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Advent reflections: Laying down pride

by Angie O'Gorman

Cookie Monster has made his position known. "99 percent of the world's cookies are consumed by 1 percent of the monsters," he has reportedly said. "OCCUPY SESAME STREET!" And while mainstream pundits still ask balefully, "what do the Wall Street occupiers want?" every child on earth knows there is something dangerous and wrong when 1 percent of the monsters consume 99 percent of the cookies. They want it to stop; the situation is catastrophic.



You already know this: there has never been a wider gap in our country between the wealthy and everyone else, the 1 percent and the 99 percent. The imbalance has not only shaken our financial system, it is destroying our democracy. This is the context in which we must apply the words of Isaiah and John the Baptist in today's readings. We don't read the words of our forbearers in faith in order to sit comfortably in their courage and wisdom. At some point the maturing believer must apply the tradition to the present. Without application, the faith tradition falters.

Years ago, Dominican Albert Nolan wrote in *Jesus Before Christianity*, "This indeed is the heart of the problem. We have built up an all-inclusive political and economic system based upon certain assumptions and values. Second Sunday of Advent. We are beginning to realize that this system is not only counter-productive -- it has brought us to the brink of disaster -- but it has also become our master The impersonal machine that we have so carefully designed will drag us along inexorably to our destruction." (9)

Our political and economic assumptions certainly do seem to have collapsed. We have just seen the President order the assassination of an American citizen in Yemen without benefit of any charges, trial or due process to determine guilt. It was enough that the military said he was involved in terrorism. Back home millions have lost their government or private jobs and are now adrift in a world of continued foreclosures, time-limited unemployment benefits, unaffordable health care, dysfunctional loan modification programs and stagnant hiring. One in five U.S. children is now endangered by food

Full text of the readings

insecurity. Homelessness is epidemic, especially among children and veterans. This too is terrorism.

In the midst of all this, religion -- or at least religious talk -- is increasingly violent. Faith-based violence, not Judaism or Christianity or Islam, is becoming the dominant religion of the U.S.

Some blame all these deformations on government, others on capitalism, and others on God. But no suggests a viable fix. We are left to wait among the ideologues for an imminent second recession. Not the kind of second coming we had hoped for.

Isaiah did assign responsibility, and John a resolution. Today's excerpt from Isaiah includes this familiar scenario: "Every valley shall be filled in, every mountain and hill shall be made low..." This is a reference to an earlier section in First Isaiah which named the mountain as pride. Isaiah tells us the problem is pride. Pride, an excessively high opinion of oneself, or one's opinion, one's ideology; conceit; arrogance; exceptionalism. When it is laid low, the glory of God can be revealed. Meanwhile, the mountain, our pride, is responsible for the coming catastrophe. And who among us cannot claim a fair share in that.

John the Baptist named the resolution as repentance. And a baptism by fire it is to achieve sorrow for our faults -- personal and national. At some level it will be called unpatriotic. In this City on a Hill is the necessary humility -- reading ourselves realistically -- possible? And repentance? Where would we begin?

"A voice cries out: in the desert prepare the way of the Lord! Make straight in the wasteland a highway for our God!" We are the desert. We and by extension the country for which we are responsible. Let us lay down pride and repent.

[For Advent 2011, Spiritual Reflections will feature the scripture reflections of Angie O'Gorman. O'Gorman's essays have been published in *America* magazine, *National Catholic Reporter*, and *Commonweal*. She has been involved in human rights work and nonviolent conflict resolution in the United States, Central America, and the West Bank. Her novel, *The Book of Sins*, was published last January.]

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