

## Catch the Vision – The world is about to turn

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Isaiah 7:7-16

Matthew 1:18-25

Psalm 80: 1-7

I met a man in the church parking lot this week. Most of the people I meet in the parking lot are **asking me** for something. But this man **gave me** something.

Jay is from Florida. Back home he visited a church where the preacher prayed for him and told him that he would be given a life-changing vision within the week. It only took a day for Jay to receive the vision, since he went straight from the church to his van where he laid down to receive the vision. The vision was this – make t-shirts with JESUS printed on them. It took six months to gather his courage, to work it out but Jay finally had the t-shirts made.

Then God told him to give the shirts away. When God subsequently told Jay to come to Washington, D.C., and give shirts away here, he listened. For now Jay is staying in a homeless shelter downtown though he drives a shiny white PT Cruiser with JESUS on either side in big letters. He is giving out shirts everywhere he goes and starting conversations with people about Jesus and what it means to follow God.

In today's text from Isaiah it seems that God has been trying to get through to Ahaz for quite a while and King Ahaz has not been receptive. God begins to get impatient and sounds like an exhausted parent. Is it too little for you to weary mortals, you have to weary God also? Since Ahaz won't take the initiative to become aware of God's presence, God sends Isaiah to convey the message, to sketch out the vision for him.

Certainly Ahaz has problems that preoccupy him. The neighboring kings are pressuring him to align with them so that together they can fight and defeat the Assyrians. This political decision paralyzes Ahaz. God says, *"Ask for a sign that I am with you. Ahaz, look around and see where I am at work."* But Ahaz is afraid, even to ask for sign. He makes excuses. But God doesn't give up; God gives Ahaz a second chance and sends Isaiah with a sign of hope.

And this is the sign: the young woman is with child and she will bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. Before the child is very old, those kings will have fallen. You will be safe.

God says, "Put your trust in me Ahaz. I will be there with you, the child will be named, God with us, Immanuel." This is not a mythical young woman. She is

for real. **Both** Isaiah and Ahaz soon will have sons though neither is literally named Immanuel in the biblical tradition.

Matthew reminds us of this incident by quoting it in the story of Joseph's dream. Was Joseph as scared as Ahaz of the difficult decision he had to make? While Ahaz was trying to make a political decision about kingdoms and power and with whom to align, Joseph is dealing with something more personal: a pregnant fiancée. He knows Mary is pregnant and the thing to do, as an upstanding and righteous Jew, is to send her away, quietly. Just end the engagement without fanfare and let her be on her way. No need to treat her in the harsh manner that Leviticus recommends. Joseph is just and compassionate and he will show this quiet compassion to Mary.

But then he has this vision; an angel comes to him in a dream and tells him there is a different way. If you really want to be compassionate, marry her. If you really want to see "God with you" take this child as your own, into the Davidic and kingly line. Make this child your own son and name him Jesus.

The birth of a baby is a very personal event. And yet this baby, for whom we wait once again, grew up to be a man who turned the world upside down. He still challenges the religious and political leaders. From these seemingly simple visions of Isaiah and Matthew comes this world changer, Jesus.

*A few weeks ago I had a scary dream. I am in a small town and I hear that there are people terrorizing the locals. They had cut the head off of a black person and put it on a pole and they were parading through the town to instill fear in everyone. I gather with some people preparing to see a show of some kind and we hear a ruckus in the lobby. Five people come walking across the stage with the head. What am I to do? Just sit there and be cowed into submission by this barbarity or should I stand and protest, say I am not afraid, love is stronger than this hate?*

*The gathered crowd is still. There is no movement but the small leering band; there is no noise but their taunting voices trying to shock us into submission. I know this is immoral, to remain silent in the face of hatred like this. So I gather my courage and stand up. I shout. "This is wrong. We will not remain silent. We will not let this happen again. We will resist." No one else speaks; I am alone in my protest. As the five tormentors walk out I bravely approach them, trying to muster up compassion. I touch their faces, smiling, and lift up their masks.*

What about us, do we have visions? Is God still speaking (as the United Church of Christ slogan maintains?) As Anabaptists we tend to trust the voice of God through the community rather than the individual. We want to test that vision in the gathered body and make sure that it is valid, that it is real. Of course sometimes the community is more concerned with maintaining the status quo

than listening to new visions. Then the prophetic voice needs to speak the vision of God to us in a loud, articulate, sometimes graphic voice.

I wonder what God is saying these days to this community at Hyattsville Mennonite? Is it a personal message or a political one? Is it a message of hope and trust or is it a message to get out there and live out the gospel in ever deeper ways?

Who are the prophetic voices among us to whom we must pay attention?

Chief encourager these days to reach out to refugees is Karrie Peterson. It would be easy for us to discount Karrie as young, a woman, fairly new to the congregation. But we are listening to her and following her lead in order to help resettle a refugee family as a congregation. There is a long way to go, the to-do lists are extensive but we are listening and beginning to act. Karrie prods us on at some personal cost to herself as she said last week. The job is stressful and exhausting and she wonders if it is worth it. It is often this way for prophets, for those who listen to God. It is not always convenient to pay attention to the vision. Witness Jay, witness Joseph, witness Ahaz who will not listen to God so must instead listen to a cranky prophet.

We could name other dreams at work here in the body of Christ. Some of us have caught a vision of deeper collaboration with University Park Church of the Brethren.

Fifty-five years ago nine young people had the audacity to follow their dream to start a new congregation that became Hyattsville Mennonite Church. Some of us have looked back at their example and caught that vision in a new way, thinking about a new place to worship and do mission. We are beginning to wonder what it would be like to be in a different facility that would allow us to be more visible and active in the community through collaboration with other groups such as Christian Family Montessori School.

Whenever we catch a vision from God, and we follow it, there is a cost; there is a price. Helping refugees will certainly cost money and time but it might also call us to question our own values and culture. Collaborating with the Church of the Brethren may cost us some of our own beloved traditions. A new (or previously used) building will most certainly cost money, time and energy. But it will also take imagination, hope and trust that we are actually following the Spirit. We will have to ask ourselves if the peace, justice, love and hospitality that we preach can be passed on to the next generations, not just in theory but in a real place and time.

When we talk about catching a vision in this way, it sounds an awful lot like how the Mennonite Church likes to talk about being missional – getting on board with the work God is already doing in the world. It sounds like what Isaiah

told Ahaz – Look around you and see the signs that I am here with you. You can trust me, I am at work here and you are invited to join in.

I suppose if we look at it that way the t-shirts are in a different category. Still, Jay seems sincere and it can't hurt to wear a shirt. He did give me 6 t-shirts in rainbow colors. Half the rainbow is still left. They are yours for the taking.

In this season when the loudest message is to buy bargains and give gifts, I encourage us turn in a different direction. Take a nap, dream a dream, catch the vision of God's work in your life, in the world. Listen and watch for Emmanuel, "God with us." Then join in God's vision and work. The world is about to turn.