

“Embracing Visions”

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Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9; Revelation 21:1-6a

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It is said, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” But over and over in the story of scripture, it seems a vision is given just at the moment that people are in danger of perishing. The vision we find in Isaiah comes as the threat of Babylon is bearing down on Israel. There’s no stopping the movement of the armies of their enemy. Israel faces certain destruction. And in the midst of all that they are embraced by a vision of hope.

“God will swallow up death forever.” Now, death is actually broader than simply the end of physical life. Death is that force which can overwhelm a nation and deliver it into the hands of fear and despair. Death is homelessness; death is hunger; death is addiction; death is domestic violence; death is anything that robs a person or a group or a nation of the benefits of life. “God will swallow up death forever.” God’s promise is to restore life wherever death has won.

That vision sustained Israel through their long exile. It sustained them and carried them back and has remained a source of hope for everyone who puts their trust in the God of life. It is surely to this vision that the writer of Revelation looks in describing the final act of history. “Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” Again, a vision of hope born out of circumstances of exile and despair.

These are the visions that embrace God’s people. They are the visions that make it possible for us to continue following our call in spite of obstacles that threaten to undo us. How many times in the long history of this congregation has it seemed as if there was no hope? How many times has death threatened to overwhelm us? It may not have been the threat of enemies at the gate or persecution and exile, but we’ve certainly experienced the fear of attrition, the slow whittling away of resources and people.

That was the situation some fifty-odd years ago when this church resided on Delaware Avenue. It didn’t seem like there was much future for North Presbyterian Church. And out of that fearful circumstance came a vision. A vision of a new location, a fresh start for ministry and mission. That vision led us here and over time the community around us became embraced by it and were drawn in to share in the mission of this congregation.

As I read these visions related in Isaiah and Revelation, I’m struck by how expansive they are, by their all-encompassing nature. In Isaiah: “On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines...” And again in Revelation: “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples...” No one is forgotten, no one is rejected, no one is excluded.

I can't help but feel it was just such a vision that shaped the hearts of the members of this congregation as they moved here in the fifties and began a new ministry. For a people perishing, life comes through embracing visions of welcome and openness and hospitality. That's the legacy passed down to us by the saints who have gone before us. They have taught us what it means to embrace God's vision for this church.

And they have shown us what happens when we allow ourselves to be embraced by God's vision. Because it goes both ways: we take hold of the vision and the vision takes hold of us.

So how do we embrace a vision where death is ended and tears are wiped away? How do we embrace a vision of a feast laid out for anyone and everyone who longs to be fed? Each generation in the church has to discern that on its own. Other generations have done that before us, and we are continually grateful for what we've received from them, but now it's our turn. Now it's up to us to take hold of God's vision and to allow that vision to take hold of us.

I don't know exactly what that will look like. But I do know it will be rooted in these visions revealed in Isaiah and Revelation. It will be rooted in God's continuing display of generosity and welcome and love. Those are some of the threads that tie these visions together. And just as the saints before us have learned, those are the threads that tether us to God.

Our challenge today is to commit ourselves to discerning God's vision among us and to allowing that vision to shape us and make us new. How can we become more welcoming? How can we become more generous? How can we become more loving? These are the questions that will lead us closer to God's intentions for us as a congregation and will move us from the threat of perishing to the promise of life.

Amen