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The website “The Beatles Bible” dubs “Imagine” as John Lennon’s most iconic song. According to Wikipedia, Lennon once explained that it was an “anti-religious, anti-nationalistic, anti-conventional, anti-capitalistic” song that got “sugar-coated” into acceptability.

In 1971, Lennon canonized the idea that if only we could imagine a world not bound by heaven and hell, not looking to the transcendent, we could live for today, and everyone would be at peace. While the Vietnam War raged, young people whose rebellion boggled the minds of their elders celebrated the song as an anthem of what had to be eliminated. Lennon’s proposals came at the end of each verse: “living for today,” “living life in peace,” “sharing all the world.” His final goal: “And the world will live as one.”

Today, we will hear a 2,500-year-old version of something similar and yet radically different. While Lennon was suggesting that some version of socialist anarchy could solve the world’s problems, the prophet Isaiah promotes awareness of God’s love as the way to human flourishing and joy. Lennon wants to be rid of dreams of heaven. Isaiah wants people to imagine how God’s loving power working through them can satisfy all human hungers.

If Isaiah’s vision also sounds like a sugar-coated dream, Jesus brings the invitation down to earth as he sends the 72 evangelists out to proclaim the reign of God. From the get-go, Jesus tells them to pray for more missionaries because there is too much for so few of them to do. Rather than fantasize about simplistic harmony, he lays it out for them with the stark realism of a prophet: I am sending you out as lambs among wolves. (How is this for a vocation poster: “Enjoy the excitement and challenge of being lambs among wolves!”?)

Every profession has standards, and the church specifies the gender and educational requirements for different ministries. Jesus, too, demanded certain qualifications of those who would represent him. In order to further his mission, they had to be ready to go out, carrying “no money bag, no sack, no sandals ... .” They weren’t to dawdle along the way; they were to stay with the first person who offered them hospitality and never complain about the food. (There’s no pension plan because there’s no retirement.)

Their job description? Teach: “The kingdom of God is at hand.” Do it by curing the sick and sharing your peace. And to those inclined to retribution, he said, “Whatever town does not receive you, go out into the streets and say, ‘The dust of your town that clings to our feet, even that we shake off against you.’ ” So there!

Jesus gives them no catechism from which to teach. It all rests on healing the broken, along with that elusive command to share their peace. Evangelization in Jesus’ style is a ministry of presence; the way his missionaries are with others is their first and strongest proclamation of the kingdom of God coming to life. They do good. Eventually, after people have been hooked by the joy of their way of life, they invite them to be followers of Jesus.

The experience of one of my Romanian friends explains this for me. She entered religious life while their church was illegal; celebrating the liturgy could get you arrested, and secret communities of monks and nuns operating underground constantly risked imprisonment. She had been working in a factory where some other young women workers attracted her attention simply by some intangible quality of their presence. As she got to know them and asked what made them different, they admitted that they were believers. One day, they invited her to pray with them at their apartment. Time went on and trust grew. They eventually admitted that they belonged to a secret religious congregation and invited her to join them. Being lambs among wolves, they had learned to evangelize by presence and only much later by formal invitations to discipleship.

People who evangelize by their presence are recognizable first by their freedom. They can hang out with anyone, without concern for what others might think or say. They notice needs and respond to them with whatever power they have. They aren't anti-establishment as much as they are utterly unimpressed by power, prestige and glittery stuff. They live in today, knowing that tomorrow is beyond their control and that the future holds invincible promise.

Lambs among wolves? Without a doubt, but they are convinced that concern for their own hide only ties them down. They have learned to imagine a world where everyone can flourish because it starts happening wherever they show up. If people reject their message, there is no argument, no revenge, they just dust off their shoes and move on. Imagine that.

