

"STANDING ON YOUR HEAD FOR GOD"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
July 10, 1994

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### INTRODUCTION

Nestled in the Green Mountains of Vermont, in the town of Rupert, is a two hundred year-old church. A man by the name of Howard Mudgett has written a history of this church. In the year 1831, he writes that the people of Rupert first added a steeple and a bell to their church. This was very special for the town and something rather unusual took place in connection with it. Mudgett writes that,

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Not much else is known about Lyman Woodard. He's only remembered for the minor stunt that he pulled off over 160 years ago. He took a small risk and did something that must have been embarrassing to the church folk. After all, Vermonters are not supposed to act like that. But this gentleman was so excited about the improvement to his church that he just had to find a way to express it. He was celebrating a victory of God, this "clown in the belfry".

### DEVELOPMENT

What has this man, Lyman Woodard, standing on his head got to do with today's sermon? So, let's dig into our scripture reading. King David, at long last, was realizing his vision for Israel. He was at the peak of his power and popularity. Longstanding enemies had been defeated and he had brought his people together, uniting them like no one else had ever before. It was truly a moment of euphoria, perhaps like the euphoria our American colonists felt after winning independence from the British.

And, in order to complete his vision, David decided to move the famed ARK OF THE COVENANT - which was believed to contain the two stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments - up to Jerusalem. The Ark was a symbol of national pride for the Israelites, as well as a sign of the presence of God. Its presence in Jerusalem would inspire David's people for generations.

### DAVID HAD A VISION

David had a vision. Put this down as point one. Let's think about this. Astounding things happen when someone has a vision. A vision can capture our imaginations and unite us in a common purpose. It can become a rallying point that leads a people into action. History supports that claim. One has only to look at one of the most beautiful cities in the world for confirmation.

Vienna, Austria is home to the magnificent St. Stephen's Cathedral which has stood at the heart of that city since the 13th century. It was nearly destroyed during the Second World War when it was caught in the crossfire of opposing armies fighting for possession of the city.

After the war there wasn't a great deal of Vienna left. Homes had been destroyed and there was barely enough food to feed the people. The economy was in shambles and there wasn't much for the people to find comfort in, but do you know what they did first? They began rebuilding their beloved cathedral. That somehow kept them going. They removed the rubble from the cathedral even though they were hungry. Funds were raised even though the country was almost bankrupt. The cathedral became a symbol of Vienna's determination to survive and to also prosper through the dark years that were before them.

We all need visions to capture our imaginations and give us hope. What was it the prophet of old said...where there is no vision, the people perish!

Those of you with roots in and ties to the Philippines will appreciate the story of Alfonso Briones. He attended a training seminar for missionary pastors in the Philippines at the Haggai Institute. The year was 1982. It was an experience that changed his life. Before the seminar was over he locked himself in his room one night, knelt down beside his bed and prayed... making a commitment to the Lord.

"When I go back to the Philippines I will make my Church the fastest growing church in East Metro Manilla District"

"So help me God". That was his vision. However, it wasn't too long after that that he began to have some second thoughts. Was he really capable of pulling off a feat like that? Perhaps he had been a bit rash to commit himself without thinking of the consequences? He decided to "hedge his bets" as they say. Oh, he worked quietly and prayed constantly, pleading with God to help him out. But he didn't tell anyone, not even his wife, of his goals... just in case he came up short...and failed!

He preached missions and evangelism and then stewardship. The people were responding. Finally he started a training program with 41 young people from the church. Only on the last day of training did he pluck up the courage to share the goal to which he had committed himself months before.

"Let us win 200 souls for the Lord in two years' time" he said. And to his surprise, somebody stood up and replied, "That is too small" said the man whose name was Nelson Castorillo.

"Make it 500 souls, Pastor!" Well, Alfonso was shocked.

"No" he sputtered under his breath. "We can't make that. It's just unrealistic!" But Nelson stood up again and declared that "nothing is impossible with God!" "Do you believe that?" Alfonso addressed the question to every one and several of them replied, "Yes...we believe!"

From that day onward, that church prayed for 500 souls. Through FAITH - (and against his better judgement) - Alfonso had ventured from the POSSIBLE to the IMPOSSIBLE...from what he knew his church could do to what he believed it would do. His faith was rewarded richly by God. And today Taytay United Methodist Church in Manilla has over a thousand members. It has grown faster than any other church in its denomination, and it has spawned four daughter churches, and now supports seven full-time and two part-time missionaries. Alfonso trusted God to take the church beyond the possible.

