

Imagination is at the heart of faith

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From the Editors in the [April 21, 2019](#) issue



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Several articles in this issue explore the role of imagination in Christian life. Jim Friedrich [urges preachers on Easter Sunday not to explain](#) or argue for the resurrection but to declare it—and so leave room for listeners to explore the mystery of Easter in their lives. Jerome Berryman, founder of Godly Play, [outlines his ideas](#) for inviting children into Christian language. His goal is not primarily to convey moral lessons or biblical information but to spark in children a deep engagement with biblical stories and the wonder of them. And Marilynne Robinson and Rowan Williams [jointly discuss the importance of imaginative art](#) and its role in unsettling fixed ideas and opening our eyes to aspects of reality ignored or dismissed by the prevailing culture. Imagination is not an addendum or ornament to religious life, but at the heart of it.

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For generations, people have lamented the decline of biblical literacy—the fact that many people don't know basic stories like Jonah and the fish or Daniel in the lion's den. The decline of biblical literacy is frequently associated with moral and social decline and the rise of indifference to religion. But in their various ways the writers in this issue of the magazine point to a different kind of crisis. The problem may not be that people lack information or arguments about religion but that we don't deeply inhabit the religious stories we do know. We aren't open to letting stories of faith and the movements of the spiritual life work on us. That's a problem even for those of us who do have some knowledge of the Bible, who study it and preach from it.

Our culture—sometimes even the culture of churches—can be inimical to the work of the imagination. We are prone to emphasize knowledge, action, and argument. These articles remind us that the work of becoming faithful people happens in ways that can't easily be measured. It happens through contemplation, prayer, wonder, ritual, imagination, play, shared meals, artful storytelling—activities that require slowing down and involve ways of knowing that our everyday world is apt to treat as expendable. It takes courage to spend time on such arts and with such disciplines. It can be difficult to trust that God is working through them.

Imagination is one of the most glorious aspects of being human. As far as we know, ants and armadillos don't have it. The imagination allows us to think of what is not, to build new mental universes, to apprehend barely conceivable truths, to think ourselves into other people's places and circumstances. The imagination doesn't ask our permission as it traverses perceptions and meanings.

That imaginative activities are at the heart of faith is a challenge to all of us, wherever we might be on the theological spectrum. It's a reminder that ultimately faith is the work of the spirit, and it's through the spirit that transformation happens.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "A faithful imagination."*