

VISIONS FROM GOD

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Visions are amazing and surprising things. I would venture to say most of us seldom rely on visions when we are planning for our careers or families or the future of our vocations. We are far more likely to rely on some sort of strategic planning – creating steps, flow charts, and timelines. We often put more ‘faith’ in such strategic plans than we do in ‘leaps of faith.’

As he was traveling from town to town, teaching and preaching and spreading the good news of Jesus, the apostle Paul had a vision - a man across the river in Macedonia calling to him. ‘Come over here, we need your help.’ Upon receiving this vision, Paul, immediately changed his travel plans, shifted his entire itinerary, and traveled to the Roman city of Macedonia.

Throughout the Bible, visions from God are not the exception, but the norm. Right from the beginning with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Moses, Samuel, David, Jonah, and all the prophets – to the apostles like Paul, visions were the way God was demonstrably engaged in human affairs. Visions gave direction and language. And visions led to transformation.

Transformation is hard because it changes everything. It is often painful. And it may be why we prefer logical planning, creating those steps and flow charts, those timelines, and tasks as we seek to name what we determine is God’s vision for us. It also gives us the false idea that God is predictable and controllable – and perhaps that is why we like it. When God does visit us, however, we are undeniably changed.

Paul epitomized this transformation. You remember the story of his travelling the road to Damascus on his way to engage in more dirty work of persecuting Christ followers, when a dazzling vision not only entered his head and heart, but physically threw him to the ground, blinded him for three days, and changed his life forever. It turned him inside out and upside down – from being the most zealous Christ hater to being the most ardent supporter and disseminator of the Good News of Christ.

And like Paul's Damascus trip where God radically shifted Paul's plans, it happens again. Paul has a strategic plan – he has a list of cities and towns all plotted out - but God has a different plan – a different direction for him.

Paul finds himself travelling to a Roman colony – bringing the gospel for the first time to Europe – to the town of Philippi. We later learn that it becomes one of Paul's favorite new church starts – as he writes his letters to the Philippians - full of vitality and love of God known through the acts of Jesus Christ.

But backup a bit. Upon entering the city, Paul and his companions spend several days checking out the city and then on the Sabbath, they go outside the gates of the city as there was no synagogue within the city. Almost certainly they are looking for a man – and what they see is a group of women engaged in a prayer group. Paul shifts direction – and Paul's first convert recorded in Philippi, and in Europe, is not a man, but a woman named Lydia. The good news spreads over boundaries of geography and gender.

Lydia is surely not what Paul expected. She is a woman of means, a self-actualized woman with her own business – a seller of purple cloth - and head of her own extensive household.

And yet, Paul shows no obvious surprise, and immediately joins the group and adds to the conversation.

Both Paul and Lydia experience visions of what God is calling them to do and be. And neither of them question the visions, but embrace and accept and move into the radically different path that will change their lives – and the world – forever.

In our culture, there is social pressure not to talk about visions if we have them. If we are too vocal about visions we experience, we are encouraged to see a therapist, psychiatrist and/or perhaps take medications to eliminate the visions. If we have visions, we may learn to call them by any other name – a dream – intuition – and we tame them down. We may question whether the vision is real or simply – “simply?” – a product of our imagination.

There is a scene in Harry Potter after Dumbledore dies and Harry meets him in a foggy train station. Dumbledore shares a vision for the future with Harry and at one point, Harry asks Dumbledore, “Is this real, or is it just in my head?” ‘Yes’ – the answer is yes.

Vision – is it real or is it just in our head? Is it ‘just’ our imagination – or is it the imagination given to us by God to see beyond our own always limited vision of what is possible.

Paul joined the women’s prayer group on that sabbath morning and the world changed forever. The good news spread beyond what had been previously imagined.

It was a prayer group to which Paul’s vision sent him. Prayer is central to what it means to be a person of God and yet, too often we discount its central importance – it’s magnitude – depth and breadth.

And right along with prayer is Bible study –Bible study that seeks not to give specific answers but to elicit questions about faith – questions that seek to discern who and what God is and how God is acting in our lives and calling us into action.

Prayer and Bible study are not options for Christians, they are central acts. They keep our faith formation in the forefront of our lives, they keep us practicing, they move us away from easier answers, they move us from our own self-centered directions. Study of scripture and praying allows us a way to enter into and engage with the scripture – into discerning and discovering – instead of blind acceptance of someone else’s interpretation. Prayer and Bible study give direction to our vision.

Proverbs 29, verse 19 reminds us ‘When there is no vision, the people perish.’ Visions from God are surprising things, for they utterly transform us, and alter our course. They give us new directions as individuals and as communities.

The hymn Spirit, Spirit of Gentleness, lets us sing of vision as the pathway to all that lies ahead, all that stirs us from our self-centeredness, all that leads us to the freedom and future to which God calls us all.

“You call from tomorrow, you break ancient schemes, from the bondage of sorrow, the captives dream dreams; Our women see visions, our men clear their eyes. With bold new decisions, your people arise.”

May that be our song in the days and weeks and months ahead. Amen.