

**DISCERNING GOD'S MOVEMENT IN YOUR LIFE**  
**ISAIAH 50:4-9a; MATTHEW 21:1-11**  
**MARCH 20, 2005 – PALM/PASSION SUNDAY, LENT SIX**  
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We are heading down the home stretch of a Lenten sermon series. We've talked to date about the cost of discipleship, about the source of our purpose and security in life, and about spiritual mentoring.

We are considering benchmarks of discipleship and the disciple-making church.

Today I want to consider discerning God's presence and movement in our lives.

We have touched on this subject in each of our discussions thus far but I'd like to focus more directly today on how we can identify God's leading.

In order to follow God's movement in our life, two prerequisites apply. First, is a willingness to be led. Not an easy thing. Being led in our society is not popular. Parker Palmer says we talk more about "making" a life for ourselves in America than we do about "receiving" life as a gift or "receiving" a calling for our life's work and mission.

Saying we "make" a life for ourselves perpetuates the illusion that we are in control of our lives. I'm not saying we are not responsible for our lives. We are. I'm just saying we are not in control of our lives. You can see this any given week in the pastoral care concerns of any congregation in America.

We began Lent, Jesus in the wilderness, wrestling with the question of control. We end Lent, Jesus being led by God's movement in his life, entering Jerusalem. God leads those who are willing to be led.

Second prerequisite – don't assume you've got God figured out and know all the ways and places God chooses to communicate where and how to lead you.

St. Paul, before his conversion was riding his horse on the road to Damascus to persecute more Christians. A bright light and the voice of God knocked him off his horse, told him to stop the persecuting and join the Jesus movement.

As far as we know, St. Paul didn't keep riding down that same road every time he wanted to get direction from God. God spoke to him exactly once in that manner. I think of God's leading in my own life: a youth retreat in high school; a Trappist monastery outside Batavia years ago; an annual convocation at Yale Divinity School. We never know how or when we will see God's movement in our lives. We just have to be open.

If those are the pre-requisites what are the action steps for discerning God's movement? Several things help. First, test your spiritual broadcasting network daily.

You know when the radio stops programming for a few minutes to test its communication system. We need to do the same with our prayer and meditation life – which is our communication network with God.

Physicists say we are constantly surrounded by radio frequencies for everything from CNN to Al Qaeda messaging codes. It's up to us which ones to tune into. God, says the Bible, is all around us all the time. It's up to us to tune into God with the right frequency of prayer. Pun intended.

The second action step for discerning God's movement in your life is to live in the moment. You've heard this before. It doesn't mean forget about the future. It does mean slow down, listen, use your senses to engage the world around us here and now.

There is a new drug being advertised on television. Maybe you've seen it. The first half of the commercial shows a woman being bombarded by fragments of situations and demanding voices. The second half is calm and peaceful, she's standing next to a large fish tank. The drug is for adult attention deficit disorder.

I'm sure there is such a diagnosis. Probably 99% of the adults in today's frenetic world who see that commercial think they suffer from it. Do we need another drug? How about dropping our crazy agendas and focusing on what is happening here and now. To say nothing of what our children conclude watching us run around and run them around all the time.

Test your spiritual communication network daily; live in the moment. The third action step for discerning God's movement is to live in God's time zone. The Bible says there is a time for every purpose under heaven. Jesus' entry to Jerusalem was perfectly timed.

God's time not our time. This was the problem with the old Soviet five-year plan. You can produce five-year plans all day long but if they are not connected to the larger rhythms of life it doesn't matter.

I'll never forget the summer between ninth and tenth grade with my very proper, punctual British uncle at his home in Vermont. It took one event to learn to set my watch by his time zone – that was when I appeared thirty minutes late for dinner because I was on the golf course. He was a loving man, but he made it clear the house didn't revolve around my timetable. God's timetable or yours? The Bible highly recommends God's.

Now I know I've already mentioned three actions steps for discerning God's movement in our lives but there is one more very important action step I would like to take a little more time to discuss: finding a small group.

The point is this – God speaks to people through people. The more intentional we are about creating opportunities for God to speak to us through others the more chance we will discern God's movement in our lives.

