

SDS Guidance  
Exodus 13:21-22 NRSV  
WRCoB 10.4.20

Our scripture lesson takes us to the wilderness.

The Israelites left Egypt freed  
After 400 years of slavery.

They headed in the direction of the Promised Land.

God went ahead of them.

They found God in a pillar of cloud by day  
And in a pillar of fire by night.

God never left his place in front of the people.

Every morning the Israelites ate their breakfast  
Packed their bags, waited and watched.

If the cloud moved, they moved.

If the cloud didn't, they didn't.

The cloud and the fire were visible signs  
Of the invisible Spirit of God.

When the Spirit wanted the people to go  
It would move in a certain direction  
And the people would follow.

If it stopped, they stopped  
If it stayed, they stayed.

It was this way  
God led the Israelites through the wilderness  
Into a land flowing with milk and honey.

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But oh how I wish following God would be so easy!

If we could just wake up in the morning  
And be on the lookout for God's pillar of cloud.

If it moved, we'd move  
If it stayed, we'd stay.

If it went to Timbuktu, we'd pack our bags  
And move to Timbuktu!

But alas, it is not so easy.

In fact, one of the greater difficulties for the people of God  
Is discerning God's will for their life.

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Today, we look at the spiritual discipline of guidance.

On a personal level, the spiritual disciplines  
Lead us towards the discernment of God's will.

Meditation, prayer, fasting and Bible study  
Open us up to the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Practicing the simple life

Not insisting on our own way

And a desire to serve

Places a desire in us to follow Christ.

But how do we know what God's will is for us?

Since we are looking at the corporate disciplines

We want to discover

How the church discerns God's direction.

And in light of our current context

How to move forward within the framework

Of the current pandemic.

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One of the ways a preCovid-19 church measured success

Was in the "3 Bs", Buildings, Budgets, and Bodies.

Churches assumed if they had a nice facility

A big budget

And lots of bodies coming through the door

They were within God's will.

But is this way the right way

To measure a healthy, spirit-filled congregation?

Particularly now?

Church buildings stand empty.

Online attendance is nigh impossible to measure

And giving has fallen substantially.

Based on the 3 Bs' yardstick of success  
We're not doing so well.

In light of the pandemic  
We can't measure the church this way.

Nor should we.

Church is different now.

And maybe, that's not all bad news.

God has given us an opportunity  
To evaluate where we were  
Where we currently are  
And where we are heading.

God disrupted life as we knew it  
So that we might ask the question  
"God, what now?"

We miss the old ways.

But as we begin in-person worship  
As we hopefully look forward to postCovid-19 era

We get to get to ask the question  
Is this the way God wants us to "do" church?

We have this wonderful gift of starting church over again.

We really do!

Some churches are returning to in-person gathering  
With the attitude of back to “business as usual”.

They want to return to the old familiar ways  
Before Covid reared its ugly head.

They want to go back to the “3 Bs” standards of success.

Rather than going back to “Buildings, Budgets, and Bodies”  
As a means to measure the health of a congregation

Brian Upshaw of the NC Baptist State Convention  
Suggests we replace the 3 Bs with the 3 Rs  
Repent, Return, and Reimagine.

I like that  
And so, I’m stealing the idea!

In these last months of 2020  
Let’s stop and seek God’s guiding presence  
So that we can confidently step into 2021  
Assured of God’s direction.

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The first R, repent, is very definitely a biblical term.

It usually conjures up feelings  
Of guilt, regret, and remorse.

From a biblical point of view to repent means  
To turn from sin to wholeness.

Repentance means a change of direction.

And if repenting means changing direction  
Then we might want to consider the pandemic

As an interlude, a time to consider other possibilities.

One of the things the church might “repent” from  
As we move back toward in-person gatherings  
Is a back to “business as usual” attitude.

Were there weaknesses in the way we did church  
That needs to change?

Are there strengths we want to build upon?

Before we can sense what God is doing in our midst  
We have to admit  
We are not perfect  
We make mistakes  
There’s room for improvement.

Are we using God’s gifts in such a way  
As to bring glory to God and our neighbor’s good?

Maybe we haven’t committed sin explicitly.

But, maybe, as a corporate body  
Our inaction towards the evils of the day becomes action.

By not opposing the injustices we see around us  
We become complicit in supporting  
The continuation of them.

We repent not only from sins of commission  
But from sins of omission.

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Before the pandemic  
We had explored a variety of possibilities

From tearing down or remodeling the white building  
Expanding Hilltop Preschool  
Various project and activities for our campus.

We were moving rapidly ahead.

We even procured a church consultant.

Well, that whole process came to a screeching halt.

So what do we do now?

Things are different.

Before we sit down and begin brainstorming again  
We need to pray to God  
To shed his light on our path  
And to prosper the work of our hands.

We need to repent and undertake a spiritual process  
To collectively seek guidance in moving forward.

In light of the pandemic  
We need to evaluate our programing  
Discover what is important to keep  
And what needs to be set aside.

When we open ourselves to God's Holy Spirit  
Through prayer, study, and assessment  
Taking into consideration the needs of our community

Open to the idea that change might be what God desires  
We may find this interlude a prime opportunity for change.

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From corporate repentance, consider the second of the 3Rs

Return.

This is NOT referring to returning to the ways things were.

It is to return to the original purpose of church.

It is asking the question

Are we being and doing church  
The way Jesus originally intended?

The NT calls the church to basic functions.

In light of the pandemic

What are the basics we need to return to?

Certainly worship, prayer and study.

Not only do I think there needs to be some physical changes

But we would do well to make some spiritual changes too.

As we return to onsite gatherings

Let us return to doing what Jesus would have us do.

From repenting and changing direction  
To returning to the church's essential functions

We can now reimagine  
What God wants for West Richmond.

Reimagine is the third R of the 3Rs.

It's not enough to repent  
Nor enough to return to biblical principles

We need to consider what that looks like  
In the current context we're in.

No one know what a post-Covid-19 church looks like.

Actually, no one knows what a post-racist  
Post-pandemic, post-presidential election  
Post-2020 Christianity looks like!

We've not been here before.

But here's the thing.

We have the opportunity to reimagine  
What a post Covid-19 church could look like  
What God would want it to look like.

We don't have to go back to "business as usual".

We can reimagine West Richmond  
Its mission and ministry.

Where is God guiding us?

What worked well in the past?

What didn't?

What are our strengths?

What are our weaknesses?

What has God taught us during the shutdown?

Has our priorities changed?

Honestly, I have no idea God's next move for us.

But I sense God has given us an opportunity

To repent, return, and reimagine

A new church, a new beginning.

And through worship, prayer, and study

We might be aware of how

God is moving in our midst.

Let us recognize what is before us

Possibility . . .

God will use the year 2020

For the good of all people

If we are open to the leading of the Holy Spirit

God will guide the church

And bring necessary changes.

May we repent and be open to change  
To be mobile, flexible and prepared for God's leading.

May we return to basic biblical concepts  
That through the spiritual disciplines  
We may sense God's guiding hand.

And through the insight of God's Holy Spirit  
May we reimagine  
What a postCovid-19 church looks like.

So let us be ready for God to lead the way.

So when the pillar of cloud or the pillar of fire moves  
We will be ready to move with it.

To the glory of God and our neighbors' good.