

## Advent 2

Is. 11:1-10 Ps.72 Rom.15:4-13 Matt.3:1-12

A sermon given by Pastor Elaine Hewes

St. Brendan Episcopal Church 12-7-25

For the past few years, on one of the Sundays in the Advent season, it's been our tradition here at St. Brendan to watch a video of Tony Stoneburner reading his poem entitled "The Annunciation." For those of you who don't know of Tony Stoneburner, he's beloved in this community, having over many years led a number of insightful Bible studies, engaged in numerous deep theological community conversations, and challenged many traditional assumptions about the nature of God and the meaning of discipleship.

Because of health issues and his age... He's almost 98 years old... Tony and his wife haven't been to the island for many years. But his presence is still felt among many here at St. Brendan, and his poetry is treasured, particularly the video of him reading his poem about what might have happened if Mary had not perceived and received (in the way she did) the Angel Gabriel's announcement that she'd been chosen by God to bear God's son to the world...

The thing is, the story of the Annunciation as told in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke's Gospel, is not appointed as a reading during this Advent season... So when Pete asked if we were going to watch the video of Tony reading his poem this year, and if so, when, I had to stop and think about which Sunday it might be a good fit...deciding for a number of reasons that today would be a good Sunday despite the fact

that our attention is drawn to a character who seems like the polar opposite of the Angel Gabriel... namely, the cantankerous, locust-eating, edgy old guy named John the Baptist...

Still, after some thought, I decided today would be a good day to listen to Tony read his poem for reasons I will explain after we hear him read it... (You will find a copy of the poem on the back page of your bulletin. But I would suggest that you just watch Tony read his poem the first time through, and then when I read it for the second time, you can follow along with the text in front of you)...

### ***The Annunciation***

*If Mary had not heard, had heard  
but not listened,  
had understood but not stood  
still, had not consented,  
had been scared  
and scurried from the garden  
where he glistened  
into the dark house or the dark wood,  
worried because the Word he hinted  
stirred  
uneasily within the ear; if she had erred  
and had permitted heart to harden*

*when, like frostenameled ground, air glinted,  
the Word would have been only sound.*

So, in part I decided that it would be a good Sunday for us to ponder Tony's poem because, on this Sunday when John the Baptist takes center stage, it seems to me that Tony Stoneburner looks a lot like how we might imagine John the Baptist to have looked...

But more importantly, I think the Angel Gabriel (in his announcement to Mary), and John the Baptist (in his announcement to the people of Judea and Jerusalem gathered in the wilderness at the banks of the Jordan River), were up to the very same thing...

Both of them extending an invitation to those they were addressing... an invitation with an RSVP attached that at its most elemental level said, "You are hereby invited to come and die... Respond if you please..."

Perhaps it seems a bit extreme to suggest that the invitations extended by both John the Baptist and the Angel Gabriel were invitations to "come and die"... But I mean this "dying" in the same sense as the prised heart I gave to Sawyer in the children's sermon a few minutes ago... that heart stuck in a block of ice that cannot be set free until the ice "dies" (or more accurately melts)...

- Or in the same sense as the bit of Advent wisdom shared by Thomas Merton who said, "Advent is the beginning of the end of anything in us that is not Christ"...
- I mean it in the sense of a dying to all that keeps us from knowing the infinite love of the God who chose the finite limitations of

incarnation in the person of Jesus, and waits to be made incarnate in our own lives...

Now the truth is, the story of the Angel Gabriel's RSVP spoken to Mary as told in Luke's Gospel, and the story of John the Baptist's RSVP to the people of Jerusalem and Judea as told in Matthew's Gospel, are two very different stories, each of them deserving of their own sermons or Bible studies...

But on this second Sunday in Advent, as we ponder what might need to "die" in us for the sake of a deeper engagement **with** and a more fulsome embracing **of** the love that has the power to break us open, lift our heads, and make us exceedingly odd in the way of Jesus, I appreciate the way both of the stories name some of the things that can so easily get in our way of RSVP-ing to that love with an impassioned whole-hearted "YES!" ...

Tony's poem beautifully articulating some of the things that could have gotten in Mary's way had she let them... Things like not hearing the invitation... or if hearing it, not listening... or if listening, not understanding... or if understanding, not standing still... or if standing still, not consenting for fear of how uneasily the invitation sounded in her ear... and the temptation in the midst of that fear to harden her heart like frostenameled ground...

And this morning's Gospel text from Matthew articulating so clearly the stuff John the Baptist knew would get in the way of those he addressed out there in the Judean wilderness, far from the halls of power... John the Baptist calling everyone into the baptismal waters of the Jordan River proclaiming, "You are hereby invited to let the waters

of God's fierce and tender love rid you of all that keeps you from living into the fullness of that Love...

"Come! Dive in!

- Dive in, those of you held bondage to guilt and fear...
- Dive in, those of you marginalized by the religious and political elite...
- Dive in, those of you so caught up in your sense of belonging to Abraham's ancestral tree, you have all but lost your sense of belonging to the God of creation, liberation, and salvation...

