



KALAMAZOO

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH

Sermons

A New Thing

Isaiah 43:14-21; Mark 8:1-10

July 11, 2021 – Seventh Sunday After Pentecost

The Rev. Kathleen King

Kids are geniuses at make-believe. They can easily inhabit the worlds of books, movies, or those of their own making with seemingly no effort at all. I think back to my own childhood and remember intricate games that my older siblings made up, but that I fully understood as a gleeful participant. A family favorite was “Mad Mother-in-Law”, in which I chased my siblings around the house with a toy baby carriage crying out, “Mad Mother-in-Law!” We think the inspiration for that particular game came from Fred Flintstone, but one never knows. The photo on the front of the bulletin today is yet another example of the playful imagination of children. It depicts a make-believe ice cream stand at the Parkwood-Upjohn Elementary School playground where my two kids, and many others over the years, spent hours pretending to take orders from other kids and parents, and then scooped up the pretend ice cream cones and served them. Sometimes, kids would ask a parent or playmate to be the clerk so that they could have the pleasure of ordering the ice cream creation of their dreams. What my memory knows for certain is that almost always, lots and lots of imaginary sprinkles were involved. Whether they are regaling others with tales of the exploits of their imaginary friends, wondering up a whole new world, creating just about anything under the sun out of Play-Doh, or just asking questions that most adults wouldn’t even

begin to conceive of, it's clear that kids have a lot to teach us when it comes to using our imaginations.

And that ability to think in ways bigger, deeper, or just differently from what we know or can experience with our various senses might just be a God-given gift. Isn't Imagination merely the ability to know or conceive of something that doesn't yet exist? Most often we see this in the Arts, right? Works of visual art like paintings, sculptures, fiber creations, or photographs that fill museums or adorn our own walls. Opera, classical, sacred, rock, country, rap, or hip-hop pieces of music that inspire us in our life or work and lift us to greater heights of joy or purpose. Movies of all genres that make us think, make us laugh, or just give us an escape from our everyday existence. Writing, whether journalism, essays, poetry, novels, fiction or non-fiction that give us a glimpse inside the minds of others, or a way to understand the world around us. Architecture, interior design, flower arrangement, gardens, and other forms of creativity that make where we live, work, walk, or pray truly awesome. All of these things are driven by the gift of imagination that allows ideas and concepts that have begun in one person's mind to enrich the lives of so many others. The ability to conceive "something" where or how nothing ever has been before is imagination at work, but it's not limited to the various assortment of arts that I just mentioned. It is my assertion that imagination is a God-given gift of the Spirit that does a great deal more than make things look interesting or pretty.

Prophecy, in fact, is imagination at work. As Bible scholar Walter Bruggemann has said, “the two things that are important, it seems to me, are on the one hand, prophets were rooted in the covenantal traditions of whatever it was from Moses and Sinai and all of that. The other thing is that they are completely uncredialled and without pedigree, so they just rise up in the landscape. The way I put it now is that they imagined their contemporary world differently according to that old tradition. So it’s tradition and imagination...I just think they are moved the way every good poet is moved to have to describe the world differently according to the gifts of their insight. And, of course, in their own time and every time since, the people that control the power structure do not know what to make of them, so they characteristically try to silence them.” In our passage from Isaiah today, the prophet is imagining the world in a different way. For the hearers of this passage, sometime after it was written in the 6th century Before the Common Era, the setting was fresh and important. The words came from the prophet during the Exile following Israel’s sinful actions, and the words from Isaiah 43 are replete with the hope of restoration. The prophet didn’t speak about how things were in the moment, but rather, an imagined rendering of what the world could look like. Host of the radio program On Being and theologian Krista Tippett has described it this way, “Prophets help us connect the dots between the world as it is, and the world as it might be.”

“Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the

wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people who I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.” These poetic words may not sound especially ground shattering as we hear them today, but then again, maybe they do? The prophet was speaking while the people were still in Exile—all was not well quite yet, and much that had been lost would never be regained. But the prophet was connecting the dots between the world as it was, and the world as it might be. The prophet, fueled by the imagination given by God, imagined the future not because the future was already set, but because the prophet understood that God’s work of restoration, turning brokenness to repairing the breach called humans to labor together to make a different world, to do a new thing, as co-creators with God.

