

Sermon Advent 3 Year B 2023; Gospel John 1: 6-8, 19-28

Advent: Imagination, Dreams and Possibility *

“To the One God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.”

I'd like to talk about poetry for a few minutes. I like poetry, although I wish I was better at capturing the meaning of poems, of understanding where the poet is trying to take me. But sometimes it comes through. Sometimes a poem opens me to imagine things that I would never have thought possible. In poetry things become possible because of the way the poet uses words and images to convey meaning and truth and possibility and hope. Webster's dictionary defines poetry as writing that stimulates an imaginative awareness of experiences, in language chosen to create an emotional response through meaning, sound, and rhythm. The part of that definition that resonates with me is “imaginative awareness.” Imagination! Poetry helps us to imagine, to open our minds to possibility we might otherwise miss. Through it we can do things that logic or reason don't permit. It breaks down the walls that the language of logic and reason build, walls built to control, walls that restrict our ability to see beauty and truth and possibility. Poetry opens the world beyond reason. Poetry allows—even encourages—contradictions and tensions that logic denies. Poetry will not only remember but also propose and wonder and imagine. It can be beautiful.

Scripture is full of poetry. It was for the Jews their way of conveying truth and hope. Miriam did poetry when they crossed out of Egyptian slavery. Deborah did poetry when it dawned on them that the Canaanites were not so formidable. Hannah did poetry when little Samuel was born. Eventually Mary did poetry when she found out she was pregnant. All these mothers in Israel celebrated the impossible that was right before their eyes, even though they could explain none of it. These women did poetry while most men were analyzing logic, writing down memos and rules, trying to control things. This season of Advent is our time for watching and hopeful waiting, but Advent can

also be a time of tension, tension between the promise of poems that open the future that God dreams, and the memos and rules we follow that keep things under control, the status quo. Advent is a time for relinquishing some of that control in order to receive the seemingly impossible from God. Listen to some of the words of poetry from the prophet Isaiah: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.” (Isa 11:6) And: “the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners.” (Isa 61:1) Remember the context of when those words were written. The Jews were captives in Babylon. Their lives had been turned upside down; many of their loved ones including families and children killed; their freedom stripped away by their oppressors. Their city Jerusalem had been destroyed. Their temple had been demolished, burned to the ground. They had been carried off to Babylon to become slaves once again. And yet their poetry so beautifully expresses their hope, their confidence that somehow God’s dream for them would become their reality. Again from Isaiah: “They will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.” (Isa 11:9) Amazing! Their poetry, their new song, is a protest against the way the world is now. It is a refusal to accept the present world as it is, a refusal to believe this is right or that the present will last. Righteousness and justice will overrule raw power in this new world. It is a dream, a dream that God is at work within the brokenness of their lives, a dream of what can be, a dream of what is possible, a dream of imagining life as God means it to be. And their poetry announces and affirms that dream.

We are not unlike those ancient exiles, scattered and often hopeless where we feel powerless, sensing that the world is resistant to change, aware that the policies and practices around us are aimed not at life but at death. Gun violence, wars, climate change, hatred, all reflective of a world so unlike the

dream of God, so unlike God's vision of a world that can be so different, so unlike the psalmist's words we heard today, these words: "We were like those who dream. Our mouth was filled with laughter, and our tongue with shouts of joy..." Poetry again, songs that boldly assert and declare that God has plans and purposes that will reorder the world, to bring wholeness and health to the needy, to our country so divided and fearful, and to the entire creation now under such assault; songs that in the face of our present struggles assert God's presence and vision for the future; words that carry us to imagine what can be. These are words of hope in the face of despair, words of possibility, words even of joy, so appropriate for this the third Sunday of Advent, and the light of our pink candle symbolic of joy. But they are more than just words, because they can energize us to act.

Perhaps what we need is a sacred imagination. John Philip Newell in his book Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul has a chapter called "Sacred Imagination," about the theologian Alexander John Scott. In the Celtic world imagination is a gift already given, already present within all of us. It is a way of knowing reality, a way of remembering who and what we really are, deeply within ourselves, beyond the trappings and distractions on the surface of our ordinary lives. The imagination is a bridge into the future, opening us to ways of seeing and living in a world that we know is possible but that is not fully realized—the world we wait for with hope during this Advent season, the world Jesus says is already here, if we will open our eyes to see it. "The Kingdom is among you," he said. Sacred imagination gives us the capacity to dream and then to create what is possible—a new world, a world where all things are sacred, all things interrelated, the earth and all humanity and all of creation. I think it is when we are true to this sacred interrelationship of earth and humanity that we can experience heaven on earth. I think that's what Jesus meant by "the Kingdom of God." I believe our salvation happens when we open up to the sacred within all things and translate it into action. We are broken, and by that I mean less than whole—less than our

potential—in so many ways, both within ourselves personally and between us as nations, races, and religions. If we are to be a part of making God’s vision for the world a reality, we need to tap into this imagination again. “The sum of the whole matter is this,” Scott said, that the role of sacred imagination is to help us remember the unity of all things, one another and the earth.

Enter John the Baptist. Actually in John’s gospel he is not called John the Baptist or John the Baptizer, or John the son of Zechariah. Those descriptions are from the synoptic gospels. In the Fourth Gospel he is just plain John. He is the first human introduced in John’s gospel, and his role is to be a witness for the coming *logos* and light of Jesus. And what is he witnessing to? To a new world. The Pharisees and the Romans don’t like him much. To them he has no authority, certainly no authority to baptize all those people coming to him. We see in the synoptics that he is a revolutionary prophet and agitator, a threat, because he is witnessing to change, to upsetting the status quo, to turning the elites of their religion and the Roman military regime on its head. He was ready for God’s kingdom to come and he was willing to speak out for it. He may not have used poetry like the older prophets, but he was speaking truth to power, just like the prophets like Isaiah who in their poetry and their songs imagined a picture of what was possible, a world beyond exclusion and rejection and hostility, a new world of justice and mercy and peace. A dream? Perhaps, but it is God’s dream, God’s vision for what is possible. No, it is more than just a dream. It is what motivates us and sustains us in our active work in making the dream reality.

I watched a sermon by our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry this week. He talked about this dream of God, this vision for what God wants our world to be. He recited a poem by Langston Hughes, the African American poet and novelist known for his portrayals of black life in American from the 20s through the 60s. He was an important artistic contributor to the Harlem Renaissance. The poem reads:

“Hold fast to dreams,
For if dreams die,
Life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.
Hold fast to dreams,
For when dreams **go**,
Life is a barren field,
Frozen with snow.”

Let us pray:

God, break open our imaginations this Advent, so that we might see a world shaped by your dream. Teach us a new song, a poem that heralds the new world that is coming, the new reality that is taking shape before our eyes. May we rejoice in its truth and power and join all creation in its loud amen! Amen!

*Sources:

Celebrating Abundance “Devotions for Advent” by Walter Brueggemann

Sacred Earth, Sacred Soul by John Philip Newell