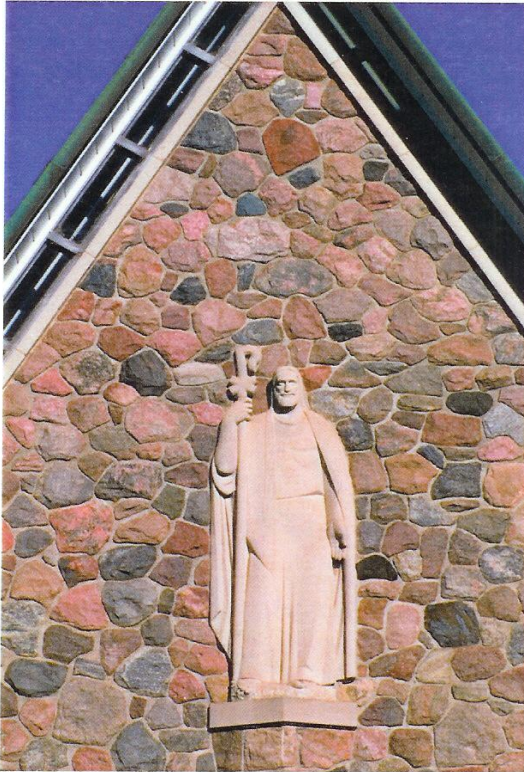


**MEDITATIONS FROM  
ORIOLE – YORK MILLS  
UNITED CHURCH**



**Suffering Inside the Circle of God's Love  
January 17, 2010**

This is one in a series of selected sermons and speeches given at Oriole – York Mills United Church. It is offered as a public service in the spirit of sharing and strengthening our Christian faith. We hope readers benefit from these meditations and the insights they provide.

### Earthquake hits Haiti: Jan. 12-13, 2010



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## Suffering Inside the Circle of God's Love

*Romans 8:35-39, Psalm 46 (Voices United, p. 770)*

Whether you have Haitian heritage or not, this has been an emotionally wrenching week. Terrible images of the devastating earthquake in Haiti have assaulted our eyes and ears on every source of news available to us. It was significant enough for me to change the theme of this morning's message. I want to say several things about natural disasters, human suffering and God.



Natural disasters are just that – *natural* disasters. We live in a world that has natural laws we can depend upon. These laws are unbending. They operate the same for all people. They make human life on Earth possible. They are no respecter of persons – whether you are wealthy or have little wealth, whether you have status or no status, whether you are a good, upstanding citizen – or not. The scientists and those interested in science among us would also understand

that the physical world operates in such a way that we can observe and often determine the cause and effect of occurrences in nature – like earthquakes and tsunamis. So when we understand how, where and why earthquakes are caused, for instance, we can make our buildings more solid and less susceptible to major destruction – if we are a country with the wealth and health and the necessary materials and stability and good governance to do this, that is.

Natural laws we can depend upon are essential because they give order to creation. They make medicine possible for our health. They make engineering possible for our housing. They make farming possible for our food. They make learning and scientific advances possible. For example, science can tell us that, when certain conditions come together *under* the Earth's surface, they will cause an underground upheaval that we *on* the Earth's surface will experience as an earthquake with lesser or greater consequences. And this past week in Haiti, the consequences were of horrendous proportions. But what is important is that these conditions and causes and effects are predictable because we hope, some day, some intelligent scientist will figure it out and be able -- in advance -- to warn those in harm's way.

These necessary and dependable and, therefore, predictable natural laws of the universe make all human progress possible but they can also bring suffering and heartache and great damage when human beings encounter them directly. Jesus once spoke to the issue of suffering and its cause. A tower unexpectedly fell and killed 18 people. The incident is recorded in the Gospel of Luke 13:4-5. Some people asked Jesus the kind of questions we all ask at one time or another: Why did this happen? Who was to blame? Were those 18 killed because they were worse than people who escaped the tragedy? And Jesus said in effect that it was no one's fault.

