

Perplexed, But Not Driven to Despair

2 Corinthians 4:6-10

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

January 17, 2010 (Martin Luther King Jr. Sunday)

The last thing we need in the face of tragedy—whether personal or catastrophic—is know-it-all Christians explaining it to us. I am not going to offer an explanation of what happened in Haiti. I am going to preach on the text I was working on before the earthquake, one of the texts read at my installation service, in which Paul speaks about the suffering he experienced as a preacher.

For it is the God who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. (2 Cor. 4:6-10)

“We have this treasure in jars of clay.” What is the treasure Paul is talking about? It is the knowledge of God’s glory. We have seen that glory—God’s light and perfection and beauty and power. We have seen it not in thunder or lightning but in the face of the Messiah, in the face of the One who died on a cross for us. So we have this treasure, this paradoxical knowledge that God’s glory has been revealed to us in Messiah’s suffering, in a paradoxical container—these suffering bodies of ours, these jars of clay.

In the spring of 1947 a Bedouin shepherd was looking for a goat along the cliffs next to the Dead Sea when he discovered a cave. Inside the cave he found a collection of clay jars. They could have been full of trash, water, anything—but they were full of scrolls, the oldest manuscripts we have of many books of the Old Testament. It was treasure in jars of clay and because of the location the jars were well preserved.

But these clay jars, our bodies—while containing an even more precious treasure—are not so well preserved. As we go through life there are cracks that show, sharp edges that crumble. We might wish that we had not been given jars of clay but rather thermoses of stainless steel, but that was not God’s plan. We were never intended to last forever. Dust to dust, clay to clay.

This week we were reminded that it is not only our bodies that are fragile. The world itself is made of clay. It cracks, it breaks, it falls apart. The treasure that God has given us of knowledge of himself in the creation is also given to us in a jar of clay, a world that we with our short lifetimes take to be stable, but a world which in the longer view is constantly shifting and crashing together and falling apart. Our fragile bodies and our fragile cities are caught in the middle of that.

What can we say about such things? Paul is not one who feels it necessary to have an explanation for everything. Especially in 2 Corinthians he deals with the mystery of his own suffering. In chapter 11 Paul asks Jesus to alleviate his suffering, to remove his “thorn in the flesh.” He asks three times. But Jesus says no, my grace is enough for you—in the midst of suffering. The power of Jesus is made perfect (completed? revealed?) in Paul’s weakness.

Therefore, Paul says, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities.”

Paul also sees his suffering as *sharing* in the suffering of Jesus. If the core of your faith is that God suffered as an expression of his love for us, how can you think that God will not allow *us* to suffer? Paul sees us believers as Messianic people, people heralding and bringing in the new age. If God caused the Messiah to suffer, why imagine that the Messianic people will not suffer? Paul says that we are completing in our bodies as Jesus-followers what remains to be done of Jesus’ work.

If there is anything like an *explanation* in what Paul says here, it is that our human weakness—especially the weakness of the preacher—is a good thing because it shows that “this extraordinary power,” a.k.a. the glory of God, belongs to God and not to us humans, even preachers.

But what would Paul say about an earthquake? Paul himself does not talk about natural disasters, but the Hebrew scriptures seem to take earthquakes for granted. We read from Psalm 46, “Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall.” Christians who have reflected on Paul’s way of thinking about the world have thought about natural disasters by drawing analogies from our human experience. There have been three basic ways of explaining them:

1. The world is *fallen*, as we are fallen. According to this model, somehow all of this (including earthquakes) is a consequence of sin coming into the world. Some would say that death only came into the world after sin, as Paul suggests in Romans 5. But many would say that death is part of creation from the beginning, that we were never meant to live forever.
2. The world is *unfinished*, as we are unfinished. This model seems to fit with geology, which says that the world still has a molten core, that these land masses we think of as solid are plates that are still moving and have not arrived at their final resting place. Paul suggests something like an unfinished world in Romans 8 when he says that the whole creation is groaning together waiting for us humans to be completed. This groaning, Paul says, is like labor pains because a new world is about to be born.
3. The world is *free*, as we are free. We all believe that humans exercise free will, to some extent. God has given us the freedom to choose to sin rather than to love and obey God. We choose to be self-centered rather than God-centered. Much of what is messed up in our lives is the result of our own exercise of freedom—our own bad choices. But, we say, God *had* to give us freedom in order to give us the ability to love and serve him freely. God wants relationships, not control. God wants worship, and real worship can only be given freely, as Baptists have always contended.

But what if God has given freedom to *nature* as well? In our science and religion discussion group this possibility was raised by a scientist at an evangelical university in California. He said that the cliffs on which his school sits overlooking the Pacific (not unlike our bluffs) were not a result of God taking a putty knife to clay but the result of God giving nature freedom to develop. The natural world, in other words, is not micromanaged but allowed to exercise its own freedom—which includes events like earthquakes. To put it bluntly, God neither send earthquakes nor protects people from them because he is letting nature take its course.

