

DISCOVERING GOD: BANKING ON GOD'S VISION
LAMENTATIONS 3:22-33
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We are in the fourth and final sermon of our series “discovering God.” Years ago Daniel Berrigan, talking about the Bible, said that the Bible for him was a treasure house of clues—indicators of God’s presence in the world.

Berrigan read the Bible by picking up these clues and applying them to his own life. Whether you agree with the politics of the Jesuit priest or not, his way of reading the Bible was very good.

In fact, it resonates with Martin Luther’s reading of the Bible on this Reformation Sunday. Luther simply took the biblical story as authoritative for his personal life and the life of the church. If it doesn’t conform to the Bible, said Luther, whatever it is it does not belong to Christ.

The biblical clues or hints we’ve been considering these past weeks are: God’s track record, God’s rules, last week God’s heart. Today—God’s vision.

When we talk about God’s vision we are talking about something that permeates the entire Bible. God’s dream for the human family is in every book and on every page from Genesis to Revelation.

But like looking at a Rembrandt we lose touch with the power and meaning of the painting if we overanalyze and dissect every square inch. At some point we have to step back and let the masterpiece seep into our heart and soul. Sometimes we can be confounded by the details and literary forms of the Bible and lose touch with its unifying vision. But then we need to step back and reacquaint ourselves with its overarching theme—like letting a great painting speak to us.

God’s unifying vision is simple. God creates heavens and earth, delights in the beauty of it all, wants someone to share it with, creates man, realizes man is lonely, creates woman. God realizes that the only way he can share creation with man and woman is if man and woman are free agents.

This is where the story turns from fantasy to romance. In Adam and Eve God has created fully equipped versions of the human male and female. We have everything it takes to enjoy God and delight in each other and creation: the capacity for faithfulness, honesty, patience, kindness, sacrifice. Every one of us.

But one thing is missing. We are equipped, not programmed. God did not program us to function the way he wants us to. God realized if our fidelity was going to mean anything it had to be by choice. So instead of a computer chip God gave us hearts and minds for discerning. And this is where the Bible becomes a romance because it is an epic story about the affairs of the heart between God and God’s people. Despite our capacity to be human we choose what is less than human. We choose our own way. The rest of the Bible from the story of Noah and the flood is account after account of God’s desperately trying to win our hearts back again.

This vision gets expressed in lots of places: the many covenants of Genesis; the concluding lines of every prophet restating God's promise for reunion and restoration.

But the high point of God's vision is found in the Gospel of John when Jesus says to his disciples before his arrest and crucifixion:

“because I live you will live also; then you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me and I in you. The one who receives my commands and obeys them will love me; and the one who loves me will be loved by my Father; and I will love and disclose myself to that person.”

What Jesus is saying is that God's vision will be accomplished. You and I and God and Jesus will dwell together one day to fully understand and appreciate one another. To honor and love one another.

It is amazing to me when I step back from the little frustrations or big worries of my life and realize what this God, who can have anything, wants is nothing more than precisely you and me. Wants to be where we are. Wants to be a part of the excitement and humdrum of our lives, wants to share the concerns that fill our hearts—our joys, sorrows, hopes and longings.

That is the core vision of the Bible, the core vision of God.

Let's shift to Lamentations. Lamentations is a book of five poems, laments of the prophet Jeremiah when the kingdom of Babylon crushed the southern kingdom of Judah.

Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann commenting on today's passage points us to the few verses immediately preceding it: “he has made my teeth grind on gravel, and made me cower in the ashes; my soul is bereft of peace, I have forgotten what happiness is; so I say, ‘Gone is my glory, and my expectation from the Lord. Remember my affliction and bitterness, the wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me.’”

Brueggemann's point is God's vision arises out of the most dire of human circumstances; like a flower growing in the cracked cement of a sidewalk.

The mentor of Martin Luther King, Jr., a very wise man Dr. Howard Thurman once said, “the fact is inescapable: there are qualities hidden deep within the very texture of the human spirit that can only be laid bare—that they may grow and be fruitful—by the most terrific flailings of desperate adversity.”

We are like the seeds of those magnificent desert wildflowers. After lying dormant for fifteen years they break open when a torrential downpour creates flash floods that send the seeds crashing against rocks. Or the jack pine whose seed-pods only open and germinate in the extreme heat of forest fires.

God's vision germinates in the human heart in the most dire of circumstances.

We see it again and again. Abraham on Mt. Moriah. Jonah in the belly of the whale. Job out of the ashes of his life. Daniel and his friends under the boot of Babylonian oppression. The writer of the Book of Revelation who says in the midst of severe loss, “God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.”

This dimension of the human spirit blossoms when all else has been torn away.

I am talking not only about qualities like endurance but also about tenderness and courage and boundless affection released in the human heart in the fierce struggle of life. These qualities emerge when there is nothing more adversity can do. It is as if a strange halo surrounded us in great tribulation and shines in transcendent glory. It conveys to those who see it that something eternal has been reached and revealed.

Like the aura surrounding Rosa Parks the day she decided to get on the bus and take a seat at the front. They tried to intimidate her and move her to the back of the bus but she said, clearly without malice, "I'm too tired to go to the back. I'll stay right here, thank you very much."

Or today in Jeremiah's third poem from Lamentations after those verses of despair the poet proclaims, "the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness. The Lord is my portion, therefore I will hope in him."

Let me state it again. The human soul blossoms in fullness and strength when two things happen: first, when adversity has torn away all of the props and supports we use to make ourselves independent and distant from God; and second when the vision of God to dwell with God's people seeps into our souls because we can no longer hold it at bay. At that moment our capacity to be fully human, like a dormant seed, explodes with life.

We concluded our adult education series today on the missional church. One difference between the conventional church and the missional church is this: when visitors say to the pastor "we want to join your church and participate in your programs" the conventional church pastor and members believe that's what visitors really want.

The missional church pastor and members know that this is not true. They know this because they carefully listen in the coffee shops and bakeries and boutiques of the community.

What people hunger for is not a church to belong to but a community to find new life. A place to discover a God who will heal their brokenness.

It is Reformation Sunday. The Presbyterian motto for this day is, "The Church Reformed, Always Reforming." The genius of that mantra is the church re-forms in every age to meet the needs and demands it faces.

The challenge before the church today, the Presbyterian Church USA and Westminster Presbyterian Church is to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us into a community where the struggle for life is a given, where humans experiencing adversity open their lives to God's vision for healing and new life.

Such a church does well to drop the mantra of image: that everything is 'fine, just fine'; and adopt the mantra of Lamentations today: 'God's love is steadfast forever, his mercies have no end, great is God's faithfulness.'

The church that trusts God's vision for individuals and communities sends a clear signal to the world:

we are here not for you to belong to one more organization but to experience God's new life and share it with as many in our community as we can. Amen.