



---

## ***Healing Our Imagination***

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn for St. John's Episcopal Church on 10-11-20  
Matthew 22:1-14; Isaiah 25:1-9; Philippians 4:1-9; Psalm 23*

In the name of the Triune God, who calls each living creature Beloved. **Amen.**

A few summers ago, my husband Jeff, daughter Carly and I took a long road trip to Rocky Mountain National Park in Colorado. We went to visit the Alpine Visitor Center at Fall River Pass, the highest elevation visitor center in the park, at almost 12,000 feet above the tree line. I was driving up to that spot, and we were on the outside lane of a narrow two-lane mountain road. At first this was fine. But eventually, we emerged above the tree line, and there were no guardrails, no shoulders, and no trees or brush at the side of the road. There was the white line marking the edge of the lane, and then within 12 inches of that line was a sheer drop of at least a thousand feet.

Now I'm not a generally anxious person. But driving up there, I experienced a visceral panic I could not talk myself out of. Of course I knew intellectually that I have been driving for decades and have never had a problem driving within the lines of a lane. But my body decided that it was not safe and I couldn't stop panicking. Thank God there was a turnoff spot fairly soon and I

pulled into it and asked Jeff to drive. I was embarrassed, but there was no reasoning my way out of my body's experience. I just had to wait for the adrenaline and cortisol and whatever else was in my bloodstream to work its way out of my system.

I'm guessing if I asked you, most of us could share a story where we experienced something our body decided was really alarming. Maybe it was something that truly was dangerous, like a car accident, or combat in war, or abuse. It could also have been something that wasn't rationally dangerous, like being afraid of the dark as a child, or feeling really uncomfortable around people who are homeless, or having your heart pound and jumping out of your skin at a scary part of a movie. My point is that there is a deep animal place in our bodies where survival instincts live, and this place can't be rationally talked out of feeling what it feels. It's a place where we learn to associate certain kinds of images with danger, and where we react to that danger in a way that bypasses our thinking minds.

Our nation, right now, appears to be full of people who seem to be debating about ideas, and I'm no expert, but I don't believe that's the only thing going on. As I witness the increasing anger and vitriol, it looks to me that many of us are acting out of our animal bodies, a fight or flight or freeze response, and rational thinking alone can't calm that response down. This is as true on the left as it is on the right.

Some of you may be familiar with Resmaa Menakem, a

Minneapolis trauma therapist and activist who has written an compassionate book called *My Grandmother's Hands*. Mr. Menakem is an African American whose grandmother had to pick cotton as a young girl, and her hands were permanently scarred by it. In this book, he talks about racialized trauma, and the new science of epigenetics which suggests that trauma can be passed down through the generations. Now we know that black and brown people have a lot of individual and collective trauma because of racism in our country. But Mr. Menakem also says that many of the white people who came here from Europe had also been traumatized, and because their trauma was unhealed, they passed it down to others as violence, that sometimes to them may have felt like self-defense.

In Matthew's Gospel today, Jesus tells a disturbing parable. In it a King invites people to a wedding banquet, and when his first round of invitees murder the messengers, the King responds by slaughtering them and their city. Then when the invitation is opened up to anyone and everyone, the King still throws out the one who shows up without proper wedding attire. Do we automatically assume that the King is God, in this parable, and that those who don't accept his invitation will receive a wrathful punishment? This parable sounds like it was written by people whose image of God was violent, punitive, vengeful. Or at least, it would be understood that way by a people whose trauma is not healed.

