

“Imagine”

Luke 2: 1-20

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Christmas Eve

In a little town in Austria, 1818, a young priest had prepared a wonderful choral work to be accompanied by organ for Christmas Eve. Some say the nearby river flooded, and damaged the organ. The disaster meant at the last minute, the church needed a different musical piece. Others say, it was just time for a new song.

The young priest, Joseph Mohr, went home and found some words of a poem he had written, and walked 3 kilometers to the village where a friend lived --a teacher, who was also the church groundskeeper who was also the part-time organist, Franz Gruber.

So the preacher asked the organist to compose a melody and guitar accompaniment for the Christmas Eve service, which was only a few hours away. Which he did. The song Silent Night was first heard 200 years ago tonight.

It may have never been heard of again, except the man who was there to repair the organ fell in love with the song. He took it with him wherever he was repairing organs. It was heard by a family of traveling folk singers, who sang it all over Austria and Germany. It spread and became a favorite wherever it went. Stille nacht, Heilige nacht. Silent night, holy night. First heard 200 years ago tonight.

Imagine that. Surprise. Imagine: the ways of faith: spread among very ordinary people, in very vulnerable ways. That story, rooted in history, now rooted in our imagination.

Preacher Robert Fulghum tells a different kind of story. About a preacher who wanted to do a Christmas Eve Children's sermon based on the ancient tale of a juggler whose gift to the Christ child was to give all he had: juggling at his absolute best.

The preacher wanted to make this story vivid and real so he invited a juggler to come and be part of the Christmas Eve service. But it came time for the service to begin, and the juggler had not shown up yet. It was not until the second hymn began that the juggler walked in the door. But the preacher saw: the juggler had no costume, and no suitcase for props. He whispered in the preacher's ear that all of his juggling gear had been stolen.

By now it was time for the children's message. Not knowing what else to do, the juggler stood up and without a word, began to juggle thin air. First imaginary balls. He mimed the whole thing. It was incredible. The best juggler can only do 7 balls at once, but this night, he did 8.

Then he began to mime juggling bowling pins. Then he began to juggle bowling balls. Then he began to juggle imaginary knives: It was so real, the congregation was relieved that he did not cut himself.

Then he began to juggle some other things: It took the congregation awhile to figure out he was juggling a drummer. And a piper. And a lord leaping.

1 lady dancing
1 maid a milking (including the cow)
1 swan a swimming
1 goose a laying,
1 golden ring
1 calling bird
1 French hen
1 turtle dove
And a partridge in a pear tree.

When he was done, the congregation burst into wild applause for what they had just seen. Then he signaled for silence. The silence in which they thought about what they had just experienced. Sometimes the most wonderful things have to be imagined in order to be seen.

Christmas requires an active imagination. Some parts seem to be serious, other parts playful, the core of the story speaks to the heart of reality.

Philosopher Paul Ricoeur makes an important distinction between two words: ILLUSION and IMAGINATION. These two words take us down very different paths.

Illusion is according to philosophers who critique religion – Feurbach, Nietche, Marx, Freud – their criticism is for those times when religion leads people away from reality. Makes them less responsible. Illusions that allow people to avoid reality can be destructive.

Imagination is different. If illusion allows people to avoid reality, then Imagination takes us deeper into reality. Imagination allows us to see what is more real by the creative use of our minds.

Emperor Caesar Augustus created an illusionary world. His was a reign of power was based in fear. He did his census counting ALL THE WORLD for the purpose of control. To know how to dominate, intimidate, confiscate. What was confiscated from people was... hope.

Caesar Augustus Set up the illusion that there was no other power greater than his. His Illusion of power led to a reign of fear. Fear that could justify alienation, enslavement. And leach out the energy and passion in the world.

Typical behavior in his reign: to teach people to fear the neighbor, the stranger
Fear the other, treat them with disregard and disdain. The way that Mary and Joseph were disdained and ignored that night very pregnant Mary went into labor.

Fear had ruled over the little town of Bethlehem. The fear filtered down from the emperor's throne to the cities, the villages, even to the hinterlands. Fear had been reigning over a group of shepherds watching their sheep.... By night.

Their typical reaction to anything was fear. Even in the daytime, they lived in the darkness. Fear was their default drive. Caesar wanted them that way: Fear keeps people docile, self-focused, and isolated.

But to this group of shepherds, on this night, out in the hinterlands there was something on the move in the darkness that even the Lord of the darkness could not comprehend. An angel: which is to say, a messenger with a message from God that turned their world upside down. In a world of fear, the message begins: "Do not be afraid."

"Do not be afraid.

Behold, I bring you glad tidings, great joy, for all the world.

To you, this day, is born a Savior, Christ, the Lord."

Imagine this: the reign of fear is over. Imagine a new world that begins like this: A baby, born to a poor family, in a barn, swaddled in cloth, laying in a feed trough. This baby will feed the world. Imagine.

That night, the Shepherds moved not just from the fields in the hills to Bethlehem. They moved from the ILLUSION of fear to IMAGINE the reality that God had come to them.

Imagine: This child Jesus – redefines us. If you want to imagine God.... Imagine this child. His power comes from the love he evokes. Inspires. His authority derives from the compassion he calls forth in us.

Can you imagine: the baby in the manger. Can you imagine him: looking up at you? Imagine him looking up at you and he does not count your sins or mistakes or failures or successes. His is a face that asks: will you love the vulnerable ones?

Imagine this child granting us a new beginning. This child ties all humanity together. All the sins, all the mistakes, all the failures, all the successes. They are redefined. The illusions that have bound us. Imagine they float away so we can become the people God has called us to be. People who are free to live in response to the vulnerable ones.

Imagine. Imagine a new world born tonight in Christ the Lord. Sometimes the most wonderful things have to be imagined in order to be seen.