

“Undimmed Vision, Unabated Vigor”
A sermon on Deuteronomy 34:1-12
preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
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Are you a fox or a hedgehog? That’s a question I’ve been living with this week. Are you, am I, are we: a fox, or a hedgehog?

Let me tell you why I’m asking that question. In a recent book on business management that John Ervin shared with me, entitled *Good to Great*, the author maintains that businesses and their leaders are either foxes or hedgehogs—and I think that also applies to churches, their members, their pastors, and their boards.

It’s all based on the old fable of the fox and the hedgehog. The fox is very clever. He comes up with lots of different ideas about how to catch and eat the hedgehog, but despite all of his smarts, he never seems to be able to do it. The fox understands the complexity of his task, so he goes in all kinds of directions, comes at the problem of getting to the hedgehog from all different angles, but he has no success. The hedgehog, on the other hand, is always successful at warding off the fox’s attack. The reason why is that the hedgehog has just one single, some might even call it a simplistic, organizing vision: to keep from being eaten. He’s passionate about that vision. So he goes out of his hole, he returns to his hole—and when he’s about to be attacked—he puts out his prickly spines and there’s no getting at him. The hedgehog is not particularly clever. He’s just focused. He just knows what he’s passionate about and what he’s best in the world at (putting out his spines), and he does it and keeps on doing it. The fox is not passionate about getting the hedgehog. He’s intrigued by the prospect, but there is always the chance other, easier prey might come along. So getting the hedgehog is not his single, organizing vision. He dallies with it, but it’s not his passion.

At Tuesday’s presbytery meeting, our general presbyter Ike Kennerly talked about this fable, and then he related it to a member of the Cameron church, a black church out towards Cleveland. Ike said that there was a particular woman in that congregation, Mother Thomas, who had a vision—a vision that her church would have a steeple. So she started collecting and returning bottles and cans to raise that money. She kept focusing on her goal and recruiting others to meet the goal—and people around her started chipping in. She had a way of getting support together. A couple of Sundays ago, Ike was at Cameron church for the dedication of that steeple. Mother Thomas wasn’t there—at least not in body. She died in 1998. But her granddaughter was there; and she gave a stirring address about how her grandmother’s vision was realized. Ike said, and I agree, that Mother Thomas was a hedgehog—she had one single, organizing vision that she was passionate about (getting a steeple for that church) and she did what she was best in the world at, which was rallying support toward that end.

Are you, am I, are we: a fox or a hedgehog? It's a good question to ponder. But we're not here to talk about fables, we're here to talk about scripture. So let's turn to the book of Deuteronomy.

The 34th and last chapter of the book of Deuteronomy is as much as anything a eulogy of the great prophet Moses. For the past few weeks the Tuesday night Disciple class has been reading about and discussing Moses. One of the things folks in that group have wondered is how Moses ever put up with the grumbling Israelites. How did Moses have the gumption put up with them and to stand up to God on their behalf? How did Moses keep going, and keep them going, even though he knew he himself wasn't going to make it into the Promised Land? You know the answer. I think you know the answer. Are you ready? Remember the fable and say it with me. He...was...a...hedgehog.

Moses was a hedgehog. He had one single, organizing vision—to be obedient to God: the God who met him in the burning bush and called him to guide God's people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to (but not necessarily into) the Promised Land. Moses was passionate about that vision—and he used the best tools and resources God had given him towards realizing it. Guiding God's people out of Egypt, through the wilderness, and to the Promised Land was not something that merely *intrigued* Moses—if that was all it was, he would have given up. Getting God's people to the Promised Land was a vision that was integral to Moses—it was part of his very self.

What about you? What about me? Fox or hedgehog?

I have to confess something here. It's mighty tempting to be a fox. There's a part of me that wants so much to be liked, I often go into fox mode. Running around trying to be all things to be people... Avoiding, as much as I humanly can, upsetting people's comfort levels, at least not too much... When I told my mom that I was afraid that I'd been a fox through much of my ministry, she said, "No you haven't. You've always been a hedgehog." That's a mom for you. And I suppose I have. But I'm always tempted to be a fox.

More and more lately, I'm feeling my inner hedgehog come out, though.

I'm beginning to catch a single, organizing vision. It's been there underneath the surface for some time now, I just haven't been enough of a hedgehog about it. I believe it's God-inspired, and that it could be our vision as a church. Here it is—a hedgehog idea: that this community of faith can be a place and a people where every single member and friend is equipped for and passionately doing the work of ministry. That idea is not original with me. It's the Apostle Paul's idea actually. That ministry takes and will take many forms within and beyond these walls—but it will all be centered in communicating the good news of love of the God we know in Jesus Christ to a world hungry for that news. It will entail that each one of us become, in a manner of speaking, a hedgehog. Possessing a single, organizing vision, doing what we do best, and in the process getting fed to continue to do the work of ministry so that people around us encounter the God of love we know in Jesus Christ.

