

Text: [Numbers 9:15-23](#)

Date: June 26, 2022

Title: “Choosing Discernment versus Decision Making” > Finding Your Way Again, Week 1

Theme: When there’s no map for where you are, planning and decision making are not enough. We need to become people of discernment.

1

About 20 years ago, my Mom bought me a cool gift for Christmas
I kept complaining about how everyplace I tried to drive in NJ I got lost
And when I was trying to navigate around places like Newark and
Hoboken,
Mapquest directions (do you remember Mapquest?) weren’t cutting it
You missed one turn and you were out of luck

So mom bought me a GPS
And I thought it was the best gift ever

It wasn’t perfect, though, far from it
There were no real-time updates for traffic or road closures
In fact, there were no updates at all
I remember one new section of highway near my Mom’s house opened a
year or two after I got it
And every time I drove that road, I thought it was funny that the GPS
showed me driving through the woods
It just had no idea what to do

There also just seemed to be big holes in the maps
Places where the screen went blank
Downtown Westfield – have you been to Westfield?
Beautiful little town – but to the GPS, it was like IT DIDN’T EXIST
And this happened EVERY time I went to use it

But this isn’t a new problem
People have ALWAYS struggled with what to do when you come to the
edge of the map
Do you sail off the edge of the world? Are there sea monsters?
What happens exactly?

2

I think this series is largely about what happens when we as God's people
come to the edge of the map
And I don't have to tell you that we're in one of those seasons now

I mean, look around

Economically – gas prices are at \$5.00+, and I've not heard of any
solutions that sound like they're going to work quickly

Environmentally – we're seeing record heat & drought, which actually
points us to the idea that perhaps using less gas isn't a terrible thing

Politically – we're a divided nation that seems to have two entirely different
visions for what society ought to look like, and a Supreme Court that
is ready to overturn 50 year old precedents

Religiously – for the first time ever, a minority, less than 50% of
Americans, are part of a church, mosque or synagogue

That's down from 70% just about 20 years ago¹

And its in churches like ours, churches that have been larger by American
standards – where average church size is less than 100 people²

The shift in post-pandemic participation has been particularly pronounced
I regularly talk to other pastors who are seeing exactly what we have seen -
a little more than half of the congregation returning

So no matter what sphere of society I look at, I see us off the edge of the
map

3

For those of us who consider ourselves good problem-solvers, and I think
of myself that way, this is a difficult moment

Because I have always believed that:

if you sit with a problem long enough

If you generate enough possibilities

if you're think ahead, if you're diligent to do your homework and approach
the journey step by step,

the map you create will lead you to the place you want to go

The problem, when you are operating off the edge of the map, is that it's nearly impossible to chart a course back to where you started
Because there's a real question: does that place where we were pre-pandemic even exist anymore?
I don't think it does

And so, when the old map stops working
When the rules of the game have changed
When old ways of planning and decision making aren't getting you anywhere
You have to turn to something different

In the context of the Church
In organizations we lead
In our own personal lives

We need the tools to create new maps
To understand the lay of the land as it is NOW
Not as it was or as we wish it would be

In the church, we call these types of mapmaking tools processes of *discernment*
We see discernment used in the Bible – in the next few weeks get familiar with the ways it comes into play for
The people of Israel in the wilderness, for individuals in moments of crisis
For the early church as they worked to spread the good news about Jesus
How God's people made new maps for new times and places by looking and listening carefully for where their Creator was leading

It's an uncomfortable process because, by definition, we're not in control
It's not quick or easy or simple, because at its best it takes place in community, and people see things differently
It's full of pitfalls and conflict, because God doesn't give ANY of us ALL the information we need all at once

The passage for today speaks to what this process, at its clearest and simplest, looks like
The people of Israel are on their 40-year journey out of Egypt to the Promised Land

And we read how they navigated their wilderness wanderings, moving the
Tabernacle, their portable sanctuary, from place to place

Not with a map and a plan to stop here for snacks and there for gas
But with God's presence serving as their guide, their alarm clock, and their
protector

Over and over the writer says:

When the cloud of presence moved, the people moved

When it stopped, they stopped

Sometimes for a night, sometimes two, sometimes for a month, sometimes
for a generation

At every stop, they were forced to recognize and reckon with the fact that
they were not in control of the **timeline**

Not in control of the **route**

Not in control of the **final destination**

And there was no small dissention among them as a result

Moses was the subject of constant complaint and controversy

But he was clear: the task was to follow the guidance of God
To march when God marched. To camp when God camped.
That was the job.

The map they were creating was limited, in that sense, to the places they
had been and to the ground right in front of them
It was slow. They never saw the whole path.

And so, for those who think they know the better way
For those who like to plan and strategize and problem-solve
Who pride themselves on it
I'm sure every day was a struggle

Because waking up in the morning to discern direction for today
When you're bored and tired of waiting on the promise to be fulfilled
And looking over again to see the cloud still parked in the same spot
Has got to feel like wasted time

But this is discernment
And it requires patience, because it happens in God's time

And so the writer says over and over again
Just so no one forgets: we move when God moves. And not before.

4

Decision-making is the process we follow when we can already see some
options for the way forward
When we know we've got to go from here to there
And it's a matter of choosing the path

People with no faith can lead the church in a decision-making approach
When you are convinced you have the answer
And its just a matter of writing up the strategic plan document
And getting the votes you need to get to the outcome you want
Then you're in decision-making mode

Discernment, though, requires something different from us
It specifically tries to take our own will out of the equation
Our own anxiety out of the equation
Setting aside our persistent belief that we already have the answer
So that we might surrender our will to God's will
And our anxiety to a deep faith that trusts that even if we don't know the
way, God does

It requires the conviction that God DOES have a will for us
That God cares about our choices

Understanding that our task is listening and looking for the right next step
that God may be revealing
Not the WHOLE path
But the right next step

5

Now we already observed some of the challenges of this approach in the
scripture we read today: the waiting around, and the not knowing

But at least we could say that Israel had this going for them:
The message was clear and unambiguous
When God moves, we move

In our lives, though, whether we're trying to:

- consider our next career move
- figure out what to do about a difficult relationship
- decide how best to lead our organization or business
- or plan for the future of Medford UMC

It's never quite as simple as following a cloud in the desert
Because it's usually very difficult to see God moving that clearly

That's why over the next few weeks, we're going to look at discernment in
depth

Talking about approaches to listening, waiting, talking, thinking, and leading
Faith practices that we hope will help us to see and hear God more clearly
That we might follow more faithfully

When we're off the map

And we're not even sure that the place we came from exists anymore

Discernment is the tool that people of faith use

To find their way again

Step by step

<Close with prayer.>

Amen.

By Joe Monahan, Medford UMC, Medford NJ

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/341963/church-membership-falls-below-majority-first-time.aspx>

² <https://research.lifeway.com/2021/10/20/small-churches-continue-growing-but-in-number-not-size/#:~:text=While%20the%20average%20U.S.%20congregations,in%20their%20weekly%20worship%20service.>