

"IMAGINATION!"

A Sermon preached by Rev. Richard G. Thompson on Sunday, July 16, 2017 at Christ Church, Kennebunk, ME

"Now Faith is the imagination of things hoped for, the intuition of things not seen." That is my paraphrase translation, and a faithful rendition of the Greek. For Faith is about Imagination. This coming week we will be able to enhance our imagination about an important event at the beginning of World War II by seeing the new movie, *DUNKIRK*. Imagination is about a deeper understanding of history, an empathetic understanding of others. You have all heard that, if you meet someone you do not like, you should walk in his shoes for a mile. Of course, there are different ways of looking at that. Consider doing that and soon you'll be a mile away from the person you don't like, and you have his shoes!

I remember reading a story about Dunkirk. But let me remind you of that event. At five and half years old, I woke up on September 1, 1939. On my desk was my 1939 World's Fair button: "I Have Seen the Future," and other souvenirs from that great fair celebrating "The World of Tomorrow." But even before I woke up the world of tomorrow had radically changed, and not for the good.

Nazi Germany had no exhibit along the Plaza of Nations. Hitler had a different vision of the future. On September 1, 1939 Nazi soldiers disguised in Polish uniforms faked an invasion of Germany, and Germany followed with a "blitzkrieg," a lightning-swift attack. The Wehrmacht, the formidable Nazi War Machine, rolled across Poland, cut through France's supposedly invincible Maginot Line of defense, and backed hundreds of thousands of troops—a large British Expeditionary Force, French, Belgian, and Polish troops—up against the English Channel, near a little French village named Dunkirk. The Nazi Generals were ready for the order to attack, but Hitler dallied, knowing he had the enemy trapped, dallied while pushing for the conditional surrender of Great Britain, the conditional terms: England would not be bombed nor invaded, and Germany would have free and uncontested control of all continental Europe. With hundreds of thousands of lives at stake along with possible bombing and invasion, Churchill and the British government were on the verge of surrendering. It was an impossible situation; I had seen the future, the World of Tomorrow, but now we were seeing another future, another tomorrow.

But then overnight while Hitler dallied in his glory and confidence something amazing happened. Motor boats, fishing boats, tug boats, cruise liners, ferries, private and business boats, over 800 boats, came to evacuate the trapped armies. Small boats had to be used to get close to the shore. After eleven days over 338,000 were rescued and taken across the English Channel to Great Britain. A new expression was born: "The Dunkirk Spirit." That moment changed the war; England had a new resolve; Churchill captured that new spirit: "We shall fight on the beaches, . . . we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills, we shall never surrender." That Spirit of Dunkirk changed history for all of us; that selfless heroism of small boats crossing the English Channel, risking Nazi air attack, probably won us the war.

Some years ago I came across a marvelous short story about Dunkirk. Three Englishmen were deep into their cups in a local pub and they were reminiscing about where they were during Dunkirk. Each told about his heroic part, but as the story finally unfolded, it was clear that none of the three had been to Dunkirk. Yet the story ended with the wonderful observation: "Every Englishman was at Dunkirk."

So it requires IMAGINATION to understand history. We are blessed with many stories and novels, with the History Channel, with movies like *Saving Private Ryan*, or *Schindler's List*, and now next week *Dunkirk*. Every Englishman was at Dunkirk—that feeling, that imagination, probably won the war.

Another people had a similar thought: "In every generation, every individual must feel as if he personally had come out of Egypt." That is taken from *A Passover Haggadah*, which has a commentary by Elie Wiesel. The most striking point is that we are included, not just every Jew, but every individual. And while we were not literally there, we are to imagine "as if" we were. Elie Wiesel emphasizes that we are all in the Passover ritual.

The Passover *Haggadah* is the long Jewish ritual remembering their Exodus, or flight, or rescue from Egyptian slavery. The Bible and that ancient history are incredibly complex. There is no serious archeological evidence for the Exodus, nor for many of the early stories of Genesis. But all stories, whether literally true or not, convey the most profound truth.

Sumer was probably the seat of the earliest civilization, on the Persian Gulf, with wheels, canal engineering, agriculture, domesticated animals, language, mathematics, social organization. With cuneiform marks in clay came accounting, and the gap between a few rich and many poor; with writing came literacy, but also illiteracy, and another division between rich and poor; with social organization and engineering came social divisions, patriarchy and slavery; with inventions came greed and war; all subsumed under a pantheon of gods. And one man heard, whether in a dream or a hallucination or in actuality, the whisperings of a mystery that would change his life and the worlds: "Leave this; get out!" And Abram left civilization to become a wandering Aramean.

Egypt would call itself by a name that meant "civilization," but which included slavery, and one day Moses would hear that same mystery telling him: "Go down, Moses, way down in Egypt land, Tell, old Pharaoh, let my people go!" The Hebrews would escape and would wander 40 years according to their stories. As one Jewish comedienne explained: "that was because Moses was a man and would never ask directions." Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, formerly the Chief Rabbi of Great Britain and the British Commonwealth, in talking about those 40 years, suggested that the distance from Egypt to the Promised Land was not so far, but using Nelson Mandela's phrase, he wrote that from slavery to true society is indeed "a long walk to freedom." For there in the Palestinian hill country in the midst of that Fertile Crescent of rivers, running from the Nile Civilization of Egypt to the various Empires of Mesopotamia, which means "the land between the rivers," the first of which had been Sumer, there in the midst of patriarchal, misogynistic, unjust, and cruelly militaristic empires, there was the first known experiment in freedom, in the dignity of each person, and every year they have, however imperfectly, embodied their own dreams, celebrated the Passover, the escape from Egypt, the escape to freedom, and the dignity of every human being. That is what the Hebrew Bible is about; that is what the New Testament is about; that is what Jesus is about; that is what this church is about!

And every individual, not just every Jew, but everyone of us are to imagine that we were slaves in Egypt. There was no getting around work issues, issues of debt, issues of slavery, but Hebrew law, Torah, tried to make clear that debt and enslavement were never to be permanent institutions, and that was built into the Law of Jubilee that cancelled debts and freed slaves every seven years. And that Law of Jubilee was the bedrock of the ethics of the prophets and through the prophets of Jesus, who celebrated the Passover on the night he knew he would be arrested. That very Jubilee was the basis for hope for African American slaves in our

history; and a contemporary Jubilee movement exists to end the crippling debts that we and other rich countries have imposed upon the Third World poor. Alan Boesak, who was one of the moving voices of the ANC (the African National Congress) along with Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond Tutu, talked about how the South African Government banned Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country*. Incidentally, there is a lovely prayer in our Hymnal by Alan Paton, "For Courage to Do Justice." Boesak pointed out that they failed to ban the Bible, probably because they did not understand how revolutionary it was. In every empire Jews have lived and every year have celebrated Passover, and imagined once again what it must have felt like to escape to freedom.

Our own American Revolution was deeply motivated by Colonial sermons about Moses and the Exodus. The Liberty Bell has the inscription: "Proclaim liberty throughout all the land to the inhabitants thereof," from Leviticus, part of the Law of Jubilee, the very next line in Leviticus: "This shall be a Jubilee." This is what is at the heart of the Declaration of Independence which was based on the philosophy of John Locke and the Bible. "We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men (and the women at Seneca Falls in 1848 would add 'and women') are created equal and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness." "... with certain unalienable rights, that among these ..." "... that among these ..."; there are other rights! I have been very sick and I can tell you when you are very sick, your rights to Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness are severely compromised. The Right to Universal Health Care is implicit in the Declaration of Independence.

So while Africa slaves sung songs of Jubilee in the night, some would slip away in the night, heading north through swamps and forests on the underground railroad, some going through the place where my daughter Pam lives, a place on the underground railroad.

A little over a year ago Marcia and I visited her daughter Leza's family. We attended at concert at South Side Presbyterian Church. In the eighties some refugees from Central America knocked on the door of the minister's home, the Rev. John Fife, and the Sanctuary Movement was born, refugees be shepherded through many churches, some from Tucson across the country and through Maine to Canada.

So IMAGINATION is a vital ingredient for faith and ethics. Years ago I heard Maurice Samuel, a very gifted Jewish writer, tell about growing up in a Jewish ghetto in Eastern Europe, where everybody gossiped about everyone else in the ghetto, but also, and here's the point, including in that gossip, gossip about characters in the Hebrew Bible. It was a fabulous exercise in imagination to know Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, as family.

Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the greatest Jewish theologians of the 20th Century wrote the classic work on the Hebrew Prophets, called simply *The Prophets*. The Prophets, Amos, Hosea, Isaiah, Micah, Jeremiah, and others, were deeply sensitive Hebrews who imagined what God must feel when God looked upon the failings of God's people. The heartbroken Hosea imagined a heartbroken God. When they wrote: "Thus says the Lord," they were dramatists imagining a conversation with God. Our most profound faith comes from the Prophets. It is crystal clear that they were the fundamental influence on Jesus.

When I was in high school I read Irving Stone's *Immortal Wife*, a biographical novel about John Charles Freemont. I loved American history since 3rd grade when I started a scrapbook of every picture of history in

the papers or magazines. This novel not only opened my eyes to the duplicity of our presidents, but also gave me a personal feeling and empathy for history.

We are all into imagination—television, movies, novels. It is the essence of understanding others. Through conversation and empathy we come to know each other. Now not all imagination is good. We can imagine some awful stuff. Nonetheless, imagination is essential and when guided by our Biblical ethic, we can come to care about all people.

Listen again to the Law, Torah, from Leviticus: “When an alien [or stranger or refugee, the Hebrew means all of these] resides with you in your land, you shall not oppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, [Why?] for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” In the very fundamental law of the Ten Commandments, we are told that keeping the Sabbath meant a day off for all your family, all your animals, and all your workers and servants, [Why?] because “you were a slave in the land of Egypt and the Lord your God brought you out from there . . .”

But let’s get to the heart of this message: “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.” That takes a lot of imagination including getting to know yourself, what makes you tick, what you really need and want, and how you might imagine helping another. It’s the law and the prophets; it’s everything; it’s what we are all about. That’s what Jesus said and was about! Look again at the Gospels, the great stories he told with all their imagination, the great stories about him with all the imagination of the early church in writing their memories, his marvelous relations with all kinds of people crossing all the barriers of society. And finally, and above all, a prayerful imagination of the heart of God, how God must feel about all God’s children. At the end of the movie *The Help* Viola Davis walks away from the home from which she has been fired. She and others have told their stories about what it is like to be a domestic servants. She will start writing. She muses to herself: “Nobody ever asked me what it felt like to be me!” That’s what imagination is all about, imagining what it feels like to be for one another.

So imagination not only helps us understand one another and our history, it also helps us, because of our better understanding of one another, to imagine better possibilities. Listen to some of John Lennon’s *IMAGINE*:

Imagine all the people living for today.

Imagine there’s no countries – It isn’t hard to do – Nothing to kill or die for – And no religion too
Imagine all the people living life in peace

You may say I’m a dreamer – But I’m not the only one – I hope some day you’ll join us -
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions – I wonder if you can – No need for greed or hunger – A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people sharing all the world

You may say I’m a dreamer – But I’m not the only one – I hope some day you’ll join us
And this world will be as one.

Amen.