

“Just My Imagination”
Matthew 3:1-12, Isaiah 11:1-10
December 4, 2016
Second Sunday of Advent
The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings
Holy imagination can lead us to holy truth

So last Sunday, I was doing what I normally do, standing here in the pulpit delivering a sermon. Now every once in a while, I get interrupted during a sermon. Maybe someone drops a hymnal with a loud “bang!” Perhaps a baby starts crying or on a stormy Sunday maybe we get a loud clap of thunder, or we hear an ambulance go through the village with its siren blaring. Lots of things can happen and I try to just keep on going as if nothing had happened. But last Sunday was a bit difficult. I was in the middle of my sermon about a Promise for the Future and I was leaning into the pulpit a bit with my right arm leaning on the pulpit. As I glanced down at my notes I noticed a slight, quick movement across the sleeve of my robe. I instantly realized that a light gray spider had crawled across my sleeve and stopped in the fold of my robe's cuff. Now I would like to say that I was disciplined enough to just ignore it, let it find its way out and down to the floor. But I was alarmed enough that I, without really thinking about it, reached up, killed it and brushed it on to the floor. I'm usually pretty big on saying that we can see God in all of creation, but I was having a hard time seeing the hand of God in this spider. In any case I went on preaching. Now you may not know it, but occasionally, when I'm preaching, random stray thoughts can enter my head for an instant, even when I am concentrating on the sermon that I am delivering. Last Sunday, the thought entered my head, “Boy I hope there aren't any more of those spiders hiding somewhere here in the pulpit.” And then I went on. But soon a second stray thought entered my head, “What if it didn't come from the pulpit but what if it had been hiding in my robe? And what if there are more?” But again I went on, concluded my sermon and went on with the rest of the service. But my imagination had begun to run wild. I started imagining feeling things on my arm, or on the back of my neck. There wasn't really anything there, it was just my imagination, but imagination is a powerful thing. I have to say I got out of the robe as quickly as

possible after church. Nothing there of course. Just my imagination. But imagination can take you interesting places. It was for Isaiah and for John the Baptist as well. Both of them had heard about the coming Day of the Lord, a time in the future when God would step into history. For Isaiah his imagination sees it as a time when the wolf shall dwell with the lamb and the leopard lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together will live and a little child shall lead them. An image of what is often called the Peaceable Kingdom. "They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, says God, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." That sounds great, doesn't it? I hope that's not a flight of fancy but imagination leading to something true. Something to look forward to.

But what does John imagine? "You brood of vipers? Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. He will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into barns, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Ok, I'm not looking forward to this one as much. Are they imagining the same Day? How can they both be seeing the same thing? What is it that the future holds? Is it the Peaceable Kingdom or is it Fire? Is there one of these prophets who is letting his imagination run away with him? Because we know imagination can be powerful, so powerful it can lead us to imagine things that are not there. But it is also so powerful that it can lead us to truth. Which is going on here?

Actually I think that both their imaginations are leading to truth, that the Peaceable Kingdom is an image of the future that God has in store for his creation, but it will not be arrived at easily. It's important to understand that the fire that John speaks of is not the hellfire and brimstone that we so often think about. Some of us went last Sunday to the Messiah sing at First Congregational Church in Kalamazoo. One of the pieces they did from Handel's Messiah was the baritone solo, "He is like a refiner's fire." One of the outstanding things about that part of the Messiah is that Handel wrote it so that the strings act like flames of fire. But like John sees it, this fire is a fire not that is destructive, but that refines. As the theologian Nancy Rockwell has said, "The unquenchable fire, which is of God and

is God, is not hellfire, but the fire of redemption through re-creation.”¹

The end of this passage has been translated that he's going to create a “fire within you, The Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He's going to clean house, make a clean sweep of your lives.” That's what John envisions, not people being burned up, but trash being burned and people being made new. Both of these texts are about “re-creation,” about the created order and our very souls returning to what they were intended to be.

Do we have enough imagination to envision that? Do we have that kind of imagination that runs away with us and take us someplace that we never expected? As Frederick Buechner has said, “My question is this: Are there in us, in you and me now, that recklessness of the loving heart, that wild courage, that crazy gladness in the face of darkness and death, that shuddering faithfulness even unto the eand of the world, through which new things can come to pass.”²

Do we have that kind of imagination? Do we have enough holy imagination to see new things? Often at the end of our pastoral prayer or even when we pronounce a benediction we say as we go out into the world, “may you see the face of Christ in everyone you meet.” Do we have the holy imagination to do that? To really do that? Do you see the face of Christ in one another? Do you see the face of Christ in the person who walked past you in Meijer, who cut in line in front of you at the deli counter? Was Christ there? What about in the refugee? Jesus and his family were refugees, weren't they? Can you see him in the Syrian refugee fleeing across the Mediterranean? Not the face of the child who is suffering, or not just there. But what about in the face of the angry young man forced to leave his home and he doesn't know who to blame? Is Christ there also? What about the newly empowered white supremacist, claiming that this country is only for people like him, only for Christians, only for those of Anglo heritage? As you are turned off by him, do you still see the face of Christ? Do we have enough imagination to see Christ in *everyone* we meet? Can we see their fears, their frustrations, can we see the grieving, weeping Christ within them? Do we have enough holy imagination to know that

1 Rockwell, Nancy. *A Bite at the Apple*.

2 Buechner, Frederick. *The Magnificent Defeat*.

the Peaceable Kingdom includes us all, even them?

Imagination leads us to place we have not been before. God uses holy imagination to show us where he is leading us.