

## **The Polished Arrow II**

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### **The “Crucial” Moment**

The hunter waits... He finds it hard to do, because he is trying to control the hunger that is gnawing at his body. His family is hungry too and it is uncertain whether he will succeed in providing them with meat they need to survive. But he has been paying close attention to the movement of the herds and if he has read the signs correctly and if he is patient, his prey will enter the clearing soon. And when the time comes, he will have one shot. It will have to be the right shot, or the prey will be gone.

He reaches into his quiver and chooses an arrow. Not just any arrow. Every one of his arrows has been crafted by his own hands and each one flies in its own way as it leaves his bow. Each is a prized possession for its own reasons. One is sturdy thick and powerful. Another is very quiet and flies with a whisper. Yet another is very slender and light. No-one would shoot a bird with the same arrow needed to take down a buck.

Some of the hunter's arrows are more honed and polished than others, having been used many times. None are free of imperfections. There is one that he particularly loves. It limps through the air in a wobbly way, but has never failed him. The arrow he is now fastening to his bow is one that he believes will bring him success.

But in order for the hunter to succeed everything will have to come together at the right moment. In his mind's eye, he can see the buck stepping into the clearing. There will be a moment of maximum exposure, in which to let the arrow fly. And in that moment, there can be no hesitation. The hand that releases the arrow will have to be the calm and steady hand of a person who's mind is clear and unafraid.

### **God's "Arrows"**

I love this image that comes to us from today's Old Testament Reading, in which Isaiah calls himself a "polished arrow in God's quiver." I like it because, when we pair it with the events following Jesus's baptism, it helps us think about Jesus in a revealing way. It helps us think about his relationship with God and how he might have gone about his task of bringing sight to the blind and freedom the captive.

And as people who seek to model our lives on his, the idea of being like a "polished arrow in God's quiver" can help us think about how we operate, and how we see our own relationships with God.

### **Charged with Purpose**

One thing to consider right away is that an arrow is an object charged with purpose. No one creates arrows in order to leave them lying around.

They are designed to be put into action; strung to a bow and sent forth, on the journey to an intended target/goal. And they are propelled forward by the energy and purpose that has been transferred to them by the one who stands behind the bow. Apart from this, their existence make no sense.

There is also something very precise about an arrow. It is not something you can use to blanket a whole area. You can only shoot one arrow at a time and hit one spot and you may not have time for a second shot. So an arrow is a precision tool that has to be loosed carefully and selectively or it will fail to achieve its purpose.

Maybe this says something about who we are as God's creatures. That God didn't create any of us with the ability to succeed in everything or to be everything for everybody. None of us can save the entire world or expect to be effective by trying to blanket the whole world with our intentions. But with the right care, and with a well placed shot, God can effectively send forth from his bow, a chosen one among us, to vanquish a particular beast.

You could think of Jesus's life as being purposeful in this way, because when we enter Lent we will see that his journey flies like an arrow

toward the center of power in Jerusalem and the cross. It is a very targeted and intentional journey, aimed at the heart of human sin.

Perhaps we can think of Mother Teresa in a similar way. When asked whether she was overwhelmed by the suffering and poverty in Calcutta, where she lived and worked, she replied that “not all of us can do great things, but we can do small things with great love.” And so her love was aimed like an arrow at bringing comfort to whoever was before her in the moment.

And of course we are reminded of the journey through life of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., whose birthday we celebrate this weekend. That having been forged and honed in the segregated South, God chose him to be an arrow, aimed at the heart of the sin of racism that distorts our land.

### **The Hunter**

The idea of being God’s arrows provides us with good food for thought. But there is still more nourishment we can draw from it, if we turn around and put ourselves in the shoes of the hunter armed with whatever arrows we have in our own quivers. Because just as Jesus was sent forth to slay the sins of the world so have we been sent forth to do likewise.

As the hunter, we have to rely on our faith in God for the patience and steady hand we need in order to craft our arrows, perfect our marksmanship and then loose them from our bows, in a way that will take them to the intended target. We must be like the young David, who lacking armor, and armed only with his experience as a shepherd his faith and a slingshot, felled the mighty Goliath with one shot to his forehead.

