

## THE VISION

Christmas does not end something; it begins something. This we have heard a lot this past season, and most of us seem to agree. I personally suspect that there is still a lot of confusion and vagueness about what it is that Christmas is starting. So I have jumped to the very last paragraph in Matthew's Gospel. Maybe if we look at the ending, we can see more clearly what Christmas is beginning.

*“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. And when they saw him they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.’”*

These are the last words of Matthew. It is after the Crucifixion and after the Resurrection. Judas has hung himself, and the other eleven have gone to Galilee to meet Jesus. There on the mountain (I think Mount Tabor, but it doesn't matter), the eleven gather with Jesus – and even still, some of them are doubting. Do you take comfort in that? If all eleven had doubted, the story would have ended right there, even after all of that. It is a scary world and we can always doubt, if we really want to badly enough. In a physical, temporal realm, there is no such thing as proof of any meaning or purpose or identity. We can always doubt, if we want to badly enough. When was the last time you doubted your spouse's love? How many years of faithful living does it take before that can no longer happen? No matter how good it gets, we can always go East of Eden if we want to.

But what is our vision? What are we trying to accomplish? Why are we in a church together? Apparently quite a number of you are uncertain about whether you want to be involved in our church in the coming year. It is your choice. We do not run a “Society for the Co-dependent” here. Lots of folk think that's what a church is supposed to be, but it is actually quite disrespectful to both you *and* Jesus. A lot of us are very excited about being here. If Christmas is a new beginning, where is it taking us? The words are familiar: *“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.”* They are familiar words, but what pictures and images

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do they actually bring to your mind? Usually I am sorry when I ask. I get back very strange and twisted pictures about colonialism and uptight, judgmental missionaries and about idyllic native cultures where everybody is carefree, happy, and screwing each other with abandon – until suddenly one or two of the missionaries appear and single-handedly force thousands of natives into shirts, ties, and rigid, joyless lives. The Gospel according to Hollywood.

But skipping all that for the moment, here we sit – most of us baptized, and most of us members of a church, claiming to be disciples, and at least trying to learn to observe the directives of our Lord. Those directives are not all as simplistic as we once thought, but we work at it every day. And we are two thousand years down the line and literally on the other side of the globe from when and where those eleven talked with Jesus on that mountain. Pretty impressive, when you stop to think about it. Not perfect, for sure, but pretty amazing all the same. If you sat down right now and started contemplating how you would design a Message that would cover the globe and be so alive two thousand years from now that millions of people would gather every week and talk and think and ponder how to understand it and live it, how would you begin? Amazing indeed. Perhaps sometimes we should mix our realization of how far short we fall with some awareness of the unfathomable mystery and miracle that so many of us are still in the game at all. There are many forces in our world working against Jesus and everything He stands for. There always have been. Clearly, not all of us are failing Him entirely. He deserves better than He gets from us; the more we know Him and try to walk His Way, the more we realize that. But there is this other reality too. Not all of us are failing Him entirely. Here we are. And some of our children are learning about Him at this very moment. And however imperfectly, millions have been thinking about Him a great deal, especially in recent weeks.

So what is The Vision? What are we hoping to accomplish? What is the grand purpose toward which we are striving? Most of you have been writing covenants and dedicating a lot of time and money and thought to what our church can be and do in the coming year. What are you hoping will come of it?

Personally, I do not want to build crystal cathedrals, fill Super Bowl stadiums, or get very wealthy or famous. You may think that's sour grapes, but it's not. I don't mind a little of it, but a little of that stuff goes a long way – and usually gets in the way. I keep getting impressed by the “unseen” things Paul talks about and by “the Kingdom not of this world”

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that Jesus talks about. “Make disciples” is very big to me, but I don’t think we can usually see very much of that with the naked eye. Baptism is very big to me too, but it only takes a few minutes to dry off, and I am mostly enthralled by what comes after you cannot see the water anymore.

In our day and time, when we talk about “The Vision” – the purpose of the church – I usually hear rhetoric about ecology or peace or justice. When I was younger, the rhetoric was more often about “missions” – the whole world becoming Christian. The two “visions” are quite similar underneath. Both hunger for a better, more cooperative world where people can be safe, children can grow and thrive, and there is no longer so much pain or poverty or evil. And (you know me by now) both are a chimera – a mirage. Wishful thinking is not the heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. A vision has to be more than a wish list or most of us would not end up living or dying for it.

So back up with me for a moment, if you will. We left the angels and the shepherds glorifying and praising God. Some of us realized that we want to join them – and that in order to do this, we have to let down our defenses and rejoice and praise God as they did. We cannot recognize who Jesus is – we cannot realize that He has come to be with us – without rejoicing. It is a categorical impossibility.