Now having a single organizing vision and doing what we do best doesn't mean you and I can't do more than one thing around here or out beyond these walls. You might do a number of things—sing in the choir, be a listener, help with Project Christmas serve on a committee, visit the sick, volunteer at 5th street, play volleyball, work in the nursery, share your faith in word and deed with your neighbors and your co-workers, do your job in the workplace to the best of your ability, you name it. That's all part of the larger vision. But just don't neglect what you're best at and what you're truly passionate about for God's sake. You may be best at being a basketball coach and working with young men... Whatever it is: don't forget that it's our role to help others encounter the God we know in Christ.

Our respective visions and passions might be slightly different. I know some of you have a vision and a passion for getting a Sunday School class started for 19 to 30 year olds—so that that segment of our church might grow. Some other folks have a vision and a passion for recording our services on CVDs, so they might be shared in video form on the Internet and in nursing home ministry. Some of you are on fire for working with youth—others for teaching adults—others for making sure that nobody falls through the cracks in our efforts to care for everyone in our congregation. I've even heard someone say we should be doing prison ministry. If that's a passion of yours, go for it—it was certainly something Jesus thought was important, and it deserves your leadership.

Which brings us back to Moses and the text. His big vision wasn't all that different than the one I outlined—it's all related to God's promises being realized in and through God's people. This week I discovered four things Moses can teach aspiring hedgehogs like you and me about the vision that God gives. You might write them down.

Number one. **Having God-inspired vision results in passionate enthusiasm.** To put it another way, having vision and having vigor, (the drive to work towards that vision) are integrally related. At least that's what our passage from Deuteronomy says.

I always find it interesting to hear how people are described when they are being eulogized. What stands out as worthy of note? In Moses' case mention is made of the unequalled signs and wonders, the mighty deeds and displays of power that the Lord worked through him in Egypt and in the sight of all Israel. But before Deuteronomy gets to all that it says this about Moses. It says that when he died, Moses was a hundred and twenty years old (which was a ripe old age even back then). Then it says—and I want you to notice this—“his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated.” Imagine that. 120 years old with undimmed eyes and unabated vigor! That's pretty remarkable.

I suspect the author of those words was not simply stating that Moses had no need for glasses—or that he was in such great physical condition at 120 years of age that he had abs like Jack LaLanne. That may well have been true. But the deeper point was more likely that Moses had eyes to see a future that few other people were able to see—and that his enthusiasm towards moving the people into that future never waned. Moses' vision fueled his passion.

People's bodies wear out. But I've seen a lot of people in their eighties and nineties who have lost some strength (and I'm looking at Mildred), who don't breathe as well as they used to, who have maintained their passion for seeing that God's work is done and doing what of it they can. I know a man who is nearly eighty years old who is so passionate about sharing the good news of God's love in Christ that he's willing to teach a course on faith-sharing, so that others might be equipped to do in their circumstances what he had more opportunity to do as a younger man. He's not physically strong—but God has given him plenty of enthusiasm.

Somehow I thought of him, and of Moses, while I was up in Abingdon watching South Pacific with the Challengers on Wednesday. As that memorable character Bloody Mary serenaded Lieutenant Cable and her daughter Liat with the song "Happy Talk," these words grabbed hold of me—and they haven't yet let me go. "You've got to have a dream. If you don't have a dream, then how you gonna have a dream come true?"

Lesson number two from Moses about God-inspired vision. **God-inspired vision is always about more than our own personal needs being met.** Think about it. In some ways, Moses' dream didn't come true—at least not for him. The people went on into to the Promised Land, but he died in the land of Moab looking over it. Mother Thomas didn't get to see that steeple on top of Cameron Church before she died. A bunch of older saints at Monticello Methodist church passed away in the three years between when their old sanctuary was torn down and when their new sanctuary was built. Martin Luther King, Jr. was gunned down in Memphis before his efforts on behalf of civil rights came to full fruition.

Last Sunday night, David Sides challenged us with this statistic from a recent survey of churchgoers. He said that, when asked what the purpose of the church and its ministry was, 89 percent of the respondents replied with some version of this: to meet my needs and my families' needs. Only 11 percent said: to reach out to a hurting world with the love of Jesus Christ. That's a statistic that reflects a lack of God-inspired vision.

Now, to be sure, the church does meet our personal needs—by reminding us of the comfort and challenge of God, by helping teach our children the faith, by providing us with opportunities to study and grow, by providing visitation, fellowship and prayer, by conducting weddings, baptisms, and funerals. That's one reason most of us are here—our needs have been and are being met. But if our vision is just about our personal needs being met—it's not God's vision. God's vision calls us to go out into the world and share the good news in word and deed—to offer people hungry for abundant life and seeking it in all the wrong places something that will satisfy their deepest hunger. Who models this vision best for us? The one we call the Bread of Life, who set aside his own needs in the Garden of Gethsemane, saying, "If it be thy will, let this cup pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done."

