

Our Future Depends on Imagination

The second of three sermons in the series

“Seeking Vitality and Renewal for Our Church”

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- Acts 10:1-28, 34-36, 44 ⁹ The next day, as they were on their way and coming near Joppa, Peter went up on the roof of the house about noon in order to pray. ¹⁰ He became hungry and wanted something to eat; while the food was being prepared, he had a vision. ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something coming down that looked like a large sheet being lowered by its four corners to the earth. ¹² In it were all kinds of animals, reptiles, and wild birds. ¹³ A voice said to him, “Get up, Peter; kill and eat!” ¹⁴ But Peter said, “Certainly not, Lord! I have never eaten anything ritually unclean or defiled.” ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him again, “Do not consider anything unclean that God has declared clean.” ¹⁶ This happened three times, and then the thing was taken back up into heaven.
- Joel 2:23a, 28-29 ²³ “Be glad, people of Zion,
rejoice at what the LORD your God has done for you....
²⁸ “Afterward I will pour out my Spirit on everyone:
your sons and daughters will proclaim my message;
your old people will have dreams,
and your young people will see visions.
²⁹ At that time I will pour out my Spirit
even on servants, both men and women.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God engages our faithful imaginations to point us toward new possibilities.

Imagination gets a bad rap. Some people think that imagination is something mostly for children to use to amuse themselves. They have imaginary friends. Children pretend they’re unicorns or cowboys or robots or ballerinas. They use their imaginations to envision themselves being something or somewhere that may never actually happen in their future.

But adults? If someone tells you, “Oh, you’re imagining things,” they’re implying that you’re off base, that you’ve misperceived a situation. There can even be a suggestion that you’re a little foolish for thinking the way you do. Being told that “You’re imagining things” tends to discourage you from sharing your thoughts and ideas. For adults and children the enemy of imagination is dismissive criticism. That’s when people dismiss an idea out-of-hand with responses like:

- “Who’d ever want to do THAT?!?”
- “Oh, we tried that before.”
- “That’ll never work.”
- “What a silly idea.”

But far from being a childish diversion, imagination is actually a potent resource. Indeed, a “faithful imagination” is one way God reveals God’s will.

Today's reading from the New Testament book called "The Acts of the Apostles" presents an example of God using the power of imagination to help Peter move past his current mindset and discover that God intends for something else, something different, something new, something more.

The story has a prologue about a military officer named Cornelius. Cornelius commands the Roman army occupying the Judean coastal town of Caesarea. Though a Roman and not a Jew, Cornelius was a devout man who had compassion for all people. While praying one day God directed Cornelius to send for Peter the apostle who was residing in the seaside town of Joppa to the south. **[Read Acts 10:1-8.]**

In the meantime, down in Joppa, just before lunchtime Peter was getting ready for his mid-day prayers. Maybe his stomach rumbled, maybe the aroma of food drifted by. His imagination fired up. Listen to what he imagined. **[Read Acts 10:9-16.]**

Before we move on, I'd like you all to close your eyes. Don't worry about looking silly; I promise to tell you when to open them again. So relax with your eyes closed, and ask yourself, *"As I heard that story, in my mind's eye what did I picture? How did my imagination allow me to engage in that story? What did the rooftop look like? What did Peter look like? The Bible talked about 'something coming down that looked like a large sheet being lowered by its four corners to the earth.' What did my imagination see? How big was it? How did it work, how did it move? Did I imagine any sounds or smells with it?"*

Okay, please open your eyes if you wish. Let's see how God used Peter's imagination to reveal to him something new, different, world-changing. **[Read Acts 10:17-28, 34-36, 44.]**

Our church is preparing to enter what I'm describing as a "season of Vitality & Renewal." It's a "season" because it's an extended period of time, not just a series of a few days or a few weeks or a few months. It's a time to explore where God is leading us now as a church. We can use this time to discover and embrace a renewed vision for our life together as a community of faith. How is God calling us to be actively engaged as Christ's welcoming arms and compassionate heart, Christ's servant hands and sympathetic ear?

This "season of Vitality & Renewal" is not an assignment or project to be carried out by me, or by some select group of individuals or even the Deacons or Session. Our engagement in this season welcomes and needs the participation of all of us – young and old, veterans and new:

- Whether you feel you have spiritual depth or you feel you're barely wading in the waters of discipleship...
- Whether thumbing through a Bible makes you feel comfortable or lost...
- Whether you're Presbyterian through-and-through or you're Presbyterian because this is the church you've landed in at this point in your life...

Whatever your circumstance, you are capable of contributing to this season of discovery. What's more, you're essential to it. The reason you're capable is because this season is not about what you can do; it's about what God can do through you. When it comes to this church, every single one of you has unique experiences and perspectives and hopes. It's truly exciting to *imagine* how God wants to fashion us now.

That's where imagination enters the picture.

Here's a practical example from right here at this church. The Garden Hall is what we call the lobby down by the kitchen and Fellowship Hall. The church library is in an alcove there. Long before I came here I'm told that the alcove used to be a cloakroom. By the time I arrived, it had been turned into a storage area filled with racks of folding chairs and tables. I remember that it was dark and dingy, dusty and dirty.

At the same time long ago we used to have a classroom down by the chapel that had some bookcases in it. That was the church library. Almost no one ever went there. People didn't tend to go down that hallway. It was out of the way.

Then someone proposed that we find somewhere else to store the tables and chairs and repurpose that old cloakroom/storage room for a church library. Moving the church library to that alcove in the Garden Hall would put it in a visible, central location. Someone used their imagination and conceived of something innovative and helpful. Sure, there were obstacles to be overcome, but imagination was fruitful, and now we have a delightful library that I'm told set a record for item circulation last month.

Yes, imagination has characterized our church's life throughout our history:

- the creativity of Sunday school teachers;
- the innovative engagement of our Presbyterian Women organizations;
- the talent shared by our staff and volunteer musicians;
- a line of ministers who explored the depths of the Bible and sought to apply the lessons of ancient writings to the realities of our day;
- the foresight and planning and programs carried out by our Deacons and Session;
- the vision of thousands of members across our history who sought not only what they could get from being part of this church but what they could give to add to the spirit of fellowship and joy and compassion and service that characterizes who we are and what we do.

Our past and our present day have been characterized by imagination. We know that God wants us to employ faithful imaginations as we welcome the guidance of the Holy Spirit in imagining what this church could become. A "faithful imagination" is one that envisions a future built on abundant trust in God – it is truly "faith-full."

Our Session is committed to this season of Vitality and Renewal. Recently they selected six people in our church to serve as a coordinating team for this process. These six people eagerly accepted the invitation to serve in this way. The coordinating team will help design and lead this process so that all of us – leaders and members – can be led by the Spirit to make decisions about the future God is giving us.

While our Vitality & Renewal Coordinating Team will be doing a lot of work, their real work is to guide us through this season of conversation and study, prayer and discernment, worship and fellowship. As a congregation we're going to roll up our sleeves and get down on our knees, so to speak. We want to see the future with eyes of faith and use our faithful imaginations to envision what it is that God holds in store for us.