

Who Told You That You Couldn't Dream Big?

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[0:00] Imagination is one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography.

! Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma.! Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity.

My name is Antonio. I'm the director of prayer and liturgy here at the table. I'm also on the preaching team. This morning I want to talk about resurrecting prophetic imaginations.

When I talk about resurrecting prophetic imaginations, I am talking about imaginations grounded in the mind of Christ. Imaginations reflecting the futures and possibilities Jesus sees for our lives. Imaginations often innate to us in childhood. There's a reason Jesus says we have to become like children again in order to enter the kingdom of heaven.

[1:08] Yet adulthood changes our imagination. Trauma changes our imagination. We need to resurrect prophetic imagination because for so many of us we have become a use to the opposite.

Oppressive imaginations. Imaginations grounded in limitations. Imaginations grounded in lies.
Imaginations who make us small.

Imaginations with myopic views of Jesus. Imaginations limited to models of Christianity tainted by unrepented sins of racism, sexism, and homophobia.

Ultimately, imagination is about perception. For some of us, our perception of ourselves, our perception of our community, our perception of Jesus, our casualties of oppressive imaginations.

This morning, I want to talk about how we can pursue prophetic imaginations and begin excavation projects to resurrect lost perceptions. We all have different occupants under our headstones.

[2:16] I see some headstones say scripture. Many of us can't envision the Bible being a place of identity anymore. I see some headstones that say prayer.

Many of us can't find authentic language to talk to Jesus anymore. I see some headstones say community. Many of us can't imagine a church who can hold all we carry and treat it with care and concern anymore.

I see some headstones say pride. Even those of us who love to pray, read the Bible, and are deeply connected to community can't imagine being open about our spiritual practices and publicly associated with a religion that has caused so much harm.

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college. I studied abroad in Spain.

I went to a bar in Barcelona one night, and a Spanish man and I struck up a conversation. He asked me where I was from. As a black American, I never get asked that question when I'm home.

[3:52] I excitedly replied, United States. He then followed up and asked, no, but like your ancestors. And I said, Africa? Africa? And then he finally asked, which country?

And I sadly replied, I don't know. In my conversation with this random Spanish man, I realized I had been robbed, and not by a European pickpocket.

Oppressive imaginations stole my racial and cultural inheritance. Due to oppressive imaginations, I did not inherit an African country of origin. Due to oppressive imaginations, I do not speak an African native tongue.

Due to oppressive imaginations, I do not possess a culturally African community. Due to oppressive imaginations, I do not have pride in an African nation state.

Oppressive imaginations created legacies shaping who I am and what I hold today. Yet in our current sermon series, we are examining the parables of Jesus through a lens of Afrofuturism.

[4:54] This lens gives us tools to reclaim all that has been stolen. It gives us lens to resurrect what oppressive imaginations thought it had killed. Afrofuturism helps us envision a world where the casualties of oppressive imaginations spring back to life in Jesus' name.

Our Jesus is the grave robber. Our Jesus is the God of resurrection. Today, I want to share about a journey, a journey I went on with Jesus that helped me reclaim what oppressive imaginations had stolen.

This is not going to be your typical table sermon. I love that we are an intellectual church, but today I want to preach from my heart about my experiences with Jesus. And even though my story is about my identity as a member of the black diaspora, it holds lessons for us all.

It is a journey of searching for prophetic imaginations. It is a journey of finding and letting the eyes of Jesus excavate what had seemed lost forever. In many ways, my life, like most black Americans, has been shaped profoundly by oppressive imaginations.

In high school, I competed in our policy debate team. As an extracurricular activity, policy debate was notoriously white, affluent, and elitist. My high school was notoriously the opposite.

[6:13] During my junior year, I attended a debate tournament, and before I round, my debate partner and I were chatting about preparing for the SAT. We were in earshot of our opponents from an affluent and white high school.

Upon hearing our conversation, one of our opponents asked me, wait, SAT, you want to go to college? Oppressive imaginations couldn't picture a poor black teenager attending college.

Fast forward to my senior year of high school. I applied to lots of external scholarships as a hopeful, soon-to-be first-generation college grad. I ended up winning a scholarship sponsored by a Korean bank who had an office in downtown Los Angeles.

