

### **An Image of Hope**

I appreciate very much this opportunity to be with you again, even if it is through YouTube. I have missed you all very much, and I look forward to the day when we can be together and share each other's lives. I am so grateful for Steve, Laura, and Carleen, who have worked tirelessly during this difficult time to keep our community of faith together, active, informed, and filled with a sense of purpose. Thank-you; as a member of the congregation, I can say how much it has meant to all of us.

Today I want to share news from Haiti. Many of you have asked me how Haiti is doing during this difficult time of Covid-19. For those of you who are new to the congregation, or are visiting our on-line service today, let me offer a brief introduction. My husband, Ted, and I founded a scholarship granting organization in Haiti 16 years ago. We began with 32 high school students and today we have 510 students from Pre-K through University bachelor's degree, all studying in Haiti. We also built an Education Center, where we offer educational opportunities in the region such as tutoring, literacy classes, seminars for educators and students and so much more. We are very proud to be in partnership with this church in our efforts.

Like the rest of world, when the virus came to the island in March, the government decided to shut down all the schools, the churches, many non-essential businesses, the airport, and they closed the borders from the Dominican Republic to Haiti. I believe they have done a better job managing the virus than we have in the U.S. The Haitians are deeply frightened of the virus, because they do not have the infrastructure or medical facilities, and equipment to handle this pandemic. So the seamstresses set out sewing hundreds of masks and people stopped traveling to other regions of Haiti, especially the major cities. Most people in the rural areas do not have running water in their homes, so portable hand-washing stations were set-up around many towns. We had two outside our Education center for the community. So far, Haiti has had about 7,200 known cases and almost 175 deaths, most of the cases are in the large cities. There have been very few cases in our region in the Artibonite Valley.

The much bigger problem in Haiti is food insecurity due to political unrest, decreasing foreign aid and the rapid depreciation of their currency, the virus has exacerbated the situation. With a multi-year inflation rate of over 22% and unemployment at 66%, it is not surprising that some regions of Haiti are heading into early stages of famine. The political unrest over the last two years is largely tied to this economic collapse and anti-government sentiments. Many of the protests, that began peacefully turned violent over the political corruption under the Moise administration. The people are tired of being hungry, unable to meet their medical needs, not able to pay for their children's education, and there are very few job opportunities. These protests came to an end when the virus came to the island, but the sentiments and anger are still there and the shut-down of the country has made the economic despair worse.

Ted and I have witnessed this deepening problem in our region over the last two years. So many of the people in our community that we have known since we began our work are markedly thinner and struggling with lack of food. It is heart-breaking. The Artibonite Valley, where we work, is one of the bread baskets of Haiti and food is trucked from there to the populous cities. I have read that food production has decreased causing food to be more expensive in the urban areas. Yet in our area, we do not see the shortage of food. The open-air markets always have baskets and baskets of produce, but many people do not have the money to purchase it. There are many families with no adults employed. I do not know how they survive. I have asked them, and they say they find a little bit of food here and there, but sometimes there is no food for the family.

At our Education Center, we have a vegetable garden and our staff shares the food with those who come to our office with hunger. We also have set aside some emergency funds to help those in dire need of purchasing food. But these efforts are like band-aids on the serious problem of unemployment and food insecurity. Over the past year, we have been thinking of ways to help alleviate the situation. We have thought of opening a soup kitchen 2 times a week that would operate out of our guest house or offering families whose children are in our program a food allowance, but the problem is too great and these practices would become unmanageable very quickly. We need to continue to seek solutions that are transformative and truly help alleviate the problem.

One way that we are helping is through our scholarship program. Education, we believe, is transformative and brings about real change. We have seen that transformation with many of our graduates, who have careers that pay a living wage. Some of these graduates are married and have children, and their children go to school. They can provide food for their family and help other family members in need. These graduates with careers are breaking the vicious cycle of poverty.

Education plays an important role, but life sustaining careers truly make the difference -- you need both. We realized this when we founded our organization. A key part of our mission statement is educating students and preparing them for professional careers in Haiti. We have had success with students in most of the fields of work, such as medical, business, computer programming, teaching, accounting, engineering and so on.

One of our students, now a doctor, has even founded his own medical clinic in his hometown in Liancourt. We are proud of these successes.

One sector that has not found employment is our agronomy graduates. After the earthquake when food insecurity was becoming more serious, our Program Director advised students to major in agronomy and large-scale food production. Since then, we have had 10 agronomy graduates and 10 agronomy students who will graduate in the next 2 years. This group of 20 prompted us to think seriously about getting engaged with helping them find employment. This past winter, we started the 'Career Development Program,' which will help with start-up grants to create small businesses.

We began contacting other non-profit organizations working in the field of agronomy and food production to seek advice and to build partnerships. We have talked with Heifer, Smallholder

Farmers Alliance, and even folks at United States Agency for International Development, known as USAID. Our inquiries have been met with enthusiasm, and I wish we began partnership development earlier. Heifer has offered internships for our agronomy students that may lead to careers. Smallholder Farmers Alliance (SFA) is willing to partner with us on a reforestation and cotton project and to also include internships for our graduates, where the interns would teach local farmers better farming techniques. It feels good to work together toward a common goal.

