

BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI
THE WORSHIP OF GOD • MAY 24, 2020
“BRAVING THE WILDERNESS”

The Litany
Based on Psalm 78

*God performed miracles in plain sight of our ancestors in Egypt;
God split the sea and they walked right through it;
God piled the waters to the right and the left.*

**You, O God, show up in big moments and ways,
lead us now out of our needs.**

God led them by day with a cloud, led them all the night long with a fiery torch.

**You, O God, split rocks in the wilderness of our past,
help us drink from your underground springs.**

*How quickly we forget what you have done,
forgot your rescue from our enemies;*

**You, O God, took good care of them; they had nothing to fear,
and now we know you will take care of us.**

Song of Focus
A Prayer for Guidance
Words and Music by Ed Varnum

God of all Truth, Holy and Wise,
Creator and Ancient of Days,
direct our steps, Lord, open our eyes!
Teach us and lead us, we pray.

Before us the paths to choose what is right:
we pray to walk in your light.
Guide us, our Lord. Show us your path.
In one accord, it's all that we ask.

God of all Truth, Holy and Wise,
Creator and Ancient of Days,
direct our steps, Lord, open our eyes!
Teach us and lead us, we pray.

Guide us, our Lord. Show us your way.
Teach us and lead us, we pray.

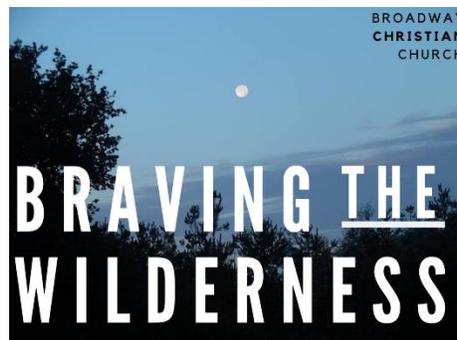
The Scripture **Acts 1:12-17; 21-26**

Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a sabbath day's journey away. When they had entered the city, they went to the room upstairs where they were staying, Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers.

In those days Peter stood up among the believers (together the crowd numbered about one hundred twenty persons) and said, "Friends, the scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit through David foretold concerning Judas, who became a guide for those who arrested Jesus—for he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry." So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So they proposed two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also known as Justus, and Matthias. Then they prayed and said, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which one of these two you have chosen to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

The Message ***Braving the Wilderness: Drawing Straws*** **Mark Briley**

Synopsis: The exhilaration of the big moment, the big season, the tragedy, or the triumph always gives way to the reality that life goes on. In the case of the disciples, the mission was just beginning. For starters? Replace Judas. The holy number of 12 proved desirable for the team, so they set out to secure a new leader. Should there be a world-wide search? Maybe an election? How about we just draw straws? And draw straws they did. How will we start again?



What's the silliest way you've ever made a decision in your life? C'mon now... don't give me that, *"I always researched the options, weighed up the pros and cons, consulted experts, and calmly made every choice I've ever made in my life."* Never an impulse decision? Never a spontaneous itch that embraced the moment at hand – consequences be darned? Or maybe it was a childhood experience. Countless times after school, I met my buddies in the open lot behind Michael Coon's house to play football. Shout out to Mike if there's any chance you're watching! Call me – we're overdue for another game! Loved that old lot. As long as you avoided running into the side of the abandoned house and kicked it high enough to clear the power wires that draped across mid-field, and took it easy on diving into the end zone that was the gravel alley behind their home, all was well in the world of childhood, backyard gaming. To pick teams, we'd put our feet into one big circle, and someone would make the call: *"Bubble gum, bubble gum in a dish, how many pieces do you wish?"* If the pointer landed on your foot, you picked the number you had already determined would get you out or keep you in, depending on who you hoped would end up on your team. They'd count the number and throw in something about *"My momma told me to pick the very best one and you are not it."* Boom. Instant backyard teams. Game on! Not you?

Surely, you've closed your eyes and dropped your finger on a map or a page and said, *"Wherever it lands, that's what we'll do. That's where we'll go."* Maybe you filled out a March Madness bracket one year by choosing your favorite uniform colors to pick winners or by the team's mascots – you know, *"Tigers eat Razorbacks"* – MU moves on. I'm just saying.