### **A translation into Non-Violent Action**

I'm conscious that all this imagery is tremendously violent. And so I think it is important to stop here to suggest that there has to be a translation of these violent deeds of violence into non-violent terms. It is a necessary because the one we serve is not the God of War, but the Prince of Peace; the one whom John the Baptist called the "Lamb of God."

It is not a difficult translation to make. The arrows we are talking about need not be real arrows sent forth from real bows. They can as easily be understood as words that leave our mouths or the looks we give each other or the arrangements we make. All that is needed for us to recognize these things as arrows, is to see that they are tipped with a purpose and designed to be sent to a target.

And these arrows don't need not be for literally slaying living creatures or people. The arrows we loose can be sent forth in the service of peace; aimed at slaying hatred and injustice, moral blindness, cruelty, hunger – at any of the evils that possess human hearts and oppress God's children. In one way or another the purpose of each arrow fired by those who follow the Lamb of God is the same; to sever the chains that bind the world to the power of death.

### **Well Placed Arrows**

When I think of what this means for us as individuals, it reminds me of those people in my life who have impacted me most. I'm not usually deeply moved by long speeches or by an overwhelming torrent of words. People dedicated to being overwhelmingly impressive, don't impress me much.

The things that really impress me are often quite subtle – a well timed observation at the right moment. In fact, when I look back on my life, I don't remember a whole lot with clarity. But I do remember what lay at the heart of a few key moments that come back over and over again as the touchstones that inspire and keep me going; those moments when I was struck by an arrow of truth.

When I was a young man, I often enjoyed making fun of people behind their backs. And one of the people I enjoyed ridiculing was my sister's

friend, Vivien. It got back to her, and one day while walking down the street, I ran into her. I gave her a friendly greeting, gracious fellow that I believed myself to be, fully expecting a friendly greeting in return. Well, she had more backbone than I had ever imagined. And she let me have it, right there in front of all the passers by. She called me a jerk and did it in a very clear and accurate way, that left me speechless. I knew that every word she had said was true. Then she told me that our next encounter would need to include my apology and walked off.

I'm sure that it was not that big a scene to the passersby. But for me it was a powerful moment that comes back to me over and over again, whenever I find myself succumbing to the temptation to talk about someone in their absence. It was like an arrow loosed by God at the perfect moment into my heart, an arrow that caught me at the height of my arrogance. And it was Vivien who let it fly.

It is not surprising that a lot of the stories of Jesus have this quality. They highlight his remarkable ability to take notice of the smallest details of what is going on around him and to draw the right conclusions. Then at some perfect moment he looses an arrow that opens the eyes of those around him in a way that frees them from their delusions.

## **The Attentive Parent**

I think that we can also describe good parenting in this way. Anyone who has raised children knows that saying and doing the right thing at the right time is not easy. Children change so quickly that what will make sense to them in one moment will be unintelligible to them 6 months later. And so, what they need to hear and when they should hear it presents a sort of a moving target.

We know that there are whole periods when, like a tooth that is not ready to be pulled, they are not ready to hear things that will be of great importance to their lives. And good parenting involves not yanking those teeth before they are ready to come out. It involves knowing that the time will come when they can be gently plucked like apples that are ripe for picking.

## **A Patient Economy of Action**

I think that these considerations are also important for us as a congregation. That we ought to use the arrows in our quivers in a timely way and that when we let them fly, it should be with a clear purpose.

It seems to me to be another way of saying that we wait on and respond to God's promptings with careful attention. And this involves watching

for the coming together of the right forces at the right moment and acting in a way that both convicts and frees our hearts to live in truth and in peace. This is actually what is meant by the word “crux” which we find in the words crucifixion, crucial and cross, all referring to the decisive act which is at the center of our existence as Christians.

The way we read the signs and the actions we choose to take are “crucial” because, if our arrows miss their mark, the family goes hungry. And if we are faithful and attentive, God will guide us to his intended goal.