

“A breath-taking vision”. Exodus 3:1-12 Acts 16:6-10

Centre Church Brattleboro, VT October 10, 2021

It is a delight to be with you today and this weekend. Over the past two years, I have enjoyed working with your Pastor, Scott, and lay people from this church. Centre Church was part of a group of churches that attended a workshop called, “How to reach new people” and did a year of coaching with me and a number of other Vermont UCC churches. And it this past year, I have had the pleasure of working with Scott and your Long Range Planning Team as you seek to do one of the most important things a church can do: discern how God is calling you into the future. For as that famous theologian, Yogi Berra, said, “If you don’t know where you are going, You’ll end up some place else!” This morning, I want to talk with you about how and why a vision/discernment process is so vital for a church.

Let us pray

When we pray and ask God where we should go into the future, God often responds with some audacious plans. Often the vision God has in mind for us is much larger than what we have imagined. Look at our story in Exodus. Can you imagine how Moses felt, thinking he was safely tucked away in Midian, when God suddenly lays this whopper of future on him: “You are going to go back to Egypt, take your people out of slavery, lead in the wilderness on their way to a new land and new life of promise.” I am sure Moses was thinking, “you want me to do what?” Isn’t it understandable that Moses would almost immediately start making excuses why he couldn’t do it, because the vision seemed so much larger than him.

And you see that is what happens when God plants a vision in us. It should make you gasp because God gives God’s people large visions. One of my mentors in ministry was a man named Jim Kidd. Jim was called to Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford Connecticut in 1980. Asylum Hill was the toughest neighborhood in Hartford. The church had lost 700 members in the 1970’s to urban flight. But God planted a breathtaking vision in the hearts of Jim and his leaders. They took out a full-page advertisement in the Sunday

Hartford paper that read, “We love Hartford and we are staying”. And they started loving on their neighborhood. One of the amazing things they did was adopt the 4th grade class of the worst school in Hartford. They told those 19 4th graders that if they finished high school they church would pay for their college education. They raised money and put it in a scholarship fund, and tutored those 19 students every week for 8 years. And all 19 graduated. Asylum Hill, gained over 100 new members in 1980 and has grown every since. When we ask God, “where do you want us to go, God responds with some audacious plans. Mark Batterson, who started a new church in Washington DC, said it best:

If you have never had a God-sized dream that scared you half to death, then you really haven’t come to life. If you have never been overwhelmed by the impossibility of your plans, then your God is too small”.

Yesterday, a large group of you gathered to imagine what Centre Church might look like in the next few years. It is my hope that some of those plans will take your breath away; plans that will only be possible if God is in the midst of them.

And that leads me to my second point. God doesn't just plant a vision in our hearts, God then gives us the energy, passion and excitement to live it out. The Apostle Paul had been attempting to plant new churches but the Spirit wasn't in it. But then one night, Paul received a vision; a man from Macedonia waving him over to his shore to start a congregation. Paul couldn't get there fast enough. In the years ahead, Paul would be beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, taunted and harassed as well as overcoming the reputation he had as a church persecutor, not church planter. You would have thought that at some point, Paul would have just decided it was too hard and would have given up. But that vision burned bright in Paul, and it propelled him forward, and against all odds, he planted new churches around the Mediterranean. What a difference that energized determination made; we wouldn't be here if Paul hadn't lived out that vision.

I coach a congregation in Warsaw, Virginia. Now Warsaw is a small town and when I say small, it's the kind of place that when you get there, you don't even know you're there. Add to that remoteness,

the county is losing population. And there in the middle of this stands Warsaw United Methodist Church, with all of 25 people. And yet God planted a vision in that church that they were going to bless lots of people and grow that church. They began by taking prayer walks and seeing their community like Jesus sees it. They began a practice called ‘Love Wednesdays’, where each week they would take lunch to a different group in town, teachers, postal workers, different businesses, and just thank them for being in the community. They had a booth at the County Fair and moved their Easter Egg Hunt to the Park and had a float in the town Christmas parade. And today, three years later, that church, against all odds is now worshipping over 100. What a difference that church is making in its community. That is my hope for us my friends, that we will discern such a compelling vision from God that it will propel us forward and give us the energy and determination to live it out.

This is a great time to be the church. Have there been incredible challenges of the past 18 months with Covid? Absolutely and you have made some amazing adjustments, including discerning a vision during a pandemic. And yet, the opportunities before you are

remarkable. God has placed you in this vibrant community of Brattleboro; a place filled with a variety of talented, gifted people. Less than 10% of people in Vermont go anywhere and right now, so many people are feeling isolated, and need a word of hope. You have a resilient congregation and wonderful leaders for the future. My hope and prayer are that you will continue to listen to God's voice and know that God will be with you, leading into a future of promise. God has a vision for this Church and for this community. Like Moses, like Paul, may God take your breath away with an audacious vision and may God then give you the energy and faith to live that vision out. It is my pleasure and honor to walk with you on that journey. Amen.

Paul Nickerson