Fifth Sunday in Lent

John 12:20-33

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 2-24-21

Over the many years I've been a student of theology and Scripture, I've often found myself thinking about and working with the image of the apple… that symbol from the first book of the Hebrew Scriptures that has long been synonymous with sin, with human willfulness and disobedience and alienation from God and from the creation God fashioned out of love…

Specifically I've worked with the symbol of the apple to see if it might have something interesting to say in the context of the Christian story… An exploration that has led me into a number of creative endeavors…

Among them, taking a large piece of red flannel, from which I cut a large apple… and then cutting the flannel apple further still into a myriad of pieces which I sewed onto a navy-blue background, transforming the apple pieces into rose petals, which when all sewn to the blue background became a rose, each petal outlined with yellow beadwork to indicate the light of Christ illuminating what once used to be the apple, but which had become a rose… **the rose, in Christian tradition, being a symbol of the presence of God…**

Another time I used the season of Advent to write a 25-verse poem, one five-line verse a day for 25 days, a few of which played with the idea of the manger being

Celloed with the breath of bees,

honey-warmed with sun

spun with apple sap

tapped from Adam's apple tree,

summered for eternity…

Summered for eternity

In that love-strung child

Bow drawn full and wild

Turning what was once defiled

Apple-sappled up-side-down.

Perhaps my favorite "apple venture" though was a Christmas sermon I wrote in which Adam came to the manger bearing a gift for the baby Jesus… that gift being an apple, the very symbol of Adam's shame…

The Christ child receiving that apple into his hands, into himself, into his heart, and then lifting it up in thanksgiving, breaking it open and using the **star** inside to become the Christmas star, the **seeds** to become an orchard, and the **fruit** of the apple to feed everyone gathered in the stable that night; animals and shepherds and wisemen and Holy Family and Adam alike…

Imagine… all the characters in the Christmas story receiving from the Christ child the very fruit that for eons had been deemed to be the symbol of "sin"…

All of which is to say that the apple has become for me both a symbol of sin **and** of "sin transformed"… a symbol of both death **and** life… a symbol of both brokenness, alienation and despair **and** of restoration, wholeness and joy… with the transformation, the life, the restoration and joy **actually coming by way of the taking in, the cutting apart, the breaking open, the dying to "apple-ness"** for the sake of that very apple rising into a fullness of life made known in the rose, the breath, the star, the orchard, the meal…

All of which, I now understand, has been an attempt on my part to work out for myself the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion, particularly as John the Gospel writer spoke of it in those challenging words we just heard read as Jesus said to Andrew and Philip and the crowds gathered round, "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. Very truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit… It is for this reason I have come to this hour… Now is the judgment of this world; now the ruler of this world will be driven out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth *(that is, on the cross)* will draw all people to myself."

"*Jesus said this,"* as John the Gospel writer tells his readers, "*to indicate the kind of death he was to die…"*

This text raises so many questions… like, "How can the hour of Jesus' **death** be the occasion of his **glorification**?" "How is the ruler of the world **driven out** by Jesus' crucifixion?" "How does his **death** bear much **fruit**?" "How can the cross be a symbol of both sin **and** of "sin transformed"… a symbol of both death **and** life… a symbol of both brokenness, alienation and despair **and** of restoration, wholeness and joy?"

When I go looking for answers to these questions, I find one story to be particularly helpful… A story about South Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation, told by writer and journalist Ian Frazier in his book *On the Res…* In the story he tells about an evening in the fall of 1988 when the Pine Ridge girls' basketball team was scheduled to play an away game in Lead, South Dakota. It was one of those times when the host gym was full of hostility against the "Indians." Home town fans waved food stamps, yelled fake Indian war cries and epithets like "squaw" and "gut-eater."

Usually, as Ian Frazier tells the story, the Pine Ridge girls made their appearance at basketball games according to height, led by the smallest seniors. But when they sensed the hostility in the room that night, and hesitated to face the crowd, a fourteen-year-old freshman named SuAnne offered to go first…

She walked out into the middle of the gymnasium, stood there for a long moment, as if gathering into herself the stories, the wisdom and the strength of her ancestors, and then she began to perform the Lakota shawl dance, bringing everyone in the room to utter silence… And when she had come to the end of the dance, she sang a song in Lakota – lifting her voice in a way, as Ian Frazier writes, "that was graceful and modest and show-offy all at the same time."

