

TO DETERMINE WHAT IS BEST

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Text: Philippians 1:3–11

After a challenging and engaging fall of being “commanded to preach,” for the season of Advent we have returned to the Revised Common Lectionary—the prescribed schedule of scripture readings following a three-year cycle. (Don’t worry: “Command to Preach” is returning in February of 2022 and I think will become an intermittent yet persistent series in our preaching schedules.) The Revised Common Lectionary offers four readings each week—one from the Hebrew Testament (or sometimes the Apocrypha), a psalm or a psalter-like reading, a gospel text, and a reading from the Epistles—the relatively short letter-like books that follow the gospels in the Newer Testament. If you are interested in knowing more about the Revised Common Lectionary or would like to follow along with your preachers and their sermonizing choices, you can easily find the schedule of readings online, or let me know of your interest and I will be happy to direct you to some sources. One might expect scriptures within the Revised Common Lectionary during the season of Advent to contain suggestions of that which we use to describe these weeks before Christmas: preparation, holy expectation, gestation, and the waiting for something magnificent to come. On the second Sunday of Advent, the gospel text always includes my favorite—John the Baptist—my love for and delight in I confessed to you all last year, and if you want a sermon on John the Baptist I would be happy to send you it, because this one isn’t it. It would have been predictable and easy for me to rhapsodize once again on John’s place in our faith story. But this year, as I studied the assigned pericopes, it was the eight verses from Paul’s letter to the Philippians that held my attention. We (the clergy) have invited you to walk the way of Illumination and discovery this Advent season. What message for Advent do you hear in these words? It may seem a bit obscure, but lets see what enlightens us in the following passage:

Philippians 1:3–11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Let us pray:

Illuminate for us, O Holy One, a word or message that will open our hearts to new understandings and a focused purpose. Amen.

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My youngest daughter, Hannah, is a high-school senior. So we are in full-on college application, decision, campus visit, what-does-the-future-hold mode. Like every other aspect of life, the pandemic has certainly had its impact on this process. For about 15 months, most schools had no in-person tours, and just like everything else, only virtual opportunities were offered. So instead of beginning this journey in her junior year of high school, Hannah and I started visiting schools in earnest this summer, traveling thousands of miles far to the west, where Hannah had hoped the mountains that she loves would entice her as she selected her post-high school venue. Reality set in a bit this fall as Hannah determined that perhaps she didn't want to go quite so far from home, making this momma's heart sing (to be honest). The one slight issue with this change of course is that for the last three years Hannah has thrown out every school invitation within a three-state radius because she was determined to not end up anywhere close by. So, the last few weeks have been a little stressful in our home as we carved out time to, once again, spend some time on prospective campuses. Friends, my feet hurt. And while we may think that the word of the year is "unprecedented" or "hybrid," when on the search for a college home it is all about "vibe." I have heard and used the word *vibe* more often in the last three months than in the last 30 years.

And if there are any college admission folks listening, I will also tell you that parting gifts of school swag go a long way to make an impression . . . as do student tour guides, and we have been so impressed with each one. With each experience, I watch Hannah for signs of that "a-ha" moment—when I can tell a match has been made, the vibe is exactly right, when she knows she has found the place that she wants to be. For Hannah and for our other young adults this is a journey of Advent . . . a time of preparation, expectation, and waiting for a new thing to take shape and come to life. Hannah has impressed and humored my friends by stating that she is in a "season of discernment," a time of serious consideration during which she is working hard not to be overwhelmed. For in the end, only she can determine what is best.

For me, that is the hook in the words from Philippians, the reason this scripture passage is the one I chose for this second Sunday of Advent. Paul writes, "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best."