### **ISAIAH 66:10-14c**

The author of the last chapter of the Book of Isaiah attempts to reassure the people that no matter how improbable it seems, God is really working out their salvation. Isaiah's people were feeling as if God's work had been truncated. As Claus Westermann explained in Isaiah 40-66, they feared that "salvation had come to a stop half-way along the road. But now ... begins ... birth, for it is the work of God."

Earlier in this chapter, Isaiah had proclaimed the coming glory of Jerusalem. Now, the emphasis switches to God, the only source of genuine salvation. Jerusalem, the city of God, remains the place where it happens, but salvation is a work of grace, not the result of human effort or urban planning. At the same time, people need to recognize, accept and collaborate with what God is offering. Therefore, Isaiah tries to open the people's imagination to God's style of salvation.

Isaiah begins with the image of God's salvation as comparable to a nurturing mother. God's will is that people know the comfort of having just exactly what they need, as though they were babes nursing on their mothers' wealth of milk. They will be loved like toddlers cuddling on their parents' laps, like the babies that fathers carry outside the house so that all can admire them.

God says, "Lo, I will spread prosperity over Jerusalem like a river." The word here translated as "prosperity" is what we write as shalom, most often translated as peace. When we understand prosperity in the sense of shalom, it calls forth images of the fulfillment of creation, in which everything and everyone reach the pinnacle of their potential; they prosper in mutually life-giving relationships with one another.

Isaiah's proclamation has a dual purpose. First, as mentioned, he is reassuring the people that God has not forgotten them. His images of God's tender care reinforce that message. Secondly, Isaiah uses these images — and so many others through the three parts of the Book of Isaiah — to open people's imagination. It is too easy for people of any epoch to have a limited, excessively self-referent image of salvation. Isaiah reminds us that God will care for us in ways that exceed our hopes and enlarge our dreams.

### **PSALMS 66:1-3, 4-5, 6-7, 16, 20**

Psalms 66 gives us the opportunity to sing with all our heart in thanks for what God does. We can think of God's deeds here as the down payment on Isaiah's "shalom-society," the freedom given us by Christ's love that Paul proclaims, and the coming of God's kingdom that the Gospel invites us to announce.

In order to sing the first two verses meaningfully, we should prepare by recalling our own awareness of God's great deeds. These may be very personal, but even the most personal lead us to the communal. In our creed, we proclaim that God has been active on behalf of the world from the first days of creation, giving us concrete signs of love through "all things visible and invisible." When we pause to consider just exactly what we mean by that, we deepen our prayer and

our ongoing awareness of God's love.

The third verse of today's psalm selection reminds us of how God led the people of Israel into freedom. In so doing, it invites us to recall ways in which awareness of God's love has freed us. That opens us to the message we hear from Paul's letter to the Galatians.

We can sing our final verse as a proclamation of our readiness to go out like the 72 disciples Jesus commissions in today's Gospel. Using this verse as a guideline reminds us that the proclamation is always about God, not ourselves or any human institution.

## **GALATIANS 6:14-18**

Paul uses the last lines of his Letter to the Galatians to recap and underline his main message: All that matters in this life is the new creation. The new creation is what Paul described in Galatians 3:28-29, a world in which "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free person, there is not male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." It is a world in which those who belong to Christ all become "Abraham's descendants, heirs according to the promise."

For Paul, all of the old way, good yet flawed as it was, has passed away. The only religious practice that has value now is identification with Christ and his cross. If there were a stronger way for Paul to say this, he would have found it — and repeated it.

When Paul says that neither circumcision nor uncircumcision mean anything, he is telling his people that no work of the law makes any difference in the long run. He is not promoting anarchy nor anticipating Martin Luther's famous injunction, "Sin boldly!" Rather, Paul anticipates Luther who went on to say, "Believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly." In other words, neither your righteousness nor your sin is decisive. Your attachment to Christ is what makes all the difference.

