

the tyranny and triumph of choosing

I didn't know what to do. For three and a half years, I was founding pastor of Beacon Light Baptist Church in New Orleans, Louisiana, the city where I was born and grew up. I watched with humble amazement as the new congregation grew from forty members to over seven hundred, including many family members and friends. People of all walks of life found their way to 1551 Mirabeau Avenue for engaging weekly group activities and several spirited Sunday worship services.

Making my way toward the pulpit each Sunday—past persons seated in the rear hallway because the small sanctuary was filled to capacity—was like walking into the eye of a sacred ecstatic storm. Twenty-five years later, I can still see and hear the late Gwendolyn Johnson, my friend and minister of music, hammering away at the organ and belting

out in her soulful alto, “I’m looking for a miracle.” Following her lead, the Beacon Light Church choir and congregation would begin clapping and swaying, setting the church and their young pastor on spiritual fire. Sunday evenings, the fervor resumed with Witness Workshop, an hourlong training session in which persons learned how to communicate their faith in courteous ways in their homes, work settings, and public places. The day climaxed with Sunday Night Live, an informal evening praise celebration that held an extra element of sacred surprise. The worship was less structured, allowing for greater spontaneity and freedom of expression.

In the middle of this stirring and wondrous experience, I was thinking about resigning. I felt full and hungry at the same time. While coming home to pastor had been a spiritual adventure beyond my boldest imaginings, a compelling new desire to teach in a seminary began welling up inside me. In order to fully meet the requirements of the new vision, I felt I needed to earn a Ph.D. in a discipline (Christian social ethics) and in a setting that New Orleans did not provide. Therein was my conflict: Should I remain in New Orleans as pastor of a dynamic church or resign to pursue further theological study that would prepare me for a seminary teaching career?

At first, I thought about continuing as pastor and commuting to the school of my choice. But stubborn questions grabbed me and would not turn me loose: “Can you hold both flames at the same time?” “Can you manage a thriving

church and a rigorous academic program simultaneously?” “If you do this, what time will you have left to be a caring husband and father?” “OK,” I concluded, “I’ll take a sabbatical, a leave of absence, to at least begin the academic program. That way, I won’t have to leave the church entirely. Once I am done, I’ll return to my full responsibilities as pastor.” In quieter moments, the not-so-subtle dishonesty of that solution haunted me. I could not honestly tell the members of Beacon Light Church that I would return after my Ph.D. program had commenced or was completed because I was not certain that I would return.

“What should I do?” On the surface of things, it didn’t make sense to even contemplate leaving. What pastor gives up a growing congregation that, moreover, just happens to be located where he was born? Though it made sense in my mind, choosing to remain where I was did not bring peace to my heart. Deeply divided and weighted down with decision fatigue, I traveled to a religious conference in Poughkeepsie, New York. Although I do not remember a single event associated with the conference, I will never forget a spiritual encounter on the banks of the Hudson River.

The Breakthrough

It was Sunday morning; my congregation, I imagined, was having a time of high praise while I was hundreds of miles away attending a clergy meeting. During the gathering, I

walked out of one of the sessions to hold a meeting of my own: a conference with God. This would be a deeply honest talk in which I would hold nothing back, including my frustration. That's right. God would tell me right then and there why I had been placed in such a bind, why I was being forced to choose between a great blessing and a great desire. And oh, yes, the meeting would not end until God told me clearly what choice to make regarding my future.

I met with God on the banks of the Hudson River. I walked to a spot and began to silently voice my confusion and consternation. I remember, in the words of the gospel song of total surrender, laying it "all on the altar." After a while, I stopped speaking, bowed my head, closed my eyes, and just stood still. My prayer became a posture of quiet waiting. Having talked myself empty, I just stood there.

Some moments passed, and I finally opened my eyes. For the first time since coming to the riverbank, I noticed my surroundings; that's when I saw them: two paths, just below where I was standing. I held them in view for as long as it took these words to sound in my soul: "Know this: Whichever path you choose, I will be with you."

