

The Rev. Dr. Hilary B. Smith

Holy Comforter

Richmond, VA

May 1, 2016; the 6th Sunday of Easter

Readings: Acts 16:9-15; Psalm 67; Revelation 21:10, 22 - 22:5; John 5:1-9.

Visions

In our reading from the Book of Revelation, we hear a beautiful vision of the peace and unity that Christ brings - the tree of life, its leaves are for the healing of the nations.

This is a vision of course and not a detailed plan for how to get from here to there...how to bring all the nations of the world together with God at the center...with God as our light.

Many who think they know exactly how to get from here to there justify violence as a means to uniting all peoples.

So often movements in the history of the world have gone wrong when visions have taken on specific steps that others have been forced to follow.

We see the corruption of visions in the policies of nations and in religions. It is hard to honor a vision or even understand a vision.

How do we in the Episcopal Church understand God's revelation, especially visions, and how do we support each other in doing the will of God, in following the Way of Jesus?

Are visions helpful or not?

In addition to the vision in the Book of Revelation...which is of course a book of visions...and imaginative representations of the political realities of the day...such as Rome being portrayed as a monster...we have a more specific vision found in today's reading from Acts.

Paul has a vision in which a man says 'come to Macedonia and help us'.

Paul goes and finds Lydia, a worshiper of God and a dealer in purple cloth, and as Paul speaks to her, we are told that, the "Lord opened her heart."

Lydia catches the vision...she does not see with her eyes but she sees with her heart.

We gather from this, and from our own experiences, that others catch the vision when we share the Good News of God; when we share the visions that we have received from God.

Paul did not force Lydia to do anything.

He shared what he felt called by God to share, and as he did, God touched Lydia, opening her heart, and she and her family were baptized and became a support for Paul and others.

She invited them to stay at her home.

God had been working on Lydia for sometime.

She had felt a desire for more than her successful business offered her.

As a purveyor of purple cloth, she was selling to the welloff in society; she was doing well for herself; she was the head of a household, which was very rare for a women at that time...but it was not enough.

She would go to the outskirts of Philippi, to a place of worship, a place where people prayed.

She was looking for more. "She comes to worship because she is hungering for something more in life, something beyond the commercial success she has apparently achieved. She is hungering for more because that restless Spirit, who is surely in us all before we ever know it, has stirred up a holy longing in her soul."¹

"That restless Spirit" looking for more, is in us all.

"Our hearts are restless until they rest in thee." Augustine of Hippo, 354 - 430.

Monica, Augustine's mother prayed for years that her vision for his life would come to pass...and it did...but not before Augustine had something of a vision himself.

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word: Year C, Vol. 2 Lent Through Eastertide*, Ronald Cole-Turner, "Theological Perspective," Epub., Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009, Loc. 16866 of 19741.

God knows our restlessness; God comes to us and invites us to find rest for our souls. And rest for our souls does not mean we are sitting still, feeling that all is well with the world...but even in the chaos and trouble of life, even in our striving to be about God's work in the world, we find that rest and that peace that is beyond our understanding.

Visions can be dramatic and hard to miss, like the vision that took Paul to Lydia, but God, the Spirit, also gives us gentle nudges, to bring us to places and people who can help us and support us and or people we are called to help and support.

We are both spiritual beings as well as ones who are very much a part of the material world...there is a unity in this, which we see in the incarnation of Christ; we reject a dualism that speaks of a spiritual world and the material world...it is just the world, God's creation. But because we see the world around us all the time, and we live in physical bodies that demand care and lots of attention, it can be easy to give less attention to our spiritual experiences.

More of us have visions than talk about them. After all, that can seem a bit odd. Not very Episcopalian, perhaps. But visions come, both the big ones that are hard to ignore, and the more gentle ones that we feel more than see. God also uses our imaginations. Bringing thoughts to our minds, that are sometimes surprising and at other times in keeping with what we would expect to think.

