

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2017
Isa. 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

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Story Telling and Story Dwelling: Witch Hazel (Giving/Healing)

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Over the past few weeks, we have been meditating upon stories from Native American traditions that speak to the themes of Advent and Christmas. Today's story is a beautiful one of giving, healing, and friendship. It's from Robin Wall Kimmerer's book, "Braiding Sweetgrass" (pp. 72ff).

"I first met Hazel Barnett when I was walking the fields in Kentucky, looking for wild blackberries with my mother. We were bent to our picking when I heard a high voice from the hedgerow call, "Howdy-do. Howdy-do." There at the fence stood the oldest woman I'd ever seen...

"I like to see yer light at night,' she said. 'It feels real neighborly. I seen y'all out walkin' and come to say hi-dee.' My mother introduced herself, explained we'd moved in a few months ago. 'And who is this lil' bundle of joy?' she asked, leaning over the barbed wire to pinch my cheek...She wore bedroom slippers outside in the garden, something my mother would never allow. She stuck her wrinkled old hand over the fence, veiny and crooked with a wire-thin band of gold loose on her ring finger. I'd never heard of a person named Hazel, but I'd heard of Witch Hazel and was quite certain that this must be the witch herself. I held my mother's hand even tighter.

"I suppose, given the way she is with plants, there was a time when some might have called her 'witch.' And there *is* something eerie about a tree that flowers so far out of season and then spits its seeds—shiny pearls as black as midnight—twenty feet into the quiet fall woods, with a sound like an elfin footfall.

"She and my mother became unlikely friends, trading recipes and garden tips. By day my mother was a professor at the college in town, sitting at her microscope, writing scientific articles. But spring twilight found her barefoot in the garden, planting beans and helping me fill my pail with earthworms that were severed by her shovel. I thought I could nurse them back to health in the worm hospital I constructed beneath the irises. She encouraged me in this, always saying, 'There is no hurt that can't be healed by love.'

"Before dark many evenings, we would wander across the pasture to the fence and meet Hazel. 'I do like to see your light in the window,' she said. 'There ain't nothing

better than a good neighbor.’ I listened while they discussed putting stove ash at the base of tomato plants to keep off cutworms or Mama bragged on how fast I was learning to read. ‘Lord, she’s a quick study, ain’t you, my little honeybee?’ Hazel said. Sometimes she had a wrapped peppermint in her dress pocket for me...

“Mostly I heard their talk as a drone of grown-up chatter, but one time, when my mother was coming across the yard with a big armload of wood, I saw Hazel drop her head in her hands and cry. ‘When I live at home,’ she said, ‘I could carry a load like that. Why, I could carry a bushel of peaches on one hip and a baby on the other without hardly trying. But now it’s all gone, gone with the wind.’

“Hazel was born and raised over in Jessamine County, Kentucky, just down the road. To hear her talk, though, it might have been hundreds of miles away. She couldn’t drive, nor could [the children with whom she lived] Janie or Sam, so her old house was as lost to her as if it lay across the Great Divide.

“She had come here to live with Sam when he had a heart attack on Christmas Eve. She loved Christmas—all the folks coming by, cooking a big dinner—but she dropped everything that Christmas, locked her door, and came to live with her son and look after him. She hadn’t been back home since, but you could see that her heart ached for the place—she would get a faraway look in her eyes when she spoke of it...

“‘As Hazel grew older, she got sadder and would talk more and more about the old times, the things she would never see again... My mother... offered to take her back to see her old place... Hazel began to cry in the backseat the minute we made the turn.

“Oh, my dear old road,” she cried, and I patted her hand... We stopped before a grassy swale under a thick grove of black locust trees. ‘Here it is,’ she said, ‘my home sweet home.’ She talked like that, like it was right out of a book. Before us was an old schoolhouse with long chapel windows...

“The room before us was like a picture book about the olden days. A big old woodstove sat along the back wall, cast iron frying pans hung alongside. Dish towels were neatly hung on dowels over the dry sink, and once-white curtains framed the view of the grove outside. The ceilings were high, as befits an old schoolhouse, and festooned with garlands of tinsel, blue and silver, flickering in the breeze from the open door. Christmas cards outlined doorframes, fixed with yellowing tape. The whole kitchen was decked out for Christmas, an oilcloth of a holiday print covered the table and plastic poinsettias swathed in cobwebs sat in jam jars as a centerpiece. The table was set for six places and there was still food on the plates, the chairs pushed back just as they were when dinner had been interrupted by the call from the hospital.

‘What a sight,’ she said. ‘Let’s put this all to rights.’ Suddenly Hazel became as businesslike as if she’d just walked into her house after supper and found it below her

housewifely standards. She set her walker aside and began gathering up the dishes from the long kitchen table and carrying them over to the sink. My mother tried to slow her down by asking for a tour of the place and saying we could get to tidying another time. Hazel took us into the parlor, where the skeleton of a Christmas tree stood with a pile of needles on the floor below. The ornaments hung like orphans on the bare branches. There was a little red drum and silver plastic birds with paint worn off and stubs where their tails should be. It had been a cozy room; there were rocking chairs and a couch, a little spindle-let table and gas lamps. An old sideboard held a china pitcher and basin painted with roses. A hand-embroidered scarf, cross-stitched in pink and blue, ran the length of the sideboard. 'My goodness,' she said, wiping the corner of her housedress over the thick layer of dust. 'I've got to get after my dustin' in here.'...

