

Decisions, Decisions Acts 1:13-26

As we prepare to welcome people back to public worship, we want to make everyone as safe as possible. The latest guidance we're getting from the Center for Disease Control is that the principle way this virus spreads is not from touching infected surfaces. And because researchers tell us that the virus can't live more than five days on paper, wood, and fabric, if we sanitize the metal and plastic in the Sanctuary and if we just use the Sanctuary for worship once a week, we should be okay. We think. We hope. Of course, we can't be exactly sure....

But since we're told that the main way people contract the virus is from being around one another, that poses an even thornier set of questions where it comes to gathering for worship. How can we sing God's praise if the water vapor in our breath could contain this virus? How far away should family groups sit from one another indoors – is six feet enough, or should it be ten? Would it help to wear masks to keep those around us from getting sick? And perhaps most disturbing of all, since the researchers suggest that we can give the virus to others without even knowing that we have it, how do we know when it's safe for us and for others to come back to worship? How can we possibly make all these decisions if there are so many things we still just don't know?

Isn't that the same sort of situation in which Jesus' disciples found themselves in today's passage? As we saw last week, He had told them to wait – but He hadn't told them how long. He had told them they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit – but they had no idea what that meant. And He had told them they would bear witness to Him all over the world – but given all the different cultures and languages involved, they didn't understand how that could be possible.

And they had another problem – the fact that their number was incomplete. Starting in verse 16, Peter recounts what had happened to Judas Iscariot, the one who betrayed Jesus by identifying Him to His enemies in the Garden of Gethsemane. Putting all the different gospel accounts together, we can understand that when Judas returned the money to those who had hired him to sell Jesus out, they took that money and bought the field in which Judas had hanged himself in his remorse. Apparently, his body had been abandoned, left as verse 18 says rather gruesomely, to fall headlong of its own accord. It's no wonder everyone ended up calling that horrible place the "Field of Blood."

But Judas' death raised an important question for the disciples. Since Jesus had chosen 12 apostles to bear witness to Him, should someone else take his place? If so, who? And how could they possibly know if they had made the right choice? Indeed, how can any of us know if we're making the right decisions in confusing times like these?

Well, what did the disciples do when they were faced with the first big decision they had to make after Jesus was no longer physically with them? You'll notice that the very first thing they did once they got back to Jerusalem was to pray. And this wasn't some perfunctory exercise, a mere introduction to what they considered the more important work to come. No, verse 14 says that they continued in prayer and supplication. And the clear implication is that they continued in such fervent and earnest prayer until the Lord Himself interrupted them ten days later by the outpouring of His Spirit upon them on Pentecost, as we'll celebrate next week.

In the same way, while we certainly should gather all the expert advice we have available to us, and while we should try to make the very best plans we can, using the best information we have, prayer is an indispensable foundation for any decision-making process. For unless we seek God's face, crying out to Him to help us, there's just no way we'll ever be able to wade through all the mountains of information, all the conflicting opinions that clamor for our attention and allegiance.

For what if we were to rely on our own wisdom in uncertain times like these? Isn't it all too easy to let our own desires tip the scales? For let's be honest – haven't we all, at one time or another, rationalized our way into thinking that what we want just happens to be what God also wants for us? And once we have come to the conclusion that God is on our side, isn't it easy to try to push other people around to get them to do things our way?

There seems to be a lot of this sort of overly-confident thinking these days. Some people think stay-at-home orders are prudent in order to prevent more people from getting this virus. Others point out that thousands of small businesses will fail if the lockdowns continue for very much longer. Both have a point – so what should we do?

Or think about what precautions we should all take when we go out in public during this pandemic. Current advice from the Centers for Disease Control is for everyone to use a cloth face cover, stressing that this is primarily intended to protect other people from the water vapor in our breath in case we are infected and don't know it. But other researchers warn that wearing masks can give us a false sense of security, thus encouraging people to stand closer together than they should. We can't have it both ways, so which policy should we pursue? And how can we avoid the temptation to assume that we're right and try to make everyone else do what we want?

Well, think again about the example the disciples set for us in this passage. Verse 14 says that they all continued in prayer and supplication – this means they were earnestly seeking God's will, not their own. But verse 14 also says that they were all in one accord – they were all in agreement that this sort of prayerful waiting was the right thing to do. And notice that this prayer meeting wasn't limited to the 12 apostles – no, verse 15 reminds us that there were about 120

people following Jesus at this time. And this wasn't some all-boys' club either – verse 14 reminds us that many women were present, including Mary the mother of Jesus.

So, what does all this tell us? The disciples were not only trying to ensure that the decisions they made were in line with God's will. They also wanted their decisions to help keep everyone together. They were trying to promote the common good and maintain the fellowship of all the saints instead of everyone insisting on having things his own way.

And during this time of confusion and stress, we Americans would do well to follow their example. For let's be honest - this virus is a big enough challenge for us to face without picking fights with one another at the same time. The fact is that younger, healthier people don't face the same level of risk as those who are over 65 with underlying health conditions, so maybe there's a way for younger folks to get back to work sooner. The fact is that people who live in small towns and rural areas where there's lots of fresh air don't face the same kinds of risk as those who, for whatever reason, want to live in huge cities, stacked up on top of one another in tiny apartments. In a country this big, one size does not fit all, and we need to be gentle with one another as our leaders scramble to develop strategies to keep as many of us as healthy as possible, while minimizing the damage done to our businesses and working people. We all need to seek God's will, not our own, and we all need to do the best we can to keep everyone together instead of letting this virus drive us apart.

