

Advent and Animals

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In those traditions where the blessing of animals is practiced, the occurrence is frequently near October 4th, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. The association is certainly understandable, tied as it is to the patron saint whose care for broader stretches of God's handiwork has long called into question an excessive focus on humanity—one that chokes out concern for other creatures also created by God. However, the beginning of the Christian year provides an occasion for pondering whether there are not only historical figures who can anchor concern for other species (like St. Francis), but also core theological convictions rooted in God's redemptive project that make our relationship to animals part and parcel of the faith we profess.

Isaiah t'was foretold it,
The rose I have in mind

Perhaps the most obvious Advent text that raises the prospect of more than only human inclusion in the messianic hope is found in Isaiah 11:1-9. The first part of the text is winsomely called to mind each Christmas season when we sing the classic hymn "Lo, How a Rose E're Blooming."

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
2 The 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.
3 His 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;
4 but 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.
5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins. (Isaiah 11:1-5 NRSV)

Thus far Isaiah stays fixed on the redemptive messianic work of the one who will transcend the egocentric reign of Israel's kings, a righteous king governed not by human ambition and self-concern but by the spirit of the Lord, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and fear of the Lord. This righteous king, centered in God's spirit, will bring justice and redemption to the people who have been abused and neglected by other kings.

But then the text takes a surprising turn. The second section of the passage is probably best expressed hymnically in Carl Daw's text "O Day of Peace," a hymn

that is interestingly not associated with Advent or Christmas in most hymnals.

6 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.
7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
9 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 NRSV)

The effect of God's messianic reign suddenly expands from the relationships of power and vulnerability among humans to the relationships of power and vulnerability among all creatures, as well as between humans and other animals.

The fact that, unlike the first section of this passage, this second section has not made its way into the lexicon of Advent and Christmas hymns is mirrored in interpretive traditions. Often commentators have been inclined to regard this second half of the passage as a poetic and metaphorical riff on the all important human-centered redemptive action of the first half. Interpreted in this way, the location of nonhuman animals in God's redemptive purpose is easily ignored. However, I have been persuaded by Ryan Patrick McLaughlin's argument that there is a fundamental parallelism between the two parts: the powerful acting favorably toward the vulnerable, both in the animal and the human realms.¹ The rose that blooms in the first part of this passage for the sake of the meek and poor of the earth blooms also in the second part for the sake of creation as a whole.

Then shall the wolf dwell with the lamb,
Nor shall the fierce devour the small.

Thus the scope of the redemptive action that Isaiah imagines explicitly and intentionally reaches beyond the merely human. Messianic yearnings are not only for human well being but also for all creatures great and small. An important precursor for this understanding is found in the story of the flood. The rainbow covenant that God establishes in Genesis 9 is too easily read as a promise simply to Noah and his offspring. But the text is palpably more extensive than that.

8 Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 9 "As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, 10 *and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark.* 11 I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to

destroy the earth.” 12 God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you *and every living creature that is with you*, for all future generations: 13 I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. (Genesis 9:8-13 NRSV, italics added)

With this strong assertion of the world that God will have that includes all flesh, we have even less reason to dismiss the second half of the Isaiah passage only as metaphors intended to embellish the promise of human well being. The God who wills to create all things wills also to redeem all things. The longing for Christ’s coming and coming again is a longing for the fullness and fulfillment of all things.

Mirroring these themes, Second Isaiah heralds the new creation that God wills to bring about, one that removes the sound of weeping from God’s people and brings peace in the animal kingdom as well.

17 For I am about to create new heavens
and a new earth;
the former things shall not be remembered
or come to mind....
23 They shall not labor in vain,
or bear children for calamity;
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord—
and their descendants as well....
25 The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,
the lion shall eat straw like the ox;
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!
They shall not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain,
says the Lord. (Isaiah 65:17, 23, 25 NRSV)

Paired unequivocally with the redemptive promise to God’s people is the redemptive promise to the whole animal kingdom, where natural antipathies are overcome and where peace and healing reign. As David Clough has put it, “Isaiah’s vision ... makes it absolutely clear that all creaturely enmity will be overcome in the new creation, and predator and prey will be reconciled to one another.”²

“O day of peace that dimly shines”

Of course the limitation on messianic yearning is the same as the limitation on all eschatological imagining: it hasn’t happened yet! In his slightly ribald song “Origin of the Species,” Chris Smithers captures the limitation in lyrics that question what the animals on the ark might have eaten.

