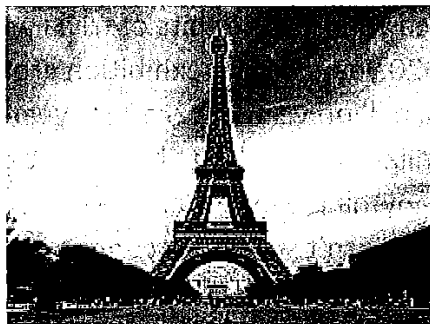


Scott L. Thompson
First Presbyterian Church, Willmar, MN
“Creative Imaginings”
Jeremiah 33: 14-16

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: ‘The LORD is our righteousness.’

Today’s Advent sermon is about hope. And in order to help us understand the concept better, I’d like to draw our attention to the Eiffel Tower.

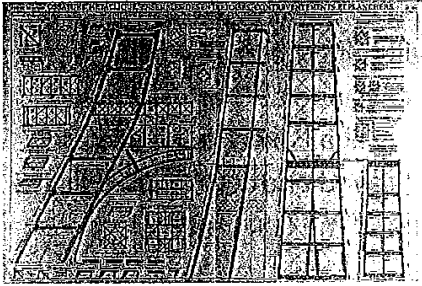


We sort of take the Eiffel Tower for granted in modern days, dominating the skyline of Paris, France. It’s the singular feature of the city, so much so, that it is an icon for Paris, if not France, unto itself. It wasn’t always so, however, especially not in the historical context of its building. The 19th century was a remarkable one for human ingenuity. People had discovered the wonders of industry and science. They were pushing the boundaries of technology in every avenue from electricity to railroads, and in the 1880s the new science of using steel in construction of new and ever taller buildings.

In preparation for the 1889 world’s fair, which would commemorate a century since the French Revolution, the fair sponsors were looking for something monumental to mark the occasion and the site of the fair. A challenge was put forth to hundreds of engineers to design a structure 300 meters, or 1,000 feet in

height. The winning design, a towering, tapered, and elegant design put forward by engineer and entrepreneur, Gustave Eiffel ended up winning the contest.

Here's a shot of the original blueprints from 1887 or so:



Interesting things about the design include the fact that the peculiar curvature of the tower is in fact dictated by the force of wind. Its curvature is meant to act in harmony with the wind, to bend it around the girders to withstand hurricane force winds. Other bits of trivia are that it was originally meant to only stand for 20 years on the exhibition grounds, but it was so wildly successfully received – 2 million visited it the first year – that it has stood ever since. Also that it was unlike anything that had ever been built before, it far exceeded the height of anything ever seen. At over 1,000 feet, it towered over everything, and its height wasn't surpassed for over 50 years with the construction of the Chrysler Building in New York City in the 1930s.

So, why is your pastor bringing up the Eiffel Tower of all things? It's simple, it's because of the power of your imagination. Your imagination is powerful beyond understanding. With your imagination you are able to conceive of a new and different reality. And by your imagining, you are able to help construct a new and better tomorrow. And the interesting thing about our imagination, is that it is built right into us as human beings. You see, the Bible in Genesis chapter 1 says that,

“²⁷ ...God created humankind in his image,
in the image of God he created them;
male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1: 27)

What the church has taken this passage to mean is that we are created in the Image of God (classically theologians have used the Latin term for this, the

Imago Dei, “the Image of God,” to describe this thought). We are creatures fashioned after the very being and mind of God. The ancient Hebrews further expanded on this idea when they told the story of The Garden of Eden in Genesis chapter 3. Where it relates that Adam and Eve were originally created to live in and delight in the life that they were given in the Garden, with only one restriction, that Adam and Eve were forbidden by God to take and eat of the fruit of a particular tree growing there in the Garden. Do you remember the details about that tree? It’s was tree that grew the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. (Genesis 3: 1-7). We know that they did not obey that single command, but rather chose to eat of it, both of them, and their eyes were opened to the knowledge of their own deaths – their human limits, if you will – and they were forced from the Garden into a life of toil and struggle.

