

Sermon: "The Vision Thing"

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

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Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

THE VISION THING

Once the elder President Bush admitted to a reporter, "I'm not good at the vision thing." It was his way of admitting that he wasn't so great at predicting and making plans for the future.

Of course, the press had a field day with that one. Isn't that what the President is supposed to do, lead us into the future? How can he lead us if he doesn't have the "vision thing"?

I have sympathy for our ex-President on this one. I would hate to think what it would be like to have a job where every word you spoke would be overanalyzed all over the world. President Bush was just being honest and realistic. Most of us don't have any idea what the future might bring, and that's especially true when a person has a job as complex as his.

Indeed, in some cases the "vision thing" can make a person a bad leader. Sometimes people have such a strong vision of where they want to go and what they want to do that they aren't flexible enough to change in response to changing circumstances. They aren't open to a different direction.

VISION IN THE CHURCH

I think this is often true in the church. We are so in love with our own plans for the future that we fail to consider other possibilities. Yes, this is our vision at the moment, but maybe God has a different plan for our church and for our lives.

Last Sunday, on behalf of our Presbytery's Committee on Ministry, I helped a Pulpit Nominating Committee plan for its work to find and call a new pastor. For those of you who may not know, when a church is looking for a pastor, one of the steps is to have a meeting of the congregation. People think about what they want in a new pastor, and then they fill out a form that lists various leadership characteristics.

As a result of this process, the church tries to find a minister whose vision of what the church should do and be matches the congregation's view. Church information forms (CIFs) are matched with Personal Information Forms (PIFs) by that great big computer at church headquarters.

Like many planning processes this one sounds good. God works in mysterious ways. Who knows? Maybe sometimes God does even works through that computer in Louisville!

But, I warned the Pulpit Nominating Committee that they shouldn't get too bogged down in the paperwork. Quite often the call of God comes outside of the decent and orderly process that we Presbyterians are so fond of following.

In fact, I would say that very seldom does the call of God come in a decent and orderly fashion. It always seems to be a messy process with many false starts and dead end roads.

LETTING THE WORD DWELL RICHLY

In order to hear God's call we must learn, above all else, to listen. We must learn to abandon our preconceived notions about the future and open ourselves to that mysterious world where God's kingdom comes and God's will is done.

We must follow Jesus to a higher place, to the mountaintop and let His Word (as the Bible puts it) dwell in us "richly." (Colossians 3:16)

That phrase from Paul's letter to the Colossians expresses something that is often lacking in our lives. In my experience, we often want to judge people and situations too quickly. It's only after we make our judgment, that we consult Scripture in an attempt to justify our actions.

But, the stories of Scripture suggest a process that is just the opposite. The stories suggest that we need to listen long and hard to the Word of God as revealed in Jesus, and then follow Him in the way that He would have us go.

That command of the apostle Paul, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly ..." suggests a more reflective and open process than many of us are willing to engage in. But, I believe this is what we are called to do. We are called to study God's Word as revealed in Jesus Christ "with no strings attached", with no preconceived notions about what may or may not be God's will for our lives.

This is a process that leads us on a long and unexpected journey, and it is a journey we will take for the rest of our lives.

ABRAHAM AND SARAH

In the Old Testament the prototype for this kind of faithful journey was Abraham. God asked Abraham and his wife, Sarah in their old age to pack their bags, pull up stakes and leave behind their family and friends. According to the Lord, they were going on a long, winding, risk filled journey to find the Promised Land.

And there would be some very strange requirements for this journey. They would leave behind their maps. This journey would have no precise destination.

God merely said,

"Don't worry. I'll tell you when we get there."

And so they struck out in faith.

They gave up control of their own destiny and put their destiny in God's hands.

Along the way some amazing things happened. Sarah who was ready for the nursing home found herself in the maternity ward. God promised that Abraham and Sarah's descendents would be as numerous as all the stars of the sky. And further, God said that through one of their descendents all the families of the world would be blessed.

