

“Listening for God in a Now-and-Not-Yet World”

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How many of you have heard the saying: “Shoot first. Ask questions later.”

It’s sort of a saying that sums up what it means to jump in feet first – to go all in.

Maybe an opposite sort of saying would be to “look before you leap.”

But how many of us have had a “shoot first, ask questions later” sort of moment in your lives? I know I have! And part of the difficulty sometimes is that you don’t always know what sorts of questions to ask until you’ve gotten enough life experience to know to have a question!

What’s more, sometimes what we’re doing seems like the right thing to do and then doesn’t quite feel that way down the line.

I’m reminded of when we were living in Quincy, there came a day when the city passed a law that there would be no more plastic bags offered in stores. Customers throughout the city of Quincy were expected to bring in their own reusable bags when they came into any shopping center. BUT! At the grocery store, if you didn’t have a reusable bag, you could get paper bags instead. This sounded good because paper breaks down better than plastic. But then, the environmental groups I was a part of said, “This isn’t good either because it takes 4 times more energy to make a paper bag than it takes to make a plastic one.” I was very in to learning how to make good choices as a consumer, and what I was learning over and over again was that it’s complicated. I was jumping in with both feet and then wondering if I really understood anything at all. And I think this sort of happens over and over again in life in all kinds of ways: Am I doing this right? Will this lead where I’m hoping it will lead? And just generally speaking, when we start to think that maybe we aren’t quite on the “the right path,” sometimes this can be where disillusionment comes in, which can sometimes look like bitterness. But maybe a quieter way that disillusionment can look is something we might call “dulled senses.” There’s a song called “Some Nights” by the group Fun. It came out in 2012, so some of you may know it, but just in case you don’t, there’s a line in the song that sums up disillusionment. This isn’t an exact quote, but he effectively sings: “Stars become just stars. Songs become like every other song.” This is life sometimes. We work so hard. We do our best. We’re trying. And then there are these disappointments. There’s confusion. “I thought we might be able to do this or that, but it’s not working.” We start with energy, and then we start to say, “Boy, this road trip is getting awfully long.” And so in the song, the singer sings the words, “Who am I? What do I stand for?” And behind the song, there’s this primal beat – this heartbeat – this hope for life.

In the spiritual world, we have a term for this. We call it: - The “now and the not yet.” And in the context of our lives as followers of Jesus, the idea is that Jesus died on the cross...which partially bound the enemy. Jesus rose again, and then, just as Jesus promised, the Holy Spirit was sent to us to be our everything – our Counselor, our Teacher, our Constant Guide in this world. And so, as we read Scriptures like Romans 8, we may begin to feel emboldened. We may say to ourselves: Jesus defeated sin and death! ...so let’s shoot first and ask questions later!

Only it’s complicated. As we heard in our first Scripture reading, Isaac and Rebekah finally get married. But then they seem to be having trouble starting a family. So they pray. And then – oh joy! – she’s pregnant. But the pregnancy is difficult and so she prays again. Then these two beautiful children are born. But they are not at all like two peas in a pod. One likes to be outdoors hunting, the other is indoors making soup. How wonderful it would have been for them to appreciate the strengths of each, but instead they are seen as differences. The younger one tricks the older one. On and on it goes.

We pray and there are answers to prayer – God is here.

And then something is not quite right – The not yet.

Turns out, a woman named “Jennifer Marshall” wrote a book actually called, “Now and Not Yet,” and in that book, Marshall proposes some questions to help us navigate these waters – things like:

☐ How am I supposed to be content today while hoping for something more?

☐ What’s my purpose right now?

☐ Do I trust God in this unexpected in-between?

For these things, perhaps we receive help from our 2nd Scripture reading: - What does it look like to “live according to the Spirit and set our minds on the things of the Spirit?”

Paul tells us that, “to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.” And, all praise to God, Paul tells us, “the Spirit of God dwells in us and is life because of Jesus’ death and resurrection.” Paul tells us, “God will give life to you through the Spirit that dwells in you.”

In other words, instead of having to trick one another – trading soup for birthrights, our adoption – our inheritance – is a done deal...albeit, in a “now and not yet” sort of way...because the work of the devil is only partially bound, is what we are told in other parts of Scripture. This is why the final verse of so many hymns reference Jesus’ second coming. We are waiting for the day when there will be no more tears, no more pain and suffering. What we have now is what will be referred to later on in Romans chapter 8, verse 23 as the “firstfruits.” We have a taste of what is yet to come. We see it now but not in full. Living according to the Spirit is a ☐ Moment-by-moment experience.

