy, fountain of loving care, source of our hope,
Help us to break open the gifts that you have shared with us,
That we may share these life-giving blessings with those around us.

This morning we pray for those whose names are written on our hearts: