

Advent reflections: 'One world at a time'

Angie O'Gorman | Nov. 23, 2011

Come on, God. Can't you do better at saving us from ourselves? Stop hardening our hearts and letting us wander from your ways. Come down and really blow us away with something big -- mountains quaking, heavens rending, something like that. We need to see you've wrought something awesome. Rouse yourself, for heaven's sake, and come.



OK, we've established God's responsibility for a certain lack of saving acts, and in doing so let's hope we've created enough distance from ourselves to allow us to be honest. In that light, I offer the following question: Why do we have such a difficult time being saved?

Admittedly there is plenty to be saved from: famine, war, pestilence, a destroyed economy, those seven deadly sins, climate change, and an infinite number of enemies. And yet, in today's first reading, Isaiah seems to be suggesting, 'We have met the enemy and he is us.' Being saved from ourselves may be the most difficult task of all. For one thing, we keep on blaming ourselves on everyone else.

He made me lie to get that raise. She made me hate immigrants. The system made me turn a blind eye to the suffering it creates. He made me go to war even though I knew the reasons didn't add up. I was ordered to torture. They made me go through a financial disaster for their profit. Perhaps they did. But what made me so ready to go along? What made me so open to their rationales? Their promises? Had 'they' wrought something awesome? Or was I bought out by something embarrassingly small and trivial? And if I was, why do I demand so much more proof from God than from 'them'? God who, when I think about it, has already given us the revelation of Jesus Christ and all that it encompasses? Perhaps this is too direct a question. Let's look elsewhere. How about the future? Lots of folks these days urge us to look to the end times, preachers, politicians and policymakers among them. They like this approach, far more so, I suspect, than they will like the end times themselves.

Full text of the readings [1]

When the weight of the present bears down too heavily, looking for God in a future Second Coming becomes popular. It gives release, hope, something to still believe in. It can also be a distraction, a reluctance to take the present and our role in it seriously.



The author of Mark's Gospel faced such a time when he wrote to a persecuted

community of gentile and Jewish Christians. It was uncertain times because Jesus had not saved them from their trials as expected. He had not returned. And what does the author counsel? Stop trying to live your lives according to when Jesus might or might not return. Live as you know you should. Listen to what Jesus told us beforehand. Persecutions will come, false prophets, false profits. Watch. But live as you know you should. "Would that you might meet us doing right," says Isaiah.

I am reminded of an exchange between the antislavery orator Parker Pillsbury and Henry David Thoreau as Thoreau lay on his deathbed. Pillsbury had come to ask him what he had glimpsed of the afterlife. We don't know the exact wording of Pillsbury's questions, but we do have Thoreau's answer. "One world at a time," he whispered. "One world at a time."

God has wrought something awesome. It is the present moment in which we cooperate with God's saving grace for a better tomorrow, or don't. It is the partnership itself that is saving. And it is now.

[Angie O'Gorman reflects on all the Advent Sunday readings on the *NCR* website at [NCRonline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections](https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections). O'Gorman has been involved in human rights work and nonviolent conflict resolution in the U.S., Central America, and the West Bank. Her novel, *The Book of Sins*, was published in 2010.]

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