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Imagined Communion
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Revelation 21:1-4, 22-27

When Tim announced that this was to be the year of imagination, a bible verse popped into my head, and then stayed there. It was kind of like an ear-worm – one of those light-hearted, catchy songs that gets stuck in your head. I’m not going to give you any examples because otherwise you’d spend the whole service with one of them on repeat – but you know what I’m talking about. And in my experience, when you have an earworm, the only thing you can really do is sing it out loud.

But here’s the problem with my particular earworm – this Bible verse I’ve gotten stuck in my head: it isn’t particularly light-hearted or catchy, and I really didn’t want to say it out loud to admit to my new colleagues that this verse was on my mind. But it’s led to my sermon topic today, so I’m going to have to say it. Here goes: “The imagination of a man’s heart is evil from his youth.” Yes, that’s right – any time someone says the word

imagination, what I hear is: “The imagination of a man’s heart is evil from his youth.”

You can see why I didn’t want to say it out loud! It’s super gendered, it’s quintessentially Calvinist, and it seems to cut against the very spirit of our theme, which portrays imagination in a much more positive light, celebrating the creative imagination of God, exploring the moral imagination of the prophets, calling us to use our own imaginations, at Westminster and beyond.

“The imagination of a man’s heart is evil from his youth.” This verse that’s stuck in my head – it takes a much grimmer view – imagination not as something bright and hopeful and full of possibility, but something corrupt, or at the very least corruptible.

So what was this verse doing in my head? Where did it come from, and what did it mean?

Of those questions, the easiest to answer was “where did it come from?” and so I started there. I don’t know my scriptures chapter and verse, and so I had to Google it – turns out it’s from Genesis, chapter 8, verse 21 – the King James Version – which makes the question, “what was this

verse doing in my head?” even more of a mystery, which I still haven’t figured out.

But anyway, the verse comes from the story of the Flood – after the rain is over, and the waters subside, and Noah emerges from the ark to make a sacrifice to God. God smells the pleasing odor, and remarks, and I’m going to stick with the KJV here, just for effect: “I will not again curse the ground anymore for man’s sake, for the imagination of a man’s heart is evil from his youth; and never again will I smite any more every living thing, as I have done.”

OK, so this seems to soften things a bit. Even though God still thinks the imagination of our hearts is evil, God will never again destroy the earth entirely – but it only kinda feels like good news, or maybe good news laced with bad news. It comes, after all, on the heels of the flood – God’s decision to bring near-total destruction to the creation that had resulted from God’s own imagination – which in turn comes on the heels of the fall – our first great act of disobedience, of turning away, of imagining ourselves to be like gods, knowing good and evil.

And even when the flood is over, the pattern repeats itself. The flood story is followed by the Table of Nations, an

account of the population and geography of the earth, peopled by the descendants of Noah and his sons – and as soon as the earth is full of people, the disobedience begins again: the people invent bricks, and then a city, and then imagine a tower with its top in the heavens. “Come, let us make a name for ourselves!” they say. And God, concerned about this raid on heaven but bound, now, by a promise not to destroy, invents a novel punishment – one that fits the crime – “and the Lord confused their languages, and scattered them abroad.” This, the Bible tells us, is how the nations came to be.

We could, of course, dismiss all this as antiquated, out of date, irrelevant. We know enough of science, of history, of cultural anthropology, to disavow a six-day creation, a Babel tower, a flood. If you remember Alexandra’s sermon from two weeks ago, even the confirmands are poking holes in stories like this. And, in a week like this one, we should be wary of any theology that assigns to God responsibility for flood and storm, that casts natural disaster as a punishment for human sin. And yet I think there’s an invitation, here, in spite of all that’s implausible, that emerges in the Bible’s enduring mythic power, its moral force.

And that invitation is simply to ask: What is imagination's shadow side? With all of its power to open new possibility, to bring together unrelated objects or ideas, to envision unseen realities, is imagination really an unrestrained force for good in our lives, or, like our reason and our senses, is it also, in some way, corruptible — subject to captivity by forces beyond our control?

Is imagination susceptible to the whisper of the serpent in the garden, to the groupthink of the brickmakers drafting plans to build a tower to the sky? Even as we celebrate imagination's possibilities, is it worth reflecting, also, on its limits?

The place my mind went first, on this, was science — where imagination is responsible for so breakthroughs whose implications often out-run our ability to restrain them.

I think of Einstein the young patent clerk, wondering what it might be like to ride so fast you caught of beam of light, and uncovering, by this act of the imagination, the theory of relativity. And then in 1945, as a famous physicist, writing to President Roosevelt, concerned that the scientists splitting the atom were outpacing the restraints of public policy on the use of a nuclear bomb. Or of Jennifer Doudna, the scientist who wondered, "how does

a single-celled bacterium with no immune system--defend itself against a virus?" and in so doing discovered CRISPR - the technology behind the incredible pace and efficacy of the Covid vaccine – but also with the potential to rewrite the human genome – a technology whose rapid development is far outpacing bioethical restraints.

