

“How Long, O Lord?” A sermon on Haiti

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“How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul and have sorry in my heart all day long?”
“How long, O Lord...how long?”

Poignant words from Psalm 13, words written some 3,000 years ago that resonate just as profoundly now in the 21st century as we see tragedy and injustice so prevalent both across the globe and in our own neighborhoods. And today, these words have special meaning for us as we gather together today, in the words of a wise colleague...

to lament...

to repent...

to reclaim hope...

and to act

in support of the countless faithful souls in Haiti who continue to do truly heroic ministry.

We gather together today...to lament.

At the start of the fifth century, when the once mighty Roman Empire was crumbling apart in the face of invaders without and corruption within, one Christian leader—Bishop Augustine of Hippo, declared,

“The world is passing away...losing its grip; the world is short of breath.”

This imagery might well bring to mind situations in our own national context, but certainly one has only to turn to news reports from Port-au-Prince and elsewhere in Haiti to witness the tragic realities that our sisters and brothers on the ground face in their daily lives: gang violence, kidnappings, exploitation, arms trafficking, fraud and unjust gains.

As another wise colleague of mine recently said, “If somebody is skimming, deep shame on them; but I imagine somebody somewhere has figured out how to profit.”

Sadly, none of this is new. Tragedy and injustice have been Haiti’s all-too familiar companions from its inception in 1492, when Columbus landed on the island he claimed for Spain as Hispaniola. We know the subsequent script all too well: the colonization of its indigenous peoples, the ceding of the western third of the island to France and those occupiers’ importation of enslaved persons from Africa to tend the highly lucrative sugar and coffee crops, Haiti’s brief taste of prosperity after independence in 1804 soon crushed by a crippling economic indebtedness to its former colonial rulers, subsequent U.S. occupation also for economic gain, the cruel dictatorship of Papa Doc and Baby Doc Duvalier, a catastrophic earthquake in 2010, and the ongoing horrors in today’s headlines.

The Apostle Paul described the community of believers as a human body in which all the members are connected: “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (1 Cor. 12:26). We here today ache and weep and lament for the people of Haiti—no, **with** the people of Haiti—for we are fellow members in the Body of Christ, sisters and brothers, siblings all. But it is not enough to lament.

We gather together today...to repent.

In 1956, Eleanor Roosevelt, former First Lady of the United States and a primary designer of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserted, “We are all on trial, to show what democracy means.”

We might well say today that we are all on trial for what is happening in Haiti...not in obvious ways, of course, not as gang members or kidnappers or extortionists. But we who this year celebrate the 250th anniversary of our own successful break from colonial rule, now enjoy benefits and privileges that we all too often take for granted, and just as often choose to forget our own history of the enslavement of persons of African descent and the displacement and destruction of indigenous peoples.

More than this, we choose to forget our country’s own part in the mid-20th century invasion and occupation of our Caribbean neighbor for profit, our blind eye to the atrocities of the Duvalier rule because we deemed him as anti-Communist, and our own ongoing failures to support self-sustainability in more recent years.

And yes, we in the Church are hardly innocent, for all too often we too have failed our fellow sisters and brothers in the Diocese of Haiti. Indeed, we Episcopalians have often prided ourselves as being a Church that takes seriously the needs of our neighbors in the here and now, yet many times through the years we have neglected the very diocese that we proudly call the largest in The Episcopal Church.

In the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 25, Jesus famously tells the tale of people standing before the throne of God, who separates them as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. We all know this story. But we should note the seemingly genuine surprise of those who stand before the Divine Presence and ask, “Lord, when is it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?” We all know the response, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” (Matt 25:44-45).

Why does the Church exist if not to be a voice for the most vulnerable? In the late 1970s in another ravaged country in the Americas, Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador rightly challenged the followers of Jesus : “A church that does not provoke any crisis, preach a gospel that does not unsettle, proclaim a word of God that does not get under anyone's

skin or a word of God that does not touch the real sin of the society in which it is being proclaimed: what kind of gospel is that?"

