

A sermon preached the Congregational Church of Almaden Valley,
United Church of Christ
San Jose, CA
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Rev. Kevin M. Smith
Acts 16:9-15 (Psalm 67)

Vision for Action

Paul seems to have frequent visions. Remember he got knocked off his high horse one day on the road to persecute some followers of this reengage Jewish prophet named Jesus of Nazareth? Remember this story that we all heard in Sunday school:

Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest² and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.³ Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.⁴ He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"⁵ He asked, "Who are you, Lord?" The reply came, "I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.⁶ But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do."⁷ The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.⁸ Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.⁹ For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank. (Acts 9:1-9)

This was such a powerful personal vision that Saul was sightless and speechless for three days—and this vision changed Saul life, forever and this once hater and persecutor of the followers of

Jesus went on to found numerous churches around the Mediterranean. He was such a new person from the one he had been that he changed his name! Imagine that! Our church, the Congregational Church of Almaden Valley, United Church of Christ today is an offshoot of those early churches. And Paul's letters to the churches founded, and to some he did not, became the earliest writings of the Christian Scriptures, the New Testament, even before the gospels were written. I would wager that during those three days that Paul was without sight and fasting Paul did a lot of listening to God and developing a vision of what he had been called to do.

This morning we hear of another vision that Paul had. A man from Macedonia was calling him to come over and lend them a hand. Some people there needed to hear the Word of God, the proclamation of the Good News!. Some people there had a vision that something more was needed in their lives. And I think it's wonderful that although the person in Paul's vision was a man, it was a women, Lydia, a dealer in purple cloth, who had a vision that more was needed in her life and the life of her community—a community devoted to and ruled by the Roman empire. What an unlikely visionary Lydia was. In the Roman Empire purple togas, as we know from the study of the classics, were “embroidered with gold thread worn by a victorious general during a triumphal parade and later adopted by emperors for state occasions. A variant of this costume was the toga *purpura*, an all-purple toga worn by the early kings and possibly adopted by some emperor.” (<http://www.vroma.org/~bmcmanus/clothing.html>)

In this story we have two people who were very much caught up in the oppressive domination system of the Roman Empire having common visions of creating a community of people who would follow the teachings a poor peasant from Nazareth. Teachings of love, compassion, mercy, and justice for the least of those in the Roman Empire. What courage. What daring. What vision.

Now lets move from the Roman Empire to the Harvard Business School. (Actually, some of us Divinity School students and alums might say that's not too far a walk.) But from the Harvard

Business School's *Harvard Business Review* I read this opening of an article about vision:

In the past decade, firms have been praised for ideas. Experts have celebrated the power of [brainstorming and idea-generation techniques](#). Eureka light bulbs have populated the covers of many books. Businessmen have been asked to improve their [creative attitudes](#). And 2009 was named [the Year of Creativity and Innovation](#) by the European Union. One consequence of a decade focused on idea generation is ideas are now more easily accessible, which has also made idea generation less of a differentiator in competition than it has traditionally been. When more than 30% of the population belongs to the creative class, as Richard Florida suggested in his 2003 book [The Rise of the Creative Class](#), ideas are not in short supply. And with the diffusion of open innovation processes, ideas competitions, and the like, executives are increasingly exposed to a wealth of ideas. What is in short supply, I'm afraid, are visionary thinkers who will be capable of making sense of this abundance of stimuli — visionaries who will build the arenas to unleash the power of ideas and

transform them into *actions*. (Verganti, Roberto, *Having Ideas Versus Having a Vision*, Harvard Business Review, Monday March 1, 2010, [http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/03/having_ideas_versus_having_a_vision.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+harvardbusiness+\(HBR.org\)](http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/03/having_ideas_versus_having_a_vision.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed:+harvardbusiness+(HBR.org)) Verganti: an author and professor of an Italian university.)

Thank goodness for people of vision. And thank goodness for people of vision who can then translate their visions into actions which turn ideas into concrete achievements. I was reading a blog the other day from a gentleman named Matthew McDonald. His blog was entitled “Without vision the people perish.” I think it’s the same for churches—without vision followed up by mission, churches perish. He began his entry by quoting Proverbs 29:18, “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Let me ask this question, where do you want to be in three years time in the Lord? Do you have a vision to be witnessing to the characteristics of the reign of God, than you are today? Or are you simply happy to just float along, and whatever will

be, will be? Or, do we get a vision for doing the work of God, and be a person that is purpose driven for God; to have a vision for greater things accomplished through the Spirit?" Are we simply floating along or are we vision and purpose driven? Mr. McDonald tells us that "If we don't have a vision, we don't have a focus. We perish for lack of drive. We perish for a lack of vision, and we don't achieve things in life. To have a dream, to aim for a vision to believe in, to have something that so grips us that we will not let it go; to have that vision for God, to be purpose driven in God, to believe in a vision and see it come to pass." (<http://peebles.wordpress.com/2007/11/19/without-vision-the-people-perish/>) I couldn't agree with him more.

There is an old saying by an unknown author which is "Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail." A church is a living breath organism. It is a living breathing organism that without purpose, without vision, will wither and perish. A church is an idea. It's an idea about a group of people coming together trying to live out the vision of Jesus for a world of greater love, compassion, and justice. You see, Jesus and his friends, lived in a world under Roman domination that was without love, compassion, and justice. Jesus and his followers in those early days of our faith birth sacrificed so much to turn their vision into concrete reality, into concrete action. But the funny thing about witnessing to the reign of God rather than the reign of humanity is that it only comes to the surface and to reality if people come together with a common vision and common purpose that result in real actions. Now, the ironic thing is that sometimes our visions are only seen through the glass darkly, as Paul would later put it and our visions sometimes introduce us to things and actions we never expected. On that road to Damascus and on that boat to Macedonia Paul was surprised. He was surprised, but he was not beaten when he was knocked off his horse or met a woman instead of a man. Somehow God turns our visions that we are trying to make concrete into effective realities.

What is the vision of our church? What is the concrete reality we are striving for? Are we willing to be led by God in directions that are not always clear but are striving for making us tools of God's

reign of love, compassion, and justice? Are we here to perish or to give purpose? You, my friends, are the body. You can be the visionaries and that people of action. What an exciting time to follow your hearts, use your minds, and trust in the Spirit. God bless and God be with you in these pregnant days of promise and purpose ahead. Amen.

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