

1 Sermon, December 5, 2010

Texts: Luke 1:39-56 , Isaiah 61:8-11, 1 Samuel 2:1-11

Title: "Holy Imagination"

- 1, Often our imagination fails
2. Mary & Hannah didn't have much, but the spirit fired their imagination.
3. Mary & Hannah imagined big. They could see, feel the reality of what they were singing. That's inspiration.
4. Imagination and justice
5. Imagination and love
6. Imagination and art

1, Often our imagination fails

When I was a little boy, my grandmother was the most wonderful person in the world to me. She made big puffy ginger cookies, served root beer floats, and had a candy dish with stuff that mom never bought, and toys in the bottom desk drawer. I just basked in her love. In my imagination, she was the most wonderful person in the world.

Then, at some point, probably in my early teens, my Grandma seemed different. I realized that she pronounced some words funny, she was overweight and wore old-fashioned clothing. She spoke loudly in restaurants and she snored very loudly. She made me sweep the sidewalk and paint the garage. Suddenly, little things about Grandma bothered me, and I was confused. She didn't measure up to the perfection that I had seen in her before.

Fortunately, that time was brief. I soon saw Grandma again as the wonderful person she was. Those little things about her that had bothered me receded into the background. Somehow, I weighed her love against the rest of it, and love won overwhelmingly.

Did Grandma change? No.

What changed was how I imagined my grandma.

My imagination at first helped me to love her.

When I lost my imagination, and started measuring Grandma by external standards of fashion and diction and ability to hear, she fell short.

When I regained my imagination— a more mature imagination— I could comprehend her goodness, her steadfastness, her trust in God, and I saw what a jewel she truly was.

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2. Mary & Hannah didn't have much, but the spirit fired their imagination.

Imagination is a good and necessary thing. It not only leads to inventions and art; it leads to love and justice, as well.

The Bible needs to be read with that in mind. The Bible is not simply a history book, but a book full of imagination: Noah going on the ark because he could imagine a flood; Abraham leaving his home and traveling to a distant land because he believed God's promise and could imagine having as many descendents as the stars in the sky.

The woman who washed Jesus' feet did so because she imagined that God would reward her even more than the community leaders would chastise her.

And in today's readings, we have the God-fired imagination of Hannah, who was looked down upon and excluded because she was childless. Yet she imagined more than just a child. She imagined a world where God gives strength to everyone who stumbles, where the hungry have more than enough to eat. She imagined God lifting the poor and homeless out of the garbage dump, and giving them places of honor in royal palaces. This despite the fact that she did not have much to eat, and she was nowhere near having access to royal palaces.

In the New Testament, we have Mary, after meeting her cousin Elizabeth, singing a song of imagination that had nothing to do with her cousin's baby or her own, but imagined a world of justice. Mary imagined God's blessing and care, and she could see God's forgiving mercy. She perceived the humble in places of power, and the hungry having good things to eat. Mary, inspired by the Holy Spirit, imagined a world of Justice. This was despite the fact that Mary was a pregnant teenager who was probably quite poor.

3. Mary & Hannah imagined big. They could see, feel the reality of what they were singing. That's inspiration.

I say Hannah and Mary imagined these things, but I'm not saying these things were imaginary. Instead, their Holy imagination helped them to conceive of what God wanted in the absence of any evidence.

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Hannah and Mary had no proof that God would do these things, but they knew God would. They were not prophets, but they spoke prophetic remarks, because God spoke through their imaginations.

The power of imagination is a God-given gift, because imagination fires our sense of the possible, and faith is about possibilities.

Bryan Allen, an American cyclist, crossed the English Channel in 1979 in a very light aircraft powered only by foot pedals. This 22 mile trip was made sometimes just a few feet above the ocean waves.

In an interview with a reporter he said, 'I have flown this Channel a thousand times in my imagination. I have seen the water beneath my feet, seen the ships, the clouds, the occasional threat of a storm ... and then heard the cheers of the people as they saw me coming in to land.'

It was essential to his success that he flew the Channel in his imagination, or else (he said) he would never have flown it at all.

4. Imagination and justice

Both Hannah's song and Mary's song imagine a world of justice, of the social order being changed so that the hungry are fed.

Holy imagination has often led to justice.

In 1965, Urie Bronfenbrenner and Edward Ziegler envisioned the Head Start program. Nothing like it had been done on such a scale before. But they had a Holy imagination for justice, tempered with social science.

Head Start has changed many lives for the better. Since 1988, more than 1,300 schools in 20 states have implemented the program, which has proven successful in urban, rural and suburban settings, as well as in affluent, middle-class and economically challenged communities.

Tommy Thompson had a holy imagination when he helped establish Badgercare as a part of the W2 program. Badgercare has made a great deal of difference for the poor in Wisconsin, and has been looked to as a model in other places. It's not perfect, but has made a great deal of difference. And it's been achieved through cooperation between Democrats and Republicans.