"Hazel leaned on my mother's arm as we circled around the clearing outside, pointing out trees she had planted and flowerbeds long overgrown. At the back of the house, under the oaks, was a clump of bare gray branches erupting with a froth of stringy yellow blossoms. 'Why lookee here, it's my old medicine come to greet me,' she said and reached out to take the branch as if she was going to shake its hand. 'I made me many a batch of this old witch hazel and folks would come to me for it, special. I'd cook up that bark in the fall and have it all winter to rub on aches and pains, burns and rashes—everybody wanted it. There ain't hardly no hurt the woods don't have medicine for.'

"'That witch hazel,' she said, 'it's not just good for you outside, but inside too. Land sakes, flowers in November. The good Lord gave us witch hazel to remind us that there's always somethin' good even when it seems like there ain't. It just lightens your heavy heart, is what it does.'

"After that first visit, Hazel would often call on a Sunday afternoon and ask, 'Would y'all like to go for a ride?' My mother thought it important that we girls go along. It was like her insistence that we learn to bake bread and plant beans—things that didn't seem important then, but now I know differently. We got to pick hickory nuts from behind the old house, wrinkle our noses at the tilting outhouse, and root around in the barn for treasures while Mama and Hazel sat on the porch and talked....

"When winter began, our visits were fewer and the light seems to go out of Hazel's eyes. She sat at our kitchen table one day and said, 'I know I shouldn't ask the good Lord for nuthin more'n what I already got, but how I wish I could have just one more Christmas in my dear old home. But those days are gone. Gone with the wind.' This was an ache for which the woods had no medicine.

"We were not going north to my grandma and grandpa's for Christmas that year and my mother was taking it hard. It was still weeks until Christmas but already she was baking up a fury while we girls strung popcorn and cranberries for the tree. She talked

about how she would miss the snow, the smell of balsam, and her family, And then she got an idea.

“It was to be a complete surprise. She got the house key from Sam and went to the old schoolhouse to see what she could do. She got on the phone to the Rural Electric Co-op and arranged to have Hazel’s power reconnected, just for those few days. As soon as the lights came on, it became clear how dirty it all was. There was no running water, so we had to bring jugs of water from home to sponge things down. The job was bigger than us, so Mama enlisted the help of some fraternity boys from her classes at the college who needed a community service project. They sure got one: cleaning out that refrigerator rivaled any microbiology experiment.

“We drove up and down Hazel’s road, where I ran in to houses with handmade invitations for all her old friends...The house still had its Christmas decorations, but we made more, paper chains and candles, out of paper towel tubes. My dad cut a tree and set it up in the parlor with a box of lights stripped from the skeleton tree that had stood there before. We brought armloads of prickly red cedar boughs to decorate the tables and hung candy canes on the tree. The smell of cedar and peppermint filled the place where mold and mice had been only days ago. My mom and her friends baked plates of cookies.

“The morning of the party, the heat was on, the tree lights lit, and one by one people started to arrive, clumping up the steps of the front porch. My sister and I played hostess while Mama drove off to get the guest of honor. ‘Hey, any of y’all feel like going for a ride?’ Mama said, and bundled Hazel into her warm coat. ‘Why, where we goin’?’ Hazel asked. Her face gleamed like a candle when she stepped into her ‘home sweet home’ filled with light and friends. My mother pinned a Christmas corsage—a plastic bell with golden glitter that she had found on the dresser—to Hazel’s dress. Hazel moved through her house like a queen that day. My father and my sister played their violins in the parlor, ‘Silent Night’ and ‘Joy to the World,’ while I ladled red punch. I don’t remember much more about the party, except Hazel falling asleep on the way home.

“Just a few years later, we left Kentucky to move back north. My mom was glad to be going home, to have her maples instead of oaks, but saying good-bye to Hazel was hard. She saved it for last. Hazel gave her a going-away present, a rocking chair and a little box with a couple of her old-time Christmas ornaments inside. A celluloid drum and a silver plastic bird, missing its tail feathers. My mother still hangs them on her tree every year and tells the story of that party as if it were the best Christmas she ever had. We got word that Hazel had died a couple of years after we moved.

“‘Gone, all gone with the wind,’ she would have said.

“There are some aches witch hazel can’t assuage; for those, we need each other. My mother and Hazel Barnett, unlikely sisters, I suppose, learned well from the

plants they both loved—they made a balm for loneliness together, a strengthening tea for the pain of longing.

“Now, when the red leaves are all down and the geese are gone, I go looking for witch hazel. It never lets me down, always carrying the memory of that Christmas and how their friendship was medicine for each other. I cherish a witch hazel kind of day, a scrap of color, a light in the window when winter is closing all around.”

May this day be a witch hazel kind of day, with a healing light in the window, shining with the glorious gift of the Christ child in the manger. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant life. Amen.