

Our Hungry World is Waiting

Our hungry world is waiting, and with her we are waiting too.
We echo the cries of the starving for justice and their daily bread.
Embrace Your people's hunger, O feeding, nourishing Bread,
and come with justice for the poor, the Feast that never ends.

Amidst this season's lengthening shadows and growing darkness, we are sometimes stunned by the hushed silence enveloping the natural world. In winter, the world-the sphere of our activity and concern-seems to shrink, and we sometimes sense within ourselves a primitive instinct to withdraw into the comfort of the familiar and the near-at-hand.

But the scriptures which we share during these weeks of Advent seem to work at cross-purposes to these instinctual habits. "Wake up! Now is the hour to rise from sleep!" The prayer of Advent is a reaching toward the light, and a plea that our blindness be healed, that we might be led-in Isaiah's imagery-out of the cave in which we grope and stumble, *into* the day. It is a salutary reminder to us that we are to live, love, and pray *with our eyes open* to the reality of our broken, hurting, yet hope-filled world. For only there will God be found. The silence of the season, too, can lead us to a more profound listening for the groaning of God's compassion at the heart of the world.

Understandably, we want to look away. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue to destroy those countries and their peoples. The numbers of our wounded and killed service members continue to mount daily. Sectarian violence spirals out of control, sparing no one. The specter of a wider nuclear arms race in northeast Asia confronts the human family. More than one billion people, one sixth of the world's population, live each day in extreme poverty-exacerbated by epidemic diseases such as HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, conflicts within and between nations, and the destruction of the environment. The exasperated words of the prophet become ours, "Truly, You are a hidden God!" (Isaiah 45: 15).

Yet, if we do *not* look away, we sense, welling up from deep within us, a profound "No" to this state of affairs-an awareness that this is *not* how things should be. This "No," this refusal to accept the horror, pain, and grief of unjust suffering, gives rise to a conviction that a different world is possible-even more, is *required of us*. "The fundamental muttering of humanity turns into a well-founded hope. Something of a sigh of mercy, of compassion, is hidden in the deepest depths of reality ... and in it believers hear the name of God." The hidden God reveals the divine name to us: "I will be there for you" (Exodus 3: 14). This season, we ponder the good news that this "sigh of mercy" has drawn near and dwelt among us in our fractured history. In Jesus of Nazareth, the living parable of God's limitless compassion, we have come to know a different destiny-a power for the flourishing and healing of all creation. Like him, all our energies must be placed at the service of this healing. Together with all our Jewish sisters and brothers, we find ourselves under the divine commandment of *tikkun 'olam*, the repair of the world.

Dorothy Day, the co-founder of the Catholic Worker movement, often commented that the "works of war" *undo* the "works of mercy." Likewise, *only the works of mercy can undo the works of war* and repair the world. Today, when our awareness is global (and not merely local), we recognize that the works of mercy have "to be expressed in worldwide dimensions, embracing the immense numbers of the hungry, the needy, the homeless, those without medical care, and those without hope." One concrete means of "repairing the world" are the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, "a set of eight quantifiable targets designed to cut poverty in half by the year 2015," At the beginning of this decade, 181 countries signed the Millennium Declaration, promising a global mobilization against dehumanizing poverty. The

eight goals are: (1) to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (2) to achieve universal primary education; (3) to promote gender equality, and to empower women; (4) to reduce child mortality; (5) to improve maternal health; (6) to combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases; (7) to ensure environmental sustainability; and (8) to develop a global partnership for development. The promise of the Millennium Development Goals is great. However, implementation has been sluggish and commitment often half-hearted. Indeed, four decades ago, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. offered this timely critique: "It is a tragic mix-up when the United States spends \$500,000 for every enemy soldier killed, and only \$53 annually on the victims of poverty."

In a 2004 address to Britain's Labour Party, Bono, of the Irish rock band U2, spoke of a visit to Africa. "Earlier I described [to you] the deaths of 6500 Africans a day from preventable, treatable diseases like AIDS; I watched people queuing up to die, three in a bed in Malawi. That's Africa's crisis. But the fact that we in Europe or America are not treating it like an emergency-and the fact that it is not everyday on the news-well, that's *our* crisis. ... I don't even know what that says about us."

