

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro  
18 August 2024

10:30 a.m. MT Worship  
Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Calvary Baptist Church  
Denver, Colorado

## ***“Together, We Serve: With the Wisdom from Vision & Discernment”***

Fifth sermon in *Part III: Together, We Serve*  
of the summer series: *Together, We are Community*

### ***Isaiah 43:15-21***

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

*NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.*

Franciscan priest and ecumenical teacher, Father Richard Rohr offers this wisdom: *“A good journey begins with knowing where we are and being willing to go somewhere else.”*<sup>1</sup>

Seeing clearly—that is, knowing where we are Right Now in This Moment is the work of Vision. Being willing to go Somewhere Else and figure out the Next Faithful Step is the work of Discernment. Both are a key part of the new leadership structure at Calvary, and both are ongoing practices that will ensure our Ministry Advisory Board doesn’t get stuck in the past or mired in the present, but rather collectively helps us perceive the “The New Thing” that God is doing in our midst (to quote the prophet Isaiah!)

Engaging in such initiative is easier said than done!

Vision and Discernment take an incredible amount of perspective and listening and reflection and dreaming. They require humility and openness, a spirit of non-attachment. Vision and Discernment require attention and intention. They are borne from communal wisdom—the voices and perspectives of many—sifted through the sieve of our values and purpose in Christ: to be *Open to All, Closed to None* and “to love God and love others,” for example.

Vision and Discernment are spiritual practices that take an incredible amount of spiritual maturity, actually. It is far easier to be a church that creates a bunch of programs of service and learning and entertainment and fellowship (that just go on

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<sup>1</sup> As quoted in Ruth Haley Barton’s book, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence*.

repeat)—without much evaluation or reflection on alignment with our values. It's actually easy and energizing to jump on someone's passion for ministry, especially when what they love is helping others and probably not creating harm. Who doesn't want to support and encourage and optimize passion and energy?

But it's a much more difficult process, and nuanced approach, to ask such questions as:

- In this season, is this the best use of our gifts and capacity?
- Is this ministry aligned with our values? Is it something only Calvary Baptist Church of Denver can do or are there other non-profits that can do this perhaps with more efficacy or capacity than we can?
- Is this a real need in the community, or a perceived need we think is there based on previous year's experience or hearsay?

You see, Vision— truly seeing where we are in the present moment— what is working, what is not working—is not for the faint of heart. Evaluating what is best takes a lot of work. It means coming off of autopilot for a bit. And it might take multiple lenses and refractions

before we see clearly, or honestly. Especially if we've been looking at the same thing with the same lenses for a long time!

I drew my attention this week to my own physical vision, and just how many times I change lenses to have optimal sight! I wake up in the morning and put on my bedside glasses so that I can walk to my bathroom. I can't see a thing without them. Within a half hour, I have replaced my glasses with contact lenses. A special kind of contact lens that corrects for astigmatism as well as my nearsightedness. I get in my car and I put on sunglasses to reduce the harsh light of the sun to enhance my vision as I drive to work. At work, I have glasses that I put over my already refracted contact lenses, which supposedly, reduce eye strain from the blue light emitted from my computer screen. By the end of my day, I've taken these glasses on and off multiple times, and the same can be said for the sunglasses. As soon as I get home, I take out my contact lenses because by then my eyes are dry from the Colorado climate, and I put in eyedrops and wear the same glasses I began my day in for the remainder of the day. All day,

every day, I am refracting and refining my vision so that I can see!

I wonder, how often are we doing this with our spiritual vision or with how we give attention and intention to how God is at work in our lives, in our church? When's the last time we tried on a different lens to see what we might be missing or what might have become blurry? When's the last time we noticed that something might be too bright/blinding and might need dimming or shades? What is drying out our vision and needs refreshment? What "metaphorical blue light" might be damaging our vision invisibly without us even being aware? Can we tell just how much we are stumbling around or moving cautiously or slowly, or how much we're squinting or straining our focus, perhaps not realizing just how nearsighted we've become? Or do we forget sometimes that some things are clearer with some distance?

Truthfully, sometimes seeing clearly means letting go of a singular destination in order to more fully embrace the journey of life that is more holistic and whole-hearted.

To that point, we've created this area of Vision & Discernment in our deacon leadership to help us refract, refine, and clarify how we see what God is doing right now in our midst. So that, we can then discern, next steps.

Seeing who and how we are Today is Vision. Seeing who and how God is calling us to be Tomorrow—that is discernment.