In February, we met with SFA at our house in Haiti along with 4 of our unemployed agronomy graduates. These 4 graduated with bachelor's degrees in 2016, and they have been searching for work for 4 years. They shared with me over the years how they had such hope when they graduated from university, but now were feeling hopeless. I was so excited to see them again at this meeting at our house. When they arrived, it was like seeing children on a Christmas day; they were filled with hope and enthusiasm at the prospect of starting their careers. We had a wonderful and encouraging meeting, and we are well on our way with this new partnership. One of our board of Advisors said he had 5 acres of land that he could lease for the SFA project for only \$500 a year. The graduates have planted one of these acres while waiting for the SFA partnership to begin. These crops will soon be ready for the market. After the first year, our hope is that the 4 agronomists will find profit and will not need our help after that. Hope is in the air. Instead of the band-aid approach to the problem of hunger and unemployment, we are investing in our graduates to bring about change in their country.

Behind me you see a bucolic painting of the Artibonite Valley by the Haitian artist, Jeune Louis DeLouis, who we have known for 15 years. We sell his work in our Partnership Co-op shop in our church. He is married with 2 daughters and life is a continuous struggle trying to provide for them as an artist. Yet in this painting you do not see hardship and struggle, you see an image of hope, an image of peace and productivity. The skies are blue; the fields are lush and abundant with healthy crops, and the river is clean and sparkles. The farmers are busy with their little plots of land, united with one goal of bringing their crops to fruition. All the plots are about the same size, which for me is symbol of equality. Women carrying produce on their heads or by donkey bring baskets to the boats that will cross the river for the market on the other side. Some of the produce will be sold outright, and some will be bartered for other produce, and some will be trucked to the inner cities. The mountains, always in view, offer a foundation of stability and strength, they are a constant presence in the valley. The painting, for me, is a prayer on canvas, and it makes me feel hopeful and happy about our partnerships to help our young agronomists.

Our scripture this morning was written by the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet Micah, who was a younger contemporary of the prophet Isaiah and was influenced by the older prophet's work. Unlike Isaiah, who was an aristocrat, Micah was a member of the laboring class who came from the rural area about 25 miles southwest of Jerusalem. The region was an agricultural area between two mountainous areas – maybe a little like the Artibonite Valley. Micah's language uses pastoral and agricultural imagery. He writes during a turbulent time of continuous threats from the Assyrian empire. Northern Israel had already fallen to the Assyrians, and southern Judah, where Micah lived, was a vassal state paying indemnity to the Assyrian ruler. Refugees from the north, fleeing from deportation, were filling the cities in south. During Micah's time 46 towns were sacked near his hometown. He was tired of war, tired of violence and concerned about ethical issues. He spoke out vehemently about socio-economic injustice, corrupt officials, and

defended the shepherds and poor farmers whose lands were being expropriated by the rich. Religious worship without social justice, he thought, was meaningless. He understood very well the correlation between human rights and peace building. Without one, the other is impossible.

These same issues of corruption and exploitation of the poor to benefit the rich sound familiar to us today in Haiti, in the U.S., and in most countries around the world. Greed and desire for power rule and with it grows an absolute disregard for the vast majority of the poor, whose numbers grow with each passing year. Haiti is the poorest country in the western hemisphere with over 60% of their population living well below the poverty line. There can be no lasting peace when the majority of the people are hungry, disenfranchised, disregarded, and thought of as lesser human beings – when living is a struggle every single day. Passivity in the face of surmounting economic problems cannot last. The violence we see in the world today many times is the result of socio-economic injustice. A true and lasting peace cannot be achieved until all people regard each other as equals; see each other as a beloved child of God. We have all heard this before; it is nothing new, especially in this congregation. But we must continue to strive for this vision – a vision of equality and respect for all people.

T.S. Eliott in his Four Quartets, wrote, “For us, there is only the trying; the rest is not our business.” For me this makes sense. If we constantly look for an end result that seems insurmountable, it is easy to get discouraged and give up. The constant striving toward, however exhausting, is what must be done, because without it, there is no transformation. Transformation is not an end .. it is a new beginning, it is the breath of God within us, and that is where hope lies. Without the striving for, there is no hope. And this world needs hope. Paul in his letter to the Galatians writes, “let us not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity let us work for the good of all.”

Micah maintains a vision of hope and universal peace during a time of war and violence. He writes, “They shall beat their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore; but they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid; for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken.”

This is a difficult time for all of us. We are waging a war on this insidious virus; we are calling out for equality and an end to racism in this country -- a movement that is long overdue; we are fatigued and angered at the corrupt self-serving politics we witness every day, and our hearts break for the life-threatening injustices against the world's extremely poor. We are tired of violence, war, divisive rhetoric, and corruption. We may feel beaten down by the weight of all this. I know I do. With the problems in this country coupled with those in Haiti, I feel as if I have a heavy cinderblock in the center of my chest. Sometimes I wish it would all go away. Yet, we all must continue to strive for what we know in our hearts is right and good – we must seek transformative change in our world and not accept a band-aid approach. We must not give up. We must continue to be the hands and heart of the living God. Like this bucolic painting of hope behind me, I have in my heart a similar vision for this country where people of all races, religions, genders, nationalities, ages, sexual orientation work together to build a nation for all people by all people, where equality is the norm, and we hear laughter in the streets that now are filled with tear gas and violence. Let us continue in the hard work of building justice, it is

exhausting, I know, but our vision, our dreams, our hope for the future generations are worth the struggle. God is with us, I am sure of that. To close, I will quote John Lewis in his final letter to all of us, “Though I may not be here with you, I urge you to answer the highest calling of your heart and stand up for what you truly believe... So I say to you, walk with the wind, brothers and sisters, and let the spirit of peace and the power of everlasting love be your guide.” Amen

Amen

Rev. Becky Crosby