Sarah thought all of this was very unlikely and sort of funny. She laughed. In fact, that's what the name God gave her meant. You can understand why. It all seemed so very foolish. Who ever heard of taking a trip without a map or an old woman in the maternity ward?

She laughed. Old women don't have babies. But, when it happened just as God said, no doubt she laughed in a different way. The laugh of cynicism became the laugh of joy.

MOSES

That seems to be a constant in this long story of salvation: Joy and laughter coming from situations that seem to spell certain defeat.

But, no matter how many miracles they see along the way, the journey never seems to come to an end. Though there were signs of hope all along the way, the promises were never totally fulfilled. In fact, it would be centuries before the Promised Land would be given to God's people.

The descendents of Abraham found themselves enslaved in Egypt. Most of you know the story. It seemed like there was no hope. And then God raised up this man named Moses who confronted the mighty Pharaoh and led his people out of captivity into the Promised Land.

As the people made their way in the wilderness, once again toward the land that God would show them, God summoned Moses up a high mountain, Mt. Sinai. And on that mountain God showed Moses His glory and His will for the people, something we now call the Ten Commandments.

When Moses received the law in the wilderness everything changed. The people now had a greater vision of who they were and what they had been called to do. They were God's people. They were special. They were God's chosen. They had been given a different standard to live by, a vision of holiness which changed them from wandering nomads and slaves into the people of God.

DECLINE

It was still a long and winding road but eventually they did make it to the Promised Land. They elected their own leaders and had several great kings. But, eventually their vision of God's way began to erode, and their kingdom began to shrink. It was a morally and spiritually bankrupt people who finally lost everything when the Babylonians conquered their land.

And though they were able to come home after many years of captivity, things never seemed to be the same. They were always a captive people, a vassal state subject to the whims of one great power or another. The dream of a promised land flowing with milk and honey seemed farther and farther away.

And when we come to the time of Jesus, the gloom has only deepened. It has been a very long time indeed since the people have heard the word of the Lord. Five hundred years have passed since the last great prophet spoke. Some people were beginning to despair. And some grew tired of waiting for God's salvation.

One group believed that God worked through military power. The Zealots said, "God helps those who help themselves. God will fight for us. God will deliver us at the point of a sword."

It was a prophecy that many wanted to hear, and there were many who would be willing to give their lives for the cause. They had a vision of former glory. They had a vision of great kings and a powerful empire.

The time was ripe for the coming of a Messiah.

THE SPIRITUAL KINGDOM OF JESUS

And into that situation stepped Jesus. Many said that he was the Messiah. After all, he said what only God could say, and he did what only God could do. But, Jesus had a problem with the vision thing. His vision did not match the vision of the people.

Jesus made it very clear. His kingdom would not be a military kingdom. It would be a spiritual kingdom. And this kingdom would be based upon some radically different ideas, ideas like compassion for one's neighbor, hospitality for the foreign stranger, acceptance of those who were different, sacrifice for the sake of others, turning the other cheek in the face of insults, loving one's enemy and caring for the poor and dispossessed.

As if that wasn't bad enough, Jesus associated with the wrong kind of people and even made some of them His closest friends and disciples. It occurs to me that if Jesus had filled out a Personal Information Form (PIF) to lay out His vision of God's kingdom and the people of Israel had filled out a CIF to lay out their vision of God's kingdom, it would have been a perfect non-match!

They rejected Jesus because the kingdom He brought was not the kingdom they wanted. It's no wonder they had him crucified; the only wonder is that it took them so long.

The heart of today's story from the gospel of Matthew is about this contrast between Jesus' vision and that faulty vision of the people. The story of the Transfiguration is God's way of putting His stamp of approval upon the ministry and message of Jesus. It is also a warning those who would be His disciples. God tells us, "Listen only to Jesus and not to the deceitful desires of your heart."

THE MOUNTAIN REVISITED

Toward the end of His life and ministry Jesus ascended a high mountain with some of His disciples just as Moses ascended the mountain long ago. As the face of Moses shone with the reflected glory of God, so the face of Jesus shone like the sun. The two greatest figures of the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, appear with Jesus and in so doing testify to His glory.

