

Lent I, Sunday March 13

Haiti – The Land that Lost its Tree Covering

Scripture: Genesis 1:11-12 (NRSV)

Then God said, “let the earth put forth vegetation: plants yielding seed, and fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with the seed in it.” And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation: plants, yielding seed of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing fruit with the seed in it. And God saw that it was good.



Using the map: place a red dot on Maryland and a green dot on Haiti. Haiti is about 3 ½ hours from Maryland in an airplane. But it is far away in many ways. Point to the green dot and say, Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere (this part of the world) and we are the richest. Haiti is located in the Caribbean Sea in the western third of the Island of Hispanola, which it shares with the Dominican Republic.

The United States is located between two oceans and we share our continent with Canada and Mexico. Haiti is much smaller than the United States. Haiti is about the same size as the State of Maryland, although the land is much more mountainous than Maryland. Nearly 6 million people live in Maryland and 9 million people live in Haiti. Here most of us speak only English but in Haiti the people speak Creole, a language spoken nowhere else in the world and one which was developed many years ago by slaves so that they could speak with each other, without their owners understanding them, and many Haitians also speak French and some also speak French and English.

How many languages do you speak?

Do you know someone who speaks something besides English?

What do you think it is like to live in a poor country?

What kinds of roads do you think they might have?

What kinds of houses do you think they live in?

When you live in a poor country there is no way to pay for roads to rebuilt when they get big holes in them or soil to be made good after something bad has happened. People have to do it themselves because there is no money to pay someone else to do it. People build their own houses too.

Long ago before Christopher Columbus discovered America the first place he landed was in Haiti. When Columbus first came, everything was beautiful there were many green trees and fruit and animals. Trees covered most of the land. The names of the native tribes who lived in Haiti were Arawak and Taino. The Spanish people who came after Christopher Columbus were not nice to the people of Haiti. They took their land and cut down many of the trees to plant what they wanted back in Spain. They planted sugar cane for sweetening, rice for eating, cotton for clothing, indigo for dye, and coffee trees. Trees in Haiti were also cut to provide fine woods like mahogany for furniture makers.



Coffee Trees



Mahogany Tree

At the time of almost three hundred years after Haiti had been “discovered” by Spain, Haiti was so precious to the Spanish and other people living in Europe that they called Haiti “The Pearl of the Antilles”. Haiti sent food crops and wood to Europe and the people who owned the fields were very rich but the people who worked in the fields were very poor. In order to plant sugar cane and rice and the other crops, many trees were cut down. Many more trees were cut down for their wood.

Today Haiti has just a little bit of its land covered by trees. The people still need trees to build furniture and homes, to burn for heat, to produce fruit and shade for homes and to keep the soil on the hillsides. But there are not enough trees to keep people warm, or build their houses, or give them food, or keep them cool. There are not enough trees to keep the soil from washing down the hills into the sea.



The mountains without trees



The border with the Dominican Republic. Haiti is on the left.

At one time you could not see the border that divided the Dominican Republic from Haiti. Today, if you fly over the border in an airplane you can see the border. There are many trees in the Dominican Republic and no trees in Haiti.

The people in Haiti would like our help to plant trees on their land. I wonder if you would like to help them? We will talk more about this next week.

Why do you think it is important for trees to grow in Haiti?

Prayer: O God, giver of all life, we thank you for this world that you have created, especially for the Island of Hispanola and the country of Haiti. Give us grace as caretakers of your earth to join with our brothers and sisters to preserve and restore all that you have given us including trees, that we and all your people may be blessed by your abundance. We ask this in your name, our great Creator. Amen.