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Quake shakes, but doesn't tumble, faith of Haitians

Bob Braun Religion News Service | Jan. 21, 2010

Earthquake survivors in the Haitian city of Leogane unload emergency supplies provided by Caritas Internationalis and Diakonie, Jan. 20. (CNS /Paul Jeffrey)

PORT-AU-PRINCE, Haiti -- Did God abandon Haiti?

No, say its people of faith -- and there are many here in a place without much beyond faith. The earthquake was a sign of God's presence.

So, it should be no surprise that on a narrow street choked by debris, outside a church with a shattered ceiling open to the morning sky, what was left of the congregation of Haiti's Second Baptist Church stood in a courtyard and waved their hands in the air and shouted, "Victoire! Victoire!"

Victory.

The Rev. Simeon Vilneus based his sermon on Matthew 24, when Jesus was asked how long the temple in Jerusalem would stand. "I tell you," Jesus answered, "not one stone here will rest upon another. Every one will be thrown down."

And the men and women, dressed in suits and dresses rescued and cleaned from the relentless dust, heard that and shouted, "Alleluia! Alleluia."

They should be happy, they should smile, Vilneus told them. What happened Jan. 12 was not an example of God's absence, but rather proof that he is coming back soon. Proof that the good people of Haiti will be the first to welcome him because they suffered first. Vilneus reminded his people that Jesus also said:

"There will be famine and earthquakes ? and all this will be the beginning of birth pains."

In the Haiti after the cataclysm of the 7.0-magnitude earthquake, hope is found in the idea that indescribable destruction and death must be proof its people are on the threshold of salvation. God, they say, has chosen Haiti of all places as the nation where the End Times, Armageddon, the end of the world, will begin.

"My faith is stronger because I know God is at the door," Vilneus cried out. "He said he is coming soon. The End Times are here. He has come to Haiti."

It may be impossible to argue matters of faith, but it's easy to understand why what has happened to the people of Haiti should be seen as proof of the coming end of the world. For probably more than 100,000 people, this world already has ended.

"I think it may be true," said Jean Charles, a member of the church. "Nothing like this has ever happened before. It's what the Bible says will happen."

Not far from Vilneus' church stands what looks like Jesus' words made real -- the ruins of the nation's largest church, the National Cathedral. It's the closest thing in this country to a temple, with the importance of the temple in Jerusalem.

Vilneus did not miss the point, mentioning that many churches, including his own, including the largest, were damaged and destroyed. "God," he said, "is showing you the temple of Jerusalem destroyed, he is showing you he is coming back and you must stay at his feet."

When the service began, many sat stunned and lethargic. One woman wept quietly in one of the pews. Denise Midy says she cannot find her children. "Ma famille," my family, she repeated again and again.

The pastor estimated that as many as half of his 3,000-member flock may have been killed in the earthquake, although it is impossible to know. Vilneus says he lost his home and his best friend, but his family was saved.

Because most phone service is out and many streets impassable, trying to learn what happened to their relatives is nearly impossible, unless they found their bodies in the morgue.

"I thought maybe I'd find some people here," said Ruth Yvon, an elderly woman who cannot find her daughter and grandchildren.

Outside the church, men and women, their faces covered in masks, gathered scraps of wood and sheets to make portable shelters. They ignored the calls of church elders who stood outside the courtyard asking them to come in and "accept Jesus."

"We have no home," said one woman pushing a wheelbarrow piled high with a barrel of water and some clothes. "Your home is here," one of the elders answered. She answered, "Then let me live there."

Vilneus, in fact, has opened the church school as a shelter, and invites both members and strangers in. He cannot

open the church -- a vast structure with plenty of room -- because it might yet fall.

Outside the National Cathedral, a truck pulls up and a crew of rescue workers from Fairfax County, Va., piles out. They are there, they say, to rescue anyone who might have been trapped inside.

"Is there anyone here who can tell us whether anyone is inside, or who's in charge of the church?" asked Pat Sheehan, one of the recovery workers.

He is talking to a woman dressed in purple, a large silver cross hanging from her neck. She appears to belong to the church.

"No, no one is here," explained the woman, Marie Lourdes. "They are all gone."

Then she turns back and shows the reason she has come to the church. She is draping her wet laundry on the high fence of the once grand temple.

[Bob Braun writes for The Star-Ledger in Newark, N.J.]

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