But from there on, if we are not very careful, we start ruining the Message, cutting it back, diluting it. I am convinced we do not mean to. We try so hard to honor the Message that we literally start taking the power and light out of it. Is there any such thing as only one end of the spectrum? The LIGHT glorifies whatever it hits – illumines whatever it shines on. The angels glorify God – that is, they are conscious of the glory of God and they proclaim it. There is no Christmas in that. God is not in trouble. Heaven is not where it is dark. The angels glorify God *because* of what he is doing on earth, *because* the Christ is being born on earth, *because* the Light is going to shine here – and illumine US. “*Unto you is born this day ....*” Incarnation. *Immanuel.*

So we rightly point to Heaven and thank God and rejoice because that is the Source and that is where our hope is coming from. But generation after generation tries to leave it at that. Christmas means that Light is coming into this world. What does it illumine when it gets here? The reason Jesus is sent – the reason Jesus comes – is so that the Light can hit YOU! Yes, me too – all of us – but don’t dilute it. Christmas is the Light of the World hitting YOU! Well, I hope it spills over onto your children and your spouse and your friends and your

co-workers too. But that cannot happen if it does not hit you. That is what Christmas starts. Jesus did not need the Light; all He had to do was stay home. He came that YOU might have LIFE – and have it abundantly. (That is not my opinion; that is a quote from Him (John 10:10), in case you are new here.)

But of course, from that moment on we have lots of turmoil and strife with Him because we keep trying to tell Him that life is just fine as it is; we're okay the way we are; everything is just fine here, thank you very much – just hunky dory. (“How are you?” “I’m just fine, thank you. How are you?” “Just fine. Everything is fine here.”) Everybody is kind, everybody eats, everybody works, nobody bears grudges, and we don’t ever have any wars or strife or injustice. It’s just a few misfits causing all the trouble. Nobody dies, nobody is sick, nobody is in bondage. Oh, maybe some of us need a little help from time to time – a welfare check, a little foreign aid, maybe a few conversations with a psychologist now and again – but nobody needs a Savior.

Only, a lot of people have felt the Light – they have felt the Savior’s power – and they have stopped quibbling and found themselves transposed into a whole new key. Do you really suppose that the dynamism of the first two centuries of Christianity was caused by Christians only noticing one end of the spectrum? That they were enthralled by the Light at the Heaven-end of the spectrum? “Hurray for God and the angels!” You think *that* was what changed the world?

Christendom has become terribly one-sided in proclaiming the Message. The full concepts are there, even the words, but somehow the impact of the Light on humans has become terribly muted. Jesus is wonderful, so we should become selfless. Jesus did so much for us, so we should think only of others. Jesus was the Savior, so we should try to save others and stop being so selfish and self-centered. If we really love Jesus, we should give up all kinds of things, like sex, money, food, nice clothes, good jobs, joy, good times, parties, makeup, jewelry, dancing, playing cards, gambling, success, popularity. There is more, but I am only mentioning the things I have personally heard sermons or lectures about or read articles or books about by well-known Christian leaders informing me that these things are incompatible with the Christian Life. Jesus means “No more good stuff for you!” Once you get religious, you don’t count anymore. Once you get the Message, it’s only for others. Give all the good stuff away, especially to the poor – so they can go to Hell. Is this really The Vision? It is in a lot of places.

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If a Savior is sent to us, that is a terrible insult. It means we needed one. On the other hand, it also means we must be a great deal more valuable than we thought. What happened to that end of the spectrum?

It really is not fair. When we are really young, we all start out trying to have everything our own way, trying to be important, trying to make self-centeredness work. And most of us get hit hard enough and often enough, in one way or another, that we try to shift to a different approach, or at least try not to let our self-interest show so much anymore. Now Jesus comes along and tries to get us into trouble all over again, and worse than ever before. “You are the light of the world. You are children of God. You are destined for eternal life. You are enormously special and precious. The Heavenly Father loves you.” Right! How stupid does He think we are? “Hey Buddy, you’re talking to kindergarten graduates! We know that stuff doesn’t work here.” It has been beaten into us by parents, teachers, friends, bosses. Even under the Christmas tree, we had to learn not to be too selfish or greedy.

And it’s true, too! Any and every attempt I make to think myself important – to get or become great in my own eyes or by my own merit or on my own efforts – is disastrous. Even if successful, like Stalin, I only become more isolated and paranoid. If I somehow got it for myself, somebody will doubtless try to take it away from me. And yet, in some strange reversal, any effort or attempt to turn my will and life over to God: I walk into glorification! How can we walk into the Light without getting illumined? Oh, not in one fell swoop, to be sure, but inevitably. How can we draw closer to the Creator and Source of Life without coming into more and more Life ourselves? In how many different ways and times did Jesus try to tell us: “*He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it?*” (Matthew 10:39) Why didn’t He just come right out and say it? Well, how loud can a person scream? What do you want Him to do, go to a cross and rise from the dead?

Back to the point. Watch Jesus. As near as we know, was He selfless? Who controlled His life? Who told Him what to do, what to say, where to go, how to spend His time and life? Our answer, of course, is that God did. Jesus lived a life of prayer. But from any human point of view, Jesus was more His own man than any other person who ever came here. It included telling off His best friend and rejecting His mother. (Matthew 16:23; 12:48-49) It included defying the entire religious establishment of His nation, even though He had great respect for the

tradition and establishment they represented. It is easy to be a rebel or a revolutionary if you don't like the establishment and if you don't care. It was just the opposite for Jesus. He cared too much – more than anybody else ever had. Who was ever more self-conscious, more self-aware? Jesus could be totally “with” others because He was so much Himself. He came into each day grounded, knowing His identity and purpose and destiny. He did amazing things for others, but He did them out of that base of self-confidence which was really God-confidence: trust in God.