And the people killed, he said, were no worse than any of the other people living in Jerusalem at the time. They just happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time when the tower fell.

In a sense, that's what happens to us today too. Sometimes we suffer innocently because we only happen to be standing in the wrong place when a natural law of the universe falls on us. Or sometimes, of course, we suffer when we knowingly put ourselves in risky positions where our actions and the natural laws work against us rather than for us. That's the amazing paradox, isn't it? There are dependable or predictable natural laws in this universe so we can live – and we can learn how to live and work alongside the laws that work for our good and how to take precautions where the laws can lead to danger.

Does knowing the science underlying what happens help us to cope with the inevitable consequences of a devastating natural disaster that causes incredible destruction and takes a terrible toll on human life? I don't know. Perhaps it does help us in our quieter moments – when we can reflect in peace and security. But in the midst of a great tragedy, emotions of doubt and despair and anger and grief may well rise within us. We may also voice questions we will not be able to answer. And for those who know God, that is OK because we stand in a long line of faithful believers -- from prophets to psalmists, including Job -- who did not understand what was happening to them – or why – and whose grief and despair and anger or doubt spilled out before God.

But there are some people now as then who will try to supply answers, of course. Besides those who are always *blaming God* in situations like this, there are also others who think they are *explaining God*. Job's comforters, they are called. But they are also the ones who usually get it all wrong. For

all of Job's questions and wondering and sorrow and suffering, according to God – and that's whose opinion counts in the end! – Job did *not* suffer because of some great sin. And when Job did encounter God, Job did not come away with a detailed explanation of why he suffered. But what Job did hear from God --in a strong yet compassionate manner -- was that God wanted to restore the relationship he had with Job before his circumstances changed. And Job responded to God by repenting for even thinking God may have caused the tragedies and pain in his life. And just so you know the rest of Job's story if you haven't read it and don't know it, God did *not* cause Job's suffering!

I do not think we offer our heart-wrenching laments in suffering primarily to get answers. But, rather, through lament – our expressions of grief, pain and suffering – we find ourselves joined empathetically to others and, most importantly, joined compassionately to God.

In yesterday's *National Post* newspaper, there was a remarkable front-page article about crowds of Haitian people, as the sun was setting, singing together on the open streets of Port-au-Prince – singing Haitian hymns of lament, understandably, *and* also, amazingly, hymns of praise to God. In the midst of fearful and terrible circumstances, God's people in Haiti still sing to God.



Woman sings praises to God after her sister was pulled alive from the rubble in Port-au-Prince. Photo: Julie Jacobson/AP

We admit we do have questions and a limited understanding of why terrible things happen. But that does not mean there is nothing to say. The witness throughout all of Scripture urges us to seek God. Not some god who lives *above tragedy* -- controlling the fates of nature and humanity like the so-called gods of ancient Greek Olympus -- but, rather, the living God who lives in the *centre of tragedy*, suffering with us and for us. And is this witness not seen most clearly in the cross of Jesus, where God was joined to the fullest human experience of loss – suffering an unjust and cruel death out of love for all humanity? My friends, God does not cause chaos but enters into it with us. God does not send calamity but suffers with us through it. God does not stand over us but holds tightly onto us and promises never to let us go. As someone has written: “Wherever there is human tragedy and pain, the incarnate and crucified God is there.”

No wonder, then, the Apostle Paul declared so powerfully in the reading we heard from Romans 8 this morning:

“Who, then, can separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble do it, or hardship or persecution or hunger or poverty or danger or death?... No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us! For I am certain that nothing can separate us from his love: neither death nor life, neither angels nor other heavenly rulers or powers, neither the present nor the future, neither the world above nor the world below -- there is nothing in all creation that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God which is ours through Christ Jesus our Lord.”

As far as God is concerned, God has declared a non-separation agreement with all humanity through the love of Christ.

