

Proper 28C, Isaiah 65.17-25**November 17, 2019****The Rev. Scott Walters**

Back in August the Calvary staff participated in a visioning workshop together. I'd gotten to know Kat Gordon on a diocesan board and learned that she did this kind of thing from time to time. Some of you know Kat as the brilliance behind Muddy's Bakeshop, and will understand that what really caught my attention was that snacks were included.

My previous attempt at staff development had been an Enneagram workshop at St Columba, led by a very intense yoga instructor who, at one point in the day, likened personal transformation to the cooking of a chicken. "And in this universe," he said, "you can't uncook a chicken." It was a vivid, if not overly hopeful, takeaway. And by the end of that awkward and uncomfortable day, we were cooked. Mercifully, thanks to a little good humor and the extension of some Christian forgiveness on the part of my colleagues, we actually did get uncooked somehow.

Muddy's seemed like my best shot at redemption. We met at the bakery on Broad Avenue where Kat's team makes the magic that gets distributed to the retail shops. And after coffee and the first round of the promised snacks, we toured the bakery and then sat down to learn about this visioning thing.

The gist of visioning is to create a fairly detailed image of a scene in your life at some particular point in the future. There's some method involved, but the essence of the practice is writing and editing a short narrative of what you would like to see happen.

As Kat was teaching us her method, she used a curious example of how effective visioning can be. She noted that dieting statistics are famously dismal. Almost none of us sticks to what we start. But there is one subcategory of humans who do manage to reach a dietary goal: brides. A bride often carries a very vivid image of what she wants to look like on a very particular day in her future. And brides are remarkably good, apparently, at sticking to a diet.

Now, Kat fully appreciates that this is a hugely problematic example. She understands that it assumes a distorted and oppressively narrow definition of feminine beauty. One that is promulgated by a massive Bridal Industrial Complex that makes the Pentagon look like an Elks Lodge. Not only that. I mean... Kat sells cupcakes for a living.

But her point was that we might be able to capture the power of visioning for something more enduring than fitting into an expensive dress for a single photo shoot. The Muddy's team created a vision for what success for a staff retreat they called Gnome Camp would look like. Kat and her husband created one for their house...one that helped them realize that a \$50,000 kitchen remodel really wasn't what would make their home the place of joy and hospitality they hoped for.

You could create one for Thanksgiving Dinner that might lead to insights like, let's face it, turkey is vastly overrated as a food. Or maybe that seating uncle Dave at the other end of the table from cousin June will keep them from talking politics and throwing plates of stuffing at each other like they did last year. Which was a real shame, because stuffing is actually delicious.

There is power in visioning, whatever your goal or process. There is power in holding an image of what wholeness or health or joy or justice might look like at some particular moment in some particular place in this particular world before you figure out how to work toward it.

I wonder how would you describe the work of a prophet. Some would say prophets are people who can tell the future. They make predictions based on inside divine information and let people

know what's going to happen. There are such stories in the Bible, but that might not be the essence of prophetic ministry.

My Hebrew scriptures professor, Dr. Judy Fentress-Williams, said being a prophet was less about foretelling than "forth-telling." A prophet speaks truth to power. Tells forth the unjust present reality so we can't go on living in denial. Calls us on the carpet.

When people say they want a preacher to be "more prophetic," I think this is what they have in mind. They want us preachers to get blunter, harsher, maybe more political. They want us to be more willing to offend. Although I've never met anyone who wants to be more offended himself by what his preacher says. It's usually more like, "I wish you'd be more prophetic and tell God's hard unvarnished truth to my sister in Christ right over there, three pews up, just to the left. Jesus wants you to set people like her straight."

Forth-telling, bringing forth to our attention injustices we'd rather ignore, this is also part of the prophet's task. In fact, there probably is more forth-telling than foretelling.

But there's at least a third thing the great prophets do for us. They are visioners of the first order. They are the ones who provide us with clear and vibrant images, not of what's about to come to pass, and not of the world as it really is right now, but visions of wholeness and health. Visions of what shalom would look like if it ever came to pass.

Isaiah's peaceable kingdom is one such vision. Some have rightly pointed out that we're still waiting on it, all these centuries later. As a certain filmmaker who will remain nameless once said, the lion may lie down with the lamb, but the lamb is not going to get much sleep.

So, is such a vision useful? To us... who still live in a world in which wolves and lambs and pretty much everyone else seems to be at violent odds?

