

**“Vision 2020: Prayerful”**  
Psalm 4, Acts 2:36-42  
Rev. Anne Weirich, April 15, 2018

One of my favorite memories of my last trip to the Holy Land is illustrated some by the picture on the cover the bulletin.

Late one afternoon, we arrived by the Jordan River. The site we visit is off the road a piece. It’s in a place where the Jordan passes through land that is brown and dusty. Scattered along the road are the broken down shells of old half-built churches and pilgrim centers. Before peace with Jordan, the land was littered with land mines.

Now, there is a simple oasis. Limestone pavers and a few shaded altars are laid out on a plaza above the river to provide places for worship. There is a small shop and an outdoor canvas walled place for changing into robes, if you want, and showering.

Past the paved plaza, there are 2 sets of broad limestone stairs and a curving ramp that go down to the river. They cling to the cut in the valley which the river has formed. At their base is a solid platform. As you move closer to the river, there are several levels of long, curved

cement and stone seating benches. Finally, a large wooden deck with shallow stairs and metal hand rails goes into the river itself.

When the river is low, the decking barely reaches the water. When the river is high, the decking and railings can be swamped and stretch out into the water for quite a ways.

The day we were there, the water, which was brown and muddy, was very high and moving pretty well. It came right up to the first row of seats. The tall green reeds that crowd the bank were just beautiful.

There were also some big crowds.

Just as our group of 30 came down, another group departed and the guide quickly helped us claim some territory. We settled in on the stone banked seats and waited a minute for the group next to us to leave. Not long after, most of the other groups were gone and we sort of had the place to ourselves.

It was quite lovely and serene. The other leaders and I prepared to lead the service for the renewal of baptism. I was thinking - this is great! We have plenty of time and all this space to really worship and

enter into more than just the river. It was a vision of peace and some moments of silence.

So, we began.

And after the opening prayer and some Scripture, a slow trickle of people came down the stairs.

Mind you - there were several other wide open places along this very big deck. But these folks made their way to sit right next to us at the end where the reeds formed a backdrop.

And they were led there by their children.

The women were dressed like the women on the cover - lovely dresses with bright trim - their heads covered with the draped white fabric. Some of the men were dressed like that, too.

The children threw off whatever clothes they were wearing and jumped for joy at this great swimming opportunity. The smooth deck with its stairs become a trampoline. The metal handrails became monkey bars. There were shrieks and giggles and splashes and... soon there were crying babies as their parents dunked them over and over in the river.

The women were more modest, but soon they waded in with the men and children. It was so moving to see how deeply they plunged themselves in this muddy river in their white dresses. The hope and transcendence on their faces was quite beautiful.

Our embrace of the river was quite different, of course.

We shouted out the call and response to the baptism questions.

One of the other pastors stepped two steps into the water near a handrail. Each person came forward stepped down one level up to their ankles. The pastor scooped up some water and placed it on their heads. As the noise from our neighbors increased, the pastor just became louder and louder as she shouted out the blessing for each person.

I did notice, however, that her face shone brighter and brighter the longer she blessed people and the louder she had to become.

After that, we shouted out the closing prayers and then strongly sang “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot.” By this time, some others had gathered behind us to watch our neighbors as they frolicked and without any liturgy at all, renewed themselves in the Jordan.

Someone from our group later commented that it seemed the height of irony that a group of mostly Anglos from American sat by a group of Ethiopians and sang an African American spiritual.

I said that was true. But I had mostly felt the irony of how we had started out so serenely. I was glad - hoping for some kind of profundity from the peace. But when the mood shifted, and the joy of the adjacent group infected me, I had a new vision of baptism and its renewal.

At first, I resisted it - and got kind of annoyed. After all, I had my vision of what it could be like when all is calm and serene. But in no time, the joy moved me. I found myself I thinking, all we needed to do was add more and more people from more and more places and some livestock and it would be more like the day Jesus was baptized among the crowds that John the Baptist drew. It was a lovely vision of the kingdom - the beloved community.

Our Theme for Eastertide is vision.

We are a strange group of people who believe that visions can be true and play true in our lives. We all know that truth doesn't mean

factual. The stories of our faith are bejeweled with visions mundane and fantastic that guided the prophets and the apostles and the people and even Jesus himself. Think about ladders to heaven and wheels turning inside wheels and doves descending and thunder that sounds like the voice of God to some. When clergy are asked to take psychological tests prior to entering seminary and ministry, there are always several questions about hearing voices and seeing visions. Most of us answer “yes,” and hope and pray that we’re not misunderstood by the psychologists.

This series of sermon is inspired by the work of the Vision 2020 team, who crafted a new vision for our denomination around the letters PCUSA. So, we will start with the letter P. The team chose the word “Prayerful.”

Prayerful is an adjective. It means “devout, engaged in the work of prayer.” Prayer is an interesting word - an almost ironic word. It comes from a Old French noun meaning “obtained by entreaty, or asking.” That noun is the word “*precarius*.”

Do you hear our modern word precarious?

