

January 17, 2010

The Second Sunday after Epiphany

John 2:1-11

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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When hurricane Mitch hit the small Central American country of Honduras in 1994, a faction of the evangelical Christian population loudly and publicly postulated that hurricane Mitch was God's response to the sin of idolatry: A large statue of the risen Christ had been erected on a hill overlooking the capital city, Tegucigalpa. This faction believed that the country was paying for this grave sin, paying for it with their property, with their livelihoods, with their own lives and with the lives of their children.

The same faction of people who identify themselves as faithful Christians spoke up after hurricane Katrina, blaming sinful behavior the people of the central Gulf Coast for the devastation that happened there.

Incredibly, we're hearing it yet again about Haiti. I'm sure many of you have heard the recent statement by a prominent evangelical Christian that God is punishing Haiti for making a deal with the devil to be freed from the French. That Haitians are paying their dues now for that deal their ancestors made.

I stand firmly in front of you this morning, my friends, and tell you that this is not the God I believe in. I cannot hang my faith on an image of God that sees violence, destruction and pain as a means of making a point.

I don't believe that suffering is poignant or useful in God's schema. That does not mean that there is never something to be learned from tragedy, but I loathe to think that God creates an earthquake or a hurricane, cancer or malaria or a car accident so that there will be a greater good.

I believe instead that, like the old spiritual says, "his eye is on the sparrow" and that the death of even the poorest of Haitian infants shatters the heart of God right alongside the shattered heart of that child's mother.

To believe that God would create destruction like that we are hearing about, tens of thousands crushed to death, tens of thousands more injured and dying of dehydration, to believe that this is God's doing, I can think of no higher blasphemy.

Friends, I can't explain to you why earthquakes happen in a world ruled by a forgiving and loving God. I don't know. I can't reconcile it. It is, like so many of the things we take on faith, a mystery larger than that which the human mind can grasp.

I do know, though, that we profess belief in a God who came to rescue us from sin and from death and who did so by taking them on. God died for us in order that we would never be abandoned to the darkness of the grave.

But while God has claimed the victory, we still live in the awkward in between place. We are the people of already and not-yet. God has won but we are waiting for the kingdom, where questions of evil no longer plague us, where earthquakes and hurricanes no longer kill us, where love rules without challenge. But until God's kingdom comes, we continue to live in this place where there is a struggle between good and evil, life and death.

I find it difficult to read a Gospel like this one in light of Tuesday's events in Haiti. The story of Jesus' miracle at the wedding in Cana is so extravagant and celebratory, it strikes a difficult dissonance in comparison with the tens of thousands of people dead and as many injured in one of the most destitute places in the world.

If we look at it like that, if we look at the miracle at Cana as a showy trick, useless in real life, it will indeed seem wasteful. It's a strange miracle, this one. It is the first miracle and it seems almost like Jesus is starting his ministry simply, testing out his powers on a more innocuous subject before moving on to, say, cleansing lepers and raising the dead.

It doesn't look like the Jesus we think we know, the one who advocated for the poor and destitute at every turn, the one who preached love and acceptance, the sacrificial Jesus. With a crisis like Haiti staring us in the face, Cana does not seem an appropriate response.

What in the world are we to learn from a miracle like this one? Lives aren't irrevocably changed in this story as far as we can tell. The lessons aren't plain and obvious. On the surface, this miracle is more pedestrian and excessive than meaningful.

But this is what God promises. God promises that if we show up, to take the ordinary, us, and make us extraordinary. If we pay attention and listen, just as the servants at the wedding banquet listened to Jesus, we can change the course of events. We can have a hand at making a miracle.

In order for God to turn water in to wine, that is, in order for God to make good happen in the world, we, God's servants, must show up with the water. And water in abundance, lots of it, the stone jars of our selves, our souls and bodies, filled and ready to be changed, in truth, ready to be the change we want to see. In doing so, we make those miracles happen.

We are the miracle of the wedding at Cana. By our faith and also by our actions, we can remind the world that our God is a God of resources, of something out of nothing, of promise and above all of love. By our own actions in the world, we

show the world not only who Christians really are, but we show the world who God really is, not capricious or violent or angry, but trustworthy, forgiving, and steadfast in love.

In the days since the unfortunate statement about Haiti's pact with the devil, I have heard people say again and again, "people like that give Christians a bad name." I have, in fact, even thought it myself. And so my challenge to you, friends, is this: in light of the epic devastation in Hispaniola, how will you redeem the Christian name? And beyond relief for Haiti, how will you make sure that "Christian" means "love" rather than "intolerant drive?"

In this already and not-yet world, our job as Christians is not to preach to others that there will be meaning in their suffering. Our job is not to blame the victims of an earthquake for their sins. Our job is to be the hands and feet of Christ, to walk alongside when necessary, to support whenever possible, to love at every turn, to pray, pray, pray without ceasing.

When the kingdom of God comes and we are finally given the answers to these questions that fill our minds in times of great sorrow, I do not believe that we will be treated to an explanation of how the vast suffering of the people of Haiti was necessary for salvation. I believe instead we will, each and every one of us, be taken in the hand of God and raised up, the tears of our collective sorrows dried.