

Sermon by Rev. Dale Woods – May, 2010 at “Stewards By Design”

Stewards of Vision

Rev. 21:1-6

Today we have read some of the most well-known words of the Revelation of John. Most often we hear them at funerals, at the end of a person's life. In way that makes sense. They are meant to speak a word of hope and comfort to those grieving, reminding them that death is not the last word.

But my guess is that John would be rather surprised to know how we have used his words; because John didn't write these words to speak a word about *death*. He wrote them to speak a word about *life*.

In John's day, the early church was struggling against the power of the Roman Empire. There were sporadic persecutions. In A.D. 70 Rome destroyed the Temple and occupied Jerusalem. Christianity was not welcomed in the empire. Some people had lost their lives because of their faith. Some lost their jobs. Some lost their homes. Others were getting discouraged, ready to give up.

So John writes to encourage them. He writes to instill confidence in them. He wants more than anything else for them to keep going, and not to give up. And the most powerful way of doing that is through a vision. Not just any vision for the world, but God's vision for the world!

He knows that because it is part of his heritage. Israel has always lived on vision. “Abraham,” says God. “I want you to go to a new land, a place that I will show you. I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great.” (Gen 12:2) And what does the writer of Hebrews say in the New Testament of Abraham: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going...For he looked forward to a city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.” (Heb. 12:8,10) Just a vision, but what a vision. It pulled him forward in faith.

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Or he could go back to his ancestor Moses. “Moses,” God says, “I want you to set my people free. I’m going to take them to a land flowing with milk and honey.” (Ex. 3) Now God could have said, “Moses I want you to give my people alternative employment and relocate them to a new geographical setting.” But that’s not a vision...that’s a memo. Instead God gives them a vision, a picture to empower them to let go of the status quo. (You could say, if you know the story that it didn’t last very long. Three days into the wilderness and they want to return to Egypt, but in my books that’s a greater comment on the power of the status quo than on the limitation of the vision.)

John knows his heritage and he knows the power of vision.

And what a vision it is. A vision of all the brokenness of the world, healed.

A vision of all the separation between ourselves and God gone.

A vision of the creation and Creator at one.

A vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

The sea will be no more and in John’s reference it’s a reference to the sea as the place Leviathan, the sea monster, the place of chaos. No more chaos in this world, says John.

There are few things more powerful than a vision. Talk to people who have made it through incredible odds and I guarantee you somewhere in the story there was a vision, some picture they held on to that kept them going. If you’ve seen the movie Atonement, you will remember the young soldier separated by the war from the one he loves. In his breast pocket is a photo of her along with letters from her. Fatigued, distraught by the battles at the end of the day he pulls out the pile of letters in his pocket and re-reads them, studies her face in the picture. He renews his vision of her; it is the one thing that keeps him going.

Some of you may remember the story a few years ago about the three fishermen from Mexico who were lost at sea for nine months. Everyone was sure that they were dead. No one could last that long in a fishing boat in the open sea. In fact, the community had held

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memorials in their honour. But miraculously they were found not far from the coast of Australia. People couldn't believe that they could have survived that long. When a reporter asked them, “How did you keep going?” one of them answered, “We had a Bible and we read it every day and then we would look at pictures of our families and we knew we couldn't give up.” A picture that reminded them who they were gave them the power to keep going.

The amazing thing about vision is that it calls us to live our lives *backwards*; to start at the end and then work backwards. That's why John's words are not meant to be heard primarily at our funerals. It's too late then. They are meant to be heard *now*, so that they can give power and purpose to our lives today.

Listen again to John's vision: “I saw a new heaven and a new earth. There was no more death, no more mourning, no more crying, no more pain. God was in the midst wiping the tears from their eyes.”

On our own, we cannot see it. But here, Jesus and the prophets draw back the curtain, and for a moment the future is shown to us. It's huge, expansive, cosmic, powerful; and it is already at work. It is part of the present. John says “Behold I am making all things new.” It's in the present tense, not the future.

I know, as Dr. Callahan mentioned yesterday that there is a danger to visions. Dietrich Bonhoeffer states that danger clearly when he writes:

He who loves his dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter, even though his personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial. God hates visionary dreaming; it makes the dreamer proud and pretentious. The man who fashions a visionary ideal of a community demands that it be realized by God, by others, and by himself. He enters the community of Christians with his demands, sets up his own law, and judges the brethren and God himself accordingly. He stands adamant, a living

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reproach to all others in the circle of brethren. He acts as if he is the creator of the Christian community as if his dream binds men together. When things do not go his way, he calls the effort a failure. When his ideal picture is destroyed, he sees the community going to smash. So he becomes first an accuser of his brethren, then an accuser of God and finally the despairing accuser of himself.¹

That is the kind of vision that hurts the community rather than helps it.

But there is another kind of vision we cannot live without. God’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth.

There is a true story of man who had a great passion for flying. His name was Larry Walters. He was a truck driver who had a lifelong dream to fly. When he graduated from high school he joined the Air Force in the hopes of becoming a pilot. Unfortunately, his poor eyesight disqualified him. When he finally left the service he had to be content with watching others fly the fighter jets.

Then one day he had an idea. Just because he couldn’t fly a plane didn’t mean he couldn’t fly. He went down to the local army and navy surplus store and bought a tank of helium and forty-five weather balloons. Back in his yard, he used straps to attach the balloons to his lawn chair. He anchored the chair to the bumper of his jeep and inflated the balloons with helium. Then he packed some sandwiches and drinks and loaded a BB gun, figuring he could shoot a few balloons at a time to come back down gradually to earth.

With all his preparations complete, he sat in his lawn chair and cut the anchoring cord. His plan was to sit back, and lazily ascend into the sky. But it didn’t quite work out that way. As soon as he cut the cord, he shot up as if fired from a canon. And he didn’t go only a few hundred feet as he expected. He climbed and climbed until he finally levelled off at eleven thousand feet. At that height he could hardly risk deflating any of the balloons, so he stayed up there for fourteen hours, totally at a loss as to how to get down.

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper and Row, 1954), 28.

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Eventually he drifted over the approach corridor for Los Angeles International Airport. A Pan Am pilot radioed the tower about passing a guy in a lawn chair at eleven thousand feet with a gun in his lap! (I would like to have heard that conversation!)

Because LA is right on the coast and the winds change off of the ocean, Larry began to drift out to sea. At that point, the Navy dispatched a helicopter to rescue him, but they had a hard time getting near him. The draft from the propeller kept pushing him further and further away. Eventually they were able to get over top of him and drop a rescue line.

As soon as he hit the ground he was arrested. As he was being led away in handcuffs, a television reporter called out, “Mr. Walters, why’d you do it?” Larry, stopped, eyed the man, then replied nonchalantly, “A man can’t just sit around. You have to have a vision for life.”²

The church is not called to sit around. It is called to live confidently, courageously. Not because it has figured out some vision of its own, but because it has been graciously invited to be stewards of God’s vision of a healed world. Amen.

² From Stories for the Heart 99