Imagination is so important, in fact, that it takes a central place in the constitutional questions asked of certified Christian Educators, other certified persons, Deacons, Elders, and Ministers of Word and Sacrament for ordination, installation, and commissioning in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). According to the Book of Order, question h. asks, “Will you pray for and seek to serve the people with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love?” Every time I hear that question asked, I feel a special surge of joy when “Imagination” is listed, because I’ve become convinced that is the linchpin that makes the other qualities work so well. It seems like common sense

that we want our leaders to be energetic, and smart, and loving, but nothing connects the dots between how the world is, and how the world might be like imagination. Imagination meets obstacles with new perspectives and ways to problem solve. Imagination wades through the muck of daily life or full-blown catastrophe, and understands that a different approach might bring healing and wholeness. Imagination is willing to risk trying something completely different than before if it advances an idea, experience, or creation. Even knowing that mistakes along the way will happen. Everything from the laws of Physics, to a Mary Oliver poem, to the accidental invention of the Toll House chocolate chip cookie has resulted from imagination, and the openness to what might be. The prophet Isaiah KNEW well what the world looked like. Things were bad, and because of the way people had been living without justice, many people were suffering; injustice will always lead to suffering, and on a scale and on more levels than those with power might think. As painful as it is to exist in a world that seemingly lacks clarity, it means that the door is open to the world that might be. Diana Butler Bass speaks to that “might” in the quote on the front of the bulletin, when she says, “Awe is the gateway to compassion. It is a deep awareness that we are creators, creators who work with the Creator, in an ongoing project of crafting a world. If we do not like the world or are afraid of it, we have had a hand in that. And if we made a mess, we can clean it up and do better.” And, surely, “crafting a world” begins with imagination.

Consider the story of Daryl Davis, who was interviewed on NPR this past week. He's an African-American actor, writer, and Blues musician. Years ago, while traveling with a band, he found himself playing at a bar frequented by members of the KKK. He struck up a conversation with one of them, which led to a friendship, which led to the man leaving the KKK, and the white supremacist views, behind. Since that first encounter, Davis has listened to hundreds of neo Nazis and members of the KKK, and being listened to has led many of them to leave the organizations and change their beliefs. He has collected more than 200 articles of memorabilia from these racist organizations, and intends to create a museum with them that educates people about white supremacy and the organizations that represent it so that people can have meaningful dialogues bent towards change which lead to new ways of being in the world. He knows it isn't for everyone, but it's what he feels called to do. A black man choosing to listen and create relationships with people in hate groups that target black people is not only brave; it is filled with imagination. Daryl Davis knows how things are now, but he also sees how they might be through loving intention.

Loving intention rooted in imagination surely describes our greatest teacher, as well, as he approached the crowd of people with seven loaves of bread and a few small fish. On a metaphorical level, at least, we often face these kinds of dilemmas in scarcity mode stuck in traditional ways of doing things. The disciples in the story clearly represent the human perspective. "How can one feed these people with bread

here in the desert?” That question isn’t very different from so many human questions. The conditions are unfavorable, and what we can see is what exists. Jesus embodied a prophetic stance, in seeing what was, and imagining what might be, and the people ate and were filled. He didn’t meet a problem with dismay or a standard reply, and we needn’t either. Where there are needs, there are ways to meet them, but it requires us to step out of what is familiar, comfortable, and sometimes, even traditional, in order to consider them from a different vantage point. Imagination isn’t just an ability found among creative types, but rather, a spiritual gift we have in abundance, but we have to be willing to make space for it in our lives.

And there has possibly never been a better time for making space for imagination. The pandemic has had a way of taking everything familiar and comfortable to us, and turning it on its head. I’m so very grateful that it seems the tide is finally turning, and I pray each and every day that we won’t need to track Covid as closely as we have for the last 16 months. But, I really hope we won’t just go back to exactly how things were before the coronavirus changed the world. I hope and pray that we will see this as an opportunity to assess what was good and healthy for our communities, and get back to that, while also considering the aspects of our culture that did not serve us all, and let imagination have its way with us so that we can re-create a world not as it has been, but how it might be. The pandemic has shone a light on the inadequate compensation for those working in the service sector, the depth of food insecurity in

our nation, our local affordable housing crisis, and the importance of public health. I feel confident saying that we too have experienced an existential Exile, and it can be a pause before leaping back into how “things were”, or it can be a moment to catch our breath as we have the courage to imagine what could be. Poet Mary Oliver well understood that the imagination to consider “what the world might be” requires humility and openness, as she wrote, “I have refused to live locked in the orderly house of reasons and proofs. The world I live in and believe in is wider than that. And anyway, what’s wrong with Maybe? You wouldn’t believe what once or twice I have seen. I’ll just tell you this: only if there are angels in your head will you ever, possibly, see one.” Amen.