

“Realizing God’s Vision”

a message by Dr. Bruce Havens

based on the theme, “LIVING THE QUESTIONS”

Arlington Congregational Church, U.C.C.

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Luke 4:14-21 [NRSV]

¹⁴Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. ¹⁶When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

In his book, *The Source*, James Michener tells the story of a Canaanite village in pre-biblical days. The time was 2,200 years before Christ, and the Canaanites in that village worshiped a number of earth gods and goddesses. It was a fertility religion, and among the numerous gods was the goddess Astarte. Every home had voluptuous clay figurines of Astarte and her male companions. These people practiced human sacrifice to the god Malek. They believed that if they sacrificed their first-born sons, the gods would be so pleased that they would make the people more fertile. Part of the religion provided for temple prostitutes by the priests to the men of the village as part of their fertility rites.

A woman named Timna is the protagonist in Michener’s story. She

cannot accept the sacrifice of her first-born son, nor can she accept the behavior of her husband with a particularly young and erotic temple prostitute.

Michener writes: “Timna, still grieving for her son, watched the performance dispassionately and muttered, ‘What folly! The fertility is in the soil. It is in me’.” While some of the villagers celebrated, she walked home. She saw life in new and painful clarity; with different gods her husband Urbaal would have been a different man. In recognizing that, she goes into his godroom, looks with disgust at the four Astartes, and begins to smash them along with their male companions. With a different god, he would have been a different man.

In the Living the Questions resource it says, “According to John Dominic Crossan, one of the most pressing questions for 21st Century Christians is, ‘What is the Character of Your God?’ The character of the God in whom we place our allegiance shapes our character as people of faith.” If we consider the vision of our God then we will know the character of our God.

We may think that because we believe that there is one God that this is not an issue. But the very fact that there are so many different denominations and different beliefs even within those denominations prove that not everyone in Christianity worships the same God. That doesn’t even begin to include other religions. So, despite what we, or other Christians may believe, there is no pure perfect religion or belief because they are all developed by humans, even those who believe that somehow they believe the Bible is inerrant or that they somehow only believe in its literal meanings.

I heard an architect say once that first we shape the building and then the building shapes us. I believe the same is true in theology and religion. First we shape the theology and then the theology shapes us. All theology, all religion is a human attempt to describe the god it wants to worship and serve. So in a very real sense we choose our gods. That isn’t to say there is more than one actual God, it is to say because we are human we are incapable of fully and completely and perfectly describing that God with our human words of theology. This means the words we choose describe God to the best of our ability and in so doing the words and actions we use to describe, to

worship, and to serve that God define or shape that God’s character. What we believe about that God’s character will shape us. We have to decide what the character is of the God we choose.

This morning we come to the end of the series on Living the Questions. It has asked us to consider hard questions of faith and be open to the fact that there are no easy answers and few simple ones. Today our topic is “Realizing God’s Vision.” It seems an appropriate culmination to the series as we move toward Holy Week and the celebration of the resurrection.

Our challenge is asking ourselves how do we know what God’s vision is? The obvious answer is that we read it in Scripture. That seems simple, but it is not always easy. I want to suggest to you this morning that this passage of Scripture represents God’s vision for us. Here’s why: We believe that Jesus was sent as God’s representative, we talk about how he was God’s son, how God’s love is revealed in him. We would expect that whatever Jesus goes about doing is part of God’s vision. This passage acts as a kind of “mission and vision” statement for Jesus.

Jesus has just returned from his own time in the wilderness, what Native Americans might call his “vision quest.” The Scriptures say he was “filled with the power of the Spirit.” In other words he was full of God. He goes into church and is the guest preacher for the day. They give him the Scriptures to read – Isaiah the prophet – and he reads it and announces that he is the fulfillment of that Scripture. In other words he is

laying claim to that passage as his purpose statement, what we would call a mission or vision statement. So let's look at what Jesus' vision was to better understand God's vision.

