

2 Epiphany C – 17 January 2010  
Isaiah 62:1-5; 1 Corinthians 12:1-11; John 2:1-11  
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After last week's earthquake in the Caribbean, some press accounts described the devastation in Haiti as being of "biblical proportions." I suppose it is regrettable that the bible might be associated by some with the death and destruction witnessed there, but in certain way, I suppose also that it is inevitable. It is inevitable because the bible concerns itself with God. Therefore it concerns a question that is even older than scripture.

It is a question that is as ancient as people's wonder of the stars; a question as ageless as people's instincts for the depths of the human heart. It is a question as inescapable, and as rigorously avoided, as human suffering and death itself. It is the question, "Is there a God?" The unimaginable devastation of an event like the earthquake last week in Haiti remind people of this question, and remind people that as old as it may be, the question is still fresh in the mind, still weighing on collective heart of humanity, even into this second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I read a story, a story that really happened. On March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1950 the West Side Baptist church in Beatrice Nebraska should have been busy. It was a Wednesday night; and on Wednesday night, the choir always gathers to rehearse for Sunday services. But this Wednesday night, something is different; nobody is around. It suggests to me a philosophical question: 'If a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it, does it make a noise?' Translated theologically, if God exists, but no one is present to notice, is there a God?

The disciples see Jesus perform a miracle at this wedding and, the scripture tells us, they believe. What do they believe? If someone were to ask them, they might not put it into exactly these words; but translated theologically, what they believe is that God is present. Jesus needs them to experience this sign of God's presence because it is inescapable that someday they will be reminded of human suffering and of death itself, and that's when that inescapable question will whisper itself to them again.

In Beatrice, Nebraska Marilyn, the church organist, is taking her usual after-dinner nap. But tonight, though it has never happened before, tonight, Marilyn oversleeps, and doesn't show up at church for rehearsal. She simply isn't there.

Susan is in the choir. But Susan is also a sophomore in high school. She does not usually struggle with her homework, but tonight she is having difficulty. Tonight, she too isn't there. Al and Emma are a couple. They are in the choir, and they usually pick up several of their fellow choir members and bring them to rehearsal. But tonight, they discover that the battery their car is dead. They are going to be late; and so are the folks that are waiting for them to pick them. So, tonight, none of them yet are there. The minister of Westside Baptist likes to join at rehearsals and his wife sings with the choir regularly. But for some reason, both of them are running late. It turns out that at 7:30 on this particular Wednesday night all eighteen members of the choir are late to practice. On this particular night, no one is there.

It likely seems to the ancient people of God that no one is there for them. It is likely that that inescapable question is rising to their consciousness, and they are wondering, 'Is there a God?' Broken as a nation, enslaved literally by others, enslaved spiritually by unrelenting despair, they are wondering, 'Is there at least a God for us?' And so God vows through the prophet Isaiah, to bring to the people a new glory, a new identity, a new freedom, a new prosperity. But perhaps more important, God tells them that their salvation shall be like a bright burning torch; they will be God's crowning beauty; God will parade them down the aisle, if you will, as God's own bride.

God will bless them, but this blessing will not occur quietly. God will send blessings upon the people. But these blessings will not come down with no one at all to notice them. The rescue of God's people will be something for them to witness and for the world around them to see, to hear, and, to the degree that they are able, to understand as a sign of the presence of God. Because

the sign of the presence of God is sign intended most of all for those to whom the sign does not belong.

Early Christians found themselves at times in possession of some extraordinary abilities. In his letter from which hear today, the Apostle Paul describes them as spiritual gifts. They are gifts of wisdom, knowledge, discernment, languages, faith, miracles, and healing. And these are curious phenomena worthy of further study, no doubt. But let's not get distracted with the sensational.

The point Paul is making here is that regardless of the particular gift, it is a gift from God and as such it is not to be hoarded; and it is not to be used as a means with which they may compete with one another for the outward appearance of spiritual superiority. These early Christians need to realize that any gift from God is meant to be evidence not just for the bearer of the gift, but evidence also for those observing it from outside, that God is there.

It is March 1st, 1950, in Beatrice Nebraska, and everyone in the choir at West Side Baptist church is late. 7:30 p.m. comes and goes, and no one is there. At Westside Baptist Church the furnace is located in the basement right underneath the choir loft. Shortly after 7:30 p.m., as usual on Wednesdays, that furnace comes on. But tonight, when there is no one there, there is a gas leak; and that gas leak explodes and completely destroys the building of Westside Baptist Church. And no one is injured, because tonight, no one was there.

Jesus' disciples witness his miracle, and we can have fun, I suppose, cherishing the fact that Jesus' first miracle seems to affirm our appreciation for a fine wine. And we can have a little more fun, perhaps, indicating to children that even the Son of God obeys his mother. But I think we get closer to the point when we realize that Jesus' reason for being present at the celebration is less what he does and more the people for whom he does it. While his actions are clearly signs of godly power, of holy love, of simple faithfulness, ultimately Jesus himself is evidence of the presence of God.

As such, Jesus is evidence of and the presence of, God's own desire to answer the inescapable human question. And what God shows in Jesus, is that question we think of as that most basic human question, that question that does indeed endure throughout all

generations, especially in times of devastation and destruction, that this question is not quite the one that people are actually asking, including you and me. The spoken question may well be, 'Does God exist?' or 'Is there a God?' But the question behind the question is 'Does God exist *for me?*' 'Is there *a place for me* with God?'

And when we remember that the miracle of the evidence of the presence of God that matters most is the person of Christ Jesus, God's very self, come among humanity, to hear the question personally, and to answer it personally, as well, then I think we see, we hear, those other miracles of evidence a little more easily; we experience them a little more readily.

On a news report from Haiti, I saw footage of a woman who had survived the earthquake. I heard the reporter asking her about her family. She had lost four children, but a baby son had survived pulled from beneath the bodies of his siblings. The reporter was asking her, as they must, what she thinks might have saved her son. "God," she replied. With eyes closed, she repeated it to the reporter, to herself, to anyone else who might hear her, "all God; it was God;"

In times of desperation, in times of peace and joy, even in times when it seems that no one is around, we may yet find the presence of God in a nap that goes a bit long, in an abundance of homework, or in a car that won't start. As we talk about it together later after a happy strange coincidence, or just sit together in silence after a disaster, we may find God's presence then in a phone call from friend, or in a tear shed with a stranger. That is when someone we know, or when someone we are just meeting for the first time ever, will find in you and me, God answering their question as well as yours and mine, "Yes," God says to them, to you and me: "I am there. More important," for God, "right now – I am here with you."

And now may Almighty God, whose has raised up Christ Jesus to be the Light of the world, and has called us out of darkness into Christ's glory, so shine in our hearts that we may show forth God's praise; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.