

Third Sunday of Epiphany, Year C
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
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I remember the first time I saw a tree. Well, the first time I REALLY saw a tree. I was, I think, about 30 years old. Now, you might sensible ask, “um, hadn’t you seen trees your whole life?” And the answer is yes, but I only really saw a tree properly when I was 30.

Let me explain. I grew up with birches and alders and black spruces. These are all spindly trees that can live in cold temperatures, and none of them are terribly impressive on their own. Then I lived on manicured college campuses and in city neighborhoods for a decade, with their domesticated and properly coiffed trees. But then, on this once fall day, I decided to visit the Morton Arboretum and bike around. And lo and behold, in front of me, was the most magnificent oak tree I had ever seen. It was ablaze in all its fall foliage, and, notably for me, no one had tried to groom it into a shape for either a front yard or for a city street. This tree reached all the way up to heaven and all the way down into the dirt. Its branches were thicker than my thighs, and it looked like it had been sitting there since God was walking through the Garden of Eden looking for Adam and Eve. Seeing that tree, that day, made me realize that all the city trees I had seen that I had thought were wild and unruly had instead been sliced up to meet the needs of cars and city folks better. They weren’t wild and glorious like the oak tree in the arboretum. And now, whenever I walk down a city street, I cannot help but notice the scars on the trunks of trees, where I now know that they have been trimmed out of their wild shape into something that fits better into our lives. In that one moment, seeing that one tree, I was given an entirely new vision for the way the world is.

Imagine Jesus walking into the synagogue on a regular morning. The people are gathered like they always are to hear the stories of their faith, to hear the wise teachers offering commentary on the wisdom and the prophets of Israel. And Jesus requests the scroll of Isaiah — words that the assembly had heard countless times. And somehow, this Jesus person breathes new life into old concepts. Because of what he teaches and preaches, people have their eyes opened. They have their ears unstuffed. They are experiencing the faith of their ancestors in an entirely new manner. What had been words, dead on the page, were all of a sudden very much alive in their midst. Luke says that, “the eyes of the synagogue were fixed on him.”

I think that the sermon Jesus preached in the synagogue — a sermon about liberation of the captives and freedom for the oppressed—so entranced the people who heard them that they were never able to go back to being who they were before they heard his words. Once you see a tree, you cannot unsee it.

A really beautiful man died this week. He was a Vietnamese Buddhist monk by the name of Thich Nhat Hanh. He was born in 1926 and entered the monastery in his teens. He was a vocal opponent of the war in Vietnam and was exiled from his country. He taught nonviolence and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr. He inspired Christian writers across generations, notably Thomas Merton, with whom he had a long and fruitful friendship.

I mention Thich Nhat Hanh, not only because I am saddened by his death, but because he had an amazing way of making people see things for the first time. When asked about the nature of death, he famously said,

there is no birth; there is no death; there is no coming; there is no going; there is no same; there is no different; there is no permanent self; there is no annihilation. We only think there is. When we understand that we cannot be destroyed, we are liberated from fear. It is a great relief. We can enjoy life and appreciate it in a new way."

This body is not me. I am not limited by this body.

I am life without boundaries.

I have never been born,

And I have never died.

Words like that, a person could ponder over year after year and decade after decade. And, at the risk of offending the orthodoxy police, I would say that this Buddhist monk had within him the Christ nature that we hear about in the Gospel of Luke. I believe that, whenever God breaks into our world, God lends us new eyes and new ears so that we can experience existence a little more like God does and a little less like ourselves. Our Christian story is one of God becoming flesh so that we might be a little closer to the Divine. So that we can see the world in a new way.

There are little Christs walking into our world every day, inviting us to see things with fresh eyes. They are people in our lives who say what we need to hear even when it's hard. They are prophets in the streets pointing to places where our society is unjust and cruel. They are children who are wise beyond their years and grandparents who have lived long enough to be able to tell us true things about life. They are even Buddhist monks whose life has been a blessing to the world. Each are little Christs in their own way, and each have taught us to really see the trees for the first time. And once our eyes are opened, by the grace of God, there is no shutting them. Amen.