

Visio Divina

January 3, 2021

You're still here!

Pwhew! We made it! We got through the Christmas holidays, these odd, in many instances much quieter holidays. Betty Hartman once wisely said to me, "I try not to wish any days of life away." I had asked her if she was counting down the days until the end of the school year, and like the wonderful principal that she was, she schooled me without needing to have a lesson plan!

And while I've thought of that wisdom a lot since then, working hard to be present in the moment and not so future focused that I miss the beauty of the present, I know I'm not alone in having feared how this holiday season would pan out. When that fear would creep in, I found myself wishing to jump past this Christmas, past the inauguration, past this spring, to a time when a good number of people are vaccinated and we can all hold hands and sing "Kumbaya" at the top of our lungs.

Indoors. Together. Unmasked.

But here's the rub: This summer, or whenever it is that things are "back to normal," the problem is that things are going to be back to normal! The racial disparities that have been so endemic to how people of color have experienced the police and COVID are going to remain. The economic system that has allowed our nation's billionaires to be enriched by more than one trillion dollars in the last year while millions of people live on the edge is still going to be with us.

I have every expectation that we will have a new president, but the polarized worldviews that made this even a question will remain. In short: while the days are getting longer and the vaccine is being distributed, we can't run from ourselves, because wherever we run, wherever we come out on the other side, our shadows will still be there.

Even though I can't see any of you, I know that some of you are shaking your heads right now, saying, "Wait a minute! I logged in because I needed some Good News, not someone to bring me down even further."

This summer I took an online class with Susan Beaumont whose ministry is in cultivating healthy church leaders. In 2019, before the pandemic, she wrote a book titled "How To Lead When You Don't Know Where You Are Going." Along with encouraging the humility and courage to admit that church work is best done when the Holy Spirit is setting the course, rather than the course being set by a pastor's interests or passions, one of Beaumont's central tenets is that, in times of anxiety and tension, communities (and truthfully individuals as well) are abundantly healthier when we invest in our spiritual depth. Beaumont encourages us to invest in prayer experiences, to move away from logic and rationality and an abundance of words, and toward creative, vision-based prayer. The idea is that struggles will be a part of every life, and personal healing as well as changing unjust political and socio-economic systems will take more than one person and more than one lifetime, so we need to continue to find ways to root ourselves in the divine, in the sacred, in God's love and grace, if we are going to have the perspective, the strength, and the health to be a part of that transformation.

This idea of cultivating a personal spiritual depth dovetails beautifully with our scriptures for today, in which the psalmist extolls the virtues of a godly ruler and Matthew tells us of Magi, learned strangers, outsiders, who observe a star in its rising and seek to encounter it with humility and generosity.

With that as our context, I'm going to invite you into a little prayer experience today, called Visio Divina. Visio Divina is much like Lectio Divina, which many of you have heard of in which one reads a scripture passage multiple times, each time with a different lens or question in front of them, with the intent of discerning what it is that God is speaking to them through that passage today. Similarly, Visio Divina invites us to pray with an image, looking at it multiple times, as we pray about what God is speaking to us.

Let's start by trying to center yourself and settle in. Sit comfortably. Attend to your breath. Close your eyes. Notice your posture, breathing, eyes resting. Be in touch with your intent to be present to God in this experience.

As you feel your spirit settle, I want you to open your eyes, and let your gaze fall gently on the image on the screen. Spend a moment taking in the fullness of this picture. Create an understanding in your mind of what you think this photo is about. When you think you have grasped what this image is about, go ahead and close your eyes again, and let the image rest gently in your mind. Eyes closed.

Now I invite you to open your eyes, again, let your gaze settle on the image. This time, I want you to let yourself experience fear as you're looking at it. Place yourself in the photo. Where would you stand? Let the photo call forth all of the ways in which you feel afraid and anxious and threatened and in need of protection. Feel the fear and sit with the fear for a few minutes.

And now close your eyes again and see if you can release yourself to God, moving through and beyond the fear. With eyes closed, rest in the release of that fear.

Now I invite you to open your eyes again, and this time, see the image through the lens of desire. Notice what draws you in. Notice the intoxicating danger of the furnace. Imagine yourself mastering this environment, what would it be like to walk around, or even fly around without getting hurt. Acknowledge how your leadership self is seduced by the power and the mastery in that. Sit with those feelings of power and desire for a few moments.

Now as you let your eyes close once again, see if you can allow yourself to release yourself to God, beyond the power and beyond the desire, and simply rest. One more time, I invite you to open your eyes and gaze at the picture, this time look at the image with a stance of compassion, with open energy, with a sense of restfulness and wellbeing. Maintain an open presence toward the image, noticing that you have no need to either draw the image toward you nor to push it away. Just allow a still, shared mind, deeply grounded in God. Notice how the picture speaks to you now.

Finally, close your eyes again, and simply rest. As you feel ready, I invite you to open your eyes and rejoin us in our shared space. If you need to, jot down anything you want to capture for later reflection.

I hope that was a meaningful experience for you, and that it demonstrated ever so simply the power of investing in spiritual depth.

I started out this sermon reflecting on the fact that, unfortunately, turning the calendar to a new year or getting a vaccine or even defunding the police aren't magic wands which will miraculously transform our world. But I hope this tiny little exercise of Visio Divina has demonstrated for you what the Magi learned in their pilgrimage: that it is when we invest in relationships with the sacred and allow the divine to influence our journeys that we will go home another way, a way transformed by Emmanuel, God With Us.

May it be so. Alleluia, and amen!

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Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Matthew 2:1-12
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