

**CELEBRATION OF THE COMPLETED LIFE OF
IMANI-NADINE REBECCA HAIRSTON ADDINGTON**
St. Paul-Reformation Lutheran Church **St. Paul, Minnesota**
December 5, 2004
Sermon: Paul A. Tidemann, Pastor

Grace to you and peace from God: Creator & Christ and Holy Spirit.

What has happened here? Is this what life is all about? Or is death the taking away of life? I want to announce to you today that life has happened here. This was a conviction of Imani-Nadine based on two thousand years of history in the Christian community. You can never take away life. What has happened here is, rather, a transformation in which Imani-Nadine Rebecca Hairston Addington has taken on a new life and a new day.

There are several of us who share a common mission out of the renewal work of Spirit Movement of The Ecumenical Institute - Chicago and one of the songs we liked to sing goes like this:

I can see a new day, a new day, soon to be,
When the storm clouds are all gone
And the sun shines on a world that is free.

There were several verses to that song. There is one other verse which is so appropriate for this celebration with Imani-Nadine:

I can see a new woman, a new woman breathing awe,
In her eyes light, and her heart strong,
And consumed with a love for the all.

Imani-Nadine is a new woman. In reality she was a new woman all of her life, but, like all of us, she was transformed in many different ways. She began life as a Hairston, the daughter of the Rev. Thurman Hairston and Rebecca Purnell. Now, if you don't know the Hairston name – you should! People in the know around Black Gospel music know the name of Jester Hairston who was a national figure in music and films who dedicated his life to making Gospel music well-known through his writing and arranging.

In 1999 a book was published by Henry Wiencek that really put the Hairstons on the map. It was called "The Hairstons: An American Family in Black and White." The book is the story of Hairstons who were Black and Hairstons who were White – all emerging out of Black slavery and White slaveholders in the early years of our country. It is a fascinating story of a proud people. The TV news magazine show "60 Minutes" picked it up and featured the Hairstons in 2000.

While it is always a challenge for our African American friends to know their roots, Imani-Nadine planted her feet firmly in history both in her family and beyond.

I hope that you will read the story of Imani's life that is in the bulletin and take it home with you. There are too many stories to tell to get through them all. But let me sketch a few things. I first came to know James as a teacher in a course in theology which was taught at The Ecumenical Institute. James was on that particular course teaching team in 1967. Imani came on the scene there in 1969.

By that time I was doing some teaching there myself and came to see Imani and James as colleagues in a process to renew the local church. Imani's son, Emanuel, was born the same year as my son, Chris and they were in the summer pre-school together in 1972.

One of the images that I have of Imani-Nadine in those early years was as a pioneering creator of an infant-and-pre-school curriculum. It has been known for years that the images that a baby picks up both visually and in smell, taste and sound from the culture around him or her will shape that child's life forever. Imani-Nadine helped create a process by which a baby could hear the sights, sounds, tastes and smell of African American culture, American Indian, Hispanic, Asian and many other cultures. Those babies at one month old and older saw Imani-Nadine and other colleagues coming into their nursery rooms with sombreros, caftans, saris and other garb, singing songs of the human tradition from many cultures.

In the intervening years, Imani and James were assigned to many regional centers of The Ecumenical Institute including in India, Jamaica and Venezuela as well as a number of sites in the United States and Canada. The work they did was focused on transformation of the mission of the church and making possible the social transformation of some of the most economically and culturally challenged places in society.

When they moved to St. Paul in 1985 it was to move into a new mode of mission. It was not long before Imani became the first Black administrator for Luther Seminary here in St. Paul. She was the office manager for the Department of Contextual Education at the seminary. James took on a task of beginning a new office called the Lutheran Coalition for Public Policy in Minnesota.

As time moved along, it became clear to Imani and James that in their life experience and fields of work they were seeing the effects of racism as a systemic disease that was and in many ways still is paralyzing our society. So it was in 1995 that they started out on yet another transforming venture which has become the Minnesota Collaborative Anti-Racism Initiative.

Now we all know Imani as a woman of faith. In fact, as she began to lose hope due to the ravages of lupus a couple of years ago, Nadine Rebecca decided to gather with us here to affirm her baptism as a Christian by taking on a new name, Imani, a name which comes out of the Kiswahili language and means, precisely, "faith."

