

## **Saintly Imagination**

*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt  
Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*

### **All Saints' Sunday**

*November 1, 2009*

*Isaiah 25:6-9, Revelation 21:1-6*

Our first passage comes from the book of the prophet Isaiah chapter 25, verses 6-9. The words of this text are apocalyptic. In other words, they envision a future in which God will step in and triumphantly make things right for a suffering people and a suffering world. There is no scholarly consensus as to when this section of Isaiah was written, but more and more scholars believe that it was probably written during or after the time of the Babylonian exile. It was written to provide hope to people who had become disillusioned and despondent. As you hear the text, bear in mind that Isaiah is Jesus' favorite prophetic book, the one from which he quotes most often. Listen in these words for images of the heavenly banquet that Jesus will later talk about. When Isaiah speaks of the mountain, know that it is likely Mount Zion in Jerusalem. When Isaiah speaks of the shroud of death being destroyed and death being swallowed up forever, think of how that shaped Jesus' self-understanding and the understanding of the gospel writers. And think of what kind of promise Isaiah might extend to us on All Saints' Day. *Read Isaiah here.*

Our second lesson is from the enigmatic book of Revelation, a book that like the section of Isaiah we just heard, was written for people who were desperately in need of a word of hope - in this case, an assurance that the circumstances of oppression at the hands of the Roman Empire were enduring wouldn't have the last word. So John, on the island of Patmos, has these visions from God that are meant to help the people to whom he is writing keep the faith, to persist in their work of loving God and neighbor even in the face of the harsh events of their lives. *Read Revelation here.*

A Latin American author tells the story of a man named Rafael Vargas, who is a carpenter. Vargas lives on the shores of Lake Maracaibo, in Venezuela. Lake Maracaibo at one point was crystal clear. Now, however, the lake is slicked with oil and filled with sewage, and the area around it is gray, ugly, and devoid of life. But Vargas, who lives in such a stark reality, is not just a carpenter, he is also a painter. And what he paints is utterly contrary to the circumstances in which he lives. He uses brilliant colors. He paints birds and fish and various forms of wildlife. The author says that Vargas possesses, "the revenge, the prophecy of one who paints not the reality he knows, but the reality he needs."<sup>1</sup>

There is something about Vargas' painting not the reality he knows, but the reality he needs, that speaks to me this All Saints' Sunday. Let me tell you what I mean. A couple of years ago at a conference, I heard Tom Long, one of my favorite preachers, make the claim that at every funeral, there are two preachers. One of them is the pastor. The other is the reality of Death. And Death, Long says, is a pretty convincing preacher. Death stands there for all to see and tells the gathered assembly, "This life is all there is. I have the last word. When I visit someone, they are through. They are in the ground, and that is all she wrote."<sup>2</sup>

Long says that it is in the face of the undeniable reality of death that the preacher stands to deliver the message of the gospel at every funeral or memorial service. And the preacher's task, the challenge that faces him or her, is to acknowledge but also out preach the reality of Brother Death. You see in those moments, Death is the reality that we know, but it is not the reality we need. And hear this: it is not the reality that at some deep level in fact, is.

I was talking with a member of this congregation earlier this week, and he was telling me how the Enlightenment, which brought such great gifts to our Western culture, nevertheless had its limitations. The gift and the problem, the double-edged sword of the Enlightenment was that it prized and privileged rationality above all else. And that had its benefits. It led to useful advancements in science and technology and in a host of other areas. But not everything that is important in life is rational, nor can it be factually proven.

And some things that can be proven in life remind us that life is not always rational. It does not always make sense. It is not, for instance, always fair. Some children are born into families that take good care of them and provide them with every opportunity to succeed, and some are born into abject poverty or abuse. A young African-American woman, one of the success stories of our Dreamer program, gets afflicted with a blood disease and faces two years of chemotherapy. Sometimes sons and daughters die before their parents. Spouses pass on well before we are ready to let them go. Human beings can show great kindness to one another, but as mass genocides and school shootings demonstrate to us again and again, they are also capable of petty meanness and terrible evil. This is the reality that we know, but there is something deep in us that knows that this is not the way life should be. That something in us is the God-given capacity to imagine that the world can be a better place, that mercy, justice, peace and opportunity can flourish. That something in us is the God-given ability to understand that although death really does rob us of the bodily companionship of our deceased loved ones; they live on in and beyond us for eternity.

Imagination often gets a bad rap in our society. That's just your imagination, people say; you're just imagining things. But imagination is God's gift. Just think how impoverished this world would be without imagination: The imagination of engineers building bridges across spans we never thought could be crossed. The imagination of architects designing buildings, both beautiful and functional. The imagination of scientists delving into the mystery of the brain, the human genome, the tiny atom and the vast universe. The imagination of teachers educating students - bringing out the best in them. Just think what the world would be like without the imagination of musicians who use melodies and harmonies to touch our souls; visual artists who paint, sculpt, draw, dance or otherwise create pieces that move us; and poets, prophets, novelists, playwrights and song-writers who fashion words in such a way that we are helped to face life and have the strength to make it better, the power to do the right thing, the compassionate thing.