And in the face of all this glory what does Peter do? He says, "Let's just bask in the glory. We can build temples right here and just stay here forever." Peter's speech represented the thinking of his people who said, "Let's recreate the glory of the past and live in it forever."

But the kingdom was not to be found in the glory of the mountain. The kingdom was to be found in the acts of compassion in the valley. Faith, as always, would require a long and winding journey. Faith, as always, would require the disciples to move to a different place, a place that would not seem so comfortable or safe.

Peter's vision of glory was not in harmony with God's vision. So, God "interrupts" Peter's speech and delivers one of His own.

The bright shadow of God's presence knocks the disciples to their knees, and they hear the voice of God telling them, "This is my Son, the Beloved; with him I am well pleased; listen to him!" Matthew 17:5 (NRSV)

Listen to Jesus! That was the main point of this vision of God, and as if to emphasize that point, the fearful disciples look up and notice that Moses and Elijah are gone. They see only Jesus.

A NEW VISION OF GLORY

According to verse nine of our lesson from Matthew, the story of the transfiguration is a vision, a vision that the disciples were forbidden to tell anyone about until after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Of course we know why Jesus forbade his disciples to tell about the glory. No doubt, before the cross and the resurrection, they would have told the story their way. It would have been all about glory of that one moment and very little about listening and sacrifice.

But, after the death and resurrection of Jesus, that fleeting moment of glory became a daily beacon of hope. As Jesus was transfigured on that mountain, so his disciples were transfigured by the hope that was in their hearts. The vision thing was not just a one time experience; it was a way of life.

And that is the meaning of the Transfiguration for us. It is not just about a mountaintop experience that some people had long ago. It is about a mountaintop experience that we can have as well. It is not just about a glorious sight that some disciples saw way back when. It is about a glory that can shine in our hearts today.

But, I would suggest to you that the greatest glory in this vision is not to be found in the appearance of Moses and Elijah. The greatest glory in this vision is not to be found in the dazzling appearance of the transfigured Christ. The greatest glory in this vision is not even found in the luminous cloud that overshadows everything.

The greatest glory comes when the fireworks subside and trembling disciples are touched by Jesus. It is that very human Jesus who invites them to come down the mountain and be the body of Christ, the human presence of Jesus to others who are trembling in fear.

CATCHING THE VISION

My grandfather was part of church that would not let you join unless you had received some kind of dramatic, transfiguration-like experience. Some people went to that church all their lives hoping to see some vision of glory that would vindicate their faith.

But, sadly, some never joined that church because they could not truthfully say that they saw such a vision.

Quite often people come to me with the same concerns. They feel that because they have not had a vision of this magnitude they are somehow less spiritual than they should be. They are sad because they don't have the vision thing.

But, maybe we're looking for glory in the wrong places. Maybe the real glory is not found in the fireworks of a mighty vision. Maybe the glory is found in a less spectacular way.

Do you remember when the prophet Elijah desired the presence of God during a time of despair? He did not find God in the fire or the earthquake or the storm but in the still, small voice that proclaimed God's word of salvation. (1 Kings 19:12 KJV)

I think the glory still often comes in that way. It is a glory that matches the spiritual kingdom that Jesus revealed.

I think the glory is found in a simple touch of love and encouragement given to those who feel alone and afraid.

I think that glory is found in a word of forgiveness.

I think glory is found when we offer hospitality to one who is alone in a foreign land.

I think glory is found when the poor and dispossessed are given hope.

We can be transfigured by the glory of Jesus. But, we have to look in the right place. We have to accept the vision that Jesus gives us. We have to look and listen to him alone.

Today we once again take a sacrament that reminds us of what really transforms our lives. It is, in a way, a vision of glory. It is the glory of body broken and blood shed. It is the glory of self-sacrifice and love.

What a strange vision. And yet this vision is our hope for salvation and life eternal.

May God help us see and listen. May God give us vision.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN