

Imagining Shalom -- B. J. Parker

Isaiah 25:6-9; Psalm 118:1-2, 14-21; Acts 10:34-43; Mark 16:1-8

One of the things that I appreciate most about our congregation is our choice to have a rotating pulpit. A rotating pulpit means that as congregants we have the opportunity to hear multiple people proclaim the gospel from their distinct perspective. As many of you know firsthand, the call to preach often comes by way of a generously worded email from Judy inviting one to confer with the Spirit and consider a proposed date. Whenever Judy asks, for me, the answer is always “Yes,” though I have to admit I usually look through the texts and consider which ones do or don’t give me pause. I recently received an email from Judy inviting me to preach, but the date was Easter Sunday. To be honest, it gave me great pause. How does one say anything well on Easter? My theology prof in seminary was Graham Walker and he taught me that all theology was just a giant metaphor, because we’re using the limitations of words to try and talk about the indescribable Other that is God. And for that matter, even the words we’re using are just metaphors. Anyone who has taken on the task of learning a second language can appreciate this reality. So today, on Easter, we gather to use the meager to think and talk about the inexhaustible.

Several weeks ago, John Massena preached. When he began his sermon, John said that he would rather communicate the ideas with poetry or painting but was bound to words. I think that on Easter, John’s observation is even more pertinent. I think that our texts for today, though, help us in this process.

As I was preparing for today’s sermon, I was reflecting on the times that I’ve had the opportunity to preach at St. Paul’s. I think it’s possible that Judy in her deep wisdom might have secretly planned this, but last year, I preached the first Sunday of Lent. As I thought, read, and wrote this week, I couldn’t help but think about these two sermons together. Now, I’m sure all of you remember the riveting words from my short sermon from a year ago, but if not, let me give you the main idea in one sentence. Lent invites us into discernment between true life, or shalom, and its absence, which is death. Today, I’d like to propose that our texts lead us in imagining, celebrating, and living into God’s shalom in light of the resurrection. A word of warning, though. I don’t think this is an easy task.

In our lesson from the Hebrew Bible—Isaiah 25:6-9—the author of Isaiah describes quite a feast. I’m not sure how you feel about dining on fatty cuts of meat served with oil along with marrow extracted from bones, and then washing it down with a nice Ancient Near Eastern wine—probably with notes of velvety terebinth tannins, tart pomegranate, and smoky cedar—but what the author describes was opulent. I think we’re all familiar with the idea of a feast being a standard way of celebrating and bonding. In our text, feasting becomes even more than that though, and seems to point to something bigger. And this is where I think Isaiah invites us to envision God’s shalom. Joseph Blenkinsopp cites our passage as the first occurrence of what some refer to as the eschatological banquet motif. This motif is the use of a banquet meal to imaginatively explore the end of death. The motif begins in some books that didn’t quite make it into the bible like, 4 Ezra and 1 Enoch and picture the elect feasting on the flesh of Leviathan. This motif was used in the Qumran community that gave us the Dead Sea scrolls, and is present throughout the gospels and early church. While we might not be excited about eating a giant

chaos monster from the depths of the sea, we shouldn't miss the significance of the meal itself. In all of these examples, a meal becomes a metaphor for imaginatively living out—even if for a few short hours—what none of us has experienced: tragedy no longer haunting humanity. The verses that follow draw upon just as much imaginative language. In verse 8, the author borrows from the Ugaritic myth of Mot—the god of death—swallowing Ba'al as a means of describing YHWH ordering chaos. Why does the author use imagery from an Ugaritic myth to assert YHWH's dominance over death? Blenkinsopp thinks that it pulls the experience of death into a broader sphere, characterized by disorder, aridity, negativity, and moral and physical corruption. These are the opposite of YHWH's intention for creation, which is the flourishing that is shalom.

So, in our Isaiah text, the author uses only metaphor to invite the faithful community to consider God's restoration of shalom for all of humanity. I wonder, what might that look like in Greenville? Here again, I think our Isaiah passage offers helpful insight. Isaiah 25 sits in the broader context of a sort of literary unit that is Isaiah 24-27. These chapters are psalms and hymns that celebrate YHWH's physical salvation of Israel from their oppressors. If we take a cue from Brevard Childs and read canonically, we should expand outwards from these chapters to understand their relationship to the surrounding texts. We don't have to go far to understand. Chapters 13-23 and 28-34, the texts directly surrounding ours, articulate a sharp judgment against the nations who have enacted violence against God's people. Whether one reads the cities mentioned in these texts as Babylon or Edom, they are, as Blenkinsopp notes, the personification of Chaos and Evil Empire par excellence. The Evil Empire. This phrase does indeed sound like something from one of the Star Wars films, but it's also deeply interwoven into the biblical text and our communities. Evil Empire for the Israelites was Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Edom, Moab, and others. In fact, Evil Empire was often Israel itself. Evil Empire is that set of structures that we as humans create to put down, take advantage of, and ultimately kill the goodness of God's creation. According to Isaiah, if we're gonna talk about shalom and the end of death, we do so by talking about the end of Empire.

