

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Sunday, May 1, 2016
Rev. Howard K. Bell
Discerning God's Will

I remember my very first airplane flight. I was twenty-four years old in the summer of 1971. It was a dreary, rainy, cloud-covered day when it was time for takeoff. I arranged for a window seat so that I could have a view of whatever might appear outside my window. Initially, visibility was very poor due to the cloud cover and rain. I remember that there was some shaking of the plane - that I now know is called turbulence. However, I was truly amazed and in awe, when - within just a few minutes - we were flying smoothly in brilliant sunshine. It was as though I had not even imagined that the sun still shone above the clouds! When we landed, the skies were clear and I gawked out my window in amazement of all that could be seen from high above the land.

What are your memories of mountaintop views? Have you climbed mountains? I remember driving to the top of Pike's Peak in Colorado. It was brilliant sunshine when we left the city of Colorado Springs and snowing when we reached the top of Pike's Peak. You can tell that I am not much for mountain climbing since my stories are about flying in an airplane and driving to the top of a mountain. I do remember feeling God's presence during these awe-inspiring experiences. (I did get out of my car at the on Pike's Peak.) I am certain that climbing high on a great mountain gives one an even greater experience of God's presence as you breathe the thin air; as you gradually take in the increasingly distant view; and as you experience the stillness. How blessed we are by God's great creation - by the majesty and beauty of everything that God has created.

Our text this morning from the Book of Revelations is a description of a mountaintop experience. Biblical Commentator, Paul "Skip" Johnson, provides us with insights about mountaintop experiences: *"The high points of mountains are looked upon as traditional "thin places," offering a closer mingling of the Divine and the mortal...We ascend to gain perspective and a different angle of vision. What can only be discerned piecemeal or partially from ground level can be better grasped from on high, where it might be seen whole and complete.*¹

On the mountaintop, the author of Revelations sees the "new Jerusalem". The early Christian church often used this term - "the new Jerusalem" - as a metaphor for the church. In our text the author describes "the new Jerusalem" as having no need for light as the glory of God is its light. Its gates will never be shut. It will never be night there. Nothing unclean will enter there nor anyone who does loathsome things or tells lies. What a beautiful vision for the church today? The glory of God can be our light. Our gates will never be shut as we move out into the world in service

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

to those in need and as we welcome through our doors all who seek to know God's love and to experience the peace that Christ offers.

In the second part of the text, we recognize that "the new Jerusalem" is also a description of a return to the Garden of Eden. The Tree of Life harkens back to the Tree of the Knowledge of Right and Wrong. In the vision from Revelations, the tree is down by the river. It actually straddles the river and it produces its fruit each month; and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. This text invites us to "gather at the river". "Gather with the saints at the river that flows by the throne of god."² Thus the church today is also a gathering at the river. At the river, we are fed by the fruits of God and our leaves may be for the healing of the world. Biblical Commentator, Joseph H. Britton, says: "*...the church is the embodiment, already coming into being, of a restored creation into which all things and all people will be incorporated.*"³

Our second New Testament text, from the Book of Acts, also begins with a vision of the Apostle Paul. This vision was not on a mountaintop, but still Paul felt that he was able to discern God's will through a dream. Our text reads: "*During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.'*" (Acts 16: 9) One of the remarkable aspects of this story from the book of Acts is contained in verse 10 that reads: "*When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.*" There was no hesitation on Paul's part nor was there hesitation on the part of those traveling with him. There was no strategic plan to be developed. There were no deliberations. They simply felt led by the spirit.

And where were they led? They were led to Macedonia. This represents the first time that Paul had traveled to the continent of Europe. They set sail and landed in Philippi on what today would be the east coast of the northern section of Greece. Once they were in Philippi, "*...on the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there.*" (Acts 16: 13) Once again, we find ourselves down by the river.

Not only are we surprised that Paul and the disciples were called to speak to and pray with a group of women, but next we hear about the woman named Lydia. She was already a "worshiper of God" which means she was a gentile that was studying the Jewish faith. She was a seller of purple cloth. Only the very wealthy were allowed to wear purple cloth in Philippi. So we can assume that Lydia was either a person of wealth or at least was well known to the wealthy. Then we read that Lydia's heart was opened and she choose to be baptized, not only herself, but also her household. This also tells us that she was a remarkable woman in that she could make decisions for the entire household. No man of the household is even mentioned. Lydia then invited Paul and the apostles to come

² "*Shall We Gather at the River*", Robert Lowry, 1864; New Century Hymnal, pg 597

³ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word - Year C, Volume 2: Lent through Eastertide.

stay in her house. Thus, Lydia, not only became the first European gentile convert to Christianity, she also likely played a major role in establishing the beloved Christian community in Phillippi.

Commentator Kathryn M. Matthews says, *“Our reading from these earliest days of the church prompts several questions for our reflection. We might spend some time thinking about the spiritual practice of discernment, and the question of how we know that God is leading us in new and unexpected ways...?”*⁴

The spiritual practice of discernment requires that we seek to discern God’s will. What is God calling Edina Morningside Church to be in the coming years? We are grateful for our church’s Pastoral Search Committee as they seek to discern whom God may be calling to be our new Settled Pastor. Our confirmands are seeking to discern if it is God’s will for their lives that they might be confirmed into a Christian way of life and if it is God’s will for their lives that they might become members of this church. Our trustees are discerning God’s will for the future of this facility from which we do our ministries. This is a critical time for all of us to be in prayer and spiritual discernment for our faith community. Each of you may also be engaged in discerning God’s will for your individual lives at this time. May we all be led in the spirit to the top of the mountain. May we see the sun shine above the dark clouds. May God bless us in all our faith journeys. May it be so. Amen.

⁴ http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_may_1_2016