

IMAGINE THAT!

A Message by the Rev. Joyce L. J. Lawson

Isaiah 35:1-10
Luke 1:46-55

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Perhaps like me, you have on occasion found yourself looking at young, playing children and thinking, "Wow, what imaginations they have!" Children can so easily pretend that they are Superheroes or Firefighters as they develop on the spot conversations while in character. They pick up a stick and all of the sudden it's a sword or a magic wand. A child's imagination often brings a smile to our face, but it can also be a bit of a nuisance for us adults who have lost the imaginations we once had as children, who have a hard time jumping into the playful conversations and actions when invited by our young children and grandchildren. I think this time of the year is filled with imagination, and perhaps that's why children love it so much. But for those of us who suffer from depleted imaginations, it's easy for us to miss the transformational power of this season.

So even though you have likely seen it on stage and TV, can you really imagine a penny-pinching, nasty old man like Ebenezer Scrooge transformed into a laughing, caring, gift-giving person? Can you imagine a tiny little heart like the Grinch's growing into a great big, generous heart? Can you imagine the eyes of the blind being opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped, the lame leaping like deer, and the tongue of the speechless singing for joy? (Isaiah 35:5-6) Can you imagine the powerful being brought down from their thrones and the lowly lifted up? (Luke 1:52) Can you imagine the hungry filled with good things, and the rich sent away empty? (Luke 1:53) Can you imagine a world that is different than the one in which we live? Can you imagine One who is powerful enough to accomplish these things and even more – One who is able to baptize and saturate your life and this world with the power of the Holy Spirit?

At this time of the year, we are encouraged to allow these kinds of prophetic images which come to us this morning from the mouths of Isaiah and Mary to cut through and halt the automatic drive we put ourselves in. Prophets help us envision a future that is different. It may not be easy for those of us whose imaginations are dimmed to imagine, but such images have the ability to penetrate the numbness of our everyday lives. This "numbness" is not so much a harsh observation as it is simply what happens when we get stuck in our routines, chained to our schedules, worn out by the wear and tear of the world in which we live. Numbness is a result of the daily pressure and tension we experience, as well as the pain and disappointment we suffer.

Because of our life experiences, our souls can become insensitive, unfeeling and selfish. We can become convinced that nothing will ever be different, that there are no new possibilities for us or for our world. We can become uncaring, almost anesthetized by the constant chatter of the world, unresponsive to the Spirit of God. Confronted by the realities of our lives and our world it can be hard for us to imagine anything else and very difficult to believe in the possibilities of a different kind of world.

But then one day, when we least expect it, we run into someone like the prophet Isaiah, or John the Baptist, or Mary, the mother of Jesus, or Martin Luther King, Jr., or Mother Theresa, or Desmond Tutu – someone who, by their words and their life, bear witness to a new and different light shining in the darkness. These are

the people who spark our imaginations and challenge the direction in which our lives are going. They help us to remember that this world and its people are not functioning as God planned, and that things could be and should be different and better. They remind us of God's joyous vision for us and for all of creation, so that we might be able to make it our vision, and then be better prepared to greet God's coming Messiah.

If we are able to catch this vision, then perhaps we will be able to hear a baby's cry rising out of a stable in Bethlehem. If we can imagine, then out on some quiet, barren field, we might just feel the flutter of angel wings or catch a glimpse of an eastern star. This gift of imagination cuts through the numbness of our souls, and suddenly we are able to envision new possibilities for our lives, for our church, for our world. Broken-hearted people can find healing. Selfish people can become generous. Takers can be transformed into givers. Those held in the grip of sorrow can find joy. The hungry can be fed. Nations who have lived for many years within the reality of war can begin to find peace. Imagine that!

I assume that those of you who have been Christmas shopping over the past couple of weeks have heard the familiar ringing of the Salvation Army bells. It seems I have heard those bells all my life, and I admit that I have at times hurried by, avoiding eye contact with the bell ringer. Some of us genuinely feel uncomfortable passing by, but we do it anyway, because we are busy and in a hurry and perhaps we don't have cash. Of course, there are likely some who don't feel a thing, and so ignoring the bell and kettle is much easier.

