

**A Sermon preached by Carla Pratt Keyes
Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
Isaiah 62:1-5, Psalm 36:5-10, 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, John 2:1-11
January 17, 2010**

Like many of you, I have been haunted this week by all the pictures of Haiti – bodies strewn in the streets . . . the agonized faces of the grieving . . . thousands of people desperate for help.

In the passage Amy read from Isaiah, God speaks to a people just back from exile – a people also desperate for help. Others had called them Forsaken. They thought of themselves as forsaken. Their land was termed Desolate. And as they eyed the ruins of that land, it was hard to think of any other name.

Have we not seen a land so desolate? For this is how desolation looks: hillside neighborhoods tumbled down, houses now piles of rubbish. Fields of makeshift tents near the airport – people hoping for what? . . . a bottle of water . . . something to eat. The injured on stretchers – weary, bloody, still without help. Mothers and fathers weeping over children, bodies still buried beneath the rubble, mass graves filled with loved ones yet unidentified. This is how desolation looks. And no words touch the pain of it.

On the same Sunday we read about Jesus turning water into wine, it is impossible not to ask: Why not turn rancid water into drinking water for these people? You who raised children from the dead, why not touch these children with your healing hand? You who stilled the wind with a word, why not step in to prevent tragedies such as these? Halt the movement of the earth's plates; speak your calming word to the ground beneath our feet. Spare a country like Haiti one more heartbreak, this massive hardship.

I hardly know what to say to God today . . . I hardly know what to say to *you* today. But I do believe, like so many of you, that the word God spoke to Israel at the end of its exile is a word God continues to speak . . . to us in our own places of desolation, and to the people of Haiti in theirs. I have been trying to listen to these promises spoken to God's people years ago, for hints about the promise that holds true for us today. And there are two things I've noticed . . . beliefs I think we need to claim.

First of all, God loves us. God *loves* us. Even in the midst of their desolation, the people of Israel came to understand the depth of God's love for them . . . so much so, that when they cast around for an image to describe it, they settled upon that of a bridegroom rejoicing over his bride. Later images for God's kingdom would include that of a marriage banquet, with everyone invited, everyone celebrating.

The metaphor of marriage is not without its problems – particularly for those who are abused within marriages, unhappy within them, or denied the privilege of entering that covenant. But the metaphor of marriage speaks to some essential things. It underlines the remarkable – almost unbelievable – fact that God longs for us and desires us, and it matters how we respond to God. God is capable of being hurt by us, when we reject God . . . and delighted by us, when we

embrace God. God values us, treasures us, prizes us, and with an intensity that can give us joy and security beyond measure.

Anne Lamott, is a remarkable Presbyterian; I have quoted her before, admiring so much the way she understands and speaks of God's love for her and for others. She has not had an easy time of it. A former drug abuser, an alcoholic, a mother of a child without a husband – she writes frankly and beautifully about being found and claimed by God. In an interview in a magazine a few years back she was asked about her faith. She said,

I try to share my resurrection story with people in the hopes that some of them who have left churches or who have been kicked out because of their beliefs or sexual orientation will find something in my words or humor that makes church safe for them again. . . .

I never said I am a good Christian. I just know that Jesus adores me and is only as far away as his name. I say, "Hi, Lord," and he says, "Hello, Darling." He loves me so much he keeps a photo of me in his wallet. If I were the only person on earth, he still would have died for me.¹

The scriptures speak again and again of God's surprising love for us. For you. For me. And for each person in Haiti, whether they lie beneath the rubble, or sleep in relative comfort. God loves us so much, God keeps a photo of us in her wallet. If you or I were the only person on earth, Christ still would have died for you, for me.

God loves us so much, God makes promises to us. That the second thing I want to lift up about this passage from Isaiah. For as a couple chooses to marry, or as parents adopt children, or as others pledge to love each other in plenty and want – God chooses to be *bound* by love. God promises to care for us, never to let us go.

I want to read you part of a story about love and binding promises – a story I found in the library this week. It's a true story, beginning in Haiti about 30 years ago. It's called *A Haitian Story of Hope: Sélavi*.² It begins . . .

