

Matthew 16: 21-28 Can You Imagine?

A commentary which I read about this week's lectionary texts was titled "Can you Imagine." There are many things found in Scripture which seem to ask us this question...especially the ones which describe God's kingdom as found in Isaiah where the lamb lies down with the lion...or in Revelation where the tree of Life stands by the river of God's grace and there will be no more tears....then we look at our world and find it hard to see that vision happening here. In 1971 John Lennon wrote and recorded a song which sort of popped into my mind as I was thinking about this concept...can we imagine God's kingdom? Theologically there are parts of these lyrics that just don't fit with my understanding of what he envisions...it will take to get the world to live as one...as I firmly believe that God's love and sovereignty will be what triumphs to make a world where there are no countries, nothing to kill or die for, with everyone living in peace...a world without possessions so no need for greed or hunger and all the people sharing. But the commentary I read by David Lose was not asking us to imagine what Isaiah or John of Patmos was describing. Instead, he commenting on another aspect of Scripture—which relates to a different aspect of God which we also have from Isaiah—the passage where the Lord proclaims that the ways of God are not like the ways of people and how when we encounter God's expectations—we often don't know what to think. The Hebrew Scripture appointed for today is from Exodus 3:1-15. The man Moses has fled from Egypt after killing an Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave. He has found refuge in Midian with Jethro and married his daughter, establishing a family. As today's text begins, Moses is going about what has become his daily routine—his role in the family—tending the flocks of his father-in-law. But this is not going to be a day that remains routine. He is in the wilderness near Mount Horeb when his life is suddenly thrust into a direction that he could never have foreseen or imagined. "There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush, he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. "Can you imagine what that was like?" Moses turns aside and goes to look and God speaks to him out of the bush. God has a plan for Moses which was certainly not one that Moses had ever considered—going back to Egypt, leading the Hebrew people out of slavery to the land promised to Abraham—definitely this has not been on Moses' mind as what his future would look like. Moses' imagination would never have come up with the path that his life would take...what God would reveal to him and enable him to do. There are a great many verbs—those words indicating action in this text—Both Moses and God do a lot of looking, seeing, hearing and listening in this story of the burning bush. Moses looked and saw the bush; God say Moses turn aside to draw closer and see the bush; then the Lord spoke to Moses. Moses heard what God had to say to him, but didn't see the possibility of success as he gave his excuses. God listened, and answered him. And Moses answered the call God had given him. In the passage I read from Matthew's gospel this morning we have described another time when the imagination of Peter which has just made such a great leap as to recognize Jesus as the Messiah, the Living Son of God is confronted with the reality that his imagination has not truly grasped what that means. "From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priest and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised." Can you imagine the shock Peter must have felt at this news? "And Peter took him aside and began to

rebuke him, saying, ‘God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.’ Can you imagine? One moment, Jesus is saying your declaration is divinely inspired and will form the basis of truth for all who will follow me, then after finding out his imagined role of the Messiah is not what God’s anointed role, Peter is rebuked in turn and called a “stumbling block”. From being the cornerstone to being a stumbling block within the space of a few words. Can you imagine? Peter’s understanding of who the Messiah was to be—a king like David—someone who would restore the nation of Israel. He had in mind a king who would drive out the Romans and liberate the Israelites. When you stop to think about it, that’s a pretty understandable, even reasonable hope. The Romans were foreign occupiers, not only imposing Roman law but taxing the people to support the occupation and the troops to back up their occupation. The Roman order that was maintained by violence. The problem with Peter’s expectation is not that it is unreasonable, but that it doesn’t change anything. Rome is there in force and by violence. If Jesus the warrior-king uses greater force and violence to drive them out, then eventually someone with even more force or willing to do greater violence will take over, yet again. Who is at the top may change, but the wheel of force and violence keeps revolving. Jesus knows this. Jesus knows that by introducing a different logic—one that runs by forgiveness, mercy, and love rather than retribution, violence and hate—he is challenging the powers that be. Moreover, he knows that the wheel of force and violence will not tolerate his obstruction but run him over. And as our passage shows us, Peter just couldn’t imagine this. If you pause and consider the events of Jesus’ life, it isn’t surprising that Jesus was killed by the powers that were in control. From the moment of his birth, his existence is such a threat to the rule of force and violence that Herod is willing to slaughter all the children under the age of two in the hope of destroying him. No, it’s not surprise that Jesus was executed. What is surprising is that God raised Jesus from the dead. Resurrection reinforces—actually establishes—that Jesus’ life, love and sacrifice are what will ultimately prevail. It’s hard to imagine, I know when we look around our world and still see the wheel of force and violence such a dominant presence around us. But Jesus asks us: Can you imagine a different world? Jesus invites us to live lives shaped by love and forgiveness; to base our actions on compassion and hope. It’s all so very hard for us to imagine those forces being the governing forces in our world. Like Peter, what we most often want is a little more of what the world obviously offers—whether it is security or wealth or status or popularity or whatever thing we feel will give us power; will place us above someone or something. But Jesus didn’t come to comfort us with a little more of what the world offers. He did come to claim power through any of the usual sources of power, but came instead to free us from the need to seek what the world offers. Like Peter, we need to realize that God’s ways are not our ways—God’s way is of love and forgiveness. It does not make us comfortable when we feel it is offered just as freely to others as to us. God’s way challenges our assumptions about how we are treating others, challenges how we participate in the systems around us that are not based on God’s message. Those of us who are called to follow Jesus are also called to vigilance, alertness, wakefulness, awareness, attentiveness, discernment about the use of force and violence in the world. We can’t plead ignorance because Jesus has told us—no, shown us—what is demanded of his followers. Most of it we don’t want to hear or see, because it goes against our sense of self-preservation, our self-serving selfishness that equates what is right with what is “good” for us. Our discipleship calls us to imagine the world as it would be if we listened to and acted upon Jesus’ calls for love and forgiveness in the most

inclusive way, to caring for all. “Then Jesus told his disciples, ‘If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up **THEIR CROSS** and follow me.’” Notice Jesus didn’t say take up a cross, nor did he say take up a cross like mine. What he did say was to follow him meant denying themselves. Leave behind self-interest. Act in love—even if it meant some sacrifice. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life **FOR MY SAKE** will find it. Jesus knew that denying the power structure of the world and living according to his message of love, forgiveness and mercy would bring opposition. He knew that living according to his command to love God with all that you were and to love your neighbor as yourself, especially if neighbor included the “other” would be to deny the power of force and violence which ruled, and still rules the world. It would not be easy and sometimes it would be dangerous. It still is not easy and can be dangerous as we see all around us today. But if we are to be followers of Jesus—that is what we are called to do; how we are called to live. Can you imagine our world if more of us actually succeeded? In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.