Christmas Eve – St. Brendan –

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

December 24, 2020

I once saw a Nativity version of what's commonly known as a Russian nesting doll. The outermost doll, in which all the rest were "nested," was large, brightly decorated and very ornate, adorned with a painting of a cathedral bedecked with gold columns and arches. At the top of this doll, where the face would normally be, were the signs for "alpha" and "omega," indicating the infinite presence of God.

Inside the largest doll there were three more; one with the Mother Mary looking very queenly, bedecked with gold, and situated among the gilded columns of the cathedral… The next was Mary more simply portrayed, with a red heart on her chest… And then inside that more simple Mary, was the smallest of dolls, the baby Jesus.

So I got to thinking about this Nativity version of the Russian nesting doll, and decided that if we were to make a set of them using Luke's Gospel as a guide, there would be a different assortment of dolls, including one more inside the baby Jesus…

On the outermost doll there would be brightly painted stars and moon, sun and wind, ocean and mountains, lion and lamb, a thousand varieties of winged birds and iridescent fishes, and people of every land and culture… the whole of creation's wonders, complete with a garden in whose center grows a tree whose fruit is for the healing of the nations.

We know Luke would start with such a cosmic representation of Eden because his entire Gospel is an attempt to push at any and all efforts to restrict, qualify or quantify God's saving presence, beginning with the genealogy of Jesus' family line which opens in Luke's Gospel this way… "Jesus was the son of Joseph, the son of Eli, son of Matthat, son of Melchi, son of"….on and on and on… until at the very end the genealogy reaches back to the beginning with these four names… "Son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God…"

"Son of Adam, son of God"… Unlike the genealogy in Matthew's Gospel, which traces Jesus' family line back to Abraham, the father of the Jews, Luke hearkens back to the deeper time, the mythic time before any nation or any people could claim God as their own. That mythic time, when the Spirit of God breathed the Divine breath into fish and foul and Adam alike, claiming all of creation to be beloved by God, known by God, in harmony with God…

This would be Luke's outside nesting doll, followed by others that would depict God's covenantal relationship with a particular people far removed from all centers of power… a people entrusted with a vision of God known through steadfast love and mercy and through a passion for justice and well-being and wholeness for all of creation… a people whose vocation and meaning it would be to hold this vision and this passion up to all forms of Empire, all

systems of oppression, all manner of closed, tight, fearful things and to proclaim, "There is another way, a different way, a life-giving way… come and see…"

Which is why Luke's nesting dolls would also include the prophets, who spoke truth to power… and **inside** the prophets a small and faithful remnant of the People of Israel bearing witness over generations to God's radical and inclusive vision of *shalom,* of *peace…* and **inside** the faithful remnant, the little town of Bethlehem, situated at the edges of the Roman Empire in the particularity of the first century… and **inside** Bethlehem a stable situated at the edge of the city… and **inside** the stable a man and a woman, situated at the edges of a life dictated by the emperor, but open all the same to the movement of God's "ah bright wings"… and **inside** the woman, a baby… and **inside** the baby…

What do you think? Or, a better question, more in keeping with *pondering…* what to you imagine? What do you imagine might be inside the baby if we plumbed Luke's Gospel to its center?

I like to imagine that if we opened the baby Jesus, the tiniest doll in Luke's nativity nest, we would find… an apple seed… An apple seed, in keeping with one line from a poem by Rainer Maria Rilke in which the poet addresses God saying**, "I want to utter you. I want to portray you not with lapis or gold, but with colors made of apple bark."**

What could be more ordinary, more down-to-earth than apple bark? We're not talking about exotic, highfaluting fruits like mangoes or kumquats. But apple bark. Challenging every notion that would situate God in some place "holy" in the sense of "other," or removed from the creation God so loves….

Meaning that if at the very heart of the one who most clearly reveals the heart of God there is an apple seed, well then, there is no place or moment that does not have the potential for God's presence to become known…

Something writer and theologian Kathleen Norris speaks of when she remembers the Christmas Eves of her childhood in Hawaii, as she and her siblings would go to hear her father's Dixieland band play in the hotel bars in Waikiki. She writes of that experience,

The band, the music itself had become a kind of ministry for my Dad. He was a preacher's kid after all… On Christmas Eve the band would attract a group of dancers, mostly middle-aged couples, and I loved to watch the complicated steps – the Balboa, the Charleston- done with such evident ease.

Sometimes the band would get couples in for a few dances before going to Mass, but for other people, my dad's version of "O Holy Night" – with the band's singer, Sydette, in a sexy silver lamé cocktail dress, and him on the cello – was about all the religion they were going to get. And people took it seriously; the dance floor would clear, the cabaret would quiet down. It was

so serious, in fact, that the song occasioned the only act of violence the band witnessed in ten years. One year a tipsy couple remained on the dance floor, moving suggestively, clinging to each other more than dancing, and a bodybuilder – one of those intensely muscular men who was unbelievably light on his feet when doing the Fox Trot with his wife – lost his temper. "This is religious music, dammit," he said, picking up the couple and depositing them, more or less gently, on a sofa. Sydette and my dad kept on going.

