

“Guided by Fire”
Psalm 131; Numbers 9:15-23
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Well! Today I am start the sermon with a confession. I am not to be's trusted with giving directions. Now I still think I'm actually really good at directions and navigation. I am seriously confident when I give someone else directions. But if you listen to those closest to me they will tell you that I am not to be trusted. And the truth is that I am not good with giving directions. And then they will probably cite the evidence of the time when I lead my family around Guatemala city with the map upside down for two days.

When I was in my mid-twenties, my husband Jordan I, we went traveling in Central America along with each of our sisters. It is the type of trip that only comes up once in a lifetime when as young adults there's gaps in your work, in school schedule, that allow you to go backpacking for a few months. So for the four of us, we took off to Central America starting in Guatemala and working our way South.

The very server trip was in Guatemala city and we had a couple nights planned there before we headed off to the more touristy Highlands. We were staying in the centre of Guatemala city in the fairly touristy area an Guatemala city it's not built around a central Plaza, but along two really long streets with a bunch of side streets and on one end is the government centre and on the other end is the public market.

So we were in a great location or hotel was halfway between. It was the perfect way to explore the city eat some local food, look at the lovely architecture, and get acclimatized to our Central America experience. So on our first morning after landing we set out to go do our exploring now I being the one who spoke the most Spanish got directions from the front desk on how to get to the government centre that's where we were going to start to exchange some money.

So we set off to explore with our guidebook map in hand to help us navigate. And we did our exploring we ate some snacks we changed the money but we couldn't find the government centre. We were poking along some side streets along the way and so we thought we just got disoriented a bit but we kept stumbling upon the public market.

I'm a bit embarrassed that it actually took until the middle of the next day for us to figure out that we or rather I had essentially been reading the map upside down. I still maintained that front desk told me to go right, when we should have gone left. Maybe it was lost in translation. Regardless, every time I thought we were heading into the government area we were actually heading towards the market. I lost my navigating privileges for the rest of those two months.

Today in scripture from the book of Numbers, it's an account of how the Israelites traveled in the wilderness. They had a bit more of a reliable navigator than say myself. Now they didn't have a map but they did receive really clear directions from God. A cloud by day and fire by night. It's quite a repetitive passage thank you so much Karleen for reading those same words over, and over, and over again. I don't know if you got it but the people stayed with the cloud was there and they moved on when the cloud left.

But I'm not sure how clear the passage is about what the cloud was hovering over. So here is your brief refresher on the Tabernacle. Once the people of Israel had left Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they were led by Moses in the wilderness. God as you remember provided food and water but as time went on remember it's 40 years that they spend in the wilderness they began to settle into their nomadic life and so after Moses receives the 10 commandments, they also construct the ark and the Tabernacle.

This was the place where God was to reside. And at the end of exodus you can read it chapters 35 to 40 is really detailed descriptions of what a Tabernacle looks like. It was a tent essentially the portable temple when they eventually get to drew some. They build the temple and the Tabernacle is the precursor. It contains the altar the bread of presence the ark of the covenant and as these six chapters in exodus tell us, was made elaborate with fine linens, embroidered cloth, dyed beautiful cloth, silver, and gold and bronze, and gemstones. This is what the Tabernacle was. And once it was constructed in the priests were consecrated we hear in exodus that the cloud covered the tent of the meeting and the glory of the Lord filled the Tabernacle.

So the cloud is God's presence right over the place that is most holy to them. And the clouds that we heard about today God's presence is their navigation system for where they are to go. God had actually been with the people of Israel since they had left Egypt. Even before Moses used the staff to part the waters of the Red Sea, the Israelites had been guided by God through the journey and it wasn't a straightforward forward journey.

When pharaoh had finally relented to let the people go and they were on the way to the promised land they had to avoid a war, avoid a struggle with their enemies. So in exodus 13 we hear so God led the people in a roundabout way of the wilderness towards the Red Sea. The Lord went in front of them pillar of cloud by day to lead them along the way, and a pillar of fire by night to give them light.

