**Discerning God’s Will: Take a step toward God**

Matthew 17:1-9 Esther 7:1-9 Psalm 124

March 21, 2021

 How many of us have ever been the person to hear a baby’s first word? Maybe we had some debate about it - family members tend to compete sometimes to see who hears that first garbled speech. A Parent magazine article noted that babies “utter their first words at 11 to 14 months, when the tongue and lips gain dexterity and the brain starts to match up objects with names.” And parents, grandparents and family members can hardly wait to hear that word. I remember watching and listening closely for early signs when my children were infants. I like other parents did a little prodding ...harmless competition hoping that it would be my name or a variation of it spoken first. It rarely happens like we plan and children’s first words can be very revealing! They often identify objects as their first words - like "car" or "tree" or maybe some version of "mommy" or "daddy." One writer suggests that second- and third- born children often utter first words that express relationships, like "gimme" or "mine." That makes sense. Second or third born children have siblings around them from the beginning. It’s like the story of a family in Tennessee who had five children. Their fourth child out of of five was late in saying that first word, but when it came it was worth waiting for: the child's first word was MOVE!

This morning we complete our four week series on discernment… and movement is our focus. I know that St. Giles has some history of taking action and moving on some things. Congregations with a passion for mission are usually more active than not. At the same time it’s not uncommon for churches with a passion for mission to make space for discernment…and we can thank the Quaker tradition for helpful insights. My hope has been that this series has shed some light on paths of discovery for us us personally and even communally to deepen our life with God. My intent has not been to suggest one path of discernment but to offer a framework based on historic Christian spiritual understandings and practices trusting that God is at work in our lives and in the world. We began by affirming that when it comes to discerning where God is at work in us we begin by asking, and we pause, opening ourselves to wonder, mystery, life, and God. Attending and being present to the God who is always present affirms our intention to see God in all things. In week two, we reflected on the importance of listening for God in scripture, in the wonder and beauty of creation, and even noticing God as we are concretely involved with the poor, as we practice charity and self sacrifice, as we pray individually and communally, and as we are vulnerable for love as Christ was vulnerable for love. Last week we addressed the notion that discerning God's will in our lives means living with tension. We all experience tension…the in-between kinds of places, the now and not yet, unresolved issues, the unknown, and the mystery of life and God’s presence within us and around us. The biblical example of this is Mary “pondering” her experiences. Its like holding them in our soul with all the tension that comes with them – until transformation occurs, until healing begins, until new life begins to emerge. And today, we recognize that along the way, at some point, we take some step toward clarity, toward hope, toward God. Like an infant saying that first word, like a toddler beginning to stumble around, like a seeker taking a step on the spiritual path, we MOVE.

The poetic words of our Psalm this morning offer us an image of trust and hope that we need sometimes when we take a step. “If the Lord had not been on our side” the Psalmist repeats, “if the Lord had not been on our side” here’s what would have happened! I’ve heard people say this and maybe you have too. In the face of health concerns, family struggle, and various losses in life, people say they don’t know what they would have done without the presence of God that had come to them spiritually and/or through the presence of God that was made real in and through the people they loved and who loved them. One Biblical scholar has said that this Psalm reminds us that yes “distress and tension are never far away, yes ambiguity is present, but the presence of God brings courage and hope: courage to face the distress, courage to MOVE in life along the best we know of the path of God’s will; and hope that as we MOVE we are moving as God would have us to move trusting God all along the way.” In his novel, *The Shoes of the Fisherman*, Morris West writes: "It costs so much to be a full human being that there are very few who have the enlightenment or the courage to pay the price. One has to abandon altogether the search for security, and reach out to the risk of living with both arms. One has to embrace the world like a lover. One has to accept pain as a condition of existence. One has to court doubt and darkness as the cost of knowing.”

