

“God’s Vision of Hope”

A sermon by the Rev. Jim Bell

Duke Memorial United Methodist Church
Durham, NC

10:55 a.m. Sunday, September 3, 2006

Text: Jeremiah 29:10-14 Romans 15:4-13 NRSV

Opening prayer: O God, quiet the distractions of our minds and calm the anxieties of our hearts, so that we may only hear your voice during this time of worship. In Jesus’ name, we pray. Amen.

Harvard ophthalmologists report that our eyes have the greatest concentration of complexity of any organ in our body. Millions of electrical connections handle over 1 ½ million messages simultaneously. Each one of us moves our eyes more than 100,000 times a day. If we exercised the muscles of our legs as much as our eye muscles, we would have to walk 50 miles a day.

As we use our eyes, focus them, and receive these images through our lens onto the retina where millions and millions of receptors flash them to the brain at a speed of more than 300 miles an hour, we can see. What a miracle!

Sometimes sight begins to dim, and dimness steals across a person’s eyes. Vision is fading, and blindness is approaching. Even now we can rejoice, for God has made it possible for people to go to an ophthalmologist. In a 30-minute surgical procedure, we can have a diseased cataract removed, so that sight is restored.

This same kind of miracle can happen when we begin to lose our “spiritual vision,” when we find ourselves losing our spiritual sensitivity, our awareness, and our

ability to dream dreams and know that God is leading us. It is marvelous to go to God, the Great Physician and experience the healing touch that restores our spiritual sight. We again have the ability to see God's will and purpose.

I believe that is now happening at our church. We are seeking to claim God's vision for us. God's vision for us is a vision for hope. Our hope is in the Lord. When we focus on the Lord, we have hope.

Helen Lemmel puts it this way in a familiar chorus, "Turn your eyes upon Jesus, look full in his wonderful face, and the things of earth will grow strangely dim in the light of his glory and grace." Our earthly troubles fade when we consider the wonder of Jesus Christ.

The life, teachings and ministry of Jesus are good news. We can rejoice in that Good News. In 490 B.C. one of the decisive battles of history was fought. The Persian army, under King Darius, attacked the Greek city-state of Athens. Although the Athenian army was outnumbered 2 to 1, they decisively defeated the Persians in the Battle of Marathon, 26 miles from Athens. The Athenian general, Miltiades, feared that the Persian ships would then go and attack Athens by sea. He was afraid that the city might surrender without knowing of the victory at Marathon. So he selected Pheidipides (Try saying that sometime!), his fastest runner, to carry news of the victory to Athens – 26 miles away.

Pheidipides raced to Athens. When he reached the city, he gasped out, "Nike!" which means, "Rejoice. We conquer." Now you know where the name of that athletic brand comes from. Some people telling this story get confused and say that Pheidipides

said, “Adidas!” But he didn’t. The word was “Nike! Rejoice!” That’s the word for Christians. We rejoice in God’s good news. That gives us hope.

The apostle Paul writes, “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope.” (Romans 15:4) We have hope by steadfastness – by refusing to give up and by hanging in there with God. We have hope by the encouragement of the scriptures. The Bible is a record of God’s faithfulness to people for thousands of years. We discover in the Bible how much God loves us. That gives us hope.

We also have hope when God fills us with joy and peace in believing. (15:13) Dr. William Barclay once wrote, “Remember the love of God that wants the best for us, the wisdom of God that knows what is best for us, and the power of God that can accomplish it.” When we consider these truths, we have joy and peace in believing God. This gives us hope.

God’s vision for us is a vision of hope. That vision of hope is most important in tough times.

There was a young boy who went to a supermarket. He asked a clerk for a box of Tide detergent. The clerk said, “Son, what do you need detergent for?” The young boy answered, “I want to wash my dog.” The clerk replied, “Well, son, that Tide detergent is pretty strong for washing a little dog.” The boy said, “That’s what I want.” The clerk said, “Alright.” He sold him the detergent. Then he said, “Now, you be careful when you wash your dog. That detergent is very strong. It might kill him.” The little boy said, “I’ll be careful.”

He took the box of detergent home. About a week later the boy returned to the store. The clerk recognized him and asked, "Son, how's your dog." The boy replied, "I'm afraid he's dead." The clerk replied, "Oh, I'm sorry, but I did try to warn you that the Tide was pretty strong to wash your dog." The little boy shook his head and said, "I don't think it was the Tide that did it. I think it was the rinse cycle that got him."

Sometimes we feel like we have been through the rinse cycle, don't we?

One of the darkest times in the history of the Hebrew people was when they were exiled to Babylon. They were taken away from their homeland in chains to become slaves in a foreign country. Even during such a horrible experience, the Lord has hopeful plans for his people. Jeremiah writes, "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."

(Jeremiah 29:11)

The author of Lamentations puts it this way, "The thought of my affliction and my homelessness is wormwood and gall! My soul continually thinks of it and is bowed down within me. But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning. Great is your faithfulness. 'The Lord is my portion,' says my soul, 'therefore I will hope in him.'" (Lamentations 3:19-24)

I traveled last May with the mission team from our church to Pascagoula, Mississippi, to participate in relief efforts from Hurricane Katrina. We witnessed some incredible devastation. We also experienced an attitude of hope from Pat Wilson, Ann Briggs and others. Even though they were still living in FEMA trailers, they were hoping

for better days ahead. They were not giving up. Undergirding that hope was courage, determination and an abiding faith in God. They knew that God was with them.

Paul wrote the Romans, “If God is for us, who is against us?” When God is for us, it doesn’t matter who is against us. It could be hurricanes or floods or sickness or the death of loved one, or the loss of a job, or broken relationships. God is for us.

We plan to unveil the proposed mission and vision of our church next Sunday, September 10. This vision will be a vision of hope for the future because we worship a God of hope.

This vision of hope does not discount the sufferings and difficulties of this world. Jesus once told his disciples, “In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.” (John 16:33) The enduring, sustaining hope of the Gospel that we share is this – the Good News of a Savior who has triumphed over our sin, the world, and even death itself, and who invites us to share in his victory through faith in him.

Every time we celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we are celebrating the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ our Lord. As you come to receive the elements today, celebrate Jesus’ victory and God’s vision of hope for your life. Amen.