

Now What? A Guide to Faith Discernment: Be Not Afraid

Psalm 46

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Every once in a while, I am asked by a colleague to describe our church, and I usually give a fairly predictable description like, “FUMC is a larger downtown church which sits adjacent to the University of Michigan. We live in an academic community so the church has a strong academic leaning, as well. We have two church buildings with very different worship and atmosphere. Both are moderate to progressive theologically. It’s a church with a long history of excellent music and worship, children’s and youth programming, and justice work and world mission.” But there is one other thing that I always say that is maybe less predictable. I always tell people that FUMC is a brave church - and I am honored and proud to serve here.

I don’t know if you all think of yourselves as brave, but let’s think back sixteen years ago to January 7, 2007 when this congregation voted to pass our original welcoming statement - a statement which read:

As congregants of the First United Methodist Church of Ann Arbor, we welcome and affirm all persons. We are intentional in being inclusive of those of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender orientations, all genders, ethnicities, nationalities, and abilities. In modeling the ministry of Jesus Christ, we shall all journey together into full participation in the life of the United Methodist Church and a closer relationship with God.

That vote was taken after a quickly growing group of church members, led by Ryan and Linda Haywood, decided people in our congregation should be aware of our denomination’s stance on LGBTQ inclusion and consider taking some kind of action. The United Methodist Book of Discipline states that “homosexuality is incompatible with Christian teaching” and does not allow LGBTQ individuals to serve as clergy or to be married in United Methodist Churches.

When our congregation learned about this, you decided you were going to think for yourselves on this issue. There were Bible studies, a sermon series, and many, many conversations which ultimately led to the writing of the welcoming statement. Now, sixteen years later, our denomination is splitting over this issue. Those who condemn homosexuality have started a new denomination, the Global Methodist Church. Those of us who support full inclusion will remain United Methodist and in 2024, when we finally are able to have a General Conference, we will begin to change the exclusive language and policies in the Book of Discipline.

The fact that our denomination is now splitting shows what a gutsy move passing our welcoming statement was sixteen years ago. And there were repercussions. Our clergy at the time were brought up on charges by other United Methodist pastors in our state. Eventually, the charges were dropped and FUMC became known as a leader in the effort to change United Methodist policy. All of this took courage, but we did it because we believe that Jesus Christ welcomed and celebrated all of God’s children exactly as they are and we choose to follow him. We responded faithfully to an important issue of that time.

Over the years since, our welcoming statement has become an important part of our identity and we will continue to grow in understanding what this means. Recently, one gay member of our congregation pointed out that there is a difference between feeling welcome, feeling included, and feeling at home. What steps can we take to make this church feel like home to whomever walks in our doors?

In the meanwhile, other issues and needs have emerged, as well. Three years into the pandemic, our church and our country have faced a number of crises - health, economic, political, and social justice crises. Covid revealed to us how those on the margins suffer the most because they have the least social safety net. The murder of George Floyd brought the reality of racism and the need for racial reckoning to the foreground in the U.S. The rise of Christian nationalism has led to the misuse and misrepresentation of our faith in deeply destructive ways.

The world needs the Church Christ founded to care for the poor and marginalized, to call out injustice, and to model a community bound together by love. Yet, mainline churches, including our own, have slowly been declining. Meanwhile, we have these amazing assets - two beautiful church buildings - which are in need of repair. The time has come for us to listen for what God is calling us to do in the future. How can we make an impact in our community and world? How do we respond to the needs of today? How can we transform ourselves and transform the lives of others? What is our next faithful step?

At the same time, many of us are at the point of asking similar questions about our lives. Which college or graduate school should I go to? Is this the right time to have a child or to buy a house? Maybe God is calling me to a new job or a different career. Is now the time for me to retire so I can do more good in the world? Should we sell our home and move into a senior community? Despite all the upheaval and uncertainty of the pandemic, the bigger trajectory of our lives continues, and we have decisions to make - if not now, soon enough.

These are all the reasons I decided on a sermon series about faithful discernment for this particular season. Between now and the beginning of Lent, we'll be looking at how to approach decision-making through the lens of our faith. How can we use the Christian concept of discernment to help guide us? How can we hear the voice of God in the midst of so much chaos?

Inevitably, when we are entering a time of discernment, we are considering some kind of change, and I don't know a lot of people who like change. The potential for change brings out our fears. We know that change will almost certainly bring loss and that thought leads to a lot of anxiety. What if I don't like the school I pick and it's too late to go somewhere else? What if having a baby hurts our marriage? If we buy a house, will we still have money for going out and having fun? What if I can't find another job? Will everything I've built be forgotten if I retire? What will happen to all our belongings if we downsize from a house to an apartment?

The same happens when we consider changes in church. If we focus on growing the church, will they change our worship? Are they going to sell the building? What if they want to get rid of the Memorial Garden? If we start a new ministry in our community, will we quit supporting the ministries I care about?

All of that anxiety gets very noisy in our brains - so much so that we can no longer listen for God and God's calling. Avoiding loss can become our primary objective. Yet, as we hear

over and over again in scripture (remember all those angel visits in Advent?), we don't need to be afraid. "God is our refuge and our strength, an ever-present help in times of trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging... God says, Be still, and know that I am God."

Whatever our fears and our worries, God is with us, calling us to stillness that we might hear God's voice. When we take time to close our eyes and just breathe, allowing ourselves to fall into the stillness of God, our anxiety settles down. With a calmer mind and heart, we can name our fears to God and give them over to God. Just naming our fears takes away so much of their power. Trusting that God has heard them and will hold them, frees our hearts and our minds to consider not what comes from human anxiety but what comes from God. Breathing in the assurance of God's love, settles our nerves and allows us to ground ourselves in God's strength and purpose in the world.

Not only does creating space within help quiet us so we can listen for God but so we can listen to each other, as well. There are very few big life decisions that we make in isolation. Almost always there are other people who will be impacted by whatever we decide, but sometimes our fears impede us from listening to their thoughts, questions, and concerns. We become quick to defend, to take a stand, to hold tight to our own priorities. Yet, it is often in quality conversations - where each person has an opportunity to speak and to listen - that discernment happens. When we speak honestly and we listen deeply, we can find common ground and a shared vision for what comes next.

All of this begins with naming your fears and allowing God to hold them for a while so you can settle your spirit and bring your best self to the discernment process. So, whether you are trying to figure out the next chapter of your own life or you are joining us in discerning the next chapter of this amazing church, I invite you to start that work with a breath prayer. Pick a phrase that comforts you. It may be something from scripture - it could even be "God is our refuge and our strength" or "Be still, and know that I am God". Or, it could be some other phrase or mantra that is meaningful to you. Sit comfortably with your feet on the floor and your shoulders back. Breathe in slowly and release that breath slowly as you say your phrase in your mind. Allow the words and the breath to calm you. Rest in the assurance that God is there to hold you, to guide you, to call you to whatever purpose God has for you and for us in building the kin-dom of love. And then, listen. Listen to the voice of God. Amen.