

Wolves *and* Lambs

ADVENT DEVOTIONAL 2016

THE STILLSPEAKING WRITERS' GROUP
Hearing God where you live (and other surprising places).

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I N T R O D U C T I O N



“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”
Isaiah 11:6-9

There are lots of things this vision of Isaiah’s might mean, and every one of them is way more catastrophic to the current order than the pictures in your Christmas card pile are going to lead you to believe.

Judge by *those* smarmy, soft-focus pictures, and you might think that all the coming of God will bring is a night when your kids finally stop bickering and you can have a nice glass of wine in peace.

Though that in fact may be all you’re actually longing for, what Isaiah threatens is something bigger, something deeper. It’s the creation of a world not that you want or don’t want, but a world so weird you can’t imagine it well enough to decide if you even like it.

We’re calling this year’s Advent Devotional *Wolves and Lambs* because we think that the image of a wolf and a lamb lying down together should be comforting, yes, even sweet.

But it should also be deeply unnerving.

As the first Christmas was. As this one will be, if Isaiah and God—and we—have anything to say about it.

Advent blessings,

Quinn G. Caldwell

The Stillspeaking Writers’ Group

Liberation

K e n n e t h L . S a m u e l

“The God of this nation Israel chose our ancestors and honored them in Egypt by gloriously leading them out of their slavery.” Acts 13:17

Make no mistake about it. When the Apostle Paul stood up to declare the Gospel to a gathering of believers in ancient Turkey, he made it clear that Israel’s devotion to God is based on the liberating work enacted by God in Israel’s history. Israel follows the Lord supremely because the Lord is Israel’s Supreme Liberator.

We can all give a host of reasons why we believe in God, why we love God, why we follow God. But as a person who strives to overcome historic and systemic oppression on a daily basis, I do not have the luxury to devote myself to anyone or anything that is not invested in my liberation.

And I am clear that God’s liberation is not limited to just the realms of spirit and emotion.

Israel’s bondage in Egypt was not just a metaphysical bondage. Egypt’s economic system had to be transformed; Egypt’s social hierarchy had to be unraveled; and Egypt’s political power had to be altered in order to effect Israel’s liberation.

Advent means nothing if it doesn’t mean greater freedom for all people who still live under the oppressions of social stigma, racial profiling, religious intolerance, gender bias, transphobia, and economic exploitation.

Advent means nothing if it doesn’t mean that wolves and lambs can co-exist with equal and mutual respect for life.

Advent means nothing if it doesn’t mean that the babes born in mangers have the same dignity and the same opportunities afforded to them as the babes born in mansions.

Lord, this Advent Season, give us greater capacity to see ourselves as your agents of liberation.

“Pant” for God?

K a j i D o u š a

“As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul pants for you, my God.” Psalm 42:1

You’ve got this. You generally know what’s required and you’ve made it thus far.

And, yet . . .

In the “yet,” in the “not quite,” through the “however,” you may feel so distinct from all that is certain. Psalm 42, Advent even, reminds you that you have a portion of what it takes. But God has the rest.

The season of Advent invites us to remember this, to draw on God’s mercy, to . . . remember. That we can only go but so far. For the rest of it, *our souls pant* for what only God can do.

Consider a major challenge in your life. Are you feeling stuck? Have you even *dared* to “pant” for God’s help? Truth is, when we ask for God’s help, sometimes we are calling on something that may be inconvenient, that would take us in a direction we do not want to go. *Pant* for God and be prepared to go somewhere you never would have charted.

Your faith tells you that this uncharted territory is not only ordained by God, but infinitely magnificent.

Where is God hoping you will go? Allow this Advent to be the time to usher you in that direction.

O Come, Holy One, come even when I forget that I need you. My soul pants for you with a thirst that only you can quench.



Real

Q u i n n G . C a l d w e l l

“But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” Galatians 4:4-6

Every once in a while, some well-meaning person of goodwill will refer to my son’s birth parents as his “real” parents. They almost always catch themselves with a hand over their mouths as soon as the word passes their lips, and apologize. Nevertheless, you can imagine how I feel about the implications of the statement.

And yet, of course I can see how people’s minds are working. In our world and families, so much depends on biological connection. Crowds used to watch queens give birth, to make certain the baby wasn’t switched and therefore had the necessary royal blood. Trashy daytime talk shows make a mint on those paternity test shows ... as do high-end retailers, who sell genetics kits that promise to tell you exactly where in the world your ancestors are all from (spoiler alert: it’s not where your grandmother claimed).

People act like there’s something mystical about the blood that parents and children share. Perhaps there is, but the clear witness of the Bible is this: for God, adoption matters more than blood. And I’m not just talking about Moses, Esther, Jesus, and the other important biblical adoptees. I’m talking about something larger, which Paul says here in Galatians: whatever family, race, or religion we inherited by blood, our real Parent isn’t finally the one to whom we’re genetically related, but the one who adopts us and makes us heirs to the greatest of estates.

This doesn’t mean you have to leave your bio-family behind, of course; God’s fine with open adoptions and you can totally still be in touch. It just means that in what happened with Jesus, “real” got redefined.

O holy one, thank you for all good parents, especially the real ones.

Lowly

Tony Robinson

“And Mary said, ‘My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.’” Luke 1: 46-48

Years ago I appeared in one congregation’s home-grown musical rendition of the “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” based on the book by Barbara Robinson (no relation)—a story of how the neighborhood terrors, the horrible Herdsmen kids, end up being the unlikely stars of the Christmas pageant.

I guess, in my case, it was typecasting. I played the minister at the church where this mess was unfolding. In my big scene the outraged mother of an absolutely picture-perfect young lady came to see me. She had expected her daughter would be cast as Mary. Instead, the cigar-smoking, shin-kicking, profanity-tossing youngest Herdsman daughter, Imogene, has been chosen to be the virgin mother.

In the play, I listen to the mother’s protest of the choice of impossible Imogene. I don’t remember my exact lines, but they were something on the order of Isaiah’s words, “Gosh, gee I guess sometimes God’s ways are not our ways.”

It’s difficult to break Mary out of the idealized images of centuries, but I imagine that part of what she meant

when she praised God for looking “with favor on the lowliness of his servant” is that she, too, was a most unlikely choice for her big part.

It’s not at all difficult, in fact, to imagine people taking considerable offense at the idea that God would choose a young, unwed and, in all likelihood, poor girl to be the mother of God. Of herself, Mary used the word, “lowly.” Other possibilities might be “unlikely,” “improbable,” or “impossible.” Thank God for choosing impossible, improbable me.

There’s good news here. If we know ourselves at all, we know how unlikely and impossible we are as choices for doing God’s work in the world, or to be God’s messengers, or to give birth to hope. But this is how God works, choosing people not because they deserve it or look the part, but because God likes to surprise us.

At the climax of the show, it is not only Jesus who is born, but Imogene too. Holding a plastic baby Jesus, Imogene’s sullen face turns tender and radiant. Imogene is, for once, calm and still at the strange wonder of it all. And so are we.

We thank you, Holy One, that your ways are not our ways, and that you in your wisdom choose us, as unlikely as that may seem.

C O N T R I B U T O R S

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