

Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello wrote: “If your God comes to your rescue, and gets you out of trouble, its time you started looking for the real God.”

I could not help but think of this as I listened to a Larry King interview with an evangelist who was rescued from the debris of a hotel in Haiti.

Larry King, addressing the evangelist says: How’d you do it, Dan?

Dan: You know what, I had a lot of people praying for me. Praying for safety for this trip. God was there. He was listening to their prayers and he helped me survive...

Later, the evangelist continues: I was always hoping for a rescue but I realized I might not have that opportunity. That might not be God’s plan for me at that time...

The de Mello quote came to my mind as I listened to him...“If your God comes to your rescue and gets you out of trouble, its time you started looking for the real God.”

I bristled at the rescued evangelist’s theology. If God chose to save him because he was praying, and because others in his hometown were praying, how do we explain the estimated 200,000 who God did not save? How do we explain the thousands of others trapped beneath the rubble crying out to God for help, who perished while they waited? According to this man’s theology, which is why I find it problematic, God *chose* to save HIM, and thereby NOT to save them.

And if God is found only in the rescues, as some of these news images would have us believe, what of the God who comforts the brokenhearted widower? Who sits vigil with the young mother as she waits for signs of life from the pile of rubble that used to be her house? Or the God who holds in his arms the young man who is trapped and praying mightily, but ultimately perishes?

And yet, in a time of great crisis, this Theology comforted this evangelist. The idea that it was just not his time to die. That God chose to save him. Who am I to strip from him what gives him hope, and a sense of purpose? And yet this very stripping of our images of God might very well be what the Gospel account is calling us to do. As someone once said, “Questioning our image of God pleases God more than a thousand years of piety.”

The first century Judeans had an image of God, and a 30 year old unmarried son of a carpenter was not it. They hoped for something different. Messianic expectations abounded. Some wanted a Messiah who would be a military leader, freeing them from Roman occupation by force. Others wanted a Messiah who would forsake the towns and cities and live as a desert ascetic, like them. Others wanted a King, a descendant of King David, regal and mighty and proud. Jesus, the son of a carpenter, was not who anybody had in mind. As the Gospel story continues next week, the amazement they have at Jesus’ mysterious authority gives way to rage at his message, and they try to drive him out of town. We want a Messiah, they seem to be saying, but not if it’s you.

It is easy for me to be the one to point out the flaws in other people’s theology, but the Gospel is not giving us permission to criticize each other. It is challenging us to be more critical of the images that each of us carry. Or, to be more specific, to be open to the idea that the image we have is actually blinding us to the real presence of God.

In my theology, God does not decide that thousands of Haitians should die in an earthquake, and that a select few will survive. Personally, I am uncomfortable with that idea that God is most present wherever we are rescued from our troubles.

Jesus is ultimately driven from town because he does not conform to their expectations. Many of us, I suspect, like the rescued evangelist, hold fast to our image of a rescuer God, this God who finds us a perfect mate, solves our financial woes, whispers to us the winning Lottery numbers.

What I believe the Gospel is really telling us, however, is that if we can get rid of all of our expectations and deeply held images of God, the true God is way better. This true God does not run around the planet, as we might hope, stopping earthquakes or war or cancer or divorce or bankruptcy the way we would like. Unbelievably, the true God is better than that god. The true God is more real than that. Jesus points us to a God who does not distribute justice across the earth, who will not reach down and unloosen the nails in his only son's hands and feet one fateful afternoon.

Rather, this God – our God – exercises power not by erasing misfortune but by walking us through it and thereby transforming it, bringing us to the other side into what we thought was our death and ruin and isolation but what we actually discover is new life. A God that carries us, and does not let us go, ever, no matter what loss awaits us.

Jesus points us toward the God fear has obscured from our sight, the God who did not come to the rescue of an estimated 200,000 people in Haiti, the God who will not come to his own son's rescue, but who offers us something better: an abiding Love no death can sever. A companion in our most difficult times. A God more powerful than any power humans can exercise. Jesus points us towards this God.

We all want images of people being rescued from rubble, and these images are indeed good news. There was a memorable one taken after a week, of a seven year old boy held aloft by rescuers with his arms outstretched, smiling a magnificent, heart-stopping smile. And of course God is there.

But even greater than this is the promise our faith holds onto: that for the thousands not so lucky, death does not have the final say. Life for them continues, somehow, not with their loved ones on earth, but somehow, with the God who would not let something like death get in the way of his fierce love for them.

We all hope for a Rescuer God, but we got something different. We got a God whose love and comfort are so often manifest in the most unusual places, and in ways beyond our wildest imaginings.

Let not these images of rescue blind us from the amazing promise of God's presence, not merely in rescue, but scandalously even in death. Erasing death's finality, and offering us the promise that life as we know it is changing, or for so many, over, but that new life awaits on the other side. There are ties and there is a love no death can sever. And, even better, this promise of new life is made not to a chosen few, but to all.