

## WHERE THERE IS NO VISION, THE PEOPLE PERISH

[Proverbs 29:18]

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Poor old Peter. He's like the big kid in a gang who's pushed to go first when all the others are afraid of what's ahead. Or like Mikey in that old Life cereal commercial. When the bigger kids refuse to try a new cereal, they push it over to Mikey, saying: "He won't eat it. Mikey hates everything." Remember?

And here's Peter, going where no one had gone before. The kid taking a risk, which no one believed he'd do because no one had done it before.

But of course, God has ways: In a vision, Peter sees a great sheet being lowered by its four corners and in it are all the animals forbidden to a faithful Jew: pigs and rabbits, shellfish—oy, the shellfish: lobsters and clams, mussels and crabs. And at the words, "Get up, Peter, kill and eat," poor Peter recoils and protests. "By no means, Lord, for nothing profane has ever entered my mouth."

But our gracious and stubborn God is nothing if not persistent and this sheet-thing happens three times before Peter is finally convinced to take this drastic step, to step out into the unknown and forbidden. And before long, it becomes Peter's "new normal."

I am particularly fond of this story because it was once used to push me out of my own comfort zone—waaaaaay out. When I had just been ordained a Transitional Deacon in the Diocese of Connecticut, months away from being ordained priest, jobs were scarce. Most parishes that could afford a second clergy person wanted a priest who could assume sacramental duties, and I was one of 11 (!) newly ordained Transitional Deacons. I was finally hired to assist the rector at a small parish in back-country Greenwich.

Now I'm a middle-class girl, always have been. My parents were first-generation Americans, we lived in Brooklyn in a neighborhood of people who remembered "the old country." The places I lived after Brooklyn were also middle-class neighborhoods and when I was ordained, I was living with my family in Danbury, CT—also an immigrant community. My sponsoring parish, St. James', was in downtown Danbury where we dealt regularly with homeless people, where we hosted a food pantry, where I started an agency ministering to people with A.I.D.S. early in the A.I.D.S. crisis. It was definitely NOT Greenwich. But unless I wanted to stay unemployed indefinitely, I had to accept the position at St. Barnabas, Greenwich.

Now back-country Greenwich is the northern part of Greenwich with four-acre zoning—the richest neighborhood in that famously wealthy town. The parish's property bordered Leona Helmsley's vast estate. You'd never even find the church unless you were looking for it. It was "the country club" of Greenwich churches, where the wealthiest and most powerful folk worshipped, including the governor. It was a universe away from St. James' Danbury, and I was duly discomfited about how I would fit in.

It took a good friend to remind me of this story from Acts, revised a bit to suit my situation. He wrote:

*Sleepy old Carole, while waiting for lunch, fell asleep "and saw heaven opened, and something descending, like a great sheet, let down by four corners upon the earth. In it were all kinds of golf clubs: woods and irons and putters, and golf bags, and some Izod shirts. And there came a voice, 'Rise, Carole. Play.' But Carole said, 'No, Lord; for I have never played anything among the rich on the well-kept greens.' And the voice came to her again a second time, 'What God has provided, you must not turn away from.'" This happened three times and the thing was taken up at once to heaven."*

And the Gold Coast of Connecticut became, for several years, my "new normal."

Now I know I'm preaching to the choir here because you folks have gone through a huge adjustment in your church and its worship in the last few years. But think back about 10 years: if you had a vision then of a great sheet coming down from heaven, held by its four corners, holding a sign that said, "Grace Church, formerly St. Paul's, formerly Trinity" with a tumble of electronic stuff that clattered as it fell, and God said, "Dear Ones, get up and join together." You might have said back to God, "Oh no, Lord, for we are *separate* and *different* and we LIKE it that way—and by the way, we don't even know what that electronic stuff is." But the sheet kept coming down, and God kept directing you until you finally moved out of that infamous comfort zone into which we'd all rather snuggle and went where God led you—into a "new normal."

That phrase, "new normal," has been used a lot lately to convince us that we need to get used to living with things we'd rather forget: to living with COVID because it's not going away anytime soon. And climate change and the drought and fires, the storms and floods that go with it. Some of our "new normal" has been with us for a long time but we've not been forced to notice it, like war and aggression—Ukraine being only the latest. Then there's poverty and starvation, gun violence, racism, and the disabling ever-rising cost of living. They're not new, but perhaps more newly noticed.

My move from a middle-class city church to a wealthy country church was nothing compared to Peter's venture into the Gentile world. History-changing though that was, it was still more doable than the enormous, overwhelming world situations that confront us now. If only we could each take a nap and see a vision of a sheet with all the answers come down upon us. If only.

Some of you may remember the 1977 film, *O God*, where George Burns plays the tennis-shoe wearing deity and John Denver plays a grocery store produce manager named Jerry Landers. In one of the most poignant scenes in the movie, Jerry and God meet up in Jerry's bathroom. Now, God had been hanging around, trying to talk to Jerry, but Jerry—a cynical young man angry at the condition of the world—thinks he's just some nutty old fool. In the bathroom scene, the two come face-to-face and Jerry finally begins to believe that God *is* who he says he is. Jerry asks God why he chose this particular time to make an appearance.

God says, "Well, I made the world to work."

Jerry says, "Well if you've read the papers lately, you'll see that it ain't working!"

God says, "I don't think it's working either. I think it's falling apart."

And Jerry asks God, "Why don't you do something about it?"

And God says, "Why don't *you* do something about it? It's your world!"

Jerry says to God, "But we need help!"

And God says, "That's why I gave you each other."

Ben Franklin said the only sure things in the world are death and taxes. I would add that *change* is just as certain, both for the better and the worse. But ... that's why God gave us each other. Soon you will welcome a new priest to your new-ish parish and despite the hard work of your excellent Search Committee, that priest will come with personal history and visions that differ from yours. And you will work toward a common vision because that's what you do when God gives you each other.

There is much in the world that we can impact for the better: we can work to reduce our personal carbon footprint, we can contribute to support Ukrainian refugees, we can affect the messiness of our political system with our voices and our votes, and we can, *and should*, teach our children well.

The poet Jane Kenyon wrote, "*God does not leave us comfortless.*" And George Burns reminded us that to face the world's change and messiness, God gave us each other. Change will come, for better or for worse, but we're meant to face it together, to cope together and to celebrate together.

St. Peter went on to baptize Gentiles and with St. Paul, to convince the others who had known Jesus that their community should be open to all who accept him as Lord and Savior—and he could do that because he wasn't alone. And I went on to have some wonderful years with Episcopalians in Greenwich, Westport, and Wilton, CT where I learned a lot, and even taught them a few things.

The fact is that as Christians, we are *meant* to change the world—but not alone. That's why God gave us each other. *AMEN*.

Readings: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; Revelation 21:1-6; John 13:31-35.