

A Tale of Two Cities

C Epiphany 2--Isaiah 62:1-5

My wife, Nan, is out of town this week, so I'm going to tell a story on her. As many of you have probably noticed, Nan is a very enthusiastic person. And there was a time, early in our life together, when she used to turn to me at random moments in the day and say, "Where are we living, Ian?" The answer I was supposed to give was not "San Francisco," which is literally where we lived, but "Paradise," which is where we lived in the emotional reality of Nan's world. And I must admit, the San Francisco Bay Area was, and is, a pretty incredible place, with its wild pacific coastline, its tall redwood trees and beautiful parks, its fresh and diverse cuisines, its cultural life, and its (*ahem*) temperate weather.

So it was in this paradise one October evening, while I was working in an after school program in North Berkeley, that I stooped to pick up a crumpled piece of paper and surprised myself by banging my forehead on the wall. Feeling klutzy and embarrassed, I went outside. The windows of the building were flexing and wobbling in their frames like sheet metal, and that's when I realized that the ground was shaking. Quickly, we staff gathered the kids into a safe place in the open, and then waited for the parents to pick them up while taking turns listening to the radio. The reports were almost unimaginable: buildings crumbling in the marina, a section of the bay bridge down, and the top layer of a two-deck highway in Oakland collapsed on the cars beneath. In the valley below us, plumes of smoke were rising and I could hear sirens. It was surreal and terrifying. That night, as I drove back into San Francisco, I'll never forget coming across

the Golden Gate Bridge into this black void that had replaced the peninsula's usual swarm of lights.

But in the end almost everybody made it through. Lights came back on. Most buildings survived. Sixty-three people were tragically killed, but many more were saved by well-engineered structures; heavy, expensive machines; and excellent medical care. Fires were put out. There was food and water and shelter for all who needed it. It was still paradise, after all, and in paradise, plentiful resources are mobilized to transform major disasters into moderate inconveniences.

As I'm sure you are all painfully aware, such is not the case in Haiti. In Port-au-Prince, hundreds of buildings have been leveled or tossed into ravines. The hospitals empty of supplies even as they fill with bodies. There is not enough water. There is not enough food or shelter. People walk around dazed on the streets and sleep on the streets and die on the streets for lack of simple things, and because there are so few heavy machines, the cries of the trapped have continued to reach up from rubble piles across the city for days until, one by one, they fall silent. There is a name for this experience, and it's nothing close to "paradise."

So: two major urban areas, two magnitude seven earthquakes, but in one, the death toll rises into the tens and in the other, the tens of thousands. Maybe even 100,000. Why? On one level, the answer is pretty simple: wealth. Inequity. The concentration of resources in some communities and not in others, and the power of that concentration to diminish or magnify natural devastation. The difference between San Francisco in 1989 and Port-au-Prince in 2010 is the difference between rich and poor. And the tragedy of the difference between rich and poor is not a tragedy of the natural world. It is not an

"act of God" as the insurance companies would have it. It is a social tragedy. It is a tragedy of human injustice and human acquiescence. It is a tragedy of moral proportions, this gap in wealth that brings one city through an earthquake relatively unscathed and reduces another to a wasteland.

When I read Isaiah's words in our lectionary today, I can't help but hear in them the voices of Haitians as they must be responding to this devastation that poverty has so compounded in their country. Isaiah is surveying the Jerusalem to which his people have returned after having been conquered and banished to Babylon for almost fifty years. Like a poor city after an earthquake, it lies in ruins, the temple destroyed, the people reduced to subsistence farming and starvation. One part anguished plea, one part defiant insistence, Isaiah cries out against God for this injustice, calls on God to fulfill God's promise of restoration, vows not to keep silent until he is heard and his people are lifted up again like "a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD." You promised to be a just God, Isaiah seems to be saying. But this is not justice. This is disaster! Where are you and your promises, now?

It's an excellent question. Where is the God of justice in the midst of these kinds of tragedies? I don't honestly know. But I can tell you that time and time again in the Bible, God calls the human community to account for perpetuating inequalities between rich and poor, powerful and vulnerable. Time and time again, God works through small and imperfect leaders in their quest to bring justice to the disenfranchised. In fact, the best evidence I could point to of God's presence in the world today is found in the actions of those who raise up the lowly and create movements to bend that long arc of history toward justice.

So it seems to me that if God plays any role in the devastation of Haiti it is to cry out with the Haitian people for a world where resources are more evenly shared. If God plays any role it is to call the rich of the world to task for the greed and stinginess with which we have ignored the poor. If God plays any role it is to help us to name the vast inequity that separates San Francisco from Port-au-Prince for what it is: a sin, a state of things that must be altered. And if God plays any role in our response to this sin, it is to animate us to imagine and yearn and work for a world where these inequities fall away, where even in the face of natural disasters, every community can be paradise.