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Hutterthal Mennonite Church

Jeremiah 33:10-16; Luke 1:26-38

28 November 2021

Dare to Imagine: Possibilities

Opening Greeting & Prayer:

Let us pray: God of hope and possibility, we long for your appearing, we anticipate your arrival, we yearn for your presence here among us, Emmanuel. Open our eyes to see and our ears to hear your movement in our midst as we wait. Give us the energy to walk in unknowing, yet patiently hoping in your faithfulness and love. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of all of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Message:

It is good to be back in Freeman after the Thanksgiving holiday. We journey together into the season of Advent, a time of longing, yearning, anticipating, and hoping in the incarnation of the living God, the God of Israel in Jesus of Nazareth, the promised Messiah, the Christ. While we enter the story 2000 years ago when God first came as a human being to a family in Nazareth and while we remember the ways that God's coming was expected, announced, and celebrated, we also take time this morning to reflect on our longing for Jesus's appearing again. Jesus will come to set things right, to fully restore and redeem this universe. We are longing for the world to be set right, for God's will to be on earth as it is in heaven. So, we hold onto hope and the possibility of a God who becomes like us in order to show us the way and provide the way as well as a God who has not left or forsaken us but will come again. Amen.

This Advent, we use what few precious moments are left to us in the milieu of the holiday season to imagine as the ancient prophets imagined the coming Messiah and as the first-century apostles imagined the coming of Jesus again. When was the last time that you were able to truly imagine something? We often reserve the time and notion of imagination for children as though it tends to mean being out of touch with reality. As adults then, we create other words, more mature or sophisticated words for imagination so that we do not appear to be out of touch with reality. We might use words like *possibility* or *vision*, *opportunity* or *idea* for imagination so that we do not sound childish or immature. This Advent season, though, I am asking you to allow the inner child in you to come to the forefront of your church experience.

I use the phrase *dare to* because we are often asked to do something, to take a chance on a particular experience, to try out a new product, to consider whether something is worth our time or energy. I am daring you to imagine, to take a chance on something that you may not have time for. Will you imagine with me these next few weeks the key themes of the Advent and Christmas season? I am asking you to risk what *is* for what *could be*, to use precious moments for what might feel like a waste of time. You might be thinking or wondering what difference it would make anyway to begin imagining again. It is truly difficult to see beyond our present circumstances, to imagine that anything beyond our current experience is possible, yet that is exactly what we are being invited into this season, even today.

In our passage from Jeremiah, the Lord, YHWH, the God of Israel calls out those who are left after the Babylonian armies have conquered Jerusalem in 587 BCE. The people can only see the devastation and death that surrounds them, the wasteland that is left, devoid of life of any kind after the enemy has defeated them. But God challenges them to a new future, in which the voices of celebration and restoration will once again be heard in the cities and countryside.

Shepherds and their sheep will again roam the pastures of the land. The temple will be filled with offerings and songs as the people praise the Lord for God's steadfast or unfailing love, the *khosed* that we talked about in the book of Ruth. Not only will God restore the land, but God will bring a righteous and just king to rule the people, one from the line of the great King David. To the people standing amidst the destruction of the city walls and grieving the loss of their friends and family members, these words and their future prediction must have seemed impossible, completely unreasonable, and ridiculous.

But we cannot stop in Jeremiah; we must also look at the passage in the first chapter of Luke. Gabriel, an angel of God, visits Mary in Nazareth. She is engaged to Joseph, a descendant of David. Gabriel tells Mary that she will bear a son who will take on the role that has been predicted by the prophets, even the role that we have just heard in Jeremiah. Her son, Jesus, will become a great king like his ancestor David. Jesus will reign over Israel forever in righteousness and justice, the Son of God, the Son of the Most High, the Holy One. But even with all of that, Mary is still stuck in the present, what is most apparently obvious to her. How could she bear a son? She has never been with anyone. If she's going to have a son, then she needs a husband, a male partner. How else could she bear children? It is impossible.

In both passages of scripture this morning, we find the characters in the same place that we find ourselves most often. We can only seem to see the impossible all around us. Our limited perspectives become enthralled in the latest story of what seems like an intractable situation or difficulty. We read or hear about the latest political, social, economic, or natural crisis, and we wonder how we will ever get out of such a mess. We are not left in this place, though. When we are most overwhelmed or consumed by the impossible, we are reminded by God and God's messenger that nothing is impossible. Mary, a virgin young woman from Nazareth, will have a

son and the land of Judah and Israel will be restored with life even after exile because what seems impossible to us is teeming with possibilities for God. By the end of our passage in Luke, Mary is literally pregnant with the possibility of God's redemptive purposes. By the end of our passage in Jeremiah, the future fruit of God's persistent and unfailing love will be so apparent to the people of Israel and their neighbors that the name of the place will be "The Lord is our righteousness," which means that Israel's God is faithful, something the people of Israel are struggling to believe as they are led into exile. Do I truly believe that God is faithful, especially when things seem most dismal?

Our passages go even further though. Both Jeremiah and Luke make political claims about this new leader. Every other kingdom in our world, whether it be the Babylonian Empire of the 6th century BCE, the Roman Empire of the first century CE, or the United States of America of the 21st century, they all pale in comparison to the true justice, grace, and mercy of the Messiah, the Christ. The faithfulness and hope of God will be and is embodied in Jesus. The possibilities of God's enduring love will not come through Joe Biden or any other president. We must look beyond the political, social, and economic tools that are handed to us through our current cultural and political system and begin imagining another way, a way that looks, sounds, and centers in Jesus.

This Advent season, then, I invite you to dare to imagine the possibilities of God in Jesus. Our communal challenge will be what to do with the possibilities that arise from our prayer and imagination. Will we continue to be paralyzed by the circumstances that surround us and tell God that what God is suggesting is impossible? Will we begin to see how God might be drawing us into the work that God is already doing? Will we respond with the same grace and humility that Mary does in Luke? When we hear God speaking, when we feel God's leading, when we

discern the hope-filled future that God is offering each of us, will we, will you, will I respond,
“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”?

Closing Prayer:

Let us pray: God of possibility and hope, we look to you when our worlds seem most
overwhelming. Inspire our hearts and minds with your Spirit and love as we dare to imagine your
will and way in our community and beyond. May your presence in us, among us, and around us
continue to move us to action and response. In Jesus' name. Amen