Again, Father Richard Rohr writes, "God [is] more a verb than a noun, more a process than a conclusion, more an experience than a dogma, more a personal relationship than an idea. [To be in discernment with God is to know that] there is someone dancing with you, and you are not afraid of making mistakes [or stepping on toes.]"<sup>2</sup> You're living in the moment of the music, the flow and tempo and beat and melody that is undergirding life.

Yet "so often when we are in a process of discernment about a choice we're trying to make in our lives, we are focused on the Concluding Outcome of that decision. What is the "right decision"? What am I supposed to do? What is "God's Plan?"

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Rohr, *The Naked Now*, pg 23.

Did I make the Right Choice?  
But this quote from Richard Rohr reminds us that life with God is more about living through our life with God than it is about asking God to lead us TO an exact point or conclusion or decision.

Do you remember what we say at Advent? Emmanuel. God is with us. God is with us always, in all ways. Truth be told, we *cannot* make a decision that is away from the presence of God! God will be with us no matter what we do, but our discernment can enhance how we make room for God in our lives, how we allow for God's loving presence to be most known and experienced in the most impactful of ways.

"It is not about one right answer or another that will bring us to a place of arrival. It is about how a decision continues to shape us into the person God intends for us to become in the broader scope of our lives."<sup>3</sup> I learned this in a very tangible way in my early 20's.

It was a pivotal time in my life. I was trying to decide what divinity school to go to. And I

was sincerely torn and I was sincere about the fact that there must be one school, the Right School, that God wanted me to attend. I had narrowed it down to six choices, then three, then finally two. And so I bargained with God and said, "Okay God, I will know what school I'm supposed to go to by which one gives me the most scholarship money. That's where I'll go...wherever the money is. (Now, this may be smart financially-speaking, but it's probably NOT the best spiritual advice.)

But you know what? It didn't even end up mattering because God had the last laugh in this whole matter. This whole "external factor" I had decided would be the "voice of God" in my life (the scholarship committees at these two schools) didn't even work. Because guess what? I got the exact same amount of money offered to me for my top 2 schools...like down to the dollar and cents! Ugh! What am I supposed to do now?

Well, I ended up in my mentor's office, saying "Now what am I supposed to do?" And I'm sure

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<sup>3</sup> Christianne Squires, "Discernment Is a Process, Not a Conclusion," *CenterQuest* (Nov. 2013), accessed on August 18, 2024 at

<https://cqcenterquest.org/discernment-is-a-process-not-a-conclusion/>.

he was probably laughing as I was making an “existential crisis” out of a very privileged position and decision. “Anne,” he said. “Both are great schools. They are literally paying you to attend them! And it’s divinity school for God’s sake! It’s not like there is a right or wrong choice. Wherever you go, God will be there.”

Then he asked something that shifted everything for me. “Where do YOU want to go? What is calling to you?”

And it was at this point that I really began to shift away from thinking about school as just what “book learning” I would have, or what professors I would learn from. I started to think more holistically but what environment I needed to be in perhaps to learn something new about the world. Where would I get different voices and perspectives?

One of the schools was in the South (where I’m from), and One was in the Northeast. And I ended up choosing the school in the Northeast because I thought the whole landscape of learning would be different, and good for me.

And guess what? God was there. At the school in the Northeast. And even though it was the less “churchy” school on paper, it was the school, and the city, where I fell even more in love with church, go figure! And here I am today—not in the Northeast, not in the South, but in the West with you all here in Colorado! Go figure.

It's not about the destination being Right as much as it is the discernment of what is the next right step for what might allow us to see and experience God in new and different ways? To see or hear or perceive that New Thing that God is doing?

What is true for us as individuals, is true for us as a community too. How are the decisions we are making, shaping us? Or our culture? Are they decisions that hold our values front and center, do they prioritize the needs of the marginalized and the vulnerable? Do they enhance the wellbeing of ourselves and others and creation? Do they allow us to be well? AND work for justice AND experience joy?

Spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen explains:

“Christian discernment is not the same as decision making. Reaching a decision can be straightforward: we consider our goals and options; maybe we list the pros and cons of each possible choice; and then we choose the action that meets our goal most effectively.

Discernment, on the other hand, is about listening and responding to that place within us where our deepest desires align with God’s desire. As discerning people, we sift through our impulses, motives, and options to discover which ones lead us closer to divine love and compassion for ourselves and other people and which ones lead us further away.”<sup>4</sup>

Discernment requires a kind of stripping away of how we have always thought of things, to rest and re-orient our minds and hearts in the center of how God thinks about things. And because we do not know the mind of God, except through the wisdom of our inner minds and hearts, we must become quiet and contemplative in order to listen and pay to attention to that which we may not be able to hear and see when we do not stop long enough to listen and

tune out the noise of the 24/7 news cycle, or our families demands on our time, or our boss’s list of ‘to-dos’ for us, or our parents expectations of success for us, or our friends best advice for us, or Instagram’s recommended reading list for us, and so on and so forth. Sometimes we just need our own inner wisdom to actually hear the wisdom of God because again, we are the *imago dei*, the image of God. We are walking, talking, beings that reflect God’s wisdom. Our wisdom IS God’s wisdom, especially when sifted through the communal voices around us as a filter and system of checks and balances.

