



“Hearing God”

Texts: Genesis 24:34-38, 42-49, 58-67 and
Romans 7:15-25a

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July 9, 2023

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

To understand this Genesis passage at face value, we would interpret it as being about finding and celebrating one’s mate for life, in this instance how Abraham’s servant goes to find a wife for Isaac among Abraham’s kin. Since he has no idea who that woman might be, he must discern God’s will. And that is what I would like us to think about this morning. How to know God’s will.

I think there are several things we need to look at when trying to discern God’s will. The first is to start with Prayer. That’s what the servant did in this story. He began his search for Isaac’s wife with prayer. Prayer is where we begin our communication with God; to be open to God speaking to us. We can’t hear God if we don’t start by first centering ourselves and opening ourselves up to God. Sometimes the clarity will be there; the yes this is right or no this is the wrong direction to take. I know that there have been times when I’ve wanted to take a certain position because I was ready to move on with my life. I’m not the best with waiting, but centering in prayer I felt that the position was not for me and that I was being called to wait in the uncertainty longer until the position God was calling me to opened.

The next thing the servant did is he asked God to show him a sign, but he dictated what the sign would be. When he asked for water, the woman would also offer to water his camels. Now that was a big job. He had ten camels that needed watering and that would take a significant amount of time. And, of course, we know that Rebekah did exactly that.

Asking for signs can be an iffy way to discern God’s will because so often we have to guard against our own will getting in the way. We can see signs anywhere we look if we want to.

Why did God answer the servant's request for this specific sign to be answered? There are some thoughts on that. First, perhaps God answered because the request wouldn't benefit the servant. It was to choose the right wife for Isaac. Taking one's own human, selfish nature out of the picture perhaps helped in this situation. Second, the servant asked a specific request that was within the natural realm, but still a huge ask. The ordinary woman would not have offered up so much time to water the stranger's camels. Or, perhaps, because both the servant and God knew that it had to be right because this woman was going to be part of the lineage of Christ and the future of God's children. I don't know.

I do know a story of someone asking for a sign and it being answered in a totally unique way. First, I want to remind you of the story found in Judges when Gideon was asked by God to save Israel. Like most of the people God asks to do great things, Gideon doubted his ability and so asked God to give a sign. He put out a fleece, a sheep's wool fleece, and asked God to make the fleece be wet in the morning and everything else around it dry. In the morning, the fleece was soaking wet and the land was dry. Still not wanting to do what God asked, Gideon asked again, but asked that this time the fleece be dry and the ground around it be soaking wet. And, in the morning, it was just that.

My former brother in law, Scott, had been a single parent for a while. His daughter is severely handicapped, and while he had dated several women after his divorce, none wanted to take on a child like his. Lonely and discouraged, he asked God for a sign. He asked for his own symbolic fleece to be answered. The answer came shortly after, but in an unexpected way. He met a woman with the unique name of Fleeca, and in time she became his wife.

Surely there are so many people, even today, who ask for signs to be shown. But as I mentioned before the problem with asking for signs is that our own human selfish nature can come into play. We can read into something as much or as little as we like. That is what Paul is talking about in the Romans passage. Our selfishness, our own desires, our shortcomings, all get in the way of serving God. It is something we have to guard against when we are trying to discern God's will. But there is also something to be said for circumstantial signs. If God keeps opening doors in just one direction, that is a sign.

My last hospice job became unbearable. The manager was making the place into a toxic work environment. At the same time, I began thinking about sermons, like all the time. Topics would come into my head and I would think that would make a good sermon and then I would think about what I would say. This was totally out of character for me as I had never wanted to be a preacher in any way, shape or form. Finally, I told God okay, I would look for a church position. I have spent the last several years back in the pulpit and have not regretted it in any way.

