



“IMAGINATION REQUIRED”
SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 43:16-21; JOHN 12: 1-8
GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC
April 7, 2019
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Isaiah 43:16-21

43:16 Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters,

43:17 who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

43:18 Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.

43:19 I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

43:20 The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people,

43:21 the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise.

John 12:1-8

12:1 Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead.

12:2 There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him.

12:3 Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume.

12:4 But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said,

12:5 "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?"

12:6 (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.)

12:7 Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial.

12:8 You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

The Word of the LORD.

Thanks be to God.

See if you can guess the name of the American athlete I am talking about:

- This athlete was a media star until this athlete publicly criticized the systemic racism of the United States, and then lost endorsements and work opportunities.
- This athlete refused to participate in a public celebration honoring their athletic achievement unless racist policies were changed.
- This athlete was appointed as a good will ambassador for the United States of America to Africa as a symbol of racial equality in the United States.
- This athlete participated in sits-ins and demonstrations to integrate lunch counters and department stores in the South in the 1960s.

Do you know who it is?

It is hard to stretch your imagination beyond the way this record-setting athlete has been deployed in the story of American history. American culture liked this athlete a lot more when the story was simply about overcoming personal obstacles.

Maybe you'll recognize this athlete when I say:

- This athlete had pneumonia, scarlet fever, and polio by the time she was 4 years old.
- Just seven years after she could walk without a leg brace she won her first Olympic medal at age 16.
- This athlete was the first American woman to win 3 Olympic track and field gold medals in a single Olympic game.

Now can anyone name her?

Wilma Rudolph.¹ The first woman in the world to run the 100-meter dash in 11 seconds. The first American woman to win 3 track and field gold medals in a single Olympics. She was America's sweet heart when she propped up the narrative America loves—that with enough hard work and grit, you can overcome anything.

¹ To learn more about Wilma Rudolph's story: Rita Liberti and Maureen M. Smith, *(Re)Presenting Wilma Rudolph*. (Syracuse Press, 2015); Code Switch Podcast, "On the Shoulders of Giants," February 27, 2019. <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/510312/codeswitch>

She was a media superstar and beloved the world over until she used her platform to provoke justice for black and brown people in the United States.

America erased the story of her activism and froze her in time. And we continue to repeat the story of black athletes who protest systemic racism being pushed to the sidelines and we aren't sure what's happened to them since.

Wilma Rudolph was Colin Kaepernick before Colin Kaepernick was even born.

Wilma Rudolph was fueled by a liberation imagination.

Her vision, her imagination of a better world, led her to take risks instead of take the money and run.

Even when the world wished she would just look pretty and smile at the camera and make everyone think things were better than they really were.

When's the last time you let your imagination stretch beyond the way we've been taught to see the world? When's the last time you let your imagination be deployed for the work of liberation?

Allowing your mind to travel into a liberative imaginary means shaking loose from the ether of the very air we breathe in America. You won't find the truth about liberation in our history books or on TV or on Facebook or Twitter.

The liberative imaginary is much more mystical, much more counter-cultural, much more threatening to our way of life than the stories we love to hear.

The Bible is full of powerful prompts for our imaginations. But they can be so hard to hear, so hard to truly see, when we read the Bible with ears and eyes trained to hear and see the things we expect and want to hear and see.

Coming to scripture with our imaginations fully deployed means surrendering to God's mysterious power to make us believe there is something more, something better than the world as it currently works.

Do you hear the words of the ancient prophecy? "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old."

The words in Isaiah 43 begin with the reminder that God is a God who liberates, who is on the side of the oppressed, who actively works to disrupt and dismantle the power of oppressors.

And God calls on those emerging from exile, from occupation, from colonization to train their eyes onto a new horizon—a new thing that God is doing—not just provisions in barren places, not just a way to get by or survive in the wilderness—but God is about changing the very nature of the wilderness.

God brings mighty rivers to the desert, not just a little pond to quench your thirst—a river that changes the landscape, that changes what can grow there, that changes what is possible in the desert.

God is about changing the very nature of the way things work—predators and prey, jackals and ostriches, will praise God’s name along with God’s people.

Imagine—jackals and ostriches singing in the Grace Covenant choir—lions and lambs ringing bells at Edna Mae Fisher’s direction. Wild animals praising God’s power to do a new thing!

