

**“Imagination and the Kingdom of God”**  
**Texts: Isaiah 65:17-25**  
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*“They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” Isaiah 65:25*

As a young child, before I knew of John Calvin or Martin Luther or Karl Barth, my favorite theologian was Shel Silverstein, the author of children’s books and songs and cartoons. My favorite was ***Where the Sidewalk Ends***, and I would ask that it be read almost nightly. Do you remember how the book begins? “If you are a dreamer, come in. If you are a dreamer, a wisher, a liar, a hopper, a prayer, a magic-bean-buyer. If you’re a pretender, come sit by my fire, for we have some flax-golden tales to spin. Come in! Come in!”<sup>i</sup>

The prophet Isaiah was a dreamer, a wisher, a hopper, and a prayer. Like Shel Silverstein, Isaiah was blessed by God with an unrestrained and free-ranging imagination, which enabled him to envision and describe a new world for the people of God. Take, for example, these ninth chapter words that we hear each December: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. For all the boots of the tramping warriors, and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Isaiah wrote of the coming of a Messiah at least six centuries before the miraculous birth in Bethlehem. His imagination gave hope to a people who would walk in much darkness before the dawn would break from on high. His words would provide a cadence for the long march of centuries toward liberation and salvation. And, each year, when we dust off our Bibles and read his powerfully imaginative words of prophecy, we are again given a shot of hope that propels us through another year. No less than our ancestors in the faith, we rely on imagination to believe that God’s kingdom will come and God’s will be done. We imagine, and we hope and we dream and we wish and pray. And then we sit by the fire and we wait, feeding our imaginations with the ancient stories of scripture that have nourished the community of the faithful for millennia.

Biblical scholars often describe the sixty-fifth chapter of Isaiah as an *apocalyptic interlude* that breaks up the smooth flow of the surrounding text. Now, “apocalyptic” is a word that we hear quite a bit these days, usually accompanied by visions of utter destruction and chaos and the harsh judgment of a vengeful God. This perspective is deeply informed by fundamentalist Christian interpretation and by blockbuster thrillers about the end of the world. Those of us who view the apocalypse as the violent and tumultuous end of time might be surprised that this morning’s passage from Isaiah is considered apocalyptic literature. After all, Isaiah speaks of peace and stability and joy. In fact, these words seem like the antithesis of popular uses of the word “apocalypse.”

It might help to consider the Greek origin of the term. It always helps to consider the Greek origin of any term! The Greek word means revelation or unveiling, and was used to

describe the type of writing that reveals or unfolds things not previously known and which could not be known apart from the unveiling. In other words, an apocalypse is quite simply, and profoundly, a vision from God. A revelation. An epiphany. And most of the apocalyptic literature in the Bible is filled with hopeful imagery that is far removed from the destruction that informs contemporary understanding. Do you remember Revelation 21? “God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more...” It’s a revelation. This sixty-fifth chapter of Isaiah is an apocalyptic vision, which breaks through the monotony of ordinary human life and reveals a vision of the kingdom of God. It is an act of imagination that unveils a truth not previously known.

The virtuoso artist and original Renaissance man Michelangelo was once asked how he was able to create a stunning sculpture of an angelic being. “I saw the angel in the marble and carved until I set him free,” the inspired artist responded. Apocalypse. The revealing of something previously hidden. An act of imagination and faith.

Each year, at Pentecost, we read prophet Joel’s vision of the day when God would pour out the Holy Spirit on all flesh. Sons and daughters would prophesy together, old men would dream again and the young would see visions. God’s spirit would be let loose on all creation. This is the great democratization of imaginative dreaming. No longer will the work of envisioning the future belong only to the elite and the powerful or those grounded in reality. Dreams and visions will be widespread. And all flesh will see them together.

In this ministry of imagination, children can be our teachers. Listen to the stories of scripture as retold by our children and youth and you will hear something you have never heard before. You will sense the kingdom of God breaking through and shining light in dark corners of your faith. The fading of imagination is perhaps the most serious loss we experience as we grow older and more grounded in the so-called real world. Recapturing imagination is one very good reason to come to church on Sunday. The rest of our lives are overcrowded with reality. Daily, we are subject to an onslaught of information and opinion. The exponential growth in media and technology has made it impossible to escape reality. It greets us in the morning and is with us until the moment we drift to sleep. No wonder so many of us have fallen victim to depression and anxiety and fear. Constant reality is not easy. We overdo it. We need imagination. We need to escape the harsh reality of reality every once in a while.

So, we come to worship and we get to exercise sacred imagination for a few moments each week. We are reminded that there is more to our world than the headlines in our newspapers and the facts in our books and the numbers on our bank balances. Surely Hamlet was right in reminding his good friend Horatio, “There are more things in heaven and on earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.”<sup>iii</sup> When we worship, we are taken out of the driver’s seat and given the opportunity to see the view. And we encounter the words and images and stories and songs that have filled the imagination of our faith community for generations past.

At last Tuesday’s Theology on Tap gathering, we discussed the future of the faith. What will Christian worship, theology, and community look like in the coming decades? Which elements of our tradition need to be left behind in order to move forward? As I heard one pastor say just this week, “when a horse dies, that’s a pretty good time to dismount.”

Clearly, there are some dead horses that the Christian community has been riding for far too long, convinced that they might spring to life any moment. Such persistent and dogged devotion to outdated or ineffective programs and theologies constitutes a failure of imagination, and endangers the future of our ministry.

Yet, there are so many aspects of our tradition that spark the imagination and nourish the mind and spirit, and these must be reclaimed and nurtured. Among the men of Morningside, none was more important than worship. What we do in this sanctuary on Sunday mornings is a source of imaginative faith, and it is a consequence of such faith. And this is what we 21<sup>st</sup> Century human creatures are so hungry to experience: powerfully creative and imaginative worship that transcends the ordinary and reframes the truth.

Moments ago, we all participated in the sacrament of baptism, the most imaginative and hopeful ritual in the Christian faith. As Nathan and Oliver and Jackson and Addison were baptized this morning, as a community we made two kinds of promises to them. The first is personal—will we be here to guide and nurture and teach and love these new members of the household of God? Will we teach Sunday school and change diapers and offer a kind voice and a loving example? Will we work to ensure that in the decades to come Morningside will be a place where these young people can grow and mature in faith? Will we be faithful to the future?

But the second kind of promise is even more important. It is a promise not on behalf of the church but of the kingdom. It is a promise not of action but of imagination. We say to these precious, innocent, unknowing children that the power of baptism is stronger and truer than anything that they will encounter in this world. It is stronger than the pain of isolation and loss and death. It is truer than myths of scarcity and fear and hatred. It is more powerful than worldly definitions of success and failure, insider and outsider, winner and loser. We do not know what is ahead for Addison, Jackson, Oliver, and Nathan which path their future will take and what kind of world they will inhabit when we have all gone away. But, with the eyes of imagination and of faith, we do know this: God will be God. God's kingdom of mercy and justice and love and peace will still break through the thin veneer of ordinary human existence, blinding us with its brilliance. And, before we even call, God will answer us, just as God has claimed these four children of God and before they can even speak God's name.

What a gift. What a mystery. What an amazing, overwhelming promise. We belong to God. God's kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven. The kingdom **will** come. Until then, we'll have to use our imaginations.

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<sup>i</sup> Shel Silverstein, *Where the Sidewalk Ends*, HarperCollins, 1974, p. 9.

<sup>ii</sup> William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5, lines 166-167.