

DID YOU SEE THE BABY SMILE?

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Psalm 42

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How have you handled the human misery you've seen the last two weeks?

What have you felt? As you've seen the pictures day after day of the earthquake survivors, masked against the stench of death, aimlessly picking through devastation as far as the eye can see, looking for some small token of life the way it was, and never will be again...searching for some hint, some clue, some small sign, that life continues to make sense.

Have you struggled in vain, like I have struggled in vain, to get your mind around what that must be like to have lost even what little you had to begin with? With a disaster, natural or human made, it is always the poorest who suffer the most – isn't it?

And in Haiti there are so many who have lost everyone they loved. How is it that they don't just literally die themselves of heartbreak? Maybe, probably, many have and will simply lie down and not get up again.

And have you been able to find words for what you have seen? Or have there been days when the pictures created in you an abyss of speechlessness?

In the past two weeks, I have heard the words of the psalmist over and over in my head: "Tears have been my food day and night." In Haiti, it has been literally true – that for many, tears have been their only food.

And some of you have told me about sitting in front of the television and just weeping. Which seems to me like a holy thing – a form of prayer.

There are times when events make everything else pale in comparison. The Haiti earthquake is one of those times. We sit there watching the network reports and everything else we worry about and complain about no longer seems worth complaining or worrying about.

I've heard some of you say, "It puts things in perspective." That's a good thing for sure. Though how long will it last? How long before all the stuff we fret about again becomes all the stuff we fret about?

But maybe there will be one face for each of us...one Haitian face among all the images we've seen, which will remain in our mind's eye. One face who we continue to pray for, like a sister or brother. One face etched in our mind, as the remembered reminder to not let our lives be consumed by that which finally doesn't matter....

"O God, my tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me, 'Where is your God?'"

Have you wondered about that too? Where was God when the earth shook in Haiti?

For some, the earthquake is proof enough that God isn't...that the universe, nature, life is purposeless and Godless after all.

It's the age-old argument: That if God is powerful and good, then why do terrible things happen? And since terrible things happen, then God must be powerless, or not good, or an illusion to begin with.

How have you dealt with this ancient spiritual question these past two weeks? What have you told the child who asked, "Why didn't God make the earthquake stop?"

How have you answered your own wondering about why this should happen to those who have so little to begin with?

TV evangelist Pat Robertson, who presumes to speak for all Christians, has said that the earthquake was caused by Haiti's "pact with the devil." It was a stupid and merciless thing to say. And even in Haiti there are Haitian evangelical Christians who blame those in Haiti who practice the rituals of voodoo. This, by the way, is not like the blood-curdling thing Hollywood movies have made of voodoo spirit veneration.

But in Haiti, as everywhere, there are always those who take religion and make it about blame and punishment. For when bad things happen, it is human nature to want to find someone whose fault it is – someone who has displeased God. So it matters that in this church house we say it clearly: that God did not do this, or will this as punishment or a test faith for anyone. For there are things, terrible things, that happen in nature and in life which even God's Great Love cannot control or prevent. Tectonic plates will just move beneath the earth.

So here in this place we will pull our children close and tell them that God wept when the earth shook in Haiti.

And among the reports coming out of Haiti are that throughout the nights there can be heard the sound of people singing...hymns. And this morning as we worship, those hymns will be sung again in Haiti, as people gather where they can in the open spaces to worship the God who they believe is suffering with them.

And my hunch is that somewhere in Haiti this morning, perhaps in several gatherings in Haiti this morning, from some Bible pulled from some pile of concrete, the words of the psalm will be read: "Hope in God, for we shall again praise God, our help and our God."

But the pictures are haunting. And we can't take our eyes off the screen, maybe because there is this irrational yet real sense that if we see it enough times, it will somehow magically come out differently in the end. Be not so bad after all. Have an explanation we can get our minds around.

But it doesn't come out differently. And the longer we watch the worse it seems. The details and numbers, the heartrending stories of loss and suffering multiply beyond our ability to comprehend. Until a kind of numbness sets in, as if our bodies are telling us we've seen enough for now.

And did you have this urgent wanting, an almost desperate need to connect with your own loved ones?

"Hi, it's me. Are you watching too? Yes, it's unbelievable. No, I'm okay. I just needed to hear your voice and say, I love you."

For you can't see those pictures and take anything for granted – love and relationships, food and water, a home and bed, the next heartbeat and breath.

All of us must confess that we live too many of our days with a sense of entitlement – that I deserve what I have and even more. Could the spiritual legacy of this unimaginable human tragedy be that we would each live a bit more humbly, simply, gratefully?

And could this, will this, also cause us to surrender our illusions of separateness and superiority?

I mean, you can't see the picture of the man climbing over a great pile of rubble because he still believes he will hear his wife's voice beneath the chunks of concrete...and you can't see the dust covered face of the grandmother who has lost three generations of her family...and you can't watch the 12-year-old child giving his ration of water to his younger siblings because now at 12 he is responsible for them...you can't see any of them

without feeling – what? – Relationship, kinship even, a sense of shared humanity that changes how we think about our lives in the world.

In this time of deep political division over taxes and healthcare, war and national priorities...maybe we're just called now to look at the picture from Haiti, and give what we can, allowing ourselves to be drawn out of self-concern, and political ideology, and the need to be right, so that we can hear ourselves say, "We are all in this beautiful and sometimes grief making thing called life together. So we best live with as much compassion and generosity and love as we can muster."

Last week, when I thought I could not watch or listen any longer, I sat there long enough to see one more story – this one of a four-month-old baby pulled from the rubble who had miraculously survived. Maybe you saw her too – her dust caked face, one of her little legs broken, yet alive.

And as the doctor held her – did you see it? She smiled at him.

In this season of Epiphany, that baby's smile was an epiphany for me. For all the agonizing questions about why, and even my own feelings of guilt about being able to sit in front of my flat screen and watch...all those questions, and even the sense of personal guilt, didn't matter as much as that baby's smile.

In that baby's astonishing smile was something more powerful even than all the powers of death in that place.

And this week when someone asks me, "Where is evidence of God's love in Haiti?"...this week when someone asks...I'll think I'll just say, "Did you see the baby smile?"