Taking a step…it can be costly. A step of faith is usually a step into darkness, yet the Psalmist tells us that darkness is as light to God. If we could see it all and be absolutely sure where our steps were going to take us, then it wouldn’t really be stepping out in faith. Walking into the known is something we all prefer - it’s easier when we are in control of our own destiny. Yet sometimes we step into the dark - “not seeing yet believing” is what Jesus asked for. He asked for trust and surrender - the letting go of the ego self in control, and trusting God. One Biblical scholar has said, “the Psalmist knows there is a third player in the drama. It’s not just me and my enemy, me and my health, me and my family problems, me and my personal demons – but God is at work and God makes possible LIFE in the world.” Some describe discernment as a “waking up” process where we begin to see even in the dark where God might be at work in us, in others, and in all things.

The story of Esther that we read this morning, is another example of taking a step. We don’t hear enough about Esther and unfortunately her story is only included once in the lectionary. Esther was a strong woman who after her parents died was raised by her cousin Mordecai. Under the reign of King Ahaseurus, Mordecai was loyal but a little stubborn. He had saved the king from some assassins, but he would not bow down to the King’s royal leaders. Queen Vashti was actually an early model of resistance to her tyrant husband and is a powerful example in her own right. As the story goes, after Vashti was banished, Esther became the new queen but the King did not know she was a Jew. The villain of the story, was Haman. He was one of the royal leaders, and was arrogant, greedy, and hated Mordecai for not bowing down to him. As the story goes, Haman convinced the king to have all the Jews of the land massacred which included Mordecai. Haman even had a special gallows built for Mordecai’s execution. Esther then risked her life to go to the king and ask him to spare her people. In the end the tables were turned and Haman got what he had planned for Mordecai. Esther took a step into the dark against injustice. The Jewish people once again were faced with destruction and in the end found deliverance and hope. That Esther was queen was timely and in the end, her place of power and influence was exactly what was needed. Esther took a step. She moved. She risked her life on behalf of God and God’s people. It was surely a step into the darkness, into the unknown to prevent the genocide of her people. Her sacrificial gesture was a sign of her deep trust and belief.

When we are discerning God’s will we ask, pause, listen, live with tension, and then take a step. It may be a cautious step and we may linger there for a while or it may be a big step and we move with abandon. I wonder, as we make our way closer to Easter and our celebration of resurrection, is there step or two that God is inviting each of us to take? Maybe to reconcile a relationship, or maybe a step with our job or with another responsibility that we have? We may not be ready to take a particular step and that’s okay. Invitations tend to continue to come… and maybe we just haven’t found the right step to take. During the pandemic, most of the steps we have taken have been about safety, and in our remote spaces, we may have lost some connection with people. Maybe it’s time to reach out just to say hello. Some of us may have a neighbor who has been isolated. Maybe we can just listen to his/her perspective and concerns even if we do not agree. Maybe we can reach out to one or two church members we don't know well, and let them know we’d really like to get to know them. We could also plan to offer grace filled words when we hand out a samaritan bag and try to reflect on how the world might look through their eyes. Maybe our step will be one of these these or it will be to pray for St. Giles every day, volunteer to help with the children or youth, help take care of the grounds on a workday, or consider a call to serve as an elder in these significant days for the church.

  Not long ago, I read an excerpt from a magazine article about a device that turns steps into energy. They’re called vibration-harvesting devices. The idea is that when you take steps you create energy. One model “featured a staircase with treads designed to flex up to 1 centimeter under the weight of a commuter’s footfall. Each step squashes a fluid-filled balloon underneath the tread, forcing the fluid through a tiny turbine that drives a generator and produces a current.” Another one used magnets wobbling on a cantilever where vibrations cause micro currents. Some were even talking about using this technology in pacemakers so that they wouldn’t need batteries any more. As you move and your heart beats it creates energy. Taking steps toward God is response to our being open to wonder, to listening, to living with the tension. Taking steps toward God is an act of trust. Taking steps toward God is not only movement, but it connects us to the creative presence and energy of God that is waiting to transform, heal, and bring new life. As we discern God's will for us individually and as a community and we make our way toward our celebration of resurrection at Easter, may God grant us the grace to move in new and life giving ways.