

God in the World: A New Heaven and A New Earth
Isaiah 40:1-11; 2 Peter 3:8-15a
December 7, 2008

The headlines on the internet and in the newspapers continue to proclaim bad news both locally and globally. It seems that we humans are unable to escape from the cycles of violence that harm our relationships with one another, with God, and with creation. This Advent season we are seeking signs of God's presence in our lives and world. Throughout the ages humans have engaged in power struggles that have resulted in great damage.

The prophet Isaiah addresses Israelites who have lived the bad news of exile for decades. He proclaims good news to them, saying, "Comfort is coming. The harsh treatment you have endured is coming to an end. God is coming, constructing a road through the wilderness to find you and deliver you from your misery. By that road God will lead you home to safety and comfort once again. Everything will be made right. The world will be landscaped with right relationships."

Few of us are caught up in misery as great as that of the Israelites. However, we are concerned about millions around the world who suffer daily. We wonder when God is coming and how God is at work in the world. The good news is that there are pockets around the world which are landscaped with righteousness, where new life is springing forth, even out of barrenness. This morning I want to share a few ways in which God is indeed at work in the world creating a new earth.

In the Darfur region of Sudan, an estimated 300,000 people have been killed and 2.5 million have fled their homes for refugee camps. Displaced people live in tents along the Chad-Sudan border, exiled from their homeland as were the Israelites of long ago.

In November over 300 "Tents of Hope" were set up here in the United States on the National Mall between the Washington Monument and the nation's capital. Each refugee tent was uniquely designed and contributed by a church, community, or organization from as far away as Sweden. Two tents were designed by our United Methodist campus ministry, Wesley Foundation in Berkeley. Plain canvas tents were transformed by bright expressions of love and peace. Many of these tents will be sent to Darfur for use as classrooms and symbols of hope.

For over a year these groups have been raising the consciousness of our nation about the grim circumstances in Darfur and pleading for assistance for the refugees. They will not let this crisis go ignored, as was the genocide of Rwanda. Mark Bogart, a youth leader at Memorial Drive United Methodist Church in Houston, Texas said, "Christ hung out with the downtrodden and the poor and the

weak. That is our call, not to be the light in places that are well lit. We are called to be light in the dark places. ... Darfur is certainly one of those dark places.”ⁱ

God is in the world when citizens of powerful nations advocate for and pledge solidarity with powerless citizens in nations experiencing oppression. Righteousness is finding a home and a new earth is being born.

For more than 25 years AIDS has been a global pandemic that has killed 27 million people, infected another 33.2 million, and left 16 million AIDS orphans struggling to survive. Christians are awakening to the crisis and searching for ways to put their faith into action.

Anti-retroviral drugs are now available that can keep most of the 33.2 million infected people alive and productive, but only 3 million have access to the drug. The rest are waiting for someone to care.

Pregnant HIV mothers around the world yearn for two small pills costing less than \$5 that will stop the transmission of the virus from mother to child during birth. Thanks to medicine provided to mothers in Africa and Asia through the United Methodist Global AIDS Fund, innumerable children have been saved. What a wonderful way to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Christ, by keeping a newborn baby AIDS-free!ⁱⁱ

God is in the world when we share our resources for curbing and treating disease. Righteousness is finding a home. A new earth is being born.

November was the first month in a long time that Diakite’Aichata has not had to take one of her children to the hospital because of malaria. The 20-year-old mother was among thousands of parents who waited in line Nov. 1 so that her two children could each receive a bed net that would protect them from mosquitoes, which carry malaria. The line outside one of two distribution stations in Alepe Town began forming at 6 a.m. and was still long by mid-afternoon.

The scene was repeated around the Ivory Coast with the launch of an integral health campaign. In addition to the insecticide-treated nets, each child received a vaccination against measles, a dose of Vitamin A and a de-worming tablet. The nets will protect pregnant women and children under 5, who are most vulnerable to malaria. The measles vaccinations will protect the children against a disease that kills 30 million people a year—60% of them Africans. The vitamin A will help the children’s eyesight and make them more robust, and the de-worming tablets will fight intestinal parasites.

United Methodists from the Ivory Coast and Texas United Methodist Annual Conferences joined with partners from the United Nations Foundation, *Sports Illustrated*, and others in kicking off the campaign in the West African country. The campaign will distribute more than 1 million bed nets to children, and it aims

to provide the shots, vitamins and tablets to all 3.2 million Ivoirian children between the ages of 9 months and 59 months.ⁱⁱⁱ

For \$10 a net, millions of lives are being saved from a disease that kills a child every 30 seconds. God is in the world when organizations cooperate, making small but tangible and life-saving contributions to health and prevention.

In these and other ways we are helping God to make a way of deliverance in the wilderness today for those who are trapped in desperate circumstances. As we work together God works through us and our efforts. Eventually the downtrodden will be led home to a place of comfort and rest. It is like the Mexican tradition of Los Posadas. It occurs over nine days from December 16-24. Each night the journey of the pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph is re-enacted as participants knock upon their neighbors' doors in search of lodging (una posada) for the family. After a series of rejections, the final stop of the nightly pilgrimage concludes with an invitation to the holy pilgrims to enter and receive modest shelter not only in the home but in the heart. The acceptance is celebrated with a nightly fiesta at the final home where the Holy Child finds lodging.

God is in the world, landscaping it with right relationships and peace. May we lend our services to the work and ministry of Jesus the Christ so that righteousness will indeed find a home here on earth.

ⁱ Kathy Gilbert, United Methodist News Service, November 14, 2008, www.umc.org.

ⁱⁱ Donald Messer, "Why Advent is the perfect time to focus on Global AIDS," United Methodist News Service, November 21, 2008.

ⁱⁱⁱ Tim Tanton, "Nets distribution campaign kicks off in Cote d'Ivoire, United Methodist News Service, November 12, 2008.

Rev. Lori Best Sawdon
Lafayette United Methodist Church
Lafayette, CA