



**DANGEROUS IMAGINATION  
AND OTHER KEYS TO HEALTHY LIVING  
SCRIPTURE: AMOS 6a, 4-7; LUKE 16: 19-31  
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC  
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The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor**

No one thought he had a prayer of winning the Olympics—except for him. Billy Mills made a decision to believe.

The first race he ever ran as a young boy from the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota, he ran in blue jeans and basketball shoes and came in dead last. But he felt something spiritual when his legs moved and his feet landed over and over on the firm ground.

He set his sights on the Olympics because of words his father read to him in a book from a Jesuit priest—“Olympians are chosen by the gods.”

Billy Mills wanted to be an Olympian. If the gods chose Olympians maybe those gods could let him see his mom again. She died when Billy was young.

At age 12, his father died and Billy’s broken soul took another blow.

His dad told him: “Pursuing a dream can heal broken wings. You can have wings of an eagle.” And so he dreamed of being an Olympic champion in the 10,000 meters. He wrote it down on a piece of paper: 10, 000 meter Olympic champion. Believe, believe, believe.

“My #1 objective was not the gold medal or the world record, it was to heal a broken soul.”

It was the early 1960s in the US and Mills struggled to find his place in American society. “Society was breaking me. I thought a lot of suicide.”

As a Native American in a country divided by race, he had a hard time finding where he fit. 3 years in a row he earned All-American status at University of Kansas. And three years in a row a photographer asked him to step out of the picture of All Americans so that he could take pictures of just the white athletes. Mills went back to his room and thought of jumping out the window. But he felt a voice that clearly said, “don’t.”

To set a world record in the Olympics he would have to take 2 minutes off of his best time—a virtually impossible task by rational standards. But he saw himself doing it. He believed. He gave himself to a Holy imagination—that he would heal his broken soul.

On the last turn he is in third place and he knows he has to go. The time is now. I will never be this close again. As he makes his move he sees an eagle on a runner's singlet as he passes him. His dad's words loud and clear: "The wings of an eagle."

Mills flies through the finish line tape to set a new world record and become the first and only American ever to win the 10,000 meters in the Olympics.

He goes to find the runner with the eagle on his singlet to say thank you and there is no eagle on his singlet.

Holy Imagination—imagination put to a sacred purpose, a healing purpose, gave birth to a moment that changed the world. Billy Mills' Olympic championship didn't just heal his broken soul, it woke up a country, a world who had tried to erase his people from the face of the earth.

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The Prophet Amos gave birth to a new kind of prophecy in his day—he was the first to say "look out world" God will not abide in your twisted ways much longer and those who live a life of ease, will be the first to be disrupted. Amos calls out with a passionate concern for the oppressed to those who have built their comfort on the backs of those who suffer. "God is doing a new thing," Amos says. And the whole landscape of Israelite theology changes just like that.

The Prophet Amos had a dangerous imagination—dangerous to the comfortable, disruptive of the powerful. He was not calling for reform. He was heralding the death of Israel's whole way of life. Amos is most troubled, most mournful about those who think they have nothing to worry about.

His disdain for complacency, comfort saturation, for existential satiation is echoed in the story we hear in Luke's gospel.

The wages of spiritual laziness, of a life of comfort lived at the expense of others are extreme—for Amos, the destruction of a nation, for Luke, eternal torture for a man who ignored the suffering of Lazarus.

Luke's story generates an imaginary intended to scare the you-know-what out of those who feel they have no worries, those who feel like they don't need to pay any attention to the suffering of others, or to the prophets of justice. Luke's is a clear message: If you just let others suffer, you will rot in hell—imagine that!

The threat of eternal punishment is an imaginary people of faith unleashed into the world long ago, a world that just doesn't seem to want to listen. It is a strangely hopeful imaginary—that somehow, someone is keeping track of all this madness and the good people win, and the bad people lose. The people who have been

beaten and battered and shattered in this world will finally get to find joy and comfort. And the people who have abused, neglected, ignored, discarded, and hoarded will see their false comfort disappear.

The Bible doesn't tell us stories so that we can take a walk down memory lane. This is not nostalgia. The Bible tells us stories to change us, to change our current situation. The Bible tells us stories to liberate us from our distortions, to disrupt our defense mechanisms, to keep us from playing it safe when it comes to making the world a better place.

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Dangerous Imagination dares to disrupt the status quo, it breaks through what is probable, what most people predict. Dangerous imagination casts a vision of something altogether new that calls us to a kind of vitality that the world has never seen.

Eternal punishment may be an effective motivator for some and that strategy has been the preferred method of Christians in the world for generations, and I hate to be the one to break it to everybody, but it's not working!

The threat of eternal torture does not disrupt our distorted ways of thinking and seeing the world, it does not interrupt the way we feel about ourselves and each other; it just extends those distortions into eternity. It takes our worst and most annihilating ways of being together as human beings: anger, torture, punishment, callousness, and abusive power and extends these attributes to God.