Not so long ago and not so far away, [when] people with guns could take a family, burn a house and disappear, leaving a small child alone in the world.

This child went north and south, east and west. Here and there he found something to eat and a place to sleep, but not a family and not a home. In the capital city of his country, the streets were crowded with overloaded buses, cars with darkened windows, and more people with guns. Angry faces shouted, "Move on," and "Go home." The child was too tired to keep going. He sat on the curb with his head in his hands.

Suddenly, a hand was on his shoulder. Was it a man with a gun? No, it was a boy his own age, saying, "My name is TiFrè. Have some plantains. What is your name? Where are you from?"

¹ From Jon Walton's sermon "We Come with Shaking Knees," preached at University Presbyterian Church, Chapel Hill, NC, January 10, 2010.

² Youme Landowne, *A Haitian Story of Hope: Sélavi*, Cinco Puntos Press, 2004.

The child ate hungrily but didn't answer.

"You can name yourself," TiFrè said. "Like my name means Little Brother. We could call you Hungry, Sleepy, or Little Traveler . . ."

"I am all those things," the child said. "And that's life." From then on they called him Sélavi. [In Kreyòl, Sélavi means "That's life."]

TiFrè brought Sélavi to the place where he lived, a banyan tree near a market square which emptied out in the evening. As the sun went down, child after child came home [to the tree] with something [to share: avocados earned working in a restaurant, mangoes gotten laboring at the docks, drinking water purchased with money given for washing cars, cleaning clothes, or having asked in hope of a little charity. "Help yourself" the children said to Sélavi.] "We each bring back what we get during the day, and we all end up with more.

That night they had enough to eat, a place to rest, and the comfort of each other. As they settled down to sleep, Sélavi told [the children] of the men with guns and his long run through the countryside. Then the others told their stories, too. [Jenti, whose family had drowned when an old ferry boat sank. Toussaint, whose house was so crowded, "It seemed like there was one dry bean for all of us." TiFrè, whose mother had gotten sick and died just after they'd moved to Port au Prince.

That night Sélavi found a home and a family. He found there was more to life than being hungry, sleepy, a little traveler. For a long time it was so: the children worked during the day and cared for each other at night. Then one day, the police came to the old banyan tree and accused the children of stealing and chased them all away.]

Sélavi ran down a side street and into a church. There he saw many families. Some of them seemed kind, but others were frowning because he had interrupted them.

A man was speaking to the people. "Alone," he said, "we may be a single drop of water, but together we can be a mighty river. We must help each other to become strong!"

Sélavi called out, "I need help." Faces turned toward him. Sélavi told them about his friends and the men who had threatened him. An older woman said, "You are safe here." A couple stood. "Come live with us and be our son."

"Thank you very much," said Sélavi, "but what about my brothers and sisters in the street?"

[The people talked to each other and decided to be the mighty river – to help each other become strong.] They agreed to build a house where street children who looked out for one another could live. It would be a place to sleep in safety, to eat well, and even to go to school. It would be a home for Sélavi and his family.

[They did build the house. And they called it Lafanmi Sélavi, which means Family is Life. More than being hungry or sleepy, that is. More than being homeless, a traveler. *Family is life.*]

I wish I could say that this story ends happily. Their orphanage was bombed and ransacked even before the earthquake made a mess of it. Corruption marred its operations. The family argued at times. Still. At the center of this story is something true – as true today as it was at the time of Isaiah’s prophecy, and as true for us as for the people of Haiti. Redemption can happen. The desolate can heal, can begin to find happiness And the process often begins not with some jazzy miracle, but with a single step. A friendly hand on the shoulder. A simple meal shared. Stories told. The decision to care for others as family.

There are times we wish that God would come down and fix things for us. But the reality is that God’s activity in the world is more often characterized by restraint. Scripture’s witness is that God chooses to work through human agents – limited people like us, who are gifted by the spirit to make a difference in the world – to see as God sees, to love as God loves, to care for each other, even as family. Alone we are just a single drop of water, but together we can be a mighty river. Alone we may be desolate. Together . . . there is the possibility of joy. And that is, sometimes, nothing less than a miracle.