

“Imagination: Fire of the Mind and Heart”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval

Unitarian Church of Montpelier

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Note: *This sermon was modified to address the January 6th attack on the U.S. Capitol the preceding Wednesday.*

After one of my son’s annual wellness visits with his pediatrician, we were given a book to take home. The book was called, *A Box Can Be Many Things*.

I bet you can imagine the basic story line.

On the opening page, a mother is pictured placing a big, empty cardboard box in the trash bin saying, “This box is junk!” As two children look on.

As soon as the mother is out of sight, they take the box, and one of them declares, “A box can be many things.”

Readers follow along as the box transforms into a cave, then a car, then a house, then a bird cage all to the children’s delight.

With the power of imagination, a simple cardboard box can be transformed and serve as a portal to fun and adventure.

Our worship theme this month is Imagination and, in light of the events of this past week, I wonder about the power of imagination and what that particular capacity of the human mind enables - from innocent child’s play to grave ill and harm.

The insurrection by an angry mob of extremists on Wednesday showed the dangers of imagination turned to delusion when fueled by hate and lies. The storming of the Capitol was inspired by some big lies - one being that the 2020 Presidential Election was stolen from the current President which has no basis in fact. The other big lie, with a much longer history, is the lie of the superiority of the “white race” over all others. This big lie was conjured up over 400 years ago based in the fabrication of “race” as a marker of human difference and used to justify the subjugation of enslaved people, the genocide of indigenous communities, and a continuing tangled

web of ideas and policies leading to what the historian and writer, Isabel Wilkerson calls, a racial caste system in the United States of America which is still alive today.

We have all in our different ways been trying to come to grips with the reality of what took place in our nation's capital this past week. Even for some of those who were there in the Capitol building who had some idea that violence was possible, what actually took place was beyond their imagining. And, as details continue to emerge, we all face the grief and horror and, indeed, fear, of what may yet come.

As people of faith and conscience who uphold democratic principles within our own religious community, we must denounce this insurrection and any attempt to overthrow the will of the people or to disrupt the peaceful transition of power. Those that are responsible for this anti-democratic attack must be held accountable. We must also continue on in the work of imagining a new story beyond the one that fuels white supremacist extremism as well as the more covert workings of racist, white supremacist ideas and policies in our day to day lives and even within ourselves.

As I have taken in images of the Capitol during Wednesday's siege, I have also been taken back to memories of my own visits there - inside the building as a visitor, sitting in the House Chamber, viewing the statues in Statuary Hall, and outside the building, protesting the Iraq War in 2003, on my way to the Women's March four years ago.

I have thought about all of the nonviolent protests and demonstrations that have taken place within the halls of the Capitol - to push for the expansion of health care, to call for the end of the separation of families at the border, to demand action to address the climate crisis. Demonstrations, I will say, that ended in the arrest of protestors for civil disobedience.

Despite its state of disarray and injury after the desecration this past week, the U.S. Capitol, as with our own State House here in Montpelier, has been a place where imagination can take hold and lead to creative, bold, and necessary actions for the common good.

It is also a place where people whose ancestors could not have dreamed they would have a seat in its chambers go to do the work of the people.

One such person is Congressman Andy Kim of New Jersey. During the deadly attack on the Capitol this past Wednesday, Rep. Kim was in his office in an adjacent building and had to shelter in place for hours. He sat in his office and worried about the safety of his staff and colleagues. He was finally able to re-enter to join his colleagues in certifying the results of the election. Afterwards, he found the Capitol Rotunda, a room that he loves, strewn with debris in the aftermath of the insurrection - trash, water bottles, clothing, even an American flag were cast onto the floor - left behind by the mob. Rep. Kim, the child of Korean immigrants and newly re-elected to a second term, describes serving in Congress as a blessing and democracy as a place of opportunity affording him a chance to do something extraordinary. He is the first Asian American elected to Congress from the state of New Jersey. And, for an hour and a half in the early morning hours, he knelt down and filled bag after bag with trash cleaning up some of the mess left by the angry mob.

Imagination fueled by deception and fear can pave a dangerous road as we saw this past week.

But, when love is the animating force of our imagination and not fear, well, that is an entirely different story. That is when we are truly alive and on fire in all the right ways. Not to burn it all down because we didn't get our way but to be part of the building up, part of making right the wrongs, and casting visions for the future that will get us beyond the current mess.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann has written, "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." Here, he is writing about the biblical prophets but his statement rings true for prophets of our time as well who can be any of us in any moment. We all keep alive the ministry of imagination by continuing to conjure up and proposing alternative futures to any single one desperately forced upon us by power-hoarding leaders.

Right now, burdened as we are with the serious realities of the present day, it can be difficult to lean into our imaginations.

Yet, in our minds and hearts, imagination plants the seeds of the possible. And, in these times, we are desperately in need of both facing present realities with as much honesty as we can muster and also imagining new possibilities beyond our present circumstances.

This imagination starts in each of us, in our own hearts and minds.

The African American writer James Baldwin said: “Though we do not wholly believe it yet, the interior life is a real life, and the intangible dreams of a people have a tangible effect on the world.”

Now is still the time to nurture these intangible dreams. It is still the time to root our imaginations in the depths of our love and to resist the forces that would seek to trample our imaginations with violent rage and power-seeking polarization. Especially for those of us whose very existence is the target of that violent rage, tending to the interior life is a necessary act, an act of resistance, resilience, and survival.

At the end of the children’s story, *A Box Can Be Many Things*, after the box has been transformed into a birdcage, the two children continue to tear at it until the box is in scraps and pieces on the floor.

“Now the box is junk,” one of them says.

And, at this point in the story, we are reminded that the imagination can still redeem even the broken pieces.

The children pick the pieces up.

“The box is a hat and a flag and a necklace and a sword,” they declare.

Amidst the brokenness of our country that is too painful to deny, there is still kindness and determination and goodwill, and dreams of liberation and justice, and our humanity.

Can we just imagine?