

Imaginative Prayer

- Good evening, brothers. Tonight I hope to entertain you with an imaginative retelling of a Gospel story that I prayed with during the directed silent retreat I went on in April.
- St. Ignatius of Loyola incorporated the use of imagination in his Spiritual Exercises because he experienced firsthand the powerful effect of combining his imagination with Truth-seeking prayer.
- This imaginative contemplation prayer technique can bring new life and new insights from Scripture passages that may now seem stale and predictable after reading and reflecting on them over and over in a more traditional way.
- This technique is especially enlightening when used to pray with the Gospels. The story I am going to share with you is from the Gospel of Luke 4:16-30. It recounts the time Jesus returned to his home town of Nazareth to preach and was rejected.
- So here is my experience of imaginative prayer where I placed myself within this story:

21 April 2023: Imaginative Contemplation on Luke 4:16-30, The Rejection at Nazareth

I was as excited as everyone in town when I heard Jesus was coming home. The rumors of the miracles he has been working throughout Galilee preceded him and now all of Nazareth is buzzing. There has been speculation that he may be asked to speak in our synagogue today. I am not the only person who has heard this because the synagogue is packed with more people than I have ever seen. Some of them do not even live in our town.

Thankfully I got here early enough to get one of the last seats. It is one of the stone seats at the base of a pillar. It is not very comfortable because the edge of the stone is pressing sharply into my legs, and there are people pressed up against me on both sides as they lean on the pillar for support. But I have a really good view if Jesus is going to read and speak.

There is a lot of dust in the air stirred up by all the people. The air is also filled with the hushed whispers of most of the people. Everyone wants to talk about him but they do not dare to do so loudly. However, everyone's hushed voices are creating a crackling and stuffy heat that is making it very difficult to breath. I can't wait until this is over and we can get outside to some fresh air.

Looking around the room is very difficult with all these people in here. The only people I can see clearly are those standing along the back wall with the women. There is a really beautiful woman standing next to Jesus' mother. She is wearing a dark velvety gown with gold embroidered patterns along its entire length. I can see little wisps of her long black hair sticking out from under her white head scarf. I have never seen her before. She is beautiful. She is older than me...probably closer to Jesus' age. I wonder if she is traveling with him.

The temple attendants have just lit more candles and the room is silent now. Everyone is waiting with anticipation for the start of the service. I can feel sweat running down my chest beneath my robe. It is so hot in here.

Our rabbi has just walked in with Jesus walking by his right side. Oh good! He has just announced that Jesus will do the reading. Another attendant has just handed our rabbi one of the scrolls of the Torah and he has placed it on the bimah in the center of the room for Jesus to read from. Jesus is stepping up to the scroll and manipulating it with such ease to get to the passage he will read. Before he starts reading, he is scanning the entire room looking at each one of us. When he looked at me, I thought he was about to read the scroll directly to me, but then his gaze kept going around the room.

He has stopped to make long eye contact with his mother. She is smiling so happily. I know she is really proud of him. Wow! That woman standing next to Jesus' mother is just radiating her beauty. I don't know where that light is coming from that reflects off of her face, but it certainly makes her appear to be glowing and so delicate. In fact, Jesus' mother is also glowing in that same light.

Well Jesus has finished looking around the room and has turned his attention to the scroll again. He reads in a gentle but rich voice:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord."

*He has handed the scroll back to the attendant and has now sat down. The room is deathly quiet and everyone is looking at him. Now, in that same rich voice, he has just said **"Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing."** There was a brief moment of silence again as everyone anticipated more, but when Jesus didn't say more, the room began to buzz again in hushed whispers and a few loudly spoken praises.*

My attention has been drawn to the back of the room for some reason. My gaze fell on Jesus' mother, Mary, just as her eyebrows went up and her eyes widened in a look of amused shock. She placed her hand over her mouth to hide her smile of amusement. My eyes now fall and rest on the face of the beautiful women next to her. She is so focused on Jesus and her face appears frozen in a serene expression that hints at a quiet wonder and joy no one else can appreciate.

*What's this...? My attention on her has been broken as I've noticed the nature of the conversational noise changing. Someone says in a loud voice **"Isn't this the son of Joseph?"** The tone of his voice seems incredulous and filled with doubt. I pick up on several other bites of conversation around me where Jesus and his family are mentioned. I am a little confused; I guess I've not been paying attention to those around me while my focus was on Jesus' mother and the woman beside her.*

Jesus says in a louder than normal voice to quiet the crowd, **“Surely you will quote me this proverb ‘Physician, cure yourself,’ and then say ‘Do here in your native place the things that we heard were done in Capernaum.’”** Now I am completely focused on him as he says **“Amen, I say to you, no prophet is accepted in his own native place.”** This is a shocking statement, and it doesn’t seem consistent with the feeling I have sensed in town over the last day. In fact, this comment seems rather insulting to us because we had all looked forward to his arrival.

And to make matters worse, he has now gone on in his comments bringing up examples of the prophet Elijah only helping a Gentile woman in Sidon during the great famine; and the prophet Elisha only healing a Syrian general called Naaman of his leprosy when there were several Jewish people with leprosy who could have been healed. It seems like he is justifying why he will not perform any miracles in Nazareth!

This is so hard for me to process. Why is he saying these things? The voices in the room are now loud. It seems everyone in the room is angry at Jesus. Well almost everyone, but not the women standing along the wall to the right of me. I look at his Mother Mary’s face. She is horrified. Her right hand again covers her mouth, now open in a silent wale. She quickly looks up to Heaven with pleading eyes and then my view of her is blocked by people getting up out of their seats.

