

Playing it Safe

Gabriel visits Zechariah
Luke 1:5-22; Malachi 3:1-4

Slide: Fish in a bowl

Right before I came to St. John's as your Associate pastor, I went through what we churchy types call a time of discernment. Now, it's not like no one else thinks through the direction they may take in their lives and what decisions they might make, but in the church especially, we really like to use that language as we contemplate a time of transition. Pastors, lay leaders and congregations take time to do this, to discern the direction towards a call by Christ's Holy Spirit, or a calling in life, or even a new direction a congregation wants to go with their mission.

These are the transformative spaces in life, sort of like as autumn goes into winter and winter goes into summer. We know the transition is happening, but we don't always notice right away or even until it is

happens, that there is a direction we must go. This in-between space before something new is always a time of anxiety. It also can be really easy to lose focus or keep things as they are. Safer is easy, less threatening. There is a desire to just fall into the easy thing rather challenging oneself to do something new or different. Therefore, change not only requires discernment, but it also requires risk.

Slide: Risks Ahead

You know, the year before I came to St. John's, I actually was doing quite well as the pastor at Immanuel Lutheran Church in Strum. I had gotten into a rhythm with my schedule, I was used to the people and loved them, and on a whole I enjoyed my role in that small village just about 30 minutes away from Eau Claire. Why would I even think of leaving? And, indeed, I could have stayed there. I could have. It was a hard decision to leave.

But, the truth was, I had come to discern that I had

accomplished what I was called to do there. It was a congregation that was in need of some healing as their previous pastor had committed suicide – coming to terms with what had happened to a pastor they loved, dealing with all that comes with the issues of suicide, finding a mission beyond that and hearing the Good News over and over from the pulpit, that was the specific purpose for me at that time, and when I felt that that purpose was completed, I also wondered if I was nearing a time of change. I also felt ready to consider the future ministry to which God was calling me.

But, where would God call me? So, when I got the phone call from our Bishop that St. John's in Eau Claire was in the process of calling a new pastor and that I may be a good fit, I had to consider that although comfortable where I was, I needed to listen to what God might have in mind, whether I wanted to risk it or not.

But, let me tell you, as any pastor knows, not to mention any congregation, there is never knowledge of what lies ahead. I didn't know you. You didn't know me. I also didn't know the ministries here like I do now. As with everything in our lives as disciples of Jesus Christ, it took a leap of faith to determine that indeed, God was calling me to this place and this time.

Slide: Man jumping

It would have been easier to play it safe where I was. I could have stayed there. It would have been safer to stay in a parsonage instead of buying a home. It would have been less risky to continue on the path I already knew and was familiar with.

Turns out that when the Holy Spirit blows, playing it safe is not usually on the table; nor does God call people to easy decisions. Ultimately, I took the risk even though I did not know the outcome, trusting the call. After eight years in shared ministry with you, I feel so abundantly

thankful to be here at St. John's. But, I had no idea I would be happy. I certainly feared I might fail.

Risk...is exactly what it is. It's taking a chance that you might fail. It's giving up your fears for the hope of your dreams. Risk, it turns out, is often what God does to us and expects from us. Without some risk in life, we just may never know the joys of the future God intends for us. Doing the easy thing, expecting things to be status quo because they are safer, even and especially in scripture, we see that is never how God is - ever. God is always doing a new thing. God is always busting in on the easy way out and changing things up, and failure is always an option.

Slide: Zechariah in temple

Zechariah knows something about that. The angel Gabriel is not so gracious at Zechariah's unbelief, is he? In fact, Zechariah gets more than a scolding for his refusal to see the new thing God was

leading him to do. His punishment is being made mute for nine months! And, the reason he is made mute, is because he actually argues with Gabriel. Here stands an angel in front of Zechariah. So, I think we can assume that it's not a lack of belief in God that Zechariah has here. It even says that Zechariah is terrified. It's clear he knows what is before him - a presence of the living God. So, why argue? It doesn't seem so faithful does it?

However, I think the lack of faith comes not from a refusal to do what God wants. It's not from lack of being a faithful man. It's from using excuses and perhaps in his older age, he doesn't want to try see how anything can change, perhaps he even thinks it shouldn't. "My wife is too old," he says. It's not a journey that people his age go through, having children at that age.

So, it's almost as if Zechariah is saying that he can't risk such a future; that he can't fathom the thought of that change. He can't imagine

the risks involved. Zechariah is playing it safe. So, therefore, the best way to deal with that is to make it impossible for Zechariah to argue anymore by striking him dumb. Instead, it's time for him to listen, to listen to what God has planned for him, for Elizabeth his wife, and for the world. And, listen he did. He had nine whole months to just listen, to discern, and to be with the new thing God was doing. He had to give up what was known, what was safe, and what was certain.

Slide: Caution

How do you play it safe? When standing at the crossroads, which way do you go...the path that is safer, or the path that may have obstacles and an unknown end? Naturally, we would rather walk down the safer path. On that path, we know what we have in front of us. We know what challenges there are.

Maybe you don't like your job but the job you have is safe because it's a job and

you need that job. How would you ever discern to change that? Maybe you would like to be more involved, meet more people and get out of your shell more, but that's such a challenge for you. How would you discern to do that? What group or even perhaps what church activity could you enter into to try something new because God is nudging you, but instead find that it's just easier to keep doing the same?

Slide Discerning the will...

Just like the stock market, you can't change anything without some risk. Let me tell you, I get it! I often want to play things safe, too. I'm risk averse just like everyone else. And, as your Associate pastor, I have been going through a huge transition on my own and also with you. With the new changes in staff and with a new lead pastor on the horizon, some things may indeed change, new leadership will be different, not the same as before.

And, we can't ask for it to be the same, for that's impossible. For, the only way to do things the same is as if Nate never left. God now must have other plans for us and I hope like me, you are ready to discern into this next risk.

Slide: Compass

But, also the path that takes a leap of faith may just be the path where God is leading you in other ways in your lives, especially in ways that may be life giving for you and for others around you. I see it in the members who chose to go to Lay School this year, in Eric, Kris, and Becci. I see the excitement but also the overwhelm all that new knowledge about the Bible and about God is doing something new for them. Knowing their busy schedules, they took the leap of faith, and I can see them blooming with new awareness, with fatigue as their brains whizzed with new learning and ideas, but with also new energy for the God that they love.

Slide: Are you living...

So, what about your life? What about your faith, your vocation, and your life are you taking the easy, safe road? Is that where God is calling you still? Or, is it possible there just may be a little nudge or push towards something with a little more risk, perhaps evens something totally new? Instead of arguing with God, try listening, try discerning, and let in the new thing God is doing. In the Advent silence, you may be surprised at the direction you will go. Amen.