Praying with scripture is a great way to open ourselves to God.

Today, being the first Sunday of the month, we have a group meeting after church to share experiences of praying with passages from the Bible, the "First We Were Loved" group.

Being able to share with each other, how we think or feel or believe God is at work in our prayer and in our lives, is a gift.

It is a gift for many reasons...one being that sharing our experience helps us go deeper into them, to take time with them.

The group is open to anyone who would like to attend, whether you have been using the booklet with the scripture passages or not.

We still have copies of this book, with short readings for every day of the year, if you would like to get one - 50 people in our church are already doing this practice.

It can be great to share our experiences of God, and sometimes, we really want to talk with each other to help each other figure out what God is up to in our lives...we call this discernment.

Every vision requires interpretation, and it helps to share that process with others.

I think one of the reasons we don't talk about visions too much in the Episcopal Church is because we don't believe as a Church that one has to have any sort of mystical vision or gift of the Spirit, such as speaking in tongues, to know God and to be a faithful follower of God.

Jesus the Christ is the extraordinary manifestation of God in the world for everyone.

We learn about God's vision for the world when we look to Jesus...his life, what he did, and he did not do, how he taught, and how he gave himself so that we can have a mystical experience of God through the sacraments of the Church, such as our sharing in bread and the wine, the body and the blood of Christ.

In our sharing of communion, we are united with each other, all people in heaven and on earth, and all creation.

We pray for God's grace to know how to share this experience with everyone...inviting all to join us...and then we pray and discern together what this mystical experience, the vision, God's vision in which we share, what it means as we go out into the world.

How can we be the people and the church, God calls us to be?

Again, there is the experience, and then the need for discernment. On Pentecost, which is in two weeks, our big celebration, being named for the Holy Spirit, I will say more about how we the members and friends of Holy Comforter are right now, doing many things that we have discerned God calls us to do.

It helps to have a community...visions can be tricky things. And as a bit of an aside, in that context, this is why Centering Prayer that leads to Contemplation is often valued more than a vision. In fact, Thomas Keating has said, written, that if you are in Centering Prayer, in silence and open to God, if all of the sudden you see the heavens open and the angels of God flying around, you should let that go and return to the centering to the silence, because that is the pure experience of God that needs no interpretation.

This week on Tuesday, our Centering prayer group will meet in this space, here in the choir area.

Such contemplation of God also leads to action, but different way.

But let's get back to visions for a minute.

It helps to have a community to discern what a vision means, be that a vision such as Paul had, a number of times, let's not forget the road to Damascus...dramatic or the sort of vision Lydia had...gradually developing and enfolding in her heart...also dramatic but in a quieter way.

If you have either sort of vision, I would really like to know about it.

If you think the vision you are having could lead us to do something new here at Holy Comforter, I would like to know about it.

We actually have a process for this, though I'm not sure if those of you who know about the process ever thought of it as starting off with a vision.

Now the thing about bringing your vision to a community of faith is that communities of faith, don't move real fast.

But going slower can help the discernment and it makes it a true community effort, bringing us all closer together.

First, come to me and we discern together what God might be calling you to do or calling our church to do.

Then, you go to the ministry group that best relates to what you feel called to do...outreach, pastoral care, parish life, property, adult formation, children and youth, worship, stewardship... you get the idea.

Then, with a ministry group discernment happens and others get excited, perhaps they will catch the vision.

One of the reasons it is really good to have a process, is because quieter people are less likely to just go ahead and do something, and quite honestly, it keeps us from all being about our individual visions without anyone else knowing what we are doing.

We hear of many visions in the Bible; and God continues to speak to us through the unexpected, in unexpected ways.

Let us pray,

Your love O God, reaches out to us in many ways. You warm our hearts and we long to rest in you. We long to follow you and help others to know you. Guide us in all that we do, however you choose to guide us, that we may glorify you through our lives and in our service to others. Amen.