

**First lesson: Acts 16:9-15**

**Second Lesson: Revelation 21:10, 22-22:5**

**Psalm 67**

**Gospel Lesson: John 14:23-29**

**The Sixth Sunday of Easter**

**May 23, 2022**

## **“Stay The Course”**

### **Sermon By Pastor David Sivecz**

Last week, we heard John share his happy place from the Book of Revelation. He painted a picture of what God would do through Jesus Christ to create a new heaven and a new earth. It would be a place where there's no more pain, anger, and divisiveness.

This vision isn't what most of us typically picture when it comes to this book. Most of the time, whenever someone mentions this book, people often try to connect to the end times. However, John didn't write this book to frighten or scare us. Nor did he write it to predict how the world would end or that certain people would be carried away while others would be left behind.

Instead, John wrote this book for a group of people who were under great persecution during the late first century. Basically, he wrote it for people who were dying for being Christian. It was and is there to help us see that God would make all things new. God would restore a broken humanity, and those things that brought pain and suffering would cease to exist.

Today, in our second lesson, we continue to hear about John's happy place. What John shared with us was his vision of what that place will look like under God's reign. This vision wasn't random; instead, it was John's "final" vision. "Final" vision means God's ultimate goal to restore the world.

Have you ever envisioned, pictured, or dreamed about what God will do in the future? Not only as a congregation but as individuals? No matter our age, do you ever imagine what the future holds? Some of us might call this daydreaming or fantasizing. I admit that I often do that, but soon realized it's not a bad thing to do.

I remember the first time I realized it's good to dream about the future. I was on my pastoral internship in Cincinnati, Ohio. Every month I would attend a clergy gathering at a centrally located church. There were various people there who were in numerous types of ministry settings. Some were pastors of large congregations, some at small parishes, some were at starting churches, and some were redeveloping them.

One day the bishop of that synod came to the gathering. One of the questions she asked was, "What are your hopes and dreams for this area?" At first, I was skeptical. It was a broad question. What was even more astonishing was that not a single pastor spoke immediately. I guess that's how to make a pastor speechless; ask them about their vision.

After a few moments of silence, one brave soul finally offered his hopes and dreams. What he said next absolutely stunned me. He said, "I hope that one day all of the churches, specifically the Lutheran churches in this area, can get together and worship at Paul Brown Stadium - which is where the Cincinnati Bengals professional football team plays. Every church will cancel their Sunday worship and come together to worship God in one place."

Talk about a vision! Just imagine it! This pastor's vision wasn't just youth coming together to worship. His vision wasn't a special gathering outside of Sunday morning. No, he dared to take the one day and time when churches gather together and picture something completely different.

That's the thing about having a vision. Visions can come in a variety of ways. They can be extravagant, and they can also come in mundane ways. A vision can be everyone coming together to worship under one roof. A vision can also be as simple as sharing a meal with someone we don't know.

Regardless, having a vision of what does not exist is essential. More importantly, we need to share our visions with other people. Visions provide hope to those who don't have any. Visions give people the courage to dream for themselves. Visioning can become a life-changing and life-giving practice.

That's why John shared his vision in the Book of Revelation. In today's second scripture lesson, John gave us a more detailed explanation of the place that we heard about last week. His vision provided the specifics of what this new heaven and new earth would look like when they come to fruition.

In this new heaven and new earth, he saw a new Jerusalem where there was no temple. Again, according to Jewish customs, the temple was where God resided on earth. Anyone who wanted to worship God, needed God's forgiveness, or made a sacrifice to God had to go to the temple.

People couldn't just stop in the middle of their day and pray. Instead, for some people this meant traveling a long distance to Jerusalem to worship God. Imagine having to travel to Washington D.C. for Sunday worship. I don't think any of us would attend every week.

But in John's vision, the temple no longer existed. That meant that God's presence was no longer limited to one place; instead, God dwelt among God's people everywhere. Because God would be present everywhere, that also indicated that God would provide everything for them. The people wouldn't need the sun or moon to shine since God provided them with eternal light.

Nations would no longer be fighting among themselves; instead, they would come together to worship God. Because they gathered together, there would be no more fighting. Without fighting, there would be no need for security systems in the city: no bars on the windows, no locked doors, and no alarms. Even the gates of the city would always be open. In other words, the city that John envisioned was a peaceful, inclusive city.

