

Once Upon a Time
Sunday, March 20, 2022, 11:30 a.m., All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Once upon a time.

That's like a spell, isn't it?

Four words that are like pixie dust sprinkled onto our heads.

Once upon a time.

When we hear once upon a time, something deep inside us shifts and settles and opens up.

Anticipation quickens our pulse and our heart says, "Oh ... this is going to be good!"

Something about "Once upon a time" tells our prefrontal cortex ... you know that part of our brain responsible for rational thought ... to take 20 and chill because it's been taking up way too much space and it's time for our imagination to come out and play.

Once upon a time is the whisper in our ear that wakens the child inside us in whose eyes clouds became mermaids and living room chairs became waterfalls as we dive off into couch cushion pools of crystal cool water below.

And though the phrase "once upon a time" has existed in English since the 13th century, it is not limited to Western Culture.

Every culture ... every culture has a common beginning for fairy tales and folk tales. A key that unlocks the imagination and transports us to worlds of new possibilities.

In South Nigeria, the storyteller begins in a sing-song voice, "Story. Story." And the children reply, "Story!" and gather round.

In classical Arabic, the storyteller would begin "There was, oh what there was, in the oldest of days and ages and times."

In Korea, many folk tales begin "back when tigers used to smoke tobacco."

And of course, the whole world knows what's coming when we hear:

"a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away."

Do you remember when you used to believe in once upon a time?

Before the phrase “that’s not real” entered your lexicon?

When you believed in magic ... because the world hadn’t become so frustrating unmagical yet?

When the world as it is hadn’t so rudely shattered our dreams of the possibilities of what the world once was ... or could be.

That’s the power of once upon a time.

Now to be clear, I’m not talking about nostalgia. Nostalgia traps us in labyrinths from which we struggle to escape. Once upon a time launches us into flights of imagination with infinite pathways leading to infinite destinations.

Nostalgia imprisons us. Once upon a time can set us free.

Azar Nafisi knew this. She was living in Tehran in the late 1990s and, at great risk, began to hold book groups in her home every Thursday morning to read and discuss forbidden stories from Western Literature. To say “once upon a time” and let the tales that came help them breathe a new world into being first in their minds and hearts and then in their lives.

After she wrote about her experiences in the amazing book “Reading Lolita in Tehran” ... she was asked about why she and her friends were compelled to risk their lives to share stories ... and she said,

“You need imagination in order to imagine a future that doesn’t exist.”

Let me say that again:

“You need imagination in order to imagine a future that doesn’t exist.”

When we imagine the future ... our rational minds too easily jump to all the reasons why it cannot be, all the barriers to change, all the obstacles in our paths.

But when we say once upon a time, we can imagine the same world unencumbered by those worries. We can construct a new and wonderful world ... and hold it in our minds ... and try, even for a moment, to trust that dreams really can come true.

To try to believe, in the words of Peter Pan, that all this has happened before ... and can and will happen again.

So, let’s try it, shall we?

Story! Story! (Story!)

You can close your eyes if you like.

Once upon a time, in the oldest of days and ages and times ... there was a glorious land full of glorious people. They knew they came from the land and the land was a gift to them ... so they treasured the land and cared for it like it was both venerated ancestor and precious child.

They cultivated it for food and let it rest when it was weary. They worked hard ... because life was often hard ... and they rested and played often ... because they knew life needed to be worth living. That life was to be celebrated and enjoyed.

They created beautiful art and music and dance and accepted the gifts of all as valuable. Because the land was not the only great gift they had been given. They had also been given each other.

They valued learning for learning's sake ... and insisted that everyone have access to the best education.

They saw all bodies as sacred, so they never touched one another without consent, never made decisions about another person's body and insisted that everyone's body be given the best, most loving care.

They developed economies that prioritized the thriving of all people and care of the land they loved.

They realized life was short ... so there was no time to lose in bitterness or regret ... and they committed to laugh often and hold each other close when it came time to weep.

And there were so many words that never passed their lips. Words and phrases that had no meaning to them and if they were ever spoken would only be met with quizzical glances.

Words like

Student loans

Uninsured

Militarized police

Poverty

Deportation

Homelessness

Homophobia, Biphobia, Transphobia

Advertising

....The National Rifle Association

They played glorious games, sang beautiful songs, and every child was held and loved.

They dreamed exquisite dreams, reached for the stars, resolved conflicts through restorative justice, had lots of fantastic, loving, shame-free sex, and relished the richness of the diversity among them.

And they all lived happily ever after.

Can you imagine that world?

I mean it, you just did ... didn't you ...
Can you imagine that world?

Would you like to live in that world?

Would you like to live in that once upon a time?

We can.

That is what we get to create.

