

“A Breathtaking Vision”
Exodus 3:1-12. Acts 16: 6-10
First Congregational Camden Maine

Rev. Paul Nickerson
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It is a delight to be with you here in Camden. I visited with a group of your leaders in June as we discussed how God is calling this church into the future. This weekend, I have met with leaders around vision, stewardship, and how churches reach new people. I invite you to stay after worship to hear more about this. This afternoon I will be meeting with some of the younger families in the church and then later talking with a group about hospitality and discipleship. All of these gatherings are pointing toward a process of discernment for 2020. Thank you for the privilege of walking with you on this journey.

Let us pray

This morning, we are going to talk about how God gives us vision for our future and what a difference it makes. First, when God plants a vision in us, it is usually bigger than we had imagined. Look at our story in Exodus. Can you imagine how Moses felt, thinking he was safely tucked away in Midian, when God suddenly lays this whopper of future on him: *“You are going to go back to Egypt, take your people out of slavery, lead them in the wilderness on their way to a new land and new life of promise.”* I am sure Moses was thinking, *“you want me to do what?”* Isn't it understandable that Moses would almost immediately start making excuses why he couldn't do it, because the vision seemed so much larger than him.

And you see that is what happens when God plants a vision in us. It should make you gasp because God gives God's people large visions. I coach a United Methodist congregation in Ohio. This church had about 150 people in worship, two full-time ministers, finances that were stable and a building that was in reasonable repair. It would have been very easy for this church to sit back and say, *“let's keep everything the same; we're fine”*. But God planted a vision in that church. That vision was of a segment of the population they were not reaching; a population for whom traditional worship, and a traditional building would not be relevant. So, they stepped out in faith and began a new service, renting space in a barn on the country fair grounds. In fact, they have to vacate the building two weeks during the summer County Fair when the barn is filled with pigs! (You can imagine what the space smells like the first Sunday after the Fair!). The Associate Pastor started networking in the community gathering people who were interested in an alternative worship style. Musicians were recruited and leadership teams were formed. Now, about 2 years after God planted that dream, The Bridge, as this service is called, has a worship attendance equal to the traditional service. People are coming to the faith and the impact of that church has in the community has greatly increased. The church could have come up with many excuses not to follow this vision which seemed overwhelming and daunting. But they listened to God's vision, and took a step out in faith.

When we ask God, “where do you want us to go”, God responds with some audacious plans. Mark Batterson, who started a new church in Washington DC, said it best: *If you have never had a God-sized dream that scared you half to death, then you really haven't come to life. If you have never been overwhelmed by the impossibility of your plans, then your God is too small”.*

My hope for you First Church, is that in the days ahead that you will catch the Spirit of what God is calling you to do. I hope it takes your breath away because the vision is challenging and can only be done if God is in it with you.

A second thing that happens when God plants a vision, is it gives us the energy and excitement to live out God's plan. The Apostle Paul had been attempting to plant new churches but the Spirit wasn't in it. But then one night, Paul received a vision; a man from Macedonia waving him over to his shore to start a congregation. Paul couldn't get there fast enough. In the years ahead, Paul would be beaten, imprisoned, shipwrecked, taunted and harassed as well as overcoming the reputation he had as a church persecutor, not church planter. You would have thought that at some point, Paul would have just decided it was too hard and would have given up. But that vision burned bright in Paul, and it propelled him forward, and against all odds, he planted new churches around the Mediterranean. What a difference that energized determination made; we wouldn't be here if Paul hadn't lived out that vision.

I coach a small congregation in Warsaw, Virginia. Now Warsaw is a small town and when I say small, it's the kind of place that when you get there, you don't even know you're there. And the church is located in a county that is losing population. And there in the middle of this stands Warsaw United Methodist Church, with all of 25 people. And yet God planted a vision in that church that they were going to bless lots of people and grow that church. They began by taking prayer walks and seeing their community like Jesus sees it. They began a practice called 'Love Wednesdays", where each week they would take lunch to a different group in town; teachers, postal workers, different businesses, and just thank them for being in the community. They had a booth at the County Fair and moved their Easter Egg Hunt to the Park and had a float in the town Christmas parade. And today, three years later, that church, against all odds, is now worshipping over 100. What a difference that church is making in its community. That is my hope for you my friends, that you will discern such a compelling vision from God that it will propel you forward and give you the energy and determination to live it out. You will have opportunities in this next year to discuss, pray and dream. You will undoubtedly come up with some wonderfully creative and challenging ways to address your future. It is my hope that you will catch the fire of the Spirit and be propelled into that future.

And I am here today to say that the opportunities are great. What a wonderful time this is to be part of a church! We are surrounded by a mission field in which less than 10% of people attend worship. Think of the opportunities. We live in a time when compassionate, caring people of faith are so desperately needed for a society that is

divided and hurting. Imagine the ministry and mission we can do. So, come join in on this journey and listen and pray. Let us together catch God's vision that will take our breath away and propel us into a future of faith and service. Let us be transformed into all that God calls us to be.

Amen.

Gratefully,
Rev. Paul Nickerson