I get a fleeting glance at the beautiful woman before she is blocked from my view. Her face still seems radiant and locked on Jesus. However, she no longer looks serene; her expression shows a hint of disbelief and sadness. She never turns away from Jesus as the crowd erupts in anger.

I quickly look to my left at Jesus. He is looking straight into my eyes. We make eye contact for less than a second, yet it seems to me that I was staring at his face for hours. His expression seems calm and reassuring to me, but despite that, I begin to feel alarmed as the crowd goes mad around me. Jesus doesn’t resist or change his expression as two men grab him and lift him to his feet. Our rabbi has a scowl on his face.

The synagogue starts emptying as the two men and our rabbi escort Jesus outside. The noise outside is just as confusing. There are comments about taking him out of our town. Someone says **“Throw him off of the hill!”** I see others picking up large stones with an intention of throwing them at Jesus. This is all wrong! What is going on here? Why are these people in my town acting so crazy and full of hate? This is such an ugly over reaction to a few words that seemed a little insulting.

As I make my way outside behind the crowd, the fresh and cooler air blasts me with a new understanding of the people I live with in this town. Now I feel certain that an injustice is taking place here. Whatever Jesus sees in the people of this town is likely a truth that justifies his comments. I wish I had not been so quick to judge him a few minutes ago. This doesn’t seem right, but what can I do?

As I follow the crowd up the narrow path, I try to work my way to the front of the pack along the edge of the trail. As I am moving forward, I recall the memory of locking eyes with Jesus. He didn't seem afraid. This gives me a boost of confidence that this ugly scene will work out in the end. Everyone will see that this is a big misunderstanding and they will let him go.

But the crowd keeps moving closer and closer to the top of the hill. Finally, the path widens more and I am able to dart past the slower people in the middle of this mob. I get close to the front, but do not pass the rabbi and the two men guiding Jesus to the hill top.

Jesus is offering no resistance and he is not saying anything in his own defense. He simply lets them walk him up to the top of the hill. Now I again have doubts of this ending well. I quietly mutter a prayer of help to our God. Right at that instant, with only a few paces left to the brink of the hill, Jesus stops resolutely in his tracks. He lifts his face to Heaven and prays something that I cannot hear. His prayer doesn't last long at all; no longer than my prayer did. Jesus turns around and faces his captors and the rabbi. He quietly says something to them. It wasn't any longer than his prayer.

The two men and the rabbi look dumbfounded. Their arms drop to their sides and they don't say anything as Jesus walks past them. The crowd also is quiet and steps off the path to let him pass. As he enters this powerless gauntlet, he looks over at me and our eyes lock again. It was more than just a passing glance, but it didn't last long enough. In that brief look, I could see the courage, confidence, and calmness with which he faced down this angry mob that should have revered him.

What more can I learn from this man? I want this man as my friend. I am leaving Nazareth to follow him.

As my dreamy prayer begins to fade away, I wonder if I will meet and get to know this beautiful and mysterious woman that Jesus has enraptured....

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- This was the end of my contemplative prayer session. I then started writing down from memory the story as it unfolded in my mind. As I wrote, I reflected on this imaginative story and the insights began to form. Let me share a few of the most important insights.
 - Several times in this story I made reference to a beautiful and mysterious woman that accompanied Mother Mary. You are probably wondering who she is. Well, I am not going to tell you because I can't. She is a mystery revealed to me to investigate.
 - We all need some mystery in our lives; especially the spiritual aspects of our lives. This keeps our faith inquisitive and fresh.
 - As you read through Scripture, I encourage you to look for those mysterious characters who are referenced, but never fully described or explained. Take the time to imagine who they might be and what they may have experienced in that setting. Imagine what their experiences might teach you about yourself.

- Another clear insight for me is that I have an imagination worth employing. We all do. My engineer's brain was trained to rely on scientific proofs, formulas, and empirical data; but that is not the limit of how my mind works.
- All we need to start with is a basic story and an appreciation for what we might experience within the story using our five physical senses and the sixth sense of feeling with our heart.
- With a little practice, we can begin to understand and empathize with the characters revealed in a story. Then our imagination will start filling in the missing details of other characters, the surroundings, the emotions, and finally our own understanding of the relationships that come alive when we find ourselves in the story.
- While the world has changed in significant and wild ways since Jesus' time on earth, humanity has not changed much. What we learn about the human experience in Biblical times can now more easily translate to our human needs in modern times.
- Finally, there is a more personal insight for me from this story. Just as Jesus had to leave Nazareth behind to live out the mission of his public ministry, so too I had to leave home to come to know and follow Jesus.
- Jesus did not abandon his home town and neither have I. I still love and interact with my family and friends of origin. But, I had to move on from that place to expand my mind and my heart. It is necessary for everyone to leave the comfort zone of early life to pursue the calling of the second half of life.
- This is a truth for all of us. When we realize that we are comfortable in our spiritual lives, it is time to reassess to determine if we are too comfortable. We have to ask ourselves and God if there is something else that He desires for us or of us. Is there something more that He wants us to understand about humanity, about the Church, or Himself?
- These are not easy questions to answer for ourselves. They can only be answered in the most private recesses of our soul; those places most readily accessed using our imagination.
- Thank you for your attention.

Peace Be With You,

Marc Barrett