We look again to St. Paul for an example. Once he tuned into God's movement in his life, Paul did remarkable things – he built the spiritual equivalent of a worldwide franchise system. But it surely would not have happened without his small group.

For Paul, the church in Antioch was his spiritual home base. He ministered to this community for years. He launched his missionary road trips from Antioch. Paul had a spiritual peer group in Antioch that cared for him and supported him.

Antioch was not a nice place. There were lots more desirable addresses in the ancient world. Antioch was overcrowded, dangerous and dirty. It had a population density the equivalent of modern-day Calcutta. Sanitation was non-existent. Life expectancy was horribly low. Seventy percent of adults died before the age of 26.

Yet, Antioch is where Paul's mentor Barnabas took him after conversion. It's where Paul found God moving in his life and the life of the church.

It is not unusual for people to blame their hardship or unhappiness on where they live. I remember a woman in a church I once served. She moved every two years – from the Caribbean to South Carolina to New Jersey to Pennsylvania. She bought and sold homes like spring outfits searching for the right one but never finding it.

The problem wasn't the places in her life, it was, in part, the lack of the right people. M. Scott Peck in his book *The Different Drum* says most of us settle for what he calls "pseudo-community" rather than true community.

What Paul experienced and what I am saying is the presence of a few committed people, listening for God in one another's lives makes all the difference. Each of us needs our own Antioch – a spiritual peer group with whom we can try out and try on our vision for life. Some group of trusted people with whom to share our sense of purpose; from whom we can hear the truth about ourselves and to whom we can speak the truth.

Let me be more specific. Pseudo-communities play nice, show deference and are polite to one another. True community does not honor the code of "I won't go there in your life if you won't go there in mine." True community probes real concerns, fears, and feelings.

Such confrontation between people can be scary and create a feeling of chaos.

Few groups are willing to risk real confrontation and the dialogue needed to create true community. But life isn't always neat and tidy. Isaiah's suffering servant we heard, Jesus' passion are examples of pursuing true community.

Yet, some spouses prefer to keep a lid on their most explosive issues.

Families settle for false community rather than deep change. Co-workers avoid confrontation with colleagues with whom they share most of their waking hours. Pastors and boards may dwell on minor issues rather than substantive matters they really care about. For me, the times I have been most clear and felt most alive in the last five years have been among the spiritual peer groups in my life who were willing to get a little messy.

Discerning God's movement in our lives. Unfortunately, we can't just download answers for living like the characters in the *Matrix* movies. Transmitting information in seconds like how to fly a helicopter or operate sophisticated software.

Wouldn't it be nice if you could do that when a family member pushes your buttons, your boss ignores your contribution, or a loved one makes bad choices? But life isn't designed that way. Life is about struggle. If there is any time on the church calendar that underscores Jesus' struggle, it is the week ahead.

We're talking about God's movement in your life. We're saying there are some things St. Paul did to build the church and Jesus did when he entered the holy city to confront death that we can do too: regular prayer, living in the moment, living in God's time zone and having a spiritual peer group.

Discerning God's movement in your life is a little like catching a wave at the beach. You wait, you watch, you scan the horizon for the big rollers.

Then when one is on the way, you ready yourself, begin swimming, let it lift you into its swell, then shoot you like an arrow toward the beach, effortlessly, nearly all the way onto the dry sand.

Recently, a colleague told the story of speaking at a Midwest church conference. One of the people there was a big, barrel-chested, controlling man. The colleague knew the fellow and wasn't fond of him. "How are you," the colleague asked. "Better than ever," the man said. The colleague never heard him say anything like that before. He didn't recognize him. Is this the same man, he wondered.

"God is moving in our congregation," the man went on. "Really?" replied the colleague. "Yep, we have a woman minister. I voted against her. All my family voted against her. But we got outnumbered." Then, in a tone of voice that sounded a lot like true community and true humility the man said, "I was wrong. I was wrong in my estimation of women."

He looked at the colleague without the old veneer and said, "You know, if I was wrong about her, I was wrong about a lot of stuff."

That difficult and controlling man discerned God moving in his life and in the life of his congregation and he broke the pattern.

Standing there in the big convention hall with a smile on his face and twinkle in his eye he looked a little like a kid who just caught a big roller and took it all the way into shore. Amen.