

ROCKY MOUNTAIN CONFERENCE
Reflections
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST

www.rmucc.org

February 2010

Haiti -- We Will Not Fear

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Psalm 46 makes a bold affirmation of faith: "we will not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains shake in the heart of the sea." That is not an idle or abstract affirmation. Even when kingdoms totter and "the earth melts" with earthquakes, the psalm is confident. Biblical scholar Leopold Sabourin summarizes the message of Psalm 46 as a proclamation that "God is the Lord of creation, of history and of eschatology" -- even when nothing seems stable or secure.

For the people of Haiti -- most of them destitute before this week's earthquake, and living in a country that was already incapable of providing security and basic services -- fear would be an appropriate response, along with their overwhelming grief and growing anger. But, for some of them, at least, hope and faith are stronger than fear.

In the last few days, I have seen numerous reports of earthquake survivors gathering in the streets and joining in song. Amber Lynn Munger blogged today: "This morning we woke up to aftershocks around 5am. Again, the tremors were met with singing. The singing is almost as forceful as the quakes. They are still singing now with all of their force -- Hallelujah! It is as if they are saying "we are not afraid!"

I can't know all of historical roots and the complex layers of meaning tied to public hymn singing in the midst of the devastated city. From these reports, though, the songs of "hallelujah" do not express resignation or quietism. The singing is of persistence, and a refusal to give in to despair.

For the people in Port-au-Prince, singing goes hand-in-hand with their search for survivors, their quest for water and food, and their mourning of all that has been lost. Hymns center them and sustain them as they go about the hard work of survival. Each aftershock triggers new panic, and then songs of praise and confidence still the fear.

"We will not fear" is not an easy statement. The hymns in Haiti are a willful commitment to carry on when there is good reason to panic or give up. The act of gathering as a community in itself provides nurture and support. The songs of confidence affirm a hopeful reality more real than the horrors.

The singing people of Haiti strengthen my faith and resolve. If they can move beyond fear when surrounded by corpses, rubble and political collapse, how can I despair? If they can sing of persistence and confidence when they have lost everything, how can we feel hopeless when Copenhagen and the US Senate don't do what we want as quickly as we'd like?

The Haitians gather to sing with each jarring aftershock. We can learn from them. Maybe -- when our news seems discouraging or distressing -- we too should congregate in the streets to sing hymns of commitment and hope.

First and foremost, this situation calls on all people -- people of all faiths, and those without faith -- to act on their most basic notions of compassion and solidarity. For most of us, who are far from the disaster scenes, that action means giving money. Loving prayers of compassion that don't also include significant giving simply won't cut it. Your denomination, Church World Service, or the Red Cross will make efficient use of your donation. This is the core ethical matter. Do it."

The occurrence of yet another crushing disaster in Haiti brings to mind a term from the writings of Lester Brown, "failed states." Those are countries "which on some level fail to provide personal security or basic services, such as education, health care, food and physical infrastructure, to their people." In 2008, Haiti was #12 in the list of the "top 20" failing states.

Among the other 20 states listed in 2008 are many of the geo-political hotspots of the world: Somalia (#1), Sudan (#3), Iraq (#6), Pakistan (#10) and Yemen (#18). Not only are failed states a disaster for their own residents, they are the seedbeds for terrorism and international turmoil.

Brown's eco-justice concern is that rapid and widespread resource depletion and the impact of climate change will lead more countries toward the instability of failed states. The global trajectory toward environmental crisis is tied directly to an increasing risk of civil war and insurrection, famine and disease, migration and displacement.

Eco-justice opens our eyes to the intersecting aspects of ecology, economics, politics and power that amplify disaster in failing states. Eco-justice draws us into compassion and solidarity with those in other parts of the world, and helps us see the enlightened self-interest in working toward a more just and sustainable world.

And the people of Haiti who sing in the presence of destruction remind us of the deep hope that must sustain us as we go about the long and difficult work of healing and transformation. May we, with the Haitians and the psalmist, announce that "we will not fear!"

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