So from the very beginning of their journey out of Egypt God was with them. God's presence was leading them a cloud by day and guided by fire by night. This was the cloud and fire of the presence of God which journeyed with him throughout the wilderness, guiding them when the cloud moved, they moved with the cloud. Stayed when God was with them. And God is with us today. We have a God who is present with us and guides us, who shows us a path in life and is present with us during the journey even and especially during the hard times.

Well! you might have noticed we don't have a cloud hovering over our altar. And if the church is on fire these days that's generally not a good thing, but that doesn't mean God

has left us, God is still here and guides us along our journey. It just isn't maybe quite as clear as following the cloud above the Tabernacle. And so when we as a Christian community and individuals need to figure out what our next step is, we call this slightly strange thing called discernment. Discerning God's will. Now discernment is more than decision making. Discernment opens us up to listen and recognize the voice and patterns of God's direction in our lives. It comes from a desire to delight in, and recognize the voice and will of God.

Decision making is not the same thing as discernment, and in fact sometimes, many times, discernment can actually look like poor decision making. And with communal discernment that can seem highly ineffective and it's a very slow and confusing process. At least when you're viewing it through the world standards. Because discernment is more than just good judgment and good decision making and having an opportunity. Now this doesn't mean that in Christian communities we throw out these strategies that we learn at work. We can still use them as tools but slot analysis or manifesting something should not be the starting place for our discernment.

prayer is the starting place. And it helps us to better see the world through the Kingdom of God, and to be better able to catch a glimpse of that fire which still guides us. Because even though there isn't a literal fire guiding us along that doesn't mean that God is not guiding us. God's guidance didn't end with the Tabernacle, it didn't end with the temple, or even when the Israelites were in exile. The story of our faith in the tradition of our faith is one that we can trace God's presence with us through Jesus, Immanuel, God with us.

I am really aware that there is fire beside me right now, the light of the Christ candle guiding us. And when Jesus departed the earth we were given the Holy Spirit. At Pentecost Jesus left us with God's presence with flames dancing above people's heads to be guided by fire. We today rely on the Holy Spirit to continue to guide us in our decisions and guiding us along our journey. It can take some practice to see this, to be comfortable with seeing things in a new way.

I think we're probably most familiar if we picture with a map of the world looks like you're either conjuring up an image of an elementary school map that was precariously pulled down and sometimes snapped back up, or you're thinking of what comes up on your phone with Google Maps. I think we're all pretty used to having North at the top but there was a time when East was how our maps were oriented. So East was at the top.

There's a map that doesn't follow our normal mapping conventions so you'll see on the PowerPoint now, a picture of the solter mapa mundi. So you could look this out later, just Google, mapa mundi. This is a map of the world from the 13th century, was found in the Bible in England. When you look closely you notice that there's no countries, there's no precise borders between things, there's no latitude, and longitude.

But there are elements that are important to our faith if you're joining us on line you probably have a better view later you can look this up if you're in person and can't quite

see. But the elements of our faith is there, there's Noah and his sons, there's angels place is the garden of Eden is there. And this map is configured around the central part of this map of the world is what is most important to our faith.

Jerusalem is there because Jesus that is where he was crucified and resurrected. And when we look you can see Jesus standing over the map of the world presiding over and uniting the world. This is definitely a different way of seeing the world, and it can take some time to adjust to new way of looking around us, and seeing the world. And so it is with our discernment. When we immerse ourselves into God's ways, when we centre ourselves in prayer, we develop a new way of seeing the world. A new way of understanding the world, a world that is configured around God, and God's Kingdom.

And this helps us align our desire to be guided by fire to follow God's will rather than with our own desires. It does take practice it doesn't always come easy that's what our spiritual disciplines are for. Practices to help us get those eyes to better align our will with God's will to be able to listen for an recognize where the spirit is leading us. So can you tell where I'm going with the sermons on the sermon on discernment? I am most definitely teaching to the test, next week this community has some important discernment to do. Calling a new minister, a preach for the call. This is when communities discernment is really elevated and put into practice.

Discernment is a way of life it's not a one time event it takes time and practice. Some of us have practiced a lot some of us are learning as we go. So today, I'm just going to give a few suggestions to help us have eyes to see what faithful discernment can look like. For me the most important part of discernment, is that communal discernment all voices are important. The Holy Spirit is given each of us a voice and gifts and quite often when it communally discerning something it's not the loudest or the most educated eloquent person in the room who has it all figured out, who has the answers.

