

“The Power of Vision” a sermon preached at EUMC 1-27-08
by the Rev. Dr. Kathlyn James texts: *Hab. 2:1-3 & Prov. 29:18

Ten years or so ago, I went on vacation to Massachusetts and stayed in a cottage on Cape Cod. One morning, as I sat with a cup of coffee at the breakfast table there, I looked out the kitchen window and saw **a woman walking down the beach.**

The beach was deserted except for this one figure, walking along the water’s edge. The morning was beautiful: blue sky, sunrise edging the water’s foam with pink and gold. The woman was too far away for me to see her face, but she looked to be about sixty or so, her short gray hair swept back by the ocean wind. She had on a sweater, and a long skirt swirling around her bare calves and feet.

I watched this woman for awhile, taking it in: the way she walked, seemingly at ease in her own skin. She appeared to be immersed in her surroundings, totally unselfconscious, and unconcerned about whether anyone else might be watching her. She looked healthy and vibrant, not thin but height-weight appropriate. As she paused to look out at the water, then bent down to pick up a shell, I imagined that she was curious, intelligent, and appreciative. I thought, “I want to be like her.”

Now, I realize, of course, that I didn’t *know* any of these things about that real woman who was walking down the beach. I was projecting my own ideals onto her. But that night I wrote in my journal:

“The woman on the beach represents the person I want to become, five years from now, or ten years from now. She is at peace within herself, able to enjoy both solitude and other people. She knows who she is and what her life is for. She knows and loves God. She laughs easily, loves deeply; she welcomes life with courage, joy and generosity. I hold her in my mind,” I wrote, “so that I might grow into that woman, my best possible future self. I mentally turn to her and ask, ‘*What do I need to do to become you?*’”

That’s the function of **a vision of the future: it shapes our choices and actions in the present.** Perhaps you have been to one of those personal growth seminars where the leaders ask you to visualize yourself on your 80th birthday, say, or on your 25th or 50th wedding anniversary. What will you be like then? They ask you to picture it, and ask: how does that vision give direction and purpose to your life right now?

Or maybe the leaders on a spiritual retreat ask you to imagine your own funeral, and to write your own eulogy. Be specific, they say. What do you hope that people will say about you, at the end of your life? What do you want to be remembered for? You write it all down. Now, they say, you have a picture of the things that really matter most to you, in the final analysis. Start living that way, right now.

Do you have a mental picture of your best self, the person you would most like to grow into, and become? Of course, to be useful, a vision has to be within the realm of possibility. Notice I didn’t form a vision of my future best self as a 16-year-old blonde

model, or the President of the United States. When you look within yourself, and imagine your own highest potential coming into being, what do you see?

In recent years, there have been hundreds of books written about the **power of living toward a positive vision** of the future. Studies have documented how the best athletes practice visualizing themselves winning the race or the game. High performers in business do the same thing: holding a picture of success in mind, then taking concrete steps toward it. Whether the goal is writing a symphony or building a house or cultivating a warm, loving family life, that outcome literally exists first in our minds, hearts, and imagination. Then, as we align our present actions and choices to be congruent with that future vision, we live it into being.

Stephen Covey makes this point in a best-selling book published in 1989, called *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. One of the seven habits he highlights is, “Begin with the end in mind.” Covey acknowledges that this idea isn’t new, however, as he writes, it “appears to have originally come out of the study of the Bible.”ⁱ For in fact, from beginning to end, **the Biblical story is about the power of a compelling vision.**

The ancient **Hebrews** escape from slavery, and wander through the desert wilderness for forty years...led by a vision of the Promised Land. Later on, the **prophets** of Israel hold before them a vision of the future God desires for all people, where the lion will lie down with the lamb, and justice will roll down like waters...and this guiding vision shapes their common life. The write of **Proverbs** coins a saying, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” When the Hebrews are again enslaved and living in exile in Babylon, the prophet **Habakkuk** gives them hope by envisioning a future in which they will be freed, saying, in our text for this morning, “Write the vision, make it plain upon tablets, so that he may run who reads it...”

Then **Jesus** steps into history, proclaiming God’s vision for what this world could be, and should be, which he calls the Kingdom of God. Jesus preached about the Kingdom of God more than any other subject, even as he embodied it in his own being, as a person so transparently one with the purposes of God that we see in him not only what God is like, but what human beings, at our best, are called to become. The Bible ends with the Book of **Revelation**, and its glorious vision of the final fulfillment of God’s will, when this garden planet is Eden once again, and there is no death, suffering or sorrow, any more.

As Christians, we are a people constituted by a vision, which gives meaning and purpose to our daily lives. The vision goes before us, giving rise to our values and priorities, and becomes, as Covey puts it, “the deep burning ‘yes!’ that empowers us to say ‘no’ peacefully and confidently, to the less important things in our lives.”ⁱⁱ The vision calls us into the future. And sometimes **it gives us the strength to carry on.**

Four years ago, I went through a dark time in my life, involving a surgical accident. In the course of two years, I underwent eight major surgeries, and was hospitalized ten times. Just before the last surgery, which I knew would be rough and could result in a liver transplant or even death, I knew I needed all the help I could get. So I gathered all

the resources I could find, including a reference, given to me by a friend, of a woman who does something called “body work and healing prayer.” I didn’t know what that meant, but I was willing to try just about anything that might help me survive this surgery. I made an appointment and went to see her.

