

The Park Road Pulpit
Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church
Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors



Leaving a Lot to Our Imagination
Jeremiah 1.4-10; 1 Corinthians 13.1-13
Russ Dean, January 24, 2010

Can you imagine? Can you imagine!?

How many times have you heard the question? Most often it is stated rhetorically, as it has been recently, regarding several tragic events – events of world news, and news for this church family. Can you imagine? (No.) We just shake our heads. When an event is too magnificent to grasp, too catastrophic to comprehend, or too sad to personalize, we offer up that happening to the nether regions of our minds – we leave it to our imagination. How ironic. You know? For the magnitude seven earthquake that just pushed the impoverished country of Haiti over the edge of ruin – was hardly imaginary. And neither is death imaginary. No matter when it comes. To whom it comes. How it comes.

If we cannot imagine the sublime, the tragic, the ridiculous, the improbable... it's only because we have not yet experienced enough of what really is real in this life – you know, reality. Nearly all of the unimaginably good or unimaginably bad happenings of “Can you imagine?” are hardly imaginary at all. “Truth is stranger than fiction.” It really is. Years ago I had watched Hollywood’s latest offering with a friend. The movie featured a crime of unimaginable brutality as the center-point of the plot, prompting me to say afterwards, “Surely this couldn’t really happen.” My friend said, soberly, “Russ, it’s hard to write about something that hasn’t happened.”

It’s hard to imagine something too good, or too bad to be part of our reality.

So why is it that we relegate so many items of scriptural hope to the category of the imaginary dreaming of some overwrought religious fanatic? Do you hear what I'm asking? If the very best... and the very worst that we can even imagine... hardly have to be imagined in this world at all – why do we disregard the vision of Jesus for a world ruled by the justice and mercy of God, why do we deem that kind of world unattainable, impossible, unreal – unimaginable? Forgiveness, as many of you have experienced, is not imaginary. It really is real. Can you imagine? (And what could be more impossible than forgiveness?) Grace is not imaginary. It really happens! (Sometimes someone else really does have to step in to life me up, help me, to save me!) Can you imagine? Love... self-giving... sacrificial... unconditional... *lay-down-your-life-for-your-friend* (John 15.13) love is not the figment of your imagination. There's actually nothing more real in all the world. Can you imagine?

So... the end of war in Iraq... war in Afghanistan... the end of war... and a home for all of Charlotte's homeless... and a hot meal for all of the world's children (every single one of them)... and a cure for cancer... and life in a nation in which all "children will one day... be judged [not] by the color of their skin but by the content of their character"¹... and the end of the oppression of the homosexual... and the welcome of the foreigner, yes, the immigrant... and God's kingdom, come "*on earth, as it is in heaven*"... (Matthew 6.10).

Can you imagine?

Apparently that's the key. And apparently, we cannot even imagine. "Reality," as John Lennon said, really does "leave a lot to our imagination."² Indeed, it leaves too much.

¹ This quotation is from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s famous speech, "I Have a Dream."

² I do not have a proper citation for this quotation.

The prophet Jeremiah records a conversation between himself and the God of Israel. Such was the intimacy of the prophets of old with the God for whom they dared to speak. Not only did they claim to speak for God; they claimed to speak to God. The text is generally read imagining God as the All-Knowing and All-Powerful. *Before I formed you... I knew you...* As if our days are, even before we are born, pre-ordained, designed, set for us in some grand plan for the ages. But as I read these words, thinking of finding God through our imagination, I imagined the God to whom Jeremiah spoke as the Abba, the father Jesus claimed him to be. And I imagined God, imagining the birth of a son, Jeremiah. (I did that once-, twice-upon-a-time!) Dreaming the best for him. Knowing, just knowing, what he would be like. Consecrating him, that is, giving the son the father's blessing, setting him apart as sacred by giving him the promise of the father's heart.

And God, the Father who dreams of the very best for his children, who imagines a world filled with all the goodness and prosperity and blessing that a father can possibly imagine, came alive for me in a new way. God imagines? Can you imagine?³

In some of the most famous words in all of scripture, the Apostle Paul speaks to an ancient church in Corinth, as he speaks to us, about unimaginable love. *It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things... Love (and love alone) never ends.* Even when faith is not... cannot... Love abides. Even when hope dies... is darkened by the crush of despair and loneliness and mental disturbance and death... Even when there is no hope... Love

³ This text is often cited by member of the “pro-life” movement as proof of their agenda: God knows us, from the moment of conception... We are fully human, worthy of the status of personhood even in the womb. I am not taking aim at the pro-life agenda, but I do not support that reading of Jeremiah's text. It is anachronistic to apply an anti-abortion understanding to Jeremiah's words. Jeremiah's purpose is to speak of God's all-encompassing knowledge, which authorizes his prophetic ministry. Furthermore, the text does not claim that God knows Jeremiah in the womb – but that God knows Jeremiah even before conception, “*before I formed you in the womb I knew you...*” Rather than taking this text woodenly, as if God, literally, has a picture of each of us in mind before we are born, I am viewing this rich imagery through the eyes of a father who has known what it is like to “see” or “know” what my child will be, through the eyes of my imagination.

abides. And though these words sound absolutely too good to be true, anyone who has ever known love, will not have to imagine – for somewhere deep down, we just know this is right.