So starting with prayer - yes. Looking at the circumstantial signs before you. Yet another piece to discerning God's will is a compelling Spirit. What is your Spirit saying to you? We need to guard against our own selfish desires, but God does speak to us through our Spirits. I was introduced to the idea of international mission when I was in Middle School. It was then the church hired a Christian Education Director who felt called to overseas ministry. She became like an older sister to me. As a youth, I thought she was crazy to want to leave the States. But by the time I got to college, I was starting to feel the call. I applied for a Volunteer in Mission position during my Senior year and was accepted to go to Egypt. I would be leaving at the end of August after graduation. That summer I packed and cried. I was terrified! I'd been to Kenya the summer before with a group from my Presbytery, but this was going to live in a country I'd never been to before, only the second time to leave the USA, and with a couple of people that I had barely met. Every time nerves got to me and I would cry, my mother would tell me I didn't have to go. But my Spirit told me that this is what God wanted for me. It was irresistible! I had to go. And while I found Egypt an incredibly difficult country to live in, I have never regretted for a moment that I went.

Another way that I believe God guides us and helps us to discern God's will is through other people. I am a strong believer that God uses friends, family, our trusted mentors and guides to confirm to us what God is saying. They can help us to see the red flags that we might be missing or don't want to see. Because often, especially with big decisions, we run the risk of having our own desires interfere with what God wants for us. We can justify almost anything and it is so easy to say God told me to do something when it is our own selfish desires that is guiding us. People who know us can help with that, sometimes that might be someone really close to us like a parent or a sibling or a best friend. Other times, it might be someone who can be a little more objective - a pastor or someone at church whose judgment we trust.

I may have used this example before, but it really hit home when I heard it from my pastor when I was in college. It was a sermon on the three magi searching for Jesus. They knew which direction to head in because they saw the star. The star was a sign to them that the Christ had been born, but when they got to Jerusalem they lost sight of the star. What to do next when the sign was no longer clear? They stopped in Jerusalem, sought out religious leaders, and asked for directions. Sometimes we lose sight of Christ's guiding star. While that can be disconcerting, we shouldn't panic. It's okay to stop and ask for help from those who can guide us.

The next thing is that we should always look to Scripture to confirm what we feel God calling us to do. Is what we think God calling us to do within the confines of Scripture, that is to say, will it be something that brings glory to God? Will it help other people? Is there anything

about what you feel God is calling you to do or go or be that goes against what God is calling us to in Scripture?

Finally, and this may be the hardest of all, sometimes the sign from God, the Word from God, the guidance from others, is simply be still and know that I am God. Sometimes God wants us to just sit at Christ's feet and learn from him, the way Mary did. Sometimes there are just things we need to learn first before we can move on. We may be anxious to move on, looking for signs, thinking that our Spirit is saying Go! But other signs, compelling circumstances, closed doors, are blocking us. Why? When we are ready, why not push forward? Sometimes the next thing that we are supposed to do or take on is something we not quite ready to do. God has more to teach us. And that is perhaps the biggest lesson in discernment - discerning what God is wanting to teach us. Being open to learning. Sometimes it is in the learning things that will then open the doors to move forward; after we have learned things to be more useful to God in future endeavors. Sometimes it is to help remove ourselves from being obstacles in what God wants us to do.

Before I came here I spent a year working as a bridge pastor at two different churches - five months at one and six months at another. While it was hard financially, there was also a peace as well. It was a wonderful year of having time to sit at Jesus' feet and to learn and to grow and to prepare for coming here. During that time I applied to many churches and had many interviews. There was really only one church I wanted to work out because it would bring me back closer to my friends in Michigan. And that wasn't the right reason for going. After flying out and seeing the place and meeting the people in person, I wasn't offered the position. I knew in my heart they made the right decision. It wasn't time. It wasn't the right church for me. Sometimes discerning God's answer as wait, be still, can be hard if we let it. But if we accept God's answer as wait, learn, grow, be present in me, then that is also a fantastic blessing to be embraced and when the time is right for whatever the next step is supposed to be, then it will be revealed to you.

I believe God uses prayer, circumstantial signs, wise counsel, scripture, and pauses to help teach us and guide us down our individual paths in life that bring the life that God wants for each of us, but also brings life to those we encounter and minister to along the way. Opening ourselves up to hear God through prayer and others, opening our eyes to see the circumstantial signs that God shows us, the open or closed doors, all of these help us to discern God's will in our lives and helps us to not run blindly into the future.

God speaks to us every day in many different ways. We have only to open ourselves up to hear and listen and see - and most of all trust. God is faithful. Listen for God's Word and block out the loud clanging noises of your sinful nature. When we are open to God, then we will know. Amen.