He organized to expand growth and he persisted with his programs until his vision became a reality. This account speaks to me...and hopefully to you.

It reminds me that our churches need a vision, a vision of what God will do if we open ourselves to His leadership. We need a vision that will call us to renewal, to forward movement, but we also need something else and this brings us to the second thought to lift up in connection with this message on vision.

OUR VISION SHOULD BE GOD'S VISION

When King David decided to move the Ark to Jerusalem, he was taking a significant step. But he took it without seeking the will of God and a tragedy occurred. While David and his soldiers were transporting the Ark, the cart it rested on shifted and David's friend, Uzzah, reached out to prevent it from falling. But when Uzzah touched the holy Ark of the Covenant he was killed instantly and King David was devastated.

This tragedy halted the movement of the Ark and it forced David to re-evaluate his plans. And only then did he consult with God. Unfortunately, we often end up doing the same. When we're successful, we think that we don't need to consult with God before we make our decisions. And then when something bad happens along the way, we ask God what went wrong and we want Him to fix it up. If we were wise, we would consult God before we get ourselves into a bind.

For God still has a vision for people today just as He did back there in the time of David.

Shortly after Steve Kern graduated from college, he joined an Oil Company, relocated to a new city and met and then married his wife, Pamela. They were both what we would call "nominal" Christians. They read the Bible, went to church, but never really sought God's guidance. Together Steve and Pam dreamed one day of being rich and traveling all over the world. There was a day where Steve accompanied by his pastor went to a nearby neighborhood stricken with high unemployment. Something happened there that day as Steve helped to feed and clothe the hurting and hungry people he found clustered there. Somehow he felt and sensed that this is what God wanted him to do.

A few years later Steve was invited to El Salvador with a group from their church. He really didn't want to go, but it seemed that whenever he prayed, he seemed to hear the words, "GO TO EL SALVADOR". He went and while there, he felt another call and this time it was to become a missionary.

This led Steve and Pam to do some serious praying, trying to decide if the call was real and if they should quit their jobs, sell their home, and move to El Salvador. Today, that's where Steve and Pam and their three children are living, helping the people there and calling them to God. They gave up almost everything they had to follow the call of God's voice. Why? Steve put it best when he said,

"It's not that you decide you hate everything you did before...but that you just love God more..."

Friends, we must also love God enough that we are willing to take God's vision as our own and step out "on faith" and on His promises towards it. He may not call us to be missionaries, but He will call to each of us and offer us a vision.

King David waited for three months with the Ark at the home of Obed-edom, waiting to learn and to accept God's vision. Finally he received it. The home of Obed-edom began to receive an abundance of blessings through the presence of the Ark. And David interpreted this to mean that God was behind his plan, or rather that his plan was IN ACCORDANCE WITH GOD'S PLAN. The Ark was taken up again and it was carried the rest of the way "up to Jerusalem".

Then something most interesting happened. David began to dance around the Ark. He simply could not contain himself. Like Lyman Woodard standing on his head in that Vermont belfrey, David burst loose with a display of reckless exuberance. It was truly a time of celebration. David's dancing was so wild and exuberant that he embarrassed his wife. But he was dancing for the Lord, and he was dancing because he had brought the Ark of the Covenant up to Jerusalem. And all of this was according to his vision and according to the will of God.

WHEN A VISION BECOMES A REALITY, THERE IS JOY

And this brings us to an intrinsic value of every vision. When we see a vision become a reality, our hearts are filled with joy and with a desire to celebrate.

And this is one reason we need a vision - the joy we receive from its accomplishment. We may not stand on our heads or dance in the aisle before the altar, but there need to be those times when we celebrate a great victory of God.

A couple of years ago, Tony Campolo was invited to preach at a Lutheran Church down in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Several days prior to this preaching assignment, he had been the speaker at a nearby inspirational music festival and some of the young people who were at the music festival decided to travel over to Lancaster to hear Dr. Campolo preach there as well. The church that evening was packed with young people.

The pastor began the service by calling the people to worship with those familiar words,

"Let us make a joyful noise unto the Lord! Let us come into His gates with thanksgiving and into His courts with praise!"

