



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Isaiah 11: 1-10, Matthew 3: 1-12

December 9, 2007

Second Sunday After Advent

“The Physiology of Paradise”

Isaiah’s vision has been called by some biblical commentators *Paradise Regained*. It’s a rather simple vision when you unpack it – a hurt-free world. He uses images from the animal world, but it’s meant for humans. The wolf and the lamb, predator and prey, learn to live together. Calves and bear cubs feel safe enough to sleep together and that early imprinting sets the stage for a life of harmony. The lion learns to eat straw instead of flesh. A toddler is safe enough to play over a snake’s den, having no reason to fear the snake. “They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea” (Isaiah 11:7-9).

I doubt that Isaiah believed that there would come a time when this would literally happen. He seems to be saying: “here’s an image of animals transcending their own instinctual nature to live together in harmony. We can do the same.” He employs poetic imagination to help humans understand that Paradise in the human realm involves transcending our instinctual impulses – the impulse to hurt others, to lash out, when we believe that we are being threatened. Who knows if animals will ever be able to literally arrive at this version of Paradise? Did you see that short trailer

that was circulating in cyberspace of the Husky dog and the Polar bear meeting each other in the wild? Instead of fighting each other, they started to play together. What makes the clip so remarkable is that huskies are trained to fight off polar bears from the time they are puppies. By whatever means, both animals transcended their instincts. Now this is an anomaly in the animal world. Paradise, in the form of non-violence, is not going to happen in the animal world in our lifetime.

But humans are different. For us, it’s a choice. Here’s an advent spiritual practice. Commit yourself to hurting no one until Christmas. Make a daily commitment that you will resist the impulse to hurt another being, human or other-than-human for the next few weeks. Keep track of when you failed at the practice, and why you failed. What caused you to say that unkind word, withdraw, lie to somebody, talk about somebody behind his back, slam the phone receiver down, withhold affection, or yell at your child? Keep a hurt journal – a record of the times when you caused someone to hurt. This would be a great way to prepare for the birth of the Prince of Peace. Hurt no one this Advent. Manage this, and you will have tasted Paradise.

Why *do* we hurt each other? Why do we so quickly turn our spouses, partners, friends, sons and daughter, mothers and fathers into the enemy – let alone strangers? The terrible irony of life is that the more we love somebody, the more trust we develop. And the more trusting we become, the more likely we are to let down our defenses. The more defenseless we feel, the deeper we feel the hurt when they wound us. So we guard ourselves with the very ones we love the most, and when we perceive threat from them – real or imagined – we defend ourselves, and in the process, hurt them. Strangers can't hurt us as deeply. That's why it's easier sometimes to act with more kindness and affection with a stranger than it is with the ones we love.

Isaiah's intuition is right on. A big part of the problem is physiological – unless we learn to manage our instincts, we'll never stop hurting each other. In terms of the 14 billion years it's taken the universe to arrive at us, we just emerged out of the animal kingdom yesterday. We inherited two brains from our animal kin and then developed a third one very recently that distinguishes humans from other animals. The reptilian brain is the oldest part of the brain. As my friend and colleague, the Rev. Anna Christie points out, all reptiles do is to sleep, bask in the sun, have sex and kill things to eat. She is sure she dated one as an undergraduate.

Our second brain is the limbic system, or mid-brain. It is responsible for the fight or flight response in our

bodies, among other things. We have a gland in this part of the brain called the amygdala – the word means “almond”, because of its shape and size. It is likely most responsible for keeping us from Paradise. It evolved for one primary purpose – to protect us from danger. Once this little guy gets triggered, it takes only 1/5000 of a second to start the physiological ball rolling. Adrenalin is released, and blood flows away from our heart and brain to our limbs to prepare us to fight or run. When it's triggered we literally get stupid, because of this flow of oxygen away from our brain.

