

God's Vision
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(Acts 16:9-15; Revelation 21.10, 22.1-5; John 5:1-9)

Well, in the church we are at the end of the Easter season; in North American politics we are in the beginning, if not in the midst of election season. Election season means that we will be hearing even more from those who want to be elected or re-elected.

The one thing that we can be sure we will hear from political voices - over and over again - is their vision. Because any smart politician understands that a clear and emotionally connecting vision wins.

The power of a strong vision no matter what its truth or consequences is what we saw – tragically in my view – in the last American presidential election. And in some of the last provincial ones.

Politicians need to claim that they can offer a new reality, a new life; their vision will change people's lives.

Many of us personally know the power of vision. For instance, we may have recognized that we have a vision of who we are and what we are capable of – a vision that either limits us or helps us do more than we thought possible.

I grew up with a vision of myself as non-athletic. I was a bookworm. As a young adult I decided to change that. So one of the things I did was learn to downhill ski.

One instructive moment was when I challenged myself to do a very steep run in the Rockies. As I headed down, I said in my head – who do you think YOU are, skiing down a black diamond. Almost immediately I fell; and fell so badly that I had to have knee surgery. My new vision of myself got as fogged up as my ski goggles were. The old vision won.

An infinitely more important and consequential example of the power of vision is that of Jean Vanier. His vision that people with intellectual disabilities are a gift of beauty and joy; that they should not be locked away but enjoyed and lived with – this vision helped shape a wondrous lightfilled change of reality for the lives of many people – both those with disabilities and those who know and love them.

The power of vision.

The writers of the NT understood vision's power. They understood that offering a vision could draw people into a new reality; it could change people's lives.

The passages we hear from John's Gospel and from Revelation are aspects of the NT vision. John's gospel, like all of the gospels, is full of episodes from Jesus' life. John calls seven of these episodes signs. Right before the episode we heard read this morning Jesus heals an official's son who was at the point of death. John calls this Jesus' second sign. The first sign is changing of water into wine at the wedding at Cana.

By designating some miracles signs John makes signals that he is not presenting Jesus' full and eventful life in a flat record keeping fashion. Signs are revelatory. As John says, they reveal Jesus' glory.

John wants to draw the hearers of his gospel into his vision of what is happening in the presence of Jesus, the Lamb of God. And, let us remember that though John writes mostly about Jesus' life before his crucifixion, as he writes John is convinced that Jesus is alive with him.

John may be writing about the past but he is doing so in the presence of the resurrection – he is writing in light of the resurrection; in resurrection light. And it is the same for those of us who hear John's gospel. In John's gospel we hear about Jesus' life before the crucifixion in company with the risen Jesus who is present in our midst.

John's gospel, like all the gospels, offers a vision – Jesus' vision. A vision with the power to change people's lives.

Today we hear about a transformative event that takes place between Jesus and a man who has been lying desperately ill for 38 years at the pool of Bethesda.

Jesus has just come into Jerusalem for a festival of his people and the first thing he does is to go to a place where there are many terribly ill people – people who are desperately sick, who are lame, who are paralyzed. John adds the detail that the location is the pool of Bethesda, near the Sheep's Gate. This detail resonates with John's claims that Jesus is the Lamb of God and the good shepherd.

Jesus notices one man in particular lying by the pool. Jesus knows this man has been waiting for help for many many years. He asks the man if he wants to be made well; and the man responds

by explaining why he hasn't been able to be healed by the miraculous waters of the Bethesda pool. No one will help him. On his own he can't make it fast enough to the waters when they are stirred up and ready to heal.

Jesus responds with a command: rise, take up your mat and walk.

John gives us a vision of Jesus interrupting a competitive, cruel system. A vision of Jesus upending a passive aggressive order in which sick and poor people must push their way to help, leaving other sick and poor people behind to wait in agony and despair year after year.

