

Acts 5:42; Habakkuk 2:2-3
Envisioning the New Normal
WRCoB 4.13.21

My oldest son, Matthew, in his third year of college
Studied at the University of Strasbourg in France.

He went through Brethren Colleges Abroad..

We went to visit him.

Visiting the cathedral was a highlight for me.

1 (Cathedral)

For over 200 years it stood as the tallest building in the world
At 466 feet.

Imagine building something that tall in the Middle Ages?

They started building in 1176
Almost a thousand years ago
And finished in 1439.

It took 263 years to build.

In fact, they started building
When the architectural style was Romanesque
And finished in the Gothic style!

Imagine working as a stone mason for the project.

Maybe your dad, granddad and great granddad
All worked as stone masons on the project.

Actually, if you think about it
If a generation is 25 years
It would have taken 10 generations
To build the cathedral.

I can't imagine how hard it would be
To maintain focus on such a big project.

Take three stone masons for instance.

Ask the first one, what he is doing.

And his response might be
What's it look like I'm doing? I'm laying stone!

Ask the second man, what he is doing

And he might respond with, *I'm building a wall!*

But you might ask the third man the same question.

And his response might be
I am building a magnificent cathedral for the glory of God!

Of the three, which mason kept focused?

Those who held the vision throughout
Put their heart and soul in it.

Knowing they were building the tallest cathedral in the world
For the glory of God.

Even in the midst of those 263 years of building
Even with big changes in the style of architecture.

The vision was kept alive.

Because the builders not only saw their present work
But they envisioned its completion.

2

In such beautiful irony, Helen Keller wrote, *the most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight but has no vision.*

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It is easy to lose hope during turbulent times.

Consequently, it is vital to maintain vision.

Kris Vallotton, writes in an article

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*Vision is a bridge between the present and the future.
Vision separates the small from the great.*

The Book of Proverbs reminds us
Where there is no vision the people perish.

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We are living in pandemic times.

Prayerfully, we will move beyond this pandemic
Into another era.

We will view history in terms
Of pre-pandemic and post-pandemic times.

That's how big an impact the corona virus has had.

Before the pandemic our congregation had big plans

We went through a process of self-identification

And strategic planning

And were moving in a certain direction.

There was all kinds of energy and excitement.

And then the pandemic hit.

Those big plans came to a screeching halt.

Now that we are approaching life beyond pandemic

Has the vision we had for the church changed?

Do the goals we were establishing in pre-pandemic times

Still apply today?

We were moving in a certain direction.

I ask, is that the direction God is still calling us toward?

Perhaps we need to consider things where we are today.

6 (Statue)

It reminds me of a sculpture by Gion Lorenzo Bernini

Located in Chigi Chapel

At the Basilica of Santa Maria del Popolo in Rome.

It is Habakkuk, the author of our first reading.

He is seated on a rock
With his lunch basket at his side
Pointing towards the direction he wants to go.

The angel above him, though, is pulling his hair
And pointing him in another direction.

Perhaps this is the scenario we face today.

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The Old Testament Lesson found in Habakkuk
Reflects the need for a short, concise, vision.

Ideally, everyone should know it, live it, and share it.

According to Christianity Today

A vision is the rallying point for everything the church does.

So whether you serve on the Witness, Stewards
Nurture or Christian Education Commissions

Whether you're an usher, worship leader, or sing in the choir
Everything one does relates to the vision.

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The CT article mentions six things a corporate vision does

1. A vision encourages unity
2. A vision creates energy
3. A vision provides purpose
4. A vision fosters risk-taking
5. A vision enhances leadership
6. A vision promotes excellence.

Based on the words of Habakkuk
God's vision has four components.

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Habakkuk 2:2-3 CEV

² Then the Lord told me: “**I will give you my message in the form of a vision.** Write it clearly enough to be read at a glance. ³ At the time I have decided, my words will come true. You can trust what I say about the future. It may take a long time, but keep on waiting—it will happen!

The first part of a vision is what God calls the church to.

It is the unique call God has
For a particular group of believers.

Certain aspects of it will be the same as in all churches.

But it should contain qualities
That are unique to a congregation and its context.

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Secondly, a vision should be written concisely
Something easily understood and easily quoted.

Once created it should be highly visible and often used.

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Thirdly, a vision should include a future reality
Found in God’s redemptive plan for humanity

It should clearly state the hope we have in Christ Jesus
And Christ’s future kingdom’s reign.

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Finally, a vision includes the trust we have in God
As we work together as the body of Christ.

We should be patient in achieving it.

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Though our second reading from the Book of Acts
Is not a vision, per se
It was what the early church focused on.

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Acts 5:42 (CEV)

42 Every day they spent time in the temple and in one home after another. They never stopped teaching and telling the good news that Jesus is the Messiah.

We should never forget that proclaiming
The good news of Jesus Christ in word and deed
Is always front and center.

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The pandemic has disrupted our lives
And it changes who we are as a church.

And in a post-pandemic era
To say we simply go back to normal is a delusion.

I don't think we can ever go back to who we were.

The pandemic changes the way we do church
The way we do outreach
The way we do fellowship
And the way we view place and space.

God is calling us to envision the new normal.

The new normal assumes
Church attendance includes in-person and online.

It knows there will be anonymous participants.
In our community of faith.

The new normal shapes worship and fellowship differently
In light of health and safety risks.

No one really knows what the new normal looks like
But it will not be “business as usual”.

13 (Facebook screenshot)

For instance, of the 388 “likes” on our Facebook page
58 come from the Richmond, Virginia
37 comes from Jos, Nigeria
And 19 comes from Waterloo, Iowa.

How does the church minister to such a diverse group?
Or, we should ask, are we even called to?

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As individuals who trust in Jesus
Gathered as the collective assembly called church
We have a story to tell.

We tell the story of how God in Jesus has come to us.
How we have been transformed by faith in Him.

Our story comes out of the story in Scripture
Of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

It comes out of the story of God’s redeeming work
From Genesis to Revelation.

And it is our story and we are called to share it!

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As we seque into a post-pandemic era
We need to reassess
Who we are, where we are
And in what direction we are to go.

We need to come together as the church
To begin a conversation
On how to be the church in today's context.

How should we respond to the current crises we face?

The strife of racism
The disparities between rich and poor
Violence in all areas of our lives.

How can the church be the herald of hope
In such turbulent times?

What does the church look like
Building God's kingdom in 2021 and beyond?

These are the questions we must be asking ourselves.

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May God grant us not to be like Habakkuk
Pointing in one direction
While the angel of God is pulling our hair
And pointing us in another.

Rephrasing Helen Keller

The most pathetic church in the world
Is a church that can see but has no vision.

God will bless our church with a new vision.

Let us, together, envision the new normal
For the glory of God and our neighbors' good.