

St. Luke's UMC  
January 7, 2024

*A Little Help Here...*  
***For Making a Big Decision***  
*Exodus 28:29-30*

We begin a new year series today called *A Little Help Here*. We want to look at spiritual resources of help for some of our biggest needs in life. In fact our staff helped with this series. The pastors sent them a list of various issues and asked them to pick the ones they feel are most relevant to them and people they know. The top five are **Anxiety, Grief, Coping with Change, Apathy, and the topic for this morning: Facing Big Decisions.** (*don't include "and the topic for this morning..."*)

Frankly I was surprised by this last one. I assumed that there is just a fraction of people who at the start of the year would be facing a big decision and therefore would find relevance in a sermon devoted to this topic. But, you changed my mind!

I sent out an email asking you to let me know what big decisions you are facing. Many of you responded. The number one decision that came back was **Whether to retire.** Now for some this may sound like a joyful decision, something you have been looking forward to, but for many there is fear and angst associated with this decision. As one person said, *"If I retired now I am not sure what would fill my time. I also want to make sure we don't run out of money during retirement."*

The second biggest is **Financial Decisions.** One person is facing having to file for bankruptcy. Another is looking at the need to revise a will based on some things that have happened in a family. One person wrote about the challenge of being 65, facing a rent increase of \$200 a month and now having to change jobs. Retirement isn't an option. The decision is how to survive.

The next biggest decisions relate to **Concerns for Family and Friends.** How to help loved ones, and what their own personal decisions like taking a job or making a move will affect people they love.

Others included: **Decisions related to leaving their home; Where God wants to use me; Health-related decisions.** A judge wrote *"I am daily confronted with the decision to send someone to prison or allow probation."*

I remember a professor in seminary telling me one time, as a preacher you will stand in the pulpit and look at faces staring back at you believing they are listening intently but understand at least half their thoughts are in other places wondering if God will help them with some heavy problem.

I hope in this series we will connect those two places and reach out to the areas where part of us is always living and understand that God is there too, and that there is hope for how God can help us in those places.

So to help us with this issue of facing big decisions, I want to consider a story in the Bible I'm sure is unfamiliar to many of us. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if the majority of us have never heard this story before. It is about the Urim and Thummim. This was

an important means for ancient Israelites to receive God's direction when facing a big decision.

What was the Urim and Thummim? It goes back to garments of the High Priest in the days of Moses, a position first held by Moses brother, Aaron. This was quite an elaborate outfit **as you see on the screen** (picture of priest garments) ....

Now what you don't see are two items that were kept under the breastplate. They are described in the verses we heard read a moment ago, ***"Put the Urim and the Thummim in the breastpiece, so they may be over Aaron's heart whenever he enters the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD."*** (28:30)

There's a lot of speculation about just what these items were. Some say they were small stones like dice. They were used when a person, often the king, had a simple question like, "Should we go into battle? Is this person guilty?" So perhaps one item meant yes, another no, and the priest knew how to discern the answer.

Mostly it is a mystery to us today to know just how it worked, but we know by several instances in the Old Testament in the time of David, that it was used. When you read about someone "inquiring of the Lord," that often meant they were seeking the High Priest's use of Urim and Thummim.

Now wouldn't it be nice to have a practice like this today? Go to your pastor, ask for the Urim and Thummim. Should I retire? Pastor rolls the magic dice. Should I take this job? Should I marry this person?

Interestingly I do get questions like that very often. People come to see me and say they are hoping I can help them with a big decision and they are looking for God's guidance. And frankly that's when I wish I had the Urim and Thummim. But I don't have that. We don't have that. But I chose this scripture today because there are some elements to this story that are helpful to consider when facing a big decision.

#### **Slide: Lessons from the Urim and Thummin:**

For one, the Urim and Thummim remind us **to turn to God in decision making**. Now that's important because when you bring God into the equation, you open your options. We welcome God's opinion, and that might not be the answer we thought we'd get.

Several times in the Old Testament people inquired of the Lord and didn't get an answer. The priest brought out the Urim and Thummim and there was no clear direction from God, because wanted to ask a different question. God had something else in the person's life God wanted to deal with. **Looking to God in decision making keeps us from just looking for what we want.**

It's like the story about a woman who would go out every day to sell things she made. When she came to a fork in the road she would throw a stick in the air, whichever way it

pointed she would go. One day a man saw her throw a stick in the air three times. He asked what she was doing. She said, "I'm seeking the Lord's direction. Whichever way the stick points, that's where God wants me to go and sell.

The man said, "So why did you throw the stick up three times?" "Because," said the woman, "the first two times the Lord pointed the wrong direction."

