

Cartoon Christianity: Imagination

Mark 6: 1-6

Philippians 4: 12-19



A young man was recently hired for a job. After several weeks, he was called into the manager's office.

“What is the meaning of this?” the manager demanded. “When you applied for the job, you said you had 5 years' experience. I found out this is the first job you've ever had.”

“Well,” the young man said, “your ad said you wanted somebody with imagination.”

Last week, we started looking at cartoons. Even though it sounds a little juvenile, I think we found something of value in looking at Christianity through the lens of something so simple.

And so this week, we are continuing our Cartoon Christianity series by looking at the very thing that was the subject of that little joke at the beginning: imagination. And we're going to do that with one of the most beloved cartoon characters in our history.



Snoopy, one of Charles Schultz's famous Peanuts characters, is already an imaginative one. After all, he's a beagle that walks on two feet and plays with the rest of the gang just like any other human child would.

Beyond just being an imaginative character, Snoopy also has an imagination of his own.



Perhaps that's best on display in his adventures as the World War I Flying Ace. In these instances, Snoopy sits atop his red dog house, imagining he's flying a fighter plane in the skies above Europe, taking on the Red Baron.

If you're not familiar with these scenes in the comic strips, maybe you've seen it as a main storyline in the 1966 fall special, *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*.

Throughout this cartoon, we see various stages of Snoopy's imaginative story. He starts in a desperate dogfight, which ends in peril as he pretends to crash his plane.

Now without his fighter, Snoopy is left to wander the countryside of France – which is really just his own backyard. As Snoopy finds himself in a pumpkin patch, he ends up in the middle of some other imagination happening in the group.

Linus has been telling his friends about the arrival of the mysterious Great Pumpkin. He's gotten Sally to join him, and they end up in the same pumpkin patch Snoopy just wandered into.



Linus sees a mysterious shadowy figure approaching, and he thinks the Great Pumpkin has finally come to visit. He's so excited he just can't take it anymore and promptly faints.

Sally, though, sees everything that's happening. She sees that this Great Pumpkin Linus has been going on about is actually just Snoopy, and it all looks rather ridiculous to her.

But Linus holds on to his imagination. As the show ends, Linus is loudly declaring that the Great Pumpkin will indeed arrive next year, and he won't miss it this time.

It's a wonderful cartoon, and indeed one of the classics featuring the Peanuts gang. It was also nice to watch when it was over 90 degrees all week long to remind myself that cooler days are on the way.

It's also an interesting intersection of imagination and reality. Snoopy's great adventure as the Flying Ace comes to an abrupt end when he's mistaken for Linus's own imaginative fantasy, the arrival of the Great Pumpkin. And all at once, both of their illusions are shattered.

I think our Gospel reading today is also a lesson in the meeting of imagination and reality.



Let's read today from the Gospel of Mark, chapter six, the first six verses:

6 Jesus left there and went to his hometown, accompanied by his disciples. 2 When the Sabbath came, he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were amazed.

"Where did this man get these things?" they asked. "What's this wisdom that has been given him? What are these remarkable miracles he is performing? 3 Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him.

4 Jesus said to them, "A prophet is not without honor except in his own town, among his relatives and in his own home." 5 He could not do any miracles there, except lay his hands on a few sick people and heal them. 6 He was amazed at their lack of faith.

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.



I think upon first hearing this story, we would imagine much what the disciples accompanying Jesus must have imagined: his homecoming would be a grand one!

Then when he begins teaching and quite literally blowing the minds of these people with his wisdom and news of the miracles he's performed, wouldn't you imagine these people who helped raise him would be falling all over themselves to welcome him?

Yet, they don't.

They reject and they ridicule him.

The Gospel of Luke tells us a little more about this event, and it tells us that the people of Nazareth even attempted to throw Jesus off a cliff for what they perceived as his blasphemy.

And this would be a recurring theme throughout his ministry. We look back and we imagine that anyone hearing this Good News, seeing these signs and wonders, would receive him first with open arms and then with praise and worship.

And yet, they don't.

Sometimes, we imagine this life as a Christian is going to be easier than it really is. Sometimes, we imagine that we're going to have immediate and grand results when we devote our lives to spreading the same Good News that Jesus came to tell us about.

Sometimes, we imagine we'll do everything we possibly can at our church, we're going to go all out at a Vacation Bible School – and we're going to reach countless people and change lives forever!