If there's an apple seed inside the baby Jesus in the nativity version of the Russian nesting doll, then Sydette in her sexy silver lamé cocktail dress singing "O Holy Night" with cello accompaniment in a hotel bar in Waikiki is no less a holy night than is this one in this place… Or was the first one in Bethlehem…

It's just that the first one in Bethlehem, with its unkempt shepherds, its smelly stable animals, and its kings "from away"… with its unwed mother and its father in the lineage of the apple-eating Adam, both of them nobodies in the halls of political and religious power… It's just that the first Christmas was the first holy night to redefine the word "holy" in a way that wasn't about being "other" or "above it all," but about **being in-fleshed, incarnate, involved, and in love…**

Which is why perhaps, Martin Luther was said to have said, "I want no other God than this Mary's son." As it is also why, perhaps, one man who went through a long grueling year watching his wife suffer from cancer said, "I used to think I could not believe in Jesus if I did not believe in God. But now I think it's the other way around."

Because, after all, who wants a God who is not **in-fleshed, incarnate, involved and in love?** Who wants a God who's so heavenly-minded he's no earthy good? Inside the baby Jesus in Luke's nativity version of the nesting doll there would be an apple seed to suggest a God who is so in love with God's creation, this God takes on the color and manner of apple bark and hangs out with Sydette in her sexy silver lamé cocktail dress every chance this God gets.

And if you doubt it, read Luke's Gospel and you will see Sydette on every page… You will see Jesus eating with her and listening to her. You will see Jesus challenging the religious authorities when they wany to exclude her from "holy things and holy places." You will see Jesus advocating for her in the halls of empire politics. You will see Jesus playing the cello while she sings, both of them lost in the music…

All because Jesus carried in his heart, in his flesh and bones, the essence of the presence of a God who refuses to be anything "other" than **in-fleshed, incarnate, involved, and in love…** Something Sydette must have come to know in her heart and flesh and bones, because you will read in Luke's Gospel a story about her washing Jesus' feet with costly perfume and drying his feet with her hair…

So there would be an apple seed inside the baby Jesus in Luke's version of the nativity nesting doll **in part** because it would remind us of the utterly earthiness of our "apple bark God." But also because it would remind us of the story about the abbot who held up an apple one day in the presence of the monks who were in his charge, and asked as he held it up, "What's inside?"

A question to which one monk responded, "the fruit of the apple"…

"And inside the fruit?" asked the abbot…

"The seeds," answered another monk…

"And inside the seeds?" pressed the abbot further…

Silence filled the room. "Ah," said the abbot… "Inside each seed is an orchard."

If Jesus is the finite, ordinary, apple-bark, incarnate presence of a radically over-the-top-in-love God, then Luke would have us know that from such love there always blossoms forth, bursts forth, orchards forth, an orchard… an orchard no religious establishment or political system can control, or buy-and-sell, or entomb forever, or organize into three-ring binders.

From the beginning of the Christian movement there has been something "orchardy" about it whenever it has been fully lived… whenever the power of love has willingly entered a finite, limited, narrow, dead-end, God-forsaken place to speak of an opening into another way… whenever ordinary people bring inordinate love to the everyday moments of their everyday tasks and lives… *(as so many people are doing in this devastating time of Coronavirus, racial injustice, economic disparity, and environmental degradation… among them those on our little island of Deer Isle as gestures of support and care and love are being extended on behalf of those struggling with physical, emotional, or financial hardship… those gestures of incarnate love* ***making it hard really to differentiate Stonington from Bethlehem, shepherds from fishermen, a stable from a bait shack)…***

Inside the seed is an orchard. And Luke would tell us it is a **seed of resistance** to all the forces and powers that would seek to deny or control its blossoming forth… Meaning we might also call it an Easter seed, born on Christmas… a "love seed" whose very bursting forth comes from its willingness to be made small; to become particular for the sake of bringing healing or hope to a particular situation of suffering, of grief, of sorrow or injustice or death…

Because of course, love that is not particular is not love at all…

A love made so particular, that look… If we really looked at the mystery of the story we ponder tonight, we would find ourselves at the manger too… along with the traditional cast of characters including the animals, the smelly shepherds, the wise-men "from away"… but also along with Sydette in her sexy silver lamé cocktail dress and her cello-playing accompanist as

they perform their soulful version of “O Holy Night”…along with the tipsy couple clinging to one another on the dance floor and the bodybuilder who’s moving them, not so gently, to the sidelines… and along with all those included in Luke’s prodigally expansive vision of God’s kingdom…

If we really looked, we’d find that we’re all there… even in the darkness of our wintry, broken, and fearful hearts… While Jesus, the in-fleshed, incarnate, involved, in-love manifestation of our apple-bark God, is doing the most amazing thing… **He’s taking an apple… the very symbol of Adam’s shame… He’s taking it, and breaking it, and passing it out to all those gathered this night in the stable…**

Jesus is passing out pieces of the apple to all those gathered… to you… and to me, and he’s saying, “Take and eat, this is my body broken for you, given to you, so I might be in you and you in me… Nesting dolls all of us, carrying within our hearts the seed of love that in the darkness of night, even now, is being born…”

This is the great good news of Christmas, dear friends in Christ… So take heart… Be not afraid… For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord… And this will be sign unto you… In his presence, you will know yourself to be beloved… And in the knowledge of your belovedness something deep within you will begin to stir… something like a seed… something on this “O Holy Night” on its way to becoming an orchard…