

God, sex, and football

Isaiah 42:1-23

October 1, 2006

It was quite a scene last Monday night in New Orleans. The Saints came marching home, and for one night at least, all was right again with the world!

Did you see it? Did you see the ESPN telecast of the Monday Night Football game pitting the hometown New Orleans Saints against the visiting Atlanta Falcons? Nearly 11,000,000 U.S. households watched the game, the largest audience ever for an ESPN broadcast. I watched, not because of all the hoopla surrounding the return to the Superdome, but because Atlanta was playing and Michael Vick is the quarterback for my fantasy football team!

But hoopla there was. It was the first football game to be played in the Superdome in over a year, the first since Hurricane Katrina, the first since the Dome had been used to shelter refugees fleeing the flooded city, the first since the Dome itself had become indelibly associated with desperation and misery and suffering and death.

But now the Superdome was ready to show off its new glittering facade. Now the Saints were coming home! The rebuilt dome and the resurgent team were symbols of the rebuilt hopes and resurgent dreams of a whole city, even of a whole nation. As "The Edge" put it, this was "about rebirth and the future and things coming back to normal." "The Edge" is the name of the guitarist for the rock band, U2. U2 was there at the Superdome, along with the band, Green Day, and Spike Lee, the movie producer, and George Herbert Walker Bush.

This was a monumental occasion, calling for former presidents and rock stars and jazz bands and movie makers, and even a preacher! Did you see the preacher? The African-American preacher shown exhorting his flock during the pre-game show? The preacher passionately extolling the glories of this great event, this moment of rebirth and redemption for New Orleans?

This was more than a football game. This was church! The Superdome was the sanctuary, the fans the congregation, and U2 and Green Day the choir. "The Saints are coming!," the bands sang out. "The Saints are coming," the people shouted in return, and onto the field, festooned in white and gold, ran their heroes. The Atlanta Falcons never stood a chance. They couldn't win, they mustn't win this football game! They didn't. The Saints won, in a rout, and for one night at least, all was right again with the world.

But what happens when that night is past? What happens when the Saints lose a football game? What happens when their fans return to neighborhoods still littered with debris and with houses left vacant and unrepaired, when they return to a city still but a shadow of what it was, plagued still by crime and corruption and poverty?

It was a great night, a great party, but homelessness and joblessness, misery and despair, are still very much the facts of life in New Orleans. It's like coming home from a great church service, charged up and feeling good, to a sick child, a failing marriage, a tedious job, an empty house.

But there is a difference ... a big difference! Because when you come home from church, God comes home with you! God is there. God is there in the midst of the

loneliness and frustration and despair, or whatever it is that life has brought your way. God is there enabling you to see everything through new eyes, to see what is there but also to see beyond it ... to see the hurt and the pain and the fear and the doubt that are part of you, but to see that all of that is not you, that you are more, much more ... to see the future, your future, as it will be, as God promises it will be. That is something that football players and rock stars, cheerleaders and even presidents, cannot do for you.

So I was disturbed by what I saw Monday night. I was disturbed that a preacher would be used to introduce a football game, disturbed that faith and football would be so seamlessly woven together.

I was disturbed that a football game would be made out to be such a BIG DEAL, and football players made out to be like knights in shining armor, larger-than-life heroes, paragons of strength and courage and valor. It's just a stupid game and they are just oversized men getting paid all kinds of money to fight over a funny-shaped ball! Now I know it's all entertainment, hype, good fun ... but it's not, really. This is serious business. The money tells you this is serious business, the business of giving the public what it wants, though not what it needs.

Too often this is the way our culture works out its frustrations, the way our culture handles its disappointments, the way our culture addresses its loneliness, the way our culture satisfies its spiritual hungers. Not by addressing the frustration, the disappointment, the loneliness, the spiritual hunger directly, but by providing compelling and attractive distractions, by giving people flashy but worthless substitutes for the real thing, by shamelessly confusing the sacred with the profane.

I was disturbed by the way the telecast could move so easily, so quickly, so naturally, from fiery preacher to stern-faced football player preparing for battle to bouncy cheerleader in a skimpy gold top. All just a part of the show.

God, sex, and football. This is the way our culture satisfies its spiritual hungers. When our lives leave us feeling powerless and alone, the entertainment industry fills the void, not by giving us power, but by providing a compelling distraction, a vicarious experience, an illusion of power.

When my team wins, I win, and I feel powerful. When the linebacker levels the wide receiver, I enjoy the vicarious pleasure of leveling all the enemies against whom I feel powerless. Take that -- Osama! And when the wide receiver eludes the linebacker's grasp, I enjoy the vicarious pleasure of escaping everyone and everything that threatens me. Like hockey and boxing and automobile racing and Clint Eastwood movies, a good part of the attraction of football is the mayhem and the violence, and the illusion of power.

Entertainment fills the void, not by giving us intimacy, but by providing a compelling distraction, a vicarious experience, an illusion of intimacy. What do you think all the sex is about? It's about substituting titillation for what we really want, intimacy. When cheerleaders preen and dance, I can imagine they are showing off for me, and I enjoy the vicarious pleasure of an imagined intimacy.

The entertainment industry makes its money by giving us what we want, or what we think we want, or what it makes us think we want, but not by giving us what we need. It gives us vicarious and illusory experiences of power and intimacy, but it can never give us real power or real intimacy.

Only God can do that. Only God can satisfy the hungers of the human heart, the hunger for intimacy, the hunger for power.

I, the Lord, have called you and given you power to see that justice is done on earth ...

You are empowered, not powerless, empowered to establish justice on earth, to set things right.

The Lord says [you are] the one I have chosen, [the one] with whom I am pleased ...

You are chosen. You are loved. You belong.

We do live in a world and in an age that is often daunting, distressing, overwhelming, debilitating. Our enemies are real, our fears are real, the power of hatred and envy, indifference and injustice is great. We do often feel helpless. We do often feel alone, but God has shown us and God has told us what God can do, what God will do, what God is doing. So open your eyes! Open your ears! *From now on will you listen with care?*

That's what Isaiah said to the Israelite exiles in Babylon: *From now on will you listen with care?* They had seen so much, but they were like those who were blind. They had heard so much, but they were like those who were deaf. They felt helpless and alone, but they turned to idols for solace -- compelling distractions, but worthless substitutes for the real thing.

It's time to listen, time to listen with care, time to listen to the voice of the Lord ...

Here is my servant, whom I strengthen -- the one I have chosen, with whom I am pleased. I have filled him with my Spirit and he will bring justice to every nation. He will not shout or raise his voice or make loud speeches in the streets. He will not break off a bent reed nor put out a flickering lamp. He will bring lasting justice to all. He will not lose hope or courage. He will establish justice on the earth. Distant lands eagerly wait for his teaching.

Distant lands eagerly wait ... for us. Our world does not need loud voices or displays of overwhelming force. Loud voices and displays of overwhelming force will not save the world and will not save us. Our world needs people of hope and courage who will faithfully, tirelessly, gently, but surely speak justice and stand up for justice. Real power belongs to the Lord, and we are really powerful when we do things the Lord's way.

The Lord has chosen us. The Lord has strengthened us. The Lord has filled us with his Spirit. May the Lord's gifts not be given in vain!