

No messenger or angel

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December 22, 2010

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There's an interesting variation between the New International and New Revised Standard versions of Isaiah 63:9. The NIV expresses quite beautifully that "the angel of his presence saved them," while the NRSV contends that "it was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them." Both convey Isaiah's revelation that God does not plan to redeem creation by force, by tinkering with free will, or from afar. God redeems creation by becoming one of us, by drawing near to us and being with us.

The former translation may be more poetic, but the latter illuminates another dimension of God's plan for salvation: God doesn't send a deputy, a delegate, a stand-in for the real thing. God sends *God*. Christians reading this text through the lens of the New Testament confess that God shows up in person--in the person of Jesus Christ. The incarnation pierces the membrane between heaven and earth and places us directly in the presence of the divine.

This passage from Isaiah may be lovely and comforting and Christmassy, but its larger context is far from pleasant. The imagery at the beginning of chapter 63 is a terrifying example of God's anger, familiar to us through the "Battle Hymn of the Republic": God is "trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored."

If you continue reading past the promise of God's presence, you recall that Isaiah lives in a world of lamentation. His people have sinned against God and been thrown into exile. They are so far from God that it seems God is their enemy, not their redeemer. The context is crisis on every level--political, cultural, spiritual. They are exiled from their land and their God.

Things could not be any worse. And yet it is smack in the center of such disaster that these words of hope are most at home, for it is when we most need a savior that the angel of God's presence finds us.

When tragedies unfold--such as the calamity that explodes in this Sunday's gospel reading--the question arises: where is God in all this? The pastoral response is often a variation on a theme: the angel of God's presence is in the midst of any and all pain. "In all their distress, he too was distressed" (NIV). God weeps with all the Rachels who cannot yet be consoled.

Emanuel Swedenborg wrote that "mercy is love that is grieving." God's grieving love flows so freely that God cannot help but draw close and share in our sorrow. And that stubborn presence and anguished mercy may not always grant solace, but it will be our salvation.