

This is the last of four sermons in which we have looked at our church through the perceptions we received from many members who have participated in the On Our Way ministry.

Today we look at the fourth perception. *“Our congregation lacks a compelling and widely shared vision of what God is calling this congregation to be and do as it moves into the future. Without a fresh discernment of God’s vision for us, we risk being irrelevant to God’s mission in our contemporary time and place.”*

Of the four perceptions this one had the greatest ambiguity. We had many people say we had a clear and concise vision. Well, I’m the pastor and I don’t know what it is. People may have a vision in their own mind but I bet if we gave everyone here paper and pencil and asked you to write the vision of the First Presbyterian Church, the result would be a variety of different ideas. In fact, in the On Our Way process, we will be giving the greatest amount of time for discerning vision.

Ever look at the end of Revelation. It ends on a very positive note. It ends in a way that when we read it, we think, that is exactly what I hope will happen. When something is described about the future that gets people excited, that is a great vision. So what is this vision in Revelation? We will read the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter, verses 1 through 5. But first, let us pray.

*Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. <sup>2</sup> And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. <sup>3</sup> And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; <sup>4</sup> he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more;*

*mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.” <sup>5</sup> And the one who was seated on the throne said, “See, I am making all things new.”*

When we began the On Our Way ministry with our first sermon series and bible enrichment, the overarching theme was that God had a dream. The dream was to reconcile people who no longer wanted to be with God back to God. God wanted to do this not through fear or manipulation but through love. And God chose people who believed in the dream to spread the dream to others. The end result of the dream is the end of Revelation. Our question is what will we be doing about this? How do we participate? How will everyone understand what and whose we are as a church? What are the priorities to move us forward?

Every church needs to do this. Most churches do not. Most churches are declining. Many congregations today are experiencing a “vision gap,” having no clearly articulated, compelling, and broadly accepted vision to guide and unite the members of the congregation as they move into the future.

God is always calling the church into the future – out of the “already” and toward the “not yet.” Vision is a gift from God that provides focus, energy, and the willingness to risk. Vision draws us forward into a creative and faithful future.

John Driver who writes for the Center for Parish Development, wrote, “The church stands in the chain of God’s creative acts: the creation of the ordered universe and humanity, the creation of a people which bears the Lord’s name through the call of Abraham. In other words, we serve God and God’s vision or we serve nothing.

So what does this mean for us today? John R.W. Stott, an English theologian, states, “Vision begins with a holy discontent with the way things are.” It is possible to become so content with our church that we become complacent. We are busy building homes, families, and careers, while trying to live in a chaotic, change-filled world. Sometimes the last thing church members want to see changed is their church. They like the stability of church being the same week after week. Unfortunately, that sameness can breed complacency and weak ministry. Discouragement may set in, even bitterness. And the lighthouse God called into existence only emits a weak light. But with a

Serving God or Serving Nothing – Revelation 21:1-5 – February 5, 2012  
vision, the future begins to grow and become clear and larger than the past and present.  
Discouragement and complacency are replaced with hope.

Aubrey Malphurs, in his book, *Planting Growing Churches for the Twenty-first Century* writes, “People can’t focus on fog! As someone once said, ‘If you aim at nothing, you will hit it every time!’” He further states, “Vision is the ministry compass that helps a congregation and the leaders navigate through the ocean of decision.” A church that develops a vision puts a compass in the hands of its people. Instead of the pastor pulling and pushing, the people have a common sense of destiny.

Through out this series we looked at forces that attack the church. Culture, attitudes, busyness all weakens the church. People are forced to make choices. Where does the church fit in? What church does not need more laypeople actively involved, using their gifts and energies to advance God’s kingdom in their community? There are many reasons why laypeople do not become involved in church work. One of those reasons is lack of vision.

With a clear and compelling vision that lay members help shape, a church is better positioned to invite laypeople into the challenges and excitement of Kingdom work. Without it, it’s just one more class to teach, room to clean, or meeting to attend.

We want you to have a voice in the direction of this church. In many churches, people feel the pastor is trying to change them without help from them. Instead, I’m imploring you to take the responsibility to decide your own direction. This is why we are offering a participatory process—one that allows people to speak. You will shape your own future.

I believe that Revelation shows that each church can help shape the destiny of the future by contributing to a vision that God lays on its heart. We can and will have one clear, common vision for the First Presbyterian Church.

God is calling His church into a new millennium—this process opens us to a fresh leading of the Holy Spirit.” In a couple of weeks we will have the Conference on the Present. Once again, I strongly encourage you to participate. Or tell me why you refuse because I truly want to understand. And then we will begin the process for discerning God’s vision. We will pray, study, talk, pray, study, talk, pray, study talk, until we are clear what it will be.

And join God in God’s vision for the First Presbyterian Church in Monticello. Amen.