

Two-year-old son Jack leans on his father's knee. His rumpled baseball jersey bears a fresh spaghetti sauce stain from that night's dinner. *"Daddy, tell me a bunny story."*

Rob tears his gaze away from the computer screen. *"What was that, son?"* asks Rob. *"Tell me a bunny story,"* says Jack. *"One with a truck in it."* Rob sighs as his glance swings back to the screen. His paper is due in two days. His professor tries to be sympathetic, but there are only so many times she'll let her students stretch a deadline. On the other hand, there's only so much time before his little boy grows up and stops listening to his dad's stories.

"A bunny story?" asks Rob. The little blond head bobs happily. *"With a truck in it."* "With a truck in it," repeats Rob. "Okay, climb up here." And placing Jack on his knee, Rob begins spinning a tale about a mischievous bunny who gets into all kinds of trouble while zipping around in his great, big truck.

Every great story has to have an obstacle or a villain. And to keep from overtaxing his imagination, **Rob uses the same stock villain in every bunny story—THE BAD-OLD WOLF.** And so, Rob, begins introducing the wolf to this tale as well. *"No wolf, Daddy!"* Jack insists. *"No wolf!"* How can you have an adventure story without a wolf?

"Jack, how does the Bunny story always end? 'And the Bunny lived happily ever after,' right? I know the end of the story. The Bunny's going to be just fine." Jack covers his father's mouth, and in the sternest manner a toddler can manage, he repeats, **"No wolf!"** Not wanting to create strife just before bedtime, Rob sighs and replies, *"Okay, Jack. It's okay. No wolf."*

"Already," says Robin Meyers, the author of this powerful story, "at the age of two, the little boy understands evil. If he had not already been introduced to evil, he would not have feared the wolf. But since he perceives its destructive nature, he thinks nothing of editing the world to make evil disappear."

That would be nice, wouldn't it? Editing the world to make evil disappear. Some of you probably saw the Adam Sandler motion picture, "Click," in which he used a television remote to alter not only television, but also real life. **What a nice gift for the first Sunday in Advent. A world without EVIL. A world with no BIG, BAD WOLF.**

Biblical faith acknowledges the reality of evil. That's the truth of the matter. *The Bible is candid. There is no place on this earth that evil and suffering and heartbreak cannot access.*

Americans were stunned when Islamic terrorists struck on 9-11. We hadn't stared evil in the face like that before. Oh, sure, we knew there were demented individuals like Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols. Oklahoma City should have prepared us. But it didn't. We thought it was a freak, an anomaly. Who could imagine that a small group of committed terrorists could wreak such violence, such destruction as occurred on September 11, 2001? "No wolf! No wolf!" *They called it "the day that changed the world."* At least, it was a reminder to us that evil is very real.

We're never prepared, are we? Either on a societal level or a personal one FOR THE COMING OF THE WOLF. A diagnosis of cancer or Alzheimer's. An automobile accident or a fire. The failure of a company. A son or daughter addicted to drugs. **"No wolf! No wolf!"** And there suddenly in the room with us is this awful monster from which we cannot escape.

We turn to scripture for help and reassurance. And we come to these words from Luke 21: *"There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. At that time, they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*

Biblical faith acknowledges the reality of EVIL IN OUR LIFE. Most scholars classify this text with Jesus' apocalyptic teachings about the last days of earth's existence. That is why we find this imagery at the beginning of Advent. **Advent is the celebration of Jesus' coming into the world.** The second advent is when he will return in

power and glory. When will that be? No one knows. But one thing is clear: **Before it happens there will be many trials and tribulations: "nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. Men will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world . . ." This can be a very cruel world, and we are never prepared.**

In November 1963, seventeen-year-old Laura Welch borrowed the family car to attend a party with some friends. A few hours later, the Welches received the kind of telephone call every parent dreads: staff from a local hospital were calling to tell them that Laura had been in an accident. She never saw the stop sign, so she drove through the intersection at normal speed, plowing through a car that had the right-of-way. Laura suffered only bruises. The driver of the other car, a track star at the local high school and a good friend of Laura's, died on impact.

Laura would later say that this tragedy shaped her perspective on life at a young age. She gained compassion and wisdom from it. Friends and family alike marvel at her "serenity and strength. " You also have grown to respect her qualities as an adult. ***For Laura Welch went on to become Laura Bush, wife of the President of the United States.***

This can be a very cruel world. And no one's exempt. Wealth can't exempt us. Position can't exempt us. Even a loving family cannot exempt us. Saints and sinners alike eventually have to acknowledge that a wolf is loose in our world--a wolf that brings heartache and suffering, even to the best of people.

Why this is so, we do not know. Why does God allow suffering? We don't know. Some think it is because that is the only way God can make us what God means for us to be. This is the only way God can make us strong.