Imagine, the most parched, desolate places of our world becoming lush, flowing, fertile places for things to grow and sing and flourish.

The liberative imaginary is extravagant—and so very other to what we know in our every day lives—our mundane realities defined by economic inequality and racialized bias and traumatic violence and people in power who we can’t trust.

When’s the last time you really dusted off your imagination and let it run full throttle? When’s the last time you let yourself dream about extravagant love pouring out into the world? When’s the last time you let yourself believe in God’s power to deploy our imaginations in the service of healing the deepest, most shadowy, most stark conditions that afflict our world?

Maybe you’re more like Martha—Lazarus’ sister. Martha was practical. Martha was dutiful. Martha crossed her T’s and dotted her I’s. Martha didn’t get too caught up in sentimentality and dreamy stuff. She was a doer, a fixer, and no-nonsense Jesus follower. Things needed to fit into the frameworks that made life make sense to her for her to be on board.

Just a few verses before our passage today—Jesus is going to bring Martha’s brother, Lazarus, back from the dead. When he’s going to roll back the stone at Lazarus’ tomb, Martha goes right to a practical concern, how bad the stench of Lazarus’ body is going to be after 4 days in the tomb.

Fast forward—to our passage today. Lazarus alive and well and sitting at the dinner table. Martha is serving guests and not saying a word!

But death is still hanging in the air—Jesus’ death is coming. He knows it is imminent. In fact, his raising of Lazarus was a nail in his coffin with the religious powers that be—they wanted him dead. He was shaking things up way too much—healing on the Sabbath, speaking truth to power, building family and community with people at the margins of culture and propriety.

The officials knew he’d be coming to Jerusalem for Passover—he was an observant Jew after all. So, the plan was in motion. Jesus’ arrest and public execution were hovering like buzzards waiting for death to take hold.

So John’s Gospel has Jesus stop in Bethany on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus wants to enjoy a meal with Lazarus and his family. Lazarus: the one who magnifies and amplifies God’s glory. Lazarus: an icon of God’s power to transform. This is a feast of God’s glory and the vitality of relationships in the family of faith—brought together by wonder and delight in God’s mystery. It is about God doing a new thing—it is about a new thing springing forth!

But the liberative imaginary of this story has atrophied in the hands of American Christianity.

With all the amazement and intimacy and intensity of this beautiful story, those with privilege tend to gravitate to Jesus’ words about the poor always being with us.

Those words make us feel uncomfortable and puzzled, but perhaps we’re secretly relieved that it sounds like there really is nothing we can do to totally eradicate poverty.

We even see Judas’ point about the money going to the poor. Why would Mary be so wasteful? We don’t even notice that Martha, the practical one, is no longer asking her annoying practical questions—she’s present with love as well—feeding Jesus, serving Jesus with a new kind of reverence.

Judas is the one who speaks up and this story quickly morphs into an anomalous moment where Jesus seems to become a sort of lush.

But to truly take in the wonder of this story, imagination is required—and not just any kind of imagination. Our liberative imagination is required.

What could Mary be up to here in this passage?

- A day’s wage is one denarius. She has used 300 denarii (almost a year’s wage) to buy this perfumed oil.
- It is the kind of oil one would use for burial.

- And she does not anoint his head (like royalty); she puts it on his feet and rubs it in with her hair. Such affection, such tenderness, such vulnerability, such intimacy.
- Her actions are not conventional, nor are they easily translatable into something socially acceptable at the time.
- Her actions point toward the foot washing in chapter 13, where Jesus washes his disciples' feet, like a servant.
- And the stench of death becomes the fragrance of love.
- The very nature of death is changing, shifting, shedding its stench, and wafting through the air with the sweet smell of something extravagant and new.

Jesus is up to something much more radical than charity or even accountability for those who abuse their power. Jesus is about changing the very nature of human existence, the very horizon of possibility that defines our life together. Jesus is changing humanity's relationship to suffering, to power, and to death.

When we don't let our imaginations make room for the messengers and carriers of liberation, then we end up shrinking transformation stories down to stories that help us collude with the status quo.

We'll never truly live into Christ's whole story without our imaginations deployed in the service of liberation.

Can you see the finish line out in front of us? If we are following Jesus, then we can't stop, we can't stop pressing forward to the goal, we can't stop short of anything less than freedom for ALL God's children.

Thanks to be God.