A WELL-FED IMAGINATION

Scriptures: Genesis 1:1-5,27; I Corinthians 11:23-26

The second scripture lesson this morning comes from Genesis 1:1-5 and v. 27. The first verse of Genesis is probably the most well known verse of the bible; it possibly even trumps John 3:16. And so my hope this morning is that we can strip off that familiarity and find newness in God's word to us as continue worshiping together.

Now, if you will humor a young seminarian, In order to aid in a new hearing of these verses, I would like to offer you a taste of how the ancient Israelites might have heard these words which become the opening to their holy scriptures. It is dangerous on a Sunday morning, I know, but I would invite you now to close your eyes. Place yourselves gathered in a large crowd in the heat of the desert, possibly having just been freed from slavery in Egypt; possibly having just crossed through a parted sea; possibly standing at the foot of Mt. Sinai, where God delivered Moses the ten commandments; you smell dirt; you smell the heat, you smell yourself and the people next to you. And you stand there listening, waiting for the presence of the Lord.

Hear now the first verses of our scriptures in a way you may never have heard before.

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ׃
וְהָאָרֶץ הָיְתָה תֹהוּ וָבֹהוּ
וְחֹשֶׁךְ עַל־פְּנֵי תְהוֹם
וְרוּחַ אֱלֹהִים מְרַחֶפֶת עַל־פְּנֵי הַמָּיִם׃

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים יְהִי אוֹר
וַיְהִי־אוֹר׃
וַיַּרְא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־הָאוֹר כִּי־טוֹב
וַיַּבְדֵּל אֱלֹהִים בֵּין הָאוֹר וּבֵין הַחֹשֶׁךְ׃
וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לָאוֹר יוֹם וְלַחֹשֶׁךְ קָרָא לָיְלָה
וַיְהִי־עֶרֶב וַיְהִי־בֹקֶר
יוֹם אֶחָד׃

Now, hear the familiar words of Genesis 1:1-5 and 27 which can be found on page 1 of your pew bibles.

[1] In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth,
[2] the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep,
while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.

[3] Then God said, "Let there be light";
and there was light.
[4] And God saw that the light was good;
and God separated the light from the darkness.
[5] God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night.
And there was evening
And there was morning,
The first day.

And then to verse 27.

[27] God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

This is the word of the Lord
Thanks be to God.

That's that danger of asking a seminarian to preach. He or she may well stand up in front of the congregation and start speaking in words that absolutely no one else can understand. But thankfully understanding doesn't just come from the meaning of the words themselves, but from what their pronunciation evokes.

And I have got to admit, I love the Hebrew language, the language the majority of our Old Testament was originally written in. It's a language intended to evoke images, colors, emotions, and poetic rhythms. And the first story that we are given in this emotive and poetic language, is the story of God's creation of the world, including the creation of humanity made in God's own image and likeness.

Theologians have wrestled for centuries over what this means, and to be honest there are many ways to approach this question and many conclusions that one can come to, but as we read the creation account in Genesis 1, there is one characteristic of God which I find stands out above all others. Up to this point, the one overarching characteristic attributed to God is that of creativity. And we, the human creation, have been created in the image and likeness of this ultimate Creator. It is being created in this image – having the God-given human potential for creativity and artistry and the imagination which allows for both – which is one aspect of what truly sets humanity apart from the rest of creation.

And the more that we live into the image in which we have been created, the more we live into God's desire for love and reconciliation in the world.

Now, I want to point out that this imaginative aspect of what it means to have been creative in the image and likeness of God is not limited solely to the areas we would typically call the fine arts – it is not only seen in theatre, film, music, dance, and the visual arts. We have the ability in all of our daily lives to use our divinely instilled imaginative capabilities to live into God's desire for love and reconciliation in the world.

But the first story I would like to recount to you does come from an art form very near to my heart and in which I have experienced the grace of the presence of God on many occasions.

There was an article in the January 2007 issue of *American Theatre* magazine entitled *Oedipus at Sing Sing*, which gives a wonderful account of the way in which living into our imaginative and creative nature may help to reunite a world in which we are estranged from one another and even from our own selves. As the title suggests, the article recounts a production of Sophocles' classic Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, at one of our country's most notorious prisons. For a number of years, a program called *Rehabilitation Through the Arts* has been an integral part of life inside Sing Sing's concrete walls and barred windows. As an example of the program's transforming power, the article is framed around the experience of one man, Clarence Maclin, whose only bed has been in his cell for the past eleven years.