When the circumstances of the life they knew had become unbearable, both the people of ancient Israel and the followers of Jesus in the first century, were given a gift from God, the vision of a better world that was to come. John on the Isle of Patmos, and before him the prophet Isaiah, visualized the end of death's dominion over us, the end of the fear and animosity that keeps people apart from each other. John and Isaiah were blessed with the ability to see a banquet for all people, a time when God would

make ALL things new. It was this banquet that Jesus talked about in the gospels. When we come to the table of communion, and pass the elements to each other, we are pointing to that reality, a reality that we need, a reality that both *already is and yet is to come*. Partaking in that banquet gives us the strength to work toward the reality that the One who instituted it embodied and continues to embody. It reminds us that somehow the saints who have gone before us are with us still - and today we celebrate that we eat with them even now.

Every All Saints' Sunday, when I take part in communion, I imagine eating with people I have known and people I never met who have died. I think, for instance, of being at table with my Grandfather Eickstaedt and my Grandmother Carlson, both of whom died before I had a chance to come to know them. I think of other deceased people whose life stories have been an inspiration to me. And I think of people I have come to know in churches I've served and in other settings who now have taken their place in eternity.

This All Saints' Sunday I am imagining sharing the feast of communion with two special saints - saints who taught me something about the God-given power of imagination. One of them was famous, the other was not.

First, the famous one. When I think of him, I always think of a little green frog by the name of Kermit. Kermit makes me smile even today. He certainly made me smile when I was a child. Jim Henson, who died too early, put these words in the mouth of Kermit the Frog:

*Why are there so many  
Songs about rainbows  
And what's on the other side?  
Rainbows are visions  
They're only illusions  
And rainbows have nothing to hide  
So we've been told and some choose to  
Believe it  
But I know they're wrong wait and see*

*Someday we'll find it  
The Rainbow Connection  
The lovers, the dreamers and me.*

*Who said that every wish  
Would be heard and answered  
When wished on the morning star?  
Somebody thought of that  
And someone believed it  
And look what it's done so far  
What's so amazing  
That keeps us star gazing  
What do we think we might see?*

*Someday we'll find it  
That Rainbow Connection  
The lovers, the dreamers and me.*

*Have you been half asleep  
And have you heard voices?  
I've heard them calling my name  
Are these the sweet sounds that called  
The young sailors  
I think they're one and the same  
I've heard it too many times to ignore it  
There's something that I'm supposed to be.*

*Someday we'll find it  
The Rainbow Connection  
The lovers, the dreamers, and me.<sup>3</sup>*

Now tell me that is not a bit of God-given imagination. Maybe a Muppet can be a prophet.

The other person I am thinking of this All Saints' Sunday is a woman named Rosalie Hornyik. I met Mrs. Hornyik when she was eighty years old. She was a Hungarian immigrant who had moved to Philadelphia in the 1960's. When I met her she still had a very broken way of speaking English. Her husband Josef had died six months before. After the death of her husband, her niece had Mrs. Hornyik come down from Philadelphia to live with her in Atlanta. Mrs. Hornyik had no children.

I met Mrs. Hornyik on the psychiatric unit of a geriatric center where I was serving as a chaplain intern. I was a twenty-three year old chaplain, wet behind the ears, and willing to take a few chances to go against what the care plan was for Mrs. Hornyik.

The care team on the unit was convinced that what we had to do was orient Mrs. Hornyik to the reality that her husband was dead. So there were all kinds of people trying to reinforce that message with her every day. But not the chaplain.

I met Mrs. Hornyik and came to know her, and as fate or God would have it, during that time, Judith and I were married and went on our honeymoon. When I came back, Mrs. Hornyik was still on the unit. She said to me, when I returned to the psych unit a week later, "Would you go visit my husband Josef? He's on the second floor." I thought to myself, "Hmm. This is going to go against the care plan." But I said, "Yes, Mrs. Hornyik, I'll do that."

The next day I went back to visit her. She told me, "Josef came to me last night and he told me that you went to visit. Mr. Aaron, you are just married. You understand about these things." And then she proceeded to talk to me about her love for her husband. A week later, oriented to reality, Mrs. Hornyik went home. But she is with me still.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> Eduardo Galeano, *Memory of Fire, Volume III: Century of the Wind*, translated by Cedric Belfrage (New York: W.W. Norton, 1988)

<sup>2</sup> This is based on my memory of a lecture Dr. Long delivered two years ago in Minneapolis at the Festival of Homiletics in May.

<sup>3</sup> The song "The Rainbow Connection" was written by Kenny Ascher and Paul Williams in 1979 for *The Muppet Movie*. Jim Henson, in the role of Kermit the Frog, sang the lyrics.