

Scripture Texts for Synod Assembly Opening worship/ Synod-wide online Worship May 16/17, 2020

FIRST READING—DANIEL 4:10-12

A Reading from Daniel

Upon my bed this is what I saw; there was a tree at the center of the earth, and its height was great. The tree grew great and strong, its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the ends of the whole earth. Its foliage was beautiful its fruit abundant, and it provided food for all. The animals of the field found shade under it, the birds of the air nested in its branches, and from it all living beings were fed.

PSALM 119:105 -

As sung by Amy Grant

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

When I feel afraid, and I think I've lost my way, still you're there right beside me. Nothing will I fear as long as you are near. Please be near me to the end.

Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.

SECOND READING—REVELATION 21:1-6

A Reading from Revelation

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes, Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away." And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." Also he said, "Write this, for these words are trustworthy and true." Then he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give water as a gift from the spring of the water of life.

GOSPEL—MARK 8:22-26

The Holy Gospel according to Mark, the 8th chapter.

Glory to you, O Lord.

They came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village: and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, "Can you see anything?" And the man looked up and said, "I can see people, but they look like trees walking." Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, "Do not even go into the village."

The gospel of the Lord.

Praise to you, O Christ.

Be Thou My Vision Sermon by Bishop Katherine Finegan for Synod Assembly Online Worship May, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God our creator and our Lord and Savior Jesus the risen Christ.

It is a strange thing, to be in the midst of a global pandemic. This, of course, is not new to humanity. Nor is it new to the church who has survived countless plagues, influenzas, black death and more. But the thing is, this is new to us. Sure, to the historical church and to the eons of the world's experience, this is expected, a part of the pattern included in creation, barely a footnote when placed against the long line of historical record of various calamities and hardships that humanity has suffered. But to us, this generation, those who inhabit the world's stage in 2020, this is new. We have never been here before. The way forward feels unclear. Our vision is hazy. The next steps are unsure. And as we've seen things change, by the day, by the hour, sketching a plan for the future is all but impossible. We plan by best guesses while considering various scenarios of how restrictions and case spikes and economic hardships will play out. As I've said and written before, this year of 2020 is anything but. How ironic to celebrate a theme that lifts up 2020 vision when we can barely see to next week.

And truthfully, when we decided on this theme, it was true even then that the way forward was unclear. Even then, we knew we could not plan far ahead. The church was already changing, the long view of the road already had more than a few bends in it.

How even more true that is now. So how do we prepare for even one more step? How do we find a way forward? As congregations, as the Synod, as the Church together? It helps, I think, to read up on how the world and the Church has handled past plagues and pandemics. We can listen to the health experts and follow their advice. We can buy only the toilet paper we will need. These are all good things, but as people of faith, we also receive clarity when we focus on the one who can clear our eyes to see what is and gives us a vision not only of what we can become, but of how God is at work in the midst of all that feels unknown and precarious.

It is worth considering the role that vision and visions have in our scripture readings, that incidentally, were chosen last fall. In Daniel, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream that Daniel is asked to interpret. The vision is of a tree that is described in great detail. Along with Daniel and the reader, we can imagine in our mind's eye what this beautiful and strong tree looks like with abundant fruit for all and branches visible to the ends of the earth. But what it means to us is less clear. And what it means to the dreamer, to Nebuchadnezzar, it takes the prophet Daniel to interpret the dream and translate its meaning. Seeing or visualizing, even in our own imagination, does not mean understanding the message that the dream conveys.

And from Revelation, another vision. But this vision is different. It pulls us in and resonates in the soul. I think of a bow drawn over a quivering cello string, or those tuning forks that echo with sound. This glimpse of the eternal speaks hope to our grief, sparking the imagination of a time when the deepest longing of our very souls is realized and our thirst for the comforting and palpable presence of a loving God is finally satiated. It speaks of a time when we are invited to drink our fill of God. God's very own self will be with us and God will wipe every tear from our eyes, Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more.