How they fed that crowd is a myst’ry,
It ain’t down in the hist’ry,
But it’s a cinch they didn’t live on cakes and jam.
And lions don’t eat cabbage
And in spite of that old adage,

I ain't never seen one lie down with a lamb.³

But by expressing his doubts about life on the ark, Smithers unwittingly calls attention to what amounts to an early version of Isaiah's vision. The peaceable kingdom is already imagined in the story of the flood. We often read and tell it without marveling at what happened to predatory relationships during the lengthy voyage. It is a mystery as to what the animals ate on the ark, but it is no mystery as to what they didn't eat—one another!

So Isaiah 11:6-9 is the full imagining of the relationships God wants for all creatures that we find implicitly embodied in the story of the flood. We can also be grateful for another detail in Isaiah that points toward a way to deal with the just mentioned limitation on all eschatological dreams. For in depicting the peaceable kingdom, Isaiah envisages not only new relationships within the animal world nor only an animal world that is safe for humans, but also one into which "a little child shall lead them" (11:6). Or as McLaughlin puts it, "There is a role of *eschatological stewardship* for humans." He explores this stewardship in terms of working "toward peace in the human realm that peace may also reign in the cosmos."⁴

As the earlier verses of Isaiah 11 make plain (vv. 1-5), the messianic age is not built on human initiative, but on a righteous king governed by the spirit of God. But the latter verses (vv. 6-9) show that God's justice concerns reach beyond the human to the entire creation. So as humans follow the righteous king anointed by the spirit of God, they exercise an eschatological stewardship that likewise reaches toward the entire creation, toward a future of peace with animals. McLaughlin believes that faithful stewards should "not be satisfied with causing animals harm for human benefit simply because nature is structured in such a way that harm is ultimately unavoidable." McLaughlin concludes that as humans herald God's desire that hurt and destruction be banished from God's holy mountain, they "bear the responsibility to be faithful to it to whatever extent they can within the confines of a disordered world."⁵

*Through all our hopes and prayers and dreams,
Guide us to justice, truth and love*

So if we take an Advent and Christmas journey with Isaiah as our guide, we come face to face with a disordered world that needs counter testimony with respect to how humans relate to animals. It summons us to an eschatological stewardship that takes a hard look at the way we cause animals harm for human benefit. It summons us to a blessing of the animals that brings to the fore not the ones we adore as pets so much as the ones we raise for food on factory farms, or the ones we experiment on that we might improve our medical odds, or the ones we imprison and/or cripple for our entertainment, or the ones we drive to extinction by the changes we make in the earth.

In short, eschatological stewardship toward animals requires attentiveness to the particular confines of our disordered world. How we have come to incorporate animals into our food chain through factory farming is a major case in point. The harms wrought by this system range from raising pigs on concrete slabs where their instincts for rooting can have no expression to breeding chickens for abnormal weight that can scarcely be supported by their legs to "finishing" cattle in feed lots where they stand deep in their own manure and are nourished by corn for which their diges-

tive systems are not designed. And in every case, the system crowds these animals into narrow confines that not infrequently lead to brutal interactions among them and between them and their handlers.

Taking seriously Isaiah's eschatological yearning that "they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain" encourages us to think afresh about what is faithful response to these disorders in our world. For some of us it might mean reaching toward God's messianic reign for animals by reaching back to Genesis' widely disregarded but clearly stated claim that God first gave only plants for food (Genesis 1:29). For others it might mean joining with people like Temple Grandin who has employed her close knowledge of animals' behavior to make more humane the way they are processed for food.⁶ And for still others it might mean supporting farming operations like that of Polyface Farms in Virginia where Joel Salatin raises cows, pigs, and chickens in a manner that allows them to live according to their natural instincts while also sustaining the ecology of the farm on which they live.⁷

Another case in point that illustrates how our disordered confines stand in need of eschatological stewardship involves experimentation of animals. Such experimentation is often for medical purposes, but there is also experimentation that tests the effects of cosmetics. Complex ethical analysis may well come into play as we seek to stretch toward that eschatological day when hurt and destruction are no more, since much medical research shares that goal. Nonetheless we may be able to do considerably better simply by being aware of the ways animals have been used in research that enable our medicines and our cosmetics. For example, while there may not be more humane ways to produce Premarin than is typically the case, there certainly are alternative drugs not based on the abuse of pregnant mares.⁸

Similarly, while many countries, including the U.S., still allow animal testing for cosmetics, more than 500 brands are recognized as cruelty-free because the manufacturer refuses to conduct or commission new animal testing, to use new ingredients only when human safety can be determined without resorting to animal testing, and decline to sell cosmetic products in countries that require animal testing.⁹ Our eschatological stewardship yearning to prevent harm to animals by experimentation is a matter of discerning choices based on a knowledge about what products are and are not dependent on mistreatment of animals.

