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A CONGREGATIONAL DEVOTIONAL

# Listening to God



BY REV. PETER REUSS

## INTRODUCTION

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Who are we as a faith community? What unique things does God call our ministry act upon? How can the Holy Spirit guide us in the coming years? These questions lay at the heart of this strategic planning process.

Strategic Planning. Those words can feel so corporate, so far away from the life of a faith community. At the heart, strategic planning is a discernment process of listening. In the coming months we will have the opportunity to:

- Listen to God through Scripture
- Listen to God through the Congregation
- Listen to God through the Community

We will engage in a very intentional process of discernment. Trusting that the Holy Spirit speaks through every person, listening to many voices will play a central role. There will be opportunities for group conversation and dreaming. You will be invited to take part in a survey looking at current ministry and dreaming about the future. A team will go out and listen to leaders in our community. In every step of the process we will ask, "What do we hear God saying to us?"

At several points in the process the Strategic Planning Team will gather us together and share what they have heard as a way of ensuring that they are on the right track. All this listening will lead to a final document, clarifying our identity and providing a clear path for the coming years.

As we begin this journey together, one of the voices we will listen to is the voice of God in the Bible. Through weekly readings we will encounter many people of faith who heard God's call. Some of these stories will resonate and make you say, "That sounds like our community of faith!" Other stories may feel foreign and distant. God speaks in many ways to many people. Experiencing a wide range of Biblical stories will aid our discernment process.

We invite you join us on this journey. Every week we will provide one story of a person or community who discerned God's call for them. After reading the background to each passage, we invite you to take some quiet time to read through the passage three times. After each reading, reflect on one of the following questions:

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

We will provide bulletin boards (virtual and in the building) where you can share your reflections on the ways these passages relate to our community of faith.

Welcome to this journey of discernment. Together we will gain clarity about our ministry and boldly follow God into the future.

### BACKGROUND

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The story of Abram (renamed Abraham) begins the long narrative of the chosen people of God. This passage is only 12 chapters into Genesis, the first book of the Bible. After creation (and Adam and Eve) the stories move quickly from Noah to the Tower of Babel. Beginning with Abraham, the story becomes specific to a person, a family, a clan, and (eventually) the nation of Israel.

In the verses before this passage, Abram and his wife Sarai moved from Ur of the Chaldeans to a new home in Haran. God then spoke to Abram and calls him to take their family somewhere they had never been. Then came the promises of a land (which came to be known as Israel) and a great nation (God's chosen people). These promises shape the rest of the Biblical story.

### SCRIPTURE

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Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.'

So Abram went, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the Lord and invoked the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

## MOSES

## EXODUS 3:1-12

**BACKGROUND**

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The book of Genesis ends with Abraham and Sarah's descendants in Egypt, following Joseph to live there during a time of famine. The book of Exodus opens many generations later. As the Israelites grew in number, they became a threat to the Egyptian Empire. The Pharaohs of Egypt enslaved them to keep them from power and put them to work.

During this oppression, a boy named Moses was born to an Israelite mother. Since all male babies were to be killed, she hid him for three months before putting him in a basket in the river. The daughter of the Pharaoh found him and raised him in the royal palace. Moses seemed destined for power until an incident occurred when he killed an Egyptian overseer abusing an Israelite slave. Moses fled to the hills for safety.

While tending to the sheep in his new life, God appeared.

**SCRIPTURE**

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Moses was keeping the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian; he led his flock beyond the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a flame of fire out of a bush; he looked, and the bush was blazing, yet it was not consumed. Then Moses said, 'I must turn aside and look at this great sight, and see why the bush is not burned up.' When the Lord saw that he had turned aside to see, God called to him out of the bush, 'Moses, Moses!' And he said, 'Here I am.' Then he said, 'Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground.' He said further, 'I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

Then the Lord said, 'I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the

## MOSES

## EXODUS 3:1-12

Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.' But Moses said to God, 'Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?' He said, 'I will be with you; and this shall be the sign for you that it is I who sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God on this mountain.'

