

# Election of a Bishop

## *Four Devotional Bible Studies on Discernment*

By

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# Bible Studies for Discerning God's Will for Our Synod

*The period that precedes the election of a Bishop is one in which the whole synod is engaged in discernment. For Christians, the goal of discernment is seeking the will of God. For synods before an election, that includes understanding God's will for the future mission and ministry of the synod and understanding God's role in choosing a shepherd for that ministry. It is God who chooses. It is the work of the Synod Council, congregations and rostered leaders, assembly voting members and the pastors who will be interviewed to discern God's choice and the Spirit's leading.*

## **How to use these Bible Studies**

These Bible studies are provided as a way for individuals and groups to do some study scripture and engage in prayerful conversation as we prepare for a Bishop's election. You may choose to use both of these studies, or only one of them, depending on time and circumstance. Plan on at least 30-45 minutes for faithful prayer, study, discussion and reflection.

If you are doing these studies with a group that has not done Bible study together before, set some basic guidelines for your time together. This includes creating space for all voices to be heard, respecting each person's reflections and responses without criticism, and being open to learning from other people's perspectives.

When making your way through these studies, take time at the end of questions for reflection and response.

Do be sure to provide individual copies of these studies to participants, so they can use the material for their own study and reflection later. Make sure to include printed copies of the first two pages to give some general grounding for discernment.

These studies are offered as a starting point. You are encouraged to look into additional resources and studies. Sr. Michelle Collins in the Synod Office can help.

# Discerning God's Will for Our Synod

## *The Basics of Discernment*

The period that precedes the election of a Bishop is one in which the whole synod is engaged in discernment. For Christians, the goal of discernment is seeking the will of God. For synods before an election, that includes understanding God's will for the future mission and ministry of the synod and understanding God's role in choosing a shepherd for that ministry. It is God who chooses. It is the work of the Synod Council, congregations and rostered leaders, assembly voting members and the pastors who will be interviewed to discern God's choice and the Spirit's leading.

The process of discernment has its roots in the New Testament community as described in the book of Acts. In Acts 1, when filling the vacancy among the Twelve Apostles, the disciples all prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry..." (Acts 1.25-26). It was a prayer of discernment.

In Acts 6, when it was time to expand the ministry of the local church in Jerusalem, the leaders called the membership together and asked them to nominate seven men "full of the Spirit and of wisdom" for this new task of ministry. The seeking of candidates "full of the Spirit" was a seeking of the Spirit's leading and calling, and seeking of God's will. It was a process of discernment. (Acts 6.1-6)

At every point of development of the new Christian Church in Acts, the Spirit was leading the church, and its members were seeking the Spirit's leading so they could follow God's bidding. At a particularly crucial point, when the leadership questioned whether Gentiles had been included in God's gift of salvation, the Holy Spirit made it known to them through a careful discernment process of receiving reports, examining evidence, engaging conversation, and prayerful deliberation that "God has given even to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life"

(Acts 11.1-18). This led to further discoveries of God's will for the Gentiles that led Church leaders to publish the results of their discernment in a letter sent to the Gentiles that boldly declares, "For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials..." (Acts 15.28).

### **Some Basics about Discernment**

Through Holy Scripture and faith experience, all Christians have come to realize that knowing and doing God's will is the best possible thing that can happen to them. And so Christians pray to God frequently, "Your kingdom come, your will be done," as Jesus taught in the Lord's Prayer.

Accordingly, Christians over the centuries have learned that there are some basic assumptions that undergird the discernment process. We assume:

### **God's Presence**

1. The Triune God is self-revealing and reveals his will within the context of our committed faith relationship with him.
2. God becomes human and vulnerable in Jesus so that we are drawn into a higher purpose through the cross.
3. The Holy Spirit is present in our personal and corporate lives, given in baptism, so that we may discern God's way of the cross that leads to new life in the resurrection.

### **Our Practice**

1. We place God's word and will as the ultimate value in our knowledge and experience, higher than all other values that might influence us.
2. We participate humbly in a faith community of grace as we discern God's will for our lives.
3. We are dedicated both personally and communally to practices of Scripture reading, prayer, worship and discernment to know and



# Bible Study #1

## *And the lot fell on Matthias.*

### **Begin with prayer (this or something similar):**

Blessed Lord God, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

### **Consider:**

- When have you felt overwhelmed by the uncertainties of making a decision? What guidance/support did you seek?
- What kinds of things guide a community when they're selecting a leader? What can be helpful/harmful in this process?
- In what ways is choosing a leader in a faith community different from/the same as choosing a leader in a different kind of community?

### **Read** Acts 1:12-26.

*Either have one voice read the whole section, or have multiple voices read the passage (v. 12-14, v. 15-20, v. 21-26)*

### **Reflect**

*Read and reflect on the following material, either in small group discussion, in large group discussion, or in personal reflection.*

This story follows the Ascension of Jesus and shows the process by which a new person was chosen to replace Judas the Betrayer for the ministry of the Twelve Apostles.

The story makes clear that there were more who believed in Jesus than just the Apostles. How many did they number? (1:15) Note the number being a multiple of 12, the number of disciples and the number of the tribes of Israel. How accidental or purposeful might this number be in the narrative? In the whole scheme of God's plan of salvation?

Peter takes the lead in the account and suggests a discernment process to follow.

What was the criteria for the candidate to be considered? 1:21-22 What's the relationship between this criteria and Jesus' teaching about the Holy Spirit in John 14:26?

If Jesus' ministry from his baptism to his ascension was about three years long, then what are the implications of the criteria suggested by Peter?