I heard the words clearly and distinctly, as if I had heard an audible voice, though I had not. The mysterious promise, "Know this: Whichever path you choose, I will be with you," seemed to instantly melt the tension surrounding my decision. I felt the anxiety and stress that had accumulated over the prior weeks and months beginning to leave my body. A strange but welcome peaceful empowerment took their place. I couldn't make sense of all I was

feeling, but I knew something significant was happening; something was changing.

Somehow, sensing the deep and lasting meaning of the moment, I wanted something to remind me that what had happened to me had really happened. Looking down, I picked up a small stick lying on the ground and placed it in my shirt pocket. The stick would be my point of continuing contact with the surprising promise: “Know this: Whichever path you choose, I will be with you.” I have kept this 3½-inch-long scrap of wood for over two decades now. Whenever I hold it, it reminds me of the promise on the banks of the Hudson River.

The Meaning of the Mysterious Promise

Until my encounter in upstate New York, I believed that vocational decision making was a matter of discerning and following God’s preordained plan for one’s life. Perhaps most of you reading this book grew up with a similar belief. It is a belief fed, in part, by biblical stories of persons who seemed to have had their destinies drawn up in full for them by God: Moses, Jeremiah, Mary, and Jesus. In Jeremiah’s case, the call on his life is made prior to his birth:

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you,
and before you were born I consecrated
you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 1:5 (NRSV)

Many of us have universalized this understanding of predetermined divine appointment. Not only are some persons called to fulfill certain life quests, even before they are born, but *all* of us are. Thus the goal of vocational discernment is to decipher the divine calling already inside you. If you are having trouble seeing what God has called you to do, all you have to do is look harder, or “get right with God.”

For me, discerning and heeding God’s call meant entering the ministry as a teenager. Family and church members confirmed my life mission by supporting me with prayers, encouraging words, and finances as I learned the essential tasks of ministry. Through high school, college, seminary, and my first full-time pastorate, I had no reason to doubt that I was doing the work God wanted me to do. I intended to follow God’s plan as I best I could. Things went smoothly until my dilemma about leaving a pastorate I loved. As I had done with other decisions in my life, I prayed and waited for God to show me the way, to reveal the next place on the map that was my life plan. When God finally spoke, I heard something different and fresh which eventually led me to radically alter my thinking about vocational discernment as predetermined divine appointment.

Challenging Divine Appointment

The new liberating idea that hit me with a jolt on the Hudson River was that vocation is not solely God’s choice; it is my choice. Thinking that vocational decision making

was only a matter of discovering what God had already decided for me created tragic unintended results.

First, it resulted in my dis-

tancing myself from genuine

desires and longings, reali-

ties that were (and are)

some of God's best gifts

to me (and you). As

much as I loved preach-

ing and serving God's

people as a pastor, I was

engulfed by a consuming pas-

sion for learning more and teach-

ing. Reading, questioning, and pondering had the power to

absorb me like few other things in my life. (Anything that

overtakes you so ought never be taken lightly.) Yet as I strug-

gled to decide between pastoring and continuing my edu-

cation, I found myself at times blocking my desires and

belittling my longings. A mind-set that pits earnest desire

against God's will needs to be challenged. I believe that

observing a vital connection between God's will and our

earnest desires has the power to revolutionize our thinking

about vocation and work choices for the better.

Another result of believing that vocation was just a

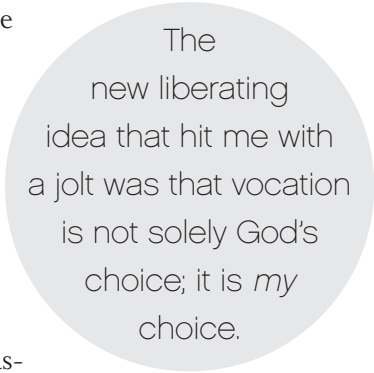
matter of living a prewritten script was feeling more fear

than thrill for the sacred transition building inside me.