And for us as Christians, who shape our lives around following Christ, another way we can discern next steps (individually and as a church) of how to live most fully in God’s presence is to be very thoughtful about the life of Jesus. How does Jesus live and love in the world? Who does he speak with? How does he spend the minutes in his day? What does he teach? What does he pay attention to? At whose table does he dine? What does he eat and drink? Where does he stay?

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<sup>4</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Discernment: Reading the Signs of Daily Life* (HarperOne: 2013), 17.

How does he heal? How often is he teaching one-on-one? How often is he teaching crowds? How often is he pulling off to be by himself? How often does he challenge? When does he comfort? What kinds of questions does he ask? Who does he welcome to come to him? Who does he turn away or admonish? What tugs on his garment catch his attention? What lofty questions or acts of righteousness does he dismiss?

Who Jesus values and how Jesus spends and values his time, has great wisdom for us.

Like Jesus' life reveals, and like Isaiah's prophecy proclaims, God is always calling us to see and discern the New Thing that is happening in our midst, that God is inviting us to be a part of it, but so often we miss it because we are only seeing what we've always seen.

Sometimes we really do have to step back and take the long view...fly high at 30,000 feet and look down over the landscape to see the patterns in our life together that have emerged...patterns and gridlines and scenes that we can't see while we are walking around on land. Sometimes we need the height and distance of the

30,000 foot view, and the disconnected time to allow the soft gaze of our eyes to cast across the fluffy clouds to dream and imagine and see something new.

Discernment is not fast. It is always emerging. It is trial and error. Or as I like to say, trial and trying. It's only an error if we don't learn something. Trying, observing, getting feedback, tweaking, and trying again—like our red/yellow/green evaluation system we've implemented here at Calvary—this is the practical work of discernment. It's not fancy or fast; but it is deeply faithful. And biblical.

There's a reason Isaiah says to his people, "*Do not remember the former things or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?*"

You see in Isaiah 43, the prophet is speaking to a people who are very, very stuck between their past and their future. And the present that they are stuck in is mucky and miserable. It's somewhere in the years 550-538 BCE, the middle of Babylonian exile.

The Babylonian exile refers to the period in Israel's history when Jews in the South were taken captive by Babylon. Babylon was a neighboring country and superpower to Judah (the Southern Kingdom).

Exile was devastating. They were away from home, community, worship centers, and neighbors. They did not have familiar foods or their own bed. Everything was destroyed, nothing left, no life or way to rebuild, destruction and famine and rubble around.

We don't have to imagine what life was like in exile living under an oppressors' power, we see images of it on our screens when we hear reports about Gaza. The situation is inhumane and excruciating. It's not just the destruction of property; it's the destruction of lives and livelihoods. In exile, King Zedekiah's sons were killed right before his eyes, and then Zedekiah's eyes were literally plucked out. His vision? Gone. To say the people had no vision, no direction at this time was not just a metaphor. It was their grief-filled reality and the only thread of hope they were hanging onto in the midst of the horrible and horrific, was the story of the Exodus and how

God had led their ancestors to freedom and liberation by the parting of the Red Sea.

Sure, they knew that they had once been, as a people, enslaved by Pharaoh in Egypt, and that God had freed them, but that memory was just laying in the distant past as almost a kind of betrayal, like, *"What's the point, God? You delivered our ancestors in the exodus only for us to now be in exile?"*

Yet this is when God says something with a lot of nuance: "Yes, remember the ways I acted in the past, remember how I delivered you then, but do not watch and wait for me to **only act in that way**. That is not actually remembering. That is nostalgia...longing for what was." Nostalgia only serves to set us up to never be satisfied, with the present or the future. To long for What Was is a real thing we humans do. Yet, it's my experience that we will never get unstuck if we only long for What Was. God is calling us to perceive something new, **God is calling us toward What Will Be**.

Nostalgia is longing for the way things were in the past, but remembering is different. Remembering is drawing



strength from the past as a foundation of hope for the future.

