

An Advent Meditation on Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow*

Author: Stephen Oster (This article is an unedited and unmodified reprint of the author's 2024 Advent meditation written for Voyageurs Fieldsport – a business that provides guided fly-fishing in the Adirondacks of New York and the Catocotin region of Maryland, and soon guided fly-fishing and deerstalking in the United Kingdom. As such, it is strongly recommended to read it at <https://voyageursfieldsport.com/advent-2024-les-chasseurs-dans-la-neige/>, using either a desktop, a laptop, or a tablet to access (using the hyperlink embedded in paragraph 7 of the article) and take full advantage of the high-resolution file of *The Hunters in the Snow*.)



Language as Prologue

I sense that I might be anglicizing the capitalization protocol as I render in French the title of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's painting, *The Hunters in the Snow*. If only I was stronger in this category (Mme Wilson, wherever you are: Étienne regrets being such a poor student of yours back in the day.). Anyhow, living in the Adirondack region for as long as I have, I've kept my French iron in the fire over the years by initiating conversations with North-of-the-Border folks on holiday in the Adirondacks and thereabouts, always leading off with something like "Est-ce que vous quebecois?" And for their part, they recognize I'm a piker when it comes to their language and go easy.

I wasn't so lucky, though, in July 2023 when I crossed paths in the southern Adirondacks with this woman who approached me to ask where she might park her auto (We were at a New York State public fishing area.). I knew right away she was francophone, but that she also was not Quebecois because her accent was... Well, this is my way of describing the difference between Metropolitan and Quebecois accents. I liken them to Scotch whiskies. The former is akin to a Speyside single malt: honeyed, balanced, and elegant. If necessary, pour yourself a dram of *The Macallan* to get the idea. In contrast, the latter is akin to an Islay single malt: smoky and heavy. Think *Laphroaig*.

Either way, I deviated from my usual custom by saying, "Est-ce que vous parlez français?" Geez, I have to break here from the narrative to relate the fact that auto-correct keeps rendering 'Est-ce que' as 'Eat-ce Sue'. It's the world we live in.

But back on-track, this francophone lady was so delighted by my overture that she assumed the most. And did I pay for it. It was as if I had initiated a spontaneous discharge of high-voltage electricity in the form of a kah-zillion kilowatts of French. I quickly then waived my arms in consternation and switched to English to make the point that I was away fly-fishing an English chalkstream when the Holy Spirit descended upon Jerusalem at Pentecost and thus I never received the gift of tongues. My diversion worked and she laughed.

Hopefully though, I'll have my act together by next November when I'll likely be in the Ardennes of Belgium hunting wild boar followed by more of the same in *Alsace, France*, where the Christmas tree was invented. The key is to travel late enough in the month to firstly avoid impinging on my Autumn shoulder season as a fly-fishing guide in Maryland and secondly to experience Alsatian Christmas markets (which begin opening around the 19th), but early enough that I'll be stateside by Thanksgiving.

Yet just as Advent is to Christmastide, brushing-up on French is prologue to my time afield in the land of the Christmas tree. For I believe it's important to converse in the native language as best as I can as a show of respect (When in Rome...). And besides, I desire to hunt as a peer, not as the dumb one reliant on others. Although come to think of it, I believe Alsatians speak German just as well (*O Tannenbaum*). Or don't they? No matter, it's only something to fight over. Besides, I've a painting to expound upon.

La Chasse dans le Tableau

Pieter Bruegel the Elder's (c. 1527 – 1569) *The Hunters in the Snow* is a favorite of mine and I believe you know why. Although my affinity runs deeper than you probably think. Consequently, hereon please refer to the highest resolution file associated with the [Wikipedia article, *Hunters in the Snow*](#), keeping the additional browser window open throughout the following analysis, because... Because I love the painting so much that I want you to be smitten by it in equal measure.

Beginning therefore with the obvious, yes, this painting is superficially about *The Chase*. Now, there are two easy to see hunting vignettes in the scene. The most apparent is the three men with their dogs.

The other is the bird trap down the hill almost in the center. But there's a third. Look closely at the berm to the lee of the second mill pond. Do you see him? There you have it: A hunter using a firearm, or what I'll call a *Saint Hubert's Candle* – a new sobriquet for that most common of *armes de chasse*.

The Homily

In truth, Bruegel only uses hunting as a vehicle to communicate a reality far more profound, and that is what really intrigues me. Take my word, *The Hunters in the Snow* is one interesting painting. We've already discovered its remarkable detail. There's also its overcast, atmospheric perspective and steely color palette. It exudes Winter. We feel the air, frigid and heavy, making the scene perfect for all things Advent – a penitential season that is cosmic in scope! But getting closer to the heart of the matter, *The Hunters in the Snow* ties a principal theme of the Triduum of All Saints, which is death, to that of Advent, which is the Second Coming of Jesus Christ when all the Faithful – the Church militant, penitent, and triumphant – are raised victorious.