Whether we are deciding upon what is next for us personally or professionally, like my Hannah, or thoughtfully considering how to dismantle racism and unjust systems or trying to figure out the best way to protect one another from illness during a pandemic, I would hope that the heart of the process would be determining what is best. Instead, the news is filled with terrible stories around selfish interest and trauma-inducing decisions. While there is much about Paul's letter to the Philippians that remains uncertain—authorship, whether or not this a compilation of letters rather than just one missive—we do know three things: the author (whom we will name Paul) is writing from a place of imprisonment, believes his death is imminent, and writes with both emotion and intimacy. This suggests a deep, enduring, personal relationship with the Philippi church and therefore invites a directness in his message. These first few verses are filled with thanksgiving for the gathered people, despite the situations of writer and receiver. Paul is in prison with an unknown future, and the church at Philippi is threatened by the social values and practices of the Roman world. As one biblical scholar writes, "Where the competitive quest for honor, hierarchal social relationships and economic arrangements based on self-interested patronage intruded into the life of the community, its unity was under attack." (Stanley Saunders, *The Discipleship Study Bible*) Yet Paul roots his message in thanksgiving and in joy, and his purpose is to embolden the Philippians to stay rooted in the hope that is Jesus Christ, and to remember that no longer is this community bound by Roman law but rather Gospel love. And together they must discern what is just, equitable, and right.

It is not a secret that I take issue with a lot of the writings attributed to Paul, while also including some as my most beloved verses. So therefore I have no doubt that Paul had some very specific ideas about "what is best." Like all of us, Paul might tend to "determine what is best" by way of his own self-interest. And as stated blatantly in my last sermon, that especially as this pandemic wears on and invites us to question

everything about where we have been and the path we are currently traveling, we must be willing to put the needs of others before our own desires. Paul presents to us the key in how to determine what is best in the words that precede it: *And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best.* Here I am going to echo DeWayne's consistent message in his first year with us: Love is the root of all relationship, it is the bearer of all possibilities, it is the core tenet of every community, it has the power to transform even the hardest heart. How do we determine what is best? By placing love firmly and securely within our discernment process and examining the conclusions to which we come with a gentled scrutiny that also means letting go of thinking there is only one right way, only one correct answer. Paul's carefully chosen language suggests that he is not seeking unity of mind at the expense of process. The verb translated as "determine" (*dokimazein*) can, in English, seem to suggest choosing one way over another, as if there is a single, right course of action. The Greek, however, implies a dynamic process that involves examination, testing, and discernment.

Such a course of action requires taking time to become knowledgeable (not just opinionated), ask open-ended questions, and listen to the views of others in a way that leads to understanding. This way of determining what is best runs counter to dominant social practices. This is a process driven by questions rather than assumptions, marked by vulnerability, and that expands the circle of conversation. This way of discernment is an act of faithfulness that builds resilience, supporting us on the journey between present and future, which is right now.¹ And so I ask every board, committee, group, gathering, etc.: When in the process of making a decision, how is love lighting the way? The next time you are in any kind of discernment, ask yourself or the group with whom you are working: How is love showing up right now? How is love leading this decision? How is love present in this process towards determining what is best? If you cannot name it, I would encourage you to rethink your decision.

How do Paul's words illuminate our Advent journey of discovery? As we wait for the coming of Love Incarnate, we are in our own season of discernment. Paul reminds us that we are better together than alone, and that even when apart from the community, the spirit of the congregation can nurture and sustain us. We need each other in this season and always, because we already know these days are daunting. As we determine what is best, individually and collectively, may we do so from a place of love and may our love overflow with abundance. I know that Hannah will make the decision about what happens next that will feel right for her because she is surrounded by family who loves her (and a mom who is working so hard *not* to micromanage!) but also because she is known in this community of faith that has lifted her and loved her even in the darkest of hours and that has shown her the power of communal support. May it be so for each of us, and may it be especially true for Plymouth Congregational Church as we determine together, indeed, what is best.

Amen.

¹Holly Hearon, "Commentary on Philippians 1:3-11," *Working Preacher*, December 9, 2018, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/reviced-common-lectionary/second-sunday-of-advent-3/commentary-on-philippians-13-11-4> (accessed December 6, 2021).