Remembering is what we do around the Lord's Table. *"Do this in remembrance of me."* We are not actually saying that the only way we remember Jesus is by breaking bread. No, Jesus is saying, *"Do this in remembrance of me,"* as in *"Remember how I loved God and loved others, remember how I lived and moved and had my being in the world, remember the truth and the love within my acts of healing and teaching than the specific acts themselves. They cannot be replicated but my love can be."*

God is saying through Isaiah in chapter 43, *"I know I delivered you through parted waters last time, but if you just stand staring at the sea waiting for the waters to part, you'll miss your whole deliverance and future! I am doing a new thing! I am not taking you to a shoreline and parting the waters of the sea like the exodus. No this time (verse 19) I am actually putting water in the middle of the wilderness, creating and putting rivers into the desert; it will surprise even the wild animals who have always had to search for water in the desert. Now it will be*

*right before them; it will change the whole landscape. I will give drink to you, my people, again, God says. But it will be in a new way. Perceive it!"*

*"Stop staring at the sea and the shoreline and turn around and look at the river that is flowing right behind you! And in order for you to perceive this new thing, you're going to have to forget the things of old. Yes, remember the love and liberation that happened in the past, but do not cling to that understanding or those actions as the ONLY way to be freed. Watch for what is new. Allow yourselves to dream of what might be."*

Such words would be hard for anyone to hear, but even more so for people who are in exile...who are thirsty in every sense of that word (spiritually and physically). No one would think a river in the desert is possible, but that's precisely the point. Liberation, true and full freedom, doesn't start with *our* thinking; it starts with *God's* dreaming. If Vision involves seeing clearly where we are in the present. Then, Discernment (as Isaiah reminds us) involves dreaming about what could be possible in the future.

In her book *Rest is Resistance*, Tricia Hersey writes, “A hidden history that is not well known by most in our culture is the story of the American maroons. [It is a story of remarkable strength and dreaming and creating.]...The maroons were Black people navigating the terror of chattel slavery by refusing to be a part of it. For close to two centuries, they leaped off slave ships as they pulled up to the shores of North America to never be seen again. They organized and left plantations for the caves and deep woods of the South, they created their own communities [in secret] outside of slavery. They were not fugitives and instead, [were] living in a Third Space, a temporary place of joy and freedom. [As they sought to create homes in swamplands and forests off the grid], they liberated themselves and each other in community. Existing in two worlds. Being in the world of chattel slavery, but not of it. They claimed their autonomy and sovereignty while the violent system of plantation labor raged around them. They told the systems, ‘No you cannot have me. I don’t belong

to you,’ and they embodied this call intensely.”<sup>5</sup>

They did not stop with dreaming about *not* being enslaved, they took risks to see if they could make that dream a reality, no matter the cost. They discerned a destiny within the realm of God’s love and wellbeing that was a New Thing...not only not perceived, but truly impossible to imagine.

You see, nothing about ‘perceiving a new thing’ is promised to be easy. We are just asked – even in our exile spaces and our liminal times – to take risks for the sake of liberation and love – for the sake of God’s dream – the kin-dom of God here on earth.

Tricia Hersey says, “I am astonished at what my Ancestors were able to accomplish and create from an exhausted and sleep-deprived [and oppressed] state. I place it in the category of divine miracle, and it creates a deep spaciousness for my hope about the future. I wonder about what our bodies can do in this dimension and this time from a rest and imaginative space.

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<sup>5</sup> Tricia Hersey, *Rest is Resistance: A Manifesto* (Little Brown Spark of Hachette Book Publishing, New York, NY: 2022), pgs 133-134.

What could we heal? What could we figure out?”<sup>6</sup> Where could our dreams guide us? Where will they lead us? Sometimes we just need to stop long enough to pause and to close our eyes, and it’s in closing our eyes that our visions and dreams are opened up, revealing where God is calling us to go.

We cannot let the world or the injustices we experience every day or the news cycle you see on TV or even the challenges and realities that seem daunting and overwhelming in your life – we cannot let these be the only images that we see in our mind’s eye. We must dream beyond what we see before us. This alone is an act of courage, an act of wellbeing, an act of defiance, an act of looking toward the future with hope – and yes, with faith too.

*“A good journey begins with knowing where we are and being willing to go somewhere else.”<sup>7</sup>*

Or, as I heard a pastor say recently, “Vision is when frustration with What Is creates passion for What Could Be.”<sup>8</sup>

And I would add...Discernment is figuring out those steps in between...

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Hersey, pgs 160-161.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in Ruth Haley Barton’s book, *Invitation to Solitude and Silence: Experiencing God’s Transforming Presence*.

<sup>8</sup> Heard from Dallas Pastor Robert Madu on the Netflix series *America’s Sweethearts: Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders*.