What I'm driving at is that what's absolutely riveting about Bruegel's masterpiece is its message, built upon a key lesson of *The Chase*: Life is contingent, but it is also purposeful and culminates in either reward or retribution. Now, Pieter Bruegel the Elder focuses on the first of the two, implicitly admonishing the viewer to hold fast. This life is a test, after all, one that the individual must pass in order to enjoy the Life Everlasting with our Lord, Jesus Christ.²

I mean simply consider our weary trio of hunters. Right away, they're probably being tempted to sulk and envy others. For rabbit tracks lead tauntingly on in front of them as they trudge past an inn that sports a prophetic sign: "This is the Golden Hart," it says under the image of a kneeling Saint Hubert, patron of hunters.^{3,4} The sign, though, is broken.⁵

What Bruegel suggests is that these hunters did everything right, even spiritually. Yet, they have only salt for their wounds to show for it, and we can imagine a dark voice to them whispering, "That's what you get for honoring game laws and not poaching." Still, they remain bound by the Code of Saint Hubert, which entails conducting oneself lawfully, and such a day afield as the one they've had is to be expected because this life is purgatorial by nature. Purgatory, in the final analysis, is not a place, but a state of existence that builds character fit for the Almighty and that extends to even the here and now. And the reality is that while honoring game laws and not poaching when the hunt is easy has value, it hardly makes you morally stronger. No, it's the fruitless days afield that build you.

I do very well for myself with rod or gun in hand, but damn it, I'm in Purgatory! And I hate it. And yet I know it's better to get it over with sooner rather than later. Therefore, in this life, it is. And I'll be fine as long as I have fieldsports to keep my powder dry. Although that's enough of the personally revelatory for the time being, because there's even more to the message of *The Hunters in the Snow* to elucidate.

An additional point that Bruegel implicitly makes – one that is thoroughly Advent in character and echoed by the painting's atmospheric perspective – is that there's a spiritual war on of cosmic proportion and the battle lines are drawn. Unfortunately, wars are also messy affairs. Those battle lines extend not only outside of us, but even within. For like the prophetic sign of Saint Hubert kneeling before the Golden *Hart*, the human *heart* is broken, too, but morally so.⁶ Therefore, don't for once think you're above it because of church affiliation or family history. All you need is to read what Saint Paul the Apostle has to say about himself in his epistle to the Church in Rome (*Romans Chapter 7, verses 15 to 19, inclusive*). If he struggled, then odds are you're in the thick of it just as much if not more.

So, it's a hell of a fight we're in and we're no different than our weary trio of hunters. Although I'll grant

we're probably not being tempted to sulk and envy by something as small as rabbit tracks. Still, there are all sorts of moral shortcomings that put a human being at cross purposes with the Throne of Heaven – the very entity for which, as the *imago Dei*, he's meant, hence the need for purgation.

Interestingly, there's substantial overlap between the doctrine of Purgatory and the Genevan (a.k.a. Calvinistic) understanding of Sanctification.^{7,8} Imagine that, Northern Ireland. Catholics and Presbyterians: A match made in Heaven. But either way, what matters is that we actively remove (synergistically with the Holy Spirit) our character defects; that we renounce sin, detaching from it, and draw near to God – confessing The Faith and keeping the Commandments – through it all, confident that our trials and tribulations in this life are neither accidental (even when they are just that, materially speaking) nor will they last, and that everything resolves properly for The Faithful.

Now as an aside, if you've ever returned home from deer camp empty handed, you might strongly identify with our trio of hunters. Yet paradoxically, you might also realize retrospectively that you felt God's presence more keenly because of it. Perhaps it was heightened in the same way that, at Christmas Eve Vespers, the darkness of the nave amplifies the candlelight illuminating the chancel. And though the experience of returning home from deer camp empty handed revealed that you're not in control, you may have discovered that something great is.⁹ If so, then that's fieldsports for you – a theophany from start to finish. Of course, and I'll say it once again, draw near to God, remaining true to the end (*Semper fi*, my man!).

In closing, Advent is the mid-stage of the Arch-Season of Emmanuel, the centerpiece of which is Christmas and Epiphany.^{10,12,13,14} Now, each Christmas cycle reminds us of the passage of time, of friends and loved ones. Some we've lost and others will not live to see the next Christmas Day. Yet, life is a vapor, but that's neither the *in summa* re nor for that matter the full message of Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Hunters in the Snow*. It is a vapor, but God is ever present and rules over it. And because of the Incarnation, including the work of salvation accomplished thereby, we can join ourselves to that which is lasting – that is if we embrace it.

