

## “The Vision Thing”

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Back in 1987, when George Bush, Sr. was still Reagan’s vice-president, someone suggested he focus less on the short-term goal of getting elected and more on the longer-term needs of the country. He responded, “Oh, the vision thing.”<sup>1</sup>

The vision thing, indeed!

That’s what I want to talk about today—  
that all-important, easily pushed aside task of figuring out,  
what are we supposed to be doing in this life?

What is our vision for the future?

What really matters to us?

How are we to spend our time, our energy, our money?

These are questions our Board of Trustees  
has been exploring all year,  
as they do the very difficult and exciting work  
of crafting a vision for the future of our church.

This sermon is for them, and about them,  
but also for all of us,

because we’re all part of this community.

And also because this question of *what are we supposed to be doing?*  
is really a question we’re constantly exploring at every level—  
as individuals, as members of a family, in our workplaces,  
in our communities and our nation.

At any moment there are a million things we *could* be doing,  
but not all of them are equally wise or sensible or life-giving.

Especially in these days,

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://www.askoxford.com/worldofwords/quotations/phraseable/visionthing/>.

especially in these anxious economic times,  
we are in such need of visionary leadership.  
We need inspiration, we need trust and wisdom  
to help us get through a really difficult time  
when the things that used to work are no longer working.  
Maybe they're not even possible any more.

When the old stories,  
the stories about who we are and our place in the world,  
are exhausted, we need new stories.

*Visionary leadership* is the art of telling life-giving stories  
that chart a path for us into the future.

At this moment in our national life,  
it is becoming clearer and clearer every day  
that the old story of perpetually expanding industrial production  
is no longer helping us,  
that story that told us more was always better,  
that every new generation deserved to be wealthier than their parents,  
that story that told us not to worry,  
there would always be more oil in the ground,  
more fish in the sea,  
more money to be made.

At this very moment we are reaching for a new story  
about the kind of life we want to have—  
a story about sustainability,  
a story about renewable energy and making room for other species,  
appreciating diversity in all its forms,  
and about being happy, even *joyful*, with *enough*,  
hopping off the relentless treadmill of *more, more, more*.

This kind of new story will be what saves us.

We are discovering it even now.

But it doesn't come from nowhere.

It takes leadership,

it takes human beings,

it takes time and space to be nurtured and to grow.

It is so easy to get bogged down  
in all the day-to-day details of our lives.  
It's easy to do things the way we've always done them.  
It's much harder to make the time for dreaming, for imagination,  
for creativity—all those qualities that allow new ideas to be born,  
to flower into life-giving stories of how we might be *now*, in *this* time.  
But we must. We have to.  
For as the proverb tells us:  
Without vision, the people perish.

Consider, if you would, the story of Moses and Jethro.  
You all know the wonderful story of Moses leading the Israelites  
out of bondage in Egypt.  
The Red Sea parts, and all the Israelites cross over to safety.  
A people who had been enslaved have won their freedom.  
The music swells in the soundtracks of our imagination,  
it sounds like a happy ending,  
but just like life, the story keeps going.  
A *new thing* happens as the Israelites wander in the desert,  
and that new thing is that Moses, their great leader,  
is getting seriously burned out.  
It's been about three months since the big rescue scene at the Red Sea,  
and the people are getting cranky  
from wandering around in the desert.  
They're complaining about the food,  
they're picking fights with each other.  
And Moses is working overtime as a sort of Judge Judy for his people.  
All day long, from morning to night, people come to him  
and he settles one argument after another.  
And it goes on like this, day after day after day.

That's when his father-in-law Jethro shows up.  
Jethro watches Moses doing all this constant arbitration work,  
settling case after case,  
and he says: "Moses, this is not good!  
You're going to be exhausted if you keep this up,

handling everything yourself,  
and then where are the people going to be,  
these people that you are supposed to be leading through the desert?”  
And he says: “Listen to me.  
What you need to do is, you need to learn how to delegate!  
Stop trying to settle all these little arguments yourself.  
There just aren’t enough hours in the day.

“So what you do is, find people you trust, good people,  
and delegate all this stuff to them.  
Empower them to decide the smaller things.  
Give *them* the authority.  
For the big things, have them come to you.  
But for everything else, let them handle it.  
Let it go.  
Then you see you have two things that happen.  
One is that now you’re not the only leader.  
You create a lot of different leaders to support the people,  
so it’s not just on you.  
And the other thing is, now you have *time*.  
You have time to do what you’re supposed to be doing:  
talking to God about how to lead the people,  
and *teaching* the people, helping them figure out  
which way to go and what *they’re* supposed to be doing.”

Moses listens and says, “OK, I’ll do it,” and so he does.  
He chooses leaders from among the people,  
good leaders to share the work and the authority.  
And just a few days after that,  
God speaks to Moses and tells him,  
“You’re ready now. Come on up to the top of Mount Sinai  
and we’ll talk.”  
And you all know what happens next:  
Moses goes up to Mount Sinai to talk with God  
and receive the Ten Commandments,  
the great laws that guide them as a people.

Now, if Jethro hadn't coached Moses  
to delegate some of his work to the people,  
I'm not sure he ever would have made time  
to go up the mountain.  
Instead of bringing down the Ten Commandments,  
he might have spent his entire life resolving arguments  
about whose turn it is to feed the goats.  
That's important too,  
but if *no one* is up on the mountain, something is missing  
and the people really are going to be stuck wandering in the desert  
for a lot longer than absolutely necessary.

Back here in the Valley, our own Board of Trustees  
has spent this church year feeling a lot like Moses—  
struggling to figure out how to balance the necessary doing  
with the equally necessary spiritual mountain-climbing  
for *our* time and place.