Anyway – decision making is extremely important – not only in daily personal situations but certainly when building a team. How will that person fit? Will they get along with the others? Do they have the skillset the team needs to advance the cause? This time has come for the disciples as they've had some time to settle from the loss of Jesus, their brother Judas, and come to grips with their new focus and purpose for the rest of their lives.

This season comes for all of us at some point. The exhilaration of the big moment, the big season, the tragedy, or the triumph always gives way to the reality that life goes on. In the case of the disciples, the mission was just beginning. For starters? Replace Judas. The holy number of 12 proved desirable for the team so they set out to secure a new leader. Should there be a world-wide search? Maybe an election? Hire a head-hunter to find just the right fit with the proper qualifications? How about we just draw straws? And draw straws they did. This seems like such an ill-advised way to pick someone for inner-circle leadership. But this was quite common at the time. The practice of *"casting lots"* as they called it is mentioned 70 times in the Old Testament and seven times in the New Testament. Among the Jewish community, it was the natural thing to do because all the offices and duties in the Temple were settled that way.

Some scholars suggest that candidates' names were written on stones; the stones were put into a vessel, and the vessel was shaken until one stone fell out – your name's on that stone – “*Congrats! You just won the election!*” Others have suggested casting lots could have been some kind of dice game or pulling sticks of different lengths – like straws.

In the Old Testament, lots are most often cast in the process of dividing land. Sometimes, lots were cast to determine God's will for a given situation (*Joshua 18*). The sailors on Jonah's ship (*Jonah 1:7*) cast lots to determine who had brought God's wrath upon their ship. Yikes! Eventually, casting lots became a game people played and made wagers on. We see this as Roman soldiers gamed for who might win Jesus' garments at his crucifixion.¹ As odd as this may seem to us regarding such a pivotal decision in the movement of the church, this was a common practice.

Now – let's think about this band of believers at this point. It's not like finding a pope today, who could be rigorously selected from choices all over the world. The pool of candidates wasn't that deep. This meeting held to figure out what to do next included the core disciples together with “*certain women and with Mary,*” the text says. Jesus' Mother also is named as well as Jesus' brothers. Interesting to note that the bros are in the company with the disciples, as we know that during Jesus' lifetime, they weren't always supportive, even adversarial (*Mark 3:21*). It's not easy to be Jermaine or Tito Jackson, the third Manning brother or the most overlooked of the Jonas Brothers trio, you know? What's his name? Right. It may be that for Jesus' brothers, and many others, the death of Jesus opened their eyes and got to their hearts in way that even Jesus' life could not.

We're told at this time that there are about 120 disciples which is an amazing thing to consider. There were only about 120 pledged to Christ, and it is very unlikely that any of them had ever been outside of the narrow confines of Palestine in their lifetimes. At the same time, there were about four-million Jews in Palestine which means that fewer than 1 in 30,000 were followers of the Way... ones we might call Christians. And Jesus has sent these more or less ordinary 120 folks – far less than the people watching online with us right now – to “*Go into every corner of the world, share the story and baptize people in my name.*” Not a problem, right?

Talk about braving the wilderness. They had to be so moved by what had happened with Jesus that they believed they must press forward and that they had every power of God's Spirit to do so successfully. They had to accept and consider themselves to be enough. And I marvel at that. How often do we feel incapable of doing significant

¹ Exegetical support from this practice found in William Barclay's commentary on “The Book of Acts.” Westminster Press. 1975 as well as from the following website: <https://www.gotquestions.org/Casting-lots.html>

things? You've got to believe you belong. You've got to believe you have gifts to share. And then you've got to take action, braving the wilderness of an unknown future.

Dr. Brene Brown, who inspired the title of this series based on her new book with the same title, says this about belonging. *"Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than us. Because this yearning is so primal, we often try to acquire it by fitting in and by seeking approval, which are not only hollow substitutes for belonging, but often barriers to it. Because true belonging only happens when we present our authentic, imperfect selves to the world, our sense of belonging can never be greater than our level of self-acceptance."*²

I think self-acceptance is among the hardest things many of us will ever attempt. We're taught that our sin carries much more weight than grace. We're taught that our beauty is defined by society, not by the eyes of God. We're taught that leadership only comes in certain packages.

