

A sermon preached by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Epiphany 2, January 17, 2010, dedicated to the memory of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., to the living and the dead of Haiti and to all the aid workers from around the globe who are on the ground helping, especially to Matt Goetz, and always to the glory of God!

“Haiti: Hope out of the Horror”

Isaiah 62:1-5

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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A magnitude 7.0 earthquake struck the Caribbean island of Haiti on Tuesday leaving widespread devastation. It is the strongest quake to hit the poorest nation in our hemisphere in 200 years. Up to 3 million people have been affected by the quake and buildings throughout the city of Port-au-Prince have collapsed, including the Presidential Palace and headquarters of the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Haiti.

This email from Polycarpe Joseph, the director of the House of Hope, a program that cares for children laboring as domestic servants, came to the United Church of Christ Global Ministries offices on Thursday:

“Greetings in the name of Jesus. Since Tuesday 5 p.m. our country lives a catastrophe. For the moment it is impossible to assess the deaths, but there are between 100 and 250,000. At the moment, our collaborators are trying to find the situation of each of our children. The situation is critical. Our facilities have been

damaged. People are scared, hungry and thirsty. People have no more homes and live in the streets. We need all your prayers and support.” The latest numbers I heard last night were over 45,000 dead and the numbers are climbing every minute.

In a correspondence passed on from Patrick Villier, the president of CONASPEH, a mission house in Haiti for children, we received this word from his daughter in Florida: “The situation on the ground is very difficult. We are grieving the loss of our foster son. And the losses to CONASPEH have been enormous. It is very difficult for us to keep our faith. The only thing we know is that God has not abandoned us through the solidarity and presence of love we receive from your Global Ministries. It is the only thing we have. Please pray for us.”

One of my friends at the Catholic News Service, Dennis Sadowski, reported stories of hope and sadness emerging from the rubble of Haiti two days ago. He writes, “Among the tens of thousands of victims in the Haitian earthquake was Salesian Brother Hubert Sanon, 85. Brother Hubert was the first Haitian to become a Salesian brother. Details surrounding Brother Hubert's death were unknown, but Father Hyde said he died in the Salesian compound that houses the National School of Arts and Trade, known as ENAM among Haitians. When the trade school collapsed, more than 500 students and several staff members were confirmed dead.

“Brother Hubert professed vows in 1947 and worked at the school's Lakay program for young adults and teenagers on the streets. The program tries to reunite the young adults with their families. For those unable to find their families, the program offers the young people a place to stay and teaches them a trade in preparation for employment. Almost 70 years ago, Brother Hubert was a graduate of the school and was so impressed with the work of the Salesians that he decided to join the order.”

In another story, Sister Mary Finnick, a nurse who directs the Matthew 25 House in the Delmas 33 area of Port-au-Prince, found that "the courage of the Haitian people starts young" when she

opened an impromptu triage and treatment center in a nearby soccer field after the quake.

“The children, though crying, did not have temper tantrums and cooperated as much as is possible for a 3-year-old when you make a splint, clean out a head wound and tend to wounds in their backs and legs,” the Grey Nun of the Sacred Heart reported in a January 13 email. “In all of this, we also hear the Haitian voices raised in song, praising God for being alive.”

Sister Mary said she, two other Matthew 25 staff members, six guests from Pennsylvania and New York, and three Haitian doctors treated 300 to 400 people in the hours after the earthquake.

“We began to see some very horrible conditions caused primarily from the cement blocks, which most of the houses are built with, poor and rich alike,” she wrote. “There were many head wounds, some so serious it surprised us the person was still alive. Most were deep wounds that should have been sutured, but we had no material to do that. . . . When supplies ran out, we finally cut up pillowcases for bandages,” Sister Mary reported. She encouraged medical teams that had been scheduled to come to Haiti not to change their plans. “There is a great need for medical supplies, suturing, betadine, analgesics . . . everything . . . and personnel to bring it,” she said.

In another part of the city, Mike Henry, project director for Cross International Catholic Outreach, described the scene in the capital city as “coming right out of Dante’s *Inferno*.”

“There are dead bodies everywhere,” Henry said in a January 13 report from the Haitian capital. “It is hell on earth.”

