

Holy Rolling

Read: Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

I was in the right place, but it must've been the wrong time. If only I knew then what I know now. I turned left when I should've turned right. Hind sight is 20/20. If it wasn't for bad luck, I wouldn't have no luck at all. What a coincidence! It was fate, destiny. It was my only choice. I don't know what to do. If only I knew what the Lord expects, I'd do it. Here's the question: how do we know what God's will is? And when things go wrong, how do we interpret them in light of our faith?

The ten day period between Jesus' ascension when he was taken up from the disciples' sight for the last time after experiencing him visibly coming and going among them during forty post-Easter days, from that day until the day of Pentecost must have been a very strange ten days. When the Holy Spirit descended upon them as a fiery revelation of the presence of God, remaining upon them just as the Holy Spirit was said to have descended and remained upon Jesus at his baptism in the Jordan River, everything changed spiritually forever. In the meantime, Jesus' final instructions to the wide-eyed, open hearted disciples were for them to go to Jerusalem and wait; wait for the Holy Spirit.

I'm guessing their problem wasn't that much different than ours. We hear about the Holy Spirit. We are told to wait upon the Lord. But we are sorely tempted to take the religious bull by the horns and get busy. We are told, "Don't just do something, stand there. Be still and know that I Am God." But inquiring minds want to know, "What are we waiting for?" It's especially difficult for religious people to be still. We mistake spiritual enthusiasm for inspiration. We all too often create all kinds of religious forms that look great but one thing is missing: the power of the Holy Spirit. God is under no obligation to bless what we cook up in His name if what we cook up was never directed by God. Wait.

To their credit, the eleven disciples who were left after Judas' defection and demise did a pretty good job of following orders. They were told to go back to Jerusalem. They did. They stayed together. They devoted themselves to worship

and to prayer. They did their level best to wait. Notwithstanding, there was this one little story which unfolded among them that occurred in response to the gnawing question that surely arose among them: “Is there anything we should be doing while we wait?”

The number 11 caught their eye. What’s wrong with eleven? In a culture where numbers often had meaning maybe they felt the need to remedy the situation. Eleven stands in between two numbers used to designate perfection or completeness. Ten is a perfect number: thus, the Ten Commandments. Twelve is a perfect number: thus the twelve patriarchs and twelve tribes of Israel. Thus, twelve gates to the Holy City, hallelujah amen. Here on the threshold of the birth of the new people of God, the Church of the Risen Christ, shouldn’t there be twelve apostles? Just as they sat between Jesus’ ascension and the promised outpouring of the Holy Spirit, so the number eleven sits between a perfect ten and a perfect twelve.

Much of the spiritual life is lived in the “in-between” times. Israel lived between creation and redemption, between promise and fulfillment. All of us spend time there as well. We are born, and then we must be born again. We believe Jesus came as a human baby, born in lowly estate in Bethlehem and we look forward to the promise of His coming in glory to renew the whole world. In between the greatest story ever told comes to light.

These waiting disciples reasoned that Jesus obviously wanted twelve disciples in the inner circle of his followers, even though Judas was a bust. Someone needed to take his place. So the first Presbyterian nominating committee was born. As yet there were no three year terms for elders and no rule that the candidate, if elected, could only serve two consecutive terms before he had to go off the disciple board for at least a year. And yes, it was a “he” at that time, no reason given. Lots of women were already in on the ministry action. Nevertheless, the person was to be a man. It was after all a patriarchal society.

Whoever was put forward had to have been with them from the time Jesus was baptized by John and who continued with them all the way through to the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. After all, a witness is someone who has seen

what has occurred. The Apostles saw themselves as uniquely qualified as eye witnesses to spread the news about Jesus. It was their main job now, to bear witness to the resurrection and to recount as holy history all that led up to the crucifixion and beyond.

Two men were brought forward as candidates to replace Judas, Barsabbas also called Justus and Matthias. These two had shown themselves to be of good character. They had hung in as followers through thick and thin. So far, so good: now how to choose? How could they know the Lord's will in this matter? We are told that they cast lots to make the choice. Whoever drew the short straw would be God's choice for the twelfth apostle. Doesn't that seem a little crude? Doesn't that verge on superstition? Perhaps prior to Pentecost they didn't know how to hear answers to prayer. Notice there is no indication the God directed any of this, but no rebuke either. There is simply silence from heaven.

Let's not rush to judgment. Did you ever play what I call Bible bingo? Have you ever needed a word from the Lord but you seemed hard of hearing? So you randomly opened your Bible and stabbed the page with your finger, hoping by a sort of providential luck to receive what you needed. Outrageous right? Except, sometimes it worked. Your finger landed upon a verse that spoke directly to your need and your situation.