Earl Woods, who is now dead, is the father of golf great Tiger Woods. Tiger will tell you that he is what he is today as a golfer because of his Dad.

By his own admission, Earl Woods used some unorthodox methods to train his son for success. When Tiger was just a small child, Earl would try to distract him as he went about playing golf by throwing golf balls at him, yelling at him, or getting in the way of his putt. **He deliberately disturbed Tiger's concentration.** Young Tiger soon learned to focus so intently on each shot that he stopped noticing his father's presence on the course.

Is that why God, OUR FATHER allows adversity in our world? To help us develop into SPIRITUAL GREATS. As we fight life's challenges, we do mature, it is true. Is this why God does not make our lives easier?

Writer Robert C. Shannon notes that in 1938 a hurricane threatened the New England coast. People feared that the railroad bridge at White River Junction would be destroyed. The danger was averted when some thoughtful person backed a line of loaded freight cars onto the bridge. The bridge withstood the force of the winds because of the weight that it bore. ***"The weight of your responsibilities may rest heavily upon you,"*** says Robert Shannon, ***"but that weight may be the very thing that keeps you from being swept away by the storm of sin."***

Is that it? IS THAT WHY GOD ALLOWS THE "WOLF" TO RUN FREE...because ultimately it makes us strong enough to bear the heaviest burden?

That may be as good an explanation as any of the presence of evil in the world. But still, some of us may feel that God has overdone it. This can be a very cruel world. Sometimes we are left sobbing, **"No wolf! No wolf!"** ***But the wolf is there. The destruction is enormous, the pain overwhelming.***

In this passage, Luke uses words like "anguish," "faint from terror," "apprehensive," and he describes a world shaken to its foundations. But then we read these words: ***"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."*** What a powerful message for troubling times. It makes no difference whether we are talking about the end of time or the end of next week, the message is the same--stand up, lift up your head, your redemption is drawing near.

This is the ultimate Advent message: OUR REDEMPTION IS NEAR. No matter how heavy the burden, how stark the situation, how discouraging the dilemma, we can make it. We can endure. We can conquer.

Why? Because Jesus Christ has come into our world.

Sometime back there was a TV drama. It was about a nurse, a single mom. Her husband had left her with three children, twin girls about twelve years old, and a boy sixteen. Her Dad was in a nursing home in another city. He had broken his hip and wanted her to come visit him. She didn't have the money, or the time. Still, she felt the guilt.

She had contracted the flu at Thanksgiving, but had not really stopped to get over it. Now she feels lousy, tired and worn out.

Then one evening, she discovers drugs in her son's bedroom and there's a terrible fight. She cries miserably through the night. The next day at work is a total disaster. She has a confrontation with another nurse and loses her composure with an irritable patient. Then one of her favorite patients dies. While she was still processing that sad event, she bumped into an orderly, spilling a meal tray. She walks home with a feeling of despair.

On the way, she passes an old, brownstone church. Inside she can hear carols being sung. Something pulls her inside. She sits in the back. There she sees a typical children's re-enactment of the nativity scene, complete with makeshift robes, a manger, Mary and Joseph, and the baby.

But there's something different about the baby in this manger. It's not a doll. It's a real baby. And it's doing what real babies do--trying to create havoc. She sees the baby Jesus raise its hand and try to pull Mary's nose. Then it starts getting fussy. Finally, it begins to cry. Not a gentle cry, but a full-throated scream. Nobody can hear the boy reading at the lectern. A woman leaves her pew and takes the baby in her arms. It has little effect. The congregation sings "Silent Night" as the baby with the strongest set of lungs in the county is taken noisily from the sanctuary.

The service is over and somehow the weary nurse now feels energized. ***"It was a real baby,"*** the nurse marvels to herself. ***"Jesus was a real baby. It was not just a story. He cried and fussed and messed. He caused his mother anguish. He was one of us, just like us." Then she thinks to herself, "God really cares about us. God really cares about real life."*** She becomes radiant at the thought. She buttons her coat and steps from the church into the cold streets. **She smiles at strangers. Something in her has changed.**

All that, because suddenly she realized Jesus was real. Jesus is real, my friend. Our redemption is at hand. I don't know what you are going through right now. But, whatever it is, Christ can help you THROUGH IT. The Bible is quite realistic: ***in this world there are trials and tribulations, but be of good cheer.*** There is one who has overcome the world. **AS FOR THE "WOLF," here is what Isaiah prophesied:**

The Prophet Isaiah tells us..." ***The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them.***" (Isaiah 11:6)

I don't remember if there is a bunny in the prophecy or not. That is not important, just remember when trouble comes: ***"When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near."***

AND WHEN IT HAPPENS, YOU WANT TO BE READY!!

Amen.