



When God Gives You a Vision

Acts 16:6-10

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On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivered a call for racial equality and freedom on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. Some 250,000 people had gathered there as part of the March on Washington in what became the defining moment of the Civil Rights Movement. They heard the soaring oratory from Dr. King as he shared his dream “that one day down in Alabama with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification, one day right down in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers. I have a dream today.”

Folk artist Bob Dylan performed at that March on Washington;¹ in those days, folk music was closely aligned with the Civil Rights Movement. Inspired by what he’d experienced in Washington, Dylan wrote an anthem for the movement. His song became the title track to his 1964 album, “The Times They Are a-Changin’.”

Less than a month after recording that anthem, President John Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas. The very next night, Dylan was in concert in upstate New York and he opened with “The Times They Are a-Changin’.” He told biographer Anthony Scaduto, “I thought, ‘Wow, how can I open with that song? I’ll get rocks thrown at me.’ But I had to sing it, my whole concert takes off from there. I know I had no understanding of anything. Something had just gone haywire in the country, and they were applauding the song. And I

¹ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=533261071243736>. Accessed May 13, 2022.

couldn't understand why they were clapping, or why I wrote the song. I couldn't understand anything."²

In September 1990, British alt band Jesus Jones released, "Right Here, Right Now," in which they sang about "watching the world wake up from history," and seeing "the decade in, when it seemed the world could change / at the blink of an eye."

However, Jesus Jones wasn't singing about the Civil Right Movement; their song was inspired by the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union. They went on to reference Dylan in their lyrics, noting that, "Bob Dylan didn't have this to sing about" when he sang, "The Times They Are a-Changin'."

But here's the thing: **The times are always a-changin'.**

They're changing in our world as our pandemic downgrades to an endemic and as societies around the world continue to open.

The times are a-changin' as Russia continues to propagate the fantasy that Ukraine is overrun by Nazis and must be liberated. The Soviet Union may have collapsed, Jesus Jones, but Vladimir Putin seems hellbent on rebuilding it.

The times are a-changin' in our country as we battle escalating inflation and continued political unrest, especially regarding abortion.

The times are a-changin' in our own community as millions of dollars are being poured into the renovation of dozens of properties in our historic downtown business district.

They're changing as bids are being solicited to give us some thirty brand new neighbors directly across Third Street from our church.

The times are a-changin' in our church as we have bid farewell to some key leaders in Kathleen Bashem and Doyce and Sue Hiscocks.

But they're also changing because we've welcomed several new families into our congregation who are eager to find ways in which they might connect people to Jesus Christ.

The times are always a-changin', my friends. So what are we to do in these changing times? One of the things we can do is look for changing times in the scriptures and see how we might adapt those principles in our lives and in our church.

The times were certainly changing in the Book of Acts as the disciples of Jesus Christ began taking the message of the gospel to the four corners of the earth. But it didn't happen automatically. It happened as the Holy Spirit moved among them and directed them into the future God had planned for them. Let's take another look at Acts 16, beginning at verse 6:

⁶ Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia. ⁷ When they came to the border of Mysia, they tried to enter Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus would not allow them to. ⁸ So they passed by Mysia and went down to Troas. ⁹ During the night Paul had a vision of a man of Macedonia standing and begging him, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." ¹⁰ After Paul had

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Times_They_Are_a-Changin%27_\(song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Times_They_Are_a-Changin%27_(song)). Accessed May 12, 2022.

seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Two things happened in that passage: (1) the Spirit stopped them; (2) the Spirit sent them by means of a vision.

The Spirit stopped them, and the Spirit sent them by means of a vision.

I want to focus on the second part of that statement and consider the fact that God gave Paul a vision. Now the fact is that anyone at any time in any place can claim to have a vision from God, and that can be a dangerous thing. Think of some of the cult leaders in recent decades who brought great harm to the gospel, to society, and especially to their own followers. Each one claimed to have had a vision, but it wasn't a vision from God.

If a vision is from God, it is going to display three characteristics. The first characteristic is this: A vision from God will always be consistent with God's Two Greats.

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The first Great is the Great Commandment, which is to—

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.³⁹ And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ (Matthew 22:38-39)

That is God's First Great. God's Second Great is the Great Commission:

¹⁹“Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

If God is going to give our church a vision, it is going to be consistent with those two “Greats.” It is going to help us to love God and neighbor, and it is going to help us to connect people to Jesus Christ.

Number Two: A vision from God—once fulfilled—will almost certainly be inconsistent with our expectations. *A vision from God—once fulfilled—will almost certainly be inconsistent with our expectations.*

Presumably, Paul was growing comfortable preaching to the people of Asia Minor. He knew the language; he knew the culture—and understandably so. He had been raised in Tarsus, which was in south-central Turkey. But then God gave him a vision to go to Greece. It was out of his comfort zone. It was a different culture and they spoke a different language. But Paul went anyway because the Spirit was leading him. Indeed, the Spirit was already out ahead of him.

As God gives us a vision, hopefully we will follow that vision. But it will almost certainly lead us out of our comfort zone. Our young people will experience that this summer as we spend a week in the Lake Traverse Reservation of South Dakota.

There is another way in which Paul was led out of his comfort zone. In last week's sermon, we met Lydia, the first recorded convert to Christianity on the European continent. She became a Christian after Paul found her among a group of women down by a river. Paul told the women of the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, and they chose to follow Jesus.

But remember, God gave Paul a vision of a *man* from the Europe calling out to him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” It was a vision of a man, not a woman.

We know from his writings that Paul wanted women to keep silence in the church. Do you think Paul would have been as eager to go to Macedonia if he had been given a vision of a woman calling to him for help? We can only guess. What we do know is that Paul went looking for a man, but he found a woman named Lydia. Paul had to innovate and preach the gospel to a bunch of women when he may have thought he would be going to help men.

Number Three: A vision from God will lead us to meet the deep needs of our neighbors. *A vision from God will lead us to meet the deep needs of our neighbors.*

In the case of Paul, he first had to discover that the people of Macedonia were indeed his neighbors, even though they lived across the Aegean Sea. And yet, he went to them.

I’m not suggesting that God is going to give us a vision for something that is hundreds of miles away; but I wouldn’t be surprised if God gave us a vision that looked outside the walls of this building. As we receive that vision, let us be mindful of the fact that we have neighbors who have a deep longing in their soul for something they can’t quite identify.

One day in glory, you and I are going to meet Lydia. When we do, we’ll be able to ask her about her conversion. And she will tell us that even though she was a worshipper of God, she still had a deep longing in her soul for something more. That something was a relationship with her Creator, a relationship that was only possible through the blood of Jesus Christ.

We are living in a day in which fewer and fewer people have any connection to God or the church. Yet many of them are longing for what can only be found in a relationship with God. They just don’t know it.

In his book, *The Agile Church*, Dwight Zscheile writes “I grew up in a secular home without knowledge of Christian faith or practice. I regarded the churches in my town as religious clubhouses catering to their members; whatever happened inside them was a mystery to me. It would never have occurred to me that Christian community could be the answer to my search for meaning, purpose, identity, and belonging... Fortunately, God used ordinary disciples to meet me where I was and share the gospel with me in terms I could understand.”³

Listen, my friends, as God gives us a vision, it will not only connect with God’s Two Greats; it will also meet the deep longings in the hearts of our neighbors—if we would only get out of our comfort zones.

³ Pg. xi.