

Seeing with the Eyes of Faith

The first of three sermons in the series

“Seeking Vitality and Renewal for Our Church”

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- Ephesians 1:15-23 ¹⁸I ask that your minds may be opened to see his light, so that you will know what is the hope to which he has called you, how rich are the wonderful blessings he promises his people, ¹⁹and how very great is his power at work in us who believe.
- Jeremiah 29:11-13 ¹¹I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for. ¹²Then you will call to me. You will come and pray to me, and I will answer you. ¹³You will seek me, and you will find me because you will seek me with all your heart.
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: God gives us eyes of faith to envision our future.

On January 8th, this congregation turned 62 years old. (Belated happy birthday!) On that date in the year 1956 the then-Presbytery of Cleveland chartered this church. But we really got our start the year before. It was in 1955 that the pastor of Lakewood Presbyterian Church, Dr. L. Wilson Kilgore, declared, “We need a Presbyterian congregation west of the river.” The greenhouses of Rocky River and Westlake and Fairview Park were being replaced by housing developments. Lakewood Presbyterian was seeing that more and more people attending services were coming by car rather than by foot.

So on Sunday, September 11th of 1955 in the former Memorial Hall at Rocky River’s City Hall, the first service was held for what was then referred to as the “Rocky River Chapel of Lakewood Presbyterian Church.” According to an account written by one of our former members, the late Marian K. Hume, 147 adults attended worship in the big room upstairs that day, and 58 children were in Sunday school classes meeting in Memorial Hall’s basement, cloak rooms, and foyer. Less than four months later, 93 members of Lakewood Presbyterian Church willingly transferred their membership to join with 109 other adults in becoming the very first members of the new Rocky River Presbyterian Church.

How did they do it? How could Dr. Kilgore see the benefit of planting a new church in a growing suburb just four miles from the church he served? How could those 93 members have the courage to switch their membership from the familiarity and comfort of the large, established Lakewood Presbyterian Church to a fledgling new church development that didn’t even have its own place to meet or its own minister yet? And what inspired the other 109 people who took the step of joining this brand new church on its very first day of existence? What did they see ahead of them? And how did they see it?

They saw a future of hope. The future was overflowing with hope because God was in that future with them. They knew God was not only with them then but in the future as well. The founding members of our church saw a future of sacrifice and reward, a future of struggle and opportunity, a future in which they would receive blessings and would be a blessing to the world. They saw all this because they looked to the future with eyes of faith.

That’s the way we roll, we Christians. God gives us eyes of faith to envision our future.

Sometimes we forget that. Sometimes we become so wrapped up in the situation we’re in that we forget to look ahead with eyes of faith. We forget that the God of hope offers a future that can be different, better than what is. But our hope doesn’t evaporate simply because we forget to look.

The apostle Paul prayed that fellow Christians would realize the hope that was theirs because they were faith-full people. In the opening verses of the letter called Ephesians Paul offers a prayer for that fledgling church and churches like it. Paul prays, “I ask that your minds may be opened to see

[God's] light, so that you will know what is the hope to which [God] has called you, how rich are the wonderful blessings [God] promises his people...."¹

Indeed, the Bible tells of a long history of people whose hope was strengthened because they resolved to see their situation and their future with eyes of faith. Just two examples:

In the Old Testament, the book of Genesis tells of a man named Abraham who obeyed God's call to relocate. Abraham gathered all his wealth and worldly possessions, took his wife Sarah² and nephew Lot, and traveled hundreds of miles to the land of Canaan — what's now Israel/Palestine. He did this because he perceived God telling him, "I will give you many descendants, and they will become a great nation."³ Abraham acted based on that promise of "many descendants" despite the fact that Abraham was 75 years old, and his wife was similarly a veteran of many birthdays. But because of their trust in God they looked at their future with eyes of faith and saw that their future was not dictated by their present situation but by what God held in store for them.

Another biblical example of seeing the future with eyes of faith: you all have heard of the city of Jericho whose walls came a'tumblin' down in the presence of Joshua and his army. Do you know how that siege took place? Did God have them dig in for a lengthy attack? Did they sneak up on the city? Were those God's strategies? No. God told Joshua to direct his priests and soldiers to march around the city once a day for six days in full view of the soldiers atop the city walls. On the seventh day they were to circle the city seven times, then when the priests let out a long blast on their trumpets, all the soldiers were to shout. That was it. What sort of battle plan was that? Could they envision a successful conquest by marching and blowing and shouting? But they looked to the future with eyes of faith. So they marched, they trumpeted, they shouted, and what God said would happen, happened.⁴

So St. Paul's prayer for believers was this: "...that your minds may be opened to see [God's] light, so that you will know what is the hope to which [God] has called you...." Seeing with the eyes of faith enables us to think the unthinkable and to imagine the unimaginable. We can even experience what has not yet come to pass.

