

Do We Have A Vision?

Acts 16

Our church needs a vision for the future – a vision of biblical length. Our faith has been formed from visions, but the practice has receded among us, hasn't it? We are not big on visions these days. But recall Abram's vision of a child of promise even though old man Abraham was as good as dead. Remember Moses' vision of leading Israel out of slavery to the Promised Land. There's Joshua's vision of fighting the battle of Jericho and all the walls falling down. And Isaiah's vision of the Lord. And Ezekiel's vision of the valley of dry bones coming alive. If you want to, you can read that story in Ezekiel 37: "Suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to its bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them." From the first time I read those dry bones story as a child to the present moment, there's something that happens to me. My mind starts singing that little song,

"Dem bones, dem bones, dem dancing bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dancing bones.
Dem bones, dem bones, dem dancing bones.
Doin' the skeleton dance.

The foot bone's connected to the leg bone.
The leg bone's connected to the knee bone.
The knee bone's connected to the thigh bone.
Doin' the skeleton dance.

Crazy huh? I know I see you looking at me, but one never knows the connections our minds will make do we? So enough eye-rolling. Let's see if we can find a vision for our church. I'm not sure what happens to people in churches. Do they lose the vision and then leave the church, or do they leave the church and lose the vision? I think the vision recedes and as it fades people lose the connection they have with the church. People start out with a strong vision of Jesus as the one they follow. I think we can chronicle the recession across the years as the image of Jesus fades in the vision of church members. The spiritual vision, "the eyes of the heart," grow blurry as people step back from the church bit by bit. There's a falling off of zeal, a lessening of commitment, a growing list of other activities. One day, Jesus is a stranger moving through the trees and a bit later Jesus disappears except in residual memory and an occasional appearance. As the years roll along, the vision of Jesus and his church continues to retreat. God doesn't appear to people in their dreams. God doesn't speak to people about how they should live. The call of God becomes remote and distant. Soon the entire religious experience retires, leaving people only a secular emptiness. The

relationship with God has grown cold. It's over and done. The world is no longer charged with the presence of God and belief becomes largely a matter of personal opinion. This is the problem we face – we have vision difficulties. We have eyes that do not see. The vision doesn't come in techno-color or in digital presentations. It's not a series of bullet points. The revelation of God comes more as an insight, an inspiration, a moment of reflection. At times God whispers the vision. To catch it, we must hush, lean forward, look up, pay attention, pray, and trust that what we see is the vision of God and that what we hear is the voice of God.

I know I'm asking for a lot. Corporate visions of God are not our default setting. Conclusive miracles are hard to pinpoint, and few of us would think that we might be in a battle with the prophets of Baal like Elijah. Times have changed. Our experience of God has changed, and it is not God's fault.

When Lewis Gerstner became president of IBM the company was firmly in the grip of slide-ware style presentations. Overhead projection was the only acceptable method of presentation. At his first big meeting at which one of the vice presidents was making such a presentation, Gerstner walked over to the projector and switched it off. Then, after a moment of stunned silence, he said, "Let's just talk about our business."

I confess that I would like to flip off the switch and just talk about the Lord Jesus and our life together. I don't want to talk about Critical Race Theory, or "wokeness" or political correctness or abortion. I want to talk about Jesus. We are off chasing rabbits – fads, conspiracies, politics, and an assortment of Americanized idols.

In the KJV, Proverbs 29:18 reads, "Where there is no vision, the people perish." No vision? Sign the death certificate.

Never have a people suffered more in the Bible than the ancient Israelites enslaved in Egypt. Pharaoh was a relentless, powerful tyrant. And the Hebrew children groaned under the burden of slavery. They groaned and they groaned, and they groaned. For four hundred years they groaned. Our minds, so sensitive to speed, to the temporary, to demanding everything at once, and wanting it now, we can't comprehend groaning for 400 years. We are a people who can't wait in line for an hour for a table to open at a fine steak house. And here are slaves groaning for 400 years. How did they do it? How did they manage to keep hope? They had a vision. They never let that vision die. When they were alone, away from the prying eyes and the sharp ears of their Egyptian taskmasters, they told one another stories of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. They sang the songs of their faith.

They prayed to God. They gathered in secret places and engaged in illegal teachings and conversations to keep hope alive.

A later people who also suffered slavery gave a name to these secret meeting places. They called them hush harbors. My vision for the church is for us to be a Hush Harbor Church – a sacred place where we can speak out against the power of a culture determined to destroy us.

I borrow the term “hush harbor” from that awful period of American history that enslaved people. African American slaves utilized camouflaged locations, hidden sites, and enclosed places as freedom cells where they could come in from the wilderness, untie their tongues, speak the unspoken, and sing their own songs to their own selves in their own communities. Hush harbors have evolved into all kinds of holy spaces – woods, plantation borders, churches, burial societies, beauty shops, barbershops, and kitchens. And taverns and bars and honky tonks all have served as hush harbors – spaces to let go and spaces to resist the culture. These spaces were also known as can breaks and brush arbors. I offer you the church as a hush harbor where we can come in from the secular powers and principalities and begin to dream of an alternative world – a kingdom of God ruled by Jesus our Lord.

