

The prophet's palette (Isaiah 1:1, 10-20)

Why in the world would Isaiah use the image of snow as a sign of life with God?

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Not long before her death, poet Mary Oliver said in an interview that she declined to join the church early in her life because she had trouble with the resurrection. "But," she said, "I got saved by poetry, and I got saved by the beauty of the world."

I thought of her words as I read these opening verses of Isaiah. God is none too pleased by the way the Israelites are practicing their religion. For instance: "Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me."

While resurrection was a roadblock for Mary Oliver's early faith development, the issue God has with the Israelites isn't their worship itself. The problem lies with the way their worship is performed without any acknowledgement or recognition of their sinfulness. God calls them to come clean: "Cease to do evil, learn what is good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow."

I'm most fascinated, though, by the portion of this lectionary text in which God invites the Israelites to "argue it out," a possible reference to thinking of their conversation like a court case. With vivid imagery, the Israelites are invited toward life, in which scarlet, the color of blood-soaked sin, is turned to snow, and crimson-stained blood contains the consistency of wool. Their decision to restore their relationship to God would fill their stomachs: "you shall eat the good of the land."

Yet, because this is a covenant, there is also the possibility that Israel will turn their backs to God's offer of life. "If you refuse and rebel, you shall be devoured by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."

The courtroom image I understand. The form and function of a sword to further sever and even kill is not lost on me, unfortunately. I appreciate how the prophet uses the colors of scarlet and crimson and how they contain the possible symbolism of blood. And certainly, in so using this image, the prophet draws the Israelites to remember their history.

Still, there is one image that eludes me. I wonder why in the world the prophet would use the image of snow as a sign of life with God? I live in a place in which it almost feels as though snow and its sibling, ice, are present and at work for most of the year. Though I am aware of the value of snow for fields and land to receive moisture and nourishment, I also know that snow and ice can be seen as more dangerous and less life-giving than is imagined in this promise of life. I also know snow grows less white and blurs into a grayer landscape as the winter season wears on.

Every metaphor and image have their limits. I suspect there's no inkling on Isaiah's part that a perennial Midwestern wintry state would ever exist.

As strange as it may sound, one of the challenges of this image is to not lessen its impact. In Martin Luther's Small Catechism, in his explanation of the first article of the Apostles' Creed, he writes, "I believe God created me together with all that exists." When I remember this, I'm left to wonder how, in the context of a covenant, we may understand snow and its siblings as sacramental, a way through which we encounter the grace of God, and thus life, daily.

I wonder if the prophet waxed poetic to help the people of Israel—and us—imagine a larger palette with which to paint a picture in which salvation is available to us. I wonder if this image draws us away from dualism. I wonder if we are called to marvel at the beauty of salvation in front of us.