

In Need of Direction
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
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1 Samuel 23:1-14

It's a beautiful fall day when a husband and wife head north to their son and daughter's house for an afternoon birthday party for their grandson. Along the way, they see a road that heads east, a road that is covered by a canopy of trees – trees that are filled with brilliant reds, yellows, and oranges. Knowing that they're ahead of schedule and have some time to spare, they decide to take a short color tour to enjoy some of God's glorious creation. They drive, and they drive, and they drive. Eventually the wife says, "Honey, do you know where we are? We're going to be late for Parker's birthday party. Shouldn't we stop and ask for directions?" "No need," the husband replies, "I know exactly where we're going."

Many of us have heard situations like this (or perhaps we have experienced them). Are they as common, though, as they once were? In an age of smart phones and digital maps, do we get lost as often as we once did? We can rely on Google to get us there, right?

I live in a condominium development that is situated around a golf course, and up until recently, the entrance to the condominiums and the entrance to the golf course had the same street name on digital maps. From my living room window – especially on days where there were tournaments filled with people who didn't normally golf there -- I would see people turn into the condominium entrance, drive slowly as they look from left to right, and then make a u-turn to go back out the other side of the entrance. Perhaps Google doesn't always get us there.

David, in our passage tonight, is also a person in need of direction. He hears, in the midst of fleeing from Saul, about the situation in Keilah, an Israelite border town. "David, the Philistines have invaded the city," he's told. "They are attacking the people and looting the threshing floors. The people will be plunged into poverty with the loss of their grain."

In addition, David has to deal with his forces, his men, who are afraid of fighting – not just of any battle, but especially a battle that involve the Philistines, one of Israel's fiercest enemies. "We have enough to be afraid of here in Judah," – likely referring to Saul and his troops persuing them -- "It will be much worse if we go to Keilah and attack the Philistine forces. Don't instruct us to do that!"

The trouble continues to mount when Saul learns through his spy network that David has gone to Keilah. "Good!" Saul exclaims in his delusional thoughts. "I've got him now! God has handed him over to me, for he has trapped himself in a walled town!" So Saul mobilizes his entire army. "Bring all the troops into action," Saul commands. "We will march to Keilah and besiege David and his men!" To make matters even worse, the people of Keilah – the very people David wants to save from the Philistines – are willing to turn him over to Saul. In the midst of all these overwhelming problems, what is David to do?

Overwhelming problems are what two men -- Barry Elzinga and Korde Van Klompenberg -- face as well. The business pair decided take a bit of a risk to purchase a restaurant together. Van Klompenberg's father had been the owner of the restaurant for decades before deciding to retire. Elzinga was a long-time employee. They bought the restaurant in early 2020, just before Covid began. Like most business owners, they did what they could just to keep the business afloat. It was a test of faith, to be sure. This spring, though, they celebrated successfully navigating and surviving the pandemic. In fact, Elzinga and Van Klompenberg enjoyed one of their most successful weeks as business owners. They were optimistic and excited about the future until tragedy struck on April 12 when Community Restaurant in Zeeland caught fire and was declared a total loss. In the midst of overwhelming circumstances, in the midst of fear of the unknown, what should they do?

That same fear and anxiety is what many in our denomination are feeling. Synod meets in just a few weeks, and the agenda is long and complex after two years of not meeting because of Covid. While there are certainly differing opinions about the value of Synod, it is true that meeting together provides time for people from different parts of the denomination to come together to worship, to reflect, to deliberate, and to decide – all this, one of our own elders noted, in a world that values independence and self-sufficiency. Not meeting in person for two years has eliminated those timely collaborative discussions, placed extra duties on the Council of Delegates, and provided a lengthy agenda before this year's synod that includes a myriad of topics.

How should the human sexuality report be handled? Opinions abound when you consider the various overtures that have been sent. How do we work as a binational denomination with congregations in both Canada and the United States? Here, too, we find a wide variety of viewpoints. The CRC's leadership structure is being re-envisioned. Some leaders have been chosen; other searches continue. In the midst of so many unknowns, so much apprehension, so much concern, what are we to do? What direction should we take?