In my experience it's often a quiet, thoughtful voice, who is caught a clear glimpse of where God is leading the community. They are the ones who caught sight of the fire that guides us. So when we do determine, how do we make sure as community, that we honour all the voices, give space so that all people may contribute to this process. Now our system 'Presbyterian is not infallible', believe me but I want to assure you that part of this discernment is already built into our system of calling a minister.

The search committee has been doing the work for months now, leading up to this preach for the call there's been groups of people doing good discernment work. And now next week next Sunday it's up to the congregation. Each person who will affirm, and confirm a decision. Each member has a vote that is able to contribute, and for adherence your voice is important as well. We want to hear everyone collectively making a decision.

Which brings me to my second part. Discernment is a communal decision. Yes! there is personal discernment, but we're talking about community making decisions now in my experience discernment can get into a little bit of a dangerous territory when someone

declares that their way is right because God told me. Well! each of us can talk to God and you know what? I heard God say you're wrong. So we can get into a vicious circle at that point. So in communal discernment we remember and honour that the Holy Spirit is here present moving among us when we make our decisions. And we need to be open to a different outcome than what we expect.

Sometimes it isn't that we sometimes when we discern together as an individual, we might realize that God's path forward is not how we initially imagined it ourselves. So when we enter into a discernment process with a posture of trust, we open up to God moments, where we can see the spirit on the move. And the goal for communal discernment is as Acts 15 points it, 'is to be able to say it seemed right to the spirit and to us'.

One last point. Communal discernment, there are often multiple good options. Often discernment is not should I do this really good thing, or should I do this thing that is clearly a bad option. Now, as we grow in our spiritual maturity is object choosing between really good options. I don't know how many of you know the term FOMO? Fear of missing out, apparently that's now a millennial thing. The Gen. Z is coming up with a new one 'fobo', fear of better options.

I've heard of teenagers and people in their early 20s who are paralyzed with indecision, because they have fear that if they make one decision it will take away the chance for a better option that comes along and so they make no decision at all. Equally in communal discernment we can't be held back in fear of making a wrong decision. This is not a direct comment about next week, more about in general. And I want to remind you that when we do our discernment, even if it is not the best decision ever, God is still with us.

If you know the story of the Israelites you know they made many, many, wrong decisions. Many wrong decisions, following the cloud of God's presence was about the only directions from God that they actually did follow and yet amongst them worshipping idols, at wanting to go back to Egypt. God stayed faithful and was present with them no matter what decisions they made.

The task of discernment is not to make a final decision where everything will be perfect. Rather, it is to take the next most faithful step. We see that in our passage today, they didn't know where they were going to end up 40 years later, but they took the next most faithful step of following the cloud where it went and camping where it stayed.

Overtime as we practice and develop our skills in discernment both as individuals and as a community we will continue to be guided by fire to be able to trust that where God is leading us is where we need to go. And God will continue to be present with us guiding us on our journey. Even, when we can't actually see the cloud or see the fire ourselves. Those around us, other people care and perhaps people we don't expect it from.

Together we are able to see what the next most faithful step is. So! Praise the Lord for God's unending presence, and may the Holy Spirit saturate our gatherings and discernment in this coming week and in our lives. As I said discernment is a practice that begins and it's held together by prayer.

So to end this sermon today I'm actually going to start our communal discernment process for the rest of the week with a prayer. So I hope that this can carry each of us into the next week and into our lives. Already heard this prayer today it was Psalm 131 which was read as part of our scripture reading. And this is the Psalm that I find particularly helpful for starting with group discernment. So I invite you to sit in a way that helps you to listen to God whether it's closing your eyes, hiding your hands in your lap maybe opening your hands up to God. And I invite you to receive this prayer as we as a community continue our work of finding the next most faithful step as God leads us.

Let's pray!

Oh Lord our hearts are not lifted up, our eyes are not raised too high, we do not occupy ourselves with things too great and too marvellous for us. But we have calmed and quieted our souls like a weaned child in its mother our soul is like the wind child that is with me. Oh Israel! hope in the Lord, from this time on and forevermore.

Amen!