For Paul, circumcision symbolizes the entire system of law through which some people assumed they could attain salvation. Paul, who once excelled in that school of thought, now sees the law primarily as a trap of self-justification. Paul claims that he can boast in nothing except the cross of Christ, that is, nothing but the salvation offered by Christ. No one can earn or deserve the free gift God offers in Christ. That is Paul's "gospel," his good news.

While today's Christians may see the whole question of circumcision as an ancient and possibly sexist hang-up, the underlying issue is basic to every religious practice. In Paul's theology, God gave the law to reveal the goal of life, which we could summarize by the word righteousness, meaning the relationships that structure a world characterized by what Isaiah described as shalom. But human beings almost inevitably distort the law, turning the guide to loving relationships into something like an achievement test or grading system. Thus, what should have led to communion among people and with God becomes degraded into a set of measurable standards that lead people to become self-righteous and judgmental.

When Paul says that the world has been crucified to him, he means that the whole system of judgment and exclusion is dead. All that matters is Christ's forgiving love. According to Paul, if any of us is going to be proud of our skin, it should be for the scars left by suffering for the sake of Christ. Nothing else has value.

Paul's challenge to us is his teaching that the only thing that matters, the only thing about which we should boast, is God's love revealed in Christ. People who believe this truth will live in such a way that the new creation becomes a visible, experiential reality in their company. Paul's hope is that the church will be this kind of company.

## **LUKE 10:1-12, 17-20**

Because Lent started so late this year, we skipped over parts of the Gospel of Luke that we generally hear in Cycle C of the liturgical year — any selections that came between Luke 7 and 10. Today, we hear Jesus commission the 72 disciples, a story Luke wrote as a complement to the mission of the 12 in Chapter 9. Luke doesn't often repeat stories. (Note that he has only one account of the miraculous sharing, while Matthew and Mark each describe two slightly different versions.) If Luke gives us two renditions of the mission of his disciples, he has done so with something specific in mind.

The most notable difference between the two accounts is the number of disciples Jesus sent. In Luke 9, Jesus sent out the 12; now he sends 72. Jesus goes into more detail about the mission of the 72 than he did for the 12. In both cases, the missionaries are to travel light, heal the sick, and announce that the kingdom of God is at hand. But with the 72, even as Jesus prepares them for the mission, he warns that they will be like lambs among wolves. He then tells them to ask God to send additional workers to help with the harvest.

One reason for Luke's two accounts of the sending is that they reinforce the fact that Jesus' mission began with his own people and was then to go out into the whole world. Although the various lists of the apostles' names do not always match, the main point is that they are 12, representing Israel with her traditional 12 tribes. The 72 are, first of all, many more — and still not enough. Secondly, according to the Septuagint's translation of Genesis 10, 72 is the number of the nations of the world. Luke's point is that this mission involves the entire world.

In contrast to the contemporary church that sets up its bureaucracy with coffee and copy machines, budgets and annual appeals, and vestments for every rank and feast day, Jesus sent the disciples out with the bare minimum in terms of material goods. Rather than be encumbered by stuff that they would have to care for, they had only their proclamation and the power to demonstrate what it meant by healing the sick.

As Joseph Fitzmyer points out in his Anchor Bible Commentary, Luke constructed the dialogue between Jesus and the successful missionaries with great care. Lest the disciples become intoxicated with their newfound powers, Jesus tells them, "Do not rejoice because the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice because your names are written in heaven." The real point of the reign of God is union with God. Power is a dangerous thing, but the assurance that God loves you and that you have a future with God is the antidote to getting hooked on power and puts the battle with evil in its proper perspective.

When the 72 return, they report, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us because of your name!" Jesus replies, "I have observed Satan fall like lightning from the sky." Fitzmyer tells us that Jesus is not speaking of a vision, but rather of what he has observed of the results of the disciples' mission. Satan, humanity's traditional accuser and tempter, is overcome by the disciples, who lead others to freedom in Jesus' name. This declaration assures us that there is no adversary equal to the grace of Christ. When the church genuinely proclaims the reign of God, nothing can overcome it.