"Dive in," John the Baptist called out... "Dive in, in joyful anticipation of the baptism of fire that will blaze in the one who comes after me... The baptism of fire that will complete the job of burning the chaff in everyone's heart for the sake of allowing the grain therein to sprout and flourish, and the branches therein to bear fruit for the healing of all creation..."

Both the Angel Gabriel and John the Baptist inviting the ones in their presence to hear, to listen, to understand, to consent to participating in the coming of God's kin-dom... in other words to RSVP in the affirmative, despite how uneasily the invitation might stir in their ears and how tempting it might be to harden their hearts in fear... Inviting the ones in their presence to say, "Yes" to God's invitation so God's Word of fierce and tender love would not... be... only... sound...

On this second Sunday in Advent we are asked to consider the things that may be keeping us from saying "yes" to the Angel Gabriels and the John the Baptists in our lives who are inviting us to participate

in the coming of God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven... the Angel Gabriels the John the Baptists who are inviting to come and die to the things that keep us from knowing the fierce and tender love of God in our bones in such a way that it will break us open, lift our heads, and make us exceedingly odd in the way of Jesus, bearing the fruits of justice, mercy, compassion and peace that are the signs of God's kingdom come...

As I was preparing my sermon for today over the past couple of weeks, and thinking about who in my life has extended the invitation to me to come and die in the way of the Angel Gabriel and John the Baptist, I thought about focusing on the Reverend Michael Woolf of Lake Street Church in Evanston, Illinois and his congregation's decision to put a Nativity scene in the front yard of their church that includes a baby Jesus with zip-tied hands, Mary and Joseph wearing gas masks, and Roman centurion-like figures dressed with tactical vests and face masks with patches that say ICE. The congregation deciding to depict the Nativity scene in this way to highlight the terror and fear being waged upon neighborhoods in Chicago where immigrants and people of color are being rounded up, separated from their families, and sometimes deported...

As I was working over the past two weeks on this morning's sermon, I had thought about focusing on this Nativity scene at Lake Street Church in Evanston, Illinois mostly because it would not leave me alone... And while I still don't yet know exactly what it is asking of me, it feels a bit like it's inviting me to come and die to resignation and apathy and fear, and to consent to the love that has the capacity to break me

open, lift my head, and make me exceedingly odd in the way of Jesus, if I allow God's Spirit to come into my heart as Mary did...

So this was the invitation to come and die I was going to focus on this morning. But then, last Monday evening, a different invitation came my way that seems somehow even more deadly to the things that keep me from knowing God's fierce and tender love deep in my bones...

And it happened this way... In the aftermath of Michael's death this past July, my children suggested that instead of getting a real Christmas tree this year, which Michael and I had done for 47 years, I should perhaps think about getting an artificial tree... Because, of course, it would be a lot less trouble...

So my daughter Emily took me to the Kohl's store in Bangor last Monday evening to see if there was an artificial tree I might think "good enough." There were three trees set up in the store for me to choose from, but the only one that met my standards was out of stock... So Emily asked the manager if we could buy the floor model. He said we could, and then said he'd send someone to help us take the tree apart and box it up...

Just a couple of minutes later a really big guy with army boots, a hooded sweatshirt, and a head full of dreadlocks appeared with the box for the Christmas tree and a cart for transporting it...

He was quite jovial, and very patient as he figured out how to disassemble the tree and pack it carefully into the box. He was also quite talkative, and told us he and his wife had moved to Bangor from Chicago just two months prior.

When he was done packing up my tree, he said he'd meet Emily and me out front. So I went to pay, and while Em went to get the car, the Kohl's guy and I waited together outside the store. It was cold and dark, and I was feeling the loss of Michael particularly deeply as I stood alongside the box holding my first-ever artificial Christmas tree...

And for some reason, I told the Kohl's guy the whole story... And while I told it, I started to tear up... And he came right over to me and he put his big arms around me, and he said, "I'm so sorry... I'm so sorry for your loss." And we just stood there in that embrace saying nothing more until Emily pulled up in the car...

And I just want to say that this embrace from a perfect stranger (my Angel Gabriel and my John the Baptist) felt like an invitation to me to die to all the doubts I carry about Love's power to bring life from death... to die to my incessant temptation to think that cruelty and revenge and hatred will win in the end after all... to die to the voices that visit me in the night, telling me I am not worthy of God's presence, God's mercy and love...

To die to these things, and to say "yes" to a Love so insistent on making itself known it will come in an embrace outside a Kohl's store in Bangor, Maine on a cold December night... It will come to all those in the wilderness of any kind with an invitation to send their fears and regrets downstream in the wild waters of the baptismal river... It will come to a young woman, not yet married, with a strange and troubling and beautiful proposition... It will come in a baby born in a manger to two people of no consequence on the margins of the Roman Empire...

It will come... It will come in a thousand thousand unexpected and impossible ways... It will come in every here and every now... waiting for

every you and every me to hear... to listen... to stand still... to consent to its invitation to die to fear and to rise in love so the Word... God's Word of fierce and tender love will... not... be... only sound...

Shhh... listen...