

### ***Soul Stretching: Visions***

2 Kings 2:1-12; Mark 9:2-9

February 26, 2006

It is said that two things are inevitable in life: death and taxes. But I think there is a third thing that is also a predictable part of life: change.

During a particularly difficult time in my life, an image of my experience came to mind. The image was a river, not a smooth, gentle river, but a fast flowing surge of water that bounded its way through, around, and over rocks and fallen trees. One side of the river had a somewhat rough terrain, marked by boulders and dense forest. I had been traveling along that side of the river, weaving my way around and through the obstacles, somewhat exhilarated by the new challenges that seemed to surface every step of the way. Then suddenly I was swept off my feet and thrown into the river by forces beyond my control. I lost my grounding; I was thrown into the chaotic current of the water. It was difficult to keep my head above water; I felt like I was drowning, always gasping for breath. There were a few special people in my life who threw life preservers to me as I tumbled through the churning waters; without those sources of support I surely would have drowned. I began to realize that I had to get out of the river. I envisioned the other shore as a sandy beach where I would find rest, where the terrain was smooth, where life was manageable, even enjoyable once again. I held on to that image of the peaceful beach until finally the rushing river subsided long enough for me to crawl ashore. I dragged myself out of the mad river, feeling like a sea lion flopping out of the ocean for a sun bath. I flopped ashore, bruised and exhausted, lacking any energy to move. But there in the warm sand the healing began, energy was restored, and lessons were learned in reflection. The vision of the sunny sandy beach, a haven of rest and renewal, had sustained me, kept me alive, and seen me through to the other side.

We need visions beyond ourselves and current circumstances to keep us moving forward, stimulated, and hopeful in the changing seasons of life. Our world is going through much change these days. Some signs seem to indicate that chaos is increasing and stability decreasing; we feel like we're descending into turbulent waters instead of ascending to more peaceful shores. Our personal lives are also in a state of flux, with changes in the workplace, changes in health, changes in physical and mental abilities, and changes in the persons around us. We need a vision to see us through, a glimpse of something which points to another way of being. It may be something we can't exactly "put our finger on," can't fully explain or even

see. We needn't follow the vision, and it may not come to reality as we imagine. But simply having a vision can be a soul stretching reminder that there is more going on than we can see or understand or know.

We find Jesus today at a turning point in his life and ministry. He has been in Galilee teaching, healing, and modeling a new way of living for his disciples and other followers. Now he sets his face toward Jerusalem, the seat of political and religious power, powers that are threatened by his ministry, powers that will undo him. He anticipates a rocky road ahead for himself and for his disciples. Jesus has recently told them that he will suffer, die, and rise again on the third day. This concept has been beyond their comprehension. Now they are taken up on the mountain with Jesus to pray. In the midst of their prayer, Jesus is transfigured before them, appearing in brilliant glory.

Not only do they see Jesus, but Moses and Elijah, the great prophets of the Hebraic tradition, are with their rabbi. It is a stunning moment of glory for them all. Moses and Elijah each had similar moments of epiphany at discouraging points in their missions. Elijah is hunted down by authorities and tries to flee from his mission, but God appears and calls him back to the struggle (I Kings 19:11ff.). Moses' message is first rejected by the people, so he ascends the mountain a second time to plead forgiveness and grace (Exodus 33:18ff.). At critical moments of difficulty, God's presence is revealed in a brilliant and rapturous way to offer encouragement to persevere in the mission.

So also here at this decisive juncture in Jesus' ministry, he and the inner circle of disciples are given a glorious vision. This vision is a gift that will help sustain through the challenging days of criticism, denial, confusion, death, grief, and fear that lie ahead. In the midst of the turmoil, they will be able to hold fast to this grand vision of Jesus in his glory, and trust that this is the goal God intends. Even though other forces seek to destroy Jesus, the vision of God will ultimately triumph.

Elisha is given just as spectacular a vision as he witnesses his mentor, Elijah, carried up to heaven by chariot. He doesn't want Elijah to leave, but facing the inevitable, he asks for a double share of Elijah's spirit. That's asking for two-thirds of an inheritance. Elisha wants the spiritual charisma, leadership, and God-given prophetic mission that Elijah has faithfully led. Elisha wants to be like his mentor and then some! Elisha is given a glimpse of the power of Almighty God as he witnesses the chariot and horses of fire that pick Elijah up into the whirlwind. Not only does he receive this epiphany, but he is also left with his teacher's mantle. He indeed is empowered to carry on the mission of his master.

