



Arise

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CHRISTMAS GENTLENESS

Editor's Note: This is a reprint of a wonderful story about my dog Shivvy while I was in Baltimore in 2004. Shivvy was eight years old at the time. Enjoy.

It was said in ancient Israel . . .

On that day, a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom

Then the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid;

the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them.

The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox.

. . . There shall be no harm or ruin on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be filled with knowledge of the Lord, as water covers the sea.

(Isaiah 11:1-10 -- Second Sunday of Advent, Year A)

And now in the Third Millennium. . .

The puppy shall nuzzle the dove and be a neighbor to the bunnies.

Christmas came a month early for me this year; it ended in my lap. It was a wonderful "aha" experience; truly a gift I will long cherish and remember.

My dog Shivvy (short for "Mr. Shivers") and I were enjoying some fresh air in the late evening. I noticed him sniffing something by the fence. It was a little bird. Shivvy was very gentle with the little one. I was gentle, too, following my puppy's lead; I gently scooped the bird into my hands and brought it inside. I leaned back in my favorite chair and cuddled the little one on my chest. And then there was an awesome moment: Shivvy came over, put his paws on my lap and nuzzled the little one with his cold nose. It was a white dove with brown speckles on its wings. Shivvy was so gentle! I found a cozy box so the little one could spend the night with us. Shivvy kept guard. The next day I found out that it belonged to someone here in my building, who examined the little one; it was unharmed.

This was truly a sacred moment for me and a powerful message God wanted me to ponder anew.

The message was confirmed the following Sunday. I was picking up a bulletin in the vestibule and, of a sudden, a lady bug hitched a ride on my thumb and would not be dislodged. I always feel very honored when a lady bug says "hello." This very little one sure knew how to get my attention! I took it outside and encouraged it to jump onto a flower. No go. Then I held my thumb up for the folks coming into church to greet the little creature. Then, of a sudden, it spread its wings and was gone.

This gentleness among the creatures reminded me of the powerful Advent text from Isaiah I just quoted. It's a dream, really, but a dream that broke into reality for me before my eyes. Had my dog Shivvy become a prophet!?

While we are on the subject of birds and animals, I have often wanted to tell you about the little critters that live around us here at the Hampton House. I live on the eleventh floor of this high-rise building. When I moved up here in 1992 with my father I was immediately delighted by the view from my twelve-foot wide window. It enables my spirit to soar as I write. When I lean back in my favorite chair, the clouds are close enough to say "hello" as they process across the sky

In recent months, there are flocks of pigeons who swirl and twirl and dance in the air, moving up then down, to the left out of sight and back again -- all in unison -- just outside my window! Once in awhile a hawk circles high above, its wings proudly motionless as it glides along the drafts of air.

This is an awesome place for those who have eyes to see.

And then there are the "wabbits." We have a couple of them. My friend Madeline in 1001 goes out every morning to leave fresh seed and water for the birds,

peanuts for the squirrels, and carrots for the rabbits. At night one of the bunnies sits motionless in the middle of the sloped lawn out back. Shivvy stands to the side on the pavement; he is still too. Sometimes he chases the rabbits and the squirrels -- just to play, it would seem.

The thought occurred to me rather powerfully that this is what we need to teach people to do, especially children -- to be gentle with "little ones." May we learn to care for little life.

There is little gentleness in this "culture of death" we live in (to use Pope John Paul's phrase.) There is so much violence and killing in our society that our children growing up often have no idea of the message that we must learn to care for little life. How can our message to safeguard the right to life of the little ones in the womb be heard amidst domestic violence, violent TV shows and movies and video games and reports on the news of death in Falluja and Darfur? Where and how are we and our children to learn to be gentle with the little ones?

And so we may ask: Can this little story about a puppy and a dove and their friends help us have a good Christmas this year?

For one thing we remember that St. Francis put a donkey and a cow and some sheep in the manger scene, thereby suggesting that all of life is touched by God-becoming-human. The animals know how to adore little life. The animals in Isaiah's prophecy have a powerful lesson to teach us about gentleness and peace. And how astonishing that my puppy would have such a powerful lesson about gentleness to teach me!

I truly felt that the Isaian prophecy was being fulfilled in my lap! It emphatically brought home the point to me that gentleness must rule in my life, in our country, and in our world. Gentleness = peace. Christmas = peace. Preparing for Christmas means learning to bring more gentleness into our lives and our families. To do this we have to cope with the harshness, the outrageousness, the idolatry of December consumerism.

Back in 1990 I took a pledge of nonviolence, proposed by Pax Christi, the international Catholic peace movement. I joined not just because we were looking at war and racism; I was primarily looking at myself. I have wanted to root out of my thoughts, words and deeds any kind of harshness. I have been working on being a little more gentle every year since.

And most emphatically, I prayerfully come to the profound conviction that war is not the answer. I looked with great sorrow on the images of the destruction in the streets of Falluja. 300,000 innocent people have had their beloved city destroyed. We destroy in order to build. What sense is there in that?

The answer is for each of us to bring gentleness -- on the ground. Many of those who advocate war as an answer to humankind's problems ridicule those who resist war. But if it weren't for those who are committed to nonviolence our world would be in worse shape than it is. The war-advocates need those committed to nonviolence; i.e. gentleness, to save them from themselves. The war-advocates need to respect those committed to nonviolence and gentleness, for we are true patriots, true nation-builders.

Yes, we very much need gentleness in our lives and in our world. But lots of us in our culture today have become cynical about peace and about Christmas.

Shivvy and the little dove in my lap gave me a powerful lesson: Don't give up on the idea of peace! Work for peace. Lead yourself to the conviction that war is not the answer. Work to be gentle with your spouse and your children and your elderly parents. For the rest of this Advent/Christmas season I invite you, -- I beseech you -- to do a Nightly Inventory. Take three minutes each night to look over your day. See where you were gentle. . . . Where you were not.

Learn from Jesus, the gentlest One of all. Jesus was gentle and nonviolent even unto death. It is he who teaches us the lessons that will save us from ourselves.

My hope in all this is to help us penetrate the beautiful story of Christmas, to let it touch our lives, our souls -- this year 2004. It's not just a charming story. It cuts to the heart of our lives and of the universe itself.

And so, may we renew our commitment to bring more love, more open-heartedness, more nonviolence, more peace, more social justice, more environmental sensitivity, and more gratitude into the lives that we live, into our encounters with others, and into the world that we are helping to shape.

A puppy and a little one brought the whole universe into my lap. I will never forget that moment.

**May gentleness enfold you
and yours this Christmas!**

(Finish by rereading column one.)

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