Let's take a minute and zoom back out and consider our Isaiah text and its call to imagination. The author of Isaiah calls us into imagining what words, images, and physical actions we might use to consider God's restoration of shalom to creation, to humanity, and to our community. Part of that imagination, though, is also the end of the systems that enact oppression. We can easily imagine what that might be like for our world. We feel the yearning for shalom every time we hear of another hundred civilians killed in Syria, or the genocide of the Rohin-ji-ya in Myanmar. But what about our community? What about Greenville? What does shalom look like here? If we take Isaiah's prompting, that means that we attend to the ways in which we see ourselves and others actively oppressing by our actions and our inactions. And here is where I think the work of imagination matters. We can easily cite the themes we discuss in the pulpit and gathered around during potlucks: racial equality and equity, gender equality, stability for the mentally unstable, and the end of poverty. But we need more. In order for there to be an eschatological banquet, I think we have to figure out ways to imagine and then actually *enact* the end of Empire. This is the part of sermons where whoever is preaching usually weaves in a few examples of what she or he means. This is hard stuff and to be honest, I'm not completely sure. I've begun thinking about how I can do this, but I'm not sure what it looks like on a community level. Because of some conversations with good friends, I've thought about rewriting all the

courses I teach so that they lead my students to consider Empire and God's fundamental opposition to it. I've begun to think about how I might create art work that enacts these things. I've thought about my time and money. When I think about St. Paul's, our denomination, and our broader community, though, I don't feel confident making specific suggestions. Of course we should pray and serve. But what else? Perhaps we should engage in more civil disobedience. Perhaps we should fundraise for Black Lives Matter. Perhaps we should become a sanctuary for immigrants. Perhaps we should hold a listening session for police officers. I'm not sure, but I know that thoughts and prayers aren't enough. I think that this is the sort of imagination to which Isaiah calls us.

The author of Psalm 118 isn't far from Isaiah. In Psalm 118, the Psalmist lets loose a jubilant praise of YHWH because of YHWH's salvation. While I think Cranmer might have put this passage in today's selection because of verse 17, which reads, *I shall not die, but live*, and the reference to *the stone that is rejected* in verse 22, I think there might be more. Psalm 118 is the final psalm in the Egyptian *Hallels*. The Egyptian *Hallels* are composed of Psalms 113-118 and are recited during the Passover meal on the eighth day of Passover. Again, we find ourselves at a meal celebrating God's deliverance of God's people from oppression. As Nancy deClaisse Walford notes, throughout the psalm we hear echoes of the Exodus and even the song of Moses in Exodus 16. This salvation that the Psalmist describes isn't an ethereal one in which a set of beliefs attain a position in a far-off spiritual realm, but a physical deliverance in which Empire doesn't break bones and kill its citizens. Continuing, if we read Psalm 118 in its ancient context, the stone that is rejected and becomes a chief cornerstone is the singer of the song. It's the one whom God has delivered from Empire and can, in turn, enter into liturgy and raise her voice in praise. Again, we are called into imagining by the open-endedness of the language. Who is the one that can say the words, *I shall not die, but live*? And why might they **have** to say those words? That is the physical salvation dreamt of and celebrated in Psalm 118. Again, I'd like to ask us to think about what shalom might look like for Greenville. Who might be on the verge of dying and how do we come beside them and walk with them into deliverance?

When we get to Peter's sermon in Acts 10, we get a bit closer to the metaphorical becoming concrete. In this passage we find Peter waking to the breadth of God's expansive care for all peoples—regardless of physical markers such as ethnicity or religion. In preaching Jesus' resurrection to Cornelius' family and household, Peter participates in God's movement to welcome Gentile and Jew.

Peter's sermon is founded on our gospel passage and what we see transpire in Mark 16:1-8. Those of you who know me probably won't be surprised by this, but Mark 16:1-8 is one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. I think this is the case because it's so strange. If you were to look at the footnotes in your bible for Mark 16:1-8, you'd probably notice that there's a little note there that says that verses 9-20 are bracketed as not original. I don't want to bore you with a long text-critical debate so here's the skinny: the oldest texts of Mark 16 don't include verses 9-20. New Testament scholars have debated whether or not 9-20 is original and the general consensus is that it is not. That leaves us with Mark and the resurrection story ending in verse 8.

Let's do a quick recap of what happens before verse 8. Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome go to the tomb and see an angel who tells them that Jesus has risen. The angel also tells them not to be afraid and to go tell the disciples that Jesus has resurrected and that he'll meet them at Galilee. What happens next? Well, the Marys and Salome promptly flee in terror and **don't** tell anyone. Why would Mark end his gospel this way? Again, the ambiguity of the text invites us to imagine. One of my favorite ways of understanding the end of Mark comes from Kelly Iverson who sees it as a call to action. Imagine an ancient context in which the literacy rate is extremely low. How would communities interact with Mark's story? For most, it would be through a public reading of the text. Put yourself in that context. Imagine listening to the entire story of Jesus' life from start to finish. Maybe all of the miraculous things that Jesus did would stick out to you. The times that he said to keep it quiet would certainly puzzle you. Imagine hearing the reciter describe the ways in which the disciples failed to get it and even the most religious of people didn't understand. The audience is in on the story, though. The audience knows who Jesus is and the substance of his real identity. And then imagine hearing Empire win yet again. I can envision the energy in the room as the storyteller gets to the scene of 16:1-8 and the audience hears that Jesus defeats all that death stands for and resurrects. Finally, the character that you have known to be the Great Other since the very beginning of the story will be justified. Then the characters flee in terror and say nothing to anyone.

In this context of a community listening to the story of Jesus, surely an ending like that would provoke the audience to take up the angelic commission. St. Paul's, Jesus is risen, and the banquet of shalom has begun. And black men are shot in their grandmother's back yards and our community flirts with Empire.