This is the kind of vision that can pull us forward through the valley of the shadow of death. This is the kind of vision that can make current suffering and grief just a little more bearable because we know there will be an end to it, that current pain is only temporary, no matter how acute. In this vision, the perceiving of the meaning, that is, the understanding of it, is perhaps more clear than the actual seeing. And what I mean by that is, we feel the vision rather than see it. We long for it in the heart rather than behold it even in the eye of

our imagination. For who can describe such a time when death is no more? Who can comprehend it, paint its color, give it dimensions, draw it on a canvas? No, this vision, is one we embrace through faith and we know it matters because it has an effect on us in this life. This vision of the future makes how we experience the present different...lightening the load, offering comfort, generating hope and strength and patience for the challenges of this life, even as it draws us forward into eternity.

And then we come to vision and visions in the gospel of Mark. It is a curious story, as if Jesus lacked effectiveness. In nitty gritty and spitty detail, Jesus tries once and then twice to apparently get it right and have the blind man not only seeing, but understanding what it is his newly healed eyes behold. But this telling of the healing of the blind man is not to inform us that Jesus had a learning curve in his healing skills, rather Mark is clueing in the reader and us, that there is more going on in his gospel than meets the eye. Throughout Mark's gospel, the very people who have a front row seat to the teachings and miracles of Jesus are blind to who Jesus is and the mission that Jesus is on. The disciples see Jesus in living color, every day. They observe his miracles and wonders. They watch him carefully. They follow him closely. And yet seeing is not perceiving or apprehending the purpose of Jesus. No matter how much the disciples witness, in Mark the meaning and mission of Jesus is more apparent, more clearly seen by the reader than it is by the disciples.

This story of healing foreshadows another story of healing in Mark when Jesus restores sight to the blind man, Bartimaeus, who even though he was blind, could still see exactly who Jesus was. "Jesus, Son of David have mercy on me," he calls out in trust that Jesus can and will heal him. And on the first try that apparently takes no effort at all, and no spit, Jesus heals his sight, but the vision of Bartimaeus was already clear. By the end of the story, Bartimaeus who already identified the Son of David, now beholds him with his eyes. And between these two healing stories in Mark's gospel, Jesus predicts his death three times. And the disciples still don't get it. But the reader does. And so do we.

We know the whole story. We do. So as people of faith, we don't just look back at how the Church survived or thrived in a pandemic. We look at how God in Christ Jesus has acted, what new life came, how the Spirit pushed and pulled and whispered and sang the people of God into a new way of being and doing. Hear the word of the Lord again, from Revelation, "And the one who was seated on the throne said, "See, I am making all things new." We are being made new, as individuals as we learn new ways of learning about and practicing our faith. As congregations as we are forced to utilize technology in ways that more readily connect our people to each other and to the study of scriptures. I continue to be impressed and blessed by the innovation of pastors and leaders in our synod. There is no shortage of online devotions, Bible studies, Coffee fellowship, worship, sermons, anyone with a computer or a smart phone has a smorgasbord of solid and engaging opportunities for study, learning, and spiritual refreshment. And anyone without reliable internet, I know pastors have made the extra effort, sending out hard copy resources through snail mail to provide people with devotions, sermons, an encouraging word, a phone call prayer. ( I'm preaching to a camera. That's new!) But there is blessing in even that.

So...Be Thou My Vision 2020? Maybe. If vision is seeing, then I'm afraid the truth is, we are blind. But if vision is perceiving, apprehending, longing for and feeling the presence of God with the heart and mind and soul, then that is where the Spirit of Christ will call you, shape and prune you, comfort you in your grief, quiet the fears of your heart, and pull you through this dark pandemic valley, into new life. The road is neither easy, nor straight, but it is the road we are travelling together, not alone, but with each other, and with Jesus the Christ, the son of the living God who is the vision that pulls us forward into the future that will be. Thanks be to God. Amen.