

December 4

This year's advent devotionals will feature readings from publications by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary faculty members. Today's reading comes from the *New International Biblical Commentary on Ezekiel* written by Professor Steven Tuell and published by Hendrickson Publishers. For information on ordering the book, visit Cokesbury.com.

This reading is found on page 248

In nineteenth century Europe, when optimism about human nature and ability was at its height, scholars such as Ernest Renan produced biographies of Jesus as a champion of moral progress. The kingdom of God about which Jesus had preached was thought to be just around the corner, the inevitable result of human advancement. But in 1863, the same year that Renan's *Vie de Jesus* (Life of Jesus) was published in France, fifty thousand men died at the battle of Gettysburg. The American Civil War, still the bloodiest conflict in the history of the United States, demonstrated that human ingenuity and technological progress could lead to heightened savagery rather than to peace and enlightenment. Then, at the dawn of the twentieth century, World War I shattered the last vestiges of that naïve optimism. Today, looking back over the century now past, we see it as a century of genocide: Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia-Herzegovina, and Darfur—the roll call of mass death and destruction goes on and on, a brutal and final rebuke to the shallow, optimistic trust in human progress. But does that mean that the kingdom of God Jesus proclaimed is a hollow dream? Surely the problem lies rather in our forgetting that it is *God's* kingdom, nor ours.

We cannot, by our own willing and doing, accomplish God's dream of justice and peace. But the point, for Jesus or for Ezekiel, is not surrender to quietism. One is able to act in the world because of the confidence that, ultimately, the victory belongs to the Lord. So Ezekiel can at the same time call upon his community to repent and affirm that God's deliverance is not dependent upon their repentance. He can refer to the new heart and new spirit as both gift (11:19; 36:26) and goal (18:31). This inescapable, irreducible paradox is a common feature of the life of faith.

Prayer

O Holy God, this advent season reminds us that we live in uncertain times. Help us to greet each new day and labor on, always faithfully waiting for your challenge and guidance. Create new hearts in us, that we might worship and serve Christ with our whole lives. Amen.