This is a word whose first meaning is, “dependent on circumstances beyond one’s control; uncertain.” The second meaning is “dependent on the will or pleasure of another.” There is a certain riskiness implied, isn’t there?

I can’t help but be reminded of the work of the Spirit. As Jesus said in John’s gospel, “The wind blows wherever it will, and you hear the sound it makes, but do not know where it comes from and where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” (3:8)

When we pray, it seems we are stepping into something that invites something precarious into our lives... something that blows where it will - and takes us into the unknown - beyond our control - but in God’s will and control. And so it is for everyone who is born, formed, given life by the Spirit of God.

What happens to us when we get pushed and pulled in this way?

Or the better question - what happens to us when we pray, then?

Richard Foster, a Quaker who writes beautifully about prayer says, it quite simply for us. **To pray is to change.** (*Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home*, Harper: San Francisco, 1992, p.6)

And we all must admit that change does make us feel a bit precarious, right?

This might have something to do with the the way being prayerful effects us. There is a progression to the prayerful life.

The Vision 2020 folks traced it like this:

- Confessing our sin before God and to those we have wronged, we accept our responsibility for the brokenness in the world and in ourselves. In Christ we are assured of forgiveness and freed to forgive others.
- We ask the Holy Spirit to direct and guide us as we actively listen to Scripture and fully engage in the joys and challenges of life in this present world.
- In Christ we are bound together by grace, cleansed in the waters of baptism, nourished at the Lord's table, and sent out to share the Good News.

Do you hear the progression? Confession. Joy and challenge. And an entrance into the work of sharing Good News of grace and the Sacraments.

I felt it along the banks of the Jordan - that little struggle to let go of my vision - so that a vision even more fully beautiful could arise. I wrestled with myself - moving from being irritated and worried. To being curious and finally joyous. The comment about the contrasts from

my friend about our spiritual song next to our African brothers and sisters - who probably didn't understand one word of our English - awakened an even deeper confession about race and bias and privilege. I came away from those prayers and that baptism changed.

And I must tell you - a few days later, one of the pilgrims described a very profound spiritual experience she had amongst the joyful noise and splashing! The Spirit blows where it will. Amen.

We see it in the new community in the Acts passage as well.

Peter is preaching right after the Pentecost appearance of the Holy Spirit blowing where it will. The tongues of fire and rushing winds have barely ceased. There is a crowd of people with some like Peter - fellow Jews. And he confesses that the house of Israel condemned and executed Jesus.

Peter said, "let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God ...made [Jesus] both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Everyone was "cut to the heart." When they asked what they could do - Peter called them all to repentance and the sacrament of

baptism for the purpose of healing - to receive forgiveness. Confession. Challenge. Sacraments and and finally joy. The order doesn't seem to be important - but the grace filled progression is all there.

The newly baptized continued to learn. And they entered into fellowship - which was the breaking of bread and prayers. The fellowship is of a particular kind. The Greek word is *koinonia*. It's hard to translate this word into English. Fellowship is the closest, I suppose. But it is truly connected to the vision of the beloved community.

If we were to keep reading in this chapter of Acts, we would find that this new *koinonia* community of the beloved was one that was “sharing food from ‘house to house,’ ... spending much time together in the Temple.... These early Christians,” scholar Ben Witherington says, “[had] glad and sincere hearts that prompted the praise of God and goodwill among the local Jews.” (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Eerdmans, 1998, p. 163.)

The hearts that were cut changed to glad hearts.

Prayers of confession changed to prayers of praise to God.

**To pray is to change.**

To pray is to live a prayerful, precarious life. A life that has been handed over to winsome and unpredictable Spirit of God to lead us deeper and deeper into the vision and joy and mysteries of *koinonia* - which is prayer and the breaking of bread and dying and rising with Christ in baptism and sharing house to house.

I want to close with some words from Richard Foster - a lovely vision of prayer that I hope will help you not be shy about praying.

[God] invites us into the living room of [God's] heart, where we can put on old slippers and share freely. [God] invites us into the kitchen of ...friendship, where chatter and batter mix in good fun. [God] invites us into the dining room of [God's] strength, where we can feast to our heart's delight. [God] invites us into the study of [God's] wisdom, where we can learn and grow and stretch... and ask all the questions we want. [God] invites us into the workshop of [God's] creativity, where we can be co-laborers with [God], working together... [God]

invites us into the bedroom of [God's] rest, where new  
peace is found and where we can be naked and

vulnerable and free. It is also the place of deepest intimacy

where we know and are known to the fullest.

And the key to this home, this heart of God, is prayer...

If the key is prayer, the door is Jesus Christ.

*(Prayer, pp. 1 &2)*

Let us pray...

We come as guests invited into the home of your heart, dear Lord. Thank you for accepting us as we are and being kind and gracious to us as we learn to pray and enter into the prayerful, precarious life that you offer us. Change us. And when we cannot pray, we invite your Spirit to pray in us, so that your vision of *koinonia*, the beloved community, may flourish. Amen.