John gives us a vision of Jesus powerful yet humble. Jesus, able to command a chronically ill man to get up and walk, yet Jesus identifying with the crowd of the rejected and dejected. A vision of healing and life among the poor and sick and dejected. Of Jesus the source of that healing and life. A vision of the power of Jesus' presence.

Another vision we hear this morning is from the last book of the NT. A vision from Revelation, also written by a man named John (no one knows if this John is the same person as the author of the fourth gospel). The first word of this book in Greek is 'apocalypse' – revelation. The last book of the Bible, Revelation, is an account of an extended vision. This morning we hear the climax of the vision.

After John sees all sorts of wonders good and bad, John says he was taken by the Spirit to a very high mountain. From that vantage point he sees the holy city of Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. John is given a vision of a Jerusalem entirely different from the earthly Jerusalem. He will say, in parts of Revelation that we didn't hear this morning, that the heavenly Jerusalem is the Lamb's bride; beloved and beautiful and faithful.

This is a city that is holy not because it is the centre of a people's religious/ political life but because it actually is holy. It is married to the Lamb; the Lamb of God; Jesus Christ. In the most intimate of ways the city shares the life of the holy one of God.

It is a city which lives and breathes with God's goodness and life and light. It is a city in which there is no temple because God and the Lamb are at the centre of the city. It is a city where the tree of life – that tree that was at the centre of the garden of Eden - is on the main street. The tree of life straddles the river of life that flows from God and the Lamb right down the main street from God and the Lamb. And that tree has leaves for the healing of the nations.

The city John sees coming out of heaven has a tree that is the source of healing for all God's world. It is a city in which there is a river that flows with the water of life. The life giving water is not

restricted only to those who can push their way in; it flows freely right through the heart of the city. And its source is God and the Lamb.

A marvellous light and life filled city where there is nothing evil or ill or dark. A city in which people can see God's face.

What a vision!

Both of the Johns' visions describe astonishing almost unbelievable alternative realities. Non-competitive, God centred realities. Where the focus is on God and on healing the world. Where there is always life and never death; where there is only, exclusively, the loving, powerful, healing presence of God and the Lamb of God.

Without visions we are captive to really nothingness. And with the wrong visions we fall, or even worse, we become captive to evil. Hitler's commanding vision comes first to mind.

Visions are powerful. It is critical for each human to hitch ourselves to a vision. And it goes without saying that it is critical to hitch ourselves to the right vision. Visions lead us and shape the way we live.

We in the church have a vital and life changing resource in the vision that our scripture offers. An alternative, subversive life-giving vision of reality.

To be clear: our scriptures offer not a vision of what was or what will be but of what is. Jesus' authoritative, humble and upending presence was not just at Jerusalem's pool of Bethsaida; it is here in this moment in this place. The holy city of Jerusalem is now. John has seen it and he lets us in on his vision. We can see it too: the city of God.

And when we catch these visions, they will shape us and lead us.

They will strengthen us to live in and into the truth of the reality we see.

We are doing that here at Redeemer: by offering help and healing at the Common Table, in our Indigenous and refugee ministries and so on.

And as we immerse ourselves ever more deeply in the vision of our scripture, and immerse ourselves in worship and prayer and community we will find more ways that we can now be the city of God in the midst of hard bitten, competitive Toronto.

We are coming to the close of the Easter season in the church. But it is always the season for each of us and for us together to keep our inward eyes focused on the presence of the risen Jesus Christ. On our risen Lord who longs for us to see what is here for us to know and to share: the city of God the centre of which is God and the Lamb of God.

I believe that the most primary and transformative thing we Christians can do is, with the help of God's Spirit and our devotion, to clarify our vision – to wipe our eyes clear of the fog that descends when we spend our time looking at the screen or our troubles or whatever it is that draws us away from God's vision.

The most transformative thing we can do for ourselves, our city, our world is to hitch ourselves to God's vision – a vision of life and only life; of love and only love; of embrace and peace for all.