So what you have when you put these ancient teachings about human nature together: that we are created in the image of God, given creative and abundant creative faculties; and the fact that we are aware of our own existence, our own mortality, and the ability to choose good or evil, you have an interesting origin story of humanity. What we have, then, is a humanity that is remarkable in its ability to comprehend its own limits and desires and a divine desire, if you will, to push and to strain against those very same limits – to press boundaries, to design, create, strive, and imagine. A creative, imaginative longing, a struggle, almost to return to the divine, to find the peace of the Garden anew.

And here I see the intersection of imagination and hope. For imagination is, in some sense, divine. Think of the power of our imaginations. A 19th century engineer designs a 1,000 feet tower. It exists only in his mind before it ever becomes an empirical reality that you can touch and feel and see with your own eyes. When I asked our men’s group about this idea the other day, one of them told of the great Renaissance sculptor, Michelangelo, who takes the block of stone, and sees Mary cradling the fallen Christ in her arms in his classic work the “Pieta,” before he even carves the first chunk of stone. We look at it today, and see lifelike ripples of fabric and the deep pathos of figures, and are marveled and perplexed to realize that these figures aren’t alive, they are in stone. Or consider Alexander Graham Bell who has this kooky idea to turn sound waves into electrical signals with a device on one end, to be carried to a second device via a long wire, only to be turned back into sound waves once again, and he takes this

imaginative idea and invents the telephone. The list of novel innovations born of human imagination could go on and on.

All of these things begin as ideas, In the power of the human imagination. Each of them human beings, created in the image of God, aware of the limits of their existence, striving against those limits to create, evolve, and master their environments, producing wonders of art, design, construction, and technology.

This ability crashes into, and intersects with Christian hope in verses like the ones we find in Jeremiah today. Jeremiah was writing in a very dark time in Jewish history. The Babylonians had invaded. They had sacked Jerusalem. They had destroyed the temple down to its very last stones. They had carried away many into exile in the East. The Hebrews were lost, lonely for their homes, feeling forsaken. And it is in times like this, when things seem the most bleak, when a grim hopelessness threatens to take over, that Jeremiah reminds the people to hope. He says, "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'"

In that particular place and in that time, Jeremiah is challenging the people to remember the promises of God to the people of Israel. That He would be their God, and He their people. That God will fulfil the promises made to the people. And that God will further cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, a Messiah, the Savior, our Lord.

And what he's doing in that moment, is he's giving the people hope. Not empty hope founded in folly. Rather, it is holy hope, sacred hope. Founded in the promises of God. And he is asking the people to engage their creative imaginations. He's saying imagine a future where you are restored. Imagine a future where the Messiah has come. When the Righteous branch of David, Jesus has brought true and lasting righteousness to prevail on earth.

Friends, Christian hope is founded in these promises of God: that God is who is, and that we see the promises of God, foreshadowed by the prophecies of faithful forebears like Jeremiah coming true in Jesus.

We are asked then, to hope. To engage our creative imaginations to ponder a day promised in Holy Scripture. A day when,

“See, the home of God is among mortals.
He will dwell with them;
they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe every tear from their eyes.
Death will be no more;
mourning and crying and pain will be no more,
for the first things have passed away.” (Revelation 21: 3-4)

Friends, our proclamation is that that day of hope is rooted in Jesus. A babe who was and is Emmanuel, “God with us.” We confess and trust that God became one of us at Christmas. That he showed us the paths of righteousness. That he restores our souls. That he gives us cause to hope and to imagine: To imagine a future with hope; A future where the swords and spears are beaten into ploughs and pruning hooks; A future where there is no more weeping or mourning or crying; A future where the abundance of the earth is equitably shared and there is no hunger or fear or want; A future where God’s peace prevails in our hearts, minds, and on this good Earth; A future where we have tempered our own destructive tendencies and have worked to minimize our impact on the planet so that it endures for future generations. And all of these things borne of hope. All of these things beginning in the creative imaginations of humans who want to follow the lead of their savior. All of these things beginning this Christmas anew. All of these things beginning when we leave this place to love and serve God. All of these things beginning now.