But this Sunday is world communion Sunday, when we celebrate the international character and scope of Christianity – and so I've been reflecting on the role of the imagination not in science but in politics – in the life of the nations. How does imagination serve us, here? How does it lead us astray?

One of the best modern takes on both the perils and the possibilities of imagination in politics comes from the scholar Benedict Anderson. His book is called "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism" – and it's as much a work of social psychology as of history – what is going on in the minds and hearts of people, individually and collectively, that they imagine themselves to be a part of something called a nation?

Now, at first brush, this feels like an odd, and perhaps unnecessary, question in the 21st century, a nation feels

less like an imagined construct and more like an established fact – a place with fixed borders and sovereign government a place to which a person belongs, by virtue of birth or naturalization.

But the strength of Anderson's book is to point out what a fiction this is – not fiction in the sense of something untrue, but as a human creation, an act of imagination. A nation, Anderson writes, is imagined because “the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.”

This image is so strong that these anonymous, unknown members of this imagined communion become willing to die for one another, and for the image of nation that they share.

Now, Anderson, in his account of how the nations came to be, isn't reaching back as far as the Babel tower. He's describing nations not in the Biblical sense of “peoples,” but in the modern sense, the nation states emerging in South America and Europe, starting toward the end of the 18th century, and gradually spreading across the globe.

This represents a shift away from political organization around family and fealty – kinship and lordship – and instead toward country-- the modern nation.

What's the difference? The king's power was centripetal the closer you were, geographically, to the throne, the greater the king's influence, but the nation's power is diffused – spread equally throughout the space within its bounds, the laws just as applicable, the same way that, on a modern political map, all the space within a country's boundaries are colored the same shade, and so a skirmish on the border becomes an attack on the very core.

The loyalties, within a nation, are no longer vertical – toward a divinely appointed sovereign, a group of elders, an aristocracy – but horizontal, toward one's countrymen – everyone who lives within these borders is a member of the same team.

And the thing about these communities that requires imagination is that they create bonds of loyalty and unity with people one has never heard of and never expects to meet.

He sees nationalism as having inherited, in the post-Enlightenment world, a role that once belonged to

religion: its ability to assign meaning to our lives, and our willingness to sacrifice for its sake.

Nations use the language of shared symbol - the face of the leader, the image of a flag, the sound of the national anthem. You can make an analogy to football where the power of symbolic language is such that the same shape - a sharp, pointed, isosceles triangle evokes two very different loyalties: here in Minnesota, the sharp prow of a ship, cutting across the city skyline; whereas across the border in Wisconsin, that same triangular shape, when colored yellow and worn atop the head, evokes a piece of cheese...perhaps a much less fearsome symbol, but no less fiercely held. (It's probably riskier, from this pulpit, to talk football than it is to talk politics, but if you're having a visceral reaction about your team right now, that's exactly the kind of deeply held, imagined loyalty that symbolic language can evoke.)

Anderson cut his teeth as a scholar of the conflicts in southeast Asia in the 1970s, and he asked, why were Vietnam and Cambodia, which shared an ideological framework of Marxism, at war with one another?

Anderson posited that the commitment of the imagination to nation was stronger than the commitment of the intellect to political ideology, and this seems to be bearing out, once again, in our own time, as globalization falls

prey to new, far-right nationalist commitments. People are willing not just to die for their countrymen, but also to kill for them, as we see in the terrible, human cost of the war between Russia and Ukraine. One thing I want to note here: I say all this not to diminish the importance of military service, or national loyalty, because for those who give their lives or their loved ones' lives in the service of their country – who suffer the moral injury of killing, or make the total sacrifice of dying, the stakes are incalculably high.

What does the Bible offer as an antidote to this? What word does it speak, what vision does it cast, into this modern, disenchanting, secular, nationalist world of ours?

The great, final vision of the Bible doesn't deny or diminish difference between nations and peoples. In what is arguably the most imaginative book in all of scripture, the Bible paints, in exquisite color and detail, the descent of the Holy City, the Heavenly Jerusalem, descending from heaven like a bride adorned for her husband. The nations come streaming in through the gates of this city, walking by its light; the kings of the earth bring their glory into it, and by the crystal river that runs through this city there is a tree, the tree of life, and the leaves of that tree are for the healing of the nations.

Rather than reject imagination, this vision relies on it – because it invites us into something we’ve never seen before – a peaceful, global gathering in. It’s not a return to a remembered past, but to an imagined future – not the pre-Babel paradise of linguistic uniformity, but instead a vision of togetherness in the midst of diversity. “The imagination of a man’s heart is wicked from his youth,” says God, but rather than destroy the world, God chooses to redeem it; rather than scatter the nations, God chooses to bring them in; rather than denigrate the imagination, God chooses to rely on it, setting before us a vision of what might be.

And today, on world communion Sunday, we enact a foretaste of that vision – an imagined communion in the literal sense – as we receive the bread and cup of Christ, in songs from around the world, gathered beneath the leaves of this sacred tree, awaiting the toll of bells cast in the name of many nations, that ring for the glory of God.