

Imagination

A sermon on Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 & Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 by Jody Kilpatrick, 7 August 2022

When I read that by faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, it stopped me in my tracks. Worlds! Not the world, the earth, this planet, impressive enough though that would be, but *worlds*.

It evokes a vast space-scape of mystery and wonder. Worlds. (Your Laughing Bird translation says “universe” which of course also captures the vast, spacious, mystery, wonder.) And as the James Webb telescope offers images and insights from on high, while down here we wade through pandemic, climate crisis, colonised inheritances, and wars of ego and resource, it jolts us into the spectacular possibilities of life and of faith.

I spent more time than was necessary, caught up in the plural: worlds.

But my fixation bore fruit of sorts when I noticed an interview, waiting like a faithful alert servant on my stitcher playlist, titled “We are in a time of new suns.”

Maybe some of you have listened to this interview. I’m not a gambler or a risk-taker but if push came to shove, I’d be willing to bet that On Being and Krista Tippett reside somewhere, somehow, in your faith community.

I knew nothing of adrienne maree brown prior to listening to her interview, but I’m a big fan now. She talks about strategy, change, transformative justice, organising, and *imagining*. The title of the interview “We are in a time of new suns” references her own hero Octavia Butler, a black science fiction writer who greatly influenced her life and work.

And she quotes Octavia Butler: “There is nothing new under the sun, but there are new suns.”

It’s a breathtaking sentence, acknowledging the grind, the status quo, the problems, the heartbreaks, the limits we all experience... and yet summersaulting so marvellously into invitation and possibility. New suns.

Of course it made me think of the faith that enables us to understand the worlds prepared by the word of God. Infinite possibility, if we dare stretch ourselves towards it.

The work of adrienne maree brown, the worlds prepared by the word of God, the gift of the kin-dom of heaven, the treasure that leads our hearts onwards, the faith that is the assurance of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen... all of it is woven with the thread of imagination.

Quite a few years ago Julian and I listened to an interview with a parenting advisor, Nathan Mikaere Wallis, who was (maybe still is) a regular guest on our national radio program. (You can probably tell most of my input comes via listening, which is significant – I don’t have a life where I sit and read and ponder. I listen as I do dishes, bus to church, and lie in bed with kids, waiting waiting waiting for them to fall asleep.)

Anyway this interview was called “What 4-7 year olds need to learn” and the premise was that during this time of life, creativity, resilience, and *imagination* are developed and embedded.

Ages 0 to 3 are for *attachment*. Feeling loved, secure, valued.

And after 7, neurotypical kids are “little adults” in terms of how their brain works – using their frontal cortex, ready for facts and logic and details - things we often associate with school based education (though school is changing).

But 4-7 is for developing social and emotional skills, building on unconditional love and security: having a positive view of yourself a learner and problem solver – imagination, exploration, wondering, trying with confidence. 4-7 is a not the time to fill a treasure chest of knowledge: phonics, reading, counting, counting higher, counting backwards, giving correct answers. It’s for stretching out towards the treasure of possibility.

So, according to this view, instead of being taught the scientific explanation for why the sky is blue, it's better if a child of this age group speculates (or, blatantly makes up) a reason, exploring ideas and making connections.

Now I don’t mean to elevate imagination in an ableist way – imagination is surely bigger than we realise, and, the classic “lacks imaginative play / ideas” diagnostic tool for autism has not carefully interrogated – studies are beginning to explore this area. And I don’t mean kids who are excited about reading or facts should be prevented from pursuit – rather we don’t need to worry if our kids are not into it at 5 or 6.

I just know this talk on imagination gave Julian and I a lot of confidence to relax about whether our kids were learning enough, and to encourage them to dream and wonder and speculate wildly. Our almost ten year old still can’t read, but his glorious support teacher recently wrote about his progress: “The biggest challenge for Walter with reading is he always has a much better storyline than what is written in the book.” So we are proud parents.

In many cases, and I acknowledge not every case for all sorts of reasons, from that first secure base of love and attachment, kids stretch into wild wonder and possibility, and this is good for them, and good for the world too.

The Hebrews text is a call to faith. But not the cost-cutting, mass-product faith of doctrinal orthodoxy, credal recitation, and intellectual ascent. It is the faith of attachment, and of imagination. Of security, and of stretch. Faith is the call on our whole being through the life and death and risen life of Christ; to be safe and secure in God, and also wild and daring in God.

From three cameos of men who stretch beyond the known by faith; in giving to God, in facing death, in building a boat on still dry land, the Hebrews text, as we heard, goes on to praise Abraham, who *by faith set out, not knowing where he was going*. Abraham is far from perfect, but his story adds flourish to the opening declaration: faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Such a shocking claim of confidence while the goal is still only hope, not even in sight, speaks to the sacred space between what is and what could be, and calls it faith.

And faith is not just the space itself, but the stretch needed to span it, to travel from what is to what could be.

As Walter Brueggemann says: “Imagination is a danger, thus every totalitarian regime is frightened of the artist. It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing alternative futures to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.

Christian imagination is shaped and goaded by Christ Jesus and his divine counternarrative to empire and power and ego. And God’s good pleasure to give us this kin-dom will not drop down as an artifact to place reverently in a treasure chest, but will serve as a secure foundation from which we stretch out towards the treasure of possibility.

The voice of God in Isaiah says “I’ve had enough of burnt offerings, your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates, I am weary of bearing them.” The Psalm tempers this; “not for your sacrifices do I rebuke you.”

In both cases though God resists being clutched or laid claim to, fenced into an empire of might at our fingertips.

Instead God demands we are formed by doing good, seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, pleading for the widow. And that formation will be our treasure, leading our hearts and stretching us into daring possibility.

adrienne maree brown talks about growing up the child of a black father and white mother in the United States, and says her parents, because of their interracial marriage, were *making a whole world unto themselves*. Their children were encouraged to think, ask questions, be amazed by the world, be curious, see it all. And they were secure in their family. When they encountered racism, hostility, misunderstanding, the message their parents gave them was: We’re safe, we love each other, we’re good. From that foundation grew the imagination to makes and remakes the world, to sees the need for change, and shape it. [This is close to but not quite a quote from the interview.]

Communion is a feast of attachment and security, as well as possibility and imagination. We come to the table because Christ invites us. We are welcome, at home, accepted, included. But we are not fed the bread of life for contentment and complacency. We are fed the bread of life to grow and stretch, to make a way from what is to what could be, for the sake of worlds of hope God is already excited about.