

Following Our Vision
Acts 6:9-15
May 26, 2019
Leslie A. Klingensmith

There's something that puzzles me about several of the famous Bible stories. When people experience a message from God, instructing them to do something, the message is always really clear, the person receiving the message understands perfectly what he or she is supposed to do, and often they are instantly obedient. The notable exception is Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit in the garden, but everyone else seems to know what they are supposed to be doing and when. Sometimes they argue with God, but ultimately obey. Moses wasn't sure he was the one who should free the Israelites, for example. Jeremiah wasn't sure he was qualified when God called him to be a prophet. But both Moses and Jeremiah wound up doing what God asked of them.

In the New Testament, lots of people have visions or visitations. Zechariah is visited by the angel and told what to do about becoming a father late in life, Mary hears from Gabriel of her task to bear the Messiah, the disciples are called from their fishing nets and immediately become followers of Jesus, Paul is converted on the road to Damascus and transforms from a notorious persecutor of Christians to a leader of the early church. While I admire all of these ancestors in the faith and consider them part of my spiritual family, I wonder – “How do they know?” How is their vision so clear, and how do they follow it with such certainty and courage? Did anyone else ever have competing visions, leading to arguments about whose direction was the “right” one in which to move?

Take today's passage, for example. The writer states states, matter-of-factly, that “Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.” It sounds so straightforward...but what if someone else had a vision that the group was supposed to go to Ephesus, or Colossae? Was there no discussion about this? It's not that the Macedonians didn't need to hear the gospel, but surely there were other people in other places who were just as desperate for the good news. How do we choose who to minister to first, and what do we do when there is disagreement over which vision to follow? These are questions that trouble me on occasion. Maybe you have a similar need for clarity.

Did anyone else get caught in that freak storm that seemed to come out of nowhere on Thursday afternoon? It probably didn't come out of nowhere – meteorologists sitting at their monitors were undoubtedly aware of it, and there were probably weather alerts that would have tipped me off had I thought to check them. But I didn't. All I know is that I left to make a visit in Columbia and it was a beautiful sunny day. As I left Vantage House, I noticed that the sky

had clouded over and was an eerie shade of green, but for whatever reason I was confident that I could outrun whatever rain was coming. How wrong I was!

I had just gotten on Interstate 29 to head back here when the hounds of hell were unleashed. The rain started pouring in just unbelievable amounts reducing visibility to almost zero – and it was LOUD. I could barely see the taillights of the car in front of me, and after that, nothing. Likewise, as I looked in my rearview mirror, I could see one pair of headlights and that was all. I had to be right on the road signs to see them at all. It was like I was traveling in this self-contained little pod, with no way of connecting with anyone else, and every other vehicle around me was in the same situation. But, if we were not all super careful we could hurt each other. I started to feel nervous. I began looking for an exit to pull off, hoping to find a parking lot to sit in and wait out the storm. Then the rain got so bad that I decided it was better to take the risky step of parking on the shoulder of the highway instead of continuing. I pulled off just a short distance from the Clarksville exit.

Then, the icing on the cake, just as I park the car and start to take a few deep breaths, my cell phone starts blowing up. BEEP BEEP BEEP! Weather alert...TORNADO WARNING IN HOWARD COUNTY. Great. Where exactly in Howard County? CLARKSVILLE. TAKE SHELTER IMMEDIATELY. Um, where?

I can feel my pulse rate going up just talking about this. I don't think of myself as someone who gets terribly freaked out by weather, but clearly I have some re-assessing to do about that. The whole experience couldn't have been more than 15 or 20 minutes but it felt like days. You probably have heard about all the severe weather in Oklahoma this past week, the state where I grew up. I had a couple of conversations with my Mom and Dad as they were preparing to ride out the storms and I said all these sage things like "Just remember in a tornado if you have a plan and stay in a safe place, chances are you will come through just fine. It's people who do idiotic stuff like storm chase who get caught in the path of a funnel and they are out of luck. Well, here I was...this was where all my good advice had gotten me...stuck on the side of a highway, a curtain of rain surrounding me, staring at blurry taillights in front of me, and my phone telling me I am exactly the wrong place. Great job, me.