I chatted with a colleague recently who ministered faithfully at a congregation in a small, middle-America town for nearly 17 years. The average minister stays in one church less than three years in this day and age, so that endurance alone is an amazing feat. He and his spouse raised twins who graduated from high school a couple of years ago and are engaging life in college. He's led the way to care well for the least of these in the little town he served. And he's often been excluded from the ministerial alliance and other groups in that little town, because he is a gay man. He says to me with tears in his eyes and a weariness in his brow, *"I'm so tired of being an issue."* Do you understand that fatigue? That pain? That sense that others don't think you're enough simply because of who you are?

Read the stories of Jesus, would you? Time and time again, he selected the ones others thought were unworthy of leadership. He encouraged the gifts of people – *"Hey – that characteristic you have – that one – yes – use it, bring it, I will be glorified, and people's minds will be blown."*

It was the ones who felt they were more than qualified, who were showy with their gifts, that he would tell, *"Go back to the drawing board. Get your priorities straight and then you'll be ready."* The disciples gathered said, *"We'll cast lots for Judas' replacement."* My guess is Jesus wouldn't have done it that way, but there was no real organization at this point. We pick out Peter and John and later Paul as natural leaders because of other things we read about them in Scripture, but here they are leaning on each other, doing what they know to do to make this decision ahead of them. I don't discount their approach whatsoever.

² *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone.* Dr. Brene Brown. Random House Publishing. New York. 2017. The title for this sermon series is inspired by Brown's work. While some references will be utilized during the series, the series itself is not directly based on the contents of her book.

A friend posted a Maya Angelou quote recently that says, “*Forgive yourself for not knowing what you didn’t know before you learned it.*” The disciples were doing their best, and we, too, make the best decisions we can in any given moment based on what we know at that time.

Casting lots it is. They decided, it seems, that there should be a couple of parameters. The unspoken expectation at that point, unfortunately, was that it would be a man, otherwise I can’t imagine Mary Magdalene not being the best choice. Beyond that, to be one of the 12 apostles, they decided that the replacement had to be a witness to the resurrection. It’s not enough to know *about* Jesus, it was critical that you *know* Jesus.

Our study is critically important and goes a long way in our understanding of Jesus and the mystery of faith, but knowledge also has its limits. I know some fitness instructors that know their stuff but struggle, or flat out won’t, do what they are asking participants to do. It’s the instructor who is in the grind with you, who puts in the work, leading by example that truly gains allegiance from the class. The world isn’t changed by our opinions but by our example. The disciples want someone who can not only talk the talk but will walk the walk, too. Which really leads to the second qualification of Judas’ replacement. Not perfection... none of them were. They wanted someone who was willing to grow in Christ day by day... not resting on their previous experience alone... but pursuing the heart of God more and more every day. It couldn’t be an arm-chair Christian. It couldn’t be someone who felt they knew it all already. It had to be someone moldable, willing, and open to the possibility that there was more for them to learn. And I ask myself, “*How teachable am I?*” Maybe we do well to ask ourselves such a question each morning. “*What can I learn today, God? How can I become more like Jesus?*” And the hard part? We can’t simply ask the question or pray the prayer; we then actually must be flexible enough to learn and grow and serve in ongoing ways.



A friend and singer posted a picture of a cough drop recently. On the cough drop wrapper itself was the phrase, “*You can do it and you know it.*” She noted, “*Well, if my cough drop has confidence in me, I should probably go for it!*”

The God of the universe implanted that very same belief in each one of us. We need to believe that we can do it. God believes we can. With Peter taking the lead, Matthias, and

Joseph Barsabbas (“*nicknamed Justus*” the text says) which is a fun detail for me that sort of makes the whole thing more believable. “*John Robert – who we all called ‘Bubba’*” or “*Michael, who everybody knew as ‘Big Poppa’...*” “*Joseph Barsabbas, who*

we called Justus” won the bracket in the east division and Matthias, the winner of the west bracket, were now to cast lots as finalists for Apostle #12.