## **Planning: 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By: Lawrence Mick**

It is difficult to read the first reading today without thinking of God in female categories. The prophet Isaiah speaks first of Jerusalem in feminine terms, inviting us to "nurse with delight at her abundant breasts!" But then, he has God speak, "as a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you." Whether you think of God as female or not, this certainly suggests that God treats us with a mother's love.

Efforts at updating our official prayer texts with inclusive language were somewhat stymied with the poor translation of the Missal that was forced on us several years ago. But that should not keep us from paying attention to the issue when preaching or composing prayers or even choosing among options for prayer texts when they are available. If you think it doesn't matter very much, talk to a group of women, especially younger women, in your parish. There is no good reason for us to continue using language that makes many members of the assembly feel ignored or devalued.

Preachers and planners might enter into a covenant to challenge each other on this issue. Could planners point out to presiders and preachers when they slip into exclusive male terms for God or for the community? Could presiders do the same when they hear such language in petitions or songs or even announcements at Mass? It is hard to make the shift, so this is not a matter of chastising one another but of helping each other to grow in awareness and break inappropriate habits of speech.

This applies first of all to terms that reference members of the assembly, but it is also an issue in how we speak of God. It can be tricky, but it is not impossible to avoid male terms for God except when speaking specifically of the Father or the

Son. One simple change is simply to repeat “God” or “God’s” instead of “he” or “his.” It may feel a bit awkward at first, but that is a small price to pay for reminding ourselves that God is not male or female. No image of God is ever adequate to comprehend God, but when we envision God as exclusively male or female, we are surely not seeing the true God.

Another theme that we might see in today’s readings is the global reach of God’s concern and thus the global scope of the church’s mission. The psalm refrain reminds us that all the Earth should rejoice in God’s gifts. God’s care extends far beyond Jerusalem to every corner of the globe. The Gospel reminds us of our mission to reach out to others with the good news of God’s love. Just as Jesus sent out the 72 disciples, so Christ sends us out to lead others to God. Let those issues find a place in the petitions today.

## Prayers: 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time

By: Joan DeMerchant

### Introduction

Journeys dominate today’s readings — from the return of the exiled to a destroyed Jerusalem, to the disciples setting out to preach the Gospel to the world. Both will be fraught with peril, hardship and pain. Even Paul’s missionary work is centered in Christ’s crucifixion. We, too, are called to be people moving into the world to live the Gospel. Like our ancestors, we rely on love, peace and mercy to sustain us

### .Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you sent the disciples on a mission to the whole world: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you warned them, like laborers and lambs, of the perils ahead: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you invite us to share the Gospel wherever we are going: Lord, have mercy.

### Prayer of the Faithful

**Presider** Let us pray for all who journey into unknown or challenging territory.

**Minister** That as a whole church we may embrace the work of proclaiming the Gospel in our time and place — knowing that it may indeed be difficult, we pray:

- For all Christians living in perilous situations, whether engaging in missionary work in areas of hostility, war or political unrest, or striving to live the Gospel with integrity in the midst of radically different cultural values, we pray:
- For those who are embarrassed or afraid to share their faith, those living in doubt, those not yet confident in their faith, we pray:
- For those who challenge God’s inclusive care for all, who do not realize that living the Gospel is difficult, or who do not see the connection between the Gospel and politics, lifestyle or social issues, we pray:
- For resolution to struggles within the church that distract us from our calling to spread the good news to those who yearn to hear it, we pray:
- For those who are too sick, worried or burdened with the challenges of life to be able to find joy and meaning in living the Gospel, we pray:

**Presider** Consoling God, we hear your sometimes uncomfortable call to us to step out in faith wherever we are in life. Give us the courage to respond to that call, confident in the love, peace and mercy you have shown to those who walked before us. We ask this in the name of your beloved Son, Jesus. Amen.

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