

When I met with Jonah's parents and godparents yesterday to prepare for his baptism, I told them to watch the movie The Lion King.

I apologize now to all of you visual, twenty-first century types that I don't have the clip to show you on the sanctuary video screen we thankfully don't have, so close your eyes if it helps you to picture the scene.

Rafiki, the quirky baboon who is the spiritual leader of the animal community, sits despairing like the prophet Isaiah or Wyclef Jean over the sad fate of his nation.

The lion kingdom has been ravaged by greed and neglect, a once proud populace reduced to a landscape of ruin and desperate want.

Rafiki catches wind of the proximity of the young runaway king Simba, finds him, and in a burst of hopeful urgency leads him, breathless, to find his dead father alive.

Rafiki leads Simba to the edge of the water and shows him a reflection of his own face.

Simba feels foolish and disappointed, but Rafiki explains, "Your father lives in you."

He touches the water again, and says "look harder."

Simba does, and then Simba sees and understands.

The image of his father is there in his face, and he hears his voice: water and word combine to show him who he really is, and whose, and, as a result, what he must do.

It is the essence of baptism.

Jonah, take note: Simba's baptismal moment is just the beginning.

He must face the tragedy from which he has run away, stare into it, see it clearly.

He must look harder.

That is the calling and discipline and hope of baptism.

It is what the prophet Isaiah did when he surveyed the landscape of Zion and Jerusalem, as barren and hopeless a situation as Haiti before the earthquake.

The exiles had returned from Babylon to the promised land, but it was gripped by poverty, petty violence, political corruption, exploitation, and the long shadow of despair.

There is no milk, no honey, no flow; a once-proud populace was reduced to dust and disillusionment.

But Isaiah dares, and dares his community, to look harder.

He sees--beneath and beyond this disaster and heartache--beauty and hope.

He sees with the eyes of God, and speaks a word that sends chill tingles up the spine when it is coupled with this week's pictures from Haiti:

*For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn,
her salvation like a burning torch.*

*The nations shall see your vindication,
and all the kings your glory...*

*You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD,
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.*

*You shall no more be termed Forsaken,
and your land shall no more be termed Desolate,
by you shall be called My Delight Is in Her,
and your land Married;
for the LORD delights in you...
as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride,
so shall your God rejoice over you.*

I pray Isaiah's vision comes true for Haiti, where the images are so horrible and haunting that we want to turn away.

But the voice of the prophet won't let us.

The voice insists we look harder.

Look harder and you will see the astonishing beauty of the people who are suffering and of the people who are scrambling to save them.

Look harder and you will see heroism and deep humanity; keep looking until you even see hope.

Lutheran pastor Rick Barger is the executive director of the Haitian Timoun Foundation, which he founded back when he was pastor of Abiding Hope Lutheran Church in Littleton, Colorado, so he knows firsthand the face of tragic death.

Barger wrote this week:

The reports that we are getting from our own people there are filled with images of death and destruction.

As one person described it, "It is worse than any war zone."

At the same time, the stories of faith, courage, teamwork and resiliency of the Haitian people are nothing short of inspiring.

As Pastor Doug Hill said from Haiti tonight, "The Haitian people are amazing."

Barger, like Rafiki and Isaiah before him, has the baptismal courage to look harder and to speak a word of crazy hope.

He does not downplay or deny the grim horror that burns our eyes, the truth so raw and gruesome and overwhelming it paralyzes us, but instead he stares into it, deep into it, and looks harder until through it and beyond it he sees Easter.

For Haiti's sake he will not keep silent, and for its people's sake he will not rest, until its vindication shines out like the dawn, and its salvation like a burning torch.

It is a vision that can only be seen beneath the surface:

beneath the surface of the rubble and the rhetoric, beneath the surface of the water, beneath the surface of skin and appearance where Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. taught us all to look...because it is beneath the surface that we find God.

After 9-11, Rowan Williams, now Archbishop of Canterbury, dared to say that God is useless at a time like this.

I think the reason for it is that God is not in the heavens of power and pilots but under the rubble, trapped in the debris of human history, clothed in our fragile mortality and vulnerability, limp on a cross, saving us not from above but from beneath the surface.

God is under our story, under our skin, deep in our hearts where we dare not look, beneath the smoking piles of chaos and choice and circumstance, the seed that has fallen into the earth to die and only then and there, slowly from beneath the surface, to bear much fruit.

I have had a very hard time this week seeing God in the aftermath of Haiti's earthquake.

I have had a hard time looking at and stomaching the pictures.
I need to look harder.
I need to look, we need to look, until we see Christ.

Today at Resurrection, a little church named for God's big, beneath-the-surface transformation,
a little kid is baptized, Christ's cross traced on his forehead, a lit candle handed to his
family.

Look harder.

That candle is salvation's burning torch.

That cross is the pinnacle of human ugliness mysteriously transformed into divine beauty like
water into wine.

That child is a royal diadem in the hand of God and a sign of life and hope for a world that so
desperately starves for it.

That family joining our community today is God's pledge of new life and crazy hope possibility
incarnate in our midst.

And that desolate land on the news is the delight of the Lord, a beautiful bride, a light aflame in
the mournful eyes of God, who will build it slowly with rejoicing as prophets like Rick
Barger refuse to keep silent or still until she shines for all the world to see the same way
Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu and their community refused silence and rest in
South Africa.

Yes, the smothering darkness looks far too deep for one baptismal candle to have any impact.

Yes, the world looks as lost as the runaway lion king or the dead messiah.

Haiti looks as hopeless as the cross.

Look harder.