On the other hand, in the reading from the prophet Isaiah, we have a vision of an entirely different kind of God- a prophet's

vision of a future in which God wipes away the tears from all faces. The prophet doesn't question the tears or judge one person's suffering to be more or less legitimate than another's. He just sees a God whose compassion knows no bounds. The prophet Isaiah knows that the healing we need from God is as tender, as personal, and as physical as having your tears wiped away. Even if this vision seems utterly impossible, the prophet Isaiah, inspired by God's Spirit, dare to imagine this anyway. Even if every animal instinct in our world pushes us to imagine a punitive and violent God, the prophet Isaiah instead imagines a God whose love and healing power have the last word. And this imagination gave the people of Israel hope long ago, and it can give us hope today.<sup>1</sup>

I was listening to Krista Tippett recently, interviewing Jericho Brown, who won the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. Instead of telling you what they talked about, I'm going to [play a clip for you](#).<sup>2</sup>

“Hope is always accompanied by the imagination, the will to see what our physical environment seems to deem impossible. Only the creative mind can make use of hope. Only a creative people can wield it.”

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Brueggemann, renowned Old Testament scholar, says this in his seminal work *The Prophetic Imagination*: “Thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.”

<sup>2</sup> This clip can be found at 42:41.

Can we be a creative people? With God's help, I imagine that we can. A creative people can learn to heal from the fear responses that are embedded in our bodies, the fear responses that made civilians see seventeen year old teenage Trayvon Martin as a threat, or that make people see a vengeful punishing God, or that makes us prefer people who look like us. But why is it that creativity and hope and prophetic imagination can heal, when rational thinking can't always?

Like my experience of a panic attack on the winding roads of the Rocky Mountains, people who are traumatized may not be able to talk themselves out of their fear, and anxiety, and anger. But people in trauma *can* access their senses and also their imagination. Let that sink in a bit more. My relatives with PTSD, and Resmaa Menakem and therapists everywhere can attest to this. People who are traumatized can access their physical bodies, and they can also access their imagination and the world of poetry and dreams, even when their trauma is activated. This is why God has always granted oppressed people prophets. The prophet Isaiah, speaking to his people in exile in Babylon, says that God will wipe away every tear from your eyes, even though that seemed patently impossible. Jesus healed in a way that was profoundly personal, and physical. The poet Jericho Brown says that "Hope is always accompanied by the imagination, the will to see what our physical environment seems to deem impossible." The famous Saint Joan of Arc, when she was on trial for heresy and was accused of thinking that God spoke to her in her imagination, said, "Of course God speaks to me in my imagination. How else would God

communicate with me?”

Of course we need rational thought. But we also need a theology and a philosophy that stretch to the far reaches of our artistic selves. These days, we need prophets. We need the helpless, creative power of the poets. We need musicians. We need gardeners. We need healers. We need children and we need play. We need the genius of the person with Aspergers who insists that there be symmetry between what people say and what they actually do, who insist on integrity. We need the genius of the people at the margins who are able to think outside the box because what is mainstream has never worked for them, and we are seeing that it isn't really working for anyone right now. We need the creative power of God to shape our imagination of what is possible.

To follow the Way of Jesus who was also a prophet, we can creatively imagine the world the prophets describe—a world in which we actually, really can heal from the fear that is a sickness and a cancer in our society. We can imagine a world in which difference becomes a source of delight and curiosity and wonder. So in Paul's letter to the Philippians, he says, “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable... think about these things.” Or perhaps, “imagine these things infusing our world.” Play with these images. Paint about them. Jil Evans, I'd love to see you take this and run with it! All you other artists and musicians, this is your time. Imagine what is true, and honorable, and just, and

pleasing and pure infusing everything that is stuck in our personal and public lives. Imagine the most outrageously just and kind and honorable presidential debates, and let that shape not just how you vote, but also how you empathize with your neighbor.

This week, let's all make some space for praying and connecting with God through play, and imagination, and movement. Let's read the poetry of the Psalms and the prophets of scripture, and the poetry of Jericho Brown and Mary Oliver and Rumi. Let's soothe our animal bodies by putting our gardens to bed for the season. Let's ask God's Spirit to infuse our imagination with what the Beloved Community could really look like at St. John's during the pandemic and beyond it. Let's invite the presence of Christ to bring a truly holistic healing to all of us, and have courage to think outside the box. Let's allow God's Spirit to make us a creative people who know how to hope. Amen.