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

## JOSHUA

## JOSHUA 1:1-9

**BACKGROUND**

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God fulfilled God's promise to Moses. The people of Israel walked away from slavery, through the parted Red Sea, and to freedom. Yet the freedom did not feel as they had hoped. They wandered in a wilderness, scraping by as best as they could. Even though God led them, providing them a Law to live by and daily food (called manna) to eat, the wilderness proved to be a challenging place.

After 40 years in that wilderness, God prepared to lead the people of Israel into the Promised Land. The promise to Abraham and Sarah would come to fruition. Joshua would lead the way.

**SCRIPTURE**

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After the death of Moses the servant of the Lord, the Lord spoke to Joshua son of Nun, Moses' assistant, saying, 'My servant Moses is dead. Now proceed to cross the Jordan, you and all this people, into the land that I am giving to them, to the Israelites. Every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses. From the wilderness and the Lebanon as far as the great river, the river Euphrates, all the land of the Hittites, to the Great Sea in the west shall be your territory. No one shall be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will not fail you or forsake you. Be strong and courageous; for you shall put this people in possession of the land that I swore to their ancestors to give them. Only be strong and very courageous, being careful to act in accordance with all the law that my servant Moses commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, so that you may be successful wherever you go. This book of the law shall not depart out of your mouth; you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it. For then you shall make your way prosperous, and then you shall be successful. I hereby command you: Be strong and courageous; do not be frightened or dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.'

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
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### BACKGROUND

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After Joshua and the people of Israel conquered and settled in the Promised Land challenges continued to arise. Throughout the time of the judges they lived as a loose confederation of tribes. Neighboring nations periodically invaded and captured some of the territory, requiring God to raise up a leader to bring them back to freedom. The book of Judges attributes these invasions to the faithlessness of God's people.

God came to Gideon in a time when Midian ruled over some of their territory. God commissioned him to lead the people to victory over Midian. God's people would again be free. Gideon wasn't so sure, so he devised a test for God.

### SCRIPTURE

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Then Gideon said to God, 'In order to see whether you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said, I am going to lay a fleece of wool on the threshing-floor; if there is dew on the fleece alone, and it is dry on all the ground, then I shall know that you will deliver Israel by my hand, as you have said.' And it was so. When he rose early next morning and squeezed the fleece, he wrung enough dew from the fleece to fill a bowl with water. Then Gideon said to God, 'Do not let your anger burn against me, let me speak one more time; let me, please, make trial with the fleece just once more; let it be dry only on the fleece, and on all the ground let there be dew.' And God did so that night. It was dry on the fleece only, and on all the ground there was dew.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
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## SAUL

## 1 SAMUEL 28:3-25

**BACKGROUND**

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Saul served as the first king of Israel and his reign did not go well. He quickly lost God's favor and the prophet Samuel anointed David to be the next king. For years Saul had a love/hate relationship with David, but eventually he sought to take David's life to protect the throne for himself and his sons.

When the Philistines invaded, Saul sought God's response. With Samuel dead, he didn't know where to turn. He encountered God's silence, so he took matters into his own hands.

**SCRIPTURE**

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Now Samuel had died, and all Israel had mourned for him and buried him in Ramah, his own city. Saul had expelled the mediums and the wizards from the land. The Philistines assembled, and came and encamped at Shunem. Saul gathered all Israel, and they encamped at Gilboa. When Saul saw the army of the Philistines, he was afraid, and his heart trembled greatly. When Saul inquired of the Lord, the Lord did not answer him, not by dreams, nor by Urim, nor by prophets. Then Saul said to his servants, 'Seek out for me a woman who is a medium, so that I may go to her and inquire of her.' His servants said to him, 'There is a medium at Endor.'

So Saul disguised himself and put on other clothes and went there, he and two men with him. They came to the woman by night. And he said, 'Consult a spirit for me, and bring up for me the one whom I name to you.' The woman said to him, 'Surely you know what Saul has done, how he has cut off the mediums and the wizards from the land. Why then are you laying a snare for my life to bring about my death?' But Saul swore to her by the Lord, 'As the Lord lives, no punishment shall come upon you for this thing.' Then the woman said, 'Whom shall I bring up for you?' He answered, 'Bring up Samuel for me.' When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice; and the woman said to Saul, 'Why have you deceived me? You are Saul!' The king said to her, 'Have no fear; what do you see?' The woman said to Saul, 'I see a divine being coming up out of the ground.'

