

## **Now What? A Guide to Faith Discernment: Stay Open-Minded Luke 5:1-11; Philippians 1:9-11**

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Imagine this...One day, you are out tending your uncle's sheep and goats, when, just a short distance away, a bush bursts into flames. From the deep heart of the fire, God speaks to you, telling you to go to Egypt where the Israelites are enslaved, talk to the Pharaoh, and then lead God's people from slavery to freedom. How would you respond? Alternatively, imagine you and your wife are enjoying your retirement years when God appears to you in the form of three visitors to announce that you, at ages 100 and 90 respectively, will soon have a baby. Your wife just laughs out loud. What do you do? Or, speaking of babies, here is another scenario to imagine - you are a young teenage girl whom God visits through an angel to announce that you are going to get pregnant with God's son, who will be the savior of the world. How do you feel?

The Bible is full of stories in which God calls ordinary, unsuspecting people to do extraordinary things in God's name. And every time, they are surprised by what God is asking of them. Moses never thought of himself as someone to confront a Pharaoh. Abraham and Sarah definitely thought their child-bearing years were over. And virtuous Mary would never have become pregnant out of wedlock. Yet, when God opened their minds to the possibilities, they said yes.

Last weekend, we started a sermon series entitled, "Now What? A Guide to Faithful Discernment". Together, we're exploring how we discern the best answer to perplexing challenges and decisions in life. We've been talking both at the level of our individual lives but also about the process of discernment we have begun as a church to identify God's calling on us. The first sermon in this series was on how fear can impede our ability to hear God's voice or sense the direction God is calling us. This week, we're talking about the importance of staying open-minded as, like Moses, Abraham, Sarah, and Mary, God might surprise us with possibilities we've never considered before.

That's why I love the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. Again, put yourself in their place. These are four fishermen, two sets of brothers, who make their living and feed their families by going out to sea every day to catch fish - just as their fathers did before them. On this particular day, they've just come ashore after a long, unproductive day of fishing. In Matthew and Mark's versions of this story, there isn't much of a preamble - Jesus just calls out to them saying, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people". However, Luke adds a bit more detail and drama. In Luke, Jesus is teaching a large gathering of people on the shore. Everyone is crowding around him, so he gets in one of the fishermen's boats to put some distance between himself and the crowd. After finishing his teaching, Jesus then directs the fishermen to take their boats out further from shore and drop their nets. They are shocked when they pull up the nets to find they are overflowing with fish. This is their moment of conversion as they recognize that there is something unique, possibly divine about Jesus. Simon Peter falls to his knees asking Jesus to go away from him because he is a sinful man.

And then comes an even bigger surprise as Jesus says to Simon, "Do not be afraid" - there are those words again - "from now on you will be catching people." What? These words are

clouded in mystery. What does he mean they will be catching people? How? Why? What is this all about? Yet, without any more information, when they had brought their boats to shore, they left everything and followed him. That was the beginning of Jesus' ministry and Jesus had invited them to be part of a movement that changed the world.

Now, this situation could have played out much differently. For example, what if Simon, or any of the others, was rowing his boat to shore after a long, frustrating day, saw the crowds gathered around Jesus and thought to himself, "Ugh - there's another one of those nut cases. That's the third "teacher" who has passed through this month. They are all just phonies, giving false hope to people who are barely scraping by. I don't want to deal with this nonsense right now." And with that, he pulled his boat further up shore to avoid the whole situation, anxious to get home to a glass of wine and an evening's rest. Yet, that's not what happened because something spoke to him or nudged him or made him curious enough to stay open-minded and tune in to the movement of God, the potential for something new and powerful. Without a second thought, he walked away from everything and followed Jesus.

So often when we are in a time of decision-making or facing a possible change, the fear and anxiety we talked about last week lead us to close ourselves off to new possibilities. We dig in to the familiar - holding on to our thoughts, opinions, and desires as tightly as we can. Kind of like the two young twin boys in the old movie "Cheaper By The Dozen" who, on the day their family is moving to Chicago, sit in the back of the family van, rocking back and forth and screaming, "We don't want to move. We don't want to move!"

Wanting to keep things as they've been is a completely understandable response when facing a complex decision because, as we said last week, making decisions almost always means considering change. What is familiar feels secure. It's why kids don't like to change schools and people stay in unfulfilling jobs. The prospect of something different is too much. And yet, if Moses hadn't gone to Egypt, if Mary had refused to carry God's child, if Simon Peter had pulled his boat up to a different shore, what they would have missed! What we would have missed!

The anecdote to the discomfort of change is to stay open-minded, and one way of doing this is to apply your imagination to your discernment.

In the Christian faith, much of what we understand about discernment comes to us through Saint Ignatius. Ignatius was a medieval military man who was perhaps a bit too proud and concerned with worldly success. Then, in 1521, while he was defending the citadel of Pamplona from the French, he was hit by a cannonball which badly fractured his right leg. During his convalescence, he read a book on the life of Christ and another on the lives of the saints. He also spent a great deal of time imagining his future. He realized that in response to his imaginings, he would experience both positive and negative emotions. When something he was daydreaming about led him to feel hopeful and satisfied, cheerful and excited, that felt as though it was coming from God. When something he imagined left him feeling restless or hollow, it was not of God. He experienced his emotions as inner movements that revealed either attraction to a certain option or path for his life or heaviness.

Many would call this the work of the Holy Spirit. We open ourselves to the work of the Spirit when we allow ourselves to think outside the box, to add to our list of possibilities, to

imagine a new or different outcome. We shut out the Spirit when we remain inflexible, closed-minded, or defensive.

The apostle Paul addresses this in Romans 12 when he writes, “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect”. He establishes a causal relationship between renewing our minds and discerning what is of God. As long as we are stuck in one way of thinking, it is difficult to recognize where the Spirit may be leading.

Christian author and spiritual director, Ruth Haley Barton, describes it this way. “Discernment requires us to move beyond our reliance on cognition and intellectual hard work to a place of deep listening and response to the Spirit of God within us and among us...”. “The discernment process,” Barton writes, “Involves a commitment to listening with love and attention to our experiences, to the inner promptings of the Holy Spirit, to Scripture and Christian tradition, to pertinent facts, to those who will be affected most deeply by our decisions, and to that place in us where God’s Spirit witnesses with our spirit about those things that are true.”

How does this play out in practical terms? For decision-making in our personal lives, it means taking time to step out of the ongoing demands of doing the business of life right now to create space for imagining, for testing how different options feel, and for sensing where God might be leading.

When we are in a group discernment process, as we are as a church right now, it means setting aside any preconceived ideas or assumptions about the outcome and trusting each other to be entering the process with integrity and openness. When that happens, Barton says, “Everyone can affirm together a shared sense of God’s desire for them and move forward on that basis.”

Unfortunately, in these 21st-century times, God seems not to choose burning bushes or angels to speak to us. God’s directions usually aren’t announced to us in plain, direct language so we know what to do. Rather, we open ourselves, our curiosity, our creativity, our imaginations to God to see where the Spirit will lead.

May it be so. Amen.