Because God's compassion "has become flesh and dwelt among us," the repair of the world, to which the Millennium Development Goals point, is a task at the very heart of our work of reconciliation as Christian communities. The Catholic bishops of the United States spoke out forcefully in their pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*: "As followers of Christ, we are challenged to make a fundamental 'option for the poor'-to speak for the voiceless, to defend the defenseless, to assess life styles, policies, and social institutions in terms of their impact on the poor. This 'option for the poor' does not mean pitting one group against another, but rather, strengthening the whole community by assisting those who are most vulnerable. As Christians we are called to respond to the needs of all our brothers and sisters, *but those with the greatest needs require the greatest response.*"

Each day at Evening Prayer, we sing the prophetic words of Mary's canticle: "You fill the starving with good things" (Luke 1: 53). This Christmas, all of us can advocate for the hungry of this world by contacting our religious and political leaders, and by supporting non-governmental agencies serving the needs of the poorest. In the hushed silence of this winter season, let us listen deeply for the voices of our impoverished sisters and brothers, and hear the groaning of God's compassion, calling us to repair the world. ✚

Our hopeful world is waiting, and with her we are waiting too.
Your presence shouts the challenge, "It's not enough to wait!
In winter's ev'ry moment, the earth is in your hands.
Embrace the hope that fills your hearts. With Me create anew."

Resources for Reflection and Action

Nancy Maeller and Peter Rogness, *Ending Poverty: A 20/20 Vision: A Guide for Individuals and Congregations* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2006)

Maria Cimperman, OSU, *When God's People Have HIV/AIDS: An Approach to Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005)

Musa W. Dube and Musimbi Kanyoro, editors, *Grant Me Justice: HIV/AIDS and Gender Reading of the Bible*

(Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005)

Tracy Kidder, *Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, A Man Who Would Cure the World* (New York: Random House, 2003)

Patrick McCormick, *A Banqueter's Guide to the All Night Soup Kitchen of the Kingdom of God* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2005)

Christian Scharen, *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006)

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1. From the Advent hymn "Our Winter World Is Waiting," © 1995 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc.
 2. The United Nations/World Health Organization reports that in 2002, 36.6 million adults and children were estimated to be living with HIV. By the end of 2004, the numbers increased to 39.4 million persons. The worst affected region of the world is sub-Saharan Africa, where over 25.4 million persons are living with HIV. With only 10% of the world's population, sub-Saharan Africa is home to over 60% of persons living with HIV/AIDS. The United Nations AIDS Report states the obvious: "Poverty and other forms of socio-economic deprivation are known to increase vulnerability to HIV infection." See <http://www.unaids.org>. Cited in Maria Cimperman, OSU, *When God's People Have HIV/AIDS: An Approach to Ethics* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2005).
 3. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 6.
 4. Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 42.
 5. The United States, for example, currently gives a *smaller* percentage of its Gross National Product to international development *than any other industrialized nation*-0.16 percent.
 6. Speech by Bono to Britain's Labour Party Conference, September 29, 2004. For the text, cf. the website www.data.org/archives/000605.php. Quoted in Christian Scharen, *One Step Closer: Why U2 Matters to Those Seeking God* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2006), 85.
 7. Cf. [The United Nations](http://www.unitednations.org); also www.millenniumgoals.org. For related efforts: ONE: The Campaign to Make Poverty History, www.one.org; [Bread for the World](http://www.breadfortheworld.org). For church-related resources: [The Catholic Campaign Against Global Poverty](http://www.catholiccampaign.org). Also see [The Episcopal Church](http://www.episcopalchurch.org), and [The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](http://www.lutheran.org). United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Economic Justice for All*, no. 16.
 8. From "Our Winter World Is Waiting," © 1995 The Benedictine Foundation of the State of Vermont, Inc.

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