Back in August we got together for a retreat  
where we began to craft a vision for the future of the church.  
This was real mountain-climbing work—  
asking ourselves questions like,  
What's going really well in our church right now?  
What do we long to do?  
And what holds us back from achieving our dreams?

Out of those questions, a vision began to emerge.  
We spoke of *generosity*, and we began to dream of a church  
where we are generous to our church community financially  
and also with our time and energy,  
and a church where are generous to our larger community  
through our ministries of social justice.

We spoke of the meaning of *leadership*,  
and we began to dream of empowering church members  
to share in the leadership of the church,

instilling a sense of ownership,  
and inspiring many people to step into a role of leadership  
with enthusiasm.

Very much like Jethro's advice to Moses—  
don't hog the leadership, but *share* it!

And we spoke of our desire to *connect*,  
and we realized that as companions  
on a shared spiritual and ethical journey,  
we aspire to be connected to our deepest selves,  
to the congregation,  
and to the larger communities in which we find ourselves.  
This is about spiritual well-being,  
and friendship and community,  
about being part of a worldwide religious tradition,  
and about good citizenship in the very best sense.

The visioning process was exciting, but also exhausting,  
and as the months went by after the retreat,  
your Board has found  
it's hard to hold on to that mountaintop perspective.  
It's incredibly easy to get sucked back into the endless round of details  
and decisions to be made about the church,  
which are certainly important  
but which just as certainly hold us back from our full potential  
if we allow them to prevent us from continuing the work  
of casting a vision and telling a new story about our future.  
We are learning through hard-won experience  
that visionary leadership really does need time and space  
to be free from the need to do things and accomplish things.

This is absolutely essential.  
If we're forever tethered to an endless chain of details  
that need our doing,  
the constant to-do list we know so well,  
when are we going to climb the mountain?

Moses figured that out, but not without help.  
And just think: if it was hard for him—  
*Moses*, the guy God actually sought out and tapped on the shoulder—  
if it was hard for *Moses* to make time to be a visionary leader,  
how much harder is it for us,  
we gentle skeptics who question so much,  
including whether there *is* a God who speaks to us?  
We need help, we need encouragement to take that time.  
The poet Mary Oliver helps me when she says:

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.  
I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down  
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,  
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,  
which is what I have been doing all day.  
Tell me, what else should I have done?  
Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?  
Tell me, what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?<sup>2</sup>

“*[T]o be idle and blessed, . . . to stroll through the fields . . .*”—  
my goodness, she knows us,  
or let me own that—she knows *me*, and all of us  
who devote our lives to doing and doing and yet again doing,  
for whom the thought of a stolen afternoon of idleness  
is wild and tempting and scary, almost illicit,  
forbidden by the trusty superego who makes us keep chugging  
so relentlessly.

And yet this delicious idleness is exactly what we need.  
Freed from the need to *do* and *accomplish*,  
we are able to *see*. We are liberated to notice, to pay attention  
to *reality*—not the *stories* we've been told about reality,

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<sup>2</sup> Mary Oliver, “The Summer Day,” in *New and Selected Poems* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), p. 94.

but *reality itself*—that which simply is,  
like the grasshopper resting for a moment in the poet’s hand,  
prior to all our ideas and stories about it,  
simply the thing itself.

And out of our seeing, perhaps,  
out of our idleness and our attention, if we are lucky and blessed,  
comes a new story about what it all means for *our* life.  
“Tell me,” the poet asks, “what is it you plan to do  
with your one wild and precious life?”

When you come right down to it,  
isn’t that the question at the heart of everything?  
I wish for everyone here, and really everyone in the world,  
the grace to discover the meaning of *your* life.  
I wish it for our church, this beloved church  
which has carried the flame of liberal religion in *this* place  
for nearly a century.  
I wish it for our Board of Trustees,  
which is doing such amazing work,  
the incredibly daring and necessary work  
of crafting a new story, a new vision for our future.

And all of you can help.  
Jethro encouraged Moses to stop doing everything himself,  
to empower many leaders to do the work of the community.  
Our Board has been doing exactly the same thing.  
I’ve watched them more and more  
try to encourage the other leaders in our church,  
the committees and volunteers of all kinds,  
to lead in their own areas,  
to share the day-to-day authority,  
to make decisions.  
Sometimes it feels like it would be easier  
for the Board to just decide everything.  
Sometimes it takes longer to set up new structures of leadership.  
It’s hard to make the shift.

But it is both positive and necessary.

Your board is trying to do something really hard—  
it's trying to create space in its work for thinking, for pondering,  
for dreaming.

And in order to create this space,  
the agenda has to get shorter, the urgent decisions fewer.  
That “idle” time thinking and observing isn't wasted at all,  
it's precious and priceless  
as we try to figure out what we're supposed to be doing in this world.  
This board is working to create a vision for our future,  
and creating isn't even exactly the right word;  
it's more like *noticing* what is happening in our church already—  
the board-meeting equivalent of idling in the fields  
and making friends with grasshoppers, as it were—  
paying attention to who we are, what we do well,  
listening for those yearnings about what we want to be,  
and infusing that noticing with our collective wisdom and creativity,  
playing with it,  
shaping what we notice  
into a story about who we are,  
what we do best, and who we long to be.

Our board is doing nothing less  
than creating a new story about the life of the church  
that will lead us into the future.

If it is well and wisely told,  
we will live into a new answer  
of that question behind all other questions:

*What is it we plan to do  
with our one wild and precious life?*

So may it be.

Amen.