During the scholarship reception, a fellow scholarship recipient approached me. As we were chatting, she shared she was going to UCLA, and I told her congrats. In return, she asked me where I planned to attend.

I proudly responded, Yale. She laughed and said, no, really, where are you going to go to college? Oppressive imaginations couldn't envision black people at Yale.

[7:17] When I moved to D.C., I attended a different church. At this church, I attended a small group, and someone asked me why I moved to D.C. from Oakland. I replied, I moved here for a job at the NAACP Legal Defense Fund.

The person replied, oh, cool, so you must be a paralegal. I replied and said, no, I'm a lawyer. Oppressive imaginations couldn't envision a black lawyer, even at a black-led civil rights organization.

Despite the strong codes of oppressive imagination being seemingly everywhere, I believe the key to reclaiming lost identities, lost languages, and lost communities is found in a parable of Jesus in Luke 15, 8 through 10.

It reads, Jesus gave them another parable. There is a woman who had ten valuable silver coins. When she lost one of them, she swept her entire house, diligently searching every nook and cranny for that lost coin.

When she finally found it, she gathered all of her friends and neighbors for a celebration, telling them, come and celebrate with me. I lost my precious silver coin, but now I have found it.

[8:31] That's the way God responds every time one lost sinner repents and turns to him. He says to his angels, let's have a joyous celebration for the one who was lost I have found.

As we look at today's passage, it's important to contextualize its placement between two more well-known parables. In Luke 15, before our passage today, we have Jesus telling the parable of the lost sheep.

In that parable, a shepherd had a hundred sheep, and one wandered off. The shepherd left the remaining 99 to find the one lost sheep, and kept searching until it was found. And immediately after our passage, we have the famous parable of the prodigal son.

The son left his dad to go live that life, and lost himself, and lost himself before coming home and reconciling with his family.

Lost sheep, lost son, lost coin. In all these parables, Jesus teaches us that through these stories, that our God pursues all that is lost until it is found.

[9:36] However, it's also important to note how the original audience of this parable would have understood it. When we think of a lost silver coin, we might think about a dime, maybe a quarter.

However, the silver coin in today's passage was called a zuzah in Aramaic. A coin valued at over \$1,200. This was not a cheap coin. I don't know about you, but if I lost \$1,200, I would be looking for it.

However, the value of the silver coin wasn't just economic. Women would place zuzahs in their headband of what they would wear on their wedding day.

A zuzah was worth around 10% of a woman's dowry. Losing a zuzah would be the modern-day equivalent to a person losing the diamond in a wedding band. As you can imagine, to the early listener, the loss of the zuzah would elicit a strong emotional response.

There would also be great panic and worry when it was lost, but also deep jubilation when it was found. This parable reminds me of a journey God took me on to reclaiming my lost racial inheritance, also priceless as a black American.

[10:46] A few years after I graduated law school, I had the opportunity to pursue a Fulbright fellowship in Southern Africa. Despite never having set foot on the African continent, I would spend 10 months working for the Malawian government in their anti-corruption bureau.

This was a moment of profound searching and finding for me. In terms of my background, most of my adult life, I've been one of the only black people in my academic and professional circles.

During my freshman year of college, I lived in a suite of six men. I had suite mates from places like Bangor, Maine, Houston, Texas, and Lynchburg, Virginia. However, the diversity stopped at geography.

All my suite mates were straight white men. After law school, I moved to New Orleans to clerk for a federal judge. There are 20 law clerks across 10 judges during my clerkship term.

I was the only non-white one. Oppressive imaginations are dangerous. Unchecked, oppressive imaginations create casualties where black people don't envision themselves attending Yale, clerking for federal judges, or becoming a civil rights lawyer.

[11:51] These perceptions are then corroborated by those around us. Oppressive imaginations, if you let it, creates false self-fulfilling prophecies. However, my time in Malawi showed me a different type of vision.

My office contained scores of brilliant black lawyers. I helped train diligent and hardworking black politicians. But it wasn't just the professional vision which caught my gaze.

It was also social. I saw black boys wearing hoodies when their head felt chilly. I saw black girls excelling in science and no one batted an eye. I saw black children swimming.

