

January 24, 2010 John A. Baldwin

Perhaps you have been as saddened and concerned about the tragic earthquake in Haiti as I have over the past two weeks. It's hard to imagine how we might respond and cope in the face of such destruction, with food and water being such scarce and precious commodities. I have been heartened by the outpouring of compassion from so many quarters, not the least being our own Episcopal Relief and Development in New York City which has been funneling contributions to Episcopal churches in Haiti beyond the epicenter. Disasters often bring out the very best in humanity, but they can also surface some less than pretty insights into human nature.

Over the past few days numerous people have expressed to me their shock and distaste at the musings of our local televangelist, Pat Robertson who said this about the disaster in Haiti, *"They were under the heel of the French. You know, Napoleon III, or whatever. And they got together and swore a pact to the devil. They said, we will serve you if you'll get us free from the French. True story. And so, the devil said, okay it's a deal. Ever since they have been cursed by one thing after the other."* Robertson's point of view seems to be is that the victims have only themselves to blame, because their ancestors made a pact with the devil they should never have made.

If you felt startled by this point of view, I suspect that your theology differs from Pat Robertson's. I think he was only saying what he sincerely believes, and there is great consistency in what he believes. For Robertson and others, there is an intense spiritual war going on between God and Satan that will only be decisively won at Armageddon and the Second Coming of Christ. Thus Satan is constantly seeking opportunities to inflict pain and suffering, to thwart God's intentions. The Devil making pacts with individuals and peoples is just part of this ongoing warfare. If you discern evil at work in the world, it's simply more evidence of Satan's malice and bedlam.

I also discern in Robertson's theology an emphasis on the punishing nature of God. Natural disasters are evidence of this. In response to "Gay Days" at Disney World, Robertson said, "I would warn Orlando that you're right in the way of some serious hurricanes, and I don't think I'd be waving those flags in God's face if I were you, This is not a message of hate -- this is a message of redemption. But a condition like this will bring about the destruction of your nation. It'll bring about terrorist bombs; it'll bring earthquakes, tornadoes, and possibly a meteor." This view of the elements as being at the control and whim of God were no doubt behind Robertson's well-publicized claim some years ago to have prayed a hurricane away from Virginia Beach and toward that wicked bastion of liberalism - New England. God heeded his prayer and diverted the winds.

Robertson is faithfully consistent in his theology. To see the hand of God at work in the devastation of Haiti makes perfect sense to him. Nothing happens that isn't part of God's Will.....God's plan. God punishes the wicked here and now, and God rewards and favors the faithful. Someone is surely to blame if God's wrath is wrought in such a powerful way. But there are difficulties inherent in this theology. Why do bad things happen to good people? How does God's grace, mercy and forgiveness dovetail into this theology of reward and punishment?

My theology differs from that of Mr. Robertson a bit. I do not believe that natural disasters are caused by God either to punish or to advance God's purposes. The world we live upon is a dynamic, powerful, ever-changing system in motion. Tectonic plates are moving all the time, magma is welling up inside of volcanos, low pressure systems meet up with high pressure systems and winds are released, heavy snows and rains lead to avalanches and floods, Unfortunately people are in the wrong place at the wrong times as these natural forces exert their power. Humans make decisions that lead to tragedy in the choices we make (or are made for us) about where we live, when we travel, and whether we pay heed to warning signs. Looking for the hand of God in causing the calamities that befall humanity, is to be looking for God in the wrong place. I do not believe in any way, shape, or form, that God triggered the earthquake beneath Port-au-Prince. It just happened. Where God is present and active, however, is in the responses we make to every situation of pain and suffering.

The same may be said about illness, accidents, personal setbacks, divorces, and addictions. I do not believe that God afflicts us to reward or punish. They happen because of poor choices we make, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, the DNA we inherited, or just bad luck. Where God is active, is in the love, support and care of our families, friends, and church communities when we are in pain. I cringe inwardly a bit when I hear people speak of suffering as part of God's plan. What does this say about our understanding of God? It points, does it not, towards a conception of God as One who is not very compassionate, and who cares more about obedience than mercy.

Earlier in my sermon, I alluded to Robertson's views on the ongoing war between God and Satan, good and evil. Evil is certainly a reality in our world, always has been, probably always will. I think there is nonetheless a bit of a difference in my theology and his, in that I don't believe the battle between light and darkness, good and evil is on a level playing field at all. I believe that on the cross Jesus decisively defeated the power of evil and darkness (call it Satan, if you will). God's own son was beaten, spit upon, jeered and mocked, nailed up in the marketplace as a warning to all passersby. Goodness, love, compassion and mercy were nailed upon the cross. Evil laughed with glee. But three days later, the Resurrection of Jesus broke the back of evil forever. To lift Satan up to a position of fear and strength is to miss the power of Jesus' everlasting victory. Evil, sin and death will always lose out in a contest with love, light, grace and healing power.

There are many differing theologies afloat in our world today, not just between world religions, but also within our own. If you take a leap of faith, akin to my own, in a God who is loving, merciful, compassionate and filled with healing power, then the concept of Satan making a pact with a people and visiting them with calamities makes absolutely no sense at all. If however, you give great power to Satan, and believe that God is a punishing, demanding One, then what Pat Robertson has to say makes sense. Theology (our view of who and what God is) is not an abstraction at all. It's how we make sense out of the ups and downs of life. Jesus is the foundation of our understanding of God. How we make sense out of what Jesus shared about his heavenly Father is very much at the heart of how we interpret the earthquakes and storms of life. Amen.