

Magical realism and the word of the Lord (Advent 2B; Isaiah 40:1-11)

Mysterious truth in fiction and in reality

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This spring, I found myself seeking out magical realism. The slippery nature of that narrative style, showing what might be against what is, seemed like exactly what I needed in a world that changed so rapidly. When it was difficult to discern what was true in reality, turning to a fictional space of mysterious truth was a consolation.

In particular, I was mesmerized by the ministry of Father Damien Modeste in *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse*, by Louise Erdrich. Damien's life among the Ojibwe offered me solid ground among the shifting sands of that time. Was the large canine that haunted Damien real or imagined? I do not know, but I was also haunted. Were all the places mentioned in the book locations that could be found on a map? They could be mapped, but the map might only be useful to the one who made it. As a person who was making a ministry map on a minute-by-minute basis, I was a comfortable resident in Damien's world of Erdrich's creation.

The interpretation of scripture, woven throughout the book, felt like part of the magical realism. It was not a challenge to me, a game of spot the heresy. It was an invitation to imagine more about God's word than I previously thought possible. Just as anything might come to life on the page, leading the characters on a chase, the flirtations of the written word of God beckoned to me.

Isaiah reminds us that God's word stands forever. The prophet offers these words as a relief to the Hebrew people exiled in Babylon. God's promises were and are real. They still stand. Even if you are to perish in an unknown place, under perilous

circumstances, God's words of hope and comfort are still true and still apply to you.

Within the framework of magical realism, the words of Isaiah take on new meaning. The word of God stands forever, even as human interpretation changes. We have not always been able to perceive the fullness of God's grace, the wideness of divine mercy, or the resurrective power of eternal justice. We have rendered meaning through the lens of our locations, priorities, and desires. When we have lost the thread, we have blamed other interpreters or a gap in language.

We have not considered that if God's word is forever, then there is divine cohesion. Where the narrative breaks apart, interpretation has failed. This is not merely a failure of our modern translations and understanding but even in the writing down, the speaking aloud, and the redactions and additions of the centuries.

At one point in *The Last Report*, Father Damien is practicing his sermon in front of snakes in the sanctuary. "'If I am loved,' Father Damien went on, 'it is a merciless and exacting love against which I have no defense. If I am not loved, then I am being pitilessly manipulated by a force I cannot withstand, either, and so it is all the same. I must do what I must do. Go in peace.'"

This is the magical realism of our interpretation. The word that lasts forever cannot be misinterpreted. God is love, says 1 John. God so loved, says John 3. Comfort my people, says Isaiah. I am with you always, says Matthew. Here is the love that brings forth life, again and again, in the face of everything that would oppose it. It is a love that grips us and holds us fast, even as everything else spins out of control.

Magical realism, as a genre, plays with what is perceivable and what might also be present but imperceptible. After a year of pain, frustration, and grief upon grief, the magical realism of the eternal word is exactly what we need. It grips us in an exacting love, not demanding a payment for the care, but insisting that we permit ourselves to be loved and to know that we are lovable. In a world with little magic and too much real pain, this is our Advent truth. *Verbum Domini Manet in Aeternum*. Go in peace.