Third Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 61:1-11 Psalm 126 John 1:6-8, 19-28

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church Dec. 13, 2020

Many of us no doubt, have been blessed over the years to see children tell the story of Christmas in the annual Christmas pageant, which is usually a **blend** of the birth narratives from Matthew and Luke, using the star and the Wise men from Matthew's Gospel and the shepherds and the choirs of angels from Luke's Gospel to create the full cast of characters. All of them gathered in adoration and awe, along with the stable animals around the Holy Family, with the baby Jesus at the center.

Mark of course has no birth narrative in his Gospel, giving his readers their first glimpse of Jesus as he's baptized by John the Baptist in the Jordan River…

And John's Gospel… Well neither is there a birth narrative included in that telling of the story, John beginning his version of the "Good News" with mysterious, cosmic, and poetic language that makes it impossible to differentiate between "God" and "Word" and "life" and "light" and the "one who was to bear that light to the world"… which, of course, for John-the-Gospel-writer was kind of the point…

The thing is, I have long wanted to write a Christmas pageant using the first chapter of John's Gospel as a guide. And as odd as it sounds, I've decided the idea has merit. Although it would be unlike any pageant anyone has ever seen…

For one thing, it would have only one character. Namely, John the Baptist. As for props, it would be simple…. There John would be, standing in front of a dark blue velvet curtain. On the curtain there would be hundreds of stars… maybe a full moon on the way down the curtain stage-left, and just the slightest hint of the first rays of sun on the bottom of the curtain, stage-right…

First John the Baptist would stand in silence while the organist played one verse of the hymn "Creator of the Stars of Night." When it was time for him to speak, he would begin, oddly enough, with the words from the first verse of Genesis, "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters…"

At first his voice would be strong. And you'd think he was going to keep on reciting Genesis with the confident resonance of James Earl Jones, when all of a sudden, he'd get all teary-eyed and confused, and start getting the words from Genesis mixed up with those from

the Gospel of John that say, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God…”

And then John the Baptist would start mumbling something about how this word became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth… About how this Word was a light shining in the darkness, and about how the darkness could not overcome it…

He’d stop for a moment, take a deep breath, and try to start again. But after a few failed attempts to get all the “God-stuff” and the “Word-stuff” and the “light-in-the-darkness stuff” straight, he would signal to the organist to play another verse of “Creator of the Stars of Night” while he struggled for the right words…

In the congregation a few feet would shuffle… Someone would cough. Some little kid in the third row would whisper loudly, “Where’s the stable and the shepherds, Mama? Where’s the baby Jesus?”

And then, as if remembering something he’d forgotten, John the Baptist would reach into his camel-hair robe and pull out a magnifying glass. He would hold it in front of the blue velvet curtain in such a way that it would catch those first rays of morning sun.

And he’d hold it just like that until the sun on the blue velvet curtain came up full… He’d hold it just like that until the place on the stage where the magnifying glass focused all that light from the sun caught fire. And just as the people in the front row started wondering if they should leave, he’d look them straight in the eye and he’d say…

The sun’s unbounded rays,

when found in the curve

of a convex glass,

will focus to a point

so rich in light

it turns to flame.

So too love,

immense and unmeasured,

when tethered

to a gesture

of sound or skin

will round to a point

so rich in relation

it burns with the fire

of Incarnation.

When everyone stared back at him with blank faces, he would say by way of explanation, "so too will the one who is coming tether the immense and unmeasured love of God to sound and skin; something that can be seen and heard and felt and known, focusing that love to a point of light so rich in relation it burns with the fire of incarnation…"

And when the boy in the third row asked again about the baby Jesus, and a few grown-ups in the congregation cleared their throats, John the Baptist would think for a minute… and then he'd hold up the magnifying glass as if he was looking through it to see what can't be seen with the naked eye… And then he'd clear his throat and sing the only other song in the Christmas pageant according to the Gospel of John; a song by Benjamin Britten called "The Birds," the lyrics of which read this way…

When Jesus Christ was four years old,

The angels brought him toys of gold

Which no man ever had bought or sold.

And yet with these he would not play,

He made him small foul out of clay,

And blessed them till they flew away.

Tu creasti Domine.

