

A Meditation

given by The Right Reverend Robert O'Neill, Bishop of Colorado
at a Requiem Mass and Vigil for Haiti
Saint Thomas Episcopal Church, Denver
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“Jesus said, ‘You are the light of the world.’”

—Matthew 5:14

This past Holy Week during the Chrismal Eucharist I described the road between Port au Prince and Petit Trou de Nippes—a trip of some seventy-eight miles that many of us here this evening have been privileged and indeed blessed to make in the past. If you know the road, you know its qualities: smooth in places but filled with ruts and potholes in others; hard packed soil when it's been baked in the sun but thick with mud when it rains; lots of twists and turns (to my recollection, seemingly constant twists and turns) and simply no guarantee of getting to your destination in any given length of time. Even so, it's not the details of the terrain that are so remarkable but the iconic nature of the journey itself—a journey that speaks of deep transformation and reveals the gift of our divine connectedness and holy interdependence. Indeed if we are willing to take the journey, it is one in which we are given the opportunity to see nothing less than the face of Jesus in our Haitian sisters and brothers. We need only open our eyes.

Last week, just before 5 p.m. the earth in Haiti shook violently. The clinical description of its magnitude—7.0 on the Richter Scale, so measured and scientifically precise—cannot begin to describe the real chaos. It is simply incomprehensible. There have been miracles in the face of death, to be sure, and stories of heroism and courage in the face of insurmountable odds. But still it is all beyond words, beyond images, beyond feeling, beyond apprehension—destruction piled upon destruction, devastation heaped upon devastation, loss compounded by loss. The Episcopal Cathedral in Port au Prince lies in ruin. The beautiful murals on its walls—created with such time and care and imagination, themselves testaments to the gift of human creativity and beauty—have become, in a matter of seconds, rubble.

Now the road that the Haitian people must travel has shifted tragically and dramatically—more twists and turns, more obstacles and barriers, more complicated, more daunting, more challenging than before—and the journey that we are called in turn to take with them as sisters and brothers in Christ (indeed the journey that is required of us) is one that demands our very best and sustained effort not just immediately but for the long haul.

Tonight, as we gather in prayerful solidarity with the people of Haiti, we hear these words from Jesus: “You are the light of the world.”

What do you suppose that means, really? “You are the light of the world.”

You. Not someone else. You. Not the person next to you. Not someone with greater skills, or competency, or money. You. Not someone in the past with a better track record and greater experience. Not someone who is yet to come with more opportunities and fewer problems, but you. It doesn't get any more specific or any more personal than that. “You,” Jesus says. I imagine him pointing a solitary finger—inviting, pleading, straining toward his disciples' fragile and wavering hearts; his hand outstretched like the hand of God on the ceiling of Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel; God reaching out to Adam, extending divine life to humankind. “You,” Jesus says, “just as you are, right here, right now, in this time, in this place, with whatever you have.” “You,” he says, “are the light—the light that this darkened world needs in order to know itself and become what God creates it to be.

When Jesus spoke those words to a group that was unquestionably an odd collection of characters known as his disciples, he was both calling attention to their deepest identity as well as calling forth their highest purpose. Like all of us, I am sure they had heard the stories—how we are created in the image and likeness of God; how we, all of us, are quite literally inspired, animated, invigorated in every moment by nothing less than the divine breath breathing life into us, the living spirit of the living God moving within us (and yes, it is that close and it is that real). But like all of us, I am sure that the disciples themselves suffered from a certain chronic amnesia, just losing track of themselves, simply forgetting—forgetting on the deepest level, like all of us, just who we really are; created, as Paul says, before the very foundation of the world, holy, divine, eternal; created for one purpose and one purpose only, to live in love.¹

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says. It's who we are. It's who the people of Haiti are. It's who we all are, and I dare say that the tragedy of last week's earthquake, with all the suffering and loss that it represents, points to our own need simply to remember—to remember on the deepest level who we all really are. As Richard Rohr says, if we get the “who” right, the rest will follow.²

Light, of course, is something that brings reality into definition. Light is that commodity that gives us the ability to see and negotiate the terrain as it really is. Just as many have said that hurricane Katrina lifted the veil and exposed the scourge of systemic racism and poverty in this country, so too our role, our ministry, our witness—even as we support recovery and relief efforts in the wake of disaster—must also be to bring to light our own unacknowledged poverty: the deeply entrenched systems, the policies and beliefs, that drive us blindly and relegate some of God's people to a life of unconscionable poverty while the rest of us live only a short distance away in material abundance. It is a hard and shameful reality caused by a constellation of factors—the inadequate and unjust economic and political policies that govern us publicly and privately; the cultural and racial prejudices that we either harbor or tolerate; the

¹ Ephesians 1:4

² See Richard Rohr, *Things Hidden: Scripture as Spirituality* (Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2008), chapter 2, pages 27-51.

unchallenged inheritance of our collective history; the self-preoccupation and consumerism of our culture; our own indifference and denial; the false and unchallenged assumption that we are insignificant and powerless to do anything and therefore can choose only to do nothing. You name it. You know as well as I do that the kind of disparity that exists between us and the people of Haiti—the same gross disparity that spans the globe as well—is not the justice that God intends for God’s creation. This is not the justice that is God. This is not the justice that is divine life. This light demands our very best. This light calls forth our highest self—our thoughtful, mature, sustained and active witness to the way of love in this world. Listen, if our prayers even now for the people of Haiti do not open our eyes and illumine our hearts and awaken us to live with a renewed and urgent commitment to be the light that we are created to be, then frankly our prayer tonight is simply not prayer.

“You are the light of the world,” Jesus says.

Those words speak to our deepest identity and highest purpose. It’s about knowing who we are and whose we are. It’s about being willing to be moved by suffering and being willing to embrace that suffering however ugly or threatening or frightening it may seem. It’s about choosing to give ourselves away—about simply offering ourselves, whatever we have, freely, generously, willingly, in love to love for love, and in so doing to bring life and light into a darkened world. This, my friends, is the way, for this is the way of Jesus, our true light.

Listen again to these words: “You are the light of the world.”

Tonight, as you take in the images and look into the faces of our sisters and brothers in Haiti, open your eyes. Behold who you are, become what you see.

—*Amen.*