*Sermon: Imagining Freedom*

*Sunday, December 22, 2024*

*First Unitarian Church*

*The Rev. Sarah C. Stewart*

If you haven’t heard, our church book group is starting up again in January. One of our new members, Susan Beddes, is taking over its leadership, and they’re beginning with the book *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel. You’re all welcome to join in for the first meeting on Wed. Jan. 15.

Last year we read books about migration: the migration of people and animals, of plant life and ideas. We read science fiction about imaginary migration and histories of migration within the United States. We also read [Azar Nafisi’s memoir Reading Lolita in Tehran](https://www.tidepoolbookshop.com/book/9780812971064), a story of leaving a place, going back, and finally leaving again. Nafisi was born in Tehran in 1948. Her father was the mayor of Tehran from 1961 to 1963. Azar went to Europe for high school, university and to complete her Ph.D.; she then returned to Iran in 1979, after the Islamic Revolution. She taught literature there until 1997, sometimes as a professor at a university, and sometimes (when she had been expelled from her teaching positions for refusing to wear a veil, or teach as the government demanded) from her home. *Reading Lolita in Tehran* is a memoir of a literature reading group she led in her living room for other women in Tehran.

Back in 1981, when the revolution was not quite new anymore and the radical student hope of 1979 was being taken over by the Ayatollahs, and people were being disappeared and executed for crimes like “being raised in a Westernized family” or “smoking Marlboro cigarettes,” Nafisi was teaching English literature at the University of Tehran. She had to scrounge copies of *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* and *The Great Gatsby* before the government shut down the foreign-language bookstores that carried them. Despite conflict and uncertainty, she successfully taught *The Great Gatsby.* In a classroom where she was being watched by students ready to report on their teachers to the government, she delved into the truth of literature. *The Great Gatsby* is a novel which describes crime, unethical wealth, and adultery. In its crimes and excesses and the freedom of Gatsby to remake himself, it is a quintessentially American novel. Yet it does not advocate dishonesty or sin. Like all great art, the novel shows human failures with compassion and uses them to illuminate the whole human condition. Nafisi quoted another writer, Josef Conrad, who said that artists

appeal to our capacity for delight and wonder, to the sense of the mystery surrounding our lives; to our sense of pity, and beauty and pain…and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that nits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts, to the solidarity in dreams, in joy, in sorrow, in aspirations, in illusions, in hope, in fear…which binds together all humanity—the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.

In other words, art works on our imagination, and tells us that the dreams we have of connection and hope are not useless but real. What we imagine we can make. And one lesson of any revolution which ends in totalitarian dictatorship is that imagination can lead to a prison cell as easily as to freedom. We imagine the world we want to make real, and then the careful, ethical work begins to realize a dream for all people.

A few of you thanked me for saying last Sunday that the birth story of Jesus is a “myth.” The story of Jesus’ birth as we have it in Luke and Matthew is a work of imagination. We know Jesus was born, lived and was crucified. We’re pretty sure his mother’s name was Mary—all the stories we have about Jesus’ life, from very different sources, give Mary has his mother’s name, and she and another one of her sons seem to have been part of Jesus’ community in his adulthood. We don’t know anything about Jesus’ father, and there’s no evidence of the star, or the angels, or even the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Two of the four gospels in the Bible, which tell the story of Jesus’ ministry, begin when Jesus was an adult. So where does this powerful work of imagination come from? And why is it still so powerful today?

There was a way that ancient Near Eastern kings and holy men were supposed to be born. It was supposed to be a certified Big Deal, with affirmation from heaven and worldly leaders alike. The birth story of the Buddha, also a myth, seems familiar to those of us who know Jesus’ story. His mother, Maya, gave birth as a virgin, following a dream of a white elephant. The baby had a golden glow and walked as soon as he was born. An astrologer considered the infant and prophesied that he would either be a great king or a holy man. It’s all reminiscent of the virgin birth of Jesus, the wise men who visited him, the halo he is depicted with in art. The early church may have chosen December 25 as Jesus’ birthday because it was also the birthday of the Roman sun god. Jesus was born, and grew, and taught and healed and preached the kingdom of God; somewhere along the line his community decided he needed a vivid and miraculous birth story to match the importance he had made in their lives.

Yet there are important differences, too. As Luke’s gospel tells it, the divine messengers don’t bring the news of Jesus’ birth to anyone with earthly authority. Instead they visit a peasant girl in Nazareth and shepherds outside of Bethlehem. In Matthew’s story, the wise men who visit Jesus subvert King Herod’s will and go home by another way. In other words, this imaginative story does not simply imagine Jesus as though he were any other near-eastern king. It imagines and magnifies what his community knew to be true: that Jesus’ message of abundance and blessing belonged to ordinary people, and that the teachings of this “king” would undermine—or be co-opted by—the reigns of worldly kings for centuries. We remember the story because of its imaginative elements, and those same elements carry the larger meaning. The facts are lost but the imagination remains. Like all powerful art, the story reminds us of something true that we had forgotten. It helps us dream of a world where the lowly are uplifted and the mighty are cast down from their thrones.

