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Testing and retaining what is good

by Angie O'Gorman

ADVENT

There have been so many false prophets recently. We now have at least three presidential candidates claiming God wants them to run and, I assume, win. So, when Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:2, "Test everything, retain what is good," it rings particularly true to me, for I have grown skeptical even of my own use of God's word in support of what I hold to be true. How do I know if the Spirit of the Lord is upon me or the spirit of ego, illusion, power-lust or despair?

 Test everything; retain what is good? I am not sure we even know what "good" means. Good for what? For whom? National cohesion? The bottom line? The common welfare? When profitability is the functional test, the objective sign of what is good, everything is twisted. Last session, legislators in my state proposed restricting -- that is, limiting, turning back, undoing -- child labor laws to free up profits. A clear evil if you ask me. Greed is a capital sin. What I think is evil turns out to be someone else's good, and vice versa.

Third Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 61: 1-2, 10-11-5
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28
Full text of the readings



No, I do not "despise prophetic utterances." In these times when the prophetic

could possibly save us from our impending self-destruction, I long for it down to the marrow of my bones. Richard Falk, international law scholar and not exactly a religious figure, has said the best of secular thinking has fallen short and left us bankrupt. Time for the prophetic? Believe me, I am all ears.

And so were the people of Jesus' time. Just think of the rival claims to ownership of God in his society: the Pharisees, Essenes, Sadducees, Zealots and scribes, each with their own analysis of who was saved and who damned. The prophetic tradition itself had been silent for quite some time. And then John the Baptist emerged.

John called for the repentance of all Israel, and in this he was unique. It wasn't just the sinner or the gentile, the ritually impure, the religiously unobservant, or the politically incorrect who needed to repent and change. It was all of Israel, for all of Israel was in danger of self-destructing. The very scope of John's call was radically different. But so to was the means of repentance and change that he required:

If anyone had two tunics, they must share with the person who had none. The same with food. Those with political power were not to abuse it. Those with economic power were not to abuse it. The people who believed John's message and method sought his baptism. Of all the voices raised in God's name at the time, who would you have followed? Jesus chose John.

Jesus would later be understood as fulfilling Isaiah's words, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the poor, to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners ..." Jesus saw in the prophetic words of John a standard for testing and retaining what was good.

What is your standard? Has it gotten warped over the years? In the commercialist culture in which we live, has it become more about profit than prophecy? This is our season to be re-baptized into the words of Isaiah and John and Jesus. Create a ritual. It is not the time for austerity but for generosity, a prophecy in itself, that the self-destruction stalking us can, after all, be converted into community.

[Angie O'Gorman reflects on all the Advent Sunday readings on the *NCR* website at NCRonline.org/blogs/spiritual-reflections. O'Gorman 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 in 2010.]

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