

Chapel Talk  
March 25, 2009  
Feast of the Annunciation  
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### Acting Like a Tree

This special day of devotion - the day of the Feast of the Annunciation of Christ - commemorates the announcement made to Mary by the Angel Gabriel that she would conceive a son, that his name would be Jesus, and that He would save His people from their sins (from the consequences of failing to meet a standard of behavior that was set by God).

While Mary was honored, humbled and excited, she was also puzzled because there was a problem: according to the scientific method, Mary couldn't possibly have been pregnant. Gabriel's answer was that the Holy Spirit (the wind, breath of God) would overshadow Mary and as a result, she would conceive. Once Mary declares her acceptance and collaboration, Gabriel's work is done, and the conception has taken place. And so it is that about nine months from now, many of us will celebrate the birth of a man whose origin remains, for all intents and purposes, a mystery.

I like to think of Jesus' conception as having been accomplished at the intersection of things heavenly and earthly, of things eternal and temporal. God, an infinite being, was his Father, and Mary, a finite human being who had simply attracted the favor of God, was his mother. Now, we can reasonably presume that Jesus was a different kind of man because most of the circumstances around His birth challenged the expectations of the culture. How many people do we know whose birth announcement was made before they were conceived? We can take for granted that this announcement was significant and was intended to command attention because an Archangel was assigned to deliver the message. Yet for some of us, there is a lingering question: *How might the announcement of the birth of Christ be relevant to any one of us in the 21st Century?*

Last December, our Headmaster sent a Christmas greeting to alumni, parents and friends that offered a reflection on Jonathan Aaron's poem, "Acting Like a Tree." In the poem, Aaron uses an unprepared party guest's lame attempt at impersonation to explore the powerful message of

Christmas. The poem's speaker, arriving at a Christmas party without the necessary costume, decides to remedy the situation by "acting like a tree":

Bending slightly, I held out my hands  
and waved them a little, wiggling my fingers.  
I narrowed my eyes and pursed my lips, making  
*a tree face*, and started slowly hopping on one foot,  
then the other, the way I imagine trees do  
in the forest when they're not being watched.  
Maybe people would take me for a hemlock,  
or a tamarack.

Apparently, the other party guests are convinced that the speaker's attempt to act like a tree is acceptable, or at least unremarkable. But one of the guests is *not* convinced that this unprepared party guest resembles a tree of any kind:

A little girl disguised as an elf  
looked at me skeptically. *Oh, come on!*  
her expression said. *You call that acting like a tree?*

Accustomed to taking a transparent approach to imaginative acts, the little girl *draws a line of demarcation between herself and the speaker* with her apparent skepticism. Her sharpened ability to perceive *beyond the physical* exposes that the speaker has made a minimal investment in his own experience, as he has reduced the concept of a tree to a few signifiers that will pass, he thinks, for a costume. Although the little elf-girl remains silent, her assessment penetrates the speaker's heart, and, moved by her unspoken criticism, he decides to "try again":

I closed my eyes  
and tried again. This time I could feel the wind  
struggling to lift my boughs, (bows) which were heavy  
with snow. I was clinging to a mountain crag  
and could see over the tops of other trees a few late-  
afternoon clouds and the thin red ribbon of a river.  
I smelled more snow in the air. A gust or two whispered  
around my neck and face, but by now  
all I could hear was the meditative creaking  
of this neighbor or that—and a moment later, farther off,  
the faint but eager call of a wolf.