How many candidates were settled upon that fulfilled the criteria? 1:23

Could there have been more? What do you think led them to put forward only two?

What was the next step in the process? 1:24

What specifically did the prayer ask for? 1:24c

The last step in the process was casting lots (1:26). Proverbs 16.33 says, "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the Lord's alone." Although this method of determining God's will was an old and venerable one, appearing 20 times in both Old and New Testaments, this was the last recorded use of casting lots in the Bible.

How do you see casting lots differing from taking a vote as we do today?

All human methods of determining or discerning God's will can be corrupted by the human element. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of casting lots for determining God's will? What might be the advantages and disadvantages of voting?

In the end, "the lot fell on Matthias, and he was added to the eleven apostles" (1:26). This verse closes the narrative without indicating faith in the process and general agreement among all the believers that God's will had indeed been done. What might help believers to have faith in a discernment process and that the results show God's leading within it?

**Apply**

*Consider the connections this passage (and others) may have to the process of electing a bishop.*

In Acts 5:38-39, a Pharisee named Gamaliel makes a helpful statement about discernment, saying, "if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them--in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" How might Gamaliel's insight be applied to the results in the Acts 1 story? How might Gamaliel's insight be applied to our discernment processes today?

What do we learn from this passage about God's leading in our ministries?

What do we learn from this passage that has implications for our synod as we approach the election of a bishop?

This passage points out criteria for candidates. Other scripture lift up spiritual criteria for leadership in the church (Acts 6:3, 1 Sm. 16:7) as well as practical criteria (1 Tm. 3:1-7). What criteria should be considered for a bishop?

It is clear from 1:24 that the disciples expected that God would do the choosing and that their task was discerning God's choice (compare with 1 Sam. 16:1-13). How do we see God's hand acting in the choice and election of a bishop?

**End with Prayer**

Close this devotion with a prayer asking God to teach us how to listen with ears attuned to the Spirit and eyes open to the signs of God's leading.

**Use the space below for notes:**

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# Bible Study #2

## *The Lord looks on the heart.*

### **Begin with prayer (this or something similar):**

Blessed Lord God, you have caused the holy scriptures to be written for the nourishment of your people. Grant that we may hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that, comforted by your promises, we may embrace and forever hold fast to the hope of eternal life, which you have given us in Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. Amen.

### **Consider:**

- What are some generally accepted “qualities of a leader”? What of those qualities are external? What of those qualities are internal?
- When have you been surprised by leadership emerging from someone you would not have ‘chosen’ as leader material?
- When have you been called into leadership when you perceived yourself to be the ‘under qualified’?

### **Read** 1 Samuel 16:1-13

*Either have one voice read the whole section, or have multiple voices read the passage (v. 1-7, 8-13)*

### **Reflect**

*Read and reflect on the following material, either in small group discussion, in large group discussion, or in personal reflection.*

This Old Testament story follows God’s rejection of Saul, the first king of Israel, because he had not followed God’s commands (1 Sam. 15:24). Samuel, the prophet who had anointed and advised King Saul during his reign, was deeply grieved by Saul’s transgression and God’s rejection of him (15:35).

As this passage opens, God is quite clear that he has a new king in mind. To whom does God send Samuel? (16:1) What town does this man live in? (16:4) Samuel, still grieving, seems reluctant to go. What reason does he give? (16:2) What instruction does God give to address Samuel’s concern?

When Samuel arrives in the city, he is met by the elders who are said to be “trembling” (16:4). Why do you think they are trembling? (cf.16:2)

Jesse and his sons arrive and take part in the sacrifice (16:5), and afterwards Samuel examines the sons for God’s choice as king (16:6). On what basis does Samuel apparently begin to evaluate Jesse’s sons? (16:7a) What is the criteria that God uses to choose a king? (16:7b) What elements are contained in this criteria that God would be looking for? How many sons of Jesse does Samuel examine and God reject with this criteria? (16:10)

In verse 11, Samuel asks if there are any more sons, and Jesse answers that there is another. Why do you think that Jesse had not included this other son from the beginning? Why would this be the least expected choice for king?

In verse 12, God's choice is made known, and the shepherd boy David is anointed by Samuel as God's chosen "in the presence of his brothers." What was the sign that resulted that confirmed God's choice? (16:13)

A major theme in this narrative is that God does the choosing. Identify and list all the verses that point this out.

It is also clear from this narrative that God's choosing is accompanied by signs that confirm that choosing. In addition to the sign in 16:13, two more stories from David's childhood years immediately follow this narrative, which serve as signs confirming God's choice: 1. David's ability to soothe Saul's evil spirit by playing the harp (16:14-23), and 2. David's conquering of the Philistine giant Goliath (17:1ff). How do these signs manifest what God sees in David's heart? If God does the choosing, will there always be signs to show this?

**Apply**

*Consider the connections this passage (and others) may have to the process of electing a bishop.*

What can we learn from this passage about how God raises up leaders?

What can we draw from this passage that we can apply to our current process of electing a bishop? In what way does God choose a bishop? In what way are we discerners of God's choosing? How might we experience God's "no" as Samuel did when examining potential candidates?

An important criterion for God was not the outward and obvious, but what was in the heart. How might mortals look into the heart to see what God sees in an election process for a bishop?

This story also took place in a context that required new direction for Israel's leadership and created anxieties among God's people. How does God empower us in the face of anxieties over a bishop's election? How might a need for new direction inform our present election process?

**End with Prayer**

Close with a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to help us to open our eyes to see as God sees.

**Use the space below for notes:**

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