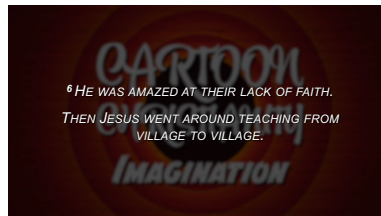
Sometimes, our imaginations get ahead of us.

What do we do when that happens? What do we do when we allow ourselves expect big things or expect the path of least resistance or expect huge results right away?

I think our natural human tendency is disappointment, perhaps resignation. We might even say, "You know what, all this isn't worth it."

I think if we experienced something even remotely close to what Jesus did, many of us would pack it in right there. We don't need to be thrown off any cliffs.

But that's not what Jesus did, and thank God he didn't!



What Jesus did instead is revealed in verse six:

Then Jesus went around teaching from village to village.

He went back to work!

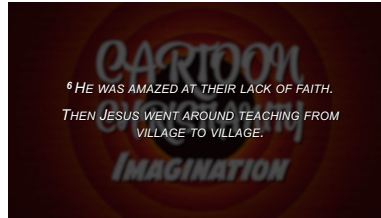
This one rejection, this one stop along the road that didn't pan out, wasn't the end of the road. Jesus went on teaching from village to village, because there are more people that need to hear about him.

I mentioned VBS a little bit ago. I want to tell you this morning that in what we did and what we bought, we planned for 48 kids this week. We imagined that could be possible. We didn't reach 48 kids. And yet, we would be so very wrong to be disappointed in that.

We had 34 of the best kids we could have hoped for. And if we focus on what we imagined was possible and didn't happen, if we would ever allow that to stop us from doing this work, some of those kids may never hear about the love of God through His Son Jesus Christ.

We must continue like Jesus – teaching, and telling, and showing of God's love.

This isn't all we can learn about imagination from Jesus' trip to Nazareth. The first half of verse six also has an important lesson for us:



6 He was amazed at their lack of faith.

These people in his hometown just had zero concept that this son of Mary, that this carpenter with all his regular brothers and sisters, could be the one true Son of God.

And Jesus was amazed that they couldn't find the faith to believe this.

You know, I've been painting imagination as somewhat of a bad thing so far this morning. And while I do believe it's true that our imaginations can get the best of us and lead us away from our calling to continue teaching, imagination isn't necessarily a bad thing.

In fact, if the people of Nazareth had a little more imagination when it comes to all that God can do, Jesus' reception in his hometown might have gone differently that day.

If the people of Nazareth could have thought big enough to realize that maybe the Son of God really could have come in the form of this seemingly regular carpenter from this definitely regular family, maybe they would have listened differently to his teachings. Maybe they would have heard about the miracles and wondered at his power.

If we can't imagine that God is big enough to act in ways we haven't thought of yet, if our imaginations can't strive towards the height and the depth of what God can do, our faith isn't much different than the Nazarenes'.

If we don't allow our faith some room for imagination, we risk falling into the trap of the "same old thing."

How often do we as a church limit ourselves to what we can do and what we can be because "we've never done that before?"

What if we miss God also asking, "What if?"

That is where the intersection of faith and imagination is not a bad thing at all. That's where the intersection of faith and imagination becomes vital.



In his quest to find the Great Pumpkin, Linus missed out on a lot of great things. He skipped the party the rest of the gang was enjoying. He missed the bobbing for apples and the candy. He took Sally along and so she missed it, too.

Maybe in that case, this search for the imaginary Great Pumpkin led to some big disappointment.

But at the same time, Snoopy's imagination took him to heights he couldn't reach on his own. It took him to places he'd never see with his own eyes.

This story about Jesus visiting his hometown tells us a little of the same.

Our imagination can lead us down paths that lead to disappointment. Big things and immediate results can happen, but it's never promised. When reality sets in, and our work isn't quite like we imagined it, we can be tempted to give up.

But Jesus didn't do that. Jesus went back to work.

At the same time, a life without imagination can blind us to all that God can do. The Nazarenes couldn't imagine this kid from their hometown could be anything more than a carpenter.

Oh, how much they missed because their imagination didn't allow their faith any room for big things.

Friends, let's never let our work stop when that work doesn't pan out quite like we imagined it. Instead, let's do as Jesus did and continue telling the world who he is.

But let's also not lose our imagination in what God can do, and all the ways He can do it.

And all of God's people said...