

***Did God Cause the Earthquake in Haiti?***  
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***January 31, 2010            Based on Luke 13:1-5***

It's a question that has been thrown around a lot lately. Did God cause the earthquake in Haiti?

It seems like only moments after the earthquake hit Haiti well-known evangelical Christian leader Pat Robertson took it upon himself to assign blame for the earthquake on the people of Haiti. Why? Because way back in 1791, a Haitian voodoo priest led the people in a revolt against the French government in hopes to be free from their slavery. Although this evangelical leader didn't go so far as to say it, there was definitely an insinuation that God sent the earthquake on the Haitian people to punish them for their sinful past, and (as Pat Robertson put it) their "pact with the devil."

Is he correct? Did God send the earthquake upon the Haiti people to punish them? How we answer that question says something about what we believe about God. Think about it: If one does argue that God sent the earthquake upon the people of Haiti to punish them, what does that say about one's belief in God's very nature? Is that a loving God? Is that the kind of God we encounter in the New Testament?

Trying to make sense of a tragedy is nothing new. In today's Gospel from Luke, two tragedies are mentioned. First, Pilate has murdered some people from Galilee while they were in the Temple. Second, a portion of the southern wall around Jerusalem (also known as the Tower of Siloam) collapsed, tragically killing eighteen people. The disciples ask Jesus, "Why did those people die?" They are trying to make sense of it all. "Did God cause this?" they wonder.

During Biblical times, people believed that if bad things happened in your life it was a sign that God was judging you for sinful behavior. It's the exact same mindset expressed by Pat Robertson about the Haiti earthquake. Take a look at the Old Testament story of Job and you will hear this same premise being expressed. Everything in Job's life is falling apart, and his best friends – even his wife – ask Job, "What did you do to deserve such judgment from God?"

Jesus' disciples also operate from this mindset. They assume the people who were killed by Pilate and by the tower tragedy were worse sinner than everyone else. But notice Jesus firmly challenges that mindset by saying that yes, sin surely has negative consequences in our lives. But not every bad thing that happens to us is a result of sin. After all, Jesus reminds us, we are all sinners. We all fall short of God's glorious standard. Therefore, God would have the right and authority to punish every last one of us.

But that's not the game plan of the God we encounter in the New Testament. Just think of the beloved words of the third chapter of John: *For God loved the world in such a way that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish*

*but have eternal life. God sent his Son into the world not to judge the world, but to save the world through him.*

The outspoken evangelical leader who all too quickly judged the Haitians needs to refresh himself on simple, biblical truth. God's intention is not to judge the world but to save it. God gave his Son upon the cross so that the sins of our past would no longer define us. God wiped the slate clean, offering us a second chance.

So, no, I do not for one moment believe that God sent the earthquake on the Haitian people in order to reveal his judgment upon them. But I do believe that God had a hand in the Haiti earthquake. Allow me to explain.

Martin Luther taught that the God we meet in the New Testament is One who suffers with us. Because of his great love for us, God chose to become human just like us in the person of Jesus Christ. The fact that Jesus was fully human means that he experienced all of our human emotions and pain. As the nails pierced his body on the cross, Jesus understood pain. When his best friend Lazarus died, Christ experienced grief and loss. The Bible says, "Jesus wept." By God choosing to become human, God made the decision to suffer with us.

So, Martin Luther reasoned, if you want to know God most fully, then stand at the foot of the cross and behold Jesus nailed to that cross, suffering with us. God is one who comes among us, stands in solidarity with us, prays with us, mourns with us, cries with us, dies with us. That is the nature of God we experience most fully in the person of Jesus Christ. God is one who joins us in our humanity.

One of the American victims of the Haiti earthquake was a soon to be ordained Lutheran pastor by the name of Ben Larson. Ben was on the third story of a children's home teaching the faith when the earthquake hit.

I wonder... where was God at that moment? Was God way up in the heavens, his finger pointed down to earth in judgment, orchestrating that great earthquake? Or was God right beside Ben, suffering with him in his time of need, cradling him in his arms of mercy, calling out to Jesus that another one of his children was ready to be welcomed into heaven?

