

Isaiah 11:1-9

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.

God walked in Eden's garden fair
such beauty there none could compare.
It soon became a place of shame;
there Adam's sin disowned God's name.
Kyrie eleison – Lord have mercy.

A favorite picture of my mind – a favorite dream of all the dreams of my soul: God walking in Eden's garden. A sadness following with the humans hiding from God in the garden. God calling out to the hiding humans. Where did you go? Why are you hiding? God knew. God knew. But, still, God calling.

A fearful picture of my mind – a worst nightmare of all the wild imaginations of my mind: Everyone seems to have a bear story. Charged by a bear. Encountering bears. And, if they do not have their own stories of bear encounters, they recall some of the chilling stories which have lodged themselves into the minds of many who live in this part of the world. The spooky stories told around the campfires in my youth, were obviously myths – I knew the kinds of creatures the scout masters told could not be true – but I would always oblige and lie awake much of the nights in those tents waiting for

those creatures rustling in the darkneses outside my tent to come bursting in to do their worst. Ah, but it was just my youthful imaginations. I finally outgrew those childhood fears. Then I moved here. Bears are real. Seems everyone I knew had a story to add to the growing catalog of such encounters. Sixteen years ago, upon coming to this part of the world, I had my desires to experience the incredible nature which surrounded us. I camped some. The old traditions of lying awake in my tent well into the night, straining my ears to hear even the slightest sounds from the farthest distances gave me ample time to reopen the catalog of stories I had heard from so many – bears passing by – and with their immensely powerful sense of smell along with their incredible appetites along with my being certain that I had left a pack of chewing gum in my tent somewhere – certain that that night would be the night that I would have opportunity to add my story to the folklore of bear encounters – that is, if I actually survived the night. Listening and listening. Every sound heard and analyzed and remembered. Fear.

Then, a return to the fondest faith dream. God walking in Eden's garden. The humans were afraid and hid themselves. Vulnerable. Frightened. How odd. For them, was God akin to the bear-fears which made my nights in the tents seem so frightfully long?

The poetic vision of God walking in Eden's garden fair visits the reader of the sacred pages of scripture again and again. Not the same story, but yet, the same story – the same vision – the same dream:

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.

A return to the Garden of Eden. Someday. Someday. And the Adam who disobeyed?

It is no coincidence that Saint Paul wrote of Jesus the Christ being the Second Adam.

(First Corinthians 15) Another chance. In Christ, another chance.

Some years ago, a family from Belarus in the former Soviet Union lived with us. Refugees. He, a graduate of Moscow's version of MIT in physics, had too independent of a mind to join the Communist Party. So, he was not allowed to pursue a career in physics. He was given a job overseeing the printing machines which produced wall paper. Outspoken enough that fears of the threats against his family brought them to us as refugees. He spoke of his grandfather being arrested, placed in a hard labor prison camp, and worked to death. He said that when going to bed at night, a person could not allow himself or herself to let his or her mind wander – to let his or her mind float into any kind of semi-dreamy thoughts – the fear was that they might talk in their sleep and say something for which he or she may have to pay dearly for. It was not worth it to dream. Dreams were dangerous. Dreams were to be feared. Dreams left one very insecure that the deepest and hidden thoughts of the day might have been exposed by words spoken in the night – words spoken from the sleep – words spoken from a dream. Dreams were to be feared.

Many of you know that I have had my battles with depression. During some seasons of my life, the depression was almost crippling – a dark cloud covering me for reasons which were beyond my understanding. In the midst of those times, dreams were difficult, waking in the morning having been tormented by the demons of the night. Day dreams – the mind-wanderings during wakefulness – were reduced to a series of

dead-ends. I had no fears of saying something I might have regretted during my sleep. Talking in my sleep was not my fear. Rather, my fear was that to allow myself the pleasure of my mind following my imaginations would only mean that I would be let down once the harsh grip of reality reached through and squeezed the life out of my thoughts. In the midst of depression, dreams were not an escape – they only added to the torment. But, thank God for the friends who broke through the darkness which surrounded me, and who helped guide me through the stigmas of depression and who encouraged me have the courage to seek the medical help I desperately needed.

Dreams which visit us in sleep. Dreams which we chase while awake. To lose the dream is to break the soul. To fear the dream is to cripple the soul.

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Of course it is impossible. Of course it is only a fantasy. Of course the rationality of our minds cannot take such a dream seriously. Another oracle of the prophetic imagination – another gift from the inspired pens of the prophets of ancient days: on a collision course between the biblical literalists and the scientific rationalists. To think these things which Isaiah wrote as being a literal reality would only confirm to those around us that we had literally lost our minds. Is the literal coming of such a reality the point? Or, is the dreaming itself the point?

The prophetic longing for the presence of God in a complete unity with humanity kept calling. They knew that the longing for humanity's oneness with God was that which would complete the lost and restless and hurt and struggling soul. But throughout

the ages, to fully grasp such a reality and confine them to words would always be elusive. God is so beyond our ability to rationally understand, that the spiritually wise throughout the ages have known to hold and cradle such a union of God and humanity as a mystery – a dream beyond explanation.

As I rest my head on my pillow at the end of a long day, my mind again wanders. I again enjoy the thoughts which flow, the ponderings, the memories, the hopes – flowing from one thing to another – but often with some guidance from my mind. But then that mysterious moment comes and I move into the world of dreams – the dreams which come when sleep finally covers my resting body. It is then that it seems that I am no longer in control of what happens in my mind. It could take me anywhere. It could take me into places which are baffling. It could take me into the incredible. Then I wake. For a few moments pondering where my dreams have taken me, pondering for only a few moments as the dream fades away. Gone. Sometimes I say goodbye to a dream as it is fading away. I thank the dream for the visit – for the joy it brought to me – and hoping that if there was anything to learn or savor from the dream, that at least that would stay with me. It seems I am not in control once the dreams visit. Again, the mystery. To walk with God is to allow God to be in control – to guide the soul down the paths of the mysteries of reality, and the mysteries beyond reality. But so much of my walking with God is more like the dreams of the day – the dreams of my wakefulness – where I try to guide the dream – where I choose the topic – where I try to take it where I want it to go. But then the mantle of sleep covers me, and it is turned around. The dream then guides me.

God walking in a garden, calling to me. Calling to you. But I hide. You hide. We do not like to be vulnerable. But God keeps calling. A strange dream. The opposites together. The impossible taking place:

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.

God calling for us to enter into the dream. God calling for us to enter the mystery. To walk with God may not make any sense – the impossible cannot really happen. But when God calls to us in the garden, we are to come out of hiding – ready to be guided into the impossible.

Advent and Christmas is about stepping into that mystery. Millions of pages of theology and biblical interpretation cannot even come close. How can one really grasp such a mystery? The refugee who lived with us could not allow himself to dream. In the darkest times of my depression, I did not have the will to dream. But God calls to us. God beckons for us to enter into the dream.

We say that Advent is the season of the expectant hope for the coming of the Christ – the coming of the Messiah. But perhaps Advent really is the season of God's expectant hope for us to enter into the presence of God. It is time to enter into the mystery. Amen.