Needless to say, it all worked out. I will admit to desperate prayers as I sat there. "If you just get me through this storm, I will check the weather report every morning for the rest of my days." "I'll never drive with any color of sky but blue again!" "Please, please, please just get me home." I also was calling home and texting and turning on the radio to try to find out more information. Ed turned on the television at our house and said that the storm was moving quickly and if I would just be still for a few more minutes the visibility would improve and I could get home. As usual, he was right.

I cannot say that *in the moment* I was making any connections between the awful storm and the biblical phenomenon of visions and the questions I have raised about how we know when and if they are real and what to do with them when we believe them to be from God and calling us in a certain direction. That was NOT on my mind, at all. But later, after I was home

safely and has a chance to think things over a bit, I began to see Paul's experiences in a fresh light. I'm not saying I did anything particularly wrong or right in the whole scenario (barring my failure to pay attention to weather forecasts!). It's just that, I'm thinking, if we are paying attention, maybe God is always putting someone in our path for whom we can be a helpful or even a healing presence. Paul's vision had been to go to Macedonia. He followed that lead and encountered Lydia—a woman who traded in purple cloth. Biblical scholars assume that Lydia was a wealthy woman because the dyes in purple fabric were hard to get and therefore expensive. Only rich people could afford to buy or sell them. It seems that Lydia was already a believer, but as she listened to Paul preach her heart was opened up in new ways. She felt moved to provide the gift of hospitality to Paul and to the others who traveled with him. I like to think that their relationship enriched the lives and the faith of all who were part of it (not only Paul, but the ones who traveled with him. Not only Lydia, but her whole household).

It was right for Paul to follow his vision to Macedonia...but is it possible that wherever he found himself, there would be opportunities to share grace and proclaim the gospel? I suspect there are Lydias everywhere – people who are eager and waiting to hear a message of love. When the instructions are not so clear as “Go to Macedonia,” maybe there is an overall vision that God has for our lives that we can follow wherever we are—one that has to do with relationship to each other and a sense that there are always opportunities to live as the people of God?

Churches and other faith communities (as well as non-profits and other businesses) have a lot of conversation about “vision” – where the organization is going, what our goals are, and what steps we will take to make it happen. Here at St. Matthew, our planning commission is nearing the end of a process that has taken many months, revising our previous 5-year plan and clearing stating our vision for years 2019-24. It's very exciting to see such plans come to fruition because you all have stayed faithful to the task.

Today, though, I also want us to make spiritual space for this other type of vision—a commitment to live each day, in all circumstances, as people of God and followers of Christ. That is a vision that can sustain us through doubt and uncertainty regarding specific situations. The storms of life undeniably can hinder our ability to perceive the next right step and can cloud our judgement, but the storm will pass and even in the middle of it we can hear from God.

Just for a moment, let me take us back to that roadside by the Clarksville exit just a few days ago. I was scared, and part of me kept berating myself for not having been more careful and not paying attention to the weather forecast in the first place. I felt alone, even though I had my phone and the car radio for more information. Suddenly, through all of that relentless rain, I saw a man get out of his car several hundred yards ahead of me. He was holding a flimsy umbrella and making his way to the car directly in front of me. He paused there and had a brief conversation, then patiently made his way toward my vehicle.

I know all the things about “stranger danger,” and horrid people who do terrible things to people stranded on roadsides, but in that moment I was so glad for a human companion in the

fear and misery that I didn't even think about the worst possible scenarios. I rolled down the window, thinking he might have information about a storm shelter or some other advice. I was wrong. He was in worse shape than I was.

"My phone has died," he said, "and I have to get to this address. I don't know where I am. Do you have a GPS? Can you get me the directions and write them down?" "Okay," I responded.

So, there we were. It took several minutes. I consulted Mapquest and wrote down the directions on a piece of scratch paper that he had. As I handed him the paper he gave me a gentle smile and said "Thank you, sweetie. (Not too many people call me that, but um...okay.) I appreciate your help. Now I will be able to find my way."

And then, guess what happened? I realized that, while I had been concentrating on writing his directions, the storm had eased. It was still raining, but I could see blue skies just a few miles ahead. I felt my body physically relax and a lightness returned to my spirit. It really felt, in a way I cannot fully explain, like he had also helped me find my way. I wasn't going to Macedonia...I was just trying to get from Columbia to Rockville. I didn't encounter a wealthy woman – he was an elderly man whose financial situation is none of my business. But in a frightening moment we were each able to help the other take the next step. I have to think that such meetings are a part of what it means to follow our vision. Thanks be to God. Amen.