

SERMON SERIES: "20/20 Vision"  
SERMON TITLE: "The Vision of Future Possibilities"  
SERMON TEXT: Joshua 5:10 – 6:5, 19-20  
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James  
OCCASION: October 20, 2019, at First UMC

### **INTRODUCTION**

In the early 1980s, I attended a church that had a large children's ministry. One Sunday, the children stood in the front of the church and sang a catchy song that has stuck in my head ever since:

I am a promise; I am a possibility.  
I am a promise, with a capital P—  
a great big bundle of potentiality.  
And I am learning to hear God's voice,  
and I am trying to make the right choice.  
I'm a promise to be anything God wants me to be.

During this month of October, we've been focusing on our "20/20 Vision" stewardship theme. We've used our 20/20 hindsight to look back at the vision of a faithful past, and we've used our 20/20 near sight to see the vision of a strong present. Today, we continue with the story of Joshua and the Israelites moving into the Promised Land. With their experience as our guide, let's see if we can look far ahead to the vision of future possibilities.

### **1—VISION OF FUTURE POSSIBILITIES BEGINS IN SPIRITUAL DEVOTION**

Many, if not all of us, are familiar with this Bible story about Jericho. When we were kids, we might have marched around a Sunday School room and blown on our hand horns. Maybe we even recall singing, "Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, Jericho, Jericho. Joshua fought the battle of Jericho, and the walls came a tumbling down." But before we get into that story of a unique victory, I want to point out what came before it.

What we see in Joshua chapters five and six is that *the vision of future possibilities begins in spiritual devotion*. Joshua 5:10 tells us that the Israelites kept the Passover. This spiritual discipline and practice was a celebration of how God had rescued their ancestors from slavery in Egypt. By religious

ritual, the Israelites remembered this important story and gave thanks and praise to God. In Joshua 5:15, we hear the messenger of God telling Joshua to take off his sandals because he was standing on holy ground. That connection to the story of Moses at the burning bush was another indicator of just how deeply spiritual all this was for the leader Joshua and his people. And, if we back up to Joshua 5:2-9, we see that the Israelites also went through a huge event of circumcising the entire generation that had been born since they left Egypt. All men and boys under the age of 40 participated in that act of spiritual dedication and commitment to God.

While Passover and circumcision hold different meanings for Christian people today than they did for the Jews back then, today we can still see that the vision of future possibilities comes out of a context of spiritual devotion. Regular attendance at worship, Christian education classes, and faith-based fellowship groups all help us see the promises and possibilities God has in store for us. Our participation in mission outreach projects, expression of Christian love and kindness in our everyday interactions, and commitment to personal devotional practices of prayer and Bible reading improve our vision too. When we are willing to give sacrificially in devotion and dedication, then we are able to see the abundance of positive opportunities God has available to us.

## **2—VISION OF FUTURE POSSIBILITIES GROWS BEYOND SURVIVAL**

With spiritual devotion as a regular practice, then *the vision of future possibilities begins to grow*. Joshua 5:11-12 reminds us that, while the Israelites were wandering around in the wilderness for 40 years, their vision was largely limited to food for daily survival. Each day in the wilderness, they saw the manna God provided for them. You may recall, however, that God told them to gather extra on the sixth day, so that they could skip harvesting on the Sabbath. That was God's way of stretching their trust and their vision from one day to two days at a time. Once in the Promised Land, where they saw that they could grow crops, their daily vision was then stretched out over months to imagine the future harvest even as they planted the seeds.

For us today, our vision of future possibilities involves these same kinds of growth. At first, it's natural for us to be most concerned with the very real and day-to-day visions of managing school and job, family and friends, healthcare and monthly bills, plus some needed recreation, relaxation, and spiritual life. First and foremost, we need to survive. Hopefully, though, our vision is able then to grow to include saving up for a house or car, to go on a trip, to invest for retirement, and maybe to set aside funds for our children or grandchildren's college fund. Hopefully, that growing vision for each of us also includes growing in our giving to God's work through our church, so that we move from 2 or 3% to 6 or 7% to even a 10% tithe or more.

As a congregation, we experience a vision stretch in similar ways. Obviously, at first, our church's financial vision is to pay our daily, monthly, and annual bills. In our case here at First UMC, every month we have to pay \$5000 on our mortgage for this lovely church—not to mention utility bills, maintenance and program costs, and staff salaries. Plus we contribute toward the mission of the United Methodist denomination as a whole. Those are the basics of survival for our church. And, as I'm sure you know, those basic survival costs keep going up. So, it's important that we stretch our vision by putting some seeds in the ground to grow up into crops that we can harvest in the future. Our annual pledge campaign is an example of that. Every year in the fall we send out the seeds of pledge cards, and we ask all of you to look ahead to the harvest months of the coming year. What will you be able and willing to give to God through our church?