Jim Cavnar, president of the Catholic aid agency based in Pompano Beach, Fla., said the magnitude 7 earthquake “has done more than shake the earth. It has shaken the fragile hopes and dreams of the Haitian people, who just last year were the victims of devastating storms and flooding.”

But even amid the devastation, there were signs of resilience. "The girls were shaken up quite a bit when it happened," said an unnamed person who works with Cross Catholic, in a message to Cavnar, "but now they are playing with the kids of the parents who are staying in our home."

"Haiti has suffered for far too long and its devastating poverty is all but ignored by the world. After the United States of America, Haiti became the second independent state in the Western Hemisphere and the first free black republic in the world. The tiny island, inhabited by free slaves, was owned by France, but the slaves wanted to be free and fought for it," the Rev. Susan Smith, of Advent UCC in Columbus, wrote on her *Washington Post* blog.

Earlier this week, fundamentalist TV host Pat Robertson was on his TV show raising money for the victims of the earthquake and said that "Haiti made a pact with the devil" when it gained its independence. "As a result," Robertson said, "God has judged them ever since." Once again, Robertson was able to show a lack of compassion and his own historically recognizable ignorance merely by opening his mouth and saying the next thing that tumbled from his tongue. (I might add that political commentators Rush Limbaugh and Rachel Maddow – one on the right and one on the left – used this time of tragedy to judge President Obama's response, rather than simply joining with the rest of the world and supporting humanitarian aid. Sad , but true).

As Susan Smith pointed out on her blog, Robertson's statement showed his lack of knowledge of African religions and historic events.

"While the Haitian Revolution went forward with the blessing of a Vodun priest; who said the nation would be free and called the inhabitants of the island to the struggle, he then called upon the blessing of Saint Dominque to work and fight for their freedom. Under Toussaint L'Overture, and later, Jean Jacques Dessalines, the freed slaves fought, and in 1804 won their fight for freedom. As part of an agreement in victory, however, the new nation, named "Haiti" by Dessalines, agreed to pay reparations to French

slaveholders. The amount to be paid was astronomical, and the island never recovered economically. Ironically, the United States grew as a result of the Haitian Revolution; Napoleon Bonaparte, discouraged by the victory of the freed slaves, agreed to sell land owned by the French to America. That was the Louisiana Purchase.” (Susan Smith’s blog on Friday, January 15).

In the midst of this tragedy, what are we then to say to all this? I hate to say it, but for most of us, Haiti has appeared in our weekly news cycle and sound bitten lives, and soon will drift from our consciousness. As this tiny nation digs out from their most recent (and worst-ever) devastation, what justice can be attained in the midst of our rush to aid injured, starving and dying people? On this day in which we lift up the memory and legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., we need to seek ways of justice and not just charity for Haiti.

For starters, I believe the World Bank and the United States AID should forgive Haiti’s foreign debt. Paying the high interests rates alone, has left Haiti more impoverished and more in need, which has in turn created little to no opportunity to develop a strong and independent economy. Second, we need to accept Haitians who have arrived here as immigrants and receive them as citizens. Third, we need to welcome adults, teens and children who are seeking asylum and a new homeland into our nation. Fourth, we need to join the global community in rebuilding Haiti for generations to come.

Perhaps the “good” that come from this tragedy will be an international outcry to assist this democratic nation to break out of the cycle of corruption and greedy leaders and embrace a true democratic reform that will allow building infrastructures that will be established to support and serve generations of children yet unborn. Such an outcry begins in the hearts and minds, the feet, hands and voices of people like us. After more than 200 years of struggle, if it hasn’t come from leaders of nations by now, it never will. So, I implore you to seize this opportune moment to give – not only a “hand out” to Haiti, but also a “hand up” to Haiti.

I am profoundly aware that Dr. King died trying to protect and defend garbage workers. The Nobel Prize winner of 1964 was on the streets of Memphis walking arm in arm and hand to hand with the poorest workers in that city when he was murdered by a sniper. When I was with the Rev. Dr. Samuel "Billy" Kiles, the Memphis pastor who was with Dr. King on the balcony as he died, he told me to tell you and everyone I know, "Dr. King died defending garbage workers. He was vulnerable to the poorest of the poor. He cared! He laid down his life for the poor men of Memphis. You tell them this truth!"