But there's one more thing the disciples did that can help us make decisions in confusing times like these – they looked to the Scriptures as their sufficient rule of faith and practice because they understood the words of the Bible to be the very Word of God.

We can see this in verse 16, as Peter clearly says that the Holy Spirit used David's mouth to speak the words that the Holy Spirit wanted him to say and wanted us to hear. Years later, Peter would express the same thought in his second epistle: "Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit." No matter what so many so-called scholars may say these days, it's obvious that the earliest Christians believed the Bible to be God's holy, inspired, authoritative word.

Indeed, such a high view of Scripture would provide a firm foundation for all the disciples' ministry. For when Pentecost finally came ten days after Jesus ascended into Heaven, when the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples and they began to preach, Peter's first sermon was based as much on the Old Testament Scriptures as it was on his personal witness of the Resurrection. Where it comes to column inches of text, almost 40% of that sermon is taken up with quotations from the Old Testament.

But it's not enough just to quote Scripture, is it? We also have to apply it to our personal lives, our day-to-day situations, if we want to use it to make good decisions. Ah, but how do we

know which verses to apply to which situations? And what do we do when we face problems that aren't mentioned in the Bible? Try to find the word "coronavirus" in your concordance and see how you do.

Well, how did the disciples use the Scriptures to answer their questions? The first quote in verse 20 comes from Psalm 69. Now, Jesus' disciples knew this psalm was talking about Jesus. When He had driven the moneychangers out of the temple, they remembered that this psalm also says, "Zeal for Your house has eaten me up." Later, when Jesus was offered sour wine at His crucifixion, they saw the fulfillment of yet another verse of this psalm: "They also gave me gall for my food, and for my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink."

And so we see the miracle of Scripture – how David could write Psalm 69, describing his own experiences in poetic language, and yet at the same time, the Holy Spirit could speak through that same poetry in order to predict specific events in the life of Jesus 1000 years later. It's no wonder, then, that in today's passage, Peter applies yet another verse of psalm 69 to Judas, one of the persecutors of Jesus: "Let his dwelling place be desolate, and let no one live in it."

But there's another verse that Peter applies in verse 20 to Judas, the betrayer of Jesus. This verse comes from another psalm of David, psalm 109. In this psalm, David asks God to judge and punish someone, as he says, "because he did not remember to show mercy, but persecuted the poor and needy man." About this persecutor, David thus says, "Let his days be few, and let another take his office."

The application point is clear enough, and it's easily applied to Judas – one who persecutes innocent people should be replaced if he holds any sort of office or practices any sort of oversight. And I hope we would all recognize that this just makes sense – who wants a bully to have any sort of responsibility?

But here's the catch: whereas Psalm 69 on numerous occasions specifically refers to events in the life of Jesus, Psalm 109 doesn't. Yet Peter felt justified in using a verse of Psalm 109 to fill in the details about what should be done to one of the persecutors of Christ, persecutors whom Psalm 69 says should be accursed.

Peter thus shows us how we should use the Scriptures to help us make the difficult decisions that face all of us all the time. We must draw the general principles out of God's Word, and then apply those principles to our particular situations.

Okay, so what general principles might inform the choices we need to make in the face of this virus? Well, we know God warns us in His Ten Commandments that we should not take what belongs to others. But He also says that we should seek to preserve all human life: Thou

shalt not kill, but thou also shalt not steal. We must thus seek a balance, protecting jobs and businesses but also keeping as many people as safe as possible.

And in our responsive reading this morning, Paul urges us to limit our own freedoms so that other people's consciences might not be violated. So, even if we might think it's silly to wipe everything down with sanitizer and wear a facemask in public, maybe we should be more concerned about how safe those practices make other people feel. Maybe the way to fulfill the second part of the Great Commandment, the commandment Jesus gave us to love our neighbors as ourselves, is to put our own opinions and preferences aside and go the extra mile to help others stay healthy and feel more secure in this time when none of our prior experience is completely valid, a time when not even the most learned experts knows exactly how this virus works.

But as we pray, and as we try to stick together, and as we seek to apply the principles of Scripture to our admittedly confusing times, there's one more truth we can learn from this passage, one which should be a great source of comfort to all of us. For look again at verse 16. Here Peter reminds us that when Judas betrayed Jesus, he was only fulfilling what the Scriptures said he would do, Scriptures written down by David 1000 years before Judas was even born. Just so, it was because the disciples were absolutely convinced that God was completely in charge of everything that happens that they could leave the final choice of Judas' successor in God's hands. They selected two worthy candidates, but let God have the final say, trusting Him to control the way the lots fell out.

So yes, we can pray to God in confidence, even when we don't understand what is going on in our lives. We can trust everything God's Word says, allowing it to help us discern the best way to love one another and stick together in perplexing and scary times. And that's because God is absolutely sovereign, absolutely in control of everything that happens, from the crucifixion of Christ even to this crazy coronavirus.

So, no matter how confused we may be, let's rejoice in God's truth. No matter how afraid we may be, let's rejoice in Christ's loving power. As we seek to obey Him and to love one another as best we can, let's rejoice that the Lord is King.