## SAUL

## 1 SAMUEL 28:3-25

He said to her, 'What is his appearance?' She said, 'An old man is coming up; he is wrapped in a robe.' So Saul knew that it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance.

Then Samuel said to Saul, 'Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?' Saul answered, 'I am in great distress, for the Philistines are warring against me, and God has turned away from me and answers me no more, either by prophets or by dreams; so I have summoned you to tell me what I should do.' Samuel said, 'Why then do you ask me, since the Lord has turned from you and become your enemy? The Lord has done to you just as he spoke by me; for the Lord has torn the kingdom out of your hand, and given it to your neighbour David. Because you did not obey the voice of the Lord, and did not carry out his fierce wrath against Amalek, therefore the Lord has done this thing to you today. Moreover, the Lord will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and tomorrow you and your sons shall be with me; the Lord will also give the army of Israel into the hands of the Philistines.'

Immediately Saul fell full length on the ground, filled with fear because of the words of Samuel; and there was no strength in him, for he had eaten nothing all day and all night. The woman came to Saul, and when she saw that he was terrified, she said to him, 'Your servant has listened to you; I have taken my life in my hand, and have listened to what you have said to me. Now therefore, you also listen to your servant; let me set a morsel of bread before you. Eat, that you may have strength when you go on your way.' He refused, and said, 'I will not eat.' But his servants, together with the woman, urged him; and he listened to their words. So he got up from the ground and sat on the bed. Now the woman had a fatted calf in the house. She quickly slaughtered it, and she took flour, kneaded it, and baked unleavened cakes. She put them before Saul and his servants, and they ate. Then they rose and went away that night.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

## ELIJAH

## 1 KINGS 19:1-18

**BACKGROUND**

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Many years after Saul and David, and after the Promised Land split into two nations (Israel and Judah), Ahab and Jezebel ruled in the nation of Israel. They ignored God and followed Baal, a God of other nations. Elijah served as God's prophet, a thorn in their sides. After a show-down between God and Baal on Mount Carmel, God displayed great power and many of the priests of Baal were put to death.

This angered the queen and made Elijah flee for his life, despairing for the future. God was not done with Elijah (or Israel) yet.

**SCRIPTURE**

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Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, 'So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.' Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

But he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: 'It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.' Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, 'Get up and eat.' He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, 'Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.' He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food for forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.'

He said, 'Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.' Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, 'What are you doing here, Elijah?' He answered, 'I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.' Then the Lord said to him, 'Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.'

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

## ELIJAH

## 1 KINGS 19:1-18

**BACKGROUND**

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The book of Isaiah spans the time from the end of the nation of Judah, into their exile in Babylon, ending with the return to the Promised Land. In Isaiah we hear words interpreting current events in light of God's work in the world. We experience despair and hope, judgment and mercy, history and prophecy. Isaiah speaks of a Suffering Servant who would save God's people. We know that Servant to be Jesus.

In Isaiah chapter 6, Isaiah received God's call to serve.

**SCRIPTURE**

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In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lofty; and the hem of his robe filled the temple. Seraphs were in attendance above him; each had six wings: with two they covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they flew. And one called to another and said:

'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.'

The pivots on the thresholds shook at the voices of those who called, and the house filled with smoke. And I said: 'Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphs flew to me, holding a live coal that had been taken from the altar with a pair of tongs. The seraph touched my mouth with it and said: 'Now that this has touched your lips, your guilt has departed and your sin is blotted out.' Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' And I said, 'Here am I; send me!'

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

### BACKGROUND

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God called Jonah to go to Nineveh and proclaim God's word. Jonah had other ideas and ran as far away as he could. God persisted.

### SCRIPTURE

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Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah son of Amittai, saying, 'Go at once to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before me.' But Jonah set out to flee to Tarshish from the presence of the Lord. He went down to Joppa and found a ship going to Tarshish; so he paid his fare and went on board, to go with them to Tarshish, away from the presence of the Lord.

