

Sermon *Asking the Right Question* aka the *God Make It Big or Make It Go Away* Sermon
The Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 8.18.24

This past week, Elijah entered the 9th grade. I can't believe he is a high schooler! We've had a good summer together. One of the things we did was watch a few television shows together. It's hard to find a show that is appropriate for a 14-year-old that will also hold the attention of the parents; but we found some. One of them is Brooklyn 99 – a comedy show about some NYC detectives. It's much more comedy than drama, or reality, but, it's a fun show to watch. In one episode, the lead detective tried to solve an 8-year old cold case. All the clues say that the girlfriend of the victim (who was murdered on his boat and then it was set on fire, thus making clues very difficult to follow) knows more than she was letting on. In an attempt to gather evidence against a particular person of interest, they repeatedly asked her when the last time was she saw the alleged perpetrator. Each time it was the same answer – 8 years ago. They brought in a polygraph machine, and she aced the interrogation. The frustrated detective was doing some filing – and mindless activity – when suddenly it came to him, he was asking the girlfriend the wrong question. They brought her back in and he asked: *When was the last time you saw the victim?* She thought about it and then answered: I saw him this morning. Ah ha! The victim was not a victim after all but was the murderer! It all came down the detective asking the right question.

Another show we are watching is the wildly popular UK series Dr. Who. In one of the first episodes, the female lead character found herself in Dr. Who's time machine. He had to flee her time and he did so with her as a stowaway. When the time machine came to a rest, she opened the door and stepped out. Not knowing it was a time machine, she asked, "Where am I?" Dr. Who said: London. She said where in London and he gave her the address. She said, "This doesn't look like London." He said, "You are asking the wrong question. Instead of asking where you are, you should ask when are you?" When she asked when she is, he told her that across the street, Shakespear is going to premier his new play, *Love's Labours Won*. (She then figured out it was not a spaceship but a time machine)

The last example of asking a better question is a cartoon that was being circulated through an email chain. It was a simple cartoon with two French mayors talking to each other. One mayor asked the other, "What punishment do you give to a citizen who stole a loaf of bread." The other mayor responded: Why do you have a citizen who must steal bread?

In today's Gospel, Jesus said, "I am the bread of life, whoever eats this bread will have eternal life." The crowd asked, "How can this be?" It was the wrong question. Jesus went on with an answer, but it didn't answer what they really wanted to know – how do I eat the bread so I will have eternal life?

The Old Testament reading for today is one of the shortest all year, but don't judge it by its size. It is a story about wisdom which acts like a person or a character. Interestingly enough, "wisdom" in the Greek Old Testament is "Sophia" like the person's name. So, when reading it in Greek, it really sounds like a person: *Sophia has built her house, has prepared a meal with bread and wine, and Sophia has invited everyone to come and eat her bread and drink her wine.*

Wisdom in Hebrew and Greek literature has a closeness like a person that one can get to know. Wisdom invites people to learn more. That wisdom is still with us today.

Now that you have heard from Proverbs and that Wisdom/Sophia has made bread and wine for people to eat to gain insight and wisdom, does it make more sense that Jesus said that he is the Bread of Life and that whoever eats of that bread will have eternal life. Unfortunately, the crowd that had gathered around him did not pick up on the metaphor and the illustration back to Proverbs.

Wisdom (and discernment) involves asking good questions. I believe that God answers prayer, God answers our questions. It's difficult sometimes to hear, or perceive, what God is saying. It's difficult to accept our loving God can say "no". And, perhaps most difficult of all, is figuring out what to ask God. I believe that God understands our intent behind the question, and that God wants what is best for us, but, on the other hand, God is a teacher; life can be a struggle, learning often involves struggling, and this is how humans seem to learn best.

Another facet of this is I believe that each one of us is here; on earth, in this place at this time; to learn something. There are lessons we need to learn. This also means there are questions we need ask and be willing to strive for hearing the answer.

In our discussion groups this past week, we talked about the spirituality of waiting. No one really likes waiting but it's a part of life. Waiting and discernment go hand in hand. One of the participants shared a joke that we've all heard; it's the one about the guy in the flood who is standing on his roof and prays for God to save him. A guy in a canoe comes by but the man refuses saying, "God is going to save me." Then a guy in a boat and finally a helicopter comes by, but the man refuses each one. He drowns and then in heaven the man asks God: why didn't you save me? God replied: why didn't I save you?? I sent you a canoe a boat and even a helicopter!

We have expectations of what God's answer should be. Part of asking, of praying, to God is also to let go of expectations of what we think God's hand, God's will, is.

