

Isaiah 2:1-5
November 27 2016
Advent's Imagination

A couple weeks ago, David stood up here and told you that he had planned to start his sermon with what he thought was something amusing, but that he knew I wouldn't approve -- and so whatever it was got red-penciled right out of his sermon. So of course after the service that day, any number of people came up to me and asked "what was it you told David not to say?"

The embarrassing thing was, there are so *many* things that I've shut down that I had no idea which one this was. And when I told people **that**, they just kind of looked at me like "*that poor man -- he creates, and she critiques.*"

Truth be told, those **are** kind of the roles we fall into in our household. David **is** a writer, he's a poet. He creates. The last poem I wrote was some really bad haiku back in 7th grade. David is blissfully happy sitting at his desk in front of the bay window, writing and writing, creating, imagining, playing with words. I'm **not** creating. I'm blissfully happy when I'm fixing things that someone else created -- "That closet door closes now, hon!" And I like fixing what my husband creates, too. I'm the one who leans over his shoulder and says "there you go using 'literally' again!" Or "semicolon! not comma, semicolon!" And, yes, sometimes I **do** say -- "what? no! you can't tell that story!" This is why David calls me The Editrix. My aunt, in fact, *was* a copy editor for Little Brown book publishers, and I always thought that was an awesome job --

she spent all day every day with a red pencil,
fixing other people's prose.

"Hello, Dr. Kissinger?" I once heard her say on the phone,
"I'm afraid that whole chapter needs work."

But, as much as I like the **fixing**, I have to admit --
I do envy David.

I'd **love** to be able to write poetry --

I'd love to paint pictures with words, to create images that dance before
people's eyes.

I'd love to paint pictures with *paint*, for that matter,
to be like the artists that we are so richly blessed with in this church --

All summer long this year,

we had beautiful paintings up here every Sunday,

all by members of this imaginative and creative church --

like the painting by Megan Brown which graces the cover of our Advent booklet.

Deep down, I'd love to be the creator

and not just the critic, as good as it feels to put a semicolon in the right place.

I'd love to have that gift of imagination.

The prophet Isaiah, who lived almost three thousand years ago,
well, he had the gift of imagination.

He was a poet.

There are sixty-six books in the Bible,

but it's the book of Isaiah that you'll hear most frequently in this season of
Advent,

because it was Isaiah who wrote beautifully, poetically, about a world he
imagined was coming soon.

And he wrote about who would lead that world:

a little child shall lead them he said, a Prince of peace.

A Messiah.

The lion shall lie down with the lamb, Isaiah said,
even the desert will blossom with flowers.

When the Messiah comes,

the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God
as the waters cover the sea.

Isaiah lived, you see, in a time when things were really rough;
when there was constant strife, and the money that kings could have spent on
the poor was spent on war,
and the people were hurting.

And Isaiah was saying to them, "Listen to me, listen to me.

God has better plans for us.

Listen to me paint a picture for you in my words."

And the picture he painted in poetry was what you heard Karin/Grant read:

There will come a day, Isaiah said, there will be a day,
when all God's people will turn their swords into plows,
and their spears into pruning hooks,

Nation will not take up sword against nation,

nor will they train for war anymore."

Imagine with me, Isaiah was saying. Imagine with me.

In the country of Mozambique, in Africa,

ten years ago,

there were four artists who came together to create a sculpture,

a sculpture called the Tree of Life,

with a strong and sturdy trunk,

and a great overhang of delicate leaves,

all metal, from the heavy trunk to the spreading foliage.

Not just any metal, though.

What they used to create the sculpture, which now stands in the British
Museum, was guns.

The guns which had flooded into their country over the long years of a brutal
civil war,

guns which other governments had sent in to arm both sides of the conflict,
and which, at war's end, were everywhere still.

So a Christian church in Mozambique commissioned the artists
to bring the word of the prophet Isaiah to life.

And they took those guns,
and with the imagination of true artists,
and the creativity of believers,
they let Isaiah's words guide their hands.
Swords into Plowshares, spears into pruning hooks, guns into sculpture.
The leaves of the Tree of Life are made from little pieces of AK-47s.

I saw an interview just the other day with the artists themselves.
"It was hard for us, making it," they said,
"we thought of how many lives had been taken by the guns we were melting.
But this tree, this tree was made to give hope.
We imagine that we will all sit together in the shade of a great tree
and discuss all problems
and achieve a lasting peace."

With their artistry, they created a vision of what the world should be --
all peoples gathered under the shade of a great spreading tree
and together finding peace.
It's that same vision that the prophet Isaiah created with his words;
a world where swords become farm implements, plowshares;
spears become gardening tools.
The eye of the artist, the words of the poet,
years ago and now --
both imagining the world as God created it to be,
the world as it is not yet.

In Advent, we remember that we live in the not-yet time.
The word Advent means simply "it's coming,"
and in this season we remember the world as God intended it is still to come.
In Advent we are called to pray for that world,
In Advent, we are called to work for that world.
But before that, before we can do that,
we have to imagine it.
We are called to creative believing.