But the Lord hurled a great wind upon the sea, and such a mighty storm came upon the sea that the ship threatened to break up. Then the mariners were afraid, and each cried to his god. They threw the cargo that was in the ship into the sea, to lighten it for them. Jonah, meanwhile, had gone down into the hold of the ship and had lain down, and was fast asleep. The captain came and said to him, 'What are you doing sound asleep? Get up, call on your god! Perhaps the god will spare us a thought so that we do not perish.'

The sailors said to one another, 'Come, let us cast lots, so that we may know on whose account this calamity has come upon us.' So they cast lots, and the lot fell on Jonah. Then they said to him, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us. What is your occupation? Where do you come from? What is your country? And of what people are you?' 'I am a Hebrew,' he replied. 'I worship the Lord, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.' Then the men were even more afraid, and said to him, 'What is this that you have done!' For the men knew that he was fleeing from the presence of the Lord, because he had told them so.

Then they said to him, 'What shall we do to you, that the sea may quieten down for us?' For the sea was growing more and more tempestuous. He said to them, 'Pick me up and throw me into the sea; then the sea will quieten down for you; for I know it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' Nevertheless, the men rowed hard to bring the ship back to land, but they could not, for the sea grew more and more stormy against them. Then they cried out to the Lord, 'Please, O Lord, we pray, do not let us perish on account of this man's life. Do not make us guilty of innocent blood; for you, O Lord, have done as it pleased you.' So they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea; and the sea ceased from its raging. Then the men feared the Lord even more, and they offered a sacrifice to the Lord and made vows.

But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

### BACKGROUND

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In a small, backwater town of Nazareth God appeared to a young girl with promises beyond belief. The Son of God would be born.

### SCRIPTURE

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In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*



JESUS

LUKE 22:39-46

**BACKGROUND**

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Following several years of preaching, teaching, and healing, Jesus' opponents finally gained the upper hand. Jesus knew that the end of his ministry on earth had come. He gathered the disciples together for one last Passover meal before leaving Jerusalem for a night of prayer. Knowing that death awaited, Jesus placed Himself in God's hands.

**SCRIPTURE**

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He came out and went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives; and the disciples followed him. When he reached the place, he said to them, 'Pray that you may not come into the time of trial.' Then he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, knelt down, and prayed, 'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' [[ Then an angel from heaven appeared to him and gave him strength. In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground.]] When he got up from prayer, he came to the disciples and found them sleeping because of grief, and he said to them, 'Why are you sleeping? Get up and pray that you may not come into the time of trial.'

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

### BACKGROUND

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After Jesus' resurrection and ascension, His disciples tried to figure out what to do next. The first step was to replace Judas so they would once again number 12 apostles.

The discernment process involved the prayerful casting of lots, basically rolling dice to determine which of the two God called to take Judas' place.

### SCRIPTURE

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Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred and twenty people) and said, 'Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus — for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.' (Now this man acquired a field with the reward of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. This became known to all the residents of Jerusalem, so that the field was called in their language Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) 'For it is written in the book of Psalms,

*"Let his homestead become desolate, and let there be no one to live in it";*

and

*"Let another take his position of overseer."*

So one of the men who have accompanied us throughout 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 they 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.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

### BACKGROUND

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In the early days of the church the Apostles struggled to figure out an effective and efficient way to organize themselves. This uncertainty led to conflict. Something needed to be done to bring order to the chaos.

### SCRIPTURE

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Now during those days, when the disciples were increasing in number, the Hellenists complained against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution of food. And the twelve called together the whole community of the disciples and said, 'It is not right that we should neglect the word of God in order to wait at tables. Therefore, friends, select from among yourselves seven men of good standing, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this task, while we, for our part, will devote ourselves to prayer and to serving the word.' What they said pleased the whole community, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, together with Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. They had these men stand before the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

The word of God continued to spread; the number of the disciples increased greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
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PAUL

ACTS 9:1-19

## BACKGROUND

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Saul (aka Paul) vehemently fought against the early followers of Jesus. He stood by in approval as people stoned Stephen to death and did all that he could to stamp out the followers of Jesus. He thought his actions were faithful to God, but God had other ideas on the road to Damascus.

## SCRIPTURE

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Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem. Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' The men who were travelling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one. Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus. For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.