One of our participants told us the Islamic version of that joke. Want to hear it? Here it is: a man prays in the morning, at noon, at dinner and at night, he prays: God I want to win the lottery. The man does this, four times a day for months. Finally one night, the man prays: God, why I have I not won the lottery? A voice from heaven replies: You idiot, buy a ticket!

Wisdom, discernment, it has to do with showing up. With asking and then doing things; that's how we grow in wisdom and in knowledge of the Lord.

There is a simple way that I pray when seeking God's wisdom and discernment. I've shared it with some of you but not with this type of depth. So here we go. I pray: *God, if this is you, make it big; if it is not you, make it go away.*

I am convinced that God's "no" is louder than when God says yes. Make it go away – that's a way of listening for God's "no". Since it's hard often times to hear God's "yes", having a

situation become “bigger” helps us understand God’s wisdom. Here’s an example: let’s say a friend wants you to go on a 21 day European adventure. You are not sure if you want, or should, go. Pray this: God, if this 21-day European adventure is you, make it big. If it is not you, make it go away. Write down on your calendar when you prayed it and then wait 24 hours. You’ve heard people say, “Let’s sleep on it” well, that’s the 24-hour clock. You’ve probably also heard people say, “Let me pray on it.” That usually means they are going to say no they just want more time. But this – *God if it is you make it big, if it is not you make it go away* – is a practice that should be written down.

Next step, if you wrote down, say, 3 pm on Tuesday I prayed “God if this is you…” then make a note on Wednesday at 3 pm to reflect on the past 24 hours. On Wednesday, at 3 pm, sit down and reflect on what has transpired over the past day. How many times did you think about the European adventure? Is it an idea that you couldn’t get out of your head? Did you dream about it? Do you remember seeing things about Europe, or adventures, or, (this one can be a little weird) did you notice the number 21 popping up? These are all ways that God makes things bigger.

And now for the other side – make it go away. Over the past 24 hours, did you not think about it at all? If, in fact, the first time you thought about the opportunity was when your calendar said for you to, that is one way that God makes things go away. Here’s another – you feel a sense of uneasiness or stress about it when thinking of the trip. Or, another opportunity comes up in the in-between time that you cannot say no to (like a family matter has come up). Or, you couldn’t sleep, or stay asleep, because you were stressed about it. Here’s one last one: when you decide you shouldn’t go, do you have a deep sense of peace about it. Sometimes I feel lighter when I make a decision like that, and I too think that is God making it go away.

God gives us chances to practice this so that when we really need to discern something, we’ve already had some experience doing it. For instance, let’s say the question isn’t about a friend inviting you on a 21-day European adventure, what if it is to invite a loved one into hospice care. Before you make that decision, pray: God, if this is you, if you want me to bring my loved one into Hospice, make it big; if it’s not you, make it go away.

It takes a lot of courage to ask God to make something, as monumentally important as going into Hospice, to make that bigger. God also rewards the courageous and trusting heart. When we step out into God’s will, we will receive the strength to do it, the wisdom and will to live into the decision, and the peace from God.

Our Anglican tradition says that God speaks through Scripture, through nature and through other people. Likewise, God’s wisdom is available, in fact Wisdom is calling us to sit down and eat the bread prepared and to drink the wine. We receive this nourishment through engagement with Scripture, with nature and with one another.

Back to the European adventure, if you see the number 21 showing in places – license plates, house numbers, on the television or what you listen to in the car – that is one way to see a sign in nature. If randomly PBS shows Rick Steve’s European Adventure, remember that. Write it down on your calendar that it happened. In our Christian past, people would go into nature and stare up

at the clouds for them to show what God's will is. For me, I don't think God writes things in the sky but if you take the time to ponder God's glory in nature, and stare at the clouds, and suddenly you have inspiration, or an answer, then who am I to say that God isn't writing these things in the clouds.

Lastly, God speaks through other people. If you ask five friends if you should go on a European adventure, that is not wisdom or discernment, that is a polling of your friend's opinions. Instead, if you ask a friend, "How do you know if you should go on an amazing trip?" Listen to how they do it. More importantly, you can ask: how did you know it was time for your loved one to go into Hospice care. And then listen to the answer. That too is God's wisdom being spoken.

Wisdom and discernment are two-way streets. Do not be surprised if a friend asks you: how did you come to the decision to do X. When you answer, pause, and then speak from the heart (and then don't be surprised when God speaks through you).

Wisdom is calling us, inviting us, to sit down at her table and to eat her bread and drink her wine. God wants us to be in conversation and God wants to share God's will and wisdom with us. One way is to ask God, if this is you, make it big, if it's not you, make it go away.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.