

Our lectionary lessons this morning bring to us a basket full of beautiful images: Isaiah speaks of crowns of beauty, royal diadems in the hand of God; delight and rejoicing between bridegrooms and brides, and the rejoicing of God over us. Our Psalm speaks of feasts and abundance, a river of delights, the great justice of God, and the loving-kindness and favor of God. Paul speaks of the abundance of spiritual gifts bestowed on us by the Holy Spirit, and in our Gospel lesson, our Lord Jesus performs his first miracle: the turning of nearly two hundred gallons of water into the best wine the steward had ever tasted. Our lectionary texts describe joyful abundance everywhere! But our hearts today tell a very different story.

We as the community of St. John's Parish gather today having tumbled together through a bewildering and heartsore week. The loss of Keith Segovia brings us face to face with the question of God's presence in the suffering and death to cancer of a shining light in the world. The devastating earthquake in Haiti forces us face to face with the towering question of God's presence in the midst of crushing natural disaster. Our memorial thoughts of The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. spins us further around to grapple with the question of God's presence in the face of evil. Our heads spin, our hearts are stunned, and The Big Question once again looms: Where is God in the face of personal and natural disaster?

Humankind has wrestled with The Big Question almost forever, I think. As Christians we hold certain concepts to be true: we believe that God is real. We believe that God is all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. And we believe that God loves us, that all human beings are God's beloved creation, and that God wants good for us. Yet we look around and see countless examples of terrible things happening to good people. Where does this equation go wrong?

There are two factors in our equation that I believe are pivotal, upon which perhaps much of our suffering turns on. One is that we somehow forget that we are natural, created beings, subject to natural laws and to finitude; we - just as all created things do - have a beginning, a middle, and an end,

and there is nothing broken in this. This is true for humans, for animals, for plants, for planets, for all created life. I believe that our human lifetimes – whether long or short – are given to us with the assignment that we are to learn how to love. Being finite created beings, we all eventually come to the end of this “little life,” precious though it is, at which point we die. I believe we then face our judgement and final purification, and then enter into our joyful larger life: because of the gift of Christ’s love for us on the cross, our brief life on earth is just the required short assignment we complete before entering into larger life with him. But I think we forget the pivotal fact that we are mortal, finite creatures who face the painful but normal phenomena of decline and death.

The other important factor in our equation is the issue of free will: the gift of choice that God gave us. What a risky part of God’s design, giving us the choice to learn, and to choose good from evil.

Risky because we humans are very drawn to selfish decisions: choices made by our forefathers continue to reverberate through future generations, causing all manner of devastation both personal and national. Think of the questionable choices made way back in the past to build cities out of the least reliable materials, on naturally unstable ground, over a tectonic fault line – lucrative surely, but devastating choices for future generations. And so nature does what nature does: tectonic plates shift, earth opens, unstable buildings fall down. I believe God weeps to see some of the choices we make, and the grave repercussions we bear because of them, but God is *never* absent in the midst of our calamities. Bidden or unbidden, God is with us, in holy presence and in the love of those who are compelled to bring help. What a poignant economy, the way in which catastrophe opens up these dramatic opportunities to improve our ability to love.

Our heads and hearts are stunned and heavy this week, and yet we see all around us the beauty and strength of love rising up all around us. We see the healing power of compassion pouring out from our church and local, national, and international community as the Segovia family gradually finds a new sense of balance in a world that has been turned upside down. We continue to come to terms with the great loss of what might have been if not for the death of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. We see the

healing powers of courage and love rushing to aid our brothers and sisters in Haiti. The Presence of God is palpable in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit - through God, and through us to each other.

We may be spinning, but our feet are quickly finding the ground: Tuesday's funeral for Keith Lee Segovia was the largest service in memory ever held in St. John's Church, where the power and presence of love among the 650 people there was overwhelming. We gather this coming week to honor the hopes and dreams of Rev. King throughout every town and city in the country, as we continue to strain forward in making his vision of the goodness and dignity of all humankind manifest. Our Prayer Vigil for Haiti on Thursday night helped us to begin to grieve together and to focus our efforts; our own L'Epiphanie is organizing a trip to Port au Prince next week, bringing medical supplies and donations of money to help Fr. Millien's Bon Samaritain School there be turned quickly into a triage center for first aid.

The weight of grief through these heartsore events is almost beyond our ability to handle, and the need for help is immeasurable. But the presence of God in the midst of it all is strong and unshakeable. Jesus' promise to be with us always is most palpable in the dust and rubble of our lives; whether they have tumbled down through personal or natural disaster, we are never alone in the midst of our devastation.

Jesus gave his life to accompany us through every suffering, and he gave his first miracle in Cana perhaps as an example of offering the very best he could offer, even when he didn't think he was ready: not inferior wine, at some future date, when he was clear that his hour had come - but the finest offering right then and there, to honor the need that presented itself without warning. In his presence, and with this example in our consciousness, what is the best, the finest, offering we can make? And can we offer it now, not later when the timing might suit us better? How can we follow Jesus' example of turning water into wine with our neighbors in Haiti to offer the highest quality of help, in abundance, and without delay?

We have much to do to help in the months and years ahead. Let us fill our baskets to the brim, offering the best we can, keeping our eyes ahead on the vision of that beautiful city of God, where with all of God's children from every tribe and every nation, we will feast and dance together, in delight and rejoicing again.

Let us pray.

Holy God, source of life, lover of souls: out of the depths we call to you. In the face of anguish and sorrow, we lift our cries of distress, and pray your mercy upon those suffering in the devastation of Haiti. We pray for those who have died, and for their loved ones who grieve, that you gather them into the wideness of your mercy. We pray for those who wait alone for rescue, that you strengthen and sustain them, and make your Presence known to them. We pray for your healing of all those suffering in body, mind or spirit. We pray for those who are orphaned, homeless, and wandering, for families lost, and ask you to guide and shelter them. We pray for those searching for loved ones, and ask that your comfort sustain them. Strengthen the hands and hearts of those who assist in relief efforts, and grant us all firm resolve to stand with our sisters and brothers in need, to love them and to offer our generous support of them, in this their time of trouble, and in the months and years of rebuilding to come. Amen.

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January 16, 2010