

SERMON SERIES: "20/20 Vision"
SERMON TITLE: "The Vision of a Strong Present"
SERMON TEXT: Joshua 1:1-9 and 4:19-24
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 13, 2019, at First UMC

INTRODUCTION

I was cleaning up my office the other day, and I found a picture that I had saved for this 20/20 Vision series. Rather than just tell you about it, I thought it would be good to show it to you so you can see it with your own eyes. This picture was circulating on the internet in August. It's one of those optical illusion pictures that can be viewed two different ways. One way, it looks like a black rabbit. The other way you might perceive it, the picture looks like a black bird with its beak open. Probably most of us can see it either way. Someone tracked this photo down and discovered that the picture was of a real creature that lives in an animal sanctuary in Valley Park, Missouri. The animal has been given the name Mischief. Are you ready to vote? How many think it's a rabbit? How many think it's a bird? It's a bird. To be exact, it's an African White-necked Raven.¹

Since we're talking about 20/20 Vision this month, I'm going to show you another test of your eyesight and perception. Very quickly, I want you to think or even say aloud: What is the first thing you see in this picture?² . . . Some of you said mountains; others noticed the road or path. Did anyone say or think sky, field, or ground? Did anyone notice the sign in the front of the picture? That little sign is kind of like when you go to a mall, a museum, or an amusement park, and you see one of those site map signs with an arrow that says, "You are here."

Sometimes we need to look out in the forward distance. That's what we'll be doing next Sunday. Sometimes we even need to turn around and look back at where we've been. That's what we did last Sunday when we talked about Moses and the vision of a faithful past that we have had in this congregation. Today, though, I invite you to consider the surroundings that are close by. Let's see if we

can get our bearings as to where we are right now. Using the early chapters of Joshua's story as our guide, let's see if we can perceive "The Vision of a Strong Present."

1—THE VISION OF A STRONG PRESENT IN THE JOSHUA STORY

OK. So, if you were here last Sunday, you remember that Deuteronomy 34 told us that Moses climbed up on Mount Nebo and looked over into the Promised Land. But, at 120 years old, it was time for Moses to turn over the vision to Joshua. So, before he died, Moses laid hands on Joshua and blessed him as the new leader of the Jewish people.

Now, in Joshua chapter one, we find the new, younger leader eager to get going. Chomping at the bit might be a better image. The book of Numbers, chapter 13, tells us that, years previously, Joshua had been one of the 12 spies that Moses had sent ahead to check out the land of Canaan. When the scouts returned, they reported that they had seen some great resources there. They described it as a land flowing with milk and honey and abundant with fruit. Decades later, Joshua could probably still salivate over the grapes, pomegranates, and figs.

With those images in his mind's eye, Joshua eagerly perceived God's instructions to get the people moving. Beginning in Joshua 1:2, we hear God telling him, "Now proceed to cross the Jordan [River], you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them . . . as I promised Moses." God's promise to the people was no longer only in the past with Abraham or Moses. Nor was God's promise only in some distant future. The **first** reason Joshua could see the vision of a strong present was because **God's promise was finally happening right now!**

A **second** reason Joshua and his people were able to see the vision of a strong present was that **God promised to be with them.** As God sent them forward into the Promised Land, God didn't just say, "Ready, set, go!" and then leave Joshua and the Hebrews to their own devices. Just like our Veterans' Tribute Run and Walk yesterday had guides and hospitality stands along the course to make sure no one got lost and everyone was OK, God promised to be with Joshua and his people. In verse five, God said,

“No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you.” In verses six, seven, and nine—three times—God tells Joshua to “be strong and courageous.” This will be possible, repeats God in verse nine, because “the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.”