Which brings us to the third lesson Moses would teach aspiring hedgehogs about God-inspired vision. **God-inspired vision requires significant personal investment.** Moses' vision required that he devote his entire life to moving toward its realization.

There were surely times when he questioned whether his investment was worth it. (I think here of John the Baptist, who dedicated his life to proclaiming the coming of the Messiah, sending messengers from his prison cell to ask Jesus, “Are you he who is to come, or should we look for another?”). God-inspired vision always requires significant investment. It never comes cheap.

Today happens to be Reformation Sunday, the Sunday when we commemorate the courage of the Reformers to break from the Roman Catholic Church of their day and its abuses. Common people were being told they could buy pardon by purchasing indulgences. They were constantly bombarded with the message that they could never be quite sure they were safe in God’s hands. Reformers like Martin Luther and John Calvin reacted to these abuses by challenging the established church’s stand. When Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to the Wittenberg Door, he did so recognizing that with that stand would come a cost (no career advancement in the church, and beyond that, the threat of imprisonment and even death). Luther’s vision of a reformed church, a church where every believer could be assured of the grace of God—a church where the laity, too, were a part of the priesthood of all believers and could do the work of mediating God to a hurting world—required a significant investment from him.

The same holds true for our God-inspired vision for this church and the world. Riding to my Synod committee meeting in Richmond a few weeks ago, I, just for kicks, tuned into the AM band and listened to a number of radio preachers. Not surprisingly, I heard a lot of stuff that was a downright distortion of the good news of Jesus Christ. But I heard some good stuff, too. When I heard one of those preachers ask his congregation to ask themselves a particularly provocative question, I wasn’t sure what I was hearing was bad stuff or good stuff. This is the question he asked them to ask themselves. “What kind of church would my church be, if every member were just like me?”

First, let me tell you my problem with that question. It’s what the answer could provoke in people. It might lead to a destructive pride on some peoples’ part: boy, if everybody was like me wouldn’t this church be great. It might lead people to forget that our gifts and talents are different—that *nobody* is *just like* anybody else. Thank goodness for that. (Randy Dellinger is a wonderful guy, and a committed church member. But if we had a church full of Randy Dellingers, we wouldn’t have much of a choir.) I’ll tell you the worst thing about that question. The worst thing about that question is that for some people, it might be experienced as a guilt trip, eliciting a sense of shame and failure. None of those responses is helpful. Set them aside. Now hear the question from the perspective of vision.

What if every member and friend of our church were so committed to a God-inspired vision of what their life and this church and this world could be that they invested themselves wholeheartedly—time, talent, and treasure—in it? We couldn’t help but grow. We’d have to build a 3500-seat sanctuary. Here. In Loray!

Moses has one last thing to teach us about God-inspired vision this morning. Lesson number four—**God-inspired vision is not about what the present is, but about what the future can be.**

A colleague of mine has written that he's had the privilege of standing on the top of Mt. Nebo, the vantage point from which Moses viewed all that Deuteronomy says he saw. My colleague writes that he was up there on a clear day, but he couldn't see nearly all that Moses saw. He couldn't see all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea. Not even with binoculars. Moses did have remarkable vision.

He saw not what was, but what could be. Isn't that what we do when we baptize our children? Isn't that what kept Moses going those forty years in the wilderness? Listening to the grumbling Israelites... Trying to placate God's anger at them... Always so close and yet so far away from the Promised Land...

Our text says that before Moses died, he laid his hands on Joshua, the son of Nun—another man of vision. You see Joshua was one of the twelve spies Moses sent to check out the land of Canaan—we read that story last week in Disciple. When the spies came back, ten of them reported that there were giants in the land—Anakim—and they said there was no way the Israelites would ever be able to overcome them. But Joshua and Caleb gave a minority report—a God-inspired vision. Unlike their colleagues who felt as tiny as grasshoppers when they saw what *was*, Joshua and Caleb saw what *could be*. They knew they weren't grasshoppers. They were hedgehogs, with God-inspired vision.

Next Sunday morning, we will all receive packets containing pledge sheets and time and talent inventories. We'll turn them back in in two weeks on November 17th. As you and I fill them out, let us consider the many blessings God has given us. Let us think about the time, talent, and treasure God has bestowed on each of us. Let's be grateful for what this church is and has been to so many of us. A people of welcome... A place where our needs are met... A community that nurtures us and our children...

But don't stop there. For God's sake, don't stop with what this church is. Fill out your pledge sheets and time and talent inventories with an eye to what this church might yet become. Fill them out with God-inspired vision—a vision of more and more and more people out there coming to know the love of Jesus Christ and encountering the love of God in and through us and the gifts and passions God has given us. God-given vision like that calls us to go beyond our own needs, and to invest our very selves in the process, but with it will come all the vigor, all the enthusiasm, and all the passion we could ever dream of needing. In Jesus' name. Amen.