As Ben and hundreds of thousands of Haitians breathed their last breath, I know that the face of God was streaming with tears. How am I so sure? Because our God is one who has come among us and loved us more fully and completely than anyone else. When tragedy strikes our lives, God's heart gets heavy and his eyes fill with tears. Because of the great love God has for us, God chooses to stand with us.

I love the picture on the bulletin cover this morning. Take a look at that picture. The first thing you notice is all of the destruction. Buildings that once stood tall have tumbled to the ground. But notice, there among all of the destruction and suffering is the Cross of Christ. Christ is there among his people, suffering with them, reminding them of God's

love and mercy that was secured through his death and resurrection. God was not up in the heavens orchestrating the earthquake that devastated Haiti.

No, God was among the Haitian people on that day. God was there, his mighty arms protecting his beloved children. God was there guiding those searching for loved ones. God was there giving people strength as their loved ones called out from under the rubble to say “I love you. I’m not going to make it.” God is still in Haiti, among the relief workers, blessing the survivors with basic necessities and, more importantly, with hope. God will continue to be there, as God has always been, giving the people of Haiti the courage and the desire to rebuild their world.

So instead of us thinking that the earthquake in Haiti was a sign of God’s judgment and wrath, let us see it as a sign that God’s kingdom has come near. The hungry are being fed, the naked clothed. The sick are being healed; the hopeless are being given hope.

ELCA Pastor Douglas Hill was accompanying eleven seminary students to Haiti as part of their January term theology courses. On the second evening of their visit, the earthquake hit. Pastor Hill writes, “We heard a big rumble and people screaming. The rumble felt like it lasted forever, but it was only 45 seconds. My first response, of course, was to make sure that everyone in our group was OK. Thankfully, everyone was fine. But we soon found ourselves surrounded by death and ruin. People who were wounded were being carried on doors. We instinctively found ourselves helping the Haitian people dig out their loved ones. But the devastation was too great. We watched hundreds of injured people die right in front of us.”

“We were told of a place to go for shelter. As we walked there with thousands of Haitians, the group spontaneously began to sing “How Great Thou Art’ in Creole. We joined them, singing in English,” Hill says.

Can you imagine, even with all of the death and devastation, the people of Haiti breaking out in song praising God?

*Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to thee,  
How great thou art! How great thou art!*

How were the people of Haiti able to express such reverence and faith in the midst of such tragedy? I think the answer can be found in the third verse of that hymn:

*But when I think that God his Son not sparing,  
Sent him to die, I scarce can take it in.  
That on the cross my burden gladly bearing  
He bled and died to take away my sin.  
How great thou art!*

Through the cross of Jesus, the people of Haiti had experienced God as one who was truly with them, as one who suffers with them, one who was willing and able to take away their burdens. And so they sang, “How Great Thou Art!”

Pastor Hill continues to share his experience: “When we arrived at the shelter, we were given something to eat: peanut butter, bread and bananas. The Haitians took care of us. They were beautiful people. They welcomed us as brothers and sisters. In the refugee area, we slept and lived with the Haitian people for two days. We didn't provide care for anyone; they provided care for us. In so many ways, hope, peace, faith and the pursuit of life overshadowed the death and destruction we saw. Without a doubt,” Pastor Hill writes, “we experienced God present with his people. The kingdom of God was being revealed.”

Yes, God is with us. The kingdom of God has come near. That's not just the good news of Christmas. We should be proclaiming that truth each and every day of our lives, especially when tragedy strikes.

Let us join our voices with the prophet Isaiah who proclaims:

*Listen to the words of the LORD who created you:*

*"Do not be afraid, for I have claimed you.*

*I have called you by name; you are mine.*

*When you go through deep waters, I will be with you.*

*When you walk through the fire of oppression...*

*the flames will not consume you...*

*Do not be afraid, for I am with you” (Isaiah 43).*

And let us never forget the good news proclaimed by St. Paul:

*Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean Christ no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us. And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life... neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow — not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love... Indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8).*

Thanks be to God! Amen.