This is not a healing proposition. This is not an invitation to health and vitality. The creator of the universe must be better than we are at the whole anger and vengeance thing, the savior of the world must have more to offer us than the threat of punishment.

God creates, Christ redeems, the Spirit sustains—these are life-giving, life-changing powers that God stitches through each and every moment in time.

We are the destructive ones, not God. Jesus is the one who told us this in no uncertain terms. He stood with the suffering, he stood with the oppressed. He called a divided society to interrogate its annihilating habit of abusing power, abusing the poor, abusing the sick and the outcast.

Jesus really wasn't ambiguous at all about the lessons he taught us about the nature of God.

Being dangerous, not docile, in the face of the realities of our current situation: oppression, injustice, inequity, distortion—takes a dangerous imagination that

believes in a God who seeks us out for liberation from the things that destroy us, including liberation from the ways we are destroying ourselves.

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We are all captive to racism and its wounding realities. We are all limited by the false color-blindness that we want to think exists in our justice systems. We are all deeply impaired by the blindness to how the legacy of racism in our country has us bound toward self-destruction.

The latest shootings involving police and the deaths of people of color in Tulsa and Charlotte take us deeper into the collective morass of racism. Layers of complexity and internalized assumptions—a woman officer accused of manslaughter in one, a black officer pulled the trigger in another, a man with a traumatic brain injury waiting for his child at the bus stop, a man with his hands up walks toward his broken down car. And videos caught from different perspectives fail to give us clarity. We strain to see truth. We can't help but interpret it all through the distortions of generations of woundedness, distrust, fear, and violence.

Our very ability to see, to understand, to fully take in what is happening around us is impaired, injured by a world that struggles to see past our own self-destructive ways.

Cultivating a new collective imaginary will disrupt the very things we have leaned on to address these problems. Our imaginations must be stretched way beyond Dr. King's dream, way beyond tolerance, way beyond a social safety net, way beyond getting our facts straight; indeed way beyond anything we've known in the world. This new imaginary must go deeper even than the mythologies of Eden or the peaceable kingdom.

A dangerous imagination frees us up to see and feel, to taste and embody another way of being in the world. This disruptive imagination introduces flexibility into the places where we are most calcified, most stuck.

Imagine, Grace Covenant, a world that doesn't turn against itself—but a world instead that long ago learned how to trust our best, most unlikely, possibilities. Imagine a world that knows how to empty itself of toxic greed, how to relax into the joy of the truth that there is enough for every living breathing creature on this planet to live fully, to live boldly, to live with a gentle disposition toward all things.

Dangerous imagination is the only kind that truly takes in and seeks to transform the social brokenness of our contemporary moment.

This week I met with clergy and faith leaders in Asheville—this group of men and women is interfaith, cross-cultural, interdenominational, and multi-racial. The thing that brings us together is that we are believers. And we believe our faith calls us to

find a new way to stand against the racialized violence in our country. We all feel the urgency of now. Some of us our helpers, some of us rebels, some of us organizers and some of us advocates. We are finding ways to come together to have an impact and to bless all the different ways we need to infuse the brokenness of our communities with a faithful response.

Complacency is not an option. Feigned comfort is not an option. Simply writing a check is not an option. Spending our energy trying to get facts straight or argue about who is right and who is wrong, is not an option.

We are being called, as people of faith, to follow a “dangerous Christ” (Metz) into a wounded world. And we cannot engage this problem from a distance; we must go deep into ourselves, into the ether of where our most daring imaginary gestates, into what animates our courage to be people unafraid of being healed.

No one believed Billy Mills could win the Olympics, except for him. And it was his hunger for healing that put his imagination to a Holy purpose, a healing purpose.

It’s safe to say there are many out there who think our country’s soul and our individual souls will never be able to heal from the wounds of racism. We try to say it’s just a part of human nature, we try to say it’s been around way too long, too much harm has been done, too many hard feelings and broken promises, too much distrust, too much. We are too far gone to be able to heal our broken souls—our country’s collective broken soul.

Billy Mills trusted a voice that called him from the precipice of despair and death and said, “don’t.” Can we trust the voice that calls us from the brink of self-destruction and says, “don’t.” This healing journey, brothers and sisters in Christ, will take everything we’ve got. And it starts right here, deep inside, a gut check like you’ve never gut checked before.

It is not the threat of eternal punishment that will call us out of our comfort, our malaise, our learned helplessness, it is our own courage to believe in a promise of a God who says we can be healed.

A dangerous imagination is a Holy imagination—an imagination set to a healing purpose. We’re rounding the corner in this healing journey of ours—we’ll never be this close again, we have to go now. We have to believe, believe, believe.

Thanks be to God.