

A sermon delivered by
The Rev. David W. Fleenor

The Church of the Transfiguration
1 East 29th Street, New York, NY

Sunday, January 17, 2010
Second Sunday after the Epiphany

[Isaiah 62:1-5](#)

[Psalm 96 or 96:1-10](#)

[1 Corinthians 12:1-11](#)

[John 2:1-11](#)

How are we to make sense of an estimated 50,000 deaths in Haiti as a result of a 7.0 magnitude earthquake? I've heard two arguments this week that I think are off base: an argument from the perspective of God's retribution on a sinful nation and one from the point of view of natural disaster as natural evil.

Retribution

If we listen to the televangelist, Pat Robertson, then we make sense of this disaster through the lens of retribution, or God's judgment on a sinful nation.¹ Many of you probably heard that on his TV show, Robertson argued that Haitians made a "pact with the devil" in the late 1700's which resulted in this week's destruction. What was he referring to?

Haitian Revolution

Robertson was referring to the Haitian Revolution that occurred between 1791 and 1803. It is one of the rare instances in history where slaves were actually able to overthrow their oppressors, in this instance, the French.

It all began on the evening of August 14, 1791. And I quote:

"A man named [Dutty] Boukman [a Voodoo priest]...organized...a meeting with the slaves in the mountains of the North. This meeting took the form of a Voodoo ceremony in the (*Bwa Kayiman*) Bois Caiman in the northern mountains of the island. It was raining and the sky was raging with clouds; the slaves then started confessing their resentment of their condition. A woman started dancing languorously in the crowd, taken by the spirits of the loas. With a knife in her hand, she cut the throat of a pig and distributed the blood to all the participants of the meeting who swore to kill all the whites on the island. On August 22, 1791, the blacks of the North entered into a rebellion, killing all the whites they met and setting the plantations of the colony on fire."²

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/01/13/pat-robertson-haiti-curse_n_422099.html

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bois_Ca%C3%AFman

It didn't end there. It took them over a decade to complete the violent revolt and achieve permanent freedom. The Haitian Revolution is regarded as a defining moment in the history of Africans in the new world. Haiti is the first republic ruled by people of African ancestry.³ Today, nearly all Haitians are Christian; about half also practice voodoo, an adaptation of their African ancestors' native religion.

Robertson was referring to the Voodoo ceremony in the (*Bwa Kayiman*) Bois Caiman. He is trying to make the argument that when Boukman and others practiced their Voodoo ceremony they essentially sold their nation's soul to the devil. The result, according to Robertson's logic, is the poverty, violence, despotic rule, and natural disasters this unfortunate country has endured throughout its history.

Did you know Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere and that half its population lives on less than a dollar a day? They also have the highest infant-mortality rate in the Western Hemisphere. 98 percent of its forests have been burned for firewood, which leaves the country vulnerable to flooding from hurricanes. In 2008 four storms in four weeks left a million Haitians homeless. This doesn't even take into account Haiti's disastrous political history, which includes the reign of François (Papa Doc) Duvalier, who assassinated and tortured more than 30,000 people in the 1960s.

Robertson sees the vengeful hand of God in all of this, including last week's earthquake.

What he fails to see is the oppression that the Haitians internalized from their French colonizers. When they did gain freedom they imitated how they had experienced power and its abuse which gave rise to selfish and violent rulers. This, in turn, gave rise to poverty and corruption.

Robertson is wrong on at least two counts: 1) God did not do this to the Haitian people as an act of punishment for Voodoo, a religion Robertson considers innately evil; and 2) God did not do this to the Haitian people for seeking out freedom from oppressors.

First of all, Voodoo is not innately evil, but it is different. The religion has a supreme God called Bondye and many lesser spirits, known as the loa. Bondye is removed from its creation and therefore may not be contacted for help. Practitioners, then, direct their prayers and communication to the loa. When the Africans were colonized they were forced to convert to Roman Catholicism and blended the two religions. Bondye, the supreme God, became the Creator that we acknowledge as the Father, and the loa became the saints. It is likely that Robertson characterizes Voodoo as evil because of his Protestant biases against both Roman Catholicism and traditional African Religions. One of the mistakes many fundamentalists make is to equate difference with evil. It is difficult for them to tolerate differences without judging them.

Second, who can blame an oppressed people from seeking out freedom? Isn't that what this country is founded upon? Jesus proclaimed over and over again that he came to set the captives free.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Haitian_revolution

The twentieth century prophet we remember on tomorrow's national holiday spent a life time highlighting this point. Martin Luther King, Jr. in his famous "I have a dream" speech, said, "And when this happens, when we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual: Free at last! Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last!"

I am not sure, but I imagine some imbeciles like Robertson opined that the assassination of MLK was God's retribution upon him and his people for attempting to upset the natural order of things, that so-called natural order being the oppression of African-Americans.

What could be farther from the truth?

