

Prayer Service for Haiti – Strength through Unity
Washington National Cathedral
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Our hearts are broken, as we sit transfixed before images of devastation and ruin, the bodies of children and elders piled in the streets, buildings crushed to dust, pleading arms and voices raised to heaven. We respond in lament and grief and sorrow, we push back against the senseless mystery of life's pain. We yield to those ancient questions: Why? What sort of a God permits destruction like this? What can I do, how can I help? Those questions can't ever be fully answered fully, yet they are most important in times like these. The reality is that life is not safe or predictable, but what we do with our lives gives them meaning. God does not cause suffering or punish people with it, but God is present and known more intimately in the midst of suffering. Above all, we become more human through our broken hearts.

That ability to *suffer with*, to feel compassion, is one of the gifts of being fully human. We may only be able to respond through being with, by standing alongside, even at a distance. We can pray with the grieving, and we can reach out.

Compassion is pouring out across this nation and across the globe, as the world feels the suffering in Haiti. Suddenly strangers have become hungry brothers and thirsty and sisters, people in pain, without a place to lay their heads, mourning the death of loved ones.

Compassion is a gift that changes the world. We have discovered and remembered our sisters and brothers in a land many of us will never see – our common humanity is staring us in the face, and we have chosen to meet the gaze of Haiti. We are changed forever, if we will only remember the terror of that gaze.

Remember and let yourself be shaken. Feel something of the terror in Haiti. Terror, the word, comes from shaking; this terror started in the shaking of the earth. It has a parallel in the fear that periodically consumes this nation. May this terror shake us out of complacency and willful ignorance. Remember the people of Haiti. Reach out to those who have lost loved ones, to those who still wait for news of the missing, to Haitian-Americans in the neighborhoods around us.

The answer to terror is solidarity. The shaking stops when we stand together, when we remember that sisters and brothers, linked across the world, are stronger than fear.

Haiti is filled with resilient and persevering people, but much of the nation's resources and systems are lost and broken. Many nations are already moving to

stand alongside. We can give thanks for the rapid and deep response from these United States. There are immense seeds of hope in the response to this disaster, seeds that must continue to be watered and nurtured for the future. We've seen some of the hopeful seeds in Haitians gathering in broken streets to sing and pray, even children playing with empty boxes in which food arrived. Hope abounds, but it must be answered.

Our remembering has to be long-term, it must endure, if it is going to beat back the terror of this disaster. The longer and harder task is to remember the ancient hope of humanity, that vision Isaiah proclaims as repairing the ruined cities and building up ancient ruins and devastations. The long arm of remembering will give the strength to see that the hungry and thirsty and ill and homeless are cared for. Rebuilding the infrastructure of Haiti will take years, just as it has in the aftermath of Katrina. We cannot forget.

The disaster of this earthquake is the most recent and the most devastating of a long series of terrors – hurricanes, political coups and instability, the centuries-long struggle of former slaves to make a home in a foreign land. There is some deep solidarity in praying for Haiti on the eve of our nation's remembrance of Martin Luther King. His message was filled with the biblical vision of the prophets, that heaven on earth comes when the poor are cared for and all God's

children are treated with justice. That vision applies to the poorest here and equally to those a few hundred miles south of our borders, to all who live in abject poverty, hungry for the world's justice.

The words of prophets also come with challenge. It's easy to miss Isaiah's caution – the prophet proclaims that eternal dream of a restored world, but also the day of God's vengeance. Matthew's version comes in the verses we didn't read, that those who don't feed and care for the poor will be consigned to what we usually call hell – it's not the poor who end up there, but those who ignore them and their suffering. The ancient vision of a healed world demands that all people have decent and dignified life possibilities – clean water, adequate food, shelter, medical care, education for their children, stable government, the possibility of meaningful employment. Here in this nation we shelter that vision under the banner of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” That vision will never be possible in any nation while some live in want and fear.

Terror is not limited to Haiti. The prophets remind us that the kind of terror that leaves us shaking in our boots comes from poverty ignored and justice denied. That shaking is calmed and healed in remembering, in compassionate solidarity with the suffering of the world.

We are seeing immense generosity in the compassionate response to this earthquake. Our challenge will be to remember that suffering through the years to come, when the desperation is no longer on our screens 24 hours a day. The shaking and the terror will stop as the ruined city is rebuilt and the devastation of generations is healed. May today's compassion be transformed into a steely will to continue caring for the least, the lost, and the left out until not one is left. May Haiti's poor be our poor until that day dawns. May the suffering in Haiti be felt here and around the world until the oil of gladness blesses every brow, and every tear is dried, and every cry of grief is turned to joy.