## PAUL

## ACTS 9:1-19

Now there was a disciple in Damascus named Ananias. The Lord said to him in a vision, 'Ananias.' He answered, 'Here I am, Lord.' The Lord said to him, 'Get up and go to the street called Straight, and at the house of Judas look for a man of Tarsus named Saul. At this moment he is praying, and he has seen in a vision a man named Ananias come in and lay his hands on him so that he might regain his sight.' But Ananias answered, 'Lord, I have heard from many about this man, how much evil he has done to your saints in Jerusalem; and here he has authority from the chief priests to bind all who invoke your name.' But the Lord said to him, 'Go, for he is an instrument whom I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings and before the people of Israel; I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.' So Ananias went and entered the house. He laid his hands on Saul and said, 'Brother Saul, the Lord Jesus, who appeared to you on your way here, has sent me so that you may regain your sight and be filled with the Holy Spirit.' And immediately something like scales fell from his eyes, and his sight was restored. Then he got up and was baptized, and after taking some food, he regained his strength.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

PETER

ACTS 11:1-18

## BACKGROUND

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The early church started as a group of Jews following Jesus. Many, including Peter, assumed that it should stay this way. But then God appeared to Peter to change his mind and set him on a new path.

## SCRIPTURE

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Now the apostles and the believers who were in Judea heard that the Gentiles had also accepted the word of God. So when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him, saying, 'Why did you go to uncircumcised men and eat with them?' Then Peter began to explain it to them, step by step, saying, 'I was in the city of Joppa praying, and in a trance I saw a vision. There was something like a large sheet coming down from heaven, being lowered by its four corners; and it came close to me. As I looked at it closely I saw four-footed animals, beasts of prey, reptiles, and birds of the air. I also heard a voice saying to me, "Get up, Peter; kill and eat." But I replied, "By no means, Lord; for nothing profane or unclean has ever entered my mouth." But a second time the voice answered from heaven, "What God has made clean, you must not call profane." This happened three times; then everything was pulled up again to heaven. At that very moment three men, sent to me from Caesarea, arrived at the house where we were. The Spirit told me to go with them and not to make a distinction between them and us. These six brothers also accompanied me, and we entered the man's house. He told us how he had seen the angel standing in his house and saying, "Send to Joppa and bring Simon, who is called Peter; he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved."

## PETER

## ACTS 11:1-18

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them just as it had upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, "John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit." If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?' When they heard this, they were silenced. And they praised God, saying, 'Then God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.'

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
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## BACKGROUND

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Conflict in the early church came to a head in a major council in Jerusalem. The question: "Did Gentiles (non-Jewish people) need to go through the rituals of becoming Jews before they could follow Jesus?" Paul (and Peter, from last week's reading) argued against it, telling stories of how the Holy Spirit worked in all people. After a robust debate, they wrote the letter in this passage laying out their understanding of God's will. They revealed their discernment process when they declared: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us."

## SCRIPTURE

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Then the apostles and the elders, with the consent of the whole church, decided to choose men from among their members and to send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leaders among the brothers, with the following letter: 'The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the believers of Gentile origin in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. Since we have heard that certain persons who have gone out from us, though with no instructions from us, have said things to disturb you and have unsettled your minds, we have decided unanimously to choose representatives and send them to you, along with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, who have risked their lives for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth. For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials: that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.'

## THE COUNCIL AT JERSUALEM

ACTS 15:22-35

So they were sent off and went down to Antioch. When they gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter. When its members read it, they rejoiced at the exhortation. Judas and Silas, who were themselves prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After they had been there for some time, they were sent off in peace by the believers to those who had sent them. But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, and there, with many others, they taught and proclaimed the word of the Lord.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
- *How open are they to God's call?*
- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

## PAUL'S VISION

ACTS 16:6-10

**BACKGROUND**

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Paul spent significant time traveling around the Roman Empire, preaching the Good News of Jesus and starting churches in many cities. How did he decide where to go? How did he know when to move on? This passage gives us a glimpse.

**SCRIPTURE**

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They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, 'Come over to Macedonia and help us.' When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

- *How do the people in the story hear God's call to them?*
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- *What might this passage say to our community of faith?*

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