

# Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE  
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

## Story of the day:

### *The Winter's Tale*

by William Shakespeare

There once was a jealous king who had an old friend, and his friend came to visit. He stayed for nine months, and in the end the jealous king tried to poison him.

Remember that, next time you are at your friend's house and he starts looking at the clock.

That doesn't sound happy, does it? The jealous man's name is Leontes, and he is the king of Sicily. His friend is named Polixenes, and he is the king of Bohemia.

There is no such country now, but if you find the Czech Republic on a map, you will be close. So you see that Sicily is pretty far away, and since this was a time before airplanes, you won't be surprised to learn that they haven't seen each other since they were boys, growing up together.

You also won't be surprised to learn that the visit has lasted a long time. Polixenes has been in Sicily for almost nine months. He's eager to get back home, because he has a young son there, and of course all the business of being a king. His wife

has passed away, so we can imagine that he's sometimes a lonely man, too.

Men who miss their wives sometimes miss having a woman to talk to. That's how Polixenes felt, and that is why he has become a good friend of the queen of Sicily, Hermione. Try to imagine a woman who is frank and cheerful, who never thinks

any harm, because she supposes that everybody around her is as good as she is. Also imagine her as moving around with a little difficulty, because she's going to have a baby, and that baby is due any day now.

Polixenes says he has to leave right away, but Hermione doesn't want him to go so soon. She talks him into staying a

week or two longer, and he can't turn her down. He loves her in the right way, as the wife of his friend, whom he has always loved.

But her husband Leontes watches them out of the corner of his eye. He has been bitten by what Shakespeare called "the green-eyed monster," jealousy.

Well, Hermione asks a teasing question that any wife would ask a man who knew her husband before she did. What was he like when he was a boy?



*Come, I'll question you  
Of my lord's tricks and yours when you were  
boys.  
You were pretty lordings then?*

If you ask that question of a grown man, you'll see him smile a little and look far off into the distance, and yet there's something in him that says, you know, I'm still a boy. This is what Polixenes says:

*We were, fair queen,  
Two lads that thought there was no more behind  
But such a day tomorrow as today,  
And to be boy eternal.*

I don't know of any finer expression of what it is like to be a boy, and to have no sense of time, and no worry. The days come, the days go, but you are still a boy, and it will always be that way.

But that isn't so, and not just because our bodies change. When Adam fell into sin, so did we. We get into the habit of doing bad things, and that too grows with us as we grow. A child can't do all the bad things he'd want to do, because his body is too weak for it. Yet in a way, children are innocent too, or almost. Hermione is still teasing, just as you do when you are fond of someone, so she asks about the mischievous things the two of them did, and says she bets her husband was the bigger scamp: "Was not my lord / The verier wag o' th' two?" That's her way of saying to her husband Leontes, "I love you!" But Leontes isn't listening.

Polixenes replies, with a mild smile at their silliness. He says that if they had never left that boyhood they would have had nothing to fear:

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be that way."*

*We were as twinned lambs that did frisk in the  
sun  
And bleat the one at th' other. What we changed  
Was innocence for innocence; we knew not  
The doctrine of ill-doing, nor dreamed  
That any did. Had we pursued that life,  
And our weak spirits ne'er been higher reared  
With stronger blood, we should have answered  
heaven  
Boldly, "Not guilty!"*

Two boys, like two lambs baaing at each other – and they never knew that anybody in the world would really do evil. So if they had continued just like that, and then died, they'd have stepped up boldly to the judgment seat of heaven, and cried, "Not guilty!" Not guilty, that is, of any grave sin, after the guilt of original sin had been washed clean by baptism.

The teasing goes on – and Leontes retires farther and farther into his cold imagination. He leers at them. He sees everything inside out. His wife and his friend are innocent, but he is not. That is bad enough just as a feeling. What if it breaks into action? He's going to try to poison Polixenes, who manages to escape. Then he's going to put his wife on trial for unfaithfulness, with the punishment of death. She gives birth to a baby girl, and he orders his men to go sail far away and abandon it on the shore. It is his own daughter, though he says it is not his at all, but his friend's.

You may have heard of another play by Shakespeare, also about jealous rage, called *Othello*. That play is a tragedy, and the good and innocent wife is murdered. But that doesn't happen in *The Winter's Tale*. It isn't because King Leontes is a better man than Othello was. He isn't. It is because in *The Winter's Tale* Shakespeare shows how God is at work, saving us when we least deserve it or even think that we need to be saved. God will use human

beings to do his work: good and courageous people, a decent man sworn to do a bad thing, a couple of good-hearted and illiterate shepherds, and a rascal who sells ballads and picks pockets. He will also use that little baby girl whom Leontes disowned. She will return to him when neither he nor she knows that he is her father. And that is still not the heart of the play. Rising from the dead is – but I won't reveal any more!

One thing is true in the plays of Shakespeare, just as in the novels of Charles Dickens. Violence against a child will never go unpunished. Of all the playwrights of his time and place, Shakespeare was by far the one who echoed the Bible the most often, and the one who took most to heart the saying of Jesus, "Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." Whenever you find a child in one of his plays, pay close attention. It's often the good daughter who will save her troubled or persecuted or sinful father, or the mere boy upon whom the hopes of a kingdom will rest.

But you won't hear that in school. Why not? It's because teachers don't read the Bible anymore. School seems all about training young people to go for big money, a glamorous job, a name plate on your desk, and power. School is not about the wonder and innocence of a child. So we produce children who are *not like* those silly boys like lambs on the hillside, but more like the sneak that Leontes has become. We trade the wisdom of innocence for the guilt of the fool. Not a good trade, is it?



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**Anthony Esolen** is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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