

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Sunday, February 21, 2021

First Sunday in Lent



“‘Belief’ Curbs ‘Fear’”

First of six in a series during Lent entitled

“Biblical Optometry: Discerning our Church's 'Corrective Vision'”

Scripture: Genesis 15:1-6

I am so proud of Centre Church.



To begin this Lenten season, our church did something it has never done before. We built a snow labyrinth in our front lawn for our members and community! What impresses me more than that we did something we have never done before is the leadership of the church had a vision, planned in short order the vision, and implemented the vision for the project - *and they did it all without the minister while he was on vacation!*



I can take zero, zilch, nada, nothing, and nil credit for the labyrinth project. The successful offering of the labyrinth to our faith community clearly demonstrates that our church can and will envision, plan, and implement the future ministry of our church and that our bright future is not dependent upon the minister.



Though our church's future is not dependent on me as its minister, I do thank God that you have called me to partner with and to support you in realizing that bright future.

Genesis 15

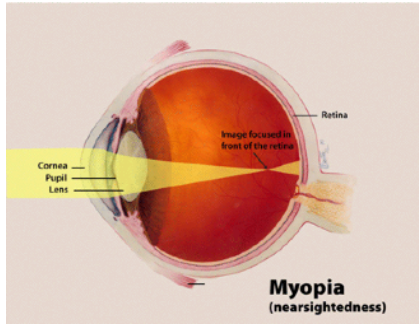
3 The Lord's Covenant With Abram

3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir."

In our scripture reading this morning read by Daniel, we hear of Abram's doubt and fear about the future. For him, there was no future. Abram had no hope for the future because for the patriarchal Ancient Near East mind-set, the failure to have a biological offspring was equivalent to existential oblivion. Of course, for us today, we know that not to be the case. I have in part raised four children, and I have just added two more to my brood, and only one of them is biological. Love and nurture are not dependent on blood. Nonetheless, we have to place ourselves in Abram's shoes. His spirit was one of foreboding. His perceived his outlook as bleak. He viewed his horizon as immediate. He had no vision. He feared oblivion.



Yet, God brought Abram out beneath the heavens and immediately provided him a new vision, a corrective vision. The vision was an expanse. And it was bright. The new vision shown to Abram ushered to him a new reality. The horizon was not only stretched, but it had no ending. And astronomy teaches us that the cosmos is expanding at an accelerating rate.



Before Abram's vision, he was what might be call 'near-sighted'. He suffered from what is called 'myopia'. A near-sighted person sees near objects clearly, while objects in the distance are blurred.¹



After Abram's vision, he became farsighted. Farsightedness, also called 'hypermetropia', is the result of the visual image being focused behind the retina rather than directly on it. A farsighted person sees faraway objects

¹ The Mayo Clinic, Patient Care and Health Information, Diseases and Conditions, found at: <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/nearsightedness/symptoms-causes/syc-20375556>, accessed February 20, 2021.

clearly, while objects that are near are blurred.² Perhaps, today I am asking that our church be *farsighted*.

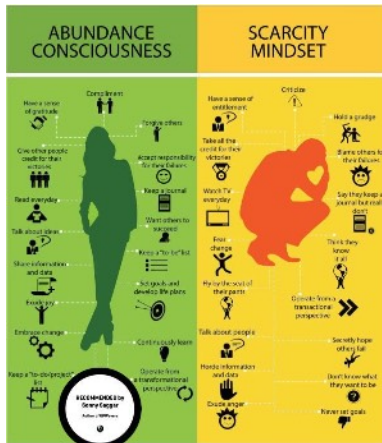


There is another reason I am so proud of our church. Our Long-Range Planning Team has conducted its tasks thus far beyond my expectations. The Long-Range Planning Team is well led, is productive, is efficient, is wise, is honest, and is discerning. And guess what? Again, it is not because of the minister's leadership. Although I continue to educate and support the Long-Range Planning Team, it is not dependent on me. Yet, again, I thank God that I am called to Centre Church to partner with and support it to implement its vision for the future.

I am going to speculate that that what made Abram near-sighted, focused on that which is close, was fear. I know from my own experience that always focusing on scarcity makes me fearful.

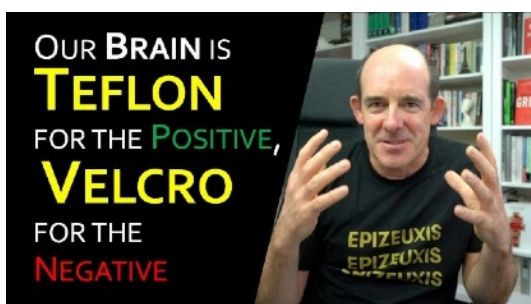
² "Farsightedness", Wikipedia, found at:

https://www.google.com/search?ei=x4YxYKfWJLGZ_QbU6IdA&q=what+is+farsightedness+and+wikipedia&oq=what+is+farsightedness+and+wikipedia&gs_lcp=Cgdnd3Mtd2l6EAMyBAghEAo6BwgAEecQsAM6BQgAEM0CUPYmWO40YPS2aAFwAXgAgAGHA YgBswaSAQM1LjOYAQCgAQGqAQdnd3Mtd2l6yAEIwAEB&scient=gws-wiz&ved=0ahUKEwjn1cy2u_nuAhWxTN8KHVT0AQgQ4dUDCA0&uact=5, accessed February 20, 2021



This is especially true when it comes to finances. Even if we have enough, if our mind-set is scarcity, we are fearful. This is also true for the church. If we are focused on scarcity - be it butts in pews, be it money in the bank, be it volunteers for the work, be it the minister’s lack of skills, be it the few children and families – if we are focused on scarcity we will always be fearful like Abram was. By focusing on our vision, we will believe and fear will melt away.

Yesterday on my last day of vacation, I read the following from Richard Rohr that I would have liked to quote when we explored the intersectionality of neuroscience and spirituality: “Brain studies have shown that we may be hardwired to focus on problems at the expense of a positive vision.



The human brain wraps around fear and problems like Velcro. We ... spend vast amounts of energy anticipating what might go wrong in the future. Conversely,

positivity and gratitude and simple happiness slide away like cheese on hot Teflon. Studies like the ones done by neuroscientist Rick Hanson show that we must consciously hold on to a positive thought or feeling for a minimum of fifteen seconds before it leaves any imprint in the neurons. The whole dynamic, in fact, is called the Velcro/Teflon Theory of the Mind. We are more attracted to the problem than to the solution...”³



For the next five weeks during Lent, let us repent of negative thinking, of dwelling on the past. Let us repent from our paradigms of scarcity and instead celebrate our abundance. Let us repent of our near-sightedness, and, like Abram, see a new corrective vision by becoming far-sighted – only seeing that which we can achieve and become. I believe we will hear a new vision, not from me, the minister, but from our own chosen Long-Range Planning Team. For the next five weeks, listen to their visions. Share your visions with them. Know that I intend to walk alongside you and to support you in achieving that

³ Richard Rohr, *The Universal Christ: How a Forgotten Reality Can Change Everything We See, Hope for, and Believe* (New York, Convergent, 2010), 63-64. Rohr cites: Rick Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness* (New York: Harmony Books, 2013), xxvi.

which you are more than capable of achieving through the Holy Spirit and a God-given vision.

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.