

Gasping for air: Sunday, November, 4. Isaiah 1:10-18.

by [Michael Battle](#) in the [October 17, 2001](#) issue

*“When you stretch out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood” (Isa. 1:15b).*

Instead of perpetuating a world of violence, Isaiah proposes a vision that demands another reality—a reality that requires peacemaking: doing good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan and pleading for the widow. These skills enable the people of God to envision a future even in the midst of destruction. This doesn’t sound like the world we know, where there is always a war in progress, and diverse people are praying with folded hands for the defeat of their respective enemies. We learn from Isaiah, however, that our enemies are not external to us, they are in fact us—with hands full of blood. Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu notes that instead of urging Peter to a violent response, Jesus said to him, “Feed my sheep.” For Tutu, to ask Peter to do this “is almost like asking a thief to become your treasurer.” How does one turn an angry fisherman into a shepherd?

It is terrifying to think that God is hidden from us—that our rage is often so thick that it obstructs our vision of God. But we have a saving grace. We are called into being by God, who loves diverse human identities back into community. “Come now, let us argue it out,” says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow.”

God’s being is relatedness; that is, God creates through God’s tendency to “be for us.” God is before everything else, then calls all other relationships into being. When our minds are tuned to violence, when our hands “are full of blood,” we do not believe in a God of relatedness. We do not understand such a God. Herein is the tragedy of the Lord’s words, “I will hide my eyes from you.” Even though we reach out our hands, we have failed to wash them of violence. If we give even a furtive glance toward violence, we cannot see God’s eyes.

The good news, however, is that God does not allow eye contact to be broken for very long. Restoration of eye contact is the return to community—“Come, now.” I call this communal life the church. A Christian cannot claim complete autonomy or

control of the self. He or she understands reality differently, not simply individually, but as community. To become the community called the church means that we learn how to return God's gaze without practicing violence in the world. When we do so, God gives us our vision back.

When we repent of our violent tendencies, we admit the need to be transformed, to become people who can acknowledge their need of a shepherd. We understand that God does not love us because we are lovable, but that we are lovable precisely because God loves us. God's love is what gives us our worth. It liberates us from the desire to kill, to rape, to bomb out of vengeance because we know these practices repulse God.

We depend upon Christ to see God's eyes, to know what makes them sad, to know what makes them glad and to pray so that God listens. Christ's eyes reveal the salvation of the world, but such a revelation does not require control or domination on our part; nor does it require a "new heaven and a new earth" already complete on earth. Instead, we are made in the *imago dei*, and God created us to be responsible for others. We even see our identity through others because God desired that our movement toward God's life involve participation in the divine life, a life that implies freedom and not violence.

Christ illumines the relationship between the grace of God and those with bloody hands in such a way that we can work with God in the salvation of creation. The disciples could see God in Jesus only by seeing his hands and head bloodied by others. In this synergy of salvation, God's eyes are no longer hidden and our prayers are heard. This synergy, however, requires a passionate search for God, to see God without obstruction.

There is a story of young disciple in India who left home and traveled in search of a spiritual master whom he at last found sitting in prayer beside a river. The young man begged the master to teach him.

The master rose slowly, then suddenly grabbed the younger man and dragged him into the river and under the water. Seconds passed, then a minute, then another minute. The young man struggled and kicked, but still the teacher held him down until at last he drew him coughing and gasping out of the water.

"While you were under the water, what was it you wanted?" the teacher asked, when he saw that the other was at last able to speak again.

“Air,” the young man said, still panting.

“And how badly did you want it?”

“All . . . it was all I wanted in the world. With my whole soul I longed only for air.”

“Good,” said the teacher. “When you long for God in the same way that you have just now longed for air, come back to me and you will become my disciple.”

In a violent world, each of us is the young disciple in need of such intense washing. When we look and pray to God without hands full of blood, God’s eyes will no longer be hidden from us and our prayers will be heard.