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5. Imagination and love

Holy Imagination is also a part of love. I told you of how my imagination affected my appreciation of my Grandmother.

Well, a few weeks ago, Dellwood Madsen came to visit me because the Lions are interested in helping a skateboard park to be established in town. Many people from Kiwanis and Lions and our church desire a place for these youth who are generally the ones who get negative attention to know that they are loved and that we want them to feel welcome.

Mother Teresa's holy imagination started with love and a roll of bandages and a pair of scissors.

I just read of 43-year-old US Navy Cmdr. Michael Misiewicz who was adopted out of Cambodia 37 years ago, leaving with the wife of a US Embassy employee for whom his aunt worked as a maid.

He's now a successful navy officer because his parents let him go to a better life in the US. After Michael left them, his father and younger sister were killed by the Kmer Rouge, and the family went through great hardship. They lost touch with their son in America.

But now he has bought a home for his birth mother, who received asylum in the US, all the while supporting his adoptive mother and caring for his own wife and children.

His mother and aunt imagined a better future for him, and loved him enough to let him go.

Every day I am the beneficiary of my wife, Marianne's holy imagination. She sees me as a handsome, kind, thoughtful man. And so I become more like that.

6. Imagination and art

Lastly, holy imagination lifts us above ourselves through art.

What we call the magnificat was a song. We see only the words, but it should be set to music, joyously proclaimed. In my mind's eye, I see a young Mary dancing and singing, just as her ancestor Miriam had done on the defeat of the Egyptians. She sang about wondrous things.

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So it's no wonder that the Magnificat has been set to music by J.S. Bach, Claudio Monteverdi, Antonio Vivaldi, Thomas Tallis, Johann Haydn, Sergei Rachmaninoff, John Rutter, and many more.

It is evident that art — be it a sculpture or a play or a song — can help us perceive things in a different way.

When I sing, I am transported to a different place — a place of joy or sorrow or awe or comfort. When I dance, I enter a different reality, measured by beats and footsteps and movement.

In art, our imaginations are set free, and we are changed, usually for the better.

So, this Advent, I encourage you to imagine.

Imagine what love can do. Imagine what you can create, with God's help. Imagine a world made more fair and happy, and what you can do that will make a difference. Imagine what is possible with the leading of the Spirit.

Imagine . . .

39A short time later Mary hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea. **40**She went into Zechariah's home, where she greeted Elizabeth. **41**When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, her baby moved within her.

The Holy Spirit came upon Elizabeth. **42**Then in a loud voice she said to Mary:

God has blessed you more than any other woman! He has also blessed the child you will have. **43**Why should the mother of my Lord come to me? **44**As soon as I heard your greeting, my baby became happy and moved within me. **45**The Lord has blessed you because you believed that he will keep his promise.

Mary's Song of Praise

46Mary said:

With all my heart I praise the Lord,

47and I am glad because of God my Savior.

48He cares for me, his humble servant.

From now on, all people will say God has blessed me.

49God All-Powerful has done great things for me, and his name is holy.

50He always shows mercy to everyone who worships him.

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51The Lord has used his powerful arm to scatter those who are proud.

52He drags strong rulers from their thrones and puts humble people in places of power.

53God gives the hungry good things to eat, and sends the rich away with nothing.

54He helps his servant Israel and is always merciful to his people.

55The Lord made this promise to our ancestors, to Abraham and his family forever!

56Mary stayed with Elizabeth about three months. Then she went back home.

1Hannah prayed:

You make me strong and happy, LORD.

You rescued me. Now I can be glad and laugh at my enemies.

2No other god is like you. We're safer with you than on a high mountain.

3I can tell those proud people, "Stop your boasting!

Nothing is hidden from the LORD, and he judges what we do."

4Our LORD, you break the bows of warriors, but you give strength to everyone who stumbles.

5People who once had plenty to eat must now hire themselves out for only a piece of bread.

But you give the hungry more than enough to eat.

A woman did not have a child, and you gave her seven, but a woman who had many was left with none.

6You take away life, and you give life.

You send people down to the world of the dead and bring them back again.

7Our LORD, you are the one who makes us rich or poor.

You put some in high positions and bring disgrace on others.

8You lift the poor and homeless out of the garbage dump and give them places of honor in royal palaces.

You set the world on foundations, and they belong to you.

9You protect your loyal people, but everyone who is evil will die in darkness.

We cannot win a victory by our own strength.

10Our LORD, those who attack you will be broken in pieces when you fight back with thunder from heaven.

You will judge the whole earth and give power and strength to your chosen king.

11Elkanah and Hannah went back home to Ramah, but the boy Samuel stayed to help Eli serve the LORD.