So recognizing that reality, how do we deal with it? What do we do with the fact that in one moment we feel like we’ve got the hang of this living thing – only to find ourselves feeling disillusioned in yet another moment? How do we handle being people that live in the middle of the now and the not yet? To explore that, I want to offer us something today that I learned from a pastor I worked under in Cambridge, Massachusetts. And I’d tell you where he learned it from, but I can’t remember.

But we often referred to this as the “5 green lights,” for which the idea is: Rather than shooting first and asking questions later, we can instead pause and listen for God’s leading in our lives using these 5 ways that God aids in our discernment. And so the first green light is ☐ God’s word, otherwise known as – the Bible.

With this one, the question we’re asking is: Does it line up with what you know the Bible to be saying? If you think the Holy Spirit is telling you to do something, and, for example, it doesn’t uphold loving your neighbor as yourself, then that’s probably not the Holy Spirit. Does what I’m doing profit me at the expense of another? Is what I’m doing offer me comfort at the expense of someone else? If so, this is not love.

And just to say, while that seems like an easy one, you can quickly become the most unliked person in a room when you start sharing about why we might choose to suffer through washing the dishes over and above using paper plates. I have been there. It sounds easy, but I felt the ire. That’s all I’m saying. In addition to paying attention to what we hear in the Bible, our 2nd green light is

listening for ☐ God’s voice – things we feel God is speaking to us through Inner Knowing.

And this could look like many things. Maybe you’ve been praying for something and you have a dream that seems significant to you. Maybe a song comes on the radio or someone says something to you that hits just right in your Spirit. Not too long ago now, I was that for someone else. They were sharing about some difficult things in their life, things that had been causing them to doubt their gifts and callings. And almost off the cuff I said, “Well you know. The gifts of the Spirit are irrevocable.” I was actually quoting Romans 11:29 in that moment, but the person I was speaking to wasn’t familiar with the verse and so they lit up like a Christmas tree and started to say, “Oh my gosh! That’s amazing! That almost feels prophetic!” And so we looked up the Scripture reference together, and when I saw that person again a few weeks later, they were still talking about that moment. It was a small moment, but it had been God speaking directly to the heart, and so it resonated in this way that was so much more than what I could have imagined when I brought the words forward. So we have God’s word, we have God’s voice.

The 3rd green light: ☑ Godly common sense (God's reasons)

And just to make it really clear, Godly common sense is not the same as human common sense because God's reason often transcends human understanding. You might feel prompted to start up a conversation with someone you see sitting alone. That might seem crazy to you. You might say to yourself, "What if they don't want to be interrupted?" But for some reason, you feel it. You feel the urge to allow the love of God to go out from you.

Or maybe you feel called to step out in faith – buy the coffee for whoever comes through the drive through next. Or more! When our oldest was 4, we knew we needed to get her into preschool, but we couldn't afford it. We enrolled her, not yet knowing where the money was coming from. The next week, Dominic was offered a job with a pay increase, and our needs were met. So we have God's word, God's voice, God's reasons.

The 4th green light: ☑ God's people.

In other words, we develop friendships with other people who are listening for God's word, voice, and reasons, and we share in life together. Now – maybe they're adding their prayers to ours. Maybe they have connections or knowledge that can aid where we're headed next. They may even have cautions for us – things that we'll want to bring to God ourselves for discernment. And then finally, in addition to God's word, God's voice, God's reasons, and God's people, we have: ☑ God's signs. In other words: The right doors open. The timing is right. Sometimes we think that something sounds really good, but nothing is working out. It feels like pulling teeth. Everything is like fighting to break down the door. When this happens, sometimes this can help us say, "Maybe now isn't the right time." And we can use this as a chance to return to prayer, to ask "God, what am I missing here?"

In my own life, sometimes what I've found is that I had the right idea but not the right path. And so I needed to ask God to help me expand my vision so that I could see what doors were currently available. In the end, the whole of it is really about going back to God – the very thing that Isaac and Rebekah were doing in Genesis 25. For us today, as Paul reminds us in Romans 8, this is what it means to "live according to the Spirit and to set our minds on the things of the Spirit?"...which is such a good thing. Paul tells us that to set the mind on the Spirit is to live into life and peace. He tells us that God will give us this life through the Spirit that dwells within. And, if we can learn from Isaac and Rebekah in Genesis 25, what we will find is that we will do this over and over again in our lives. In the midst of the now and the not yet, our aim is to continually return to trusting God as we navigate and discern in the context of the unexpected-in-between.

And when we do that, we experience the wonder of Romans 8, verse 1 where Paul says: There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. We experience the fruits of the spirit that Paul points to in Galatians 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

May it be, my friends. For each of us, may it be.