Imagine the pastor's surprise when someone in the balcony jumped up and yelled out, "All right. All right!" And then started clapping. Before long several hundred young people were on their feet shouting "praise" "praise"...and applauding wildly and enthusiastically. Said Tony Campolo later of this event,

"I don't know what the pastor was expecting when he told the people in the church to make a joyful noise unto the Lord, but I do know that the last thing he expected that Sunday night was that anybody actually would...."

It's kind of sad that so many churches no longer expect to be "joyful". We're so used to worshipping in a sort of somber silence that we never allow ourselves to become excited by our Christian faith. Some of you have heard the story about the young lady here in our city who one Saturday morning was cleaning her apartment and accidentally vacuumed "up" her little pet canary. The canary survived the ordeal, but in describing what took place to a friend, she said...."you know he doesn't sing much any more...mostly just sits and stares!" Where's the joy? It needs to be recovered.

We need a new vision. We need a vision that comes from God. We need a vision that will set our pulses racing and our spirits soaring. King David

followed his vision and united the people of Israel. Let's pray for a vision for ourselves, for our church, for our society and then let's follow that vision that we might ~~one day~~ also dance for God with deep joy in our hearts.

PRAYER

Grant us such a vision of Your truth, Your goodness and Your beauty, O God, that like David we, too, might be deeply moved. Touch our hearts, O God, in these moments. Wrestle with us and help us always to see to it that our earthly visions are in keeping with the heavenly vision. Help us to sing your praises, always. In Christ's spirit, we pray. Amen.

FIRST INTRODUCTION

The week of toil has ended. Our day of rest is at hand. May the rest and the quiet of this hour of worship refresh our inner life. And may it renew in all of us a sense of God's holy and abiding Presence.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

SECOND INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation...a time in which we prepare ourselves expectantly...that the Spirit of the living God may be made real to us in this hour of worship.

In quietness, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

THIRD INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter into a time of silent meditation as we come into the Presence of Him whom our faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

FOURTH INTRODUCTION

Remaining in a prayerful spirit, let us enter now into a time of silent meditation. In these moments, let us ponder the pattern our lives have been weaving as we come into the Presence of Him whom our Faith declares to be the Source of all life and love, all peace and power, the Source of all hope and healing.

In silence, let each now pray as the heart may prompt.

MEDITATION

We rest our hearts in the Promise of Jesus who said:

"Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of Me, for My yoke is easy and My burden is light".

"Ask, and it will be given you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and it will be open unto you."

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father, but by Me. If you love Me, you will keep my commandments"

"For I tell you...do not be anxious about your life, what you shall eat...or drink..nor about your body, what you shall put on. Is not life more than food? And the body more than raiment."

"But seek ye first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

"For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present...to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature - shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus, Our Lord."

"And all things...whatsoever you shall ask in prayer, believing...you shall receive. And as many as touched Him were made whole!"

"Wait on the Lord. Be of good course and He shall strengthen thine heart. For we dwell in the shelter of the Almighty. He is our refuge and our strength."

"We know that in everything, God works together for good with those who love Him!"

"But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They shall mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not be weary. They shall walk and not faint".

"God so love the world that He gave His only Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life".

"Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all His benefits: who forgiveth all thine iniquities; who healeth all thy diseases".

"Thou wilt keep Him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on Thee: because he trusteth in thee".

"In the name of Jesus Christ, I share with you the Good News: We are forgiven".

PRAYERS / LORD'S PRAYER

O Thou, who hearest prayer, hear our prayers...for others, as well as for ourselves. Touch with healing, O God...Father of us all, those whom we mention in our prayers this hour:

- |                              |                         |                         |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. <u>Coralie Lee Bailey</u> | 2. <u>Shelley Roper</u> | 3. <u>Daisy Herrick</u> |
| 4. _____                     | 5. _____                | 6. _____ 7. _____       |

...beloved members and friends of this congregation. Comfort the bereaved and the broken hearted among us...and especially be close to \_\_\_\_\_ who in recent days has lost a loved one. Abide among us as a healing benediction. Heal each of us at the point of our deepest need.

Answer the upspoken prayers now offered to thee on the altars of our hearts, spoken in the name and spirit of Jesus, who taught us to say when we pray.... For we ask all of this in the powerful name and lifting spirit of Jesus who taught us to say when we pray...

"Our Father, who art in heaven. Hallowed be Thy name. Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for Thine is the Kingdom, and the Power and the glory, forever. Amen"

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