

Pentecost 21
13/10/2024

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 25:6-10a

Psalm 116

Revelation 21:1-6

God's Real World

Sermon preached by Alisha Fung

What do you imagine?

We are given a scripture today of tangible and tasty images from the Book of Isaiah.

The only place in the Bible, in fact, where we're given *this much* description of food and drink.

And so, it's a scripture we're meant to really sink our teeth into.

But it's also a scripture we were meant to sing.

And in its rhythm and reverberations we just heard read, maybe we can even begin to imagine this day of celebration and restoration.

A time where all people are gathered on the mountain of God, sitting at the table of God with rich food filled with marrow and well-aged wine.

A time where the covering of sorrow and suffering, despair and death is lifted.

Where every tear is wiped dry,

where death will be no more and

where we will be glad and rejoice at last.

But do we really let these images sink into our minds, mold into our muscles and become a part of *our* marrow?

Do we let hope become part of our body, our breath and our being?

Or do we, like the wealthy guests invited to a master's banquet, *turn away*?

While I was doing my period of discernment a few years ago before candidating with the UCA, I was encouraged to take an improv workshop.

Even though I was new to improv, never having done drama in my life, there was something about it that was deeply intuitive.

It reminded me of my early childhood days in a way that I had completely forgotten; some of which were the most nourishing times of my life.

It wasn't because of the clubs I was a part of, the vacations I went on or the kinds of toys I had.

It was because of my imagination.

I remember how easy it was to jump in and out of different personas like becoming a witch with my friend next door, making potions out of her mother's herb garden.

To becoming one of the Spice Girls and performing in the corner of a playground. (I was Posh Spice if you were wondering)

But my fondest memory by far was spending the weekend creating a world with a bucket full of street chalk.

I remember the freeness of my imagination as I drew out railways, roads, and restaurants on the blank canvas that was the driveway.

And when the masterpiece was done, I remember taking a cardboard box and making it into a car as I drove around the world I created.

I didn't care that in rainy Vancouver, the clouds would come and wash away my world as quickly as I had created it.

It was just an excuse to do it again the next time the sun came out.

Looking back at it now, there was nothing that filled me with more joy than the spleness of creating something out of nothing.

And it made me realize that, as children, imagination is as natural and as necessary as the air we breathe and the water we drink.

It was second nature to me and my hunch is, it was second nature for you.

And then something happens.

We grow up and we enter the real world.

In the song 'Aint no rest for the wicked', Matt Shultz sings: "Money don't grow on trees, we got bills to pay, we got mouths to feed, there ain't nothing in this world for free."

In other words, we set limits on our lives, boundaries around what's possible.

We let the fast-paced rat race and the frequency of our news inform our world view of what's fact, what's fiction and what to be frightened of.

But this doesn't just happen during our Monday to Fridays.

We often bring this temperament to the places we worship, not wanting it to disrupt us too much from our *real world*.

And so, if we're not paying close attention, church can become a tempered and tame animal, within our calculated control.

And when a hint of imagination does surface, we might feel that it is either too dangerous or too disillusioned.

We mock it, we smother it but, at worst, we crucify it and leave it in the realm of our childhoods.

And yet, as Carl Sagan the American scientist said, "Imagination can carry us to worlds that never were. But without it, we go nowhere."

And this is the wisdom our scripture in Isaiah is tapping into:

that our imaginations are necessary for the fullness of life and are often stimulated, if not necessarily activated, in the presence of nothing.

For this was the context in which the prophet of Isaiah was writing from, amidst a time where the Jewish people were covered in sorrow and suffering, despair and death, exiled from their home and their place of worship.

In other words, a time of extreme change and extreme loss.

Does this sound familiar? As we look at the state of our church, our country, our world or maybe even our own lives in a rapidly changing 21st century and as war and death reign overseas?

Imagining hope seems like it should be the last thing on the menu;

and yet, as we hear in our scripture,

this defiance despite reality

is actually what begins to change hearts, lives and, eventually, leads God's people into new ways of experiencing God in seemingly desolate, despairing and desert times.

It's like how Jim Wallis, the founder of the Sojourners magazine, says it "trusting God in spite of all the evidence, and then watching how the evidence changes."

Now hear what I'm not saying.

I'm not saying that we should use our imaginations to escape the realities of this world.

I'm not saying imagination should take the place of acting for justice in the world.

And I'm not saying that imagination is reserved for those with nothing.

What I *am* saying is when we give our imaginations over to God, it becomes the key that connects us to *God's* real-world.

George MacDonald, the Scottish author, poet and minister of the 19th century, says it this way: "It is by imagination God enters into our world, so that through imagination we can enter into the world of God."

And it is through *this* kind of imagining we can begin to join in God's feast.

But it might not be as comfortable as we think it is.

It is a feast, after all, that reorients all are misconceptions of who gets to take part:

It's a feast for all the wrong kinds of people, of Pharisees and foes, sinners and Samaritans, the disenfranchised and the desolate.

But this is the song that's being sung in Isaiah today, and it's not the only place where it's sung.

Hannah echoes this deep knowing in 1 Samuel by singing, "Those who were full hire themselves out for food, but those who were hungry are hungry no more."

And again this tune is carried by Mary in the Gospel of Luke when she sings, "The Lord fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty."

And our scripture in Revelation takes these songs of God's feast of celebration and restoration, of wiping away tears and swallowing up death forever and riffs them and reverberates them into the here and now.

Notice the present tense in our Revelation reading, "It *is* done".

Because the thing about our Christian story, about the Christ event, is that time and space collapses in itself so that the day of God's feast is not just in the end, not just in the beginning but here amongst us now.

That is, the Alpha *through* to the Omega, the beginning to the end.

God who, from the beginning, made creation out of nothing makes Jesus out of the nothingness of this world, dust of the earth, matter from an unmarried Jewish teenager.

He had Isaiah's, Hannah's and his mom's song sung to him while he was bouncing on his mother's knee.

He lived out these imaginings in his ministry, eating with all the wrong kinds of people and every uninvited guest, feeding the hungry, healing the hurt, freeing the enslaved, wiping away every tear from every eye.

And it was the power of *this* imagining that led him to his death and resurrection where he swallowed up death forever.

And here's the wild thing: we are left with the rhythm and the reverberations of this imagining *now*.

So when we participate in communion, we are meant to make real the fact that we *are* participating in God's holy feast where every tear *is* wiped dry,

where death *is* no more, and

where gladness and rejoicing *is* realized at last.

When we eat what, sometimes, tastes worse than nothing in these small bits of bread, we are eating the rich food filled with marrow at God's table where all things are made new.

When we drink this ordinary juice, we are drinking the well-aged wine from the spring of life where the covering of sorrow and suffering, despair and death *is* passing away.

These are the bits of nothing, the mustard seeds, the pinch of yeast that yields a radical celebration and restoration in *God's* real world

A feast that will happen on the last day, has happened since the beginning of time and *is* happening here and now.

You see, communion isn't *just* about eating these visible signs of God's promise, it's about embodying them.

While we're standing idly, we're invited to imagine wildly the glass ceilings to our imaginations being shattered in light of what *is* possible.

We're invited to join in these songs of old sung by these prophets so that *we* might live this radical feast in *our* lives.

And we're invited to let these visions melt into our minds, mold into our muscles so that it might become part of our marrow.

Because when we come to the table in a moment, we have a profound opportunity to partake in the new heaven that *is* coming to this world.

A world where all will gather at God's feast on the last day, from the beginning and even here and now.

So whether it be through a bucket full of street chalk, a mustard seed, some bread or some wine....

What do you imagine?

For it is the power through which we can participate in God's feast at last.