A **third** reason Joshua and the Hebrews were able to see the vision of a strong present was God’s clear instruction in verses seven and eight. God told Joshua that the people should be careful to **study and act in accordance with the law that was given by Moses**. Their success and prosperity would come, said God, if they would meditate day and night on the book of the law and never let it depart from their teaching or actions. For Joshua and his contemporaries, the law of Moses wasn’t something from an ancient past, and it wasn’t something yet to come in a distant future. The law of Moses was already in their possession. They had God’s expectations and could study it now, and there was no reason not to live according to it. The commandments of God provided for them the vision of a strong present.

We could have stopped our scripture reading there. But I couldn’t resist adding Joshua 4:19-24. By then, Joshua had led the Jewish people across the Jordan River. Even though the river was at flood stage at that time of year, God parted the Jordan River so they could cross on dry ground, just like God had previously parted the Red Sea. Truly, Joshua and his people were living the dream. No longer were such miraculous stories only from the past. No longer was the promise only for the future. This was God’s strong action in the current time.

Of course, God expected the people to do something too. God told Joshua to have the priests pick up stones from the river bed and carry them to the new side of the river. There the Hebrews made a monument which would serve as a teaching point for their children. In the future, this pile of stones would be a sign of what God had done for the people in the past. But right now, as the priests were

carrying the river rocks to the Promised Land side of the river, this **monument was a very visible and very current celebration of the strength that God was giving them in the present time.**

So, we see the vision of a strong present in the Joshua story in four ways: 1) The time of promise is now. 2) God is with you wherever you go. 3) Study and act in accordance with God's laws. 4) And don't forget to celebrate your victory in such a way that it will be a visible teaching memorial for your children.

2-- THE VISION OF A STRONG PRESENT IN OUR FUMC STORY

Now that we know the biblical story, it's time to apply it to us today. Just like Joshua, we can't leave God's promise in the ancient biblical past or think of it as something so far in the future that we'll never get to experience it ourselves. So let's imagine what it looks like to see the vision of a strong present right now in our First United Methodist Church.

Like Joshua, we can claim and celebrate the reality that God is working in and among us. The past had some wonderful successes, and we hope the future does too. But right now, with this generation, God is doing great ministry. Yesterday's successful Veterans Tribute Run and Chili Cook-off is just one example of how God is engaging us in the promise of ministry right now in this time. As Chairman Scott Warren could tell you, that was no small feat. It took powers almost as great as parting the Jordan River to get everything planned, organized, and accomplished. And yet, God did it through some visionary leaders and willing participants.

As big an effort as we put into the Veterans Tribute Run, that is only one of the many ways that we do ministry around here. Here's a quick review of some of the ways our congregation has been involved in serving God throughout this year of 2019 (PowerPoint pictures):

- January-February Souper Bowl of Caring food drive
- Faith and Poverty Day at the Capitol
- Volunteering at the UMCOR Depot
- Beekeeping Ministry
- Palm Sunday, Good Friday, and worship services throughout the year

- Children’s Easter Egg Hunt & Children’s Sunday School
- Easter food baskets for the hungry
- Chancel and Bell Choir
- Heritage Sunday
- Rummage Sale for UMW Missions
- Roar! Vacation Bible School
- Youth Mission Trip to Atlanta & Youth Ministry throughout the year
- Community Garden
- SWIFTS Earthkeeper Irrigation Project
- FUMC at the Raptors Game
- Mission outreach at Veterans Home Farmers Market
- Financial Peace University Classes, Adult Sunday School, and Friday Study
- UMW preparing for Craft Bazaar
- Yard Clean Up Day and keeping things maintained and beautiful throughout the year

CONCLUSION

This PowerPoint slide show isn’t the same thing as a monument made out of river rocks. But maybe it serves a similar purpose. It gives us a visible sign. It shows us that, yes, we can and do see the vision of a strong present.

¹ <https://fox6now.com/2019/08/21/bird-or-bunny-this-optical-illusion-is-confusing-the-internet/>



² Will Mancini and Warren Bird, *God Dreams: 12 Vision Templates for Finding and Focusing Your Church’s Future* (B&H Publishing Group: Nashville, 2016).

