

Old South Church in Boston

February 28, 2019 (from September 30 & October 3, 2010, sermons preached in advance of the congregational meeting and vote about the, then, proposed *Vision for the 21st Century*. It was entertained at a specially called meeting of them member on December 10, 2010 and adopted unanimously.)

VISION, a sermon by Nancy S. Taylor, Senior Minister, preached on the Sunday of our 349th Annual Meeting.

Based on Revelation 21: 1-4

John is exiled, banished to the island of Patmos for his Christian faith. Isolated from family and friends, he suffers privation and hardship.

On the mainland, his fellow Christians are suffering persecution: being rounded up, arrested, flogged and crucified. His own family is endangered.

It is in the midst of this – of terror and heartache, of pain and anguish – that John is given a vision. He sees beyond what is, beyond the pain and anguish, to the future God intends. It is given to him to see “a new heaven and a new earth.” He hears a loud voice from the throne saying, “God will wipe every tear from their eyes and mourning and crying and pain will be no more,”

Did you hear that? “God will wipe every tear from their eyes; no more crying, no more mourning or pain.” No more children shot to death in the streets of Mattapan. No more mothers tormented because their children have been taken from them. No more soldiers bloodied and destroyed by war. No more human trafficking.

Moses had a vision. Moses guided the children of Israel for forty years through desert wilderness. As nomads, they scratched a harsh, meager living from the desert. Everything was parched, dust. Their flocks were scrawny, and so, too were the children of the Children of Israel.

For forty years they journeyed in these conditions. For forty years they lifted one foot ahead of another, along the way burying and mourning their dead. And for every single day of those forty years Moses told them to lift their eyes from the parched, arid earth and to see ahead the Promised Land flowing with milk and honey. A land of clear rivers. A land fat with cattle and figs. A land sylvan with trees of olives, quince and pears.

Martin Luther King had a vision. He was standing on the white marble steps of the Lincoln Memorial. It was there that he told the whole nation what he could see. In his vision he saw the day when the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners would sit down together at the table of fellowship.

Nelson Mandela had a vision. He was behind bars, imprisoned on Robin Island. Through the bars, past the guards, on the other side of Apartheid he beheld a vision of a non-racial, democratic South Africa.

Ludicrous, these visions, every one of them. Ludicrous, preposterous, naïve: John's, Moses', Martin's, Nelson's. If you were an actuary setting the odds on whether or not any of these visions could be realized, you'd say the odds were long to none.

Here's a question: What makes us different from the animals? Opposable thumb? Our consciousness of our own mortality? Or perhaps, altruism: the ability to care for another, act on another's behalf without regard to either the cost or benefit to ourselves?

I propose that what makes us different is what John and Moses had. What Martin and Nelson had: the ability to see beyond what is, to what might be. Beyond Apartheid to a non-racial, democratic South Africa. Beyond inequality to equal rights. Beyond the desert wilderness to the Promised Land. Beyond pain and death to healing and resurrection. What separates us from our sister and brother animals is our capacity and desire to imagine a future finer than the present, a purpose greater than our own lives and then to pray for it, labor for it, sacrifice for it.

“Without a vision the people perish.” (Proverbs)

We had a vision. Ten years ago the leaders of Old South Church—the members of the Church Council, your board of Trustees and Deacons, your ministers – began having glimmers of a vision; glimmers of a future that was bigger, finer, bolder and more faithful than where we were ten years ago.

We didn't come by the vision by accident. We asked for it. We put the question directly to God: “God, what is your vision for Old South Church? What would you have us be and do? How can this church – the church of Benjamin Franklin, Samuel Adams and Phillis Wheatley, the church of the Boston Tea Party, of radical abolitionists and those who built housing for the poor and marched for civil rights – serve you in the future?”