Yet another case in point further clarifies the shape of the disordered confines in which we are called to exercise our eschatological stewardship, that of using and abusing animals for financial gain and entertainment. Horse racing, rodeos, circuses, and some zoos and aquariums are all problematic. Despite the great pleasure we take when an American Pharoah wins the Triple Crown, there is a darker side to the enterprise. Whereas a hugely successful animal may be carefully tended and cared for, there are many "also rans" who may be valued only to the extent they can keep running, perversely earning fees not for winning, but simply for entering the race. Thus trainers are encouraged to enter them in races even when they are not "fit." Rodeos and circuses both generate entertainment for humans, but often at a frightful price to the well-being of the animals involved. And while zoos and aquariums can be places for species preservation and human education about the importance of other species, they can also become warehouses or prisons.

How to herald the messianic age for all creatures in the face of such "entertainment" options is a challenging task. But perhaps the most crucial place to start is

by asking ourselves whether we really want to be entertained by the abuse of other animals. By and large we have grown past taking enjoyment as human beings are thrown to lions. Now we should ask whether we really want to throw lions (or other animal species) to humans, all in the name of entertainment for many and financial profit for a few. Thereby we may come to see, for example, that pari-mutuel betting on horse racing is a problem not because of an abstract view about the evils of gambling, but because of a concrete recognition of how it can lead to the abuse of the horses. Whether we do or do not decide to participate in entertainments that feature animals, we owe it to Isaiah's messianic vision to be aware of what hurt and destruction may be involved.

Finally, the most far reaching example of the disordered confines in which we are called to eschatological stewardship has to do with species extinction. Here the problem is not a matter of this or that particular animal, but more consequentially about whole species. Species extinction is consequential because the loss of each species closes the particular evolutionary pathway it uniquely represents—forever.¹⁰ From a theological point of view, it reduces the complexity God has built into the unfolding universe by one, leaving God to draw the whole creation toward its fulfillment minus that particular resource. But of course in what is coming to be called the “Sixth Extinction” that may well rival the five great extinctions that have occurred over earth's history, countless species are being lost. Only this time it is not generated by an outside event like a meteor crashing into the earth. It is generated by us, as we change the composition of the atmosphere that in turn changes the climate and the chemistry of the oceans.¹¹

Eschatological stewardship here presses us beyond care for this sort of animal or that, to care for the earth itself. For unless we find ways to adapt and/or mitigate the effects of climate change, this Sixth Extinction will likely rival the previous five known to science. The earlier great extinctions occurred before humans were on the scene. God's unfolding universe has proceeded through them to the creation and calling of humanity to lead all things toward a new creation in which the vulnerable of all species are protected by the powerful, that is to a peaceable kingdom.

*The hope of peace shall be fulfilled
For all the earth shall know the Lord.*

Funny how beginning with something as innocent as the blessing of animals leads us to this place. But we know full well that Advent and Christmas is never an ending, but always a beginning anew. So we may begin with St. Francis' communion with other species as a friendly guide and continue with Isaiah's vision as a provocative prod—of a righteous king who creates a kingdom of peace among people *and* a peaceable kingdom among all creatures. Thus is set for us a path of eschatological stewardship responsive to the needs of our time and responsible to the God who will make all things new.

Notes

(Much of the material and all of the most poignant insights into the travail of animals included in the foregoing grow out of a teaching partnership with Dr. Carolyn Crowder, also from Black Mountain. While I am indebted to her for much, she is not responsible for the conclusions I have drawn, still less for the mistakes I will have inevitably made.)

1 Ryan Patrick McLaughlin, *Christian Theology and the Status of Animals* (Palgrave Macmillan, New

York, 2014), p. 109.

2 David L. Clough, *On Animals: Volume One Systematic Theology* (Bloomsbury T&T Clark, New York, 2012), p. 158.

3 Chris Smithers, "Origin of the Species," *Leave the Light On*, 2006.

4 McLaughlin, p. 110 .

5 Ibid., p. 113.

6 <http://www.grandin.com>

7 <http://www.polyfacefarms.com/story/>

8 <http://www.lcanimal.org/index.php/campaigns/other-issues/horses>; <http://www.humanesociety.org/news/magazines/2015/03-04/premarin.html>

9 <http://www.hsi.org/issues/becrueltyfree/facts/infographic/en/>

10 Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (Henry Holt and Company, New York, 2014), p. 321 .

11 Ibid., p. 2.