

Advent II A 2016

Instinct is among the most powerful forces in any living creatures.

Innate, inborn tendencies that arise from deep in the brain, from the realm of automatic response. From instinct, the blackbirds gather in their great flocks this time of year, the ducks and other birds gather for their movement south.

Instinct, not thought, leads the bass to strike; there are no educated fish.

Instinct led squirrels to hoard acorns in the organ chamber last fall, producing some interesting anthems.

And instinct leads a mother fox to find a crevice under a stump when her belly grows heavy with kits. Nobody taught her.

And we supposedly higher creatures are not immune to its activation.

Instinct carries us away from reason and helps us to survive.

Instinct leads us to flight or to flee,

to seek food from our first hours,

to seek a mate and to embrace.

The most basic things that keep an individual alive and that preserve the species are governed by the deep-seated power of instinct.

And what moral danger lies therein, for surely instinct is a mother and father to sin.

Some desperate voice within says, "Snatch it quick; you might need it later. They don't."

A violent burst of neurons deep in the brain tells you to lash out against an everyday adversary.

Or the ancient urge to carry on the life of the species leads you astray in some moment of weakness and all that you have promised and made together is suddenly threatened.

From deep within our evolutionary history arise urges that are part of who we are, that must find expression, but which also must be controlled.

Last year I struck up a correspondence with a fisherman and outdoor journalist.

He had written for all the outdoor magazines and has fished all over the world.

Fly rods, spinning reels, saltwater and fresh; he's written wonderfully about those experiences, about fishing with his father, about the emotional depth of the angler's experience.

I wrote to him in hopes of planning a men's retreat at Gravatt, by which we would fool some of you who would never come to a men's retreat to come because fishing and hunting.

He was not game for the endeavor.

"I lack a spiritual life myself, being a skeptic, infidel, unbeliever, freethinker, and so on.

Nature is endlessly interesting and astonishing, but the natural world doesn't make me feel the presence of a creator, particularly a beneficent one.

If every living thing in the woods and fields had a voice that we could hear and understand, the endless screaming would drive us mad."

This is not a winsome picture of nature, of course, but consider what we would be without the gift of reason, memory, and moral reasoning, if we never restrained our instincts?

This is one great difference between the rest of God's creatures and us.

We regret our violence, mourn our sins, wish that life could carry on without our interest being in conflict with that of others.

The animals feast on each other; some eat even their own kin or mate,

and it is the fallen power of instinct that leads them there. The poet Mary Oliver says it is impossible to look at nature without acknowledging “this other-creature consuming appetite,” for in doing so we would miss “the miraculous interchange that makes things work, that causes one thing to nurture another, the creates the future out of the past.” Still, she says, “in my personal life, I am often stricken with a wish to be *beyond all that*.”¹ She remembers Teilhard de Chardin’s point that “man’s most agonizing spiritual dilemma is his necessity for food, with its unavoidable attachments to suffering.” There seems to be no way to get through life without violence. Steaks and pork chops and chicken wings to be sure, but even the vegan lifestyle requires the imposition of our will on other creatures to our own ends. We seek our interest and accept some level of loss for others in doing so. Go to a preschool classroom or observe a litter of puppies struggling to the teat and you will see that we are this way from birth.

But we are not always to be, as Isaiah saw as he was led to look into God’s own future:

*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.*

A day is promised and a ruler given who will remove the tyranny of self-interest, the necessity of violence, the rule of instinct over selfless love.

Whoever the wolves are among us will treasure the lambs;
The leopard people will cuddle with the innocent baby goat people;
The bear nations will be at peace with the cow nations;
Indeed the carnivores will all be rendered vegan, as the lions eat straw.
And so great will be their peace with each other that a little child could lead them.

We believe, of course, that this person is Jesus, who on the cross allowed the forces of irrational instinct, of self-interest, of self-preservation, of sin (in a word) to destroy him.

Accepting all of the horror of what people and other creatures can do to each other,
He revealed another way, a way of love that knows nothing of revenge, that does not take life
But gives it.

Our struggle and joy as those who belong to him is to be as much in his way as we can
while we wait for the day when his love wins the whole creation.

Let your own imagination be guided by the Holy Spirit to discern what this might mean.

When were you last a lion, hungry in some moment of anger for flesh?

When did you last turn that instinct and feast instead on love and forgiveness?

¹ Mary Oliver, “Upstream: Selected Essays,” 49.

Where are leopards and wolves among us and how can we help them to see another way?
And what, while we wait for the Lord, can we do for the sheep and other innocents, those
unequipped for the violent struggle that all too many excel in?

These are the questions that should animate our thoughts, about our work, our parenting, and
about what we seek together as the church.

How can the peaceable kingdom of Christ be seen, in us?