This morning's gospel is one of those readings that at first glance has me shaking my head and wondering if Luke had watched too many Quentin Tarantino movies. You know, like maybe he was writing a spec script for Once Upon a Time in Galilee.

Blood of Galileans mixed with sacrifices at the Temple. Eighteen people killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. And then some strange story about cursing a tree and cutting it down if it doesn't bear fruit.

Whatever happened to "patience is a virtue?"

Well, first of all, "Patience is a virtue" isn't from the Bible but from a 14th century Middle English poet ... and second, that's not what Jesus is trying to say here.

Jesus hears these grisly stories and asks the same question. Did these people do something especially bad ... worse than other people ... to deserve these gruesome fates. And the answer ... which was actually somewhat controversial in those days, and frankly and incredibly is still controversial to some people today is "no ... they didn't do anything wrong." Stuff ... or whatever synonym you choose to insert ... just happens.

Now some stuff happens to innocent people just because stuff happens. And we know this. Really, really awful stuff happens that we could never do anything about. And when it does, we just need to cling to each other, comfort each other, and help each other go on.

But then there's the other stuff ... and there is lots of it ... that happens because we have constructed a world for the benefit of the few at the expense of the many.

A world where white supremacy has more power than true democracy.

A world where we say time is money ... and too many people have long since run out of money and we are all running out of time.

A world where we punish vulnerability.
 Restrict accessibility
 Refuse accountability
 And where sensibility has just gone out the window.

And when those things kill God's children ... we can do something about it – but we choose not to.

Because we are hanging onto this world like it is something we like.

We are hanging onto this world like it was something we need.

We are hanging onto this world like we have no other choice.

And it's not that we have run out of alternatives, it's just that we have been beaten into a poverty of imagination.

A poverty of faith.

A poverty of the power of Once Upon a Time.

That was true in Jesus' time, and it is certainly true in ours. In fact, we have doubled, tripled and quadrupled down on the destruction. We're getting really good at it.

And we are reaching a tipping point if we haven't already where the whole thing is just going to come crashing down like that Tower of Siloam.

And so, Jesus gets us back on track.
 Jesus activates our holy imagination.
 Jesus says "Story, Story" ... and the people cry "Story" and gather around.

Jesus says, "Once upon a time"

"Once upon a time, someone had a fig tree planted in their vineyard ... and they came looking for fruit on it and found none. So they said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find non. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting

the soil?' The gardener replied, 'Friend, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'

The people around Jesus were doing what we all seem to be doing these days ... looking around at how awful things are and crying "When is this going to stop? Why does it have to be this way?" They are looking for answers in a completely out-of-control, logicless world and are teetering on the edge of despair.

And Jesus doesn't silver lining it. He doesn't say ... oh, don't worry, it's not that bad.

And he also doesn't say, "you're right ... it's hopeless. There's no fixing this mess."

Instead, he says, "once upon a time there was a tree ... and this tree had the capacity to bear wonderful fruit, amazing fruit, fruit that will feed the people.

"Fruit that will be a feast for the eyes, a delight to the nose, exquisite to the tongue and will fill belly, heart and soul.

"Fruit that will set all God's children free to live, love, laugh, dance and create.

"Fruit that will heal our hearts, our relationships and our planet.

"Fruit that will dismantle and defund all that is oppressing God's children and deliver us to a life of justice and peace."

"Once upon a time," Jesus says. "there was a tree that bore that fruit."

All this has happened before ... and it will happen again. And ... time is running out.

Azar Nafisi was right: "We need imagination in order to imagine a future that doesn't exist." And ... we have that imagination. We just imagined it.

Every movement for liberation has begun with a dream for tomorrow. The loosed imagination of a "once upon a time" that became the dream of what could be that eventually became what is.

That is the opportunity before us. Time is running short. And the good news is, if we can imagine it, we can create it. There is still time for this tree to bear amazing fruit. Fruit that will set all God's people free. Fruit that will create the world we imagined just minutes ago.

Don't worry about how. Not right now. That will come.

Right now, just believe it can happen.

Right now, just imagine that world of once upon a time and trust that God is out there luring it into existence if we will but do what Jesus longs for us to do and that is approach him as a child. Let our imaginations soar free.

The first step is remembering what we have too long forgotten. That once upon a time opens us up to worlds not of fiction but of infinite possibility. But it takes letting go of believing the way things are is the only way they can be ... if we are going to imagine that future that doesn't exist into being.

And some day, someone will be standing with a group of people and saying,

“Story. Story.” (Story!)

“Once upon a time, there was a group of people gathered on a Sunday morning in Pasadena, California...”

And the people will sit in rapt attention and awe ... and believe that the wonders that happened before can happen once again.

Amen