I caught a vision of blackness unencumbered by fearful and racist stereotypes. My time in Malawi exposed to me that oppressive imaginations that saturated my black experience in America was an illusion.

It was not inevitable. It was created. Yet, even as I caught a glimpse of prophetic imagination about black potential in Malawi, I'm reminded of the parable of the lost coin.

[12:55] She found her coin. Did my time in Malawi help me find mine? Did I find my particular ancestral identity? Did I relearn my stolen native tongue?

Did I have a reunion with generations of lost relatives? Did I become a dual citizen of an African country? No. However, when I read the parable of the lost coin, I see a larger message.

It is not a historical account. As a lawyer, I would say parables are not precedential. Indeed, if the parable of the lost coin was a legal testimony of a personal injury lawyer you would see on TV, it would likely have a disclaimer at the end.

It would say, every case is different and must be judged on its own merits. Prior results do not guarantee a similar outcome. We have to acknowledge that we live in a fallen world, marred by sin. Not every silver coin that is lost will be found. But the good news, what I learned in Malawi, is that sometimes our victory is in the searching. Sometimes our victory is in the journey.

[14:02] Adrienne Marie Brown posits, what if the practice of looking, of sweeping every corner, of refusing to accept what is precious is gone, what if that practice is what keeps the precious thing precious?

My time in Malawi was a search reminding me I'm connected to a global African diaspora. It didn't change what was lost to oppressive imaginations, but it gave me prophetic inspiration for the future. I found that all constraints on black potentials are illusions of oppressive imaginations. I discovered that oppressive imaginations that seemingly have no bounds actually had a border to its reign.

We cannot change our past, but we can prophetically imagine our future. A future not defined by constraints we have inherited. Black lawyers do not have to be rare.

Black girls can study science without anyone batting an eye. Black boys can find comfort in hoodies when it is chilly. My journey into reclaiming my racial inheritance has spiritual implications for all of us.

[15:10] Oppressive imaginations don't just lie and say I cannot be black and a lawyer. It also says I cannot be gay and Christian. It also says you cannot be a woman and a pastor. It also says you can't have questions and still believe in God.

For some of us, we have already partnered with prophetic imaginations in certain areas of our lives. Many of us have imagined love and intimacy beyond the constraints of purity culture.

Many of us have envisioned a relationship with Jesus without fear of hellfire and eternal torment.

Many of us have learned to see ourselves free from shame and judgment.

Yet, there are still areas in our lives where many of us still have oppressive imaginations distorting our perceptions. Do we listen to oppressive imaginations when it says we can't get emotional in worship without falling into manipulation?

Do we listen to oppressive imaginations when it says you can't be gay and speak in tongues? Do we listen to oppressive imaginations when it says you can't volunteer at church without being burnt out again? Do we listen to oppressive imaginations when it says you can't donate money to this church without becoming economically exploited again?

[16:23] Do we listen to oppressive imaginations when it says you can't offer prayer to a friend without engaging in gaslighting? Do we listen to oppressive imaginations when it says you can't raise your kids to love Jesus without creating spiritual trauma?

Do we listen to oppressive imaginations when it says that we have to be closeted Christians so we don't become associated with bigots? Yet, as I learned in Malawi, oppressive imaginations is a false prophet.

It does not speak to oracles of God. Adrienne Marie Brown said, imagination is one of the spoils of colonization. But I hear Jesus saying, imagination is the inheritance for all of my children.

In 1 Peter 1 and 4, it says, we are reborn into a perfect inheritance that can never perish, never be defiled, and never diminished.

It is promised and preserved forever in the heavenly realm for you. I got a glimpse of this inheritance years ago at a church retreat when a preacher gave me a prophetic word.

[17:29] The preacher looked at me and said, you look in the mirror and you see two Antonios, but God only sees one. The voice of oppressive imaginations convinced me I was splintered.

Yet, prophetic imagination moves in the opposite spirit. In 2 Corinthians 5 and 18, it says, and God has made all things new and reconciled us to himself and given us the ministry of reconciling others to God.

Prophetic imagination says, no more splitting, no more hiding parts of yourself, no more disavowing parts of yourself. Prophetic imagination declares God has reconciled it all.