By the way, I find it informative to know that her other names have roots, too. Nadine comes out of French tradition and means "hope." Rebecca is a Hebrew name that has to do with being bound and connected to a community. So, we know this new woman as a person of faith and hope, inextricably bound to a transforming community for the sake of justice and peace.

Thus it was that when Imani-Nadine and James began this anti-racism work they did so out of the community of faith through the Minnesota, Minneapolis and St. Paul Area Councils of Churches. They and we come out of a conviction that to be the church is to trust that the church can and must be a transforming body that does not sit in its past, but is constantly re-creating the future. Imani was a guide in this congregation for our Dismantling Racism team.

Through all of this, Imani-Nadine has been what we like to call an iron-woman. Yes, there have been

times through these years of struggling with her physical body that Imani-Nadine asked the questions we often ask about why and how and when. In the last six months or so in my conversations with her what she said time and again was that she will miss her family – and I know she meant. She was referring, especially, to James, Emanuel and Indira, Kathy, Daniel, Robert, Lorraine, Wynola, Arneita, William and David. But family was also wider and more global for Imani and I know she felt the sadness of separation which she was clear was coming.

But this iron woman was full of faith. She was grounded in that word of God in Isaiah in which we are called “to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives, and release to the prisoners.” The last verse of the passage in Isaiah 61 especially informs what Imani-Nadine’s life was about: “ They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.” (Isaiah 61:4)

She was also clear, with the Apostle Paul, that nothing in life “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 8:39) There were those in the 1st century as there are those in the 21st century who want to declare that only a certain few will be given an honored place in the presence of God. It is such nonsense and Imani knew that and constantly proclaimed an inclusive word, a word of hope, a word of justice and peace.

Imani-Nadine was one who embodied the song of Mary in the Gospel of Luke.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For God has looked with favor
on the lowliness of this servant.
Surely, from now on all generations
will call me blessed;
For the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is God's name.

So, what has happened here? Life has happened. Yes, we have read some passages which remind us that there are times when death seems like an enemy, but I find the words of the Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore to refocus that idea:

Because I love this life,
I know I shall love death as well.

Imani-Nadine is not lost. We declare in the ancient creed of the church that we believe in the communion of saints. There is a verse in the 6th chapter of the Gospel of John in which Christ Jesus says, “this is the will of the one who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that God has given me, but raise it up on the last day.”

Imani-Nadine has been a member of my Council of Saints for many years and perhaps she has been one of yours as well. That relationship will not end. You cannot kill off life, my friends. I especially invite James, Emanuel and Indira and all the rest of you in Imani-Nadine’s historical family to know that she will remain an active part of your life if you allow that to happen. We confess that when

Christ Jesus died and rose again something happened in human consciousness about our connectedness to the whole universe.

A few of us with the Spirit Movement connection have a common saint in the person of the late Joseph Wesley Mathews, who was Dean of The Ecumenical Institute. Joe, as we called him, spoke about the eternalness of the human spirit and suggested that we might want to have a conversation with God that goes like this, “God, I will be your being, in my living and dying. I will be your being.” And God will say, “All right, all right, and I will let you participate in my endlessness.”

If you need that translated into another faith language, Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26)

Enough already!

Now we are going to sing a song which was a favorite of Imani-Nadine. It is a song that came out of study that we did at The Ecumenical Institute - Chicago on what was called “The Other World.” The Other World is that idea that we live both in this earthly world at the same time that we live in another world – of the spirit – which informs us and grounds us in our earthly living.

In the Chicago gatherings people would take hold of familiar songs and tunes and write some new words. These particular words are titled “At the Center Tranquil,” and are based on an old American folk song, “Shenandoah.” The words are a way of re-telling the Christian understanding that death and life are all of a piece and that even though we have mixed emotions as we die or experience the death of a loved one, at the center we are tranquil, we are at peace, we are loved by God.

May God give us peace and assurance that there will be a new day in which all God’s people will share in all of the goods of the earth, all the decisions of history, all the inventions of humanness. AMEN.

“At the Center Tranquil”