Pamela Renner, the author of the article, writes, "By his own account Clarence Maclin was angry and rebellious when he came to Sing Sing at age 29, convicted by a jury of armed robbery along with three other men. He didn't want much to do with the other inmates, and he had no patience with the authorities or the rules. A hardheaded loner from Mount Vernon, N.Y., he'd already seen an awful lot of violence and futility, and he felt outraged that he'd been convicted of a crime, which he maintains he didn't commit. Once behind bars, Maclin recalls, he almost never smiled."

But as the article continues, we discover that things slowly began to change for Maclin—and it was a change that began when he saw a production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* put on by volunteers in the prison. At the urging of an inmate involved in the production, Maclin subsequently joined the work of *Rehabilitation Through the Arts* and has been involved in its productions—of which there are two a year—for nine years.

Through his involvement, Maclin began the journey of becoming reunited to his own estranged self.

Again, Renner writes, "The very largeness of emotion and gesture that stage acting requires is magnetic to [Maclin]—it gives him a license to dig down into his own emotions and cleanse himself of some of the burdensome ones: the wasting of regrets that can eat away at [one's] soul while [waiting] for the years to pass behind bars."

Maclin puts it in his own words: "These plays give us an opportunity to express emotions that we normally don't get a chance to express in a prison setting—like crying is something that you don't do in jail. It shows weakness, and the last thing you want to show in prison is weakness. But up on the stage I can be anybody. I can cry. I can laugh. I can do all those

things, and it won't be looked at as weakness because this is my *craft*." Through participating in Sing Sing's *Rehabilitation Through the Arts* program, Maclin has been reunited with himself.

And that is the greatest part—when we tap into our divinely instilled imaginative capabilities, we are reunited to our own inner emotions, thoughts and desires And it is only then that we can begin to be a positive force in the wider community.

Now, it was not the intent of this article to make any theological claims, but nonetheless, one stands out. Maclin was allowed, though the release of his imagination, to live more fully into the image in which he had been created—and in so doing, he was reunited with his own estranged emotions.

Maclin's experience is typical for the program. When the program held its first and only performance outside the prison walls, the cast was joined by "eight alumni of [*Rehabilitaiton Through the Arts*] who had 'graduated' [as the inmates say] from Sing Sing." And through the matching of their personal experiences of their crimes, incarceration and rehabilitation through the arts, they have gone on to do tremendous social work after their "graduation."

"We're eight guys," one alumnus recounts, "who represent 66,000 other guys….We're speaking their words, representing their crimes and their experience…I sleep better being part of the solution."

The more that we live into the image in which we have been created, the more we live into God's desire for love and reconciliation in the world.

Rehabilitation Through the Arts has been a life transforming experience for the inmates involved in the program. But this program itself would not have come into existence has the initial creators of the program not first imagined the possibility of such an incredible experience taking place inside the walls of Sing Sing. They first imagined it. And then they lived into it. And the effects have reverberated inside and outside the prison's walls ever since.

But we don't need to travel to Sing Sing to see that way in which living into our imaginative apabilities helps to heal a broken world.

There are many ways in which individuals and groups from Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church have been imagining a world of God's reconciling power, and living into that imagination. What comes to mind most readily for me are the ways in which our Sr. High youth groups have gone out year after year and imagined a world in which they help reconcile broken and impoverished parts of this world building houses in Tijuana, serving in love in the Gulf Coast, working in service projects in the poorer areas of Portland. They have imagined a world in which they would make a difference, and they have lived into that God-given imagination and they have made a difference.

Through imagining the difference they would make, and acting on that imagination, they have lived into God's desire for love and reconciliation in the world.

Now, today we celebrate communion. And I have chosen the familiar words of 1st Corinthians for our first scripture lesson. They are the words we hear in some form every time we gather at this table.

Paul writes:

> For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Now why on earth are those verses paired with a sermon on God's act of creation and the God-given human capacity for imagination? Because every time we celebrate communion and proclaim Christ' crucifixion and resurrection, we proclaim a new reality; it is a reality of total reconciliation between us and our God.

And in this new reality we have been transformed—

> Like Clarence Maclin in Sing Sing,
> Like the Sr. Higher returning from Mexico, Portland and the Gulf Coast
> Like Kara King who is currently serving Christ in an orphanage in South America

And who like myself had a literal roof top experience at Whitworth College that has set me on a trajectory which has brought me to the point where as of yet I am standing here today.

We have been set free as new creations through the transforming power of the Holy Spirit, and we are called to live into this new reality, which means first being able to imagine its truth.

We come to this table to feed our imaginations. And when our imaginations are well-fed, there is no telling what the power of Creator God might do.

-Nick Preuninger
M. Div. Senior, Princeton Theological Seminary
Member of Hamblen Park Presbyterian Church
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