When he tries again, the speaker and the poem experience re-birth. Each takes on new life, new perception, new sensitivity, and a different kind of power. The language of the poem explodes in verses that are filled with detail, making clear that the speaker accesses a more fulfilling

experience. The speaker's reality morphs from behavior that is perfunctory in nature to genuine harmony with all that is; from the externalities of appearance to the inward comfort of integrated relationship; from performance-driven behavior to a more self possessed quality of existence. Our transformed party-guest has attained a new way of investigating and inhabiting the moment. Jesus says to Nicodemus in John 3, "*Don't be surprised that I say to you that no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.*"

Nicodemus' question was, "*How could an adult man be born again?*" Jesus explains to Nicodemus that there is a Kingdom, complete with King, territory, laws of governance and sphere of control, that one cannot see or access, unless he or she is willing to don the corrective lenses of a childlike perspective. He gives further insight to how this might be possible when He instructs his disciples that one must accept the existence of this particular kind of kingdom *as a child*. Christ wanted us to capitalize on transparency and presence in every moment and each relationship, and to trustfully submit ourselves to the leadership and governance of the original source of wisdom and things eternal.

At the end of Jonathan Aaron's poem, we find ourselves sharing the speaker's epiphany, and retreating from the shallowness of the costume party. We eventually join him in a moment of reflection and integrity, understanding that *after he is provoked to try again*, he ceases to *act* like a tree, and he *becomes* a tree.

Reflecting on the poem, I was struck by a few concepts:

I was intrigued by the speaker's response to the little girl's unspoken challenge. I noticed that he did *not* become offended by her intimation that she knew something about trees that he didn't know; that he did *not* ask her how many years of experience she had with trees or read her a list of all of the types of trees that he had seen in comparison to her; he did *not* argue that he looked more like a hemlock tree than she did an elf.

Instead, Jonathan Aaron's speaker submitted himself to the humility and nakedness of that moment of having been found out, giving himself to the possibility that there was more to this tree business, but he didn't know what. This child, armed with insight afforded by the lens of inexperience, *knew* that this party-guest missed the full experience of 'tree-hood'; she *knew* that

what he really thirsted for, was not to *act* like a tree, but to *become* a tree; and *he knew* that she was right.

I thought that the little elf-girl's role was to challenge the *theoretical framework* of the speaker and to present an alternative framework by which he would reconsider his concept of a tree. Her job was to hold up the mirror of his error; to challenge his relationship with his intuition and his ability to connect with a part of himself that was separate from his conscious, yet disconnected person. Elf-girl's job was to introduce the possibilities that come from a trusting yet unproven *perspective* born of faith; *she* was the catalyst that translated him into an experience with eternity.

As I read this poem, I was reminded of a conversation I had last fall. A colleague and I were having one of our raw and sometimes tension-filled discussions about faith. During that exchange, one moment stood out for me. My colleague said, "I feel as if I have to *think* my way to God." I remember that as part of my response, I explained that sometimes there is an advantage to suspending the need to see evidence before we believe.

My colleague and I have often talked about trees in the scriptures – the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden, palm trees in the temple of Solomon, and trees whose leaves are for the healing of nations. I thought about how, as a follower of Christ, I found it easy to perceive trees with a sense of reverence that comes from simple belief and trust. I didn't know how true that was until I received Tad's e-mail and read that poem.

The birth announcement made to Mary is relevant today because Jesus came to us from the redemptive Kingdom of hope. He brought with Him the availability of second chances. The good news was that He brought the remedy for restlessness and generalized discomfort, emptiness and wrong decision making, disconnectedness and prosthetic living. When I think of people who might need a second chance, I think of most recently, Blagojevitch, the Madoffs, Ted Haggard and Elliot Spitzer. These are people who might have been *acting* like trees -- but with the promise of a second chance, and perhaps the closing of their eyes, they can *become* trees. The gift of redemptive hope and the availability of second chances brought to us by the birth of Christ was what made our speaker's transformation available. It is that *same* gift which makes it possible for each of us to flourish into our own individual tree.

A portion of the first Psalm says, “*and he shall be like a tree, planted by rivers of water.*” When we research the word “tree” as it is found in that text, it leads us to a root Hebrew word that means to make firm, as in “the closing of the eyes.” I challenge each of us to become a tree: infinitely and eternally aware of the depth and breadth of our roots, our leaves, our boughs, providing shelter and shade for some, and fruit for others – humanly created, but with the ability to experience degrees of the divine. And when we lose our way and don’t know how, we can begin our transformation by closing our eyes.