

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The 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. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They 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. ¹⁰On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." ³This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" ⁴Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. ⁵Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, ⁶and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁷But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" ⁸Bear fruit worthy of repentance. ⁹Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. ¹⁰Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ¹¹"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." (564)

An iguana hatchling cracks forth on a Galapagos Island.

Its first order of business is to make its way from the lava rocks where it, as an egg, had been laid, across the easy slope of sand to the sea, lapping. Here its mother is waiting to feed and nurture it.

The journey from rocks to shore is short, but it presents a challenge for the hatchling, so new to this whole thing.

The challenge is made all the greater for all just-hatched iguanas by the lurking presence of racer snakes, which are called that because they are snakes that will race after you. They subsist on

a diet mainly of (I'm sorry to have to tell you) iguana hatchlings. And they're fast, as you might surmise. And, though cold-blooded, they work together. They do seem to cooperate, at least until the moment when there's one iguana hatchling in their grip and only one of the snakes is going to be able to eat it. Then, I imagine, their cooperation breaks down.

Their one handicap: they can only barely see, can much better sense motion.

As for the iguana hatchling's one advantage: its instincts, when sensing mortal danger, has it stand utterly still.

As for everything else, I don't know. Why the mother doesn't wait on those rocks by the eggs, I don't know. Why the mother lays the eggs on the rocks up shore rather than by the edge of sea where she'll be, I don't know. Why nature, or evolution, or intelligent design made it this way, I don't know—because, really, there's nothing intelligent about this. This is *Hunger Games*, but for babies. This is *Game of Thrones* for the pre-verbal set. (Turns out the theory of intelligent design isn't just bad science; it's also bad theology, for this creation can be *cruel*.)

Our iguana friend has been caught on camera and broadcast on BBC Earth with Richard Attenborough providing color commentary. There, just beyond the rocks of its birth, it has scurried as far as it can until it senses

it's time to stand still.

So, it does, stand still, utterly still.

And a snake slithers by it—

then pauses.

Did it sense something? It pokes its head toward the iguana's tail and gives it a little nibble.

The iguana shoots up into the air and runs. The snake races after it. Then, out of the rocks, come more snakes, lots more. They race and catch the hatchling and knot themselves around it to the degree that you'd think they'd get their bodies mixed up with one another's, would tie themselves so tightly they couldn't get themselves unknotted again.

Remember that game at school recess? Remember Twister?

Meanwhile, the hatchling works at slipping itself out of the knot. Slowly, slowly, so the snakes can only squeeze harder, which only makes the slow slip of the iguana increasingly inevitable, the hatchling is suddenly free, and off it scrambles up the lava rock piles.

“Wrong way!”

The racer snakes unknott themselves and are on the chase again, slithering up the rocks that the iguana has retreated to, now back at the beginning. The snakes leap at the hatchling's tail

and bite at its feet. Seconds more of the suspense, and then the iguana hurls itself off one rock and across a chasm to land on another rock. The snake closest behind hurls itself too (because apparently racer snakes can jump?) but it falls into the chasm never to be seen again.

Our iguana friend is going to make it.

Off to find its mother.

But just now another iguana is hatching, cracking forth into a world we call good. Indeed, very good.

What?

Advent is a short season: there's only one shorter. Christmas, the season, lasts but twelve days, so includes at the most two Sundays, but usually just one. Advent is four weeks, four Sundays of which this is the second.

Its shortness has felt as a relief to me in years past. A season of burning hope, it would have us wake up to all the things about life in the world, all the things because of which we hope, because of which all we can do is hope. All the corrupt, cruel, heartbreaking, unjust, wasteful, horrifying things of this world because of which we hope, against which we hope, would have us but throw up our hands and recognize that our only hope when it comes to such things is hope. We can't actually do anything about this thing or that thing; we can't actually do anything but hope, watch the horizon for early signs of the arrival, the dawning arrival of that for which we hope, that for whom we hope.

