

## **A Vision for Christ Church: “Write the Vision. Make it plain.”**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab.*

*20<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost. Proper 22, Yr. C. October 3, 2004. (Habakkuk 2:1-4.)*

One essential for any kind of achievement is a *vision*. That is: to make progress, we need a mental picture of where we’re going and how we’re going to get there. To succeed, we need a vision of what success will look like. The entrepreneur building a new business, the educator establishing an experimental school, the physician treating a patient, the parent raising a child—all these build on a visionary sense of what the outcome of their efforts will be (God willing), if they do things right. Or, to choose a different example: Michelangelo – starting out to carve an angel from a shapeless block of stone – said that from the beginning he could *see* an angel in the marble; his work was simply to release it from the stone.

We read a passage from the Book of the Prophet Habakkuk this morning. Habakkuk – like Amos earlier and Ezekiel later – was a visionary prophet. That is to say, God gave him a vision – a mental picture – of what was going to happen to Israel. God showed Habakkuk how he would purge his people of their sin and gave him a vision of the healing that God would provide for them, once they’d been purified. And the Lord commanded the prophet to write the essence of the vision and make it plain, to write it on tablets in letters so big and bold that even a runner passing by could read it: *the righteous shall live by faith*.

In every instance, the vision of a prophet like Habakkuk was a way of making the promise and purpose of God concrete for his people... so they could hang on to it, believe it, and know when it had been fulfilled.

I believe that it’s important for a pastor to ask God for a vision for his church. Such a vision, such an inspired picture sent from God, can give pastor and people a sense of direction. A vision enables a church to know when we’re succeeding and when we’re failing. It’s both a promise from God and a call to obedience. It’s a standard against which we can test ourselves, asking “If we do thus-and-so, are we being faithful to the vision God has given us?”

I do not claim to be a prophet like the ones whose books are in the Old Testament, but I do believe that from time to time God has given me a definite message to share. And I believe that the Lord has given me an unambiguous sense of what he is looking for from our church. This is a vision, and its central element is a picture of Christ Church in Aspen as a *community where people meet Jesus Christ*.

I believe that what God wants is for us to be most of all a fellowship of people where both we and those who come to us from around the country can encounter Christ in a deeply personal, entirely authentic, life-transforming way.

The vision of our church as a community of where people meet Jesus Christ is a composite picture, sort of like a photo-montage. First, it’s a picture of worship that unites us with Jesus, ...that communicates his undiluted love, ...that lifts us into his presence in the power of the Spirit, ...that refreshes us as those were refreshed who came to him on the Galilean hillsides and lakeshore, ...that heals the hurting hearts and bodies of those who come into his presence, ...and – most of all – that inspires us to imitate him.

It’s a picture of teaching that is grounded in the Biblical gospel, the record of the words and works of Jesus, the Son of God, ...that connects discipleship with daily living, ...that equips every participant in a Bible study or class to be an informed and faithful witness for Jesus, ...and that supplies us with the only kind of moral formation that will allow us to find our way safely through the minefield of temptations and delusions which we know as contemporary American society.

It’s a picture of service to others as the normal Christian life, ...a life shaped by the pattern that Jesus taught when he asked his followers: “*Who do you think is greater, the person who sits at the table, or the person who serves?*” Then he said, “*Surely, the one who sits at the table is greater. But I am among you as one who serves,*” The normal Christian life is a life that’s other-oriented not self-centered, ...a life

that's lived in optimism about what those who believe in Jesus can accomplish, rather than pessimism because the task before us is daunting.

It's a picture of a church where Christ is really treated as Head, as Lord, ...where no decisions are made without prayer, ...where each person great or small, young or old, local or part-timer, is treated as if he or she were the Lord himself—with respect, dignity, and care, ...where Jesus is the reconciler of our differences and the focus of our unity, ...and where there is a collective zeal to invite others to join us, not for our sake—because we want them to provide financial support or help with programs— but for theirs, because what we're experiencing is so valuable we want to share it.

The vision God has given for Christ Church is that it be just that: *Christ's Church*. —Centered on Him. —Trusting in Him. —Empowered by Him. ....In worship, in teaching, in service, and in community life. That's the heart of the vision, and as God commanded Habakkuk, I want to make the vision simple, clear, and plain. I wish I had a big marker board up here by the pulpit so I could write this for you in bold letters: "CHRIST CHURCH: CENTERED ON HIM, TRUSTING IN HIM, EMPOWERED BY HIM." —But we need to remember that a vision from God like this one is not a picture of things *as they are*. No. It's a picture of things *as they can become if the people of God respond in faith*.

We have a daunting task. There's plenty of evidence that Aspen is not a religious town. According to survey data, roughly 75% of the people who live in Pitkin County profess no faith of any sort and are, in fact, "faith resistant." That is to say, three quarters of the people who live around us have no religion and no interest in religion. Churches are not "on their radar screens." For them, "Jesus" is just the name of a man who lived a long time ago. The Bible is a boring book they have no interest in reading. —So there's the challenge God has for our church: to be a community of encounter with Christ in the midst of an environment where most people are not looking for him.

Next Sunday is Pledge Sunday. When we talk about "pledges" in the church, we're usually referring to written promises to support the church with our money, time and effort. And we're certainly asking for those kinds of pledges. We need them. But I want you to look towards next Sunday with a much bigger understanding of what it means to make a pledge than simply to promise to donate money and time. I want you to think about your pledge as being like what happens when a man and woman marry and make a commitment, a pledge of faith to one another, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, until they are parted by death. I want you to think about your *pledge* as being like what we mean when we put our right hands over our hearts and pledge allegiance to the flag of our country.

Pledge Sunday is the time for us to pledge ourselves to follow the vision God has given us... a time to renew our commitment to *be a community where people meet the Lord Jesus Christ*—right in the midst of a deeply secular, faith-resistant society. The money that we promise to give to support the church's work in the coming year or the tasks that we promise to do as part of the church's ministry are not really the substance of our pledge, they are simply the tangible signs, the "proof" we might say, of our *real* pledge: a pledge of our faith in Jesus, the Son of God, who has called us to follow him and be his disciples. Our true pledge is to go where he leads us. And he has given us a vision to show the way.

The word of God to the prophet long ago is a word that rings in my ears as if spoken this very morning: "*Write the vision; make it plain... For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous shall live by their faith.*"