

¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
for Jerusalem's sake I will not remain quiet,
till her righteousness shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a blazing torch.

² The nations will see your righteousness,
and all kings your glory;
you will be called by a new name
that the mouth of the LORD will bestow.

³ You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's
hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

⁴ No longer will they call you Deserted,
or name your land Desolate.
But you will be called Hephzibah,
and your land Beulah;
for the LORD will take delight in you,
and your land will be married.

⁵ As a young man marries a maiden,
so will your sons marry you;
as a bridegroom rejoices over his
bride, so will your God rejoice over you.

Sadly there are times when tragedy begets tragedy. The earthquake this week in Haiti is no exception. The country already struggled in poverty, its citizens regularly put in danger as the government struggled to establish the rule of law, the earth being destroyed as desperate people cut down any tree that could be used for fuel, disease contaminating the water supply. And now this—I won't repeat the devastating statistics; we've all heard the news reports. And sadly, among those news reports we heard the remarks of Pat Robertson who claims that the suffering the Haitians are enduring is God's wrath for a "pact they made with the devil to gain independence from France." Essentially, he makes the claim that the Haitians had this coming, perhaps even that it is deserved.

His comments leave most of us dumbstruck, wondering how someone could say such things. And for those who work hard in this life to promote an understanding of a kind, loving, and compassionate God—well, his comments are nauseating. But let me admit that his way of seeing things, well, in a way, I can see how some folks might find what he is saying attractive. He's explaining away the tragedy, making it make sense. After all, if the Haitians brought this upon themselves, if they are, in the end, deserving of this misery, if it is God's will, well, then, we bear no responsibility for them, for their suffering, for their future. We can wash our hands of the whole nasty business and be on our merry way. That makes sense, in a sick kind of a way.

But I don't know about you, no matter how hard I try, I can't make a tragedy of this magnitude make any sense. I want to blame someone, to find fault, for there to be some kind of explanation for this level of human suffering. But there's not, there's just no explanation.

But just because we don't know, just because we can't make it make sense doesn't mean we can remain silent in the face of someone like Pat Robertson who claims to know, who makes statements such as this. For far too long, pundits and extremists have led the agenda, have been the one's making the news and determining the direction of the conversation. But it doesn't have to be this way and it hasn't always been this way.

Isaiah is a good example. The book of Isaiah is probably the product of two or three Old Testament prophets. Today's reading comes from a section of the book thought to have been written after the Babylonian exile. During that time, the Jew's homeland was occupied by armies of the Babylonian empire. The Babylonians attempted to control and dissipate the power of the Jewish people by breaking up communities and families by dispersing Jews throughout the Babylonian empire. And though the Israelites lost so much in the exile, they never lost the promises of God who promised "to build up the barren and forsaken city of Jerusalem with foundations of sapphires, ruby towers, gates and walls of precious jewels (54:12). God promised to bring the exiled people home, and promised them the richest of feasts (56:2)."¹ But when the Israelites finally got home,

¹ Anatheia Portier-Young at WorkingPreacher.org.

not only was home not a bedazzled and bejeweled Jerusalem, but it was a city and countryside abandoned, after having been abused, by foreign troops who couldn't care less about the place. Instead of finding a restored city, the Jews returned to find they had been forsaken and forgotten by God.

But the prophet [Isaiah] knows this is not true. The prophet knows that God has declared Jerusalem innocent, that the people are not forsaken and forgotten by God. The prophet remembers the promises God made to Israel—the promises God made to Zion, another name used for the Jewish people. According to an Old Testament scholar, God said to them, “yes, I left you, but now I return to you (54:7), and my love will never leave you (54:10). So now the prophet vows to hold God to God's promises. The prophet will pick up right where God seems to have left off and make sure that God gets no rest until Jerusalem is built up, filled with her children, surrounded by fruitful fields, and shining with the continuous light of God's presence.”²

Isaiah acts a little differently than we might suspect here. We're used to prophets speaking to the people on behalf of God. But in this instance, Isaiah is speaking to God on behalf of the people—holding God to the promises that have been made, holding God accountable, reminding God of what God promised.

And at a time like this, I can't help but wonder if this is what prophets—if this is what we—are called to do. Not to try to reason out tragedy, condone catastrophe, or offer judgment on suffering and hurting people. But rather, perhaps this is the time when we are called to speak up, to say something, to remember God's promises and to remind God of those promises on behalf of the people. Perhaps our role here is to remind God, to remind others, and most importantly, to remind ourselves, of the promises that God has made.

Because we need reminding—when we feel forsaken and desolate, it's easy to forget God's promises. We need prophets to remind us. And they do. Isaiah reminded the ancient Israelites. “The nations will see your righteousness, and all kings your glory; you will be called by a new name that the mouth of the LORD will bestow. You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God.”

Jesus reminded the disciples. ¹“Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. ²In my Father's house are many rooms . . . I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Paul reminded the early Christians ³⁸For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Martin Luther King, Jr. reminded our nation. “I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted: every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plane, and the crooked places will be made straight and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.”

And this week, Alix Jackman reminded me. She reminded me of the promises of God not by quoting scripture but simply by saying that, even though her beloved husband Bob had been diagnosed with cancer, she was going to keep buying green bananas. At a time when she might have been feeling forsaken and desolate, she's buying green bananas, with the certain hope in God's goodness and promises that those bananas are going to ripen to be enjoyed by Bob and her together.

I don't have an eloquent response to unkind words of hate such as those uttered by Pat Robertson. But I do have, you do have, we do have the promises of God, promises that tell us that in spite of the incomprehensibility of the suffering in Haiti, in spite of the times in our own lives when we feel like we've

² *ibid.*

arrived in a forsaken and desolate place, even then we have the promises of God—and perhaps God just needs a little reminding, because Lord knows, we do.