

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 2, 2018

A Hopeful Imagination

Ephesians 1:15-23

During this time of the year, Peter Pan usually flies onto the stage or the screen, and reinvigorates our sense of wonder. That's true for both children and adults. People of all ages find that their hearts and minds are stirred by the dreams and adventures of the boy who refuses to grow up.

In 1991, Steven Spielberg directed a variation on the story, called *Hook*. The movie follows grown-up Peter Pan, played by Robin Williams, as he travels back to Neverland to save his children from Captain Hook. To do so, he must first learn to become Peter Pan for a final time, which includes learning how to fly, how to crow, and among other things, how to recover a childlike state of imagination. In one of the film's key scenes, Peter has a feast with all the lost boys. Even though the plates and bowls lining the table appear empty, that doesn't stop the boys from digging in. The secret is to imagine the food, which soon appears in brightly colored form. This soon leads to a huge neon food fight, as everyone celebrates how Peter has rediscovered his imagination.

We often associate imagination with childhood, and rightly so. Pastor and teacher A. J. Sherrill has reminded us that "adults have fully mature versions of everything that kids have, except the imagination."¹ He highlights a study that was conducted with hundreds of children, and found that around fourth grade our tendency to daydream and to wonder declines sharply. Over time we lose a sense of curiosity and possibility. This is due partly to biological changes, particularly in the brain. But our educational environment can play a role as well. And so can our religious training. So Sherrill argues that the church should be a community that empowers curiosity and fosters imagination.

Christian author Max Lucado has noted, "Christmas is best pondered, not with logic, but with imagination." Lucado is onto something that we need in the life of the church, not just during Christmas but year round. In fact, in many parts of the Christian family, today is the beginning of a season that cautions us against rushing too quickly into the celebration of our Savior's birth. It's the start of Advent, a time for followers of Jesus to focus more on his second coming than his first. During the days leading up to December 25, lots of congregations return to and reflect on essential Christian convictions about the return of the Lord and the full arrival of God's kingdom. Advent is a season for recovering a sense of waiting and watching for God to finish what he has started through Christ. And that too requires imagination.

Not the kind of imagination that just wanders freely and aimlessly, without any grounding in historical reality. Sometimes we have a negative perception of imagination because we associate it with fantasy and make-believe. Having an active imagination means living in a dream world of some sort. It means losing touch with reality.

But from a Christian standpoint, a faithful, godly imagination has more to do with being in touch with the ultimate reality, the reality of God's kingdom. One dictionary defines *imagination* as "the faculty or action of forming new ideas, or images or concepts of

external objects not present to the senses."² As followers of the risen Lord, we believe there's more to reality than just what's available to our senses. By faith, we perceive the unseen reality of the reign of Christ. Even though the outward circumstances in our lives and in the world, while certainly real, seem to contradict the claim that we're under the loving rule of Christ, our Spirit-enabled imagination reassures us that Jesus is Lord. As Brandon O. Brien puts it, "This is why faith is an act of the imagination. Faith requires us to envision and inhabit a world that we cannot perceive with our senses—a world where an invisible God lovingly maintains his creation, where the Son of God became a human child, died on a cross to save sinners, and is seated at the right hand of God in glory."³

No wonder that Paul opens today's Scripture passage by telling the Ephesian Christians that their reputation for faith and mutual love has won them a place in his prayers. He gives thanks to God for their spiritual perception, their trust in the reality of Jesus risen and reigning. He sums it all up by declaring, "And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way" (vv. 22-23). Paul's words have a lyrical quality to them, as if he's gone from praying to singing. He invites the Ephesians to open their hymnals and join him in a chorus of praise to the glory of God in Christ.

Paul's words reflect a faithful and sanctified imagination. That doesn't mean that he and the Ephesians are living in a dream world. On the contrary, it means that they're living in the real world where Christ's sovereign love has overcome all the forces and powers that attempt to thwart God's purpose for the universe. Because of what God has already accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ, the Ephesian Christians are people of hope. In fact, that's one of the things Paul prays for most. "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you . . ." (v. 18).

Christian imagination isn't free-floating and aimless. It's firmly tied to Christian hope. And Christian hope is firmly grounded in God's past action, above all what God has accomplished through the death of Jesus in order to atone for our sins and reconcile us to himself. Preacher Paul Zahl says, "Hope which is not founded on some empirical basis is magic dust."⁴ Our Christian hope isn't magic dust. It's built on the solid foundation of past historic events, most of all the cross.

