

Message: Lift Your Eyes to God

Have you ever run in a marathon? Maybe you know someone who did or watched a race? It’s an amazing physical, mental and spiritual feat over a distance of more than 26 miles. It requires stamina – strength of body, heart and mind. Running a marathon takes preparation, commitment. Before someone begins the extensive preparations needed, they need a vision – a dream of what it would be like to finish the race. The dream can be very realistic, encompassing how they feel, who would be there, what they would say and more.

Here’s a question: at what mile do most people quit a marathon? If you said “mile 26,” you’re in good company. That’s the most common guess. In reality, fewer people quit in the last mile than any other time during the race.¹ People quit during “mile 20” more often than any other time. Many runners, even those who are well trained, don’t complete races on occasion. It’s called “hitting the wall,” when their energy reserves and strength are overcome and they just stop.

Why is that the case? The experts think it’s related to one thing: vision. When runners get to the last mile, they can see the finish line and everyone gathered to greet them. That’s an incentive. But when runners get to mile 20, that’s the point when most people lose sight of their goal. At that point in the race, they’re physically exhausted and mentally drained. Runners feel like they’ve come so far and yet have so much further to go. That’s when their goal fades away and their mental power dissipates. That’s what Solomon was writing about in Proverbs 29:18, “*where there is no vision, the people perish.*”

This points to an important principle that’s the key to success, health and happiness: we must keep our vision alive. To do so, we must stay mentally and emotionally strong and spiritually fit. After all, there will be days when our bodies say “no.” That’s when we need our mind to say “yes.” There will be times when it will seem like everything in life is conspiring to sabotage our goals and dreams. And there will be weeks, or even months, when we feel like we’re hitting the 20th mile.

¹ <https://www.guideposts.org/keep-your-eyes-on-the-prize>

What do we do when we're feeling tired, mentally worn out and spiritually down? The answer is to maintain your vision. Focus on it. Keep your vision alive and it will keep you alive. Don't give up. Don't lose your hope. Plant your vision deep in your heart and mind and strive towards it. Lift your eyes up and look forward, to what lies ahead. It's not easy. If it were easy, everyone would be content, filled with hope and peace. We can lose our vision in life in the same way a runner loses vision in a race.

The apostle Paul recognized the need for vision in the face of challenges. His words in Philippians 3:12-14 encourage us, *"Not that I have already reached the goal, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."* Paul invites us to imitate him, even as he imitates Jesus, living a new way with a new vision. That's because in Jesus we find meaning, identity and what we need to overcome the challenges of the world. The loving power of our Savior changes us, from the inside out, so we aren't overcome by the temptations and trials of life. We're made part of the glorious body of Christ, on earth and in heaven.

What's our vision as a congregation? What's your vision as a person within our community of faith? What can we plant deep inside our hearts and minds, helping it to take root and then tending and feeding it through our prayers and time in the Bible? What image will we hold on to when our energy is down, we're mentally fatigued, our emotions are running high and we don't feel the presence of God? Paul tells us *"do not lose heart"* (2 Corinthians 2:16). God shows us the way by grace.

The best way to find vision is to look to God. God reveals his divine nature in Jesus and guides us through the Holy Spirit. God gives us a spirit of faith so *"we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal"* (2 Corinthians 4:18). God gives us eyes to see beyond the material substance of creation. God shows us a world filled with spiritual substance, eternal in its very nature and meaning. It's a world filled with promise. It gives us hope. In that world, we see that we're

new creations in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:17). We can rely on God to supply all our needs (Philippians 4:19). When our visions lead us to acts of faith, hope and love, we know they're from God. By our attitudes, words and actions we're responding to Jesus' call, "*Come! Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*" (Matthew 4:19).

We need to ask ourselves "why?" Why is the vision significant to us? What hope does it give? What's the big picture? Our answer to the question "why?" defines our purpose. And vision needs purpose. A vision without a purpose is like setting out on a trip to Yosemite without any gas in the car. It's also like sitting in a sailboat on the water with the sails flapping, waiting for the wind. You can see the goal, but you can't get there. Jesus said, "*The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*" (John 3:8).

Let's confess Jesus as our Lord and Savior without reservation or fear (Romans 10:9). That makes us God's children, born of the Spirit, with a new vision for life. We're runners in the race with an extra boost to get us past the 20th mile. We're racing the sailboat across the waters with a full sail and brisk wind, enjoying the thrill and excitement of being alive. What's holding you back?

It's important to have a vision. It's even more important to have a vision that gives us hope and a purpose. We always need to ask ourselves "why?" first, before "what?", "how?" or "when?" A vision and purpose focused on following Jesus can't miss if we remain true and follow the Holy Spirit, wherever God leads us.

I invite you to consider the vision we have cast for our church. It's found on the front of your bulletin. Please join me in reading it now:

We are a church of blessings, changing the world through words and deeds of grace, showing others how to follow Jesus Christ

On behalf of the church leadership, I invite you to reflect and pray about this vision. Ask yourself the question "why?" I pray you will find it giving you hope and purpose as we serve together by faith. To God be the glory!

Psalm 51:7-13 (NRSV)

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean;
wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins,
and blot out all my iniquities.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
and sinners will return to you.

Matthew 4:18-23 (NRSV)

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea - for they were fishermen. And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.” Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.