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“Lord, Hear Our Cry”
A sermon by Joseph S. Harvard

Second Sunday in Lent
February 28, 2010

Gen. 15:1–12; Ps. 27; Phil. 3:17–4:1; Lk. 13:31–35

Gracious God, speak your Word to us today as we wait. So many voices clamor for our attention, our devotion, our resources. Enable us to stop and listen to the One who has come to bring peace and hope to this troubled world. Move us so that we may respond through Christ our Lord. Amen.

We seem to be living in a season of earthquakes as there were two more earthquakes this weekend. I remember when the earthquake struck Haiti on January 12, we were all shaken. The loss of lives, injury, and homelessness was unimaginable.

Also appalling was the Reverend Pat Robertson taking to the airwaves to announce that Haiti had been “cursed by one thing after another” since they “swore a pact with the devil.”¹

He talked about their suffering as a result of their sin of voodooism, and having made a pact with the Devil to defeat the French years ago. As horrible as that tragedy in Haiti was and still is, these remarks compound the injury and the pain. As I have reflected on it, I’ve come to understand his response as a terrible

¹ “Pat Robertson Haiti “Cursed” After “Pact to the Devil.” *CBS News: Crimesider*. Retrieved February 26, 2010. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2010/01/13/crimesider/entry6092717.shtml>>

example of our need to explain seemingly random tragedies. We need a reason for such things.

Barbara Brown Taylor, who will be our McPherson Lecturer at the end of April, tells a story about an experience she had as a hospital chaplain. The calls she dreaded most did not come from the emergency room, the psychiatric ward or even the morgue. They came from the pediatric floor, where little babies lay in cribs with bandages covering half their heads and sweet-faced children pushed IV poles down the hall. One day she received a call to come sit with a mother while her five-year-old daughter was in surgery. Earlier in the week, the girl had been playing with a friend when her head began to hurt. By the time she found her mother, she could no longer see. At the hospital, a CAT scan confirmed that a large tumor was pressing on the girl's optic nerve, and she was scheduled for surgery as soon as possible.

On the day of the operation, Barbara Brown Taylor found the girl's mother sitting under the fluorescent lights in the waiting room beside an ashtray full of cigarette butts. She smelled as if she had puffed every one of them, although she was not smoking when Barbara Brown Taylor got there. She was staring at a patch of carpet in front of her with her eyebrows raised in that half-hypnotized look that warned the chaplain to move slowly. Barbara Brown Taylor sat down beside her. The woman looked at her, and after some small talk she told Barbara Brown Taylor just how awful it was. She even told her why it had happened.

"It's my punishment," she said, "for smoking these damned cigarettes. God couldn't get my attention any other way, so he made my baby sick." Then she started crying so hard that what she said next came out like a scream: "Now I'm supposed to stop, but I can't stop. I'm going to kill my own child!"

Those were hard words for Barbara Brown Taylor to hear. She decided to forego reflective listening and concentrate on remedial theology instead. "I don't believe in a God like that," she said. "The God I know wouldn't do something like that." The only problem with her response was that it messed with the mother's worldview at the very moment she needed it most. However miserable it made her, she preferred a punishing God to an absent God or a God who ignored her. She

may have been able to reconcile a loving God with her daughter's brain tumor, but at that moment, it was impossible. If there was something wrong with her daughter, then there had to be a reason. She was even willing to *be* the reason. At least that way, she could get a grip on the catastrophe.

Even those of us who claim to know better often react the same way. Calamity strikes and we wonder what we did wrong. We scrutinize our behavior, our relationships, our diets, our beliefs. We hunt for some cause to explain the effect in hopes that we can stop causing it. What this tells us is that we are less interested in truth than we are in consequences. What we crave for, what we long for, above all, is control over the chaos of our lives. If we can explain it, it won't quite seem so chaotic.

One time, Jesus was told that some Galileans were suffering because of their behavior. He said that's not the case. The implication the Pharisees were sending him was that those who died at the hands of their enemies did so because they had offended God. Jesus said, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way, they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?"

It is a tempting equation that solves a lot of problems. 1) It answers the riddle that haunts us: why do bad things happen to good people? They don't. Bad things only happen to bad people. 2) It punishes sinners right out in the open as a warning to everyone. 3) It gives us a God who obeys the laws of physics. For every action, there is an opposite and equal reaction. Any questions?

You have the formula. It is a tempting equation, but Jesus won't buy it. "No," he says, "that's not the way it is." But then, just in case we might get a little smug, he says, "But unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." In the South, that's what we call giving with one hand and taking away with the other. *No*, Jesus says, *there is no connection between the suffering and the sin.*²

² Barbara Brown Taylor, "Life-Giving Fear," in *Home By Another Way* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1999), pp. 69-71. I am grateful to Barbara Brown Taylor for this story.

I understand the need to find answers. I understand the feeling of vulnerability when bad things happen. Why is this happening to them? It could be us next.

Jesus tells them blaming the victims doesn't cut it. He then suggests that our actions do have consequences, but every time we suffer, it is not payback.