Instead of being excited by a new dawning, I tormented

myself: "What if I make the wrong choice? What if I miss

God's will for my life? What if I blow it?" Why would a



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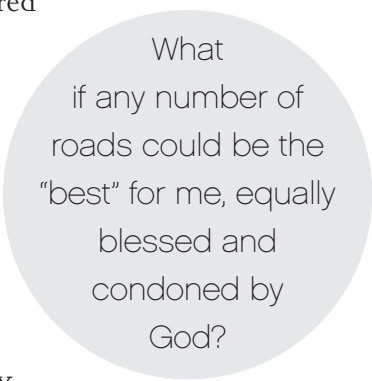
loving and gracious God make
vocational discernment
such a gruesome and
painful affair? The
answer is that God does
not; we do with our
overly narrow under-
standing of vocational
choice making. Being free to
assume more responsibility for

our life's choices, including vocational ones, frees us to take
more joy regarding them. Not fully celebrating our blessed
right to make choices is the worst choice of all—and per-
haps the one choice that grieves God the most.

“Know this: Whichever path you choose, I will be
with you” granted me unexpected permission to choose
my way without fear. Throughout my discerning process,
one fear loomed larger than any other: the fear of making
the wrong choice, one that would divert me from the
“divinely ordained plan for my life.” It was refreshing relief
to know that neither of my choices would be “wrong” in
God’s eyes. This knowledge empowered me to make my
own decision about what I wanted to do. It challenged me
to believe that faithfulness was less about *surrendering* and
more about *assuming responsibility* for my life. Put another way,
it prompted me to interpret faithfulness to God not just in
terms of submission to divine authority but also in terms of
embracing the divine empowerment already in me.

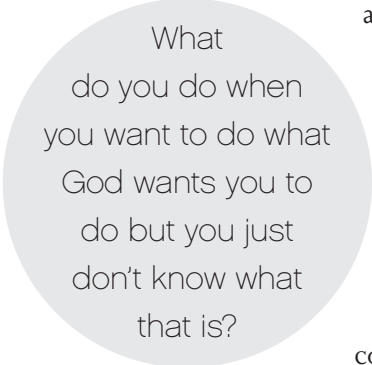
A third unintended result of thinking that vocation was a matter of decoding a divine prewritten script was believing that the best vocational choice is always a singular choice. In my own mind, I was trying to determine which road would be the best for me, continuing to pastor or pursuing a Ph.D. It had not dawned on me that my way of formulating the equation was problematic. I envisioned there having to be a best and less than best solution. The riverbank promise opened my eyes and mind to the prospect of a *broadened best*, a way of interpreting “best” in pluralistic rather than singular terms. What if any number of roads could be the “best” for me, equally blessed and condoned by God? Since that revelation, I have beheld the lavish diversity of nature countless times and wondered how any of us can be duped into holding on to narrow, confined, singular notions of “best.”

The fourth unintended result of believing that vocational expression is a matter of living according to God’s ordered plan is to feel stuck when that plan is not readily apparent. What do you do when you want to do what God wants you to do but you just don’t know what that is? If your earnest desire is to please and obey God, you wait. You



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wait until God decides to tell you or the blinders are removed from your eyes. Waiting while rolling around the same thoughts over and over



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again leads to agonizing, if faithful, frustration. One solution is finally receiving a clear directive from God. Another is to believe a new truth: Our waiting is not the result of divine delay or human confusion but rather the con-

sequence of human resistance to making God-inspired choices. Divine guidance is best received when we see the *dance* in guidance and actively play our part in the holy human adventure we call life.

Losing Life-Deadening Ideas

Believing that our purpose in life is some fixed thing that we passively receive from God is deadening. Such a belief blinds us to the reality of multiple bests in life. Part of the frustration related to discerning our work has to do with wanting to be in “God’s perfect will.” Often that will is interpreted very narrowly. Some people think, “Though there may be several callings in life that I might want to fulfill, the one I really want is the one that God wants for me.” Holding on fast and tight to this idea places us on a faithful

but futile search for the “one thing” God has called me to do in life. However, is it not possible to interpret God’s will in nonsingular ways? Moreover, is it not more reasonable to do so given the lavish diversity of our world and universe? What difference would it make for you to believe that there are many different tasks you can meet and roles you can fill in life? How would it make you feel to know that many of them, if not all of them, are stamped with the seal of “God’s best for you”? To live our purpose more freely and enthusiastically, we must first expand our notions of “God’s perfect will” and “God’s best.”