I still don’t know exactly what she did, because my eyes were closed at the time. But she had me lie down on a table in a darkened room, in which a candle was lit and soft music was playing. In that state, I experienced something like a guided imagery, or you might call it: a vision.

In my imagination, I found myself in the hospital bed set up in my family room at home, where I had spent far too much time in the past two years. Then suddenly I was lifted up out of the bed, in the form of a seagull. (Even in this dream-like state, I thought: a seagull! I’m a birder, and that would *not* be the bird I would choose to represent me.) But as this seagull, I flew out through the window to the river which flows behind my house. As I flew, I followed the course of the river, through the city and out into the country, passing by houses and then fields and forests on both sides.

The river then swept west toward the ocean, the way the Columbia River flows. As this seagull, I was growing tired; I wasn’t sure I could make it all the way to the sea. With great effort, I did make it. At the mouth of the river, I looked right and left at a barren, windswept coastline. I looked again, and there, far off to my right, walking down the beach toward me, was this lone figure of a woman, her gray hair blown back from her face. She was wearing a sweater, and a long skirt swirling around her legs and feet.

It was my future self! I wanted to fly to her, to reach her, but even as I tried, my strength was ebbing away. I faltered; I couldn’t make it! In exhaustion, I began to fall toward the ground, fluttering, flailing... Just then, at that moment, the woman on the beach looked up, reached out her hand, caught me, and pulled me to her. Then I woke up. The vision was over. Blinking, I thought, maybe I’m going to live through this surgery! Maybe I’m going to become that future self one day, after all.

Victor Frankl was a psychologist who survived the death camps of Nazi Germany. While in the camps, he watched others who shared in the ordeal. He was intrigued with the question of what made it possible for some people to survive, when most died. The single most important factor, Frankl realized, was a sense of future vision. Those most likely to survive were those who could picture themselves someday writing about this experience, say, or locating a lost loved one, or raising a neighbor’s child. They held the conviction that they still had a mission to perform, some important work left to do.ⁱⁱⁱ

Such is the power of **vision. It strengthens and sustains us**, pulling us into the future. Frankl said something else, too. He said that we don’t *invent* our own vision, or mission in life. We *detect* it. It’s already within us, waiting to be realized.

Two weeks from now, on Saturday, Feb. 9, we will gather here, as a congregation, for a day of envisioning our church’s future. Our facilitator, Gail Grossman, will lead us

through a series of exercises designed to help us discern, together, what God is calling us to do and become. We will be asking: **what might this church look like, at its best, five years from now, or ten years from now?**

One person might say, for instance: “I picture a church that is **a deeply spiritual community**. Everyone in the church belongs to a small group that prays together and is committed to spiritual growth.” Someone else says, “The church I see is **a vibrant worshipping community**. It’s known as a center of beautiful music, liturgical art, dynamic preaching, drama, and dance.”

Someone says, “I see a church that **takes the intellectual aspect of faith seriously**, and doesn’t ask people to check their brains at the door. There are classes and events that encourage seekers of all ages. The church sponsors a theological lecture series every year.” Another says, “The church of my dreams is **friendly and hospitable**. People smile a lot, and look each other in the eye. And people of every background and walk of life, every age and stage of faith, are valued and warmly welcomed here.”

Someone say, “My vision is a church that **reaches out to the poor** in the name of Christ. Here in this affluent community, we are known for our food bank, our tutoring program, our mission trips, and our willingness to live more simply so that others can simply live.” Another says, “I see a church in which you can sense that **people really care** about each other. They are there for each other, especially in times of sickness or grief.”

Another says: “I see **a prophetic community**, willing to take stands on issues of faith and life, and to advocate for social justice.” Another says: “I see a community in which **people can disagree** about important things, and still treat each other with Christ-like kindness and respect.” Another: “I see a place where **people are joyful**, open-hearted, and able to have fun together.”

What is your vision for the future of this church? I wonder: what **collective vision** will emerge on February 9? It’s exciting to think about, and important. For you know, the vision that we discern together, and that percolates among us even now, **will shape our identity, our actions, and our priorities for years to come.**

A couple of months ago, I was down in Grayland, on the Washington coast, where through an unlikely series of events, my family has come into possession of a house. It was morning, and I was alone on the wide, flat beach. I walked along, into the wind, peaceful, communing with God and nature. I bent down to pick up a gleaming shell.

As I stood up, brushing my hair---which *is* graying now---out of my eyes, it hit me, suddenly: that I am, quite literally, becoming that woman on the beach, who I envisioned ten years ago! I’m not her entirely, not yet---like, for instance, that part about being height-weight-appropriate ☺---but I’m on my way. Amazing, isn’t it?

Such is **the power of vision**. Amen.

ⁱ Stephen R. Covey, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 1989) p. 134

ⁱⁱ Stephen R. Covey, *First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994) p. 105

ⁱⁱⁱ Victor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (New York: Pocket Books, 1959), pp. 164-66