

Sunday, February 14----Praying, Mourning and Worshiping God in Ouanaminthe

By: Dave and Pam Mann

2 p.m. Sunday, Apartment Main Room

Hugues had learned that the big Baptist church began its Sunday worship service, not at the usual 10 a.m. start time, but at 6 a.m. So much for our plan to leave IU at 9:30 so that we'd be early for church. The mission team was dreading walking in late and having the front row worshippers give up their seats to the foreign visitors. I naively believed the Sunday morning worship would be much like usual despite this being the third and final day of the nationwide call to prayer and fasting. School had been called off on Friday. Even the Dajabón market day was moved to Thursday so everyone could pray, beginning Friday morning. And people prayed. We heard the loud hymn singing, corporate prayer and shouted responses to preachers all around us. That was Friday morning, the 12th, remembering January 12th, the date of the quake. *This is the anniversary, I had thought. Their energy will peter out after this.*

Saturday did seem calmer though people still dressed in black and white, the colors for mourning. People still gathered in churches but with less commotion. So I thought I knew what to expect on Sunday. Then Saturday night with the mission team we discussed Sunday morning church options. Ironically, we opted for the big Baptist church because their service was more predictable in length and content than the Bible Temple on the edge of town. I'm not likely to call Haitian Baptists predictable again any time soon.

When we arrived at the huge double-steeple church on the main drag through town, there was standing room only. The leadership was so engrossed in worship that we slipped upstairs to the balcony unhindered. The stairwell was lined with people in prayer. The balcony was also packed. The balcony construction is like a U.S. high school football stadium seating which creates an open triangular space underneath. In that space, which inspired claustrophobia in me, people were also camped out praying. We could not move much beyond the stairwell because so many others stood already ahead of us. Our view of the chancel area was no better than that of those in the stairwell: nil. But everyone could hear well: the prayers, the choir anthems, the exhortations. Maybe it was the usher who collected the offering who rattled out our location because shortly after he left, we were escorted downstairs to two emptied pews near the front of the sanctuary.

Suddenly we found ourselves at the heart of the praying. The women's ensemble which had been singing a plaintive chorus "Lord, have mercy" did not stand in the chancel. They knelt swaying at the prayer rail as they sang. Their overt pleading took my breath away. Ensemble anthems were interjected with corporate prayer. The pastor urged the congregation to forget themselves and cry out to God. The people in the pews seemed eager to be asked. They wailed and sang out, arms uplifted and waving, longing for God to hear them.

Then the preacher gave an altar call. I've attended this church enough to know it's a good Sunday when three people come forward. This Sunday the preacher warned his listeners in rapid-fire Creole that many died in the quake without knowing Jesus. "Do not make their mistake. Today is the day of salvation. The Holy Spirit is moving here. Do not resist. Repent now." Predominately young adults came forward and knelt, filling the chancel area, 25-35 in number. Members prayed with them and recorded their names as the congregation sang. I hated sensing that people were terrorized into the kingdom of God. It's been forgiveness at every turn that has drawn me closer to God, not fear. I hate the fright that has gripped my neighbors. And yet I know it is biblical to fear God. Is what I'm witnessing here not like what Jonah's preaching aroused in the people of Nineveh?

In one of the chants the congregation echoed the preacher: "Grace! Grace! Grace!" When was the last time I pleaded with God for grace? Then the pastor led us in a petition to invoke the blood of Jesus in every direction: east to the DR border, south to the capital, west to Gonaives and north to the sea. The congregation stretched out hands in each direction as we prayed for cleansing and anointing. Finally we

stretched our hands toward the ground and prayed that heaven would so bless Haitian soil that it might know tranquility.

Then the most amazing thing of all happened. The senior pastor announced that the congregation would proceed to the town square following the benediction, singing Hymn #320 (French). The older women started a shuffle step as the main floor emptied first. We flooded onto Rue Espagnole, Ouanaminthe's main street, singing the refrain:

Save, Lord, bless our dear Haiti!
Little nation, advance toward Zion.
Consecrate yourself to God.
Make Jesus your king.
Save, Lord, bless our dear Haiti!

We walked two blocks to reach the town square, coming from the east. From the west came other churches, singing the same hymn. Others still came from the south. And to the north the Catholics were already outside singing. We were thousands, thronging the pavilion in the midst of the square, spilling out into the street. The crowd pulsed with its singing, arms upraised. I had my hymnbook open but it was difficult to sing. I felt like I should hang back in the court of the Gentiles while the real intercessors entered the sanctuary. Someone suggested we go to the top of the clinic to get a photo. Still the massive crowd continued to grow as more churches let out and joined in.

From the UMC roof, the energy of the throbbing throng was amazing. A foreign reporter with a near foot-and-a-half camera lens followed us up. Maybe you'll see his town square photo on the news. "How long do you think they'll go on?" someone asked.

"Who knows," I think I said. *Until they think God has heard. Likely they'll never stop. Maybe they'll teach the rest of us how to pray when life is hard.*

Pray without ceasing.
1 Thessalonians 5:17

7:40 p.m. Same day

A gentle breeze began to blow. Eventually it blew in a light rain about 4:30. Call me a Romantic, but it seemed a sign from God's own hand. The last intercessors withdrew then and the town square fell silent in the gray mist. Even now the quiet calming drizzle continues. As the people of Ouanaminthe go to their beds tonight, they hear the comforting plopping of heaven's tears. May they know that the Lord Almighty is also their tender Redeemer.