1. In my view, Advent trumps the competition. That other penitential season focuses on the personal. All fine, but I've a weakness for the epic and the objective. Advent checks the boxes.
2. I say this as a man who is sympathetic to the Genevan position on salvation, but who also believes the age-old soteriological dilemma (sovereignty of God vs. human agency) is akin to the conundrum we call 'light,' which is both wave and particle-like, and thus is best approached in a manner reminiscent of quantum mechanics rather than Newtonian physics.
3. A 'hart' is a red stag over 5-years of age.
4. In Christendom, the stag symbolized Jesus Christ and gold that of kingship. Therefore, the Golden Hart with Saint Hubert kneeling before it altogether represents the human being who acknowledges Christ's lordship, making it the rule of his life.
5. That the sign is broken, but not completely so, suggests both the fallenness and the moral nobility of humanity. As such, it points to the spiritual struggle that rages externally and internally.
6. Might our weary trio of hunters have an innate proclivity to break game laws and envy others? Yes, at least one of them probably does.
7. Walls, Jerry L. *Purgatory: The Logic of Total Transformation*, Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2012.
8. God loves a sanctified heart – something achieved either by a tour of duty in Purgatory or

by enduring years of Presbyterian sermons, the latter being the reason Scots excel at whisky.

9. "Men who live in the wilds know they are in the hands of God" – from the character Richard Hannay's monologue on the religiosity of his friend and South African dangerous game hunter, Peter Pienaar (In *Mr. Standfast* (1919) by [John Buchan](#)).

10. I am now taking a vanguard position and freely admit that the Church year, on this point, irritates me. For it's an example of cognitive dissonance inasmuch as it contravenes the natural doctrinal hierarchy, which starts with theology proper, meaning the being of God, and then proceeds with christology rather than soteriology, even if the latter is a key component of the former. Therefore, the Church year ought to be centered around the Incarnation (It is the greatest miracle,) rather than the Resurrection. For a man does what he is, not the other way around. And Jesus of Nazareth is no ordinary man. He is God incarnate, the second person of the Trinity. As such, our Lord, of course, rises from the grave.

11. Another way of looking at the custom of liturgically elevating the Resurrection above the Incarnation, wherein the gift of the Life Everlasting manifested by the former eclipses the Giver, is that, behaviorally speaking, it makes us like a man who's more absorbed by what he gets from his woman than who she is as a person even though the latter is the best part of the package (What he needs is a good wacking!).

12. My mind drifts to Martin Luther (1483 – 1546) when he pronounces, "Justification is the article by which the Church stands and falls." Firstly, I respect the German's sincerity. And yet, I believe he was also a bit neurotic and, as a consequence, was inordinately transfixed on the *mechanics* of salvation. In the final analysis, though, Luther's dead wrong with respect to his point. Not that I believe justification by faith falls short of being eminently important. It is a core principle. Even so, it remains subsidiary. What the Church claims with respect to who Jesus is: That is the article which, in the words of Simeon, leads to "the fall and rising of many." It truly is the absolute center of The Faith by which every other matter is settled (*Athanasius Contra Mundum*!).

13. That aside, the Arch-Season of Emmanuel begins with the *Feast of the Annunciation*, making the opening argument, emphasizing not only the Son (divinity) but also the Holy Spirit (divinity) and the Virgin Mary (humanity), which *Pentecost* expands upon (God is still with us. For we have the Paraclete, the third person of the Trinity.). Then afterwards, *Trinity Sunday* summates by focusing comprehensively on the being of God. Interestingly, the *Triduum of All Saints* is thematically joined to the Arch-Season inasmuch as humanity is the *imago Dei* in the general sense and yet mortality is a fundamental component of our being, which means The Church must reconcile the two sides that by degrees form an apparent contradiction – and doing so, it ultimately leads us back to the joy of man's desiring (Jesus!) who is the *imago Dei* in the particular sense. The heart of the Arch-Season of Emmanuel, though, is Christmas and Epiphany. Roman Catholics observe the latter only as a day when adhering to the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite, but stretch it to an Octave when the Extraordinary Form is in play. In contrast, their underachieving High Church Anglican brethren for once punch above their weight by observing it as a season that begins January 6th and ends February 2nd.

14. As I explain in *Épigramme de Lascaux and the Turning of Water Into Wine*, "Christmastide assumes Jesus' divinity while seeking to prove His humanity. Epiphanytide, though, turns it around. Now, Jesus' humanity is taken at face value and His divinity is established."