

January 24, 2010
Third Sunday after Epiphany
Pr. Michelle L. Miller

I suspect that, like me, images of Haiti and of our sisters and brothers in that nation have filled your mind and your prayers this past week. The massive scale of destruction, the loss of life, and the broad sweep of pain that devastated this tiny and poorest nation in the western hemisphere is beyond description. The problem of getting basic aid to the survivors is daunting; the long term needs for stabilizing and redeveloping the nation seem beyond comprehension.

Words seem inadequate at times like this, and yet emotions are strong. Our hearts break for the people who survived and now are suffering without food, water, safe shelter and medical attention. We cry in sorrow with parents weeping for their children; young widows calling out for their husbands; new orphans searching for their parents. Doubt or anger amid such tragedy is a natural response and joins us with the faithful of every time and place who have wondered, "How could this have happened?" and "Where is God?"

One Lutheran family has helped me think about all these emotions, reactions and questions this past week. His name was Ben Larson, a 25-year-old 4th year Wartburg Seminary student spending J-term in Haiti to teach Lutheran theology to lay people. I'd never met Ben, but I know his mother, April Urling Larson—the first woman elected as a bishop in the ELCA.

Since hearing that Ben died in the earthquake, I've learned so much about Ben and his faith. His parents wrote this in a statement, "As an infant Ben was wrapped in the arms of God in the waters of baptism, and from those waters, his life was an outpouring of love and joy, laughter and play, in response to God first loving Ben. Ben's love of God, walking in accompaniment, passionately loving others, listening and learning from those who are poor across the globe, drove his serving. Most of the people who died in this earthquake were the poorest of the poor in this hemisphere. In his young death," his parents write, "his life joins the bodies of the poor."

Ben's wife, Renee, and his cousin, Jonathan, escaped from St. Joseph Home for Boys where they all were when the quake hit. Renee and Jonathan went back in to where Ben had been and Renee heard him singing, "I told him I loved him and that Jon and I were OK and to keep singing." But the singing stopped after he sang 'God's peace to us we pray.' Ben spent his last breath singing."

In his sermon at Ben's memorial service on Friday, the preacher said that when we're confronted with situations "that push the human experience to its limits" people turn to God for answers. "Where is God?" he asked. "The gospel message is that we find God in those places where we think it is impossible for God to be. God is present in the periphery of human existence marked by poverty, exclusion, hunger and violence. God is present under the rubble of collapsed buildings in Port Au Prince. Our God is the one who enfolds our broken reality and the pain of the world, making it God's own."

He said Ben loved music, and through songs of oppressed peoples of the world he discovered and proclaimed God. Working with the people of Haiti, "Ben became one with their pain, even as his God was one with their pain."

Since the day of the earthquake, and Ben's death, and thousands of other people's deaths, his wife, cousin and parents have been witnessing to us all about God who stands with us in the midst of suffering and tragedy. Even in their own grief and deep sorrow, they have spoken to the world about the God made known to us in Jesus, who suffers with us and for us. God is present, not causing chaos, but entering into it, not sending calamity, but suffering through it. Not standing over us, but holding tightly on to us and promising to never let us go. Wherever there is human tragedy and pain, the incarnate and crucified God is there.

This morning's reading from 1 Corinthians couldn't be clearer in this reminder: Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many..." Paul says. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. Paul's assertion that we are members of the body of Christ is a bold and profound statement of faith. We who are broken, limited, sinful are the ones through whom Christ is active in the world. It's an empowering statement of faith. We are not helpless. We are the body of Christ and agents of God's redemptive and restoring love in the world. As the quote from Teresa of Avila reminds us,

Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which to look out Christ's compassion to the world. Yours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses people now.

The Spirit of God was upon Jesus, because God anointed him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and the year of the Lord's favor. And here and now, we are the Body of the Christ, the Anointed. Maybe we need to put that reminder on our bathroom mirror so we hear the promise and the invitation each day as we get ready to make decisions throughout the day. Imagine reading this, praying this each day, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because God has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

It's powerful. And this scripture is fulfilled in our hearing—and in our doing.

And my guess is that you have *done* something these past 10 days with your life of faith. When images have made your sleep restless, you've likely prayed. Perhaps you've dug out your credit card for an online donation or written a check to the ELCA disaster fund or texted \$10 to the Red Cross or Lutheran World Relief. Since the earthquake, the ELCA has received 11,000 gifts ear-marked "Haiti relief" that total more than \$1.6 million—all of the funds going directly to the response effort.

Or maybe you helped provide for the hygiene kits assembled by our Sunday School children this morning. The kits will be sent to Church World Service, our partner in Haiti and around the world where others need basics for daily life such as a washcloth and a toothbrush.

And, of course, you are here joining the prayers and songs of other people of faith throughout the world who gather around Word and Sacrament this day, drawing comfort and promise from God who is among the ruins of Haiti; who is with us in our own worries, sickness and stress; and who hosts this meal, who IS this meal, and who promises all of us that in the waters of baptism: we belong to God.

We have been given the same promise Bishop Larson reminds us was given to Ben (paraphrased) "*You* have been wrapped in the arms of God in the waters of baptism, and from those waters, *your* life is an outpouring of love and joy, laughter and play, in response to God first loving *you*." And we join Ben in the blessing he offered those he loved—especially the poorest of the poor—"God's peace to us we pray."