Jesus invites us during this Lenten season to take a look at our lives, to turn towards the light, not of a condemning, judging God, but towards the light of a God who loves us, who cares for us, who is in to struggle with us.

We have resources to turn to that light, even in our vulnerability. The Psalm that was cantored today for us is one such resource.

*The Lord is my light and my salvation:
whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)*

The Psalmist reminds us that we are not alone. We have not been ignored in our suffering, in our pain, in our struggles, left to our own resources. God has not abandoned us.

Later in the same Psalm, we hear these words:

*Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud,
be gracious to me and answer me!
"Come," my heart says, "seek his face!"
Your face, Lord, do I seek.
Do not hide your face from me.
Do not turn your servant away in anger,
you who have been my help.
Do not cast me off, do not forsake me,
O God of my salvation! (Ps. 27:7-9)*

The Lord is my light and my salvation;

*whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the stronghold of my life;
of whom shall I be afraid? (Ps. 27:1)*

Do not hide your face from me; hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud.

It sounds like two different people, doesn't it? It sounds like someone talking out of both sides of their mouth. What if fear of the uncertainty, what if fear and faith can live together inside of us?

What if doubt and trust can co-exist in us?

What if the Lenten discipline is not to settle for easy explanations about what's going on in our world and in our lives, explanations that dishonor the love and justice and glory of God? What if our Lenten discipline is to hold faith and fear, trust and doubt together in our own lives?

We are invited to live in a community that talks honestly about our feelings, our concerns, our affirmations and to be honest about our faith and our doubt, our fears and our hopes with God and in each other.

I found something very moving this week. It is a poem written by Carolyn Winfrey Gillette. It models what we see done in Psalm 27.

In Haiti, There is Anguish

*In Haiti, there is anguish that seems too much to bear;
A land so used to sorrow now knows even more despair.
From city streets, the cries of grief rise up to hills above;
In all the sorrow, pain and death, where are you, God of love?*

*A woman sifts through rubble, a man has lost his home,
A hungry, orphaned toddler sobs, for she is now alone.
Where are you, Lord, when thousands die-the rich, the poorest poor?
Were you the very first to cry for all that is no more?*

*O God, you love your children; you hear each lifted prayer!
May all who suffer in that land know you are present there.
In moments of compassion shown, in simple acts of grace,
May those in pain find healing balm, and know your love's embrace.*

*Where are you in the anguish? Lord, may we hear anew
That anywhere your world cries out, you're there—and suffering, too.
And may we see, in others' pain, the cross we're called to bear;
Send out your church in Jesus' name to pray, to serve, to share.³*

I found that poem moving, and I felt it illustrated the point of Psalm 27. As we pray and cry out and call to God to be accountable for God's promises made to Abraham, made to all of us, God's Covenant made to us, as we call upon God in our uncertainty, in our bewilderment, to be accountable. Our task is also to respond.

In this congregation, you have already given \$6,605.00 in aid to Haiti through the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. Presbyterians around this country have given more than \$564,000 to PDA, which brings relief, food, tents. Your gifts are providing not only the material things but the emotional support these folks need.

I saw two pictures this week that illustrate the way in which the love of God is being expressed. There was a woman who recovered after a long time under the rubble and there was another woman who was there, a mission worker representing the churches. She was giving her a glass of cold water. Now that water didn't solve all the problems. All the pain and suffering didn't go away, but it was a witness to another reality: the reality of God whose love will not go away either.

The other thing I saw were some Haitian children dancing. The emotional support the churches are supplying is encouraging them to do a cultural dance called

³ Carolyn Winfrey Gillette, "In Haiti There Is Anguish," © 2010, All Rights Reserved. Retrieved March 5, 2010. <<http://www.limestonepresbyterian.org/HymnforHaiti.htm>>. Permission is given by the author (bcgillette@comcast.net) for use by those who support Presbyterian Disaster Assistance.

Capoeira, which is an art form that combines elements of martial arts, music, and dance. The participants form a circle and take turns playing musical instruments, singing, and sparring in pairs in the center of the circle. It's full of joy and laughter.

Just as the Psalmist said in the midst of struggling with where God was in the face of all the adversities that the Psalmist was facing, the Psalmist was able to say:

*Now my head is lifted up
and I will offer in his tent
sacrifices with shouts of joy;
I will sing and make melody to the Lord. (Ps. 27:6)*

Is this just whistling in the dark, or is it being faithful to the God who has come to us in Jesus Christ? When we lift up our voices, singing and dancing in the face of the difficulties that life puts before us as an affirmation of faith. A dance, kicking, movement is helping children deal with the trauma all around them. It is, in my opinion, a dance of faith and hope that stands beside the fear and the doubt.

Our mission, dear friends, is not to settle for simple equations that make us feel comfortable, but to be honest with God about our concerns, about our pain, and about the pain of others, and then to respond as Christ our Lord did with compassion. He reached out in any way possible to those in need. So, can we reach out to those in need in Haiti, across the street, around the world? Let us accept this call and this challenge to try to live faithfully as God's people.

Amen.