



THE WORK OF IMAGINATION

Devotional





A friend of mine recently came to visit. I live in a small town outside of Portland, Oregon, an hour from the major airport. My friend's return flight was late in the evening, so I suggested we leave early and spend the day hanging out in the city. She was excited...and nervous. She'd been hearing statements about Portland, calling it 'war-ravaged,' labeling it a hotbed of dangerous activity, claiming it is 'burning to the ground.' She felt safe hanging around my small town, and traveling to and from the airport, but wasn't sure about a whole day in a place that's been the subject of such troubling headlines.

She admitted she doubted the characterization; said she was pretty certain those statements were made for political gain and might not reflect the on-the-ground reality. We made an itinerary of must-see local spots and headed in, agreeing that if we felt unsafe, we could get to the airport early and lounge around there.

Our first stop was a specialty chocolate shop. She bought bars made with Oregon hazelnuts and other local delicacies to bring home as gifts to her family. We sipped decadent hot cocoa and took our cups to go, walking the streets and gawking at the elaborate murals covering the sides of old warehouses, making the whole neighborhood a work of art.

Next, the International Rose Test Garden. It's free and part of a massive city park. With lots of friendly strangers, we slowly meandered the paths made from more than ten thousand rose bushes comprising more than six hundred varieties of roses. We paused to admire the brilliant colors, the elegant shapes. We called each other over to "smell this one; oh, oh! and this one!"

When the sun started to set and the temperature dropped, we headed to a bookstore downtown—THE bookstore, the one that spans an entire city block, the largest independent bookstore in the world. We gave ourselves a time limit and arranged a meeting spot, since it's easy to get lost in all those floors of fantasy and fable, mystery and myth.

And we ate. There is so much good food in that city, it's hard to choose where to go, but we ended up at a place that sources local, organic flavors, and we feasted.

When we finally headed to the airport, we drove under a bridge where protesters had positioned themselves and were holding signs: "Love Your Neighbor," and "Public Lands Make America Great," and "No Human Being is Illegal," and "I Prefer My ICE Crushed."

We knew that in another part of town, where people are being imprisoned—some without cause—there were other protesters. Those were carrying their own signs, wearing inflatable costumes of frogs, unicorns, and other fanciful creatures. And they were dancing, singing, and tossing a frisbee back and forth, like they have been every night for months, bringing some lightness to the heavy burden of the crisis.

Regardless of the lies told about it, Portland is a city that knows itself. It clings fiercely to its identity as a quirky, independent place, filled with beauty and art and knowledge and flavor and care. Showing my friend around, I couldn't help but smile: the city was celebrating itself, true to its convictions, resisting the lies about it peacefully, joyfully, and proudly.

When Jesus was taken by the Spirit to the wilderness—to the wildness—powers other than God worked to get him to deny his identity as God's Beloved. Three different times, his identity is put before him conditionally: *if* you are the Son of God. In three different ways, he's asked to be someone he's not:

- Make magic bread, and satisfy yourself.
- Make a scene, and prove you're invincible.
- Make a compromise, and gain it all.

Jesus refuses each time, resisting the lie that he is not who he knows himself to be. In each refusal, he's also making a choice: to be human, to be vulnerable, to stay connected. He says “no” to the violence inherent in each of the temptations, and “yes” to the life offered by God's call, by God's naming of him as Beloved.

Staying rooted in God's call and God's naming empowers Jesus to resist the pressure of letting other words distract him from his mission. Meeting each temptation with memories and stories of his ancestors assures him he is not alone, but surrounded by spirits who faced their own wildness and were formed by the faithful God they met there.

Jesus holds fiercely to the identity he was born and baptized into, the stories he was raised on. He emerges from the wildness ready to take that private resistance public—to make his life a sacred movement against a brutal empire, and in its place, to inaugurate a kin(g)dom governed by the powers of love, justice, and liberation.

Reflection Questions

1. What are some names you think God calls you?
2. What are the truths about God, about your community, and about the world that you feel rooted in?
3. Have you ever been in a place—physically, or emotionally, or spiritually—that you would describe as ‘wildness’? What do you remember about it?
4. In what ways might “resistance” be a spiritual practice?
5. Reflect on a time you were true to your deepest convictions.