

November 13, 2022
"Imagine That!"
Isaiah 65:17-25
Rev. John Pritchard

Good morning! Oh, good morning!

It is so good to see and be with you today, and for those who were here yesterday for the Always Love You concert, it is good to see you again. What a gift to have shared that time, that creativity, that spirit! What a gift to imagine together streets without assault weapons! What a gift to sing and clap and stomp it together, to encourage each other in that vision, to plan already to vote in the next elections for the sake of children, to imagine and to take baby steps toward enacting a city, a state, a country, without assault weapons, without gun deaths, without the multiplication of loss and grief and trauma in families, in neighborhoods, in an entire city, all caused by guns. Gone, all of it—imagine that!

Which is precisely what we do here together, isn't it, why we gather with one another—to imagine, to step aside from the narrow possibilities for constructing and living life that are dictated to us by what is, by the powers that be, by all that we have come to take for granted, to step aside and entertain life together organized differently, to consider alternative ways to stretch and grow and challenge each other not to be squeezed into compliance and apathy and despair by the disappointing reality we find ourselves amidst but to live towards a different vision? Imagine that!

Which is precisely what the poet—Isaiah—is doing in the passage we read this morning, imagining, imagining a new heavens and a new earth—a new world—being created, a world aligned with the purposes and priorities of God rather than the grip of destructive powers, a world healed, a world for living. Imagine!

That's what Isaiah invites his hearers to, imagining, and he's doing that at a time when imagining is oh-so difficult to do. The poet, the prophet, is addressing people flattened, demoralized, disappointed to the core. They'd spent over a generation in exile in Babylon, until the armies of Assyria began pressing on Babylon, and when that

happened, they began to dream there, to imagine, led by another prophet/poet. They imagined that God was liberating them, ushering them into a grand future, that they would march through a former desert turned into a glorious highway leading to Jerusalem, a city they would find rejoicing and restored to wealth, shared justly. And indeed, Assyria did conquer Babylon and did let them return to their city, but they they found there neither wealth nor rejoicing, but rather devastation and ruins. And far, far worse, they found no justice either. Their own leaders, puppets now of the Assyrian regime, oppressed them, forcing them to rebuild the Temple, which would collect the massive taxes due Assyria, some thirty to forty percent of the work of their hands, and forced them on top of those to tithe to support the priests in grand style, and all of that, they were told, was the will of God.

Can you imagine the disappointment, the discouraging reality that followed their grand dreaming? Can you imagine the hardship? Fields long neglected, barely producing, and so much of what they produced going elsewhere; their own labor given not to rebuild their homes and feed their families, but to rebuild the Temple and to cultivate crops sent to their wealthy rulers, while their own children did not have enough to eat and their elderly and weak succumbed to the hardship, their God, as they were told, blessing the world that was bleeding them. Can you imagine them?

They are the people Isaiah is addressing, piercing their numb surrender with an energizing alternative, countering the great lie of God's blessing with a vision of what God would really bless. Denying that the world as they know it exhausts the possibilities, despite how it looks, Isaiah tells them, no building for another to inhabit while you live in ruins; no planting for another to eat while you go hungry; no burying your hungry children or emaciated elders; but instead, the world as God would have it, where you enjoy the work of your hands, you live in the house you build, you eat the food you grow, your infants live a lifetime and your elders live out their days, and no one shall threaten or do violence to you.

How different; how wonderful ... except that ain't the way their world was. It's not what their hearts had grown used to. It wasn't even in the realm of the possibilities they could see ...

And so comes the poet, God's poet, to crack open their imaginations, to create a different vision, to invite them, in their limiting and oppressive world, to consider themselves, their world, God, differently, to see life with a different shape, to begin imagining together that life could be otherwise, and so to open a different story, to give entry to hope.

That's the power of imagination, of *faith*, to open the door on hope, to let its light guide our desires and aspirations, to allow its energy to fuel our commitments and endurance, to flow through us like a river strong enough to stop a wave. That's the power of faith, and it's what we're about together, singing deliverance in the face of Pharaoh, singing justice in the face of massive inequality, singing safety in the face of gun violence and freedom in the face of fascism, singing wholeness in the face of all that splinters and scars us, singing life larger, freer, *more* than the life scripted for us. That's what we're about, imagining together, imagining God at work among us, imagining life, a world, different.

And so today, I want to invite you to let the prophet tease you open just a bit so that you imagine, imagine, for just a moment.

Imagine an economy, our economy, not geared toward profits, not geared toward the GNP or stock prices, not geared toward increased wealth for the already obscenely wealthy protected by the idol of "private" property. Imagine our economy, instead, geared toward real wealth, toward planetary survival, toward human thriving, toward our common good of decent jobs, safe streets, nourishing food, affordable housing. Imagine that!

Imagine our politics not geared toward othering and conquering, but neighboring; fueled not by fear, but by a vision of our common, neighborly good; not carried out with demeaning caricatures and violent rhetoric, but with mutual respect in the work together of enabling a decent life for all. Imagine that!

Imagine our healthcare system not dictated by insurance and pharmaceutical profits and stakeholder gains, nor by political ideologues, but by real health needs and the

goal of providing good, affordable healthcare and medications for everyone, for children, for old folks, for those prone to being ignored and denied. Imagine it being free to respect the choices women make and to provide the care that people need. Imagine that!

Imagine our banking system not preying on our lives or the lives of our neighbors, not gouging itself on the debt of students, of home-buyers, of those living hand-to-mouth with the only option of an increased credit card balance to carry them through the unforeseen. Imagine it instead helping to build neighborhood—where each has a livable wage and each has a place and each has enough. Imagine that!

Imagine life together where we really take responsibility for each other's well-being in our policies and practices, where we take responsibility so that no one is left out and no one left behind and no one left alone. Imagine that!

It's what we do together, isn't it—imagine, entertain what isn't or isn't recognized or valued, what could or should be. We imagine and release the energy of new possibilities, of alternative life in the God who is making all things new.

Commenting on this passage, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says that "this poet does the proper work of poetry, inviting us to cut free beyond ourselves and entertain the notion that ... purposes for good and ... power for healing ...and promise for *shalom* are loosed in the world." Loosed in the world, loosed in the world—perhaps, even through us, through our imagining, our hope, our commitments. Imagine that! Imagine that!

And let's dare to imagine, purposes for good, for justice, for shalom, loosed in the world; let's sing them into possibility—"Go Down, Moses."