

Cover-ups: Psalm 85

by [Fleming Rutledge](#) in the [November 17, 1999](#) issue

Blaise Pascal evokes a sense of existential dread in this famous line: "The eternal silence of those infinite spaces terrifies me." In his poem *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, W. H. Auden pictures the human being forsaken in a blank, fathomless universe:

We are afraid
Of pain but more afraid of silence; for no nightmare
Of hostile objects could be as terrible as this Void.
This is the Abomination. This is the Wrath of God.

The wrath of God is a principal theme of the pre-Advent and Advent seasons. There is no more challenging task in theology than interpreting it. Pascal and Auden both interpret it as silence—*Deus absconditus*. C. S. Lewis wrote, after his wife's death, "Where is God? . . . go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is in vain, and what do you find? A door slamming in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the inside. After that, silence."

The wrath of God can be viewed as silence from a quite different perspective. I have a newspaper clipping in my file that dates back to the apartheid era in South Africa. Desmond Tutu, then Anglican bishop of Johannesburg, had just returned from one of his trips abroad where he openly sought support for the fight against the racial policies of his country. At an airport news conference in Johannesburg, he declared that he was not at all worried about his passport being confiscated yet again. Having one's passport taken away is not the worst thing that can happen to a Christian, he said. Even being killed is not the worst thing. "For me, one of the worst things would be if I woke up one day and said to people, 'I think apartheid is not so bad.' For me, this would be worse than death."

This is surely a clue to understanding the wrath of God. A god who remained silent in the face of atrocities would not be the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob or the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It has been given to Bishop Tutu more than almost anyone else in our time to be the human voice and face of the God who has

not remained silent.

Other governments, other voices have chosen silence. The Guatemalan Commission for Historical Clarification, for example, was so hamstrung by the military that it continued the same policies of cover-up and denial that gave the Guatemalan civil war its sinister character in the first place. In Chile, General Pinochet was allowed to slip away to England to enjoy teas with Baroness Thatcher.

Voices have been heard, however, from the underground. The families of the Chilean "disappeared" are voiceless no longer. A retired Argentine captain confessed to dropping as many as 2,000 political prisoners from airplanes.

Argentine President Menem, afraid of more revelations, has urged former military executioners and torturers to confess in private to priests so that the country can move forward.

It is not enough. Bishop Tutu has shown the world that the only way *forward* is the way *through*. With all its faults and limitations, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission was able to demonstrate that although they were determined to seek reconciliation and move into the future, justice had not been abrogated. As Tutu has said to the victims, "Something seriously evil happened to you, and the nation believes you." Thus the wrath of God against injustice broke a terrible silence.

The lectionary designers omitted the vital center of Psalm 85:

Thou hast taken away all thy wrath:

thou hast turned thyself from the fierceness of thine anger . . .

Wilt thou be angry with us for ever? Wilt thou draw out thine anger to all generations? . . .

Show us thy mercy, O Lord, and grant us they salvation.

A failure of imagination was at work in this excision. Jettisoning the references to God's wrath deprives us of the good news that his wrath has been turned away. The omissions have robbed us of an opportunity to understand that righteousness and peace cannot kiss until "the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against . . . those who by their wickedness suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:19). Ask Bishop Tutu.

The premier personage of Advent is John the Baptist. When he appears on the banks of the Jordan, the cover-ups come to their appointed end. Two thousand years before all the Watergates and other sordid "-gates," he came proclaiming God's imminent judgment on the venality of governments, the corruption of police departments, the selfishness of the rich, the self-righteousness of the religious establishment. In the end, he himself was executed without a trial, thus becoming the precursor of the One whose death signified the final judgment of God on all the powers and principalities.

There are cover-ups of all sorts: families that will not acknowledge the alcoholism that is destroying them, people who are making their loved ones miserable but will not go to a therapist, business partners who cover up for each other. Advent is the season of the uncovering: "Bear fruit that befits repentance . . . Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees!" This is the right time to root out the cover-ups in our own lives, as we wait with bated breath for the lights to come on and the announcement of the angel that God is not against us but for us.