This year Chanukkah begins on December 25. We’ll light our menorah during the service next Sunday and then celebrate with our annual Chanukkah party after the service on January 5. Chanukkah is a fairly minor Jewish holiday—nothing like Passover, or Rosh Hashanah, or Sukkot. Yet it also captures our imaginations and helps us dream of a better world.

The Chanukkah story has a stronger historical basis than the Christmas story. The rebellion of the Maccabees against their foreign oppressors is documented in two historical works, sometimes considered part of the Bible. Alexander the Great died and a weaker empire gained control of Israel, although Jewish writers called all these rulers “Greeks.” Frustrated with their people’s assimilation to and tolerance of Greek culture, leaders such as Mattathias and Judas—called Maccabeus, meaning “hammer”—led a revolt against foreign rule. They gained control of Jerusalem after 7 years of fighting, and they removed Greek gods and images from the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Here’s where the story moves from history to myth: the tale relates that when the temple needed to be reconsecrated, there was only enough holy oil to last one night. Yet it would take 8 nights to bless more oil. Miraculously, the oil they had lasted for eight nights, and today, Jewish families light the lights of the menorah for eight nights to remember God’s blessings on their people in that time.

The history of this story is not especially laudable. The Maccabees fought for self-determination for the Jewish people, but the Hasmonean dynasty they ushered in was not especially just. Fighting lasted for a long time; who knows how many died? It’s telling that King Herod in the story of Jesus’ birth was himself a Hasmonean ruler, a descendant of that Maccabean victory. Yet the imagination has staying power. For last Hanukkah, [Stephanie Fox, the executive director of Jewish Voices for Peace, wrote an opinion piece in Time magazine](https://time.com/6344171/hanukkah-miracle-resistance-essay/) calling for an end to the Israeli occupation of Gaza. She wrote,

The miracle of resistance I choose to honor this Hanukkah is the one favored by the rabbis of the diaspora. When the Maccabees restored the temple, they only found one jar of oil, barely enough to keep the menorah lit for one day. Yet, it lasted eight days, the time it takes to press olives into a new jar of oil. This Hanukkah, I want to…really study the miracle of that oil: there is enough. There is enough for everyone.

It is imagination that helps us understand the world. Mere facts are never enough. They just happen, one after the other, meaningless in their relentless existence. Metaphor and symbol remind us of the truth and value we make out of those facts. What actually happened matters—without fact we cannot perceive truth—but what it means to us helps us shape the world we want to live in. Imagination is the source of our power.

During my Thursday online Tea with the Minister this week, a member of the church told me something she had learned about Jim Henson. You’re probably familiar with Sesame Street and the Muppets. Jim Henson made another show in the 1980s called *Fraggle Rock*. What I learned this week was that Henson imagined *Fraggle Rock* as a television show that would end war. It was the first western TV show to be broadcast in the Soviet Union. This children’s show, which was mostly about how creatures of very different cultures could learn to live together in harmony, tried to end war. It hasn’t worked yet; but what else could end war, other than an act of imagination? Each person only looking out for themselves could lead to the death of everyone else. Only imagination can help us live together.

In my opinion, there is too much argument in America about whether or not our sacred stories are “true.” Did the oil really burn for eight days if there was only enough for one? Did Mary really give birth as a virgin? Did Jesus walk on the water, as though gravity didn’t affect him? Did he come back to life after three days in his tomb? In too many discussions of these sacred texts, the answer to these questions must either be “yes”—it’s all literally true, never mind science—or “no,” and therefore the meaning found in the stories is void. The truth, in my eyes, is in the imagination and not in the history. Not, “Did this really happen exactly like it says?” but “What difference does it make to tell the story this way?” What meaning did the writer hope to convey, and what does it mean for us today?

In every political moment we need our hopes, dreams, and imaginations of a better world. The power of dreams is why Azar Nafisi continued to study literature after her government tried to silence her; it is why the holy family listened to the angel; it is why no border wall between the U.S. and Mexico will be effective; it is why the miracle of the lights can speak to peace today. People’s dreams of a better world are always more powerful than the barriers placed in their way. The dreams of justice and freedom travel down the centuries, inspiring humanity again and again as more people dream of better lives and a world without war. As we light our candles this Hanukkah and this Christmas, let us use them to light the way for our imaginations. Imagination takes the merely real and gives us the hope we need to stay alive. It connects us to one another through love, yet another form of imagination in our hearts. This year, we dream, could be the year of peace and enough for all. I love you all. Amen.