Someone once said if you want to know what went on in the mind of Jesus you have to read the Old Testament. After all, that was the only Bible Jesus knew. That was probably the only book he ever read. In quoting this Fleming Rutledge points out that Jesus' vision statement here is consistent with the prophets of the Old Testament. He points out that the concept of justice was central to their message and it was interchangeable with the words righteous and holy. I would suggest to you that we have taken those words and used them to mean something less. We have made them about personal sin and in the process forgotten how those things are more than that. They speak of how sin, injustice, unrighteousness, and unholiness is just as much about what we do as a community, as a people, as a nation as it is about our personal peccadilloes and failures.

In the most strident voices of contemporary Christianity the emphasis is all on the individual. It is about your personal relationship with a personal God who is concerned only about your personal sins. Generally the suggestion seems to be that this is actually limited only to the most personal of arenas, our sexual behavior. Faithfulness becomes limited to personal purity in matters of sexuality as opposed to acting justly and compassionately in ones business, social, and governmental responsibilities.

But, Rutledge points out that, "In those Hebrew Scriptures, there are a few ideas that predominate, and of these themes, there is none more central than that of the justice of God, also called his righteousness. God is righteous, just, holy: these words are used interchangeably with his name. The prophet Isaiah says, "The Lord of hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness." Wherever justice is administered, the Lord himself is present: When the king appointed judges in Israel, this is what he said to them: 'Consider what you do, for the Lord is with you in giving judgment. Let the fear of the Lord be upon you; take heed what you do, for there is no perversion of justice with the Lord our God, no partiality, no taking bribes.'" "

Rutledge goes on to say, "One of the best-known passages in the Old Testament reminds us that justice is an indispensable aspect of a godly life. The prophet Micah: "He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?" Notice how in this famous text, justice and mercy are brought together as equals with no suggestion that they are contradictory. And here is the point: justice and mercy are two foundational aspects of God's character. Working out the relation between the two is an essential task...."¹

Here is how I understand Jesus to have worked that out. He says he has

¹ Fleming Rutledge, "The Justice and Righteousness of God," Program #5022, March 25, 2007, 30GoodMinutes.org

been sent to “preach good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” It seems to me that he is proclaiming the character of his God. That character appears to be one that is concerned for the poor, the captive, the blind, and the oppressed. It is very tempting to worship a God whose approval is measured by how blessed we are monetarily and materially. We seem to fall into the temptation of believing that God does not love us if we are poor, captive, blind, or oppressed. The good news of Jesus Christ appears to be that we are just as beloved and blessed by God if we are not “healthy, wealthy, and wise.”

If that is indeed Jesus’ vision, and we have said that he represents God’s vision then I think we can safely say this reflects God’s character. If that is the case then it appears safe and correct theologically to say that God’s vision is what we ought to work to fulfill. We too ought to be committed to fulfilling the vision of sharing good news with the poor, releasing the captive, helping the blind recover sight, and bringing justice to the oppressed.

I think Timna was right. With a different God, we will be different people. I think it comes down to starting to think “usly,” rather than “Me-ly.” I think our culture does a grand job of promoting the religion of the god of “Me-first and Me-only.” It is a religion that refuses to admit that there is any “us,” or that we have any responsibility for the other person. We have heard the question asked by Cain, “Am I my

brother’s keeper?” and we have shouted, “No.” The god of “Me-lyism” reigns and its character is ugly. It is unworthy of us, we deserve a better god, a bigger god. Fortunately, with a better god we can be better people.

I think Jesus had a vision of a God that calls us to think in terms of us, rather than I. Sure, each of us must claim faith. Each of us must be accountable for our personal actions and decisions. But I heard a wise old preacher say once, “no one gets into heaven alone. When we arrive at that pearly gates God will ask us, where is your brother, where is your sister? Did you not care enough to reach out to them?” Jesus calls us to reach out to them not just with a message about the correct beliefs, but with the correct actions that demonstrate God’s own justice and compassion.

I would say that’s what it I believe is God’s vision and in the same way that’s my vision of God: to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” What’s your vision of God? AMEN.