A hush harbor is a space of emancipation. “We is gathated hyeah, my brothahs in dis howlin’ wildanes, fu’to speak some words of comfo’t to each othah in distress” (Paul Laurence Dunbar, “An Ante-Bellum Sermon”). A hush harbor is a place, a space where folks go to affirm, negotiate, and reproduce culture, faith, knowledge, relationships, and resistance and to find sacred grace.

The hush harbor gave birth to the vision of slaves of that time when God would hear the cry of the oppressed and set the people free. Our church can serve as a hush harbor where we can critique our culture and its alien power over so many millions of our fellow citizens, where we can confess our own complicity in secular ways, where we can destroy American idols and refuse to give in to greed. A hush harbor is a “disruptive discursive space,” a “space of radical Christian faith.” Here we can challenge and negotiate our various contested ideas. Here we can work out our troubles and disagreements together.

Being a hush harbor church presents us with tremendous challenges. In hush harbors, slaves addressed sacred issues but also secular and political issues as well. Frederick Douglass had a hush harbor space where he secretly taught slaves to read and gave them political instruction. We struggle to imagine such a space in our fractured culture.

We need the vision of a hush harbor church where we may be able to hatch Christian rebellions to the encroaching secular culture. Somehow, we must recover the backbone to resist the culture. And good news: We can. It is possible for young women and men to see visions. It is possible for old men and old women to dream dreams. It is possible for a valley of dead bones to live again. It is possible.

The living God, the God of the living not of the dead, is alive in our ancestors who surround us. The communion of the saints we call it. It is possible to hear your grandmother's voice. It is possible to hear voices who are trying to guide you. It is possible to have dreams of your father or your mother to help you. Don't discount the power of the living God to move across what we call time. During slavery, African Americans were buried faced toward the ocean, "with a view over the sound, since it was believed that their spirits would return to Africa if buried near the water."

Before you leap to call this superstition, please remember that Joseph left instructions for the Israelites to dig up his bones down in Egypt and take them to the Promised Land. "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here." Joseph wanted his bones to testify that he didn't belong to Egypt. He belonged to the people of God. Even in dying, we are testifying to our faith. There are always ways to resist the power of the secular culture.

Our space is a holy space – God's house we call it. "A whole history remains to be written of spaces," Michel Foucault said. Space matters. Safe spaces for people – the Bible calls them cities of Refuge. Space where people feel safe, accepted, love, and affirmed. The place where people can be real, authentic, share ideas that may include anger, frustration, despair, and fear. I am suspicious of a church that's always happy, happy, happy. There's something unreal about the entire performance. We need our church to be a hush harbor place.

In Paul's dream, a man of Macedonia pleaded with him: **"Come over to Macedonia and help us."** The man from Macedonia doesn't represent our culture, because the mature, intelligent, sophisticated unbelievers populating our city are convinced that human beings are on their own. Backed up by an array of intelligent apologists who assure them there is no God, they reside in isolated splendor relieved of all need to believe in God. Yet the everyday arguments thrown at me by those who don't believe in God are not exactly knockout proofs for not believing in God. You could need help and not know it.

In an off-Broadway play a young man speaks for the multitude when he slams the window of his big-city apartment to drown out the sound of the Salvation Army band and says, **"I really don't see what Jesus can do for us."** Don't we overlook how easy we can be to fool? After all, we are the people deceived into believing that a state lottery and casino gambling is the economic wave of the future. I saying that we can be fooled by fool's gold, fake promises, and riches that never materialize. The working men and women of America feed the goose that lays the golden eggs, we house the goose, we provide the goose with the best health care, we take care of the goose, but we never, never get a single golden egg.

I want us to have Paul's dream. I want us to have a vision that we are being called to do something about the secularism of Schenectady. Look at Paul go. At the crack of dawn, he is up and headed to Macedonia. One thing about Paul: he was the most intense person in the church. We may never meet anybody who takes Jesus as seriously. Paul believed that the ideal Christian life would be to be like Jesus: to love, to care, to give, to serve, to suffer, and to sacrifice like he did." And every morning of his life, Paul said, "today I will press on toward the goal."

Focusing on Jesus prepared Paul for the vision of the man from Macedonia. Flannery O'Connor has an essay that begins, "I am no vague believer." Paul could have written those words. He was hard into Christian faith. I am not offended when you think that my theology is too liberal, but you need to know that "I'm no vague believer." I came by my convictions the old-fashioned way – in a life-and-death struggle to know. I am hard into Christian faith.

Come back for a moment to the text: "On the Sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we **supposed** there was a place of prayer." We only know as we go. We supposed; we didn't know. Do you get it?

Guess what? There was a place of prayer and a group of women were at the river praying. A woman named Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, a worshiper of God, opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. This is a preachers' dream: listeners eager to hear the gospel. "When she and her household were baptized," she prevailed upon Paul and his friends to stay with her.

Lydia was the first convert in Europe. Later the Europeans brought the gospel to America and today we worship God all because a man of God had a dream and saw a man from Macedonia asking for help.

That's why vision still matters in the church. Our vision today will impact the Christians that worship here a thousand or two thousand years from

now. Do we have a vision large enough for two millennia? I'm a Christian and that's what I'm working on today, May 22, 2022. That's the sermon and I'm out of here. Amen!