

# What Does God Want Us to Do?

sermon preached at Church of the Holy Cross, Dunn Loring, VA

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How can we know what God wants us to do? This question has intrigued humankind forever. It's a question that ties in directly with the question of what God's call is to us as individuals and as a community. But it's not always such a lofty question, either. It shows up in our day-to-day ethical dilemmas—*should I tell someone what I overheard when eavesdropping?*—and in the decisions we must make regardless of not being able to predict the future—*should I take this job? should I sell the house?* No matter how many plans we make, we only get to live our lives one moment at a time. And in each and every moment, there is the possibility of one of us asking, “How can I know what God wants me to do?” We ask it, and our biblical ancestors asked it as well.

In our story today from the second book of Samuel, King David's enemies have been squelched, and the land is at peace. Now David can finally carry out the reforms he's been wanting for so long. And his first decision is to build a temple for God. Now, this plan is most appropriate, pious, and innovative. David wants to thank God for the military victories and the good fortune of the Kingdom of Israel. Finally, after all these years, the Promised Land has been conquered and settled, and David is not going to take it for granted or even take credit for it. The king is going to build a monument to God's sovereignty, not his own—grandier than the royal palace. How countercultural! What a bold demonstration of faith!

David runs the plan by the priest Nathan, his closest advisor. Now, Nathan is accustomed to asking the question, “What does God want us to do?” But this time, without blinking, Nathan says, “Brilliant! Go for it.” Nathan has his own internal monologue in which, of course, God wants to have a huge, glorious temple. God is so great that we should be obligated to do our best for Him! And certainly God's house should be far grandier than our own. (Not to mention, it'll be a real poke in the eye at all the nations we've just defeated.)

But God has something different in mind. And it's a good thing that Nathan is listening when God speaks to him that night. God says: “Don't build me a house. Let me build *you* a house.”

You see, God has led the people of Israel to victory many, many times, and always against the same enemy: fear. God has told the Israelites again and again that they will succeed, and they finally have. They've conquered their enemies and their fears, and now they can rest. But the real strength of Judaism so far has been its inability to put down roots. As soon as there's a temple, God knows that the kingdom of Israel, free from fear, will most likely go toward the other extreme: complacency. When Israel gets to be a real country like all the other real countries, there may be shady alliances, politically motivated marriages, backroom deals ... the king may make many bad decisions that affect many thousands of people.

So God says to Nathan, "I do not require four-star accommodations. You don't need to take care of me or defend my honor by making sure there's a place worthy of me. You can't create such a place, and I don't want such a place. I just want *you*. I want *you* to be my Holy of Holies. In fact, I will build *you* a house, and then we can all live in it together." This is what is known as the Davidic covenant, and it is outlined in today's psalm: God's promise that a descendant of David's will always be on the throne.

Well, you can't say God doesn't try. Through Nathan, God stops David from building that temple. But God predicts that this temple is going to happen eventually, and sure enough, David's son Solomon comes along, begging and pleading for a temple. Finally, like an exhausted parent, God gives in and says, "Alright already! Build your temple and see what happens. Don't say I didn't warn you."

Sure enough, one generation after Solomon builds that temple, the complacent kingdom is in disarray. The nation of Israel splits, and the two sides are both eventually conquered, first by the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks.

A thousand years after David, the Israelites are still an occupied people. Now the Romans have conquered the known world. Through a combination of strict religious observances, carefully recorded Scripture, and the distinctive mark of circumcision, the Jews are still Jews—still proud, still chosen, and still listening for God's voice. It's at this point in the history of Planet Earth that God says, "OK. The time has come." And then God raises hiddenness, obscurity, and mystery to a whole new level. God decides to build us a different kind of house ... inside the body of a 14-year-old girl. And Mary, with all the bold, optimistic foolishness of a teenager, says, "Well, God ... I guess you know best. Let's do this."

Now, that's a story for another time of the year. But all year round, we do tell the story of the building of God's house in Jesus. Today's passage from the letter to the Ephesians tells us that through his death and resurrection, Christ "has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us." No doubt the Israelite kings couldn't have imagined that God would rather reconcile the peoples of the earth than keep a temple intact in Jerusalem, or that Israel's many ancient enemies are not necessarily God's enemies. Both Jews and Gentiles have been made one in Christ, says the epistle, "with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone."

All this is heady stuff, theological and geopolitical and even cosmic. We could take it any number of ways. But today I don't want to wander too far from the original question: "How can I know what God wants me to do?" I think even Jesus struggled with this question. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus and his friends have been extremely busy. They've been teaching and healing all over the countryside, and they're happy but exhausted. So Jesus says, "Tell you what. Let's take a little retreat." But everywhere they go, they find themselves mobbed by groupies.

Have you ever felt as if your work wouldn't leave you alone? Have you caught yourself eating lunch at your desk, texting at your child's orchestra concert, or bringing the laptop on your family vacation? In today's Gospel you may find some measure of solace: it seems that something similar happened to Jesus and his disciples. And when they found themselves surrounded by the crowds, they had to make a decision: send the people away, or teach and heal some more. Jesus chose the latter.

When we are trying to make a decision, we might well turn to the Bible, especially to the example of Jesus. If Jesus decided to put off self-care for the sake of another day of teaching and healing, shouldn't we, also, give everything we have for the people we love? Shouldn't we run ourselves ragged for our children, sacrifice our schedules for our friends, and never stop dashing around from home to church to school to work? Well, not necessarily. Self-care is important, too, and on other occasions, Jesus did successfully get away. Once he even elicited the reaction, "Where have you been? Everyone is looking for you!" And he didn't apologize for having made himself scarce.

My point is that Jesus had options, and so do we. As much as we might wish God would take away the pain of making a difficult decision, ultimately, it's up to us. God gave us free will, and most of the time we're not afraid to use it. Why should we become afraid of our free will just because, on one occasion or another, the stakes seem higher?

Recently I shared a conversation with a friend about a decision she will soon have to make: a very clear-cut decision that will affect where she goes next in life. She said, “I’ve been praying about it, but I haven’t received an answer.”

I said, “That sounds really hard, and I can tell that making this decision scares you. But I wonder ... when God doesn’t answer, maybe the message is: ‘This one really is up to you. But fear not: I will be with you, no matter what you decide, and whatever the consequences may be.’”

We do have to make our own decisions, but we are not without guidance. We have Scripture. We have our community of faith. We have our own God-given reason. Most of all, we have Christ, who never stops working even when our energy flags. He chooses at every turn to knock down the barriers that separate people from each other, bringing healing and restoration to outcasts and to people who know all too well just how many bad decisions they have made.

In Christ, God has built us a house. But when we live in love, we become the Church, and today’s epistle describes the Church as the very body of Christ, growing “into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.” Well, would you look at that? It seems God has allowed us to build a temple in His honor after all. Amen.