

Sermon for Sunday, November 13, 2022
Isaiah 65:17-25

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

My neighbour's son has an amazing imagination. He is an only child. On warm summer afternoons, I would often see him playing by himself on his front lawn. He loved remote control cars and I would overhear him chatting away, to no one in particular, imaging scenarios where his toy car would be breaking speed barriers and rescuing folks, stranded in puddles. A few years ago when his mother died – he imagined she was in their dog. He used his incredible imagination to get through what must have been a very painful and confusing time. He is older now, he continues to have a very caring Dad and piles of friends – he seems to be doing well. My neighbour's son, and it would seem, most children have a natural ability to tap into their imaginations. And those imaginations have the power to help them through some pretty tough times.

I think the prophet Isaiah must have had a pretty good imagination – it is evident in our reading this morning. Isaiah imagines what life could be like given what he knows about God's dreams for us.

The vision comes near the end of Isaiah's collection of writings. After many chapters full of pain, Isaiah shares a vision of healing and restoration. Isaiah helps the people imagine God's dream of an abundant life for all. If there was trouble, it would be interrupted by joy. If there was despair, the burden would be taken away. If anybody was robbed of life, life would be given back – with abundance.

Isaiah offers the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Why are they new? Because the old ones are worn out. **Imagine** a world, says the prophet, where everything connects, like a puzzle where all the pieces fit.

With vivid colors, Isaiah paints a picture where heaven and earth are one. No more weeping or distress. Life will never be cut short. People will live out the full length of their days. There will be perfect harmony between human dreams and their fulfillment. Families will build houses and live in them. Farmers will plant vineyards and taste the wine. Every worker will enjoy their daily labour, and every soul will be thoroughly alive. That's the picture.

At the center is an astonishing vision of peace: predators do not consume, and the prey doesn't hide or run away. The wolf and lamb coexist. The ravenous lion has become a vegetarian and steps up to the feed bin next to the ox. Imagine this, says the prophet, Isaiah. **Imagine** a life where everything fits.

This is what God dreams for the world. This is the dream that God places in the imagination of the prophet Isaiah. This is the dream that arises to be written down in the Bible, where it is waiting to be discovered by every generation and lived with fresh energy year after year.

The Bible tells us some pretty gritty stories. We are told that once God created all things good but by page three in the book of Genesis, Cain has risen up against his brother Abel. We are told that not long after that, Pharaoh enslaves a whole race of people as his work force. And God came to break Israel out of slavery, offering a number of commandments to guide the nation's life – commandments that are regularly broken. The people cry out for a leader, a good leader. And soon, most of their kings

(and a few of their queens) are maneuvering and manipulating their way to greater power, climbing over whoever is in the way.

The Bible is not a book of fairy tales. Rather it offers honest observations about the human experience. It tells of a real world where good work is met with resistance and the innocent are crucified – the stories echo our own.

We are reminded within its pages of the recurring problem with humanity: God implants within us a dream of peace, yet we keep choosing something less than the dream. Every day some people are demeaned as something less than the image of God that they bear. The weak are plundered, often to increase the profits of the arrogant. Those who are deemed different are dismissed. And everybody is shouting over one another.

The Bible tells the truth about real people just like us. **And** the Bible also speaks the truth about our God. And our God has a dream, so says Isaiah, that we, God's people can live into. **Imagine** the wolf and the lamb feeding together. Nobody gets hurt. On God's holy hill, there is no destruction, only peace.

One of the reasons why some of us come to church is to catch a glimpse of this holy vision, because as we grow our imaginations get rigid from lack of use, or get lost in the tough stuff of living, or loses its power in the push of disappointment. When we come to this holy place, we connect to one another and we hear that God has a dream for us – and together we can commit to living the dream once again. This dream, has been planted in our hearts and minds. Left to our own devices, it is hard to know where we might end up. But together, in God's dream there is hope.

Isaiah reminds us in the dream. That that peace – peace within ourselves, peace between one another is possible. The Hebrew Bible calls it “shalom. Shalom is a life lived without aggression or its ensuing damage. We can welcome one another as neighbors, and not competitors. We can live in harmony with everybody we meet. This is God’s dream, and it is given to us. It is ours live.

In New York City, in central park, where the sounds of sirens can be heard in the distance, and panhandlers shake down tourist and families argue about who tossed the Frisbee too far. In the midst of the chaos there is a grove of elm trees where three paths intersected in the shape of a teardrop. AND what you will find there is a mosaic of black and white stones, often covered with bouquets of flowers. It is the memorial to the songwriter John Lennon. It’s right there in the middle of a huge, chaotic, busy city, by 72nd Street, right across from the apartment building where John Lennon had lived. In the center of the mosaic is the title of one of his most famous songs, “**Imagine.**”

You probably know that song. In it, Lennon sang of a world as Isaiah saw it: a globe without borders, a world without greed or aggression, a community of living beings dwelling together in peace. Right across the street is where an assassin took Lennon’s life one night when he returned from a recording session.

But there, in that mosaic, the invitation remains: *imagine*. It is a holy invitation.

It invites us to live the dream that God has for us all:
That we live as generously and graciously as Jesus.
That we set a high standard of how to respect one another, serve one another, and love one another. It's not enough to have the dream; it must also take flesh in what we do with our lives.

The first Christians formed the church by living like Jesus - as best they could. They didn't take any orders from the Roman empire. They lived the Isaiah dream. People outside their circle - were drawn inside it. They caught a glimpse of how all of us can take part in God's shalom. Even the fiercest critics looked at the church and said, "See how much they love one another."

We, here in our churches, are doing our best to live the dream. We pray that people in our community look at us and say, "See how much they love one another." "They treat one another with such respect and compassion."

We know it starts with small, steady steps that benefit the lives of others, like taking a meal to the woman who just came home from surgery. Or introducing ourselves to the neighbors whose names we do not know and find hard to pronounce. Or reading a story to a child. Or listening to the stories of those older than ourselves. Or planting a grove of trees that could outlive us. Or offering a safe haven to someone in danger.

Shalom begins by offering an act of kindness. I think of the woman who heard a strange noise in her neighborhood - It had been a difficult week in her town. A loud noise erupted outside her home, and she went to see what it was. It was a man with a leaf blower working his way down her

street. He doesn't live nearby, but he was clearing all the leaves from everybody's yards.

She opened her front door and asked, "Why are you doing this?" He replied, "It's been a difficult week, and this is a way to offer some goodness and blessing."

Imagine that. Imagine shalom.

May we not be so consumed by the hostilities of this world that we cease to see what God imagines for us nor cease to make the dream come true.

Amen.