One of the ways we've been stretching our collective financial vision here at First UMC is by increasing our giving to the United Methodist denomination. Due to the financial difficulties our congregation went through in building this new church, a decade or so ago the decision was made to cut way back on our denominational giving. Since then, we've been gradually bringing that up by half a percent per year. So, now, in 2019, we're contributing 9.5%. In 2020, we want to raise that up to 10%.

At this rate of increase, it will take six more years to reach the 13% we're supposed to give, but that's a goal we can clearly see.

### **3—VISION OF FUTURE POSSIBILITIES LOOKS BEYOND US**

Our vision of future possibilities can't be limited, however, to what we can see up close in the next few months or *even* the next several years. We can't limit our vision to what's within our own personal space or control. God calls us to *look out farther, beyond us*.

Think again about the Joshua story. In chapter five, verse 10, the Israelites were camped at Gilgal. That's where they celebrated the Passover. But notice in chapter five, verse 13, that Joshua is now standing "by Jericho." This is the holy place where the vision came to him from the messenger of God. Leader Joshua wouldn't have been able to see the vision of future possibilities if he had stayed inside the Jewish camp where it was safe and cozy. He had to risk going outside the camp where he could see what possibilities lay ahead for him and his people.

This is true for us today, as well. The experts on church vision all tell us that, if our churches are going to live into the future, then we have to do more than hunker down in survival mode inside our buildings, doing the same things we've always done. We have to get out into the communities and the world around us. We have to look out there and see who inhabits this place. We have to experiment and see what their needs are and what the new potential is for ministry among them.

Hopefully the answer we come to doesn't include destruction and genocide like happened at Jericho. Hopefully our vision is more humane and helpful in meeting spiritual needs for all God's children. I'd like to think that our church's gardening, beekeeping, and SWIFTS irrigation project fit into that category. As we care for the earth by being good stewards of water and agriculture, we help preserve a sustainable and hospitable planet for all kinds of future generations.

Of course, we also need to consider other felt needs of the people in our community. How can we better reach those new residents who move here because of their work and might be interested in

our kind of religion? Is there a way we can connect our United Methodist theology with the growing Hispanic population in the Ogden metro area? You know that I've been researching how we might better meet the needs of Protestant Christians who are aging and feel the pain of spiritual isolation. And how do we meet the spiritual needs of young people who show less and less interest in attending church? If young people won't come here, then what kind of digital presence might our church use to engage with them?

There are many questions we could ask and many answers that we might come up with about the vision of future possibilities. But, as any non-profit manager would tell you, *there will be no mission without money*. In this story of Jericho, it's interesting that the Israelites were told to keep no booty for themselves. No captive slaves or extra wives. No oxen, sheep, or donkeys. Everything was to be destroyed as a sacrifice to God. Except, said Joshua in chapter six, verse 19, "all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the Lord; they shall go into the treasury of the Lord."

We may not know yet the answers to the questions about future ministries, but we certainly can have a clear vision about the need for funding whatever it might be. For sure, we need money for our 2020 operating budget. That's critical for our survival. But we also need some big visionary gifts to help us pay off our mortgage which currently stands at \$712,000. And we need to fully fund our FUMC Endowment, which visionaries like Harold Mischler set into place.

Right now, the Endowment has \$50,400 in it. When it reaches \$100,000, it will begin generating dollars for ministry. Are you willing to help us get there? On the pledge card we'll soon be sending you, in addition to your primary pledge to our operating fund, you can also pledge a dollar amount every month toward the endowment. And/or you can put the Endowment Fund in your will, so that a larger chunk of your estate goes toward it when you die. The sooner we reach \$100,000, the sooner that fund will begin generating the dollars for ministry that this congregation will need in the future.

If you'd like more information about how to put our church in your will, please take a look at the brochure that's included in your bulletin today. The United Methodist Foundation in Denver is eager to help you by phone, email, or through the great information on their website. They work for us, and they will help you on behalf of our church.

### **CONCLUSION**

In the news a few weeks ago, there was a story about a United Methodist man who died in Wisconsin. His name was Dennis Valstad. He was in the news because, according to his will, every person who attended his funeral will now be given a portion of his estate, amounting to about \$1800 each. One family of five who paid their respects will be receiving over \$9000. Dennis also left sums of money to his church and to some other organizations in the community. The estate gifts were a surprise to almost everyone. During his career, Dennis had owned and operated a dry cleaning business, and he never acted like he had very much money. In fact, some young friends had wanted 69-year old Dennis to attend their destination wedding, and they had made plans to pay his way because they were sure he couldn't afford to go otherwise. And then when Dennis died unexpectedly from a stroke, the bride and groom to-be were among the funeral attendees who will now receive money *from him*. It was ironic that those who had known Dennis thought of him as a person of limited means, and yet he was the one who demonstrated what generous future possibilities there are even at the late years of a person's life.

*I invite you, and this story from Joshua invites you, to see the vision of future possibilities.*