Some say such fanciful visioning is precisely the problem with religion. Too heavenly minded to be of any earthly good and all that. And if these visions shift us away from the present moment and into a kind of wishful thinking that anesthetizes the experience of living in the world as it is, it's probably not functioning as prophecy is meant to function.

But isn't it also true that we — maybe especially in our time — can barrel ahead with our lives without pausing to wonder what it is we're charging toward so hard? Maybe we generally believe that the life Jesus and the prophets call us to really does involve love for our neighbors and welcome for strangers. Maybe we talk about abstractions like justice and mercy, but could it help to pause and flesh out a clearer vision of what a just and merciful world actually might look like? What it would look like in the actual lives of embodied human beings with ordinary needs and longings?

Isaiah did this. He gave us a vision of a world made whole. And the first thing we might note is — I'm sorry Crosby, Stills, Nash, & Young — Isaiah's vision was not about getting back to the garden. It wasn't about a return to Eden. It was a vision of Jerusalem as a city at one with itself.

"I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people," the prophet says on behalf of God. "No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime..." He says, "They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit. They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat; for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be, and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands."

There it is! This is what we want, isn't it? For all children to live into their lives. Elders still vigorous and engaged with their communities. People inhabiting the houses they've built and enjoying the fruit of their labor. Not having their labor extracted by someone else or not having to labor at work that has no connection with well-being.

These are images of human flourishing. Before Isaiah lays out any kind of program to get us from where we are to a better world, he presents us with a vision of what wholeness looks like in the eyes of God. And this holy visioning suddenly strikes me as what our world seems so bereft of right now.

There are raging prophets everywhere screaming about what's wrong. Where are the prophets holding up images of a world made deeply right for everyone?

As you know, it's nearly impossible to ignore the brokenness of the world in downtown Memphis. I swerve through the waves of people washing across the street at 201 Poplar as I drive to my office. I see a lot of cold, hungry Memphians eating a hot meal from our kitchen here Sunday mornings and unsheltered people bedding down on the Great Hall floor for Room in the Inn a couple of times a week. This city is hurting so deeply in so many ways. Hope can be hard to come by, even as Calvary responds as Calvary has for so many years.

And it can be the same for us as individuals. We can go through seasons of pain and loss, confusion and disconnection. We can feel adrift and alone and unworthy and... fill in the blanks with your brokenness.

So, what I wonder here, today, is whether we might develop a vision of Calvary as an even fuller instance of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom in our city in the years to come.

When I see all that you do as Christian ministers I am astonished all over again. You are people of justice and kindness. In addition to food and shelter, you give away beauty and music, as you did Friday night when the Fisk Jubilee Singers sang here for free. You pray for the sick and welcome the stranger. I could go on.

While there is so much more to be done in Memphis, so much need and despair to be met, what God may be calling us to next is the question of how the various ways we live out the gospel of grace here at Calvary might be made a little more visibly one.

Here's an example. Our offices are way up on the fourth floor, as far away as one can get from most of the people of God, behind a locked elevator and a couple more locked doors. And we are invisible to one another up there down a long, long hallway of doors. Well, what if we began to imagine a vision of our block where children in school and neighbors in need, priests typing sermons, bookkeepers paying bills, chefs preparing meals, volunteers tending the clothes closet...what if we began entertaining a vision, not of Jerusalem as a city, but of Calvary as a block even more at one with itself? A place where the doings of all kinds of people were more visible to each other. A place open and accessible and available for all kinds of interactions and encounters. A block of shalom.

These may sound like secular concerns, not spiritual matters for a church to take seriously. But when Isaiah presented his vision of shalom, his vision of the holy city of Jerusalem made whole, it wasn't of a bunch of individuals having private spiritual experiences or performing personal acts of charity. He showed us a flourishing human community, people finding shelter together in houses they'd built, the young and the old living out their days, enjoying the fruits of the good work they've been given to do. Even wolf and lamb, lion and ox, finding unexpected harmony in their common life.

Such visions aren't means of escape and avoidance. They are the sorts of concrete images of flourishing you and I have to carry with us if our lives are to be made anything like whole. Images Memphis needs to return to if it's to become a city more at one with itself. Prophetic visions that Calvary could become an even fuller expression of in the years to come, if today, we set our hearts to filling them out, and then making them real.