Natural Evil

The second assertion I've heard this week is that natural disasters result from natural evil. This line of thinking suggests that there are two types of evil: moral and natural. Moral evil is caused by an agent, i.e. a human being. Murder is an example. Natural evil is an event not caused by a human agent and is therefore the sole responsibility of God. An earthquake is an example.

I don't believe in natural evil. As I've said before from this pulpit, I believe that God creates and grants free will to all of creation. It (and we) are all free to grow and fulfill our potential. It is easy for us humans to forget that we are part of creation. We are animals, albeit the highest evolved of the animal kingdom. We are not separate from creation, but inexorably knit within it. So just as we have free will to choose what we will do so does nature. The difference is that we humans have the potential for making evil choices, whereas the earth does not. Nature is morally neutral. When tectonic plates shift and cause earthquakes it is not the hand of a vengeful God exacting punishment on humankind. Rather, it is one of many actions the earth takes to continue its growth cycle.

Let me give you another example. When I was the clinical supervisor for chaplain interns at Memorial Sloan-Kettering I would ask them this question, is cancer evil? The answer, of course, is no. It is morally neutral. "Cancer is a disease in which abnormal cells divide without control and are able to invade other tissues."⁴ They are cells with no respect for other cell's boundaries.

Some cancers arise from unhealthy (maybe sinful) behavior, but many do not. Cancer is a group of cells that don't follow the normal course of cell growth. Normal cells have something within them that causes them to expire at some point – something like a suicide mechanism. Cancer cells don't have that. In many cases, these mutated cells just grow and grow and grow and eventually overtake healthy cells which leads to pain and sometimes death. Is this horrible? Yes. Evil? No.

⁴ <http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/what-is-cancer>

Like cancer, earthquakes often result in suffering and death. But neither are inherently or naturally evil.

What is Evil?

Evil exists within human systems that value profit over human life and human dignity.

That is why our baptismal covenant asks us to commit to doing three very important things: 1) persevere in resisting evil, 2) strive for justice and peace among all people, and 3) respect the dignity of every human being.

The evil in this situation in Haiti can be found in the poverty and political systems that perpetuate it. For example, it is because of the shoddy construction of Haitian buildings that so many people died.⁵ A BBC reporter wrote, “Ironically, people living in the shanty towns might have had a better chance of survival than those trapped under concrete buildings, many of which ‘pancaked.’”⁶ In other words, the homeless folks in Haiti fared better than those with enough resources to put a roof over their heads. If the people and systems of power in Haiti had valued human beings and human dignity over profit then many lives would have been spared. Building codes would have been established and upheld and lives would have been saved. The culprit here is not God, but people and systems that perpetuate poverty and corruption.

Turning Water Into Wine

All of this makes Jesus’ first miracle at the wedding in Cana seem a bit frivolous, at first glance. After all, he turned water into wine so a already-drunk wedding party could continue to drink. Couldn’t his first miracle have been something more substantial, like giving sight to the blind or casting out demons? Yes, but the first miracle is a sign that points to something far greater: the kingdom of God on earth.

Jesus’ first miracle took place for one reason: to reveal his glory to the disciples so they would believe he was the Messiah. This was the start of his ministry that would eventually culminate in ushering in a whole new order for the universe – one built on peace, justice, righteousness, and love.

There are many interpretations of this miracle.

Replacement – One has it that the water represents the purification system of the Jews that is replaced by the blood of Jesus. Therefore, this miracle foreshadows that Jesus is a new way to get to the Father.

Eucharist – A second interpretation proposes that this miracle is pointing to the Eucharist. When Mary says, “They have no wine” it is reminiscent of the shortage of bread available to the 4000. Jesus says, “They have nothing to eat.” He then turns 7 loaves of bread into enough to feed the entire crowd. In both cases, bread and wine are multiplied in order to give life and show God’s abundance.

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/8460042.stm>

⁶ Ibid.

Abundance – A third interpretation has it that this miracle is a sign of moving from scarcity to abundance. The Kingdom that Jesus will usher in will be one of fullness of life, not poverty. Remember “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”

How Shall We Respond?

In light of all of this, how are we to respond? We are part of a kingdom that turns poverty into abundance. We are part of a kingdom that sets the captives free. On that note, I need not remind you that we are part of a parish that was a stop on the Underground Railroad and a sanctuary for Blacks during the Draft Riots. We are a people called to revolt against the present world order, called to turn the world upside down.

Practically, we may respond in two ways this morning: pray and give.⁷

- 1) Prayer = in a few moments Fr. Platt will lead us as a community into prayer for the people of Haiti. I urge you to focus your private prayers on Haiti as well.
- 2) Give = shortly, we will take up a collection like we always do. I invite you to include an additional donation that we can send to ERD as a parish.

We, the people of God, are the arms and legs that do the work of the kingdom.

⁷ Check out the Episcopal Public Policy Network for recommendations on how to put your faith in action: http://www.episcopalchurch.org/resources_118505_ENG_HTM.htm