God has reconciled all parts of your identity, your language, and your culture to himself. It's already done. Prophetic imagination merely helps us see the finished work of Christ.

Indeed, prophetic imagination helps us tap into the mind of Christ. In 1 Corinthians 2 and 16, it says, for who has intimately known the mind of the Lord Yahweh well enough to become his counselor?

[18:36] Christ has, and we possess Christ's perceptions. We can see what Jesus sees. We can perceive what Jesus sees. And let me tell you, his gaze is not clouded by oppressive imagination.

His piercing eyes of fire operate from prophetic imagination. The eyes of Jesus are not fooled by false binaries based on our histories of pain and trauma. Prophetic imagination, like Afrofuturism, allows us to see the past but not be bound by it.

Prophetic imagination sees how Scripture has harmed us but gives us new eyes to find comfort in God's Word. Prophetic imagination sees how prayer was weaponized against us but gives us a new lexicon to talk to Jesus.

Prophetic imagination sees how community has let us down but gives us new vision to see a church elastic enough to hold all we carry. Prophetic imagination sees how our siblings in Christ have taken his name in vain but shows us we can proudly profess a belief in a more beautiful gospel. Prophetic imagination will excavate buried parts of our Christian spirituality, lovingly acknowledge our histories, but provide us with a new vision unencumbered by the images of the past.

[19:53] In order to break free from distortions and cycles, we have to tap into prophetic imagination. We can't let oppressive imaginations of evangelicals put our Jesus to a box.

We can't let oppressive imaginations of conservative Christians monopolize experiences like intimacy with the Lord and hearing the voice of God. We cannot let oppressive imaginations rob us from encountering a love more passionate than we can imagine.

I get it. I have been there. The voice of oppressive imaginations may be familiar but it is not our friend. As a black American, I will not let the voice of oppressive imagination impose artificial limitations on me and my people.

Instead, I will lean to prophetic imagination and a vision of future beyond racism and white supremacy. As a Christian, I will not let the voice of oppressive imaginations impose artificial limitations on cultivating the vibrant spirituality because of conservative models tainted by sin. Instead, I will lean into prophetic imagination and cultivate a radical friendship with Jesus that causes those on the margins to question, could this gospel even be good news for me?

[21:05] You may ask, how do we tap into prophetic imagination? How do we dream bigger than our past trauma? Afrofuturism tells us the world does not have to be this way and invites us, even requires us to imagine otherwise.

I think one practical step is to keep searching like the woman with the lost coin, even if it takes a while. Prophetic imagination is not merely positive thinking or daydreaming of utopias.

It is actively listening to the voice of God and hearing how he hears. It is actively searching for the eyes of Jesus and seeing how he sees. I cannot help but think of the old gospel song whose chorus states, searched all over, couldn't find nobody.

I looked high and low, still couldn't find nobody. Nobody greater, nobody greater, no nobody greater than you, Jesus. To engage in prophetic imagination, we have to find Jesus.

We need to hear how he hears and see how he sees. His eyes will cut through to shame. His voice will cut through condemnation. He will show us seeds of redemption even in the midst of painful, barren lands.

[22:20] In many ways, there's not a perfect roadmap. It's almost like asking someone, how do you fall in love? But I think it begins with searching. It begins with talking.

It begins with looking. We have to search for Jesus. Search for him in scriptures. Search for him in prayer. Search for him in worship. Search for him in community.

Search for him in memories of joy. Search for him in memories of pain. If we search for him, I promise we will find him. I'm reminded of 1 Corinthians 2 and 10.

But God now unveils these profound realities to us by the Spirit. Yes, he has revealed to us his inmost heart and deepest mysteries through the Holy Spirit who constantly explores all things.

The good news is that unlike the woman with the lost silver coin, we are not searching alone. We have the Holy Spirit. One of her jobs is to literally reveal Jesus.

[23:21] Sometimes she will lead us back to the exact silver coin in our lives that have been lost. But sometimes she will show us that redemption doesn't always look like our past. I hear Haggai 2 and 9.

The glory of this new temple will surpass the glory of the original. I think about the redemptive story of God with mankind beginning in Genesis in a garden.

