



“FAITH IS A HABIT: Kingdom Rehearsal”

John 18:33-38a

November 21, 2021

I spent the first two decades of my life in a ballet studio, and nearly every time I began to learn a new ballet, the choreographer would gather the cast and articulate the vision for the piece. They invited us to hear the music with our hearts, welcomed us into their imaginations, and offered us movement befitting of their vision. As a response of gratitude for the opportunity, we spent weeks or months—if we were lucky—letting their imaginations shape our movement and transform our bodies into vessels for their story. We rehearsed, hoping simultaneously to perform that piece perfectly and to be made complete as dancers by the process of practicing. We sensed that the goal was elusive, but because we would fall asleep each night envisioning that day when the curtain would rise, the music would swell, and we would appear unflawed before a watching world, we pressed on toward the goal. Our imaginations had taken flight, the dream was vividly before us, and we would shape our lives toward that goal no matter what adversity arose.

This was perhaps the vision of Pope Pius XI when he wrote the encyclical which ultimately created this Sunday, the Reign of Christ Sunday. He wanted to draw the attention of the church toward the image of Christ in Scripture as King, and he wanted us to rehearse it. We return to it once a year, before Advent begins. This was instituted fairly recently, 1925, and the times were not unlike our own. He writes, “The seeds of discord sown far and wide; those bitter enmities and rivalries between nations, which still hinder so much the cause of peace; that insatiable greed which is so often hidden under a pretense of public spirit and patriotism, and gives rise to so many private quarrels; an immoderate selfishness making humanity seek nothing but their own comfort and

advantage, and measure everything by these...”ⁱ In 1925 the people’s imaginations had been captured and the “people measured everything by these...” because that is the power of a captured imagination. It becomes our frame for measuring our world, for deciding our movements, and for answering the most central questions of our lives.

And Pilate’s imagination was captured by wisdom we might call conventional but is really a failure of creativity. We might recognize this line of thinking when we hear it. It says that there is never hope for unity and reconciliation, so winning out over an identified enemy becomes life or death. It says that there is no vision for abundance, so collecting and increasing the limited resources available becomes life or death. There is no voice inviting us to imagine an undivided world, so our voices chirp and chatter of ways to sort and subjugate our neighbors. Our imaginations—like Pilate’s—can be held captive, too, when we’ve marinated for too long in these messages. We need to hear something more beautiful because *we rehearse what we imagine, and we become what we rehearse.*

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So what if it doesn’t have to be this way? What if cynicism, which is just an inclination of the spirit and the mind, is just that, an inclination? And we can become otherly inclined, be redirected? But we’re going to need something—or someone—more beautiful to recapture our imaginations, a force or a face who can hold up a mirror to these “conventional wisdoms” and help us see a more beautiful way.

So imagine this. Imagine a king who was there in the beginning, through this king everything that

was created came, and apart from this king nothing was created. A king of this power chose to rule not merely in heavenly headquarters but arrived among his people as a king in a cradle. And that king grew into an adult and would heal those discarded and disinherited by the powerful. He performed miracles for the meek and the miserly alike, and forgave all who asked him. But a king this powerful in love angered and terrified those whose imaginations had been captured and those who supposed themselves mighty, and so they subjected him to the only tools of power they could imagine: force, fear, violence, and death. But this king would not meet their fear with force because he had not come to make them subjects but to save them. He knew that they did not need more superiors; they needed a savior. And so he sets them free. He sets *us* free.

His powerful and perfect love casts out fear. It saves us from our former ways. The force of his forgiveness conquers our hardened hearts. The gentleness of his mercy captivates and reclaims our imaginations so that we can ask with curiosity and not condemnation: “What is truth?” And then we can lean close and hear him as he says: “I am the truth, the way, and the life.” And with our eyes opened, we watch and weep as one mighty and righteous enough to judge us is being judged in our place,ⁱⁱ crying out, “It is finished,” from a cross he could have climbed down from. But he stayed—he *stayed*—offering himself to save us from our thirst for power or our hunger for violent victory. And then he returns three days later to crown his people with his Spirit and send them out to live with their imaginations transformed, to rehearse for a kingdom where the meek are mighty and the lowly are lifted up. And those who expected judgment are disarmed by grace.

We rehearse what we imagine, and we become what we rehearse.

There is another way. There is a new imagination available to us, and it is called the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God ushered in by Jesus himself. Jesus lovingly courts us and invites us to live into that kingdom. No longer must we follow hollow

heroes who turn to violence or spectacle to impose their rule. No. Christ our King comes to indwell our imaginations and grant us a more perfect vision for a kingdom of kinship we can recognize and rehearse with our very lives.

For we rehearse what we imagine, and we become what we rehearse.

Maybe you dragged yourself here this morning, or were dragged here. Maybe you’re tuning in to hear the sermon just to check the church box off your to-do list. We’ve all been there. Maybe it feels like going through the motions, *but I imagine something very different is happening here*. I see a people who want to live in the goodness of God, who want to dwell in Christ’s kingdom. If I were a betting person, I would bet that you are seeking, that you are seeking a God who can answer the question, “What is truth?” And you sense that He’s standing right in front of you, and you want to hear it in his own voice. So, you came to church to be with the body of Christ, to listen to him in prayer, in song, in silence, and in stillness. To look for him in the faces of one another and to sense his presence in food for the hungry or mercy for those who have hurt us.