The third part, called the neocortex is the distinctly human part of our brain. It's responsible for reasoning, logic, solving problems, language, and doing advanced calculus. The problem is that the amygdala outguns the neocortex when we perceive that we are in danger. Before the neocortex has a chance to engage in reason, this little walnut gland hijacks us. Now, this is handy when a Tyrannosaurus Rex has us lined up for his next meal. Unfortunately, the amygdala doesn't differentiate between an actual monster and our mother-in-law. And yes, there is a difference! It's why a 50-year-old man can get apoplectic over a phone call from his mother. He's in no physical danger, but the amygdala makes virtually no distinction between emotional and physical danger. In 1/5000 of a second, before he's consciously aware of what he's doing, he's defending his life for all its worth, and in the process, saying things he may regret later. He's

hurt his poor mom simply because he couldn't manage his amygdala.

When John the Baptist thunders a message of repentance to us in this Advent season, it means in part, taking responsibility for our evolutionary equipment. Nobody outside ourselves makes us feel anything and nobody outside ourselves makes us behave badly. Nobody causes us to hurt anybody else. We are called to transcend our natural instincts, even as we are appreciative of their evolutionary function in protecting us. Comedian, Flip Wilson became famous for his quip, "the devil made me do it!" Well, it wasn't the devil, it was his amygdala. But you are responsible, as a human being, for your amygdala. Animals are not, but you are. To repent, and turn our lives in the direction of fuller expressions of Spirit, is to notice how we hurt others, and take absolute responsibility for our actions.

Last week I went to see the film, *No Country for An Old Man*, a film adaptation of Cormac McCarthy's award-winning novel. It's a portrait of evil and I'm not recommending it. It's a horrifying portrait of hell on earth, not Paradise. The central figure is a psychopath. The definition of a psychopath is one who either is unable or refuses to take responsibility for his actions. This guy flips a coin and requires his victims to call heads or tails. Their life depends on a flip of the coin. One brave victim refuses to play his game, telling him that he can't blame the coin. It's his choice. His pathetic, chilling response is that he

and the coin were made the same way – by random circumstance – so he has no more responsibility than the coin he flipped. The practice of repentance requires us to take responsibility for the hurt we cause.

Do you want to stop hurting the people you love? Learn what happens to your body when your amygdala is triggered. Learn what it feels like to have adrenalin coursing through your body; notice the tightness in your shoulders, how your breathing has become shallow; take a deep breath, walk away and give your neocortex some time to kick in. Say nothing. Tell whomever has been the source of the trigger what is happening to you, and that you are unable to respond at the moment, because at the moment you are really, really stupid. Then go to a competent therapist and find out why you are so sensitive to this particular trigger. There's always a reason, and no matter what happened to you in your family growing up, or no matter the trauma you may have suffered, you are now responsible for your actions. You are not responsible for what happened to you. But you are responsible for what you do to others. This is a Paradise practice. No more hurt. No more violence. It starts with you and with me.

Together, we are co-creating Paradise, where we cause no hurt and destroy no thing. The doctrine of the fall is actually a misinterpretation of the myth of Adam and Eve. The writers couldn't possibly have known that we live in an evolutionary universe. Eden, for these pre-modern

thinkers, described a historical location and time, when the first two humans lived in perfect harmony with God, each other, and creation. Then Eve ate the proverbial apple, that was wrongly associated with sexual temptation, and we “fell” from grace. But, philosopher Ken Wilber, uses the term “up from Eden”, rather than the fall, to describe the human journey. We have not fallen. Since the dawn of humanity, we have been actually been growing in our capacity for take responsibility for our lives and shape the future. We are imperfect, evolving creatures, not fallen sinners.

There is actually no Paradise to return to. It lies ahead. That’s the evolutionary challenge. What the myth of Adam and Eve describes is a mystical state of essential unity, a world without fear, without disconnection. This state of consciousness has been available to humans from the very beginning and is available to us today. The “fall” is not something that happened way back when – for which we are now being punished. Both the state of unity and the state of disconnection that the myth of Eden describes are states of consciousness here and now. Here’s the bad news. We’re even responsible for this perception of disconnection. The root of the problem is also the way our brain is structured.

The second Advent practice – after managing your amygdala - is to intentionally overcome this perception of disconnection. The refusal to take responsibility when our amygdala gets triggered is the psychological cause of

hurt and violence. The refusal to take responsibility for our perception of disconnection is the spiritual cause of our capacity to hurt and destroy. We are in the midst of destroying our planet because we believe that we are separate from it, and that it was meant to be “used” by us. We have colonized and terrorized the earth for profit, and now we’re paying the piper.