We here today repent for all the times that we have not done more, not pushed harder, not listened more carefully and responded more boldly to the voices of those on the ground in Haiti who like the Psalmist cry out, "How long, O Lord, how long?" But also...

We gather together today...to reclaim hope.

How in the world is it possible to do faithful, effective ministry in the midst of so much violence and hardship and struggle? And yet this is exactly what so many Haitian clergy and laity do day in and day out. As former Presiding Bishop Michael Curry might say, these truly remarkable Episcopal Christians try to find ways to turn the nightmare of the world around them into God's dream for all God's children.

I don't need to tell you all about the work that is done everyday in the local churches, clinics, and schools. Against all the odds, they press on, living out the words from the Easter prayer, "Let the whole world see and know that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new." Hope is what we cling to when all else around us tries to drown it out. And the followers of Jesus in countless towns and villages throughout the country not only hold onto hope...they embody it for all the encounter, and indeed for all of us to look on from outside.

In the 1215, the worldwide Church was arguably at the zenith of its earthly power. Sadly, it often displayed that power in acts of violence, mirroring an Empire whose authority it inherited. Crusades, inquisitions, pogroms: where was hope to be found when Christians were slaughtering all who were different in faith or opinion?

And yet in the midst of all this power and pomp and violence, an unlikely figure emerged from the Umbrian hills north of Rome, a young man named Giovanni Bernadone who had a vision in which God called, "Rebuild my Church." This son of a wealthy businessman renounced his own wealth and privilege, and started doing what he had been told to do, rebuilding the church called San Damiano, one stone at a time. Others took notice, especially as this troubadour forever known as Francis of Assisi situated himself alongside the poor and vulnerable. Today, he is known by many as a lover of animals, but the fact is that in his own time, he turned his world upside down, breaking down a system of gross economic disparity and sharing the love of God with all he met, even enemies on the battlefields of the Crusades. Along with Clare of Assisi and many allies, Francis became a light in the darkness, a living embodiment of hope who changed his world and rebuilt God's Church, not just one stone at a time, but one life at a time.

Even so, we here today reclaim hope as we see the faithful in Haiti seeking to make a difference in their world, one school, one clinic, one village, one life at a time.

We gather together today...to act!

You wouldn't be in this place today if you did not have a love of Haiti and its people, and a desire to walk with them in their mission and ministry, helping to make a difference. In this past year and a half, as I have worked on behalf of the Presiding Bishop to try to find both short-term and long-term ways to support the clergy and laity on the ground, I have found myself deeply inspired by both the work being done by Haitians there and the many ways in which people here in this country seek to support them in that work.

Second-century critics of Christianity did not understand the strange practices of this new movement—imagine trying to explain to the average Roman of that time what it means to eat the body and drink the blood of their crucified founder. Even so, as the Christian apologist Justin Martyr noted, those critics could not help but admit, “But see how they love one another.” In a short time, we are going to have a forum discussion in which we can discuss specific challenges and needs.

But for now, I want to remind myself—and perhaps some of you—that even as we lament and repent and reclaim hope, we also and dare to act, in small but significant ways. For example, this past week, 1500 French Prayer Books made their way to Cap Haitien, to be distributed throughout the diocese, thanks to the teamwork of several individuals and groups here.

Earlier, I mentioned the martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero. Here is another familiar quotation of his that I hold onto whenever I feel overwhelmed by the seemingly impossible tasks before us. “We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that. This enables us to do something, and to do it well. It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.”

So let us act, in small ways or great, with our time, our talent, our treasure, answering the cry, “How long, O Lord, how long?” with a resounding, “God hears you, and in God's name we will try to hear you far better than we often have. We will find strive to find new ways to stand with you.”

My friends, let us dare to recommit ourselves, with God's help, to walking alongside our Haitian siblings, seeking with them to transform the world—one stone at a time, one life at a time—and perhaps find ourselves transformed in the process.

May it be so. Thanks be to God!