This is different from trying to root our hope in nostalgia. Nostalgia can be a very powerful thing, especially this time of the year. The sights, sounds, and scents of the holidays often cause us to have positive feelings about or be attracted to the past. "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas / Just like the ones I used to know," sings Bing Crosby. It's hard to think of a tune that has a more nostalgic feel or flavor to it. Nostalgia helps us feel connected to people and places. It grounds us and gives us a sense of identity and stability across time. True, nostalgia can have its down sides, but at the same time it can help us battle anxiety and depression. It can inspire creativity and optimism. In many respects, looking back can actually help us look forward.

But when Paul prays that the Ephesians will know the hope to which they've been called, he's invoking something greater than the power of nostalgia. He's calling to mind the cross and the resurrection that followed. When God raised Jesus from the dead, he set something in motion that's still being worked out to completion, namely, the restoration of his creation. All the forces and powers that work for the disintegration of the universe and the corruption of our lives have been defeated through Christ. Where there was once fragmentation and division, God has brought reconciliation and reunification. God's purpose, the goal toward which he's moving the universe, is to unite all things in heaven and on earth under the reign of Christ.

And the church has a critical role to play in this plan. A unified church is supposed to be a foretaste of a unified creation. Where previously humanity was fragmented by sin and the power of the devil, now the church is supposed to be an advance sign of the new humanity, restored in Christ by God's great love and mercy. In other words, the church is designed to be the evidence that God's plan for the universe won't be thwarted.

Here in the present, we who confess that Jesus is risen and reigning, that he is Lord of all creation, have been given the Spirit to help us wait faithfully and actively, standing strong and united against the devil and his realm. To do that, we need to have our hope stirred and enlarged, on a regular basis. As Paul puts it, you need to have the "eyes of your heart" enlightened (v. 18). Part of what that means is having your imagination renewed. Now I'm not saying revert to your childhood, or take flight like Peter Pan and soar off from one adventure to another. I'm simply saying that as you live forward, by faith, into the full scope of God's saving purposes, you need to have a vital vision of the gospel.

During this time between Christ's resurrection and his return, the circumstances in our lives and the events in the world can take a toll on our perception of what God has accomplished through Jesus Christ. Your personal combat with sin, your battles with disease, your struggles with grief, your issues in the workplace, your broken relationships at home, your financial hardships. The sorrow from natural disasters, the ceaseless gun violence, the failures in the justice system, the neglect of the environment, the never-ending international conflicts. Scan the realities of life, locally and globally, and you might reasonably conclude from experience that the reign of Christ is sheer fantasy.

But by the life-giving power of God at work in us, we look beyond our experience and perceive another reality, the reality of the age to come, where Christ reigns fully. It's not the fruit of our imagination. Actually, it's the result of God's imagination. God who envisioned coming to us in the first place, in human form. As John Henry Jowett has put it:

Who would have had sufficient daring of imagination to conceive that God Almighty would have appeared among men as a little child? We should have conceived something sensational, phenomenal, catastrophic, appalling! The most awful of the natural elements would have formed His retinue, and men would be chilled and frozen with fear. But, He came as a little child. The great God "emptied Himself"; He let in the light as our eyes were able to bear it.⁵

He's still letting in the light, as the eyes of our heart are able to bear it. While we wait for his coming, the Lord opens our spiritual eyes so we can know more of the hope to which he has called us. Through worship, Scripture, fellowship, and ministry in the world, God enlarges and expands your hope. He stirs and renews your imagination, so that you can envision more of what we can be and do as his people. So we join in Paul's great doxology: "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21).

¹ Sherrill, A. J. "The Importance of Imagination." *Christianity Today*. June 29, 2015. Accessed November 28, 2018 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/pastors/2015/may-web-exclusives/aj-sherrill-importance-of-imagination.html>>.

² Quoted in Brandon J. O'Brien, "Can You Imagine?: Why Imagination Is Crucial to the Christian Life." *Christianity Bible Studies*. July 26, 2011. Accessed November 28, 2018 <<https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/articles/theology/canyouimagine.html?start=1>>.

³ O'Brien, "Can You Imagine?"

⁴ Paul Zahl, "Preaching Hope as Retrospective: An Evangelical View." *The Living Pulpit* (January-March 1992) 11.

⁵ John Henry Jowett, in *My Personal Meditation*, *Christianity Today*, Vol. 34, No. 18.