- For instance, I think about Abraham Lincoln issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. He envisioned a time when slavery in our country would be no more. It wasn't true yet in our young nation — not even with a presidential decree — but Lincoln could envision a day when it will be. He saw the future with eyes of faith.
- And when Martin Luther King, Jr. challenged our society to see and to treat people of color as full citizens equal under the law, it wasn't true yet, but he could envision the day when it will be.
- Today people and organizations and movements are striving to guide society to show respect and appreciation for all people. It's an ideal. It hasn't happened yet. But with eyes of faith we envision a day when God's love rules every heart. With eyes of faith we envision a day when respect and appreciation are given to *every* woman and man and child of *every* land and *every* religious tradition and *every* skin tone and *every* language.

Yesterday we saw the film "Darkest Hour" about Winston Churchill's political and personal struggle to determine how England would respond to Hitler's threat. As he prepared for his first radio address to the nation as its new Prime Minister, Churchill shared with a colleague the goal of his speech. He said something like, "I want them to feel what it's like to be where they have not yet been." In his own way, Churchill wanted the people of the United Kingdom to see their future through eyes of faith.

This year Paul's prayer is our prayer as a congregation: "...that [our] minds may be opened to see [God's] light, so that [we] will know what is the hope to which [God] has called [us]...." God invites us to envision a hopeful future for our church... a future that's not constrained by present circumstances but is empowered by God's Holy Spirit stirring passion in the hearts of each of us.

¹ Ephesians 1:18 Good News Translation

² At this point in the story they are still known by the names Abram and Sarai (Gen. 12:1-9)

³ Genesis 12:2a Good News Translation

⁴ See Joshua Chapter 6

How will we do this? I don't know for sure. But I am being joined by an energetic, courageous, faith-filled group of people from our church will be guiding us in a "season of Vitality & Renewal" in the months ahead. Our church is one of about a dozen churches in our presbytery going through an experience like this. We all are working with the Center for Parish Development, an organization in Chicago that guides and advises congregations large and small in exploring what God's future holds for them.

This "season of Vitality & Renewal" is not going to be a mere academic exercise, or a facts-and-figures analysis of strengths and weaknesses. In the coming months we're going to come together to talk and share our stories. We'll seek guidance from the Bible. We'll eat and drink (of course). We'll have fun. We'll get to interact with each other and befriend fellow members we may not know that well... yet. We'll talk to God and listen for God. We'll become more and more open to what God's Holy Spirit reveals to us. And we'll look to the future with eyes of faith—looking to the future God has in store for Rocky River Presbyterian Church.

We're doing this because the world around us has changed. Since 1956—and especially in the last decade—many people view the church's place in their lives differently than they once did. How they engage with the church, and how often they do... all of that is being shaped by how relevant to their lives they see the church, as well as the time pressures they feel from work and home and community and family.

But as society has changed across the decades, most congregations have not changed much at all. People who study organizational dynamics have observed that it's not enough for an organization to "hold its own," to stay in place. They caution that unless you're moving forward, you're actually falling behind.

We know the landscape we find ourselves in is different from what it is was in 1956. Now we wonder what the future holds for us. What will Rocky River Presbyterian Church be? What does God want us to do besides arrange worship services like we've always done them and offer classes like we've done for decades and give away some money to worthy causes? What does God envision for our next steps as an agent of Christ in Rocky River, Ohio?

The words we heard earlier from the prophet Jeremiah give us reason to be encouraged, even excited about our future. Remember?

I alone know the plans I have for you, plans to bring you prosperity and not disaster, plans to bring about the future you hope for. Then you will call to me. You will come and pray to me, and I will answer you. You will seek me, and you will find me because you will seek me with all your heart.⁵

"The courage to trust the future comes not from confidence in our own abilities and resources, but from confidence in the faithfulness of God to fulfill God's promises."⁶ "With the eyes of faith we are given the ability to imagine—to visualize God's dream for humanity, and God's dream for our church."⁷ My prayer is that we rediscover what St. Paul promised in that prayer for the Christians in Ephesus: "...how very great is [God's] power at work in us who believe."⁸

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⁵ Jeremiah 29:11-13 Good News Translation

⁶ "Discerning God's Call: Seeing the Future with Eyes of Faith." Center for Parish Development, p. 1

⁷ "Discerning God's Call: Seeing the Future with Eyes of Faith." Center for Parish Development, p. 2

⁸ Ephesians 1:19a Good News Translation