

SUN SEPT 10
9AM & 11AM

What Are You Learning These Days?



FALL 2023 SERMON SERIES

ENERGY

INTELLIGENCE

IMAGINATION

LOVE

Sunday, September 17, 2023

IMAGINATION - “The Power of Hope in New Things”

Megan Berry | Isaiah 43:15-19

Isaiah 43:15-19 (NRSV)

- ¹⁵ I am the Lord, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.
- ¹⁶ Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down; they cannot rise;
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:
- ¹⁷ Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.
- ¹⁸ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
- ¹⁹ I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

This is the Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.

When Charlie first asked me if I wanted to preach on “imagination” during this sermon series, my immediate thought was this GIF. I know, mostly my Millennial and Gen Z friends understand this GIF, but this comes from the show *Spongebob Squarepants* during a part when Squidward doesn’t understand how Patrick and Spongebob are making so much noise and having fun within a simple box. Squidward in frustration

goes “HOW ARE YOU DOING ALL THIS?!” and Spongebob simply responds as above: “Imagination.”

It’s a somewhat cheeky remark, one meant more for the adults having to watch this show more so than the kids and yet still a great reminder that our imaginations can transport us to places and spaces we’ve never been.

But Spongebob GIFs aside, I was left wondering what it meant to serve one another with Imagination? Is it as simple as putting your pun skills to the test with a Reformation Themed Halloween costume for that one day every 6ish years when Halloween falls on Reformation Sunday? For those who don’t want to count, I went as the 95 Reese’s... In honor of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses... :)

Or maybe serving with imagination is just being creative with crafts for children’s ministry, games for the youth ministry, using a skit in worship to explain a Bible passage instead of reading it from the standard NRSV translation?

I feel like those are some ways that we can use our imagination well to serve one another in ministry, but I think there’s something deeper to our imagination and our call to use it alongside energy, intelligence, and love.

If we return to our scripture from Isaiah for a moment, we find this in verses 18 & 19.

“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?”

What a bold statement that God is making here, but we know God is all about making and following through on Bold statements.

For those who don’t know, these particular verses come from part of the book of Isaiah, called Second Isaiah. For a brief tangent, Isaiah is a book that is made up of three parts, and not so imaginatively named First, Second, and Third Isaiah. These parts all come from a different time frame in Israel’s history. Second Isaiah was written in approximately 538 BCE while the Israelites were in exile in Babylon but were preparing to return to Jerusalem.

So, it's important to keep in mind that the Israelites are hearing these words as they are in exile, and maybe not fully trusting that God will bring them back out of exile. They have been traumatized through an exile where they were uprooted from their homes, forced to live in new spaces with a different culture and expectations. They're probably pretty scared and maybe even embracing some nostalgia and longing for "the good ol' days" before they were exiled in Babylon.

But God comes to them and reminds them how their ancestors were saved from Pharaoh, and how they shouldn't fear for God has called them by name, they are God's.

God doesn't leave it there though, God tells them not to focus too hard on the good ol' days, rather to look to something new, encouraging them to place their hopes on the new ways that God will show up in their lives and bring them out of this exile.

Now, thankfully we're not living in exile, but I bet almost every single one of us has lived with those rose-colored nostalgia glasses on, looking into our past, and thinking about the "good ol' days". That could be the good ol' days of your childhood, the good ol' days of ministry, or even the good ol' days before the lock down changed everything.

And while it's so tempting to put on those rose-colored nostalgia glasses and lament the present for not being the past, we can so easily lose our hope by living in those glasses for too long. Whereas, if we look at our present, acknowledge our past, but look imaginatively to the future of what we want or what we're being called to. That future and the possibilities can bring us hope to fuel us and give us what we need to achieve what we've been dreaming.

Now, you may be thinking, well this is all well and good Megan, but I'm not a creative or imaginative person, how am I supposed to serve with imagination? Well good news, you can learn to be more creative and imaginative, it's not something that once you lose it, it's gone forever!

Most of you probably don't know this, but when I was in college I was a music major and studied flute. Now, while I was technically proficient at it and ended up getting a whole degree in flute performance, I was actually not great at the whole performing part.

See, you could give me a piece of music that looks like this, and I could learn the technique, learn the runs, and “play” it fine. But I wasn’t great at interpreting and really being playful with the style of music. That wasn’t intuitive to me. I would play what was on the page and that was it.

Well, finally my music professor decided enough was enough and he was going to force me to be creative whether I liked it or not. Each week in my lessons I would have to play my assigned piece, but I wasn’t allowed to use any of the notations on the page. At first this was *rough*. I rotated between the same few ideas, and it didn’t sound good at all. But slowly, I started to appreciate this exercise and the freedom it gave me to try something new, even if that particularly new notation wasn’t the best. These new skills slowly integrated into my practicing and gave me freedom to try new things in the pieces I was performing, some of which stuck, and some of which I said, “well that was okay, but maybe not best to recreate.”

So, I want us to try something new together. There are several spiritual disciplines that invite creative and imaginative thinking while reading scripture and praying. I invite you to look into *Visio Divina* or *Lectio Divina*; both come from St. Ignatius and invite you to read Scripture or look at a picture multiple times with some different prompts to help your brain think about and look at different aspects you might not have considered before.

The particular practice I want us to try part of right now is “Imaginative Mediation.” This practice invites you into a particular text and to explore that text with all five senses, along with a couple other prompts, but we’re focusing on the five senses today.

We’re going to explore a text that may be familiar to you, the feeding of the 5,000 from the gospel of Matthew. As I read, I want you to think about what you see in this story. I’ll interject some other questions to think about as we go through the story. But first, start with what you see as you hear these words:

When Jesus heard about John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities.

(I wonder what the crowd sounded like? Could Jesus hear the crowd while he was by myself?)

When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick.

(I wonder if the crowd kept their distance or if they were pushing on Jesus? Trying their hardest to get as close as they could so they could be healed?)

That evening his disciples came and said to him, "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

But Jesus said to them, "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat."

They replied, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish."

He said, "Bring them here to me." He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples.

(I wonder what this all smelled like? Was the bread stale? Crunchy? What did the fish feel like?)

Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers.

(What was the chatter of the crowd here? Did everyone eat with the people they came with? Did they find new friends that they shared food with?)

About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.

What did you see? Hear? Feel? Smell? Anything new you experienced with this little exercise? That's okay if not, it can take lots of practice to open up our imaginations and listen for something new in a story that you may or may not know by heart.

But opening up our minds to this creative thinking and work is so important and one of our callings as Christians and as humans. Because when we imagine new things, when we get creative with traditions and rituals that hold special meaning to us, we can often find a hope stirring within us and the community.

It's important to recognize and remember our traditions, that's how we have beautiful liturgy and movements around our sacraments and spiritual practices like the Lectio Divina. But we also know how important it is to try new things within those traditions that might highlight something new or explain something that brings even more people to the table.

So, I want to encourage y'all to try something new this week, and more than that, use your *imagination* to find something new you want to do this week. Even if that something new goes poorly, even if you're not perfect at it and you'll only do it the once. Try something new and see what emotions that brings out in you, and then do it again and again and again because our imaginations and our hopes and our dreams are wonderful God-given gifts that can bring us hope in times that feel less than hopeful sometimes. Amen.