Again, part of the problem is physiological. Our brain is split into two hemispheres. Most of us perceive the world predominantly through one hemisphere or the other. This kind of perception divides the world up into them and us, right and wrong, black and white, evil and good. We experience ourselves as disconnected from each other, from the earth, and from God. Our theological models are formed through this split hemisphere way of seeing the world. God is “out there” beyond the universe. But scientists have carefully tested the brains of nuns, Buddhist monks, and mystics of all religious faiths. What they find is that, in a meditative state, the brains of these people show less “lateralization” – meaning they use both sides of their brain to think and to feel. What seems to be happening is that the practice of meditation builds neural connections across the hemispheres. They are growing new brains for a new age. As a result, they perceive the world holistically. The brain, it turns out, is not a static organ. It grows. It makes new connections, and lays down new neural pathways.

Our brains are not our minds, despite what you’ve been told in

biology class. Consciousness doesn't come out of a brain. It comes *through* a brain. The brain is the exterior aspect of an interior, subjective consciousness. We are centers of consciousness – minds – that can reprogram our brains to help us see the world as a unified whole. The best way to do this is through the practice of meditation. The second best way to do this is through reading spiritual writings to help us access our higher mind. When we see the world through a brain that's been reprogrammed to see in wholes, that is to see our connection with everything and everybody, the impulse to hurt and to violate others disappears. This is because we understand that the other that we're hurting is part of us. To perceive this way, is to know God directly, as the divine milieu in which we live and move and have our being. In the words from Isaiah's vision: "The earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea." As we overcome this state of disconnection, our inner experience of unity with all of life, lifts us up to a higher level of consciousness.

From this place, we see the big picture – the whole radically connected enchilada of this living universe, shot through with Spirit. We become more interested in loving and less interested in dramas of hurt and violence. After the Air India crash – a horrific disaster – only one man (as far as I am aware) grieved and then moved on. He lost his wife and two children. Then he moved to India and opened up a clinic in their memory for the poor who needed cataract surgery. He has saved

10's of 1000's of people from blindness. He simply wasn't interested in giving 20 years of his life to legal battles, catching the bad guys, finding out what went wrong with the investigation, and punishing everybody who was responsible. He created a kind of paradise out of his tragedy. I honestly don't know what I would have done in his situation, but I hope I would have followed in his footsteps.

Many of us secretly love the dramas of our hurt and our schemes of revenge. Often, we have nothing better to do. We think it's the only game in town. If someone tells us that we don't have to live like this – that there's a way to stop playing this game of obsessing about who hurt who and why and when, and all the reasons that they deserve justice, we'd refuse. They give our life a kind of meaning. These dramas make us *feel* something, and we often confuse these strong feelings with purpose. That's why we don't forgive. Who would we be, what would we think about, what stories would we tell, and who would we have to blame if it weren't for these dramas? But the dramas are creations of our brains, not our higher minds. The alternative is love and trust and seeing the world in all its unified glory. And yes, you're going to get your heart broken if you choose this path, because we don't live in Paradise yet. Most people have not chosen to exit this drama of hurt and destruction.

Here's a Christmas present that keeps on giving. Choose to give the world, your family, and a planet your gift to be a hurt-free zone. In your

presence, people will feel safe. They will sense that they can trust you. Can you imagine allowing your higher self to reign over your physiology? Think of this as your Christ consciousness. Our brains were never meant to be in the driver's seat. They are magnificent organs of perception, but terrible drivers. Our hormones don't know anything about purpose or meaning or loving intention. They'll never build the paradise that Isaiah envisions. They are meant to serve you and to serve the higher purposes of Christ. We are not alone if this is our intention. We can get ourselves to Bethlehem once more this year and pay homage to the one we call the Prince of Peace. In another vision, Isaiah anticipates the birth of a Saviour: "The government of the world shall be upon his shoulders." We can choose to allow the Spirit of the Christ to govern our hearts and minds – and through them, our brains. Let's call it the Paradise Project.