

Karen Anderson, Certified Lay Preacher

Isaiah 6:1-8, [9-13], Psalm 138, 1 Corinthians 15:1-11, Luke 5:1-11

In his commentary on today's reading from Isaiah, The Rev. Dr. George Martin references the stoppage of time. Occasions that divide our lives into life prior to an event and the vastly different existence following it. You may recall some of those dates for American citizens: December 7, 1941, or November 22, 1963 or September 11, 2001.

Rev. Martin states that "Isaiah had one of those moments. It defined the rest of his life. The whole action inside that temple for Isaiah is decisive and life changing."

Like Isaiah, I have undergone a life changing event. Mine took place in April of 2013. That is when I took my first trip to Haiti. Before taking that trip what I knew of Haiti was: its location in the Atlantic Ocean, and its designation as the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. As someone who lives a life of white privilege in the comfort of the wealthiest country in the world my comprehension was to say the least, incomplete!

That trip to Haiti was amazing - I often use the word visceral to describe it. My senses were inundated as we made our way through Port-au-Prince. The heat and humidity were stifling. The air smelled of burning charcoal. Our ears were bombarded by the constant blaring of horns from cars, motorcycles and the famous tap-tap taxis. There appeared to be no rules of the road for drivers or pedestrians. The streets were littered with rubble from the earthquake of 2010, and garbage from the people who lived in make shift houses made of corrugated steel, cardboard, plastic tarps, or whatever they could find to provide minimal shelter from the blistering sun and the rain. Regardless of the direction I looked I saw vendors selling anything and everything to the 2 million people who lived in the capital.

I learned instantly, that what I did not know about Haiti could fill a library full of books. As we toured the decimated city, and participated in the Partnership Conference, I experienced 2 events that stopped time for me.

The first was when I saw the beautiful bronze statue the Nèg Mawon. That statue commemorates the abolishment of slavery in Haiti. It is a symbol of the strength and beauty of the Haitian people. Of their perseverance in spite of unspeakable hardship. Of their victory over inhumane treatment. Of the dignity God intends for all his children. Seeing it in person had a profound effect on me. I was drawn to its beauty, but more importantly to its symbolism. It was somehow able to transport me away from my life of white privilege and caused me empathize with the people of Haiti who endured such pain and humiliation, who

still live with corruption and poverty, yet they harbor tremendous hope for their future. I felt humbled and grateful and open to God's presence.

The second event began with little fan-fare. Over the course of the conference we made the acquaintance of countless people. It was only with the passage of time that the significance of this one particular audience would be revealed.

I was introduced to The Rev. Frederic Menelas - Père Fred. An Episcopal priest who would show me the beautiful, hopeful children of his country. This man who I would host in my home. A shepherd who I would have the privilege of visiting, along with others from this parish and together we witnessed the wonderful care he gives to his sheep. This preacher who would mesmerize me as he officiated the longest church service I have ever sat through, and he would do so speaking French and Haitian Creole and English translations for his "blan" guests from Clinton! A sweet human being who loves God, and values education, and is a true gift to this Episcopal Church we all call home.

In the verse following today's old testament reading Isaiah receives instructions from God seems rather odd - make the people's mind dull, shut their eyes and stop their ears from hearing. It is hardly something you would expect God to command. But if we keep reading, there is assurance in the final line of that passage - so they will turn and be healed. The people's hope lies not in themselves, but in the Lord.

God frequently contradicts our beliefs about what we see and hear and know. The Almighty tells us that even as we live in a world of war, we should love our neighbor AND our enemy. We are instructed to practice forgiveness in the face of vindictive speech and exercise generosity in a world that glorifies greed. We are asked to walk in peace in spite of being surrounded by violence. These are all part of Isaiah's prophesy. We will be brought through whatever we encounter, if we simply turn toward God and allow ourselves to be healed.

When "Bondye" (God) called me to leave my life of luxury, and experience the struggle for basic needs in Haiti there were no winged Seraphs. When the Spirit compelled me to leave this wealthy church in Clinton and go experience worship in a building that has no doors or windows in Grand Colline I had no idea she would reveal to me a love that transcends everything we think we know. However, now that I have experienced it, that sacred love compels me to share the blessings I have received, inspires me to bring others along for the journey, has ignited a fire that burns in my heart, and has gifted me with a friendship that challenged what I knew of the world and my place in it.

A friendship between two people who seem to have so little in common, and yet have so much to give to each other. And in opening our hearts to that friendship - God has changed lives on an island home in the Caribbean, AND lives in a small hamlet in North America.

Over the course of 2 visits to Haiti, I had the honor of traveling with 5 other folks from St. James' - JoElyn to P-A-P in 2013 and in 2017 Margaret and Blair Jones, Mike Baldwin and Randy Wilson to Cherident and Beaudin Jean Pierre. We all had an opportunity to learn first hand of the ministry in Haiti.

Today, each of you has a rare privilege, to learn about Haiti from a Haitian. It is with immense joy that I ask you to join me in welcoming zanmi pa m' (my friend) Père Fred to St. James'.

(Following Père Fred's address)

I want to thank Père Fred for traveling all this way to come to our very cold town. As well as our generous parishioners who financed his plane ticket. I invite you to attend our reception following this service to look at some photos from our trips, hear more about his new parish St. Matthias in Camp-Perrin, Haiti, and to meet him in person