Jesus Christ thou child so wise,

Bless my hands and fill my eyes,

And bring me at last to Paradise…

Then John the Baptist would just stand there for a minute, his face shining like Moses' when the bush caught fire that one day eons before. **He'd say something about how the one who, like a magnifying glass, focuses the unbounded rays of God's presence to a point of light so rich in love, it turns to fire, is the very same one who, like a magnifying glass, helps us to**

see deeper than the eye can see… all the way to the place where birds, made out of *clay*, are so filled with God they fly away… (and sing of course).

Then he'd take a deep breath and say how it takes some preparation of the heart to see both the eminence and the imminence of such love, and how he was going down to the river to help folks get ready for the one who would show us how… and extending the invitation, "you all come now… you all come."

And then he'd walk stage-left, down the stairs, down the side aisle, and out of the room, handing to each person as he went by, a magnifying glass and a small clay bird, and saying as he went, "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son who is close to the Father's heart who has made him known… I leave you with these Christmas gifts to help you ponder this mystery…"

No wonder Christmas pageants don't use John's Gospel as a guide for telling the story of Jesus' coming among us as the light of the world… It's all so impossible to take in… to understand… And plus, how much less satisfying it would be to have a magnifying glass and a small clay bird on our coffee tables rather than a manger scene with all of the characters we love so well gathered around the Holy Family…

And yet this year, with the Corona-virus raging, and our social institutions coming apart at the seams, and long-entrenched systems of injustice screaming for attention, and so much division in our families and communities… This year, I think the magnifying glass and the little clay bird would make a very helpful "nativity scene," because you see, together they do what the whole of John's Gospel intends to do… Which is to help its readers to see and to bear witness to what Jesus reveals to the world about the God of all creation…

A revelation I can best understand by going by way of the gold-gilded image of the Mother Mary painted by the 14th century artist Stephano de Giovanni Sassetta… Because if you took a magnifying glass, and looked deep into the light emanating from the gold that permeates and surrounds the Madonna… if you looked through that glass deeper than the eye can see, all the way to the materials that make that golden glow seem almost inaccessible, almost divine… you would see that the gold the artist used was made of gold powder, red clay, calves' hooves, egg yolks produced by city hens, oils, minerals, old linen and marble dust…

You would see that the brilliant presence of the ineffable, the divine, is inexplicably bound together with the ordinary, tangible stuff of this earth… indeed, that the light of the Divine presence can't be seen or known without the stuff of city chickens and barns and old cloth and dust and minerals from deep inside the mountain…

This is what John-the-Gospel-writer hopes his readers will see when they read his Gospel, starting with those words of cosmic proportions and the testimony of John the Baptist

pointing to the coming of Jesus… He hopes they will see in Jesus both the one who bears God's ineffable light to the world and the one who directs our eyes downward for a closer view of God's deepest and truest presence… A presence found not in the angels' toys of gold, which no man ever had bought or sold. But rather in small foul made out of clay, blessed until they fly away…

A presence found in the stuff of city chickens and barns and old cloth and dust and minerals from deep inside the mountain…

A presence found whenever good news is brought to the oppressed… whenever the brokenhearted are cared for with compassion… whenever those held captive by injustice are set free…

A presence found even in the most God-forsaken of times and places +… like on a small island off the coast of Maine where in the midst of a virus ravaging an entire community, meals are delivered, and bread is baked, and care is extended, and lights are lit, and words of comfort are spoken, and love is shared…

A presence found even in our own lives as we come to see the brilliant presence of God's love inexplicably bound together with our longings and failures and fears and tears and regrets and hopes and dreams… Just as it says on the "Y" page of a book entitled "The ABC's of Christmas" where it says, "Y is for you, the reason for glory, 'cause if you look very close, you see you in the story."

This is the good news to which John-the-Gospel-writer **bears witness** as his John the Baptist **bears witness** to the light of Christ who comes to **bear witness** to the light of God that even now focuses to a point so rich in relation it burns with the love of incarnation…

Love made incarnate in this day, in this life, in this time so we can feel it and see it and hear it and sense its presence with us as close as the air we breathe… so we might bear witness to the light no darkness can overcome… So we too might be participants in the Christmas pageant according to the Gospel of John, along with John the Baptist… all of us carrying in our hands the magnifying glass and the small clay bird… all of us ready to give a defense for the hope that burns within us… all of us ready, like the small clay bird, even in the darkness of our world, to take wing and to sing…