

“In Case of Emergency...”

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Lawrence Park Community Church

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This reading is slightly different from the usual lectionary. This Sunday is traditionally the Ascension of Jesus, where we share Jesus telling his apostles and disciples that he is ascending into heaven, and will return to usher in a new Kingdom. They are to carry on with the work of this newly established church, and when the time is right, he will come back. Jesus has told them what they need to do in the meanwhile, baptising people, sharing the gospel, etc. He ascends to heaven, body and all, disappearing into the clouds with angels. Presumably a harp plays during this scene.

What we rarely see is this scene, the one we just heard, where the disciples look at each other and say “what now?”. Up until this point, everything they had done either was led directly by Jesus, or was the waiting period between his death and resurrection. They were truly and properly on their own now. And that is a terrifying thought. This story is about discernment, when we blend practical wisdom and the presence of God into making a major decision.

It makes sense that they looked around and decided that they needed to deal with the “Judas problem”. Judas, in a different reading, died of the sorrow and heartbreak from realizing what he had done when he had betrayed Jesus. But he was also one of the 12 apostles, and his death leaves a gap in the leadership.

Apostles are not just disciples, they are named by Jesus specifically to carry out the mission of the church. We can see that there were dozens others there, ones who also followed Jesus and would share the gospel. But the apostles were special. They were the knights of the round table, the founding fathers, the leaders. The apostles themselves would baptize and call people to be bishops and priests of the early church. Those clergy would then ordain others, and so on and so forth. In the Catholic, Lutheran, and Anglican churches among others, the idea is that every priest that is ordained today can trace their ordination history back to the apostles. So, they are needed for this work. Alright, we have a goal. What’s next? Who gets to decide? And more importantly, what if they get it wrong, will we be dealing with another Judas?

Peter, who Jesus established as the Rock of the Church (aka the first among the apostles), decided to take action. He would rely upon Scripture. If there is one thing that Jewish tradition does very well, it is that there is a scripture for darn near any scenario. In this case, from Psalm 69, he decides they will elect a new leader from one of the disciples who had also been there from the beginning. We have two candidates, Justus, and Matthias.

It is here, at this point, that we see the crux of the church. How do we discern what to do? How can we trust what our reality is telling us, our gut feelings, or the trusted wisdom of someone? What if they got it wrong and they got another Judas, one who would try to sell them out all over again? To cast lots and leave it to fate. Casting lots is familiar, they would do something like pick straws and the longer straw is the new apostle, or pick stones from a bag. It is actually a relatively ancient tradition and Jewish stories across the centuries would use casting lots as a way to determine a course of action, leaving room for chance, the universe, God, to intervene.

Casting lots is seen in the bible. Jonah, the Jewish prophet who decides to not listen to God and flee, is on a ship when a large storm rolls in. The sailors know it is supernatural and cast lots to decide who they need to throw overboard. Lo and behold, it is Jonah who angered God and well, thank God that large fish swallowed him whole.

In the New Testament, the garments Jesus wore at his crucifixion were divided among the soldiers into lots, where they gambled to decide who won his property.

Discernment is a weird and difficult thing for us humans to do.

Nor can it depend entirely on the whims of others or random chance.

-discernment is a distinct spiritual practice that we do when we pray, share with others what is on our minds, and listen to others with an open mind and heart. It leaves room for God to shape the reality around us so we may hear the Spirit and be moved to a decision. It is one of the reasons at our meetings, including next week's AGM, we start and end with prayer. We pray for wisdom, compassion, courage, and patience, that God's will may be revealed as we hash out what we want to do next. Inviting God into the centre of that conversation and inviting us to truly listen to what is being said, is the only way to discern with intention.

It is also challenging. Oil pipelines are aligned with the teachings of Jesus, as Albertan Premier Danielle Smith said at the Alberta Christian Leadership Summit. The governors of Florida, Texas, Mississippi and even the federal government have made it clear their discernment process led them to know God wants Christian Nationalism in the US. And there are accounts across the world God has helped someone discern that they should become a megapastor and have millions of dollars and untold fame. This is not discernment. This is twisting scripture to fit

your wants and desires in a way that it becomes unrecognizable. I feel like that is a good measure of your discernment process. If your conclusion is always one that benefits you and never challenges you to be uncomfortable or humble, well it may be time to cast lots again.

In our scripture, this is the last time we hear about casting lots. Next week we will have Pentecost, and the Holy Spirit will imbued all the Apostles and disciples with the ability to share the gospel across the land. It will cement this part of the process, where we no longer need to call on God to be involved in games of chance, but in prayer and meditation, or in the wisdom of each other.