Perhaps the things that weigh upon your heart are not a devastating fire or even the CRC synod. Maybe you're someone who's watching a spouse or a parent decline mentally or physically, and you're wondering what is the best way to provide care and keep them safe. Maybe you have a grandchild who is wandering from the faith and is sexually following a lifestyle that you know is contrary to God's Word. You wrestle with how to still love her and to point her to Jesus. Or, your heart may be hurting as you consider the Ukrainian people and the bloodshed, devastation, and injustice that has been inflicted upon them by the Russian forces. What are we to do in the midst of challenging situations?

In this passage from 1 Samuel, David knows what to do, and he does it without hesitation. In the midst of fleeing from Saul – in the midst of trying to save his own life -- David stops to defend a city from foreign aggression – an act of kindness and compassion, to be sure -- but before he takes physical action, he takes spiritual action. David prays. He inquires of the Lord, and the Lord answers him. Pious man that he is, he will not do battle with them until he is led and assured by God.

Apparently the faith of his men is not quite as strong. Despite God's clear answer, they are still frightened by the battle that looms ahead. The sign of a great leader is evident, though, for instead of simply ordering them to follow his commands, David prays again, for their benefit, and God replies more explicitly this time (verse 4). Notice the difference: "Go down to Keilah, *for I am going to give* the Philistines in to your hands." Some versions say *for I will help you* conquer the Philistines. Knowing that God goes with them, David and his men obediently go to Keilah, save the city, and conquer the Philistines.

David's problems are not over yet for he learns of Saul's plan to come with his forces and surround him and his troops at Keilah. David's response, though, is similar: seek God in prayer. This time he calls for Abiathar, the priest he protected from Saul back in chapter 22. He tells him to bring the ephod, a priestly garment with a pouch that contained the Urim and Thummin: stones that were cast like dice to determine God's yes or no to questions. David prays to God: "Will Saul come down to Keilah as your servant has heard? Lord, God of Israel, tell your servant." God answers affirmatively. "Will the citizens of Keilah surrender me and my men to Saul?" Again, God's answer is yes. Hearing God's answer to his prayer, David and his men leave Keilah, moving about and staying in wilderness strongholds and in the hills of the desert. Saul continues his search, but comes up empty-handed. The escape does not mean, though, that David is faster or more clever than Saul. The escape is possible because God intervened. God does not give David into Saul's hands.

When we consider this story, we see a clear juxtaposition between David and Saul and between divine guidance and human guidance. Saul looks to human sources to find David's location in Keilah, and while speaking and listening to others can be helpful in our spiritual walk, it's a problem when those sources are not attuned to God's voice. Saul's informational network does provide him much, but David's intelligence services are far greater for he has access to divine information through the power of prayer. He knows whom he should seek, he listens to God's voice, and he responds in submission.

Something similar is happening for the owners of Community Restaurant in Zeeland. Yes, work is ongoing as they look for a company to clear the lot and as they seek bids from construction companies to decide if a rebuild is possible, but in the midst of all that, prayers are being offered – especially by the Zeeland community who has rallied around them. Wisdom is needed following something like a devastating fire, and seeking God is the place to find it.

Wisdom is also needed for the Christian Reformed Church. We asked earlier – what can we do with so many unknowns, so much apprehension? We praise God that our denominational leaders have called us to a season of prayer, for God desires for us to seek him in the midst of our challenging times. Colin Watson, our denomination's executive director, reminded readers in the March issue of *The Banner* that we "serve a God who is more weighty than any agenda and of more consequence than our most consequential issue. To this," he wrote, "we lift our prayers and ask for wisdom."

David's example in this story reassures us that God does not leave us without guidance. While we no longer have access to the Urim and Thummin of the priestly ephod, and while we usually don't hear of God directing people with an audible voice any more, we do have access to things that those in Bible times did not

– God’s written word, the indwelling of his Holy Spirit, and access to the Father at any time, through prayer, because of what Jesus accomplished on the cross. Just as God was with David and his men, so Immanuel, *God-with-us*, is with us in word and in Spirit. May God empower us -- when we don’t know what to do and when we are in need of direction -- to seek him in prayer, to listen to his voice, and to submit to his leading. Amen.

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