The next time you go shopping, how about trying to hear that Salvation Army bell as if for the first time. Like a child who is excited about the sound and curious about what it all means. In the midst of your rushing from store to store, allow the sound to penetrate through your numbness and into your soul. Let it remind you of all those who far from worrying about gifts and cards and cookies are wondering what they will eat, where they will find diapers for the baby, and where they will spend the night. Can you imagine anything different for them?

The point I'm making today is not so much the size of the donations we choose to place in a kettle, but whether we allow the sound of that bell to cut through our souls and to give us a Christ-like compassion others. If we do, then we might just be able to acknowledge that in those moments the Savior of the World has entered our hearts and transformed our imaginations. Today's prophetic announcements challenge us to see the Christmas season, and the coming of Christ in a different way than our rushing around and the buying of gifts allow us. They invite us to imagine the kind of transformation that is possible when God's son enters a heart, a home, a community, the world.

This act of imagination is why we gather in this place, and it is why we choose to buy Sponsor-a-family gifts, participate in Habitat for humanity building projects, volunteer at the Cleveland Foodbank, and even make plans to travel to a country like Guatemala. We come here and we do these things and other things in a never-ending effort to better see things God's way. To be honest, God's way of seeing things is peculiar; it doesn't always make sense to everybody. We need a lifetime of Sundays and as much practice as possible, if we are going to allow our imaginations to be transformed by God. But, if we can imagine new possibilities and a different kind of world, we might just have to admit that God's spirit has penetrated our souls, the true light has broken through our darkness. If we can imagine what the coming of a Messiah really means, then we can also be a part of the new possibilities. I believe God invites us to imagine something different than the hurt, abuse, hunger,

homelessness, loneliness, and hopelessness that surrounds us. God invites us to imagine and then to participate in the transformation.

Just this past Tuesday, it wasn't the ringing of a red kettle bell that broke through the numbness of my busy day, and yet God broke through nonetheless. It was about 6:30pm, and I was in my office working on an email. There were three other people in the church, but no formal meetings so the church doors were locked. My evening was planned – finish the email, make two phone calls, and then off to do some Christmas shopping at Kohl's. I heard someone trying to open the doors and went to investigate, most often it's a church member, but this time it was a young man I first met back in October when he walked through the doors of the church seeking help. We offered some help at that time, but he was back after being thrown out of the house by his drunken father. He was cold, hadn't eaten for a while, had no car, and was walking around Chagrin Falls with nowhere to go.

Alex was not a part of my Tuesday evening plans, but there he was. Inviting him into the church to warm up and making sure he had a hot meal were easy to address, but my big concern was what he would do once the last restaurant closed in Chagrin Falls. It was too cold for him to be outside all night. Alex has a degree from John Carroll where he majored in economics. Following graduation, he worked for a reputable company for 5 years, but he made some bad choices and fell into the family pattern of drinking too much. This young man from our community who is about the same age as my children has basically no resources and a dysfunctional family support system. He wants to get a job and get back to a better place, but he feels stuck; he is stuck. I ended up driving him to Bedford Tuesday evening to stay overnight with a friend. In the midst of my disrupted Tuesday evening plans, God compelled me to imagine a different reality for Alex.

As the time of the Messiah's birth draws nearer who among us is willing to imagine and proclaim a different reality than the one that confronts us day in and day out? Who among us will bear witness to the "True Light," which is the light of the world? Who will proclaim Good News to the oppressed, share words of hope with the brokenhearted, proclaim freedom to all who live in captivity, bring comfort to all who mourn? If the light of Christ will shine in the darkness of our world, if this will be a season of peace, hope and joy, it will be because someone – perhaps a few, hopefully many, but at least someone is able to imagine and bear witness to a different reality. If the baby born in Bethlehem is the Lord of our lives, then there is hope that we will be able to see and live into God's vision of a different reality. So look around, now is the time for imagination! Amen.