

The leader of a certain Indian tribe encamped at the base of a mountain was dying. The chief summoned his three sons and said, "I am dying and one of you must succeed me as the head of our tribe. I want each of you to climb our holy mountain and bring back something beautiful. The one whose gift is the most outstanding will succeed me."

After several days the sons returned. The first brought his father a flower, which grew near the summit and was extremely rare and beautiful. The second son brought his father a stone, which was colorful, smooth, and round, having been polished by rain and sandy winds.

The third son's hand was empty. He said, "Father, I have brought nothing back to show you. As I stood on top of the holy mountain, I saw that on the other side was a beautiful land filled with green pastures and a crystal lake. And I have a vision of where our tribe could go for a better life. I was so overwhelmed by what I saw and by what I was thinking that I could not bring anything back."

And the father replied, "You shall be our tribe's new leader, for you have brought back the most precious thing of all – the gift of vision for a better future."

In our passage from the book of Revelation today, the writer is also given a marvelous vision of a hope-filled future. God transports the writer beyond time into eternity. He is given the vision of a new heaven, and a new earth, indeed, a new Jerusalem. In the new city, God lives eternally with peoples of every nation.

What a spectacular vision of the future! What a wonderful message of hope! Vision and hope were precisely what Christians needed the most as they suffered from the persecution of the cruel Roman Empire. Life was chaotic, uncertain and very dangerous for those early Christians of the first century. God knew that they needed vision and hope if they were going to survive.

Indeed, so important is vision and hope that humankind – from the beginning to the present day – has hungered and thirsted for it. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of visions and hopes of a glorious future for the Israelites as well as for all other nations. The prophets, in particular, had dreams and visions of the coming of a Messiah. Their dreams and visions -like the dream recorded by the author of Revelation – also spoke of God wiping out death: no more tears, mourning and pain.

The writer of Proverbs tells us that: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” (29:18) That which gives to any country – or, for that matter, any local community, any church, any organization, its stability and strength is not the immediate prosperity which it has gained, but the ideals which pervade its life. Has it any vision of a better future? Or is it sunk in self-sufficiency, material prosperity, and self-indulgence, until there is no vision anymore?

What is true of a nation or a community is true as well of an individual. Each of us is apt to think that his (or her) life is made up of that which (s)he has, or perhaps of that which (s)he is. But it is not. That which, in reality, most defines your life is not its possessions or its acquisitions, but its desires, its expectations, its imaginations, its visions.

One of the most common visions and hopes of human beings is that of a home. In recent history, Jewish people from around the world had the vision and hope of a homeland, a nation of their own. And so they have their country of Israel. But what about those they displaced to make that home? The Palestinian people also hunger and thirst for a homeland, a nation of their own. Refugees who have fled their own country to live in another one in a time of war or famine also have the vision and hope that sometime, in the future, they might return to their homeland.

In our passage from Revelation, when God makes the new city of Jerusalem, God calls it “home;” it is the place where God will “dwell” with all of God’s peoples. The words “home” and “dwell” here literally mean “tabernacle” or “to pitch God’s tent among us.” In the Hebrew Bible, the tabernacle is the visible sign of God’s presence among the Israelites. God dwelling with God’s people is the final fulfillment of the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: “A young woman with child shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.” Immanuel meaning “God is with us.”

In a world that is troubled with death, tears, mourning, crying and pain; we too are given this marvelous vision and hope that there will be a new heaven and a new earth, a new Jerusalem. No more death, no more tears, no more mourning, crying and pain. No more wars and divisions of peoples by race, culture, language and national borders. A home of love, security, joy, unity, equality, peace and final fulfillment.

This is our vision and hope for the future – the place we call our true home, heaven and a place of eternal life. However, this vision and hope is also ours right now, today. It is the future breaking into the present, eternity reaching out to time. That is why we pray

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” It is by having this marvelous vision and hope for the future that we will also be inspired and strengthened to live under this reality today, right now.

Without vision and hope we perish as individuals, congregations, our Episcopal Church and, indeed, the whole Christian Church. So, brothers and sisters, no matter how difficult our circumstances; no matter how seemingly blind and hopeless we may feel; don't give up, remember God is not finished with us yet – for God gives us a vision and a hope in Christ that lasts a lifetime and beyond. Amen.