Another way in which the traditional understanding of purpose deadens life is that it nullifies human creativity. Why must we assume that our purposes are ready-made, especially given the Creator’s issuance of dominion to humankind in the Genesis narrative of creation? We may do so out of respect for God’s mysterious and omnipotent power.

I contend that we do so more because we have been taught that God wants to program us, wants to tell us what to do. I object! Stop wanting God to tell you what to do. God wants to inspire you; God does not want to control you. To want God to tell you what to do is to give back God’s greatest gift to you: freedom. Close to freedom in terms of divine and wondrous gifts is the gift of our creative impulses. This gift is fresh and freely manifested in our first years. As children, we live beyond all inhibition and prohibition, to make, to create, to play, to imagine. Why wouldn’t God want such primal forces to be at our

disposal for designing our life's work? Why would God open us up as children to shut us down as adults? Any thought or

deed that thwarts human ingenu-

ity and creativity is not of God

but rather an enemy of the

truly divine. This includes

the thought that God

dictates a purpose for us

to discover. No. We are

called to join God in

cocreating purpose and life

itself.

Finally, I oppose a closed, God-domineering understanding of purpose on grounds of delight. Earlier this week, I penned a letter to be read at a loved one's funeral. In it, I said the following about Alberta Brock:

During our stay in Chester, we grew closer. We cannot count the meals eaten, the conversations held, and perhaps most memorable of all, the moments of laughter. Her devout commitment to the faith included a pleasant disposition and a lightheartedness. We loved her smile that could come suddenly, catching you by surprise. We loved the way she laughed freely at jokes and the humor in life, including the funny things "God's people" could say and do.

Delight, joy for and in life, is a sacred gift that gets snuffed out when divining one's purpose becomes a bur-



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densome and puzzling affair. Looking for God's will in a way so narrowly configured and so unwelcoming of human creative initiative may be "faithful," but it sure ain't fun. (I contend that it isn't all that faithful either.)

Now, delight is a small matter if your idea of faithfulness has little room for it. I happen to believe that living delight is at the heart of God's original and overriding purpose for all creation. One of my favorite testimonies to this is found in Madeleine L'Engle's *Glimpses of Grace*. In an entry called "Enjoying God," L'Engle records the conversation of two sisters in a convent. Joaquina has become increasingly incensed by Sister Mariana's open appreciation for life. For her part, Marianna does not back down; she continues to take joy:

"I don't know,"
Joaquina said flatly.
She looked across the
table at Mother Escol-
astica. "I don't mean to
criticize, Mother, but there's
something wrong with it."

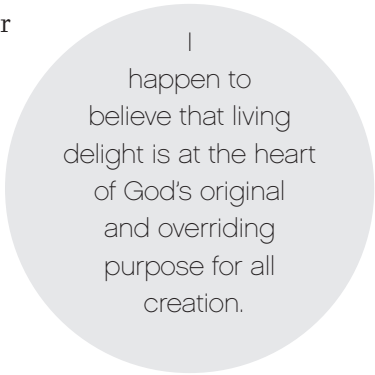
"With what, child?"

"The way Sister Mariana looks out the window at
the flowers, and the way she enjoys that orange."

"Well?"

"She enjoys it too much."

Mariana's mouth was full of juicy pulp. "Aren't
we supposed to?"



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How do you answer the question “Aren’t we supposed to greatly enjoy life?” If the answer is yes, that means that even our arduous struggles often give way to joy, and there is more joy to be had in any given moment than we are usually willing to see or allow ourselves to take.

Discernment is not inevitably and automatically a trying matter. One of the essential messages of holy play is that we can loosen up when it comes to purpose, see ourselves not tensely searching for it but joyfully playing and dancing it. With divine guidance? You bet—just follow the last syllable of the word *guidance*.