

“Seeing the Future with Eyes of Faith”

Valley Presbyterian Church – January 28, 2018

4th Sunday after Epiphany

Psalm 111

Rev. John Wahl

Ephesians 1:15-23

Each Sunday, during the time in the service where we offer ourselves and our gifts to God in response to the Word of good news that we have heard and received, we sing a doxology of thanksgiving. In glorifying God’s magnificent gifts of creation, revelation, mercy and grace, we proclaim that giving of ourselves for God and God’s people is our reason for being.

This section of Paul’s letter is about thanksgiving. “I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in prayers,” (v. 16) the author writes. He mentions the things the Ephesians are doing that cause him to be grateful: their faith in Jesus and their love towards all the saints. But the doxology is directed not to the letter’s recipients, but to God for stimulating the church’s acts of hope and love. Paul is grateful for their faith, but not satisfied with it; he is hopeful that God would grant them more knowledge, more wisdom, more understanding, more hope.¹

Paul does not deny things that exist within the church such as divisions, the fragility of peace, the “bitterness and wrath and anger, the slander and malice” (4:31) that are part of the diseased and disfigured world that we inhabit. But, he also assures us that Jesus is Lord over every power and authority in his and every time to come. What a powerful message this would have been to Ephesian Christians in the first century. For no matter how absolute Caesar’s power may have seemed, Jesus was above him. We, too, need to hear the comfort and challenge that no human authority will win the day. Not the military, not the market economy, not racism or tribalism; Jesus reigns over all.

In this passage, Paul prays specifically that God would give his Ephesian friends a spirit of wisdom and revelation as they come to know God; that the “eyes of their hearts will be enlightened” (v. 17); “so that you may know,” he writes,

¹ Amy Peeler from *WorkingPreacher.com*

“what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power for us to believe.” (v. 18-19)

Hope is not always comforting or comfortable. Hope asks us to open ourselves to what we do not know; to imagine what is beyond our imagining, even to bear what sometimes seems unbearable. It calls us to turn to one another when we might prefer to turn away. “Hope,” writes Jan Richardson, “draws our eyes and hearts toward a more whole future but propels us also into the present, where Christ waits for us to work with him toward a more whole world now.”²

This Sunday is the day of our Annual Meeting – a day that we look back to assess the year that has passed, and look forward to imagine the year that is beginning; but also to take a look at the present: to offer thanksgiving for God’s great gifts that we experience here and now. As we thumb through the annual report, we are reminded of the amazing ways that God blesses us and calls us to live together in worship, fellowship and mission; to live our lives with Christ toward a community and world of abundance, filled with doxology; today and tomorrow.

One of the wonderful aspects of life is that along with the ability to remember the past and to analyze the present, we have the capacity to project ourselves into the future. Wherever we are marrying and raising families, learning and teaching new ideas, preparing for vocations or retirements, there is investment, affirmation and trust in the future. Try as we might, we are able neither to live simply in and for the moment, nor to rest comfortably in the accomplishments of the past. To be human is to dream of a future: to hope for it, to plan for it, and to dedicate our energies to the accomplishment of particular dreams and goals.

Jeremiah 29:11 reads: “For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.” The courage to trust in the future comes not from confidence in our own abilities and resources, but from confidence in the faithfulness of God to fulfill God’s promises.

This is now the tenth year that I will moderate the annual meeting for this congregation. Over that time, I have witnessed many things change, and others stay the same. Many members have come and joined; others have moved or passed away. Children have grown, traditions have been formed or carried on;

² Jan Richardson, “So That You May Know the Hope”

new programs have begun or ended. You have walked with me through my separation and divorce, then engagement, marriage and the blending of new family. Together, we have built houses, planted gardens, reclaimed a dormant manse, and have now repurposed a venerable barn.

Many of these things, I could not have dreamt or imagined a decade ago. I'm sure that you can say the same about the ways that you and your families have been transformed over the same time period. Before we could anticipate what they might be, God had plans for us, plans for welfare and not for harm, for a future with hope.

The ways in which we anticipate the future are shaped by our vision of what is really real. Our reality consists of more than just what we can see with our eyes or touch with our hands in the present. Our future is not determined only by what we can achieve today; limited by the facts, figures and trends of our current situation.

We see the future differently because of God's promises that are received by faith. To have hope is to imagine something new that does not presently exist. As a Christian community, our vision of the future can and must be imaginative and hope-filled, not limited or determined wholly by facts, figures and current trends.³

During the November deacon's brunch, we held table conversations focused on the topic of *Tell Me a Story...* a time to share memories about how Valley has played a part in shaping our lives of faith. As I listened to the stories being shared, I was struck by the depth of emotional investment; how much this congregation and its faith matters: to those of us who were present, to our family members and neighbors, to this community and the wider world.

This year, we will continue on this *Journey of Renewal* with a number of other programs and practices which will be focused on visioning for our church's future. In order to do this faithfully, it will be important to renew a vision of what is really real in the first place: seeing the world as the creation of a loving God who will not leave us to our sometimes misguided and rebellious ways, but is faithful to God's promise for an abundant life and a future of hope.

This is the special vision that God grants to the church by, as Paul ways, "enlightening the eyes of our heart." (v. 18) Seeing with the eyes of faith enables us to think the unthinkable and imagine the unimaginable. With the eyes of faith

³ "Seeing the Future with Eyes of Faith" from Center for Parish Development

we are given the ability to visualize God's dream for our future as a church and a people.

This *Journey of Renewal* will require the participation of the whole community if we are to truly see with the eyes of faith. There will be opportunities for involvement for everyone in the church: some on Sunday mornings, some at other times; some as a corporate body, some in small groups or at future table gatherings. To do this faithfully, we will need to practice spiritual discernment: sometimes this will take longer or be more uncomfortable than we might hope, but it all starts with doxology: with our song of thanksgiving that Christ is Lord, meaning that he is above all other power and authority. Instead of rushing to judgement, or relying too much on our own ideas and actions, the process of renewal invites seeking and waiting upon the Holy Spirit in prayer, patience, and humble expectation.

And so today, as we look back upon a year that has passed and forward to a new year that is just beginning at Valley, we give thanks for the faith of this congregation and for its many acts of love and compassion. And we pray that God might give us the spirit of wisdom; that we might live into our calling to make our lives and the lives of those around us more joyful, more grateful, and more faithful. In our worship and our work, we seek to be God's people with a vision for a future with hope. This is God's plan for us: a plan that is well worth the time and the effort and even the discomfort to faithfully discern. AMEN.