

Vision (Part Two)

“For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord”

Reflection 64 in the series “A New World in the Morning”

Twenty-seven hundred years ago the great poet-prophet Isaiah had a vision of the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. He pictured a new Eden where the most helpless and vulnerable would now be safe with those who once had been the most brutal and violent. Such a vision matters. In fact, the notion of a new world in the morning is woven of this very vision, and where people believe it and hold on to it, this dream slowly but very surely becomes reality.

The things that really matter in life always depend on vision, on someone having a dream. So it was with Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech on August 28, 1963 as he told his fellow Americans of his dream that one day this nation would rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed, “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal”; that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners would be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood; that one day his four little children would live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. And inspired by King’s moral imagination, which was in turn inspired by Isaiah’s vision, and by his dying for his vision, for many years King’s dream has become ever more real.

So take Isaiah’s vision into your imagination, this picture of how things could be. And believe it. Is it idealistic? Yes. Yes. Yes. It is idealistic. Isaiah has a dream that one day swords will be beat into plowshares; that there will be universal peace; that the wolf will live with the lamb; and that the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord. Will everyone believe? No, Isaiah knows they will not. He is (we know from other texts) the prophet of the Remnant. It will always be this way. Those who trust God’s ways – who hear his story and believe it – will be a remnant. We will tell the story as it is. Some will disregard it entirely. Many will toy with the idea. Some, a few, will believe it, and these few will change the world. Through them by the grace of God God’s kingdom will fill the whole earth (Daniel 2); God’s rule will extend from sea to sea (Zechariah 9); God’s kingdom, like the smallest of seeds, becomes the largest of plants; like yeast, it transforms everything it touches (Matthew 13); the many will be made righteous (Romans 5); at the name of Jesus, every knee will bow (Philippians 2); and there will reign on earth a great multitude that no one can count (Revelation 5, 7).

But it all begins with this – to let Isaiah’s vision inside: to live a life worthy of this vision; to never lose track of how good life can and will be; and to without apology give in to the idealism and see what Isaiah saw. So facing what we’re facing right now – the challenges and even the losses of our lives, our dreams and our disappointments, our own inner struggles, the mistakes we’ve made as well as the opportunities that are ours, facing, yes, the very real difficulties of our lives, this is still life’s fundamental issue. Do we see what’s right with life or what’s wrong?

The issue is always trust. Do we see the opportunities for good or the risks of failure? Do we see the challenges or the obstacles? The choice is always to trust or to doubt. Can we see the wolf living with the lamb? Can we see the calf and the lion together, and a little child leading them? Can we see the earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord?

In many ways, it really is: What you see is what you get! This is what Jesus meant when he told the centurion concerned about his servant who was paralyzed and in terrible suffering (the story is told in Matthew 8:5-13), “Go, it will be done just as you believed it would.” More often than not, life works out just as we believe it will. If we see the world as cold and bleak, for us it will be. But if we see it as open and friendly, for us it will be open and friendly. If we see people (or any group of people) as primarily hostile and threatening, they will be. But if we see people as generally trustworthy and under most circumstances glad to help us, they will be. If we see the church – or the nation or whatever – falling apart, losing direction, in irreversible decline, as far as the good it will do us, it is. But if we see the church or our lives or our world as filled with possibility and even wonder, they are. It all keeps coming back to how we see things, to what we deep down inside believe will happen.

Absolutely fundamental to a new world in the morning are people dreaming dreams, even in a world haunted by those who are cruel and ruthless, still people holding to a vision of peace, of a world filled with the knowledge of the Lord, Eden restored, God walking with us in the cool of the day. It’s a story the broad features of which are ordained. Redemption is ordained. Salvation is ordained. That good will triumph over evil is ordained. That mercy will triumph over justice is ordained. Universal peace is ordained. That the heartbeat of the universe is sacrificial love is ordained.

But where you find yourself in this story, the part you play in this story, whether you are part of a good chapter or bad, comes down to vision, to how you see things. This new world filled with the knowledge of the Lord is not a story imposed on us. We are invited to enter it, to participate in it, to contribute to it, to expand it and enlarge it, to protect it, to work for it, to give this story life in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces, in our corners of the world. But we are also free to reject it, to decide that we will go off and live in another story.

But The Vision is the answer. It’s the way that leads to peace and leads to life, seeing what Isaiah saw, seeing the world not as it is but as it could be. It does come down to what you can see. I never forget how the movie *The Mission* ends, the final scene. After the Indian tribes have been massacred, caught in the crossfire between the claims of Spain and those of Portugal, the papal legate sits musing about what has happened. His associate says: The world is thus. The soul-weary papal legate responds, “No, thus we have made the world.”

We look at the world and see it as it is, but it can be made another way. Isaiah sees it as it should be and as it can be: an earth filled with the knowledge of the Lord, in communion with the Lord. And when he dreams he dreams of Eden, of the wolf living with the lamb, the leopard laying down with the goat, the calf and the lion together, and a little child

leading them. The challenge then is to see this new world in the morning, God's new world, and not to reject it, but to enter into it, to live in its light, to let it fuel our imaginations, to contribute to it, to expand it and enlarge it, to protect it, to work for it, to give this story life in our families, in our neighborhoods, in our workplaces and in our nation.

– Dale Pauls