Her capacity for taking in the hostility of the crowd… for taking in the vitriol and the hatred, and giving back something so "other", something so true and deep and real, it broke open the closed hearts of those in attendance and transformed the moment fraught with animosity into a moment of redemptive beauty… bringing the crowd at the end of her performance to their feet with thanksgiving and cheering and applauding…

SuAnne's offering thereby exposing the ugly face of vengeance and violence first present in the room that night**, and rendering it devoid of power in the face of beauty, in the face of creativity and courage and love…**

Offering to all present in the gymnasium in Lead, South Dakota that night, and to all of us who hear the story SuAnne's response of love in the face of hatred… offering to all of us the possibility in any given moment of **dying** to a life bound by the hard constrictive shells of hatred, vitriol and payback, and of **rising** into a life of creative, improvisational and redemptive self-giving… a dying that bears fruit beyond our imagining…

Because look, here we are, almost thirty years after that night and thousands of miles away… here we are, recipients of the fruit SuAnne bore that night, with the seeds of her bold witness to love bursting open in our midst even here, even now…

Not so different perhaps, from the seeds still bursting open in memory of thousands of others who have worked for racial justice, economic justice, and dignity for all by choosing to meet violence and vitriol and hatred with acts of creative, redemptive improvisational, non-violent resistance… Martin Luther King Jr., John Lewis, Howard Thurman, Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa, Archbishop Oscar Romero among them…

Each of them, in their willingness to take in the hatred, the violence, and the injustice of their time and place, and to give back something totally other… something so deep and true and real… Each of them exposing the systems of injustice and dehumanization for what they are, and rendering them devoid of power in the face of love…

It is in this way that Jesus' death bears much fruit… It is in this way that the hour of his crucifixion becomes his glorification… It is in this way that the cross (the symbol of brokenness, alienation, despair, and death) becomes a symbol of restoration, wholeness, life and joy…

It is in this way… by way of Jesus' receiving, (taking in) all the hatred and violence and vitriol the world had to give… by his being broken open by it… by his choosing to respond not in the way of "payback" but in the way of creative, redemptive, improvisational love…

It is in this way that Jesus' death revealed the fullness of life John the Gospel-writer called "Zoe"…. Eternal life… life so full of love nothing can constrain or limit it, not ever death…

It is in this way that Jesus' death revealed most profoundly and deeply the presence and power of the God who from the beginning had spent God's self with wild abandon for the sake of the world God so loves… It is in this way that Jesus' death bore much fruit, because look, here we are, some 2,000 years later, still pondering the mystery of how this death + broke open for the world a whole new way of being…

A way of being that is a daily dying to the self-protective coverings of our hearts and a rising into the fullness of the orchard God longs for us to become…

(No wonder one theologian has said that trying to rid the world of Jesus is like blowing on the head of a dandelion gone to seed)….

Is it easy; this kind of life to which Jesus invites us? No… Will it lead to suffering? Sometimes… not because suffering is the goal, but because suffering is oftentimes the by-product of choosing the way of love and justice in a world where payback and vengeance are the modus operandi… But in the breaking open of the seed-covering around our hearts we will come to a fullness of life, a joy, we would not otherwise know…

A fullness of life in which we see that we too, like Adam, can bring the "apple of our sin," to *that love-strung child, who with bow drawn full and wild*, *turns what once was sore defiled* a*pple-sappled up-side-down.*

We too can each bring our own apple to Jesus… where it is received into the hand and the heart of God… And there, in the crucible of God's creative, redemptive, improvisational love, it is broken open and transformed into a rose, a star, a breath, a meal, an orchard, a

dance, an exquisitely beautiful melody made from the fears and the hostilities, the failures and the animosities of our own lives…

It is in the devastating beauty of such love, that we are invited to ponder a question this and every morning… This one…

If each of our lives is a grain of wheat, dare we die to those things that keep us closed up tight so we might rise into the light of this and every new day bearing fruit in the name of the one whose **self-giving is his glory**? Dare we dare to live a life so alive with love it bids us come and die?