The world, which has looked away from Haiti for hundreds of years and has refused to see people struggling to survive, many living on less than \$1 a day, and mothers feeding what amounts to mud pies to their children, can look away no more. If you will, God has gotten our attention!

In the story of the Exodus, God hears the cries of the people in slavery and sends Moses to deliver them from their travails. Could it be that God is tired of seeing people on this tiny island ignored, suppressed and oppressed? We've seen it in this country and Dr. King was at the center of the action in 1963 when the world saw white police officers putting attack dogs and fire hoses on innocent black children in Birmingham, and the horrific images of these actions drove a finally indignant nation to demand that Congress and the president pass laws that forbade racial discrimination.

The world couldn't see Haiti before this past Tuesday. As far as the world was concerned, Haiti was poor by its own doing and lack of competent leadership. But now the world sees all this suffering, and can hear, on television and on our ipods and computers, people screaming in agony, reaching for help. Perhaps the pact with the devil, spoken of by Pat Robertson, was not made with the Haitian people, but rather with people who decided they would not help this nation of freed African slaves, which was bold enough to fight for its freedom so long ago.

We Americans and others were lauded for fighting for their freedom. It is a noble and right thing to demand one's freedom. Bigger than that, it is a spiritual need, freedom is a spiritual need.

No human was intended to be enslaved and oppressed by another individual or group. With freedom as our cry for Haiti, let's put in place building blocks of justice that will help the devastated, freedom loving people of Haiti to be truly free!

My sister in faith and colleague Susan Smith, wrote this in the Post. "When Joseph's brothers left him for dead, because they were jealous, they thought the deal had been completed. They forgot that there is a God of justice, and that God is the ultimate deal maker. Joseph suffered, but was then delivered, and said to his brothers, when they later needed him, **'What you meant for evil, God meant for good.'**"

I believe that God means good for all the people God created – and especially this week – the people of Haiti! It takes a long time sometimes for people to witness God stepping in, but maybe, in spite of all this suffering and death, we are seeing God stepping in, saying, "Enough!" I think this is the moment for us to stand with God, step in and take action meant for good for God's people.

In closing, I want to share one more piece of news and correspondence, one last word of comfort coming from this immeasurable tragedy. Rev. Mary Ann Goetz of our congregation sent this out to friends yesterday. I saw it late last night:

"I have been watching CNN all morning - talking to Herb on the pier and Matt on The Comfort . . . the ship is on its way and I just hope and pray that it hurries! Herb and Matt said that they had never seen such a huge ship. Herb's there because I sent him to deliver our paper chain - "Chain of Hope" for the Haitian people. We have many international students at Northland H.S. and some from Haiti. Many have gathered around our Haitian students and many of them (the Haitian students) have begun to plan outreach/fund raising events for their country. Yesterday students made a huge paper chain with messages for the Haitian people, Herb delivered it last night to Matt on The Comfort and Matt will make sure it gets to the people. Matt called as the ship was pulling away from the pier . . . this will indeed be another life-changing experience for him. He gave up coaching rowing (very difficult decision) and was going to tutor at the youth detention

center in Norfolk until The Swift left for East Africa. Then he was called up for this assignment. I always tell him that when we empty our hands, God will fill them again with unbelievable blessings/experiences! There goes Mom with that theological talk again!”

Our prayers are with Matt and the Navy vessel Comfort as it heads to Haiti. As we head out into this week, remember these words we heard earlier from Isaiah and may it be said that this is God’s true and glorious vindication for Haiti:

“Foreign countries will see your righteousness and world leaders your glory. You’ll get a brand new name, right from the mouth of God. You’ll be the stunning crown in the palm of God’s hand, a jeweled gold cup held high in the hand of your God. No more will anybody call you Rejected, and your country will no longer be called Ruined. You’ll be called My Delight and know that your God is happy with you!” (Excerpts from *The Message* , Isaiah 62:1-5).

Our God loves the people of Haiti. They are “God’s delight.” May we love Haiti with the same love. Amen.

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