

Lynda and I have been working on our parish website over the last few days. We are using the website of another Nevada parish as a template. That parish has a vision statement on the front page of their website. Lynda asked me what our parish vision is. To my knowledge, the parish has not identified a vision or vision statement. We have a mission statement, which we print on the cover of our bulletins. Do we need a vision statement, too?

In today's lesson from Acts, Paul saw a man in a vision who told him to go to Macedonia to share the Good News there. Paul and his companions had been traveling around telling people about Jesus, and this vision that came at night guided their next move. Since this was a vision that came to him at night, perhaps we could call it a dream instead?

There are many instances in the Bible of people receiving messages through dreams and visions. For example, recall the story in the Gospel of Matthew in which Joseph was warned in a dream not to return home after Jesus' birth, and so the holy family traveled to Egypt instead.

In recent months I've been trying to remember my dreams long enough to write them down after I awaken. The imagery in the book of Revelation is rather like dream imagery. In dreams things that would not seem normal while awake seem perfectly unremarkable. And that's what much of the book of Revelation is like—somewhat surreal, and fantastical when seen in the light of day. At the same time, dreams can help us to understand and process things that are troubling us. Dreams sometimes help us figure out how to deal with a problem we are facing. Visions can help to guide us, perhaps give us a new direction.

Have you ever had a vision? Or a prophetic dream? Did you act on that vision? Have you ever "followed your gut"? We talked about this very topic in the book study class this week. Many of those present had experienced a prophetic dream or vision.

What is the difference between a dream and a vision? Is there a difference? Is it that a dream happens when we are asleep, and a vision when we are awake? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines

Dream as

1. : a series of thoughts, visions, or feelings that happen during sleep
2. : an idea or vision that is created in your imagination and that is not real
3. : something that you have wanted very much to do, be, or have for a long time

And ***Vision*** as

1. : the ability to see : sight or eyesight
2. : something that you imagine : a picture that you see in your mind
3. : something that you see or dream especially as part of a religious or supernatural experience

The main difference seems to me to be that a dream comes from inside you, while a vision may come from beyond you. I also think that a vision is clearer than a dream. Dreams are often confusing, especially when examined in the light of day. A vision is more compelling. It doesn't leave us when we wake up, as dreams so often do. With a vision, one's course becomes clear, though sometimes it takes time for the vision to come to fruition. A vision leads to a goal, which leads to concentrated and directed effort.

Sometimes God speaks to us in visions and dreams, sending us messages through the subconscious, through unconventional channels of communication. Sometimes following those visions gets us into trouble in this world, or makes people look at us as though we are crazy. Paul's visions sometimes got him into trouble. The Old Testament prophets experienced visions and were generally not well-loved in their own times. Rather, they were often scoffed at, turned away from, ignored, and even persecuted because of the messages they voiced. Yet the prophets persisted because those visions came from God. Those visions were of people living more in accord with God's will

Following a vision can be a difficult course to pursue. But when that vision comes from God, then it is the right path to pursue. We should probably be suspicious of visions that fit too neatly with what we want to do anyway. Those could be false, not sent through the Holy Spirit, but arising out of our own wishful thinking.

The idea for this chasuble came to me in a dream. At General Convention 2012, I had spent some time looking at the vestments made by Mary, who is the cousin of one of my college colleagues. They were beautiful, but felt I didn't need another stole, and a set of chasubles in all the seasonal colors was beyond my budget. Then that night I had a vision of this design for a chasuble that could be used during all the seasons of the church year, with panels of the different seasonal colors along the edge. I described that vision to Mary, and this is what she made for me.

In order to transform our world from one filled with problems and troubles, we must have a vision of what the future will be, of what God's Kingdom will be like, and therefore, what this world could be like.

In order to help us to discern the difference between a personal daydream and a vision sent from God, we can ask ourselves whether following the dream would primarily make us feel more comfortable and secure, or would it further God's kingdom? Would it help to make the world a better place? We could also ask, where am I needed, rather than where do I want to go? Paul was trying to get to Asia when he received the vision telling him to go to Macedonia.

In today's gospel we heard these words: "the Holy spirit will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you." The Holy Spirit is God with us. It is God's voice sparking through us, and in us. It is what we recognize as God in one another. I think that our true visions come through the Holy Spirit. God speaks to us through the Holy Spirit, and those messages sometimes come to us through visions. They come to us without our having to work out every detail on our own.

We can be open to these visions. I invite you to be open to that vision or dream or that gut reaction that tells you that the Holy Spirit is at work in your life. In order to follow it, you may be forced to move beyond your comfort zone, you may find yourself having to think in new and different ways, and to associate with distinctly different people, but that's ok. God is with you and God loves you. On that you can stake your hope and your life as you follow the vision God has shared with you. Amen.