

Was It God, or Was It Chance?

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Acts 1:21-26 — Peter said, “One of the men who has accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection.” So the disciples proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, “Lord, you know everyone’s heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

So, at this point in the biblical story, Jesus has recently risen from the grave and ascended into Heaven, leaving his followers with the promise that the Holy Spirit is coming. Right now, these followers number about 120, we are told—but on the day of Pentecost, which we will celebrate next Sunday, several thousand more will be added to their ranks, as a wind from God will rush through Jerusalem.

But before then, there’s some business that needs to be taken care of: Judas, who handed Jesus over to be arrested and crucified, is now gone. The 12 closest followers of Jesus, called “the Apostles,” are now just 11, which feels incomplete. The number 12 had significance for Jesus and his followers, because the Jewish people originally consisted of 12 tribes—descendants of the patriarch Jacob’s 12 sons, who we read about in the book of Genesis. During his ministry, Jesus functioned as a Jewish rabbi, or religious teacher, and he wanted all of his students and followers, called “disciples,” to stand in continuity with the Jewish tradition. So, if they’re going to keep the tradition alive, a new twelfth apostle needs to be selected.

It’s Peter—who, along with the apostles James and John, was a part of Jesus’s innermost circle—it’s Peter who stands up and says, “Let’s do this thing.” There’s only one criterion mentioned, but it’s a high bar: the new apostle, who Peter refers to as “a witness to the resurrection,” should be someone who’s been with the crew of Jesus’s followers more or less from the beginning. We should note that there are at least a couple of women who meet this criterion, and if we want to talk about witnesses to the resurrection, then it only makes sense to consider the three women—named Mary, Mary, and Salome—who sought out and met the resurrected Jesus before *any* of the twelve apostles did. But sadly, this process of selecting a twelfth apostle is taking place within a profoundly patriarchal cultural context, and so our passage does what biblical passages so often do, but what Jesus more or less never did: that is, snub women.

After some discussion, the crew of 120 narrows the choices down to two: Joseph, called Barsabbas, but also known as Justus, and then Matthias. Ultimately, they choose Matthias. My sneaking suspicion is that they chose the second candidate because everyone was confused by

the first candidate's three different names. They're all like, "Wait, do we call him Joseph? Barsabbas? Justus? Ah, just forget it, we're going with Matthias." But the text gives us a different reason for the choice that was made—and personally, I find this reason just as weird as my joking suspicion: the group cast lots, and the lot fell on Matthias. In order to select a new apostolic leader, someone who would go down in history as one of the founding figures of the Christian faith...they play a game of chance.

Couldn't they have found a more intentional, less accidental way? Surely, these two candidates had differing merits, which could be discussed and debated and eventually decided between. And even if the group was totally split 50/50, and they honestly couldn't make a decision, it's easy to wonder why they didn't try something more explicitly related to God. Couldn't the 11 apostles have asked for a big booming voice from the sky? That wouldn't have been too hard for God, would it? It's easy to wonder why the apostles would leave something so important up to chance instead of up to God.

But actually, I don't think that's what's going on here. Our passage tells us that before they cast lots, Jesus's followers prayed: "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen." Then, after the prayer, they cast lots—not because they're choosing chance instead of God, but because they're trusting God to show up even in something that looks a lot like chance.

A big booming voice sure would've been convenient for these early followers of Jesus, and eye-popping miracles sure would be nice for us now—but most of the time, that's not the way God operates. I don't think that's because those things are too hard for God; rather, I think they are too easy for us. That is, I think that what God wants from us is trust—not primarily trust that God is capable of doing something extraordinary, but trust that God *is doing* all sorts of things in the midst of the ordinary. I think our story this morning invites each of us to look for God at work among the seemingly random, seemingly mundane occurrences in our lives.

Years ago, I heard this story about a man whose neighborhood was beginning to flood, and everyone was ordered to evacuate, but he insisted on staying behind, on top of his roof. "The Lord will save me," he said. Now, a car was passing by, barely able to drive through the rising water, and a passenger rolled down the window and shouted, "Come down and hop in! You're going to drown here!" But the man shouted back, "The Lord will save me!" And the water continued to rise. A few hours later, a rescue boat pulled up to the man's house and leaned a ladder up against the roof. "Come down! You're going to drown!" the crew shouted, but the man still refused: "The Lord will save me!" Several more hours passed, and the water was now at the house's gutters. Finally, a rescue helicopter flew over the house and dropped a rope down to the man, and through a megaphone he heard a voice, saying, "Climb up! You're going to drown!" But the man still stayed put and persisted in proclaiming, "The Lord will save me." But the Lord didn't, and the man drowned. He got to Heaven, and with a mixture of confusion and indignation, he said, "God, I trusted you! I showed such extraordinary faith! Why didn't you save me?" And God replied, "Well I tried to—three times, with a car, a boat, *and* a helicopter!"

Friends, when we're on the look-out for God in our lives, sometimes it feels like God is nowhere to be seen—especially when the water is rising around us and we're afraid of drowning. But perhaps it's not that God is nowhere to be seen; perhaps we just need new lenses. Perhaps we need to train our eyes to perceive God's presence in places where and in moments when we aren't used to looking for God. It doesn't have to be something as dramatic as a flood; it might be a friendship, or a one-time interaction, or a task you've been assigned, or an activity you love—or one you take for granted: eating, walking, sleeping, waking up.

Sometimes, life feels like one big game of chance, but the life of faith invites us to look closer—even as we widen our gaze. By the power of the Spirit, may each of us grow in our ability to recognize the miraculous in the mundane, to recognize God in our world. Amen.