And for that, we don't need artistic talent.

Regardless of whether we're any good with words,
or have the vaguest idea of what to do with a paintbrush,
it doesn't matter--

Advent calls **all** of us to be poets of faith,
artists of belief,
imagining, imagining a world in which, yes,
nations shall learn war no more.

A world in which, yes, every child will be loved,
every one shall live, as the Bible says, 'neath their vine and fig tree.

We can't work toward it until we picture it --
with the prophet Isaiah for company, we have to imagine it, to dream it
in order to start living toward it.

Every year, at around this time,
CNN does something that has nothing to do with politics or talking heads --
Each year they air a holiday special on heroes.
From around the world, they collect nominations from people everywhere who
know of someone who should be celebrated,
someone whose life and work brings hope to others.

I love watching this show -- I love to be inspired by the goodness that is
everywhere in this world, by people whose courage and vision leave me in awe.

Some of heroes over the years have really stuck with me.

One in particular was a man who was on the show six years ago,
a guy named Magnus MacFarlane,
who grew up in Argyll, Scotland and lives there still.

As a young man, he dropped out of university and became a salmon farmer,
and was quite content with that as his life's work.

But then one night, in 1992, he and his brother were down at the local pub,
having their customary pint, or two --
when the TV in the pub aired a story about the conflict in Bosnia,
and the suffering of the people there.

And the story did something to his heart.

So over their beers, he and his brother hatched a plan -- they would ask their neighbors for contributions of food and clothing, they would rent a truck, and actually drive to Bosnia to distribute aid. And this -- remarkably -- they actually did.

They filled a truck with stuff, drove into Bosnia in a time of war, distributed, and left.

And as Magnus and his brother drove back home, they congratulated themselves on having done a rather extraordinary good deed.

Until they turned up the driveway to the family home, and saw that everywhere, everywhere, in the garage and the sheds and piled under tarps, were more donations of food and clothing that had come in while they were gone.

So Magnus kept driving to Bosnia; his brother came with him, friends, his dad helped out.

Eventually he quit salmon farming because, he said, "it was becoming pretty obvious what God had in mind for me"

-- and he started his own non-profit dedicated to international relief.

And now, 24 years later, Magnus MacFarlane's organization feeds 1.2 million children every day in 15 countries.

From Haiti to Zambia to Malawi and even into South Sudan, where they are one of few organizations still venturing into that place of suffering.

Magnus named his organization "Mary's meals," because, he explains, Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew what it was to be a refugee, and knew what it was to raise a child in poverty.

So the meals we give, he said, are her meals -- they are a sign of God's own mercy in this world.

And here's what else he says --

Everyone of good will in this world wants to see the hungry child fed.

And so I dream of the day when that is true, when every child has food and a school to go to.

All of us, he said, are called to see that vision and to work toward it.

And that, that's imagination.

It might be imagination that began over a pint of beer in a pub,
but that's okay --

Magnus MacFarlane's entire story is the living out of imagination,
the imagination of belief, the poetic vision of the world God created.

Magnus MacFarlane, and every person like him on this earth --
and there are many --

they are all led forward by that same vision Isaiah had,
a vision of a world as God intended it to be.

They dream of what can be, and say why not.

And they are out there feeding, and loving, and dreaming,
caring, and educating, and dreaming,
imagining and doing. Imagining and doing.

These past weeks, these past months in this country,
have been hard.

They have not felt like a time of poetry or imagined beauty,
there has been harshness and hurt --

and for everyone buoyed by hope, there has been another person weighed
down by fear.

No one knows quite what lies ahead in this nation of ours.

Which means that now -- and not just because it's Advent --
now is the time for us to be the imaginers -- and the doers.

Now is the time to see the vision and to work toward it --
to be God's presence of hope in whatever way we can,
in whatever corner of the world we inhabit,
with whatever capabilities we have.

Even the smallest acts of love, done in the service of God,
move us closer to the world that Isaiah imagined.

Over the course of this next week, as December arrives, I guarantee
you'll hear radio stations start to play an Advent song.

They won't call it that, because they won't know that that's what it is.

They'll just be playing a beautiful song in honor of the musician who wrote it,
an artist who left this life on a cold December day,
a artist who, whether he knew it or not, wrote an Advent song about
imagination.

*Imagine all the people living life in peace,
you'll hear John Lennon sing.*

No need for greed or hunger

A brotherhood of man.

Imagine all the people, sharing all the world.

You may say I'm a dreamer/ But I'm not the only one.

Imagine is an Advent song.

In this Advent season, **you** find ways to be the dreamer.

Find ways toward the vision.

From the dollar in the Salvation Army kettle

to the ornament you take off the Giving Tree this morning.

From the kindness to a stranger to the love you show to a friend.

From the faith that you allow to blossom

to the hope that you let yourself feel.

Believe again in the vision,

imagine a world where hope, faith and love are all that is known --

imagine it, and work toward it.

Amen.