Rev. Dr. Rudi Zimmer, executive director of the Bible Society in Brazil, said in response to the tragedy in Haiti:

“In the spirit of Romans 12:15, we all are ‘crying with those who are crying.’ These days we all are Haitians and, at the same time, we associate ourselves with Jeremiah as he saw the fallen Jerusalem: ‘The thought of my pain, my homelessness, is bitter poison. I think of it constantly, and my spirit is depressed. Yet hope returns when I remember this one thing: The Lord's unfailing love and mercy still continue, fresh as the morning, as sure as the sunrise. The Lord is all I have, and so in him I put my hope.’ (Lamentations 3:19-24).”

God not only *suffers with us* but God also *works through us*. Helen Keller once said: “Although the world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” Jesus once said: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.” As Christians, we call ourselves members of the Body of Christ. When I consider the implications of the Church being called the Body of Christ, I believe we are making a bold and profound

statement of faith. To confess that people such as us – who are broken, weak and sinful – are people through whom Jesus is active in the world is incredibly empowering. Because all at the same time God is healing us, commissioning us and sending us – the Church -- to be Christ’s healing and helping presence in the world -- in the world of our communities and also around the globe.

It is not difficult to find organizations asking for money to help the people of Haiti. It may take a little more of our discernment to determine those who will do the best job with our donations. Giving through proven organizations you know and already trust is always the best way to donate. Our United Church is also appealing for donations to support relief and reconstruction efforts in Haiti in partnership with the ACT Alliance. ACT is a network of churches and Christian aid agencies that enables global responses to emergencies. Our national church is also seeking access to matching funds available through CIDA (The Canadian International Development Agency) for relief efforts in Haiti.

Our Aboriginal neighbours remind us about our human interconnections with their use of the circle. At times I wish we were in seats that enabled us to move into a circle instead of sitting the way we are. But for the moment, will you imagine with me that we are sitting in a circle together? That you can see everyone in this sanctuary because each one is part of the circle and is not behind you or in front of you. Let us also imagine that the countries of this world are connected in a circle. Haiti may then seem a little closer to our hearts and minds. I want to conclude this message with a prayer written by Diana who lives in San Jose, California. As I pray on our behalf, let’s focus on our Lord and also on our connections to the people of Haiti. Let us pray.

## **A Prayer After the Earthquake in Haiti**

Lord, at times such as this,  
when we realize that the ground beneath our feet  
is not as solid as we had imagined,  
we plead for your mercy.

As the things we have built crumble about us,  
we know too well how small we truly are on this ever-  
changing, ever-moving, fragile planet we call home.

Yet you have promised never to forget us.  
Do not forget us now.



Today, so many people are afraid.  
They wait in fear of the next tremor.  
They hear the cries of the injured amid the rubble.  
They roam the streets in shock at what they see.

And they fill the dusty air with wails of grief  
and the names of missing dead.

Comfort them, Lord, in this disaster.  
Be their rock when the earth refuses to stand still,  
and shelter them under your wings  
when homes no longer exist.

Embrace in your arms those who died so suddenly this day.  
Console the hearts of those who mourn, and ease the pain  
of bodies on the brink of death.

Pierce, too, our hearts with compassion,  
we who watch from afar,  
as the poorest on this side of the earth  
find only misery upon misery.  
Move us to act swiftly this day,  
to give generously every day,  
to work for justice always,  
and to pray unceasingly for those without hope.

And once the shaking has ceased,  
the images of destruction have stopped filling the news,  
and our thoughts return to life's daily rumblings,  
let us not forget that we are all your children  
and they, our brothers and sisters.  
We are all the work of your hands.  
For though the mountains leave their place  
and the hills be tossed to the ground,  
your love shall never leave us, and your promise of peace  
will never be shaken.

Our help is in the name of the Lord,  
who made heaven and earth.  
Blessed be the name of the Lord, now and forever. Amen.

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May this be so for you and for me.

Rev. Chris Miller  
January 17, 2010



Haitians in survival mode in a ramshackle refugee camp close to the airport in Port-au-Prince, where basics of life are in not available in ample supply.  
Photo: Chris Hondros / Getty Images