

## Navigation, Discernment & Direction

Exodus 13:20-22, Romans 12:1-5

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*Moses and the people set out from Succoth, and camped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. The Holy One went in front of them in a pillar of cloud by day, to lead them along the way, and in a pillar of fire by night, to give them light, so that they might travel by day and by night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

*Exodus 13:20-22*

*I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may **discern** what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another.*

*Romans 12:1-5*

Here is St Martin's Church Ceiling, Birmingham, United Kingdom. In many churches, the ceiling of the sanctuary is designed to resemble the underside of a boat or ship. In the Old Testament, that ship of safety and salvation would be Noah's Ark. In the early days of Christianity, believers often had to hide when meeting together for worship, fellowship or study due to persecution. Some scholars suggest they may have taken refuge inside over-turned fishing boats on the shoreline. Later, as church buildings were built, the ceilings continued to resemble the bottom of a ship. Over time, this took on deeper meanings reminding us that a church, God's house, is to be a place of safety and shelter. It would also remind people that we can trust in the stories when Jesus was in a boat in a storm with his disciples. He offered the words in the storm, "Peace be still." Christ is with us in the storms of life.

During this worship series, we have explored different aspects of being a sailboat church and what it has to do with actual sailing. We started with the message that as we deepen our connection to God and each other, we come to see that we were created to sail. This invitation means we are not simply to get in the rowboats of life and settle for life alone that relies on our ego strength. No, we were created, blessed, loved by the source of Divine and made to sail. We come to know how to sail by exploring the life of Jesus, stories of the Bible, and other religious traditions.

And we experience the sailing life, this traveling together in community, as a church. We reflected on what it means to be the crew on a sailboat church – all of us are needed. We have reflected on the mystery of the Spirit, the wind, that moves us and in us. And we considered Our Church. A community of deep belonging. Being a body with different parts and working together, a living body of Christ. A crew that has different jobs and seeks destinations and new ports along the way. We need to raise our sails, our many different sails of ministries and what new ones may be added.

When a sailboat leaves the harbor and goes out to sea, navigation comes into play. This ancient skill involves charting a passage between where the boat is and where it needs to go. As a sailboat church, we are called to navigate toward God’s vision, the vision of the Beloved Community in our ministry and mission.

Direction. Navigation. How do we know which way to go? What is our destination? It does not rely on a crystal ball. It is not a GPS with the most efficient route to avoid trouble. Navigating our sailboat together begins with knowing what we can see and what we can’t see, what we know and what we do not or can’t know.

The story of the Hebrew people offers some wisdom for us. “The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. As so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.” (Exodus 14:19-21)

The Israelites would have been scared out of their wits. Not only had they witnessed plague and pestilence up-close-and-personal. They made a break for it, and the army of an angry Pharaoh was coming after them. They didn’t know what was going on. They didn’t know where they were going. They didn’t know what was going to happen tomorrow. They didn’t know that there would be a tomorrow. And then darkness fell upon them.

They were in darkness, but the cloud—the angel of God—was with them in the darkness. They were not alone. And God lit up the night. And yet - Would they trust Moses? Would they trust God? Enough trust for the day and night? They were in the wilderness for 40 years. A time of transformation and preparing for the new home, the Promised Land.

When darkness falls the hardest God lights up the night. God is with us. And God sees us through. Whether we imagine being part of this wandering tribe leaving Egypt and going to the Promised Land or a crew on the sailboat church, we are not alone. The Spirit blows our sails and offers guidance – in worship, in silence, in prayer, in study, in serving.

Turning to the passage in Romans, Paul wanted those early followers of Jesus in Rome to know they are called to be a community that is determining their direction by discerning what God

desires. They are not individuals but together a community, a sailboat crew, of prayer. Discernment is a way of orienting ourselves toward God as the true north of our lives. (Joan Gray pg. 96). It develops our inner life and outer actions more inline with the ways of Jesus. The practice of discernment has a goal – to embody the gospel, the life-giving truth, and living knowing that the Divine dwells in us. We are not our past. We can experience grace and forgiveness. We are not alone.

Discerning is a way of life. It keeps us hopeful and expectantly turned toward God. It relieves us of the tyranny of circumstances, the obsession with personalities & politics, and the addiction to always have our way. (pg 99)

When faced with discernment around a particular issue, many are paralyzed by the fear of making a mistake. Maybe some believe that God's will or God's desire is like a bull's-eye on a target and in order to be right and please God, we have to hit it perfectly. People may not want to risk being wrong. Instead, we can see discernment and navigating our sailboat lives and church as doing our best. Praying, reflecting, listening, talking, acting, failing, returning to begin again.

The word in Greek in Romans translated as discern is – *Dokimos*, which means tested, approved, determined to be authentic and true. Not about avoiding a mistake or getting the wrong answer. We are called to navigate together and discern where Spirit is leading.

Paul wants people to discern by “presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice.” I think this is a call to offer our very selves to God. We offer our own selves, as holy and acceptable to God. The world would conform us to images of sameness, but God seeks us to be transformed into God's vision for each of us so we can transform the world. Individually, we are members of one another.

Again and again, scripture lifts up the truth that rugged individualism is not the goal of life. Yes, be who you were individually created to be, but the point of our particular gifts is to participate in making a better world, because we are members of one another. It's the world that needs your individual gifts.

We need women and men leading our church. We need long time members and new friends to get to know each other and share stories. We need LGBTQ folks in leadership and sharing how we can best sail to be a place of deep belonging. We need to listen to our neighbors and community and be open. We need Cynthia to be Cynthia, and most importantly, the world needs you to be you. Individually, we are members of one another.

How might we sail and transform the world in life giving ways if we each lived into who God created us to be, and perhaps more importantly, if we allowed other people to do the same? The disciples were worried about how to participate in this work of healing, teaching, and feeding that Jesus was doing. How were they supposed to do what he had been doing?

And where are we to find the courage to do what needs to be done? It's a hungry and hurting world out there and while some people seem to relish in their cruelty, we know there can be a different way.

The poet David Whyte writes about courage this way:

To be courageous is to seat our feelings deeply in the body and in the world...To be courageous is to stay close to the way we are made. Courage is what love looks like when tested by the simple everyday necessities of being alive.

Can we be courageous together as the people of First Presbyterian Church of San Rafael? How will we sail this boat together? If we each stayed close to the way we were made, and brought that as an offering, think about how we could transform the world. Many of you are already doing this, in truth. It's one of the reasons I said 'yes' to being your pastor. I want to work alongside people who are willing to offer themselves as to give people a place to belong, a community to be comforted and challenged to love and serve.

Being a sailboat is a calling to an adventure. There will be stormy seas. But we have the tools and instruments we need to navigate the seas and sail out toward a destination of the kingdom of God. Amen.

Resource for the series

Joan Gray, *Sailboat Church: Helping Your Church Rethink Its Mission and Practice*. Westminster (2014)