

## Meanwhile Christianity

By *Heather Isaacs*

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I will board a plane on November 3 to be with Nate, who is currently stationed in upstate New York and preparing for deployment. I have lost sleep the last few nights and I realize I am more scared than I would like to admit. I am scared to fly. I am scared of anthrax. I am scared of war. I am scared I will lose Nate. But I have not changed my flight reservations, even though I have been tempted. I am going on with life. And this feels like the least Adventist thing I have ever done.

On the morning of September 11, I sat on my bed wondering if Probation had ended. Everything I had ever believed about the end of time was playing itself out on CNN. I examined the state of my soul. If my soul had shoulders, it would have shrugged. This is the best you can be in God's eyes, it said. If he won't take you, then you were told lies about him.

I agreed.

But the feeling that things were coming to an end did not let me go. I considered leaving seminary and going home to try and gather family and friends before heading for safety in the Sierra. Conversations with Nate about marriage dissolved. I would return to the mission field and become an Adventist nun. If I were going to forsake all others, it would be for God. If I were going to cleave to another man, it would be to Christ.

Rationality interrupted and reminded me that I needed to be somewhere else. I went to class, where I heard almost nothing of a lecture on the history of early Israel. I watched the stunned faces of the other students, which mirrored my own as if we shared one grief, one sadness, and one fear. The world was falling down and we were in a classroom.

After class, we made our way to morning chapel. Inside the little round sanctuary, which has large stained-glass windows, the pews had already filled. I sat on the floor in the back with other latecomers. The room was alive with light, but it didn't soften the distress, the contorted effort to comprehend.

Although I cannot remember all the details of that chapel service, I do recall that the comfort of the well-known became

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infused with new meaning. I sang "Great Is Thy Faithfulness" and felt, for the first time in my life, the extraordinary power of its words. The Lord's Prayer became something I could cling to in much the same way that I imagined Christ fighting to hold onto his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. A baby sitting with her mother laughed. This, too, gave divine comfort.

Whatever else I have forgotten about that chapel service, I remember that I did not hear one reference to the end of time, as I might have expected in an Adventist church.

I am currently the only Adventist at San Francisco Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian school. In the brief time I have spent in seminary, the impression has overwhelmed me that Presbyterians are a present people, involved in the movement of belief and culture through time. They are optimistic; they believe the world can be improved. They are ready to rethink old problems in new ways. Above all, they do not focus on the end but on the process. Why is this Presbyterian perspective both immensely foreign and inviting to me, a fourth-generation Adventist?

I want to know why I would rather run to the hills in moments of crisis than stay and struggle. How was I shaped as a child to see the world as a broken elevator filled with people, hanging by one frayed cable that we prayed would snap?

If I am unique--if I am alone in this experience of escapist fatalism--then I admit that I should leave the denomination. If this is only *my* translation of Adventist language into life experience then I believe I should not stay because it is fouling my relationship with Christ.

But if I am not unique, if I am not alone, then I want to be part of the conversation that addresses Adventist fatalism. Does such a conversation exist, or do each of us endure separately and quietly? Do we utilize our rational faculties to override an impulse to escape the world, and in this way manage our fears? Perhaps Adventism doesn't produce more novelists because it only teaches people how to write the end of a story. If this is the case, then we should demand more of ourselves and our denomination.

The paradox of Adventism is that it believes the world must get worse before it can get better and it does not want to

attempt too much social good for fear of delaying Christ's return. But such a response to the world is inherently un-Christ-like. Who else had more reason to run than Christ? Yet always he loved the world and cared for it. It means nothing that we have knowledge of the End if that understanding doesn't make us more Christ-like in the Meanwhile.

In my experience, there are believers who do not have the impulse to run. There are believers whose initial response is to embrace their neighbor, to ask "What can we do to help?" to weep with the world in its moment of need and not to attach prophetic significance to tragedy.

I will become a believer like that, and I hope it can be within Adventism. In the Meanwhile, I am here--at the beginning.

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