

## Savior

“The Quiet American,” a novel set in Vietnam, written by Graham Greene in 1955, was eerily prescient of what transpired years later in the tragedy that was the Vietnam War. Central to the story is the triad relationship of the main character, Thomas Fowler, his mistress, Phuong Hei, and a CIA operative, Alden Pyle. Fowler is instrumental in Pyle’s assassination. His participation in the murder plot is partly for admirable humanitarian reasons, but also a result of his jealousy of Pyle’s growing romantic involvement with Phuong. This tainted motivation torments Fowler and toward the conclusion of the novel he states, “I wished there existed someone to whom I could say that I was sorry.”

Fowler’s predicament is everyone’s who has become trapped by evil and unable to extricate themselves. They can only become unbound by another, through an act of forgiveness or salvation. Every one of us has experienced having crossed a behavioral line, knowing that we have not participated in something good but instead have enabled evil, that we have not built up but torn down, that we have not enlarged the common heart of humanity but have shrunk it, and we are left with a sense of guilt, regret, sadness.

If there was someone to whom we could say we were sorry we could be freed from the inner aftermath of the bad word, action, or attitude. Thankfully we often do have a friend, a spouse, a family member, a fellow human traveler who through a word or gesture saves us from an intangible but nevertheless real discomfort. Besides our own actions, there are external circumstances that define and limit our lives to the point at which we must rely on the intervention of another to draw us out from whatever has enclosed us: a word of advice, an offer of assistance, a defense against an adversary, a gift of opportunity.

The need of individuals to have a chance at redemption - a second, third, or fourth chance – requires a savior to be sure, but what of the needs of the country, the needs of the world? Well beyond us as individuals, whole collections of people require a savior. After all, the evil that overcomes us is rooted in systems and cultures, traditions, and powerful interests, and so anyone who would be named a savior faces a considerable challenge. God’s expectation is not that the Messiah will save Fred Sneesby or any other particular person. God has his sight set on communities and peoples and nations, and that scope of His intention creates a problem when looking for a Savior.

We face a number of enormous problems that humanity cannot seem to solve: the scandalous gulf between rich and poor, the reality of starvation and disease that unnecessarily plagues so many still, looming environmental disaster, the unbridled and blind greed of the “have’s” in the world, and the unimaginable brutality of wars big and small to name a few. The bigger the problems, the bigger the Savior needed. As the size of the problem increases, so does the degree of difficulty in believing in a Savior. As the complexity of the world’s evils has grown, the possibility that there could be someone who would conquer those evils and redeem the world has shrunk. The sheer size of the project of redemption becomes too much for us and so we tend to

seek a Messiah for ourselves, to make us better people and to bring us some measure of comfort. It is relatively easy to believe in a personal Savior and much harder to believe that the world can be saved.

All that has gone wrong with God's intention at creation, the unspeakable harm that has been done nation to nation, tribe to tribe, person to person; all that cries out for justice and mercy; all that is in need of salvation through the centuries until the present day somehow funnels down onto this one person, the Messiah. Oscar Wilde, who came to his own redemption after suffering an unjust imprisonment, captured this beautifully in his work, *De Profundis*:

*There is still something to me almost incredible in the idea of a young Galilean peasant imagining that he could bear on his own shoulders the burden of the entire world, all that had already been done and suffered, and all that was yet to be done and suffered, the sufferings of oppressed nationalities, factory children, thieves, people in prison, outcasts, those who are dumb under oppression and whose silence is heard only by God.*

The salvation God envisions is an immense and seemingly impossible task. It is hard to believe that it can be accomplished or that there exists a savior capable of bringing it about. For Christians, believing such a thing is not made easier by Jesus' story: born in obscurity and dying in ignominy. It is hard to grasp that the vulnerability revealed in his birth and the sacrifice marking his death are somehow the keys to the world's redemption. I would suggest that is why we need the weeks before Christmas to dwell on these things: the immensity of both the task and the promise. God is not asking us to believe firmly that all of this will take place; the first step God asks is not certainty but hope: to hope that there is a Savior, to hope that the world can be redeemed.

Regardless of how one imagines the divine interventions in human history that might bring salvation to the human family that cannot save itself, the work of grace inevitably happens through people who have allowed themselves to be a bed for the stream of divine life. People who dare to hope and who act on that hope become the fulcrum that is moving creation back to its original goodness. Our daily acts, the decisions we make, the forgiveness we offer and receive, the goodness we do on whatever scale moves everyone further along toward redemption.