“*The lot fell on Matthias...*” which sounds like a painful thing – did that mean he won or lost? Well... it means he won. Matthias was in. And we never hear another, single thing about him in Scripture. Historians give some insight about his role as an evangelist moving ahead and while there is some disagreement, one account says that Ananias, a high priest of the Jews, gave a blasphemous speech that slandered Jesus’ name. Matthias defended Jesus saying, “*He is the true Messiah.*” The Sanhedrin were bent out of shape by the whole deal and sentenced him to die. The account then says that “*Matthias was stoned and died.*”³

Another account suggested he was crucified. Either way, it seems he drew the straw, gave his life to the cause, and died like most of the others for his persistence that Jesus was the real deal.

Clarence Jordan who was a farmer from Georgia and New Testament scholar – influential in the founding of Habitat for Humanity said, “*The proof that God raised Jesus from the dead is not the empty tomb but the full hearts of his transformed disciples. The crowning evidence that he lives is not a vacant grave, but a spirit-filled fellowship. Not a rolled-away stone, but a carried-away church.*”

This group of men and women – the faithful 120 had this going for them. They were in it to win it. They believed in themselves, because Jesus believed in them. And that’s what will drive the church forward today... no matter the COVID Kerfuffle, as one of my mentors likes to call it... no matter the unknowns ahead of us... we are the Church... and there’s a calling for us in this world yet. We’ve got to believe in ourselves, because Christ believes in us.

Part of achieving, perhaps the most important part, is believing you can. I have done far better in my life, accomplished far more, when someone believed I could than I ever achieved because I had the right formula or knew all of the right things to do. This is why when someone teaches, someone who feels they couldn’t possibly teach, tells me afterward, “*I learned so much more by teaching than I do by just listening.*”

I remember coaching my youngest son’s soccer team a couple of Spring’s ago after making my soccer coaching debut the previous Fall. Baseball I know. Basketball I get. Football – hey, I grew up playing in the vacant lot behind Mike Coon’s house – I get that too. Soccer? I got nothing – except – keep your hands off the ball. But one thing led to another, nobody would step up, essentially, we cast lots... I ultimately volunteered... but it felt like drawing the short straw and... Boom! I’m a soccer coach. I figured at that age that I couldn’t mess them up too much. The boys mostly needed

³ <https://amazingbibletimeline.com/blog/the-apostle-matthias/>

someone to believe in them, encourage them, teach them about being a good teammate and playing with good sportsmanship. And so that's what I did that first Fall, and we had a great time and I learned a little about soccer. When I would apologize to parents about my lack of knowledge about the game, they would say kind things like, "*You're the kind of coach we want our son to have.*" They believed in me and made me want to rise to the challenge. And do you know what happened? Another parent stepped forward and said, "*I'll organize the snack list.*" (Most important role on the team at that age). Another said, "*I can be an assistant coach.*" And another stepped up to join the sidelines as well. Another parent said, "*I played college soccer,*" and she instantly became a critical piece to the puzzle. That Spring, one of the dads who was working on his PhD in Paul's letters to the Corinthian church of all things, joined the coaching squad, because he finished his tenure as a high-school soccer coach the previous Fall. All the sudden, we really had something cooking. Everyone brings to the team what they know. I turned soccer instruction over to the "*Assistants*" who have played and coached and know the game so well, and I homed in on the communication piece, encouraging the boys to become good teammates and believe in themselves and we found our way forward – truly one of my favorite team experiences I've ever had. Now – I didn't give up my day job for a career in coaching soccer, nor am I comparing U6 soccer to the magnitude of our call as people of faith to serve Christ, but I do know this: we are capable of far more than we could ever hope, dream or imagine. And sometimes, we just need to hear those words: "*I believe in you.*"

Robert Fulghum, the *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten* guy wrote this poignant word: "*You may never have proof of your importance, but you are more important than you think. There are always those who couldn't do without you. The rub is that you don't always know who.*"

You are needed; in your family, in your community, in your church. Are you bringing your best day in and day out? Do you need to know you have what it takes? You do. You showing up with the gifts you have inspires somebody else to show up with their gifts too. When we all commit to that way... the Church... from even a remnant of as few as 120... can bring hope... literally... to the ends of the earth.

May it be so.