Is it any part of your Vision that our church becomes more like that? Is it any part of what you think a church should be trying to accomplish? I don't think most churches are within a country mile of helping their people become Christlike. They help people become judgmental, to become namby-pamby people-pleasers, or to live only “for others.” Naturally, I am asking all of you to help me make this church different. And I understand better than you think I do how much that disturbs some of you and that it is not what you are used to.

By the way, if Christianity is always and only for others, then it is never, ever for anyone. Selfless love is like a dog chasing its tail. Even if you do finally catch it, what have you got? Christianity may bring us to such joy and awareness that we will no longer sacrifice our lives for earthly values. It may also bring us to such joy and awareness that we *will* sacrifice our lives for the Kingdom of Christ. (I don't mean destroy our lives; I mean consecrate and dedicate them.) But never does true Christianity leave us believing any longer that our own lives have no value. That is where we started. That is how it was *before* we met Jesus. How on earth have we turned the Cross into “I love you so much I'm willing to die for you, but you aren't worth bananas”?

Christianity is a very selfish, self-centered religion, more so than any other religion on earth. Once you get it into your head that God loves you, you have to start taking your own life seriously in a way you never did before. People who do not think they are important do not believe anybody else is important either – not really. “Love 'em and leave 'em” – whether you apply that to love affairs, churches, jobs, pets, children, friends, or countries – is a non-valuing principle. Love *means* valuing individual life. Our culture has used the word so carelessly and mushily and generically for so long, it is hard to remember the core meaning. Love values life. If somebody gets hurt, love does not like it. But love will kill somebody dead in a split second, without mercy or fear of consequences, to protect a child or another who is also loved.

We have “love” all tidied up with a pink bow tied around it. That has to be an imposter, because real love is unpredictable, and it is the most powerful motive force on earth. Yet we have people running around talking as if they know all about how love should behave and what it will do next?!

People who do not think their own lives are valuable reduce, mess up, or destroy the lives of all those around them to the degree that they are able to. Have you never watched alcoholics trying to get others to drink more? Drug addicts trying to get others to take drugs? Smokers trying to tempt others to keep smoking? Negative people trying to make sure nothing very good ever happens to anybody?

Some people who cannot believe that individuals are valuable try for a while to think that groups are valuable – that individuals should always sacrifice themselves for the group. Some people call it “communism,” but “Catholicism” and any other “ism” can quickly shade into the same collective mentality. Eastern religions do not believe individual life is important. Western religions tend to claim that individuals are important, but with a constant tendency to hedge the bet and make sure nobody takes it too much to heart, at least not to the point where individuals might become unmanageable. That is what was wrong with Jesus: He became unmanageable. And if we go to *Him* and not just to the religions that claim His name, we will become unmanageable too. Christianity is far and away the most selfish, self-centered religion in the world. If the Omnipotent, Omniscient, Almighty, Eternal God cares about you personally, you simply flat-out can no longer pretend that your life does not matter. Nor can you go on pretending that some “other authority” has a greater or more important claim on your life. Suddenly the love of God faces us with IDENTITY, DESTINY, and PURPOSE – and all of it *individual, specific, and personal*. From that moment on, we cannot pretend that things do not matter. And suddenly it is no longer enough to just spin our prayer wheels or to compose one-way statements instructing God about what we think is right and what God ought to be doing. Suddenly we need to know what God thinks, and we can barely wait to hear more about what God has in mind for us. The moment this business of “us mattering” – of God caring about *us* – gets past mere words and into *really and truly*, it is all brand new. The old life is over.

I am your pastor. I have no responsibility under Christ for others – just for you. The only thing I care about is that you – the members of this church – get more and more Christlike. Only, I am talking about character, identity, vocation, who you really love, and what you are

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trying to accomplish with your life. If this church grows or thrives, it will be your fault, not mine. And if we grow, I hope it will be because you genuinely cared about some individuals and truly wanted them to be in on the kind of LIFE *you* are personally finding so exciting and valuable. If we grow on any other basis or for any other reason, I will hate it, and Jesus will hate it more than I do.

Some of you struggle with me and work against me because you have been taught that the essence of the Christian Life is generosity toward others, especially helping the poor. Let me ask you a question: If you spend your whole life giving to the poor instead of developing your own true identity, character, and purpose, what are you going to do when you get to Heaven? How many poor people do you think we have there?

It can be good to care about the poor. But why not come halfway with me? Pick one or two of the poor and bring them into the full excitement and experience of Life in Christ Jesus as you experience it, so that they end up full colleagues and friends and Christian teammates by your side. Then they will be truly grateful instead of just beholden. And you will not have to carry them through all eternity.