We are all a bit like that. Making the "right" decision is one we assume is going to assure happiness or easiness or well-being. So that if things don't turn out that way, we assume we got it wrong, we misread God, or God fooled us. But what if a God-directed decision could involve challenge or difficulty? Seeking God's direction means that our top priority isn't success or happiness, it is being in a place to honor and be used by God.

I had a staff person years ago who moved to that community and so much wanted to be there, but things just weren't working out for her family. She felt they had to move back to Georgia where they lived prior. She was distraught and sought out a wise woman of faith in our church. She listened to her and she said through tears, "I so thought this was where God wanted me to be. I don't understand." Then the woman said, "Now remember, God can use you wherever you are." That simple statement changed this person's feeling about everything. She realized being in that community was about what she wanted. But God will use her wherever she ends up. She was able to return with a more positive outlook.

The Urim and Thummim remind us that when we seek God's direction we might start looking for what answer will bring us what we want, but in the process we sometimes discover an even better destination.

But there's another lesson to this story, and that is while we don't have magic dice to give us answers, **(Same is first slide with first point lighter) we do have resources for discernment.** Think about it for a moment. Somewhere along the way the use of Urim and Thummim went away. God provided other things. Prophets who spoke God's will to the people. Then, Jesus who lived and demonstrated God's will. Then came the Holy Spirit which Jesus said would be like a Counselor to us. Today we can think of several resources we have: **Scripture (Make this a slide that builds with each of the 3 resources)**. Just like the High Priest who kept the Urim and Thummim hidden over his heart, when we learn scripture, meditate on it, study it, hold it in our hearts, we find God often giving us direction and guidance. Its not magic, but it is incredible how God can speak to us through His Word to offer guidance.

Another resource is **prayer**. Taking time to be still and quiet before God opens us to hear from God often when we aren't expecting an answer. I don't usually get clear signals while I pray. But the more I pray the more I find God giving me what I call "God-nudges," feelings, senses in my spirit where I have a peace, or sometimes a disturbance. My wife Susan talks about a certain stomach-ache she gets when she knows that God's way of telling her not to go a certain way. She has come to recognize that feeling.

I remember trying to decide about going into ministry. The more I forced an answer the quieter things got. But when I prayed and went on my way, I found these unexpected occurrences where I would later feel like God was saying, "That's the direction. Don't be afraid to answer."

One more resource is the **the counsel of wise people**. Having folks who are spiritually mature, wise, and care about us, are very helpful to hear from. Maybe they just listen and bounce back what they hear us saying. I've done this with people who will say things like, "Rob, you just gave me every reason why not to do such and such." It's like they help me hear what I can't hear in myself.

So we do have Urim and Thummim today, and we don't have to go to a High Priest. We don't even have to go to a pastor. God speaks to all of us. The Bible says, **"God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us."** (Acts 17:27)

But there's one last consideration when it comes to decision making and seeking God's guidance. **(Same is first two slides with first two points lighter) There is no decision we can get so wrong that it removes us God's will.** We sometimes make the will of God like a bullseye so that we either hit it or miss it. But God's will is much broader. God's will isn't limited to specific events. It is ongoing. As the late British Methodist leader, **Leslie Weatherhead, said: "Not everything that happens is God's will, but nothing can happen which finally defeats His will."**

Glenn MacDonald shared a devotion the other day about how **Tim Keller**, the founding pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York, came to be inspired in ministry. Of all things it goes back to the Watergate Scandal, one of the most politically divided times in our country. It led to the resignation of President Nixon. It was an ugly time. It would have been easy to question God's will and how God was at work at all.

Gerald Ford became president. He had a son named Mike who was a student at Gordon Conwell seminary, walked into the dean's office one day while the dean was praying. He asked what he was praying about. The dean explained that he was in great hopes that a British scholar named Andrew Lincoln could come to the seminary to teach. He believed Lincoln would be a significant addition to their faculty and could transform students. But there was red tape in the way and he couldn't get a visa.

Mike said, "I might be able to help with that." Well when your dad is the new president, you certainly can. The red tape disappeared. Lincoln came, and one of the students hugely transformed by his influence was Tim Keller. 14 years later Keller started his new church. In his career Keller wrote books, many of which are on my shelf, that have been transforming to people around the world. When Keller died last year, the network he started launched more than 750 new congregations worldwide.

Sometimes it appears to us like God has gone absent. Or that God is not hearing our prayers. Like we can't see evidence of God moving in response, but you never know.

When it comes to decision making, we use our intellect, we rationalize and make sense of things, but then we hold it over our hearts, just like the Urim and Thummim over the heart of the High Priest. We bring our considerations before God and to the best of our ability discern God's leading and then choose. And even if things don't turn out like we thought they would, then believe we have yet to know how things turn out.