What shall we make of experiences like this? Is this the best way to communicate with the God who loves you? Maybe not, but shall we simply dismiss the practice out of hand? I guess a strong clue to the answer to such a question is the qualifying fact that we serve a God who loves us. God can and does use anything and everything to bless our lives.

The first disciples, Jews one and all, employed an old technique that was embedded in their own holy history going all the way back to the time of Moses when the Levitical priesthood was ordained. Part of the Priest's garment was called an ephod, which was sort of like a bib worn in front and covering the heart. The ephod has several pockets and was studded with precious stones. The details are unclear, but somehow, attached or inserted within the ephod were the Urim and Thummim. It is not known what these two instruments were made of, possibly

carved stones or pieces of wood, maybe even bone. The simplest way to connect ourselves and understand this without getting too deep in the weeds is to think about our custom of flipping a coin: heads you win, tails, you lose. Or we single someone out by drawing straws; the one who pulls the shortest straw from a group is identified for a particular purpose.

Urim and Thummim were consulted for guidance by powerful and influential people in the presence of the priest who wore the ephod. They weren't used as a parlor game for everyday people. They weren't a child's toy like the Magic Eight Ball bought at Toys-R-Us. Urim and Thummim were consulted about weighty things, like who was guilty of sin and who was innocent, who would be anointed as a leader, and whether or not to go into battle. In short the affairs of generals and kings and religious leaders were the domain of Urim and Thummim. The theory and belief behind the practice of consulting Urim and Thummim was that God's will could be revealed through something that ordinarily would be viewed as random.

There is great debate even today as to when the Urim and Thummim disappeared from Israel's spiritual life. Some argue that it disappeared when the first Temple was destroyed along with all the priestly vestments and the people went into exile. Some argue that it was reinstated after the Temple was rebuilt, while others say not. Still others say that it no longer worked because the priests no longer had the requisite connection to the Holy Spirit who was believed to be behind the inspiration coming through the oracle. Theologically, the use of the oracle was a conviction that God is God of the purposeful, the planned, as well as the random. God's will can be accomplished through any and all means.

So the first Christian disciples cast lots and Matthias was selected to fill the position of twelfth apostle in place of Judas. If all this history doesn't fascinate you, you are probably muttering to yourself, "Why in the world is he telling us all this? What does this have to do with me?"

I think there is much of importance to us all enshrined in this little episode between the Ascension and Pentecost. What qualified Matthias to be considered for the position? The first thing mentioned is that he was with the disciples from

the beginning, from the day of Jesus' baptism. Matthias witnessed Jesus going down into the water. He heard John say, "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world." He saw the Holy Spirit descend like a dove and alight upon Jesus. He must have been profoundly impacted, because he walked away from whatever his life had been up until that day and launched out into a brand new life. From that day on he walked with Jesus wherever he went, and after Jesus died, Matthias stayed connected to the Apostles.

If you've ever seen weasels on the witness stand, you've probably heard answers to questions that the witness was afraid to answer like, "I refuse to answer on the grounds that it may incriminate me," or, "I can neither confirm or deny that I ...whatever." A witness to Jesus Christ does not take the option to dodge the questions of an often hostile world. What we have seen runs too deep.

One of the ways we get good at knowing and doing the will of God is to do it over a long period. Matthias was with them from the beginning, through good times and bad, through joyous days and difficult days. He hung in there and his character became sufficiently Christo-form that he was suited to become one of the Apostles whose witness and teaching became the foundation of The Church.

Your testimony is important to your work as a witness. What have you been through with Jesus Christ? Your testimony is unique to you and God will direct you when to share it and with whom. What have you seen? What have you experienced? What do you know and what to you do with what you know?

And we are told some of what God knows about us all. And we are told that God knew Matthias by heart and that God had chosen him, before the lots were ever cast. His call was not the luck of the draw; it was the Will of God revealed through something seemingly random yet full of divine purpose.

As you and I walk with God through time, it should begin to dawn upon us that precious little in our lives is random. When we finally begin to come of age, we begin to see that nearly everything in life presents an opportunity to witness to the power and the goodness and the love of God. We don't come there quickly or easily. Along the way we must come under an ever-increasing conviction that

the resurrection of Jesus is the central fact of history and of our own lives. Jesus: crucified, dead, buried, risen, alive forevermore, reigning and returning. He is coming to make all things new. We learn to stake our lives on it. We learn to face our death in light of it. We come to be equipped to live a life that bears witness to all of it.

Not one of us is here by accident. Not one of us is a mistake. We are known and loved by God and we are called by God to live a life of impact, significance, and purpose. And that is not the luck of the draw. You are chosen in Christ and predestined to be conformed to his image. If you live and move in Him by the Spirit, you will know God's will and God will direct your path.