Even the other images John portrayed in his vision, the tree of life providing enough fruit for everyone, the rivers flowing from the throne of God, and light shining eternally, ultimately showed what would happen when humanity reached its intended goal and lived in God's presence. This description is the ultimate vision from John - that out of the long story of human sin, rebellion, and suffering - God fulfills God's promise to give life.

Again, while John's community was persecuted for being disciples of Jesus Christ, this vision was supposed to carry them through those trying times. It was supposed to help them stay the course during horrendous moments.

That's why visioning is so crucial in our lives. Vision gives us hope when we are hopeless. Vision provides direction when we feel lost. Vision not only provides us with a purpose but also the courage

to keep going when we want to give up. Vision helps us overcome the difficult challenges we face because God leads us to fulfill them.

I remember how one vision became a reality in one of my seminary classes. The class was called Christianity and International Development. Somehow the professor managed to bring in a variety of speakers who worked on ending poverty across the world. When I say poverty, I'm talking about the senseless poverty we see in underdeveloped countries.

One of those speakers he brought in was a person named Derreck Kayongo. His story began during his early childhood in the 1970s. Kayongo, as a Ugandan native, had a happy, peaceful life until Uganda's president waged war against Tanzania. Kayongo and his parents soon fled to neighboring Kenya to escape the horrors of the conflict. As a result, they struggled to survive without access to basic necessities.

As he explained, "When you have come from a home that you knew, you're used to your food, your friends...to move from that to become a nobody and to literally be called a refugee is as dramatic as it gets."

Years later, he got a new chance in life through his education, first in Nairobi and then in the United States. When he first came to the U.S. in the early 1990s, he stayed at a hotel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. But the whole experience was a foreign concept to him.

"When I checked into the hotel, there were 3 bars of soap - there was body soap, hand soap, and face soap, and that did not include the shampoos - and so for me, that was a new experience, I was thinking, "why do they have soap for every part of their bodies?" Kayongo recalls. "Now, my goodness, why would you throw away such a resource?"

Soon this startling realization stayed with Kayongo and prompted him years later to vision and create the Global Soap Project. The non-profit organization reprocesses used soaps from hotels around the United States. It turns them into new bars for impoverished nations like Uganda, Kenya, Haiti, and Swaziland.

He said, "An estimated 2.6 million bars of soap are discarded every day from hotels in the United States -- but more than two million kids die every year to lower respiratory diseases like diarrhea. If you can put a bar of soap in every child's hand, you can reduce infectious diseases like diarrhea and things like typhoid and cholera by 40%."

Although the vision was immediately clear for him, someone in my class asked him how long it took to go from discovering the idea to implementing it. He responded with "ten years."

Kayongo has personally delivered thousands of bars of soap to orphanages in Kenya. "When I took the soap to the orphans, and they smelled the bar of soap, ah, you could see the joy -- those little messages of hope are what people need when they are between a rock and a hard place," he said. "When I was a refugee, a pen pal letter was all I needed to get through the day. If the bar of soap is going to help them get through the day, then good, but our final goal is to change behavior and make sure they wash up and to stop diseases like diarrhea from infecting and killing people - that's our ultimate goal, we have yet to achieve."

Despite all the success, Kayongo is determined to continue dedicating time and effort to his cause. "If you want to do big things and you want to bring big change, then you have to be able to give in a

big way," he says. "It's important to understand what this is about -- people coming together globally to connect the dots."

So, what's your vision? What do you envision for not only us at American Lutheran Church and the surrounding community but what's your vision for what God will do for this world? What's your vision in life, regardless of how much or little is left? No vision is too big or too small because they are all critical.

Is your vision to reconnect with friends and family? Is it to change someone's life in Sun City? Is your vision to plan a mission trip to another country? Is your vision to even begin a new ministry? Whatever it is, we need to be a people of vision.

We should imagine and dream what others might think is not possible. We should picture a more glorious day than what we are experiencing. We should be able to look back at the life that God has given us and leave a legacy behind for others. Because in those moments when we are disheartened and struggle, we can stay the course by keeping the vision that God has given us. Because that vision is our purpose, the purpose we are called to through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

- Amen