Well however you came today, you’ve come to the right place. This is the studio where we rehearse for the Kingdom of God. Here, the Choreographer’s imagination is clear: Christ reigns. And we can live this truth: Our King is lowly and a loving Savior, and his throne is a throne of grace. And so he bids us, “Come.”

We rehearse what we imagine, and we become what we rehearse.

I am grateful you came to rehearsal. If our King comes in forms we cannot anticipate—a King in a cradle, a crucified King, a Sovereign God who came to save us—then our rehearsal for his coming Kingdom is going to surprise us, which is why it’s important that we show up and learn the steps. Our rehearsing may lack the theatrics or fireworks one might think befitting of a king, for it will be gentle, and it will be lowly, and it will be attentive to

the downtrodden. The church cannot be captured by conventional definitions of power; we must be transformed by the image of our powerless Jesus hanging on the cross, a King powerful in the truest way: love.ⁱⁱⁱ So, we rehearse walking in his Way and keep doing this as Christ shapes our habits and our hearts. We rehearse until our muscles are shaped and stretched into the way of Jesus and our affections are bent away from force, greed, violence, or death and toward the abundant grace of God.

In ballet we call that muscle memory: repeating movements so frequently that our bodies know what to do without needing a tutorial. I worked for years with a ballet teacher and choreographer, the late Samuel Kurkjian, who—in exchange for me bringing him his sandwich before each evening rehearsal—taught me lessons that still reverberate beyond the studio. I've been thinking about two of those lessons quite a bit recently. The first he articulated like this: "Now, Gracie, when you mess it up, which you do a lot, you should get it right five times before you take a break. Make your muscles wise." The second lesson was similar but a little more nuanced. He said, "You have to dance your way to believing it." He knew that my imagination was prone toward cynicism, critique, and sometimes fatalism. I had a hard time believing that I could participate in the beautiful piece that he was imagining. He knew I would stumble on my steps, but he wanted me to try again. He knew that I would doubt the vision, but he wanted me to dance anyway.

Conveniently, at church and in the life of faith we essentially have five ways we try again. We rehearse for the Kingdom in worship, in Scripture, in prayer, in community, and through acts of mercy. These habits of faith not only make our muscles wise after we have stumbled. They also help us dance our way to believing it. When our imaginations have grown dim or the world has made us worrisome, these practices help us realize, experience, and taste the Kingdom of God. And as we rehearse, it becomes our reality—the Kingdom becomes our home.

1. In worship, we proclaim that Christ is king, that He reigns. And as we do that, he dethrones the false gods of our day, gently drawing our hearts toward his hope rather than the narratives of cynicism that pervade our daily storytelling.
2. In meditating on and digesting Scripture, as Reverend Chris Henry encouraged us, we hear again the vision for God's coming Kingdom. We seek to listen to Jesus as he speaks through the Holy Scriptures.
3. We rehearse through prayer. In a world that says, "My will be done," we gather and say, "Thy will be done." It's revolutionary. In prayer, we turn over those kingdoms of our own creation, and we ask for a more beautiful imagination. And the Spirit is faithful in granting us that gift.
4. And when we practice prayer and study in community, we rehearse loving our neighbor as ourselves, and perhaps even harder, we allow ourselves to be loved and cared for. We break free from that imagination that teaches that we are invulnerable or impermeable, and we surrender ourselves back to the God who loved us first.
5. And we rehearse for the Kingdom by making our faith a habit through acts of mercy. These are outlined in Matthew 25. We feed the hungry. We offer drink to the thirsty. We clothe the naked. We give shelter to the stranger. We visit those in prison. We care for the sick and bury the dead. We do this because we see our King who offers all he has for the despairing, disinherited, and disregarded. And so we do likewise.

We rehearse these things because our imaginations have been captured by our crucified King. We see another way is possible because Christ is also the King of Creation. And we want to dance our way into that reality because we know that rehearsal becomes reality. When we proclaim Christ's reign with our words and with our habits, that becomes our new reality. Our imaginations are being freed from the powers of force, fear, violence, and death, and our

muscles are being made wise with the wisdom of love. Rehearsal becomes reality because while we are busy rehearsing, the Spirit is at work transforming us. That is what grace does. We are no longer members of the kingdoms of this world, for the Kingdom of God has become our home. Friends, that is a truth worthy of your imaginations. So let's live like it, and let's dance our way to believing it. Amen.

ⁱ “Quas Primas (December 11, 1925) | PIUS XI,” accessed November 9, 2021, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_pi-xi_enc_11121925_quas-primas.html.

ⁱⁱ Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, ed. T. F. Torrance, trans. G. W. Bromiley, 1st edition (London: T&T Clark, 1958).

ⁱⁱⁱ This image, and the Scriptural basis for it, is taken from William C. Placher, *Narratives of a Vulnerable God*, 1st edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994).