

Lessons from Haiti

It has been almost a month since an earthquake wreaked havoc on the impoverished republic of Haiti, claiming the lives of thousands of Haitians and reducing the nation's capital city of Port-au-Prince to rubble, yet many reporters, relief workers and onlookers are still mystified by the Haitians' unrelenting faith.

Amid the devastation, despair and the stench of rotting human flesh that permeated the air when the 7.0-magnitude earthquake shook Port-au-Prince with a vengeance on Jan. 12, hundreds of grief-stricken Haitians were seen singing, clapping and dancing through the rubble-filled streets and makeshift camps where many are now forced to live.

Their celebratory expressions, which began spontaneously shortly after the disaster when food and water were nowhere in sight, puzzled spectators who were in disbelief that people who have experienced such unimaginable suffering could praise God in the midst of their adversity and their seemingly hopeless situation, which would be enough to break anyone's spirit.

The Haitians fortitude is even more remarkable when you consider that they live in what has been cast as a "cursed" nation, an ominous title bestowed on Haiti, I suppose, because of its legacy of voodoo and its tortured history of oppression, corruption and poverty that spans over 200 years.

There are many lessons we can learn from this disaster and from the Haitians. First and foremost is the power of the human spirit and the power of faith. Despite the death and destruction in Haiti, there were signs of hope in the miraculous sto-



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ries of survival that defied medical science, like the 5-year-old boy who was pulled from the rubble eight days after the earthquake and the 84-year-old woman who managed to survive without food and water for 10 days under the rubble. And, just when the rescue teams had given up on finding anyone else alive, a 16-year-old girl was found 15 days later.

These stories should also serve as a constant reminder to all of us that just because a situation seems hopeless through our natural eyes, does not mean that it is hopeless. Things can turn around, when you least expect it, if you do not capitulate and if you have faith.

It is easy to have faith when you have a roof over your head, you know where your next meal is coming from, you are healthy and you have resources to tap into, but true faith is believing even when everything seems hopeless and when you are in a dark place.

Though some have dismissed Haiti as a moribund nation, I am convinced that the faith that the God-fearing people of Haiti have displayed during this tragedy has the power to lift it out of the pit of darkness and break any curse.

Haiti's misfortune has also shown us that it is possible for people of

different races, nationalities, and political and religious persuasions to come together in solidarity and work side by side for a common goal. Rescue teams and doctors from around the world including the United States, Iceland, China, France, Cuba, Russia, Venezuela and Belgium flocked to Haiti after the earthquake with one mission in mind – to save lives.

It is unfortunate that it took a natural disaster and the graphic footage of decomposed bodies and body parts lying in the streets of Port-au-Prince and protruding through the dirt of a landfill, where many of the dead were dumped like trash, for the spotlight to finally shine on Haiti and shock the world into action.

I wonder what it will take to provoke the world to unify in a sustained effort to put an end to the humanitarian crisis in Africa, where millions of people, especially children, die every year from starvation, malnutrition and lack of access to clean water.

What will it take for the world to become outraged by the crimes against humanity taking place in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where countless people have been brutally slaughtered, women and children gang-raped and millions forced to seek asylum in refugee camps that are ill-equipped to deal with their nutritional and medical needs.

These stories are rarely heard or seen in the mainstream media, but they should generate the same attention, compassion and call to action as a natural disaster.

— Shirley L. Smith lives on St. Thomas.