Here is what we heard:

First, we heard God calling us to live our Christian FAITH AT THE CROSSROADS. Jesus and his followers ministered at the crossroads in their day – at the contested areas between slave and free, male and female, Gentile and Jew and Samaritan, rich and poor, sick and well. We heard God calling us to roll up our sleeves, wade in deep and minister at the crossroads, in the contested areas of our time: between black and white, Christian and Muslim, rich and poor, housed and unhoused, immigrant and citizen, gay and straight. And, for the past ten years, in one way or another, that has been our work.

We became a sanctuary church; started Boston Warm, a day center for unhoused neighbors; partnered with City Mission and others to work on the edges of homelessness and affordable housing. We launched (G)RACE Speaks, conversations about race; not about race out there, but here, among ourselves. We established our Gospel Choir. Our work with GBIO carries us to mosques and synagogues, jails and prisons, transforming foreigner to friend, and strangeness to familiarity. We went on mission trips taking us out of our comfort zones into circumstances that were challenging, life-altering. We authorized and launched a group focused on climate change.

Second, we heard God calling us to be a SANCTUARY IN THE CITY. Christian churches are in decline. All across this country, urban churches, one after another, are closing their doors. The vast majority of church buildings in Boston and across Massachusetts are open for a stingy two to four hours per week. We heard God shouting to us from heaven: adapt or die, evolve or perish, adjust or succumb. We heard God say: fling open the doors. Fling open the doors and welcome in all God's people. We heard God urging us to capitalize on this extraordinary space and location. Since then we've been renovated this old building. We are exploiting and adapting new technologies so that we might better give witness to the whole wide world of the progressive, glass-is-half-full, God is more-mercy-than-judgment faith that we proclaim. We hired a full-time director of communications, overhauled our Website, and started live-streaming. We hung banners and put out signs proclaiming God's good news.

Third, we heard God is calling us to be CHRISTIANS IN FORMATION. We heard God calling us to be a teaching church, mentoring new generations of Christians. But, in order to be a teaching church, we needed first to be a learning church. We hired a full-time director of Children and Family Ministries and a third minister focused on teaching and membership development and assimilation. We imported a new children's curriculum: Godly Play. We rearranged our Sunday morning schedule. We launched Community Hour and added a ton of small groups and study groups. We got ourselves a Theologian in Residence and a Theologian in the City so that we, the creature God has imbued with extra-large brains, can put our very large brains to the uses God intends.

To do all these things, we had to get our financial house in order. We stepped up our own generosity. We sold a book, addressed deferred maintenance, and built a capital reserve into our annual budget. We built up our endowment, revised the by-laws, renamed and added committees and working groups. We reorganized ourselves in important ways.

Old South Church's *Vision for the 21st Century* guided us, just as we intended it to do, to the very precipice of our 350th Anniversary. We didn't realize every part of the vision God laid before us. But then, neither did Moses, or Martin or Nelson. Like them, however, we saw some of it come to pass.

Old South's *Vision for the 21st Century* has been and remains a collective effort; an effort informing our 350 Anniversary activities and programs.

If you were a member of the Trustees, Deacons or Council in 2009, 2010, or 2011 please stand up and remain standing.

If you served on one of the Vision Task Forces: The Vision Working Group, Sanctuary in the City, Christians in Formation or Faith at the Crossroads please stand up.

If you attended the annual meeting on December 5, 2010 at which meeting we adopted the *Vision for the 21st Century*, please stand up.

If you supported the recent capital campaign with your dollars, please stand up.

If you are supporting the church today – or have over the past ten years – financially, or as a volunteer in any way, please stand up.

If you are visitor today, and are still sitting, try this: if you believe in visions, in committing to a future finer than the present and a purpose greater than your own life; if you believe God endowed us with extra-large brains (with wit and imagination and a ravenous hunger for justice, and a thirst for mercy) so that we could see past what is, to what might be, please stand up.

The difference between John and us: John was utterly alone, bereft of companionship, exiled, banished, solitary on an island. We, on the other hand, have each other. We are each other's keepers, to be sure. But we are also each other's cheerleaders and champions. It is all the difference in the world.

On the day of this church's 349th Annual Meeting, here is what I know: it is good to be church, church.