Deborah Smith Douglass, who writes for a journal on Christian spirituality called “Weavings,” says she learned of this kind of knowing as a sophomore at Duke University. “The old certainties of childhood were rocking beneath me,” she says, “and grown-up life did not appear to have much to recommend it.” How many of us have known the disconcerting uncertainty of learning to think for ourselves? Have felt the very ground of faith shaking beneath our feet, as a quake of its own destructive magnitude? The iconoclastic and wise Will Campbell once told me, “Once you get educated, nothing is ever easy again.”⁴ And Deborah Smith Douglass was there, she says, asking new questions... entertaining new doubts... contending with new, unimaginable possibilities for her world, when she looked down and noticed a large paw print painted on the flagstone. And then another. And then another, which she followed until, at the end of the series she found the words, painted by the same graffiti prophet, “Aslan Lives!” And she says, “I knew, with a rush of tears to my eyes and of joy to my heart, that it was simply *true*.”

Aslan, as you may know, is the great mythic beast of the *Chronicles of Narnia* by C.S. Lewis. He is Lewis’s Christ figure, a huge lion who teaches and protects, and who eventually is killed by the dark powers, but rises, unexpectedly, to new life.

I hadn’t thought of Aslan in years (she says), though he... had made himself at home in my imagination more than a decade before. I was not reflecting on allegory or metaphor; I did not analyze my reaction. I simply, with all my heart,

⁴ I was a sophomore at Furman University and, as a result of taking Introduction to Philosophy, the “certainties of my childhood were rocking beneath me.” Campbell spoke in a Furman chapel service, and his words angered me – because I knew they were true. Now that Philosophy had opened the doors of doubt and question, nothing would ever be easy again. It has not – but walking through those doors has made my faith much deeper than it could have been if it had remained easy.

recognized the transforming truth of the affirmation. Aslan is alive. Resurrection happens. Christ is risen. In a single leap, Aslan had bounded past the watchful dragons of my mind and all the intervening years to return... – deep within my consciousness of God. Because my whole childhood rose up to greet the Lion, my tenuously sophisticated young-adult self had no defenses against the saving “alleluia!” truth of that moment.⁵

The “saving truth” of that moment came, not by scientific inquiry, nor by analytical reasoning. Not by mathematical proof, nor by logical conclusion. The life-changing, God-encompassing truth of that moment came to a faith-shaken college sophomore on the wings of her imagination. It was a truth she recognized... with all her heart.

Aslan lives. Resurrection happens. Christ is risen. Can you imagine?

We must teach our children to imagine. Not some fanciful world of wish fulfillment. Not of some Grandfather God who answers our prayers if we pray them rightly. Not of a world and a life that a manipulative God has predetermined us to walk into... But we must teach them to use their imaginations, to see the world that God is imagining with us. The world that God is longing for us to see. The world that God, with all God’s heart, is hoping we will help to create.

Maybe it seems odd that Paul inserts into his beautiful passage about love a statement deeply laden with eschatological significance. Eschatology is the study of the end. Last things. Or, lasting things. *For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then...* Then? Yes, in the eschaton... in the end. *Then, we will see face to face...* Oh, leave it to a preacher to ruin a beautiful moment, the deep poetry of love and its effects, to ruin this sentimentality with a lesson in eschatology! But maybe the preacher is asking us to consider the unexpected connection between eschatology and... cardiology. Paul merges his hope for the end, for the way things should be – with love.

⁵ Deborah Smith Douglas, “To See With the Eyes of the Heart,” in *Weavings*, Jan/Feb 1997, p.21.

Paul joins his hope for an unimaginable future with his belief in unimaginable love – neither of which should be unimaginable at all. He joins his hope for the future with the way we use our hearts, now. For we can only know God if we can imagine God. And we can only really imagine God if we can feel God – with our hearts. Not our heads. Not our hands. Not our feet. These are important for Paul, as he makes clear by his other teaching and by his own life, but here he suggests that we must see that future, imagine that “what will be,” offer up our imaginations to be baptized by in love.... , if we ever hope for that future to become reality.⁶

Imagination is a matter of the heart. No one says, “Can you imagine?” dispassionately – no matter what they’re imagining. Imagination is a matter of the heart, and all of the hopes, the wildest dreams of God for this world, are a matter of our imagination. Yes, “reality [really does] leave a lot of room for our imagination,” but as the poet Kahlil Gibran says, the space between our imagining and our attaining... must be “traversed by [our] longing.”⁷

So... what can you do? What is this sermon asking of you? A few suggestions... Read a book. You might start with the *Chronicles of Narnia*. Go to a movie. Listen to an opera. Take up painting. Tour your neighborhood through the lens of your camera. Write a poem. Listen, during Lent, to the New Testament – and make note of all the wild dreams of Jesus and his disciples. Let your imagination go, and ask God to baptize it with the blessing of your own heart.

What would happen if we ever really did let our imaginations run wild?⁸

Can you imagine?

⁶ Today’s opening meditation was from Robert Fulgum: “I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge – myth is more potent than history – dreams are more powerful than facts – hope always triumphs over experience – laughter is the cure for grief – love is stronger than death.”

⁷ This quotation by Gibran was printed as the final meditation in today’s bulletin: “There is a space between man’s imagination and man’s attainment that may only be traversed by his longing.”

⁸ This confession was part of today’s service: Forgive us, O God, when we cannot see. *Enlighten the eyes of our hearts* that our world may newly brim with unexpected births, truth in parables and in practice and, despite the suffering of a fallen world, resurrection joy – all around. Enlighten our eyes. Hold up our hearts. That our “reality might leave a lot to our imagination.” Amen. (from Ephesians 1 and John Lennon)

May it be so!