We do hope a disservice when we mistake it for wishing, something wistful ("Make a wish!") or cynical. ("I *wish*...") Hope has more of an edge, and more of a hard pith at its core. Hope is tinged with anger and polished with defiant joy. Hope is "nope" and the obstreperous "Yes." Hope is Job standing amidst the wreckage of his life and the accusations of his friends who only want what's best for him ("Everything happens for a reason."), strong in his insistence that he doesn't deserve any of this, Job standing there declaring, demanding, "I *know* that my redeemer lives—and at the last he shall stand on *my* side."

The thing is, to be awake to such things in response to which our only hope is hope is (again, you might surmise) no easy thing. Such wakefulness: I think of "The Fever," Wallace Shawn's monologue of a play he first performed in 1990. He is a traveler in a war-town country when a fever besets him. Stuck alone in his cramped hotel room, the fever strips away all his defenses, makes fall away all the blinders that we all wear most of the time which make it so we can move through time, go about our day.

For truly to see: it's terrible and terrifying.

He recognizes his own country as the cause of the civil war that has left this current country in tatters.

He recognizes his own complicity in the actions of his country, and the horrifying way he's benefited from the suffering inflicted elsewhere.

He recognizes the scaffolding of life, material, ideological, that we like to think allocate privilege and risk, comfort and cost, in ways that are just, fair, everyone getting what they deserve—but are in truth far from that.

Ninety minutes of honest seeing, truly assessing, a conflation of the twenty-four hours or so the character suffered the fever—and nearly more than the audience can take.

And then the fever lifts, and regular perceiving returns (along with its attendant regular ignoring) and he can go about his business in this war-torn country where at least *he* is safe and, I mean,

he hasn't done anything wrong. He's not innocent exactly but he's also not to blame.

Just like all of us—now to return to our business, theater lights coming up, the audience dispersing and then hurrying a little bit because you just checked your watch and, “Oh, we have dinner reservations across town.”

You gotta wonder, are we better off for occasionally seeing? Is anything better for our occasional recognition? Misery tourism, it has come to be called, when you visit the world's misery as if this makes you a better person, more accountable, more moral, as if “There but for the grace of God go I,” is good theology rather than ascribing to God's grace your own dumb good luck.

Advent would have us wake up to this.

It would also have us rest assured that that for which we hope we can rely on in fulfilling. It's not easy—to wait in wakeful hope; but it is true. We can trust.

But, get this: Advent does one better than merely to promise that human interacting might be met with justice. It does one better than to plant in our hearts the hope that human political doing might come to justice and right relating, a just and true king to come to reign in peace and beauty, to make all things right, a restoration to some Edenic origin that is also an arrival at a perfected end. Advent does one better than simply to see that human relationships are in drastic need of reorganizing, redeeming. It also recognizes what is called natural evil and promises that even this shall be overcome, undone, redeemed. Somehow.

Natural evil is evil for which “no non-divine agent can be held morally responsible.” Defined in contrast to moral evil, which is directly caused by human activity, natural evil is derived from the operation of the laws of nature. It is the fruits of a creation that is cast in limitation—limited time, limited energy, limited resources upon which though life itself depends. Natural evil is racer snakes and iguana hatchlings, both simply seeking to live but which life for one comes as death for the other.

Which might be a tough one for us to believe in—natural evil. Because we tend to believe that what’s natural is good, and what’s wrong here is simply because of us. We are the source of trouble. We are the problem here. Really, we’re at a particular moment in our accounting for it all. We (people like us) tend toward a romantic understanding of the natural order of things which now comes coupled with misanthropy, a misanthropic (human-hating) set of assumptions that would have the world better off if we were simply gone. We trust nature, and grieve its suffering under the Anthropocene, a geological age recently imagined (and controversially imagined) as the age when humans have reigned to so profound a degree that we will have left a mark on the scale of the Paleozoic Era and the Mesozoic Era, time scales measured in the millions of years.

Hence the controversy: we’re many, many hundreds of thousands of years shy of reigning for millions of years.