These visions give Elisha, Jesus, and the disciples the stamina, motivation, and courage they need to forge ahead into the challenges of ministry. They move forward because they have a glimpse of the power of God, and assurance that God will ultimately succeed in bringing God's dream to completion.

Visions are sources of empowerment and encouragement that keep us moving on, even when the going gets tough. Visions inspire us to persevere and not to give up. Stephen Covey's second principle for highly effective people is "Begin with the end in mind." Start with a vision of where you want to go, of what is possible. Having a vision propels us forward in spite of obstacles that will undoubtedly try to block our way.

What kind of visions do we carry? Most of us have not necessarily had grand and divine revelations such as the transfiguration of Jesus. Many visions are of our own making, dreams of improving our circumstances.

Many of you are companioning loved ones through difficult journeys in their lives. Sometimes we don't know the answers; we don't have a sense of direction; we don't know the possibilities. But we can still envision our loved ones bathed in the light of God's brilliant love, basking in grace and forgiveness, warmed by a renewing energy. God knows what they need. We can hold fast to a vision of our loved ones in God's tender embrace, where they will receive whatever healing, care, and strength they need.

I listened to an internet interview with Huston Smith, a delightful Visiting Professor of Religious Studies at Cal, and a United Methodist. He was asked what one thing he would change in our current culture. He said that he would concur with Isaac Asimov, the most successful science writer, who said, "I would wish that there could be a huge in pouring of funds to the primary schools. That's where imprinting goes on."<sup>1</sup> What a grand vision, to have funds diverted from ventures unnecessary to human survival and redirected to education and our children. They are the most precious resource we have for guiding the course of history and promoting understanding in our increasingly complex and diverse world.

We are familiar with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s dream "that one day on the red hills of Georgia, the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood."<sup>2</sup>

The remarkable Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has written a relatively new book called *God Has A Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time*. He writes, "'I have a dream,' God says. 'Please help Me to realize it. It is a dream of a world whose ugliness and squalor and poverty, its war and hostility, its greed and harsh competitiveness, its alienation and disharmony are changed into their glorious counterparts, when there will be

more laughter, joy, and peace, where there will be justice and goodness and compassion and love and caring and sharing. I have a dream that swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, that My children will know that they are members of one family, the human family, God's family, My family."<sup>3</sup>

Archbishop Tutu held fast to that dream while his people endured years of oppression under apartheid. He has been a force for hope, healing, and reconciliation in that recovering land. He says, "It is because we were so improbable that God chose South Africa and will point to us and say to the Israelis and Palestinians, to the Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, to the Tibetans and the Chinese, to the Muslims and Hindus in Kashmir, [and today we would add "to the Sunnis and Shiites in Iraq] to people throughout the world, 'They had a nightmare, the apartheid nightmare, in South Africa. It has ended. Your nightmare will end, too. They had what was considered to be an intractable problem. Well, they have solved it, and so nowhere in the world can people again speak of facing intractable problems.' That is the principle of transfiguration at work. And so no situation is utterly hopeless, utterly untransfigurable."<sup>4</sup>

What a witness of faith! Faith is indeed the gift of vision, the ability to see in a new way. It is seeing as God sees. It is seeing the sacred in all things. When we live by vision, by the vision of persons transformed, the vision of situations transfigured, we live with hope. With hope we can trust that our nightmares will turn into dreams, the dream of God for the wholeness, peace, and goodness of all God's family.

Hold fast, my friends, to the dream of God, to the vision of Jesus transfigured, our lives transformed, and the world at peace.

<sup>1</sup> Huston Smith interviewed by Dean Alan Jones, Grace Cathedral Forum, September 25, 2005, [www.gracecathedral.org](http://www.gracecathedral.org).

<sup>2</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., "I Have a Dream," August 28, 1963.

<sup>3</sup> Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream: A Vision of Hope for Our Time* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), pp. 19-20.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 125.

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