I think it may be that all three theories have some truth in them: that the planet itself is fallen, unfinished, and to some degree free.

Still, when we come back from theory to the reality of this earthquake in Haiti and the amount of human suffering, our best response may sound a lot like Paul’s response to his own

suffering: “we are perplexed, but not driven to despair.” All these things keep happening to us, Paul says. We are beaten and arrested, we are chased and humiliated, we go through shipwrecks, we have periods when we are starving, periods when we sit alone in prison. These things are perplexing. I am not telling you that they all make sense to me. I don’t know why some of these things happen. But nevertheless, I do not fall into despair. Almost all modern translations use the same terms “perplexed” and “not in despair” but I like one version in simple English (NIRV): “We are bewildered. But that doesn’t make us lose hope.”

That is how we can respond to the disaster in Haiti. Let’s be honest: we are bewildered, we are perplexed, we can’t make heads or tails of it. But that does not make us lose hope. That does not drive us to despair. Why doesn’t Paul give up hope? Three reasons that he mentions right here. First, we have seen the glory of the great Creator-God revealed in the face of Jesus, so we know that the one who made the world is indeed loving and full of mercy. Second, Paul says that it is his experience that when he suffers in his body, Jesus’ life is revealed to other people in that suffering. This does not make sense of the suffering, maybe, but it makes it useful and not pointless. But the third and main source of hope for Paul is the fact that God raised Jesus from the dead. For Paul it usually comes back to this: I hope because I know that Jesus is alive, that God raised him and vindicated him and put him in charge. I hope because I have become one with Jesus through faith and I am sure that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also raise me. That is what we show the world in baptism and that is the hope that keeps us hanging on when the world doesn’t make sense.

Christians are not people who wear smiley faces instead of real faces. Christians are people who are perplexed but not driven to despair. We learned this from Jews, including Paul—how to be honest with God, how to cry out “how long O Lord,” how to complain and sometimes scratch our heads, but still to come back from the edge of despair by saying “This much I know: God loves us, he called us, he saved us, he made us his people. God is still faithful even if my world seems to be collapsing around me.” The most extreme form of this faith is Job’s cry, “Though he slay me, yet will I trust in him.” Great chunks of the Old Testament deal with how God’s chosen people came to terms with defeat and exile. How can we worship God without a country and without a temple? How can we explain the disaster that befell us? There are voices, just as today, that say that disaster must be a judgment from God. But the wiser voices, I think, simply affirm their faith in God in the midst of tragedy. “We are perplexed, but not driven to despair. We are bewildered, but we do not give up hope.”

When I was a teenager I heard the great preacher John Claypool tell about losing his young daughter to leukemia. He had wondered about that promise from Isaiah 40 about those who wait upon the Lord: “They shall mount up with wings as eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint.” Wasn’t that an anticlimax? Didn’t Isaiah get the order wrong? Shouldn’t you end the chapter with the image of eagles? But then he discovered that there are times in life when you cannot soar like an eagle and you cannot even run across the ground. There are times in life when all you can do is put one foot in front of the other and walk, and those times may be when God’s strength is most real to you. We are perplexed but not driven to despair.

It is not a good thing to look out on a world of tragedy and injustice and think that it all makes sense, that it’s all good. If we understand that the standard of good is Jesus, we will be perplexed.

Martin Luther King Jr. was perplexed when he saw that that Christian people did not support Rosa Parks’ right to sit anywhere she wanted on a bus. Perplexed, but not driven to

despair. He was perplexed when the Klan chose to bomb the basement of the 16th Street Baptist Church where the children had gone for Sunday school after a sermon on love that forgives. Perplexed, but not driven to despair. Dr. King was perplexed when the white clergy of Birmingham told him to slow down, that he was moving too fast. Perplexed, but not driven to despair, and he penned the classic letter from the Birmingham jail. He was perplexed when met by police on the Edmund Pettus Bridge on a peaceful march from Selma, but he was not driven to despair and he led the people on the bridge in prayer. Dr. King was perplexed when he realized that civil rights alone would not bring about justice, that what God demands is economic justice. He was perplexed by the persistence of poverty, as we all are, and so he stood with garbage men in the Poor People's March. His followers were perplexed when Dr. King was killed. Becca grew up in Atlanta with the King children and played on a basketball team with Dr. King's daughter Yolanda. She saw firsthand the bewilderment at how God could let this happen but she also saw Coretta Scott King and others refuse to be driven to despair. They held on to their hope in God, hope grounded in the One who raised Jesus from the dead.

At the funeral for the four girls killed at the 16th Street Baptist Church, Dr. King offered these words:

Life is hard, at times as hard as crucible steel. It has its bleak and difficult moments. Like the ever-flowing waters of the river, life has its moments of drought and its moments of flood. Like the ever-changing cycle of the seasons, life has the soothing warmth of its summers and the piercing chill of its winters. But if one will hold on, he will discover God walks with him, and that God is able to lift you from the fatigue of despair to the buoyancy of hope and transform dark and desolate valleys into sunlit paths of inner peace.