And yet, the idea itself is an interesting one in its revealing that we’re pretty convinced of our own evil and also convinced of the goodness of nature, and thus our own alienation from nature—which trust is itself an indication of our privilege, how well insulated we are from a capricious natural world. Earthquakes, volcanos, survival of the fittest.

I remember an event in the last decade or so. A lion was killed because it had gained a taste for the human. This closely followed Harambe’s death, the gorilla in the Cincinnati Zoo into whose enclosure fell a three-year-old boy visiting the zoo. It was decided that Harambe’s close encounter with a human child made him a danger and thus he needed to be “put down.”

Which he was.

An outcry followed, that Harambe was made to pay for someone else’s gross error, whether blame belonged to the adult in charge of the child or to the fact of zoos in general or to some other moral agent acting immorally on some level between the individual (where was the parent?) and the phenomenological (what is with zoos?)

Next came the need to kill a lion, though one not in captivity, one in the wild I think, one simply living its life.

Which: I don't know why it captured the world's attention, other than that Harambe had us all, the whole internet, primed to be outraged on behalf of animals. A reddit thread, though, had one person writing from his own experience of living in an African village where a lion did periodically come through, would not infrequently wander into the thicket of huts to snatch a baby or child or adult for its food. This voice meant to correct those internet warriors writing from their armchairs in the global north where a lion is but a zoo animal, has only been experienced as imprisoned and unjustly so. The lion is the victim. The people are the problem.

Turns out, in some places, a lion can very much be a problem, is indeed the very last thing you'd want to come close to, and if upon which (such close encounter) your best hope is a gun.

So, a lion lying down with a lamb. A wolf made a pacifying presence to a kid. The cow and the bear, the leopard eating straw like an ox, the baby playing at the adder's den: a creation made kind, no longer survival going to the fittest but abundant life poured forth for all, a creation made perfect such that none shall hurt or destroy but all shall be sustained by the goodness of God's grace alone. Like that bush that burns but doesn't consume, like that fire that burns but doesn't reduce things to ash. Sustained being. Shalom.

So where to start?

John thought he knew.

John thought he knew what to expect in this coming one. John the baptizer, the herald of Advent whose voice and proclamation make way for the coming one: he thought he knew what it would take. To set all this to right, it would take someone even more caustic than this wilderness prophet was and certainly more powerful, someone with a winnowing fork, someone who would clear this world-cum-threshing floor, who would burn the chaff while only keeping the grain, that small portion of the good amidst all the trashy husk.

John thought he knew what it would take to establish righteousness: it would take the eradication of evil, the annihilation of pride and hypocrisy, the humiliation of the religious authorities who parade around in their sanctimony, to bring to humility those who pranced about, "We're children of Abraham. We are by our nature better than everyone else, indeed blameless, indeed good."

John thought knew that it would be someone like him but more so: an ax lying at the root of the trees, a bearer of it ready to cut every useless tree down, throwing into the fire, a consuming fire, not a sustaining fire but a consuming one.

John thought he knew.

But then he began to wonder. Watching the one whose coming he heralded, watching the one whose winnowing he was hoping for, watching him rather eat with sinners, drink with the compromised, approach with compassion the all who know not what we do, John did begin to wonder: maybe he'd been wrong...?

More on that next week.

What we can know now is that if the new creation that this short, piercing season would have us anticipate is one where none shall hurt or destroy, one where the very nature of things has been transformed so that all is peace, then it's unlikely the one whose arrival is the beginning of this transformation will come with an ax, a winnowing fork, an annihilating fire and the sort of ferocity that would gladly put such things to punishing use.

But this we can only barely imagine, and we certainly can't always trust. The mystery is too great. The "how" of it is too confounding: we *know* this creation, we *know* how it works. Survival of the fittest so some must simply die.

The yearning for it, though: *our* yearning for it: this is its own truth.

Walk with me through these many